


Article

Unique Ethical Insights Gained from Integrating Gradual Practice with Sudden Enlightenment in the Platform Sutra—An Interpretation from the Perspective of Daoism

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Abstract: Since sudden enlightenment in the Platform Sutra is over-emphasized and gradual practice is comparatively ignored by quite a number of scholars, this article is primarily intended to illustrate that for Huineng, gradual practice and sudden enlightenment are practically integrated, which has profound ethical implications. Furthermore, it goes a step further to explore how gradual practice is made possible, by using original material in the text and by introducing relevant theory from Daoism. It also addresses the question about transcendence of morality that some scholars raise. Through exploring the topics of virtue and knowledge in Huineng's thought with the help of Daoist wisdom, I aim to show that, as sudden enlightenment is accompanied by gradual practice, virtue together with knowledge appear hand in hand in a "perfect" form, which also strengthens the feature of perfection revealed in Huineng's ethical doctrine.

Keywords: gradual practice; sudden enlightenment; ethics; Huineng; Zhuangzi

1. Introduction

Chan¹, as a school of Mahayana Buddhism, grew from a comparatively unknown school to a significant sect during the eighth century. The founder of Chan Buddhism Bodhidharma taught the practice of "wall gazing" in order to attain enlightenment; thus he set the tone for the centrality of "meditation" in the development of Chan Buddhism. After the fifth patriarch, two different Chan schools emerged. The story that became widely accepted in Chan circles is that the Northern school emphasized the process of achieving enlightenment, which required much practice, while the Southern school held that enlightenment was abrupt and instantaneous, as described in detail below.

For the Northern school, the way to enlightenment entirely depended on gradual meditation practice—gradually getting rid of all habitual tendencies (習氣)² to the extent that enlightenment

¹ Pinyin will be used throughout the paper, including in quotations that originally used Wade-Giles, changed without brackets. Wade-Giles used in the book and article titles or personal names of modern scholars will not be changed.

² According to Robert Sharf, the phrase 習氣 is also understood as "pervasions of deluded thought", which is ubiquitous in works associated with Northern Chan and found repeatedly, for example, in the *dunwu dacheng zhengli jue* 頓悟大乘正理決 (True Principle of the Great Vehicle of Sudden Awakening) by Moheyan 摩訶衍. Sharf notes that "The central theme of this polemical work in Northern Chan, repeated ad nauseam, is that buddhahood lies precisely in 'transcending the pervasions of deluded thought' 離一切妄想習氣 or, alternatively, in 'transcending the pervasions of conceptualization' 離心想習氣. Moheyan impugns all but the simple awareness of thoughts as they arise. This practice of constant awareness (覺) is characteristic of many of the teachers associated with Northern Chan" (Sharf 2002, p. 218). It shows that the issue pertaining to 習氣 did raise a profound consciousness and much study, antedating the presumed time of composition of the *Platform Sutra*.

occurs. Roughly speaking, the practical process was: Precepts → meditation → wisdom. Through precepts and meditations, the enlightening wisdom could be achieved. However, Huineng, head monk of the Southern School, awakened to his original nature and directly achieved enlightenment simply upon hearing the line from the *Diamond Sutra*, “arouse the mind in accord with no place of abode”. The *Platform Sutra*, which is centered on teachings of Huineng, clearly shows that he criticized the practice described as “devote themselves to sitting and contemplating their minds or purity and not to move or to think” (Red Pine 2006, pp. 11–12) and said “all these beings have deluded themselves into looking for a buddha through external practices and haven’t yet realized their own nature, that they remain people of small capacity” (Red Pine 2006, p. 23). Huineng emphasized that enlightenment took place as an act of one moment, that is, if we can awaken and see into the originally pure nature which illuminates all the delusions and attachments to the outside world, we can experience such an instant and abrupt enlightenment. He espoused the teaching of “sudden enlightenment” and said “they would see their natures and immediately become buddhas” (Red Pine 2006, p. 4). For this reason, many scholars have insisted that Huineng advocated that sudden enlightenment could be achieved without any effort (Jia, cited in Meng and Boyd-Wilson 2017, pp. 18–21; Shen 2008, pp. 125–27). Other scholars have argued that practice was not totally rejected in the Southern school. For instance, Yampolsky held that “once the initial awakening was gained, more practice, more enlightenments, greater efforts, were probably called for on the part of the students” (Yampolsky 1967, p. 116). However, scholars seldom elaborate further on the relationship between sudden enlightenment and gradual practice in the *Platform Sutra*.

Therefore, it is essential to clarify such a controversial problem and then take a step further. Before touching on Huineng’s practice in the *Platform Sutra*, I shall investigate the characteristics of sudden enlightenment and bring up questions worth pondering, which are closely related to the nature of practice. The matter can be summarized in the following three points, each raising a different problem:

Firstly, sudden enlightenment consists of seeing into the Buddha nature (original nature) which is inherent in all sentient beings. Although it is something immanent, people generally fail to realize it, due to erroneous and deluded thoughts. It is only when all delusions are illuminated by the prajna wisdom, which is innate in the original nature, that enlightenment can happen. Furthermore, it is such an abrupt, intuitive act and all-at-once type of enlightenment that, seemingly, Chan practitioners could be immediately enlightened without a long Buddhist practice. This brings up the question: Since sudden enlightenment is such a rapid awakening process, does Huineng assert the need for any gradual practice?

Secondly, in a traditional view, ultimate wisdom is acquired as long as deluded thoughts are erased step by step, which implies a gradual course that is essential for being enlightened. However, for Huineng, sudden enlightenment is the self-illumination of the prajna wisdom inherent in the original nature and it happens spontaneously and instantaneously without practical objectives. The conundrum is: If gradual practice really exists in Huineng’s sudden enlightenment theory, then how is a target-oriented practice proven valid and actually realized in so-called sudden enlightenment? In this part, I will attempt to apply the thought of Daoism to analyze and answer the question.

However, an interpretation from the perspective of Daoism confronts challenges, for example, that the “Daoist-like” emphasis on spontaneity could promote an understanding of enlightenment as amoral³. However, the inappropriateness of this hermeneutic explanation precludes us from understanding Huineng’s ethical theory accurately. In the third part, I will probe the ethical thought of

³ For instance, with regard to the moral significance of what Hans-Georg Moeller has called “knack stories” such as the well-known one of Cook Ding, which fully displays spontaneity in the Daoist sense, Robert Eno maintains that Cook Ding’s dao is completely amoral; also, “Dao-practices can be adapted to any end: the dao of butchering people might provide much the same spiritual spontaneity as the dao of butchering oxen ... [Cook Ding’s dao] makes no selection among the goals to which it might apply” (Eno 1996, p. 142). Finally, he concludes that Zhuangzi’s approach is “ethically inadequate” (Eno 1996, p. 143).

the *Platform Sutra* and articulate its unique status by clarifying Daoist ethics within the framework of virtue and knowledge.

The essay tries to address and expound on the three problems mentioned above, by exploring the text of the *Platform Sutra*. The method of my investigation is to provide arguments and conclusions through a close reading of the *Platform Sutra*, supplemented by adopting an interdisciplinary approach, emphasizing the writings of Zhuangzi in order to address the underlying problem⁴.

2. Part 1

2.1. The Role that Gradual Practice Plays in the Platform Sutra

It is generally assumed that Huineng's teaching is directed towards experiencing absolute emptiness instantly rather than making long-time efforts to wipe away accumulated dust on the mind since any gradual practice inherently establishes the very foundation of dualism and objectifies the ultimate emptiness. Therefore, is this the whole story?

Theoretically speaking, once somebody is enlightened, the person still needs to maintain the enlightened state, applying the enlightened view in everything until attaining supreme, perfect enlightenment. Huineng articulated this in the *Platform Sutra*:

"In your dark house of afflictions, keep the sun of wisdom shining. Falsehood arrives because of afflictions. When truth appears, afflictions depart. Letting truth and falsehood be. Nothing is left to purify". (Red Pine 2006, pp. 31–32)

"But they (people of small capacity) all possess the wisdom of prajna, the same as people who are truly wise. So why don't they understand the Dharma when they hear it? It's because their barriers of mistaken views are so thick, and their roots of passion are so deep. It's like when heavy clouds cover the sun. Unless the wind blows them away, the sun can't shine through". (Red Pine 2006, p. 23)

Here, Huineng drew an analogy between the sun and prajna wisdom: prajna wisdom illuminates like the sun; as long as passions are cast aside, true reality can be discerned. However, it is worth noting that Huineng stressed the necessity to "keep the sun of wisdom shining", and that "the sun of wisdom must at all times shine" (Yampolsky 1967, p. 160).

This illustrates that the sun cannot always be in view and its light may disappear due to the coverage of heavy clouds. It means that, although the prajna wisdom is indwelling, yet its ability to confer illumination is merely potential and can easily be obstructed and shadowed. Human beings, especially those people of small capacity, tend to become enslaved and confined by the thick barriers of mistaken views and deep roots of passion. Even though they could achieve enlightenment abruptly in one moment and gain an insight into their original nature, they are not totally liberated by that; instead, they are still unconsciously controlled by deep-rooted ignorance and habitual tendencies. The only way to overcome the limitation is to ensure that the sun shines (by prajna self-illuminating) at all times, since, although the awakening is sudden, the initial insight is only the start and first stage of spiritual cultivation. Like breaking a bad habit, it is indispensable to incorporate the insight as a motivation and guide to further practice methods that lead to attaining perfect enlightenment.

⁴ For example, I have tried to find a way to understand the latent "paradox" in Huineng's thought by borrowing Cook Ding's story from Zhuangzi's philosophy, in order to make an innovative interpretation. However, I have to mention that the two works show somewhat different approaches to the problems in their respective contexts and also have different goals. Even so, similar concerns may exist, such as self-cultivation to the extent of gaining spontaneity; or similar misunderstandings may occur, such as dismissal of morality and knowledge. Moreover, similar problems may be confronted, and the seeming "paradox" could serve as an example. After all, the teachings of Huineng are influenced by previous Chinese thinkers and have deep roots in Daoism, which profoundly reconfigured the teachings and style of traditional Indian Buddhism. Hence, better understandings of the *Platform Sutra* can be reached by bringing in perspectives from Daoism, especially the highly influential writings of Zhuangzi.

This is the reason why “practice of prajna”, which could be deemed a kind of gradual practice, really counts for much. There is sufficient evidence in favor of this viewpoint in the *Platform Sutra*:

“What does prajna mean? Prajna means ‘wisdom’. At all times to keep your thoughts free of ignorance and always to practice wisdom, this is what we mean by the practice of prajna. One thought of ignorance, and prajna stops. One thought of wisdom, and prajna reappears. A person whose mind is full of ignorance says ‘I’m practicing prajna’. But prajna has no form. It’s the nature of wisdom”. (Red Pine 2006, p. 171)

“Those who realize this teaching realize the teaching of prajna and practice the practice of prajna. Those who don’t practice it are fools. But if they did practice it, for even one moment, their dharma body would be the same as a buddha’s. Good friends, affliction is enlightenment. One moment you’re deluded and a fool. The next moment you’re awake and a buddha”. (Red Pine 2006, p. 172)

The continuous practice of prajna occurs at the same time as sudden enlightenment. Every time the prajna wisdom illuminates deluded thoughts, sudden enlightenment happens. Once illumination becomes an instinctive reaction and expression of the inborn potential, the perfect and ultimate enlightenment will be attained. In other words, although the idea of enlightenment as being sudden and rapid seems to reject the conviction that practice is essential, it is of great importance to perform gradual practice continuously, until enlightenment manifests naturally and effortlessly. Specifically speaking, what are the characteristics of the “practice of prajna” that differentiate it from the Northern School?

2.2. Characteristics of Practice Proposed by Huineng

One assertion shared by a number of leading thinkers is that, for Huineng, being enlightened is awareness of absolute emptiness, whereas the Northern School is based on a fundamental misconception that impurities are real and substantial, and therefore need to be wiped away. This typical distinction set the terms for a consensus in later understanding of the two kinds of Chan methodology. The significance of the methodology proposed by the Northern School lies in the need to address this genuine reality: Habitual tendencies are so overwhelming that sentient beings inevitably fall into them unaware, even after an experience of sudden enlightenment. Successfully recognizing this reality reminds practitioners of the need to stay alert to delusions arising unconsciously, a fact which the Southern School also has to take into account. However, Huineng opposed the standpoint that tends to reify the wisdom⁵, which is actually inherent in the Northern School’s thesis; instead, he emphasized that the “practice of prajna” does not mean practicing “prajna”, because “prajna has no form. Rather, it’s the nature of wisdom”. Thus, the most distinguishing feature of the Southern School’s “practice of prajna” lies in “no form” (無相) or “no thought” (無念)⁶.

The practice of “no thought” means experiencing the essential emptiness of all thoughts that arise and disappear spontaneously and freely, without attaching the mind to any of them. That does not mean cutting off thoughts; rather, it alludes to the realization that the true nature of thoughts, as well as the emotions caused by them, is fundamentally illusory, hence adept practitioners never identify with them. In this condition, all thoughts are illuminated by wisdom and should neither be grasped nor thrown away; then practitioners can see into their own nature and gain the Buddha Way. At this

⁵ For instance, the famous gatha composed by Shenxiu is “The body is a bodhi tree, the mind is like a standing mirror, always try to keep it clean, don’t let it gather dust” (Red Pine 2006, p. 6). Apparently, body and mind, with the wisdom within, are both reified.

⁶ Huineng said, “Good friends, since ancient times, this Dharma teaching of ours, both its direct and indirect versions, has proclaimed ‘no thought’ as its doctrine, ‘no form’ as its body, and ‘no attachment’ as its foundation” (Red Pine 2006, p. 12).

moment, they are now capable of knowing instantly which of the thoughts is true and which is false. The false thoughts may still appear due to habit but they have lost their power⁷.

Undeniably, some passages might be interpreted to mean that sudden enlightenment and the state of buddhahood can be attained simply by means of seeing into the original nature. For instance, Huineng said, “The Bodhisattva Precept Sutra says, ‘Our original nature is pure’. When you know your mind and see your nature, you complete the path to buddhahood” (Red Pine 2006, p. 24). It seems that sudden enlightenment could immediately lead to the state of buddhahood, but that inference has been over-emphasized. Even though someone might have perceived the realm of the Buddha and achieved that status, it is only for an instant. If the next instant of thought is evil, it “results in the destruction of a thousand years of good ones” (Red Pine 2006, p. 16), so further efforts must be made in order to maintain the enlightenment. Moreover, attempting this effort does not, in itself, necessarily cause attachment, so long as it is not to intentionally “overcome” the delusion. Actually, as Ishida Hōyū said:

“Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch, experiences different levels of awakening. In his youth, upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra*, Huineng recalls that his mind became clear and he was awakened—initially awakened. He was immediately awakened again when he heard the Fifth Patriarch expounding the *Diamond Sutra*. When Huineng left the temple after receiving the robe and Dharma as the Sixth Patriarch, he was again instantly enlightened”.

(Ishida 1996, p. 7)⁸

To explain why some people gain incredibly profound insights and attain the buddhahood by sudden enlightenment without further cultivation, Zongmi points out “that this is only possible because such persons have already engaged in a long process of spiritual cultivation in past lives—hence there is a gradual component in this position as well” (Gregory 1987, p. 283). Thus, in the view of Zongmi, people such as Huineng have actually accumulated much gradual practice, although they may not be consciously aware of this. However, for most people, seeing one’s own original nature will not, in itself, suffice to achieve enlightenment. Even though the original nature is awakened, much practice is needed afterwards.

3. Part 2

3.1. A Path to Understanding the Paradox

Part 1 above emphasizes the need for gradual practice and clarifies that the prajna practice is to be non-goal oriented and unintentional, while never isolated from the ethical world. However, it seems that every practice implies an inherent goal which holds out the alluring promise of being achieved by a great endeavor. This seems like a paradox, a dilemma that we are probably condemned to encounter as we perform gradual practice that claims to have no goal. Perhaps we can try to make sense of this paradox by comparing it with the perspective of Daoism.

The following passage is an example from the *Zhuangzi*, Chapter Three, “The Secret of Caring for Life”:

⁷ Please see (Tolle 1999, pp. 18–41) for reference.

⁸ The first significant event in Huineng’s spiritual progress occurred when he was delivering firewood in Nanhai, “Then one day a shopkeeper ordered a load of firewood brought to his store. After he took the delivery and paid me, I walked toward the door and met a customer reciting the Diamond Sutra out loud. As soon as I heard the words, my mind felt clear and awake” (Red Pine 2006, p. 79); after the Fifth Patriarch saw the famous gathas composed by Huineng, he called Huineng into his room and explained the *Diamond Sutra*. Huineng was once again awakened, “As soon as I heard the words, I understood. And that night, unknown to anyone, I received the Dharma, as he transmitted the robe and the direct teaching to me, and I became the Sixth Patriarch” (Red Pine 2006, p. 109–10); when Huineng left the temple after receiving the robe and Dharma as the Sixth Patriarch, the Fifth Patriarch accompanied Huineng to the Nine Rivers Ferry and wanted to ferry him across; Huineng refused and got enlightened instantly, “When I was deluded, the Master had to ferry me across. But now that I’m awake, it’s only right that I row you across the river. Although the ‘ferrying’ is the same, the functions are different” (Red Pine 2006, p. 115).

Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Jingshou music.

“Ah, this is marvelous!” said Lord Wenhui. “Imagine skill reaching such heights!”

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Way which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop, and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint”.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I’ve had this knife of mine nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play about in. That’s why after nineteen years, the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone . . . ”.

“Excellent!” said Lord Wenhui. “I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!”. (Watson 2013, pp. 19–20)

In this story, the lesson learned by the lord, from the cook’s discourse, is focused on caring for life. More than that, it is an issue of self-cultivation pertaining to caring for “mind”, if the mind is compared to the knife. Furthermore, the reason why the cook does such a good job without his knife being dulled can shed light on the paradox of practicing gradually to make the mind gain sudden enlightenment. Let us make an analysis of it in the following aspects:

First, he cuts up the bullock in accordance to the “Dao” (“The Heavenly Way”) which is an ultimate concept in Chinese philosophy. The “Dao” in Daoism mainly has two connotations. One is the general principle followed by all the myriad created things, and the other is the specific nature of every single thing. The Daoist practice is to behave in a way that is naturally, effortlessly in harmony or accord with the “Dao”, which will produce the best outcome. However, the “Dao” in the thought of Huineng means the True Reality (or original nature). Huineng mentioned it many times, persuading people to practice the “Dao”. For example, he stressed:

“Walk the Way with vigor and don’t be a slacker or suddenly you’ll pass this life in vain” (Red Pine 2006, p. 27), “if you follow the Way in this world, let nothing block your path, paying attention to your own mistakes, will keep you in step with the Way”. (Red Pine 2006, p. 32)

The emphasis on “practice the Way” could be regarded as the meaning of doing the prajna practice in Huineng’s thought. The question is: How is one to practice the “Way”? For the cook, he does not “cut” or “hack” the bullock such as other cooks; rather, the blade of his knife only moves about as if in an empty space and this is the reason why he was able to keep the blade of his knife for nineteen years as though fresh from the grindstone. Here, the blade represents the “mind” that will not be hindered by even the smallest ligament or tendon, because it follows things as they are and flows freely through spaces between the joints. It requires a gradual dissolution of the self, as stated in the description “I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop”. That means, senses and intelligence withdraw gradually to the background rather than

taking a dominant role so that the spirit can ultimately move where it wants. This practical approach is termed “fasting of the mind” by Zhuangzi and it is explained as follows: “Spirit is empty and waits for all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind” (氣也者，虛而待物者也，唯道集虛，虛者，心齋也) (Watson 2013, p. 25).

In a word, by keeping his mind in a state of “emptiness” (虛) and going along with the natural patterns of things⁹, his interacting with the outside world is no longer a nerve-racking and exhausting struggle, but becomes comparatively smoother. This is the main spirit of “non-action” (Wuwei) in Daoism and suggests some implications for understanding the paradox. Huineng advocated not to fight with thoughts in the mind, especially passions and delusions, but to awaken the original nature and be aware of the truth of its emptiness. Then, similar to the cook’s blade passing unobstructed through the interstices, the mind can function freely from attachments. Conversely, if the practitioner deliberately suppresses distracting thoughts, then a purposeful goal of seeking enlightenment becomes established and a new kind of attachment appears. As a matter of fact, all delusions are functions of the original nature and they are intrinsically transient and empty; trying to reject them, pursuing enlightenment intentionally, will serve as its own source of delusions. Huineng commented that “a dharma like that would be the same as lifelessness and would constitute an obstruction of the Way instead. The Way has to flow freely” (Red Pine 2006, p. 11). Therefore, for Huineng, practicing the “Dao” means that the mind is in the state of “non-action”, not conflicting with anything but with a penetrating insight into the essence of emptiness. This is perhaps the most critical point for understanding why the prajna practice needs to continue and to remain unintentional. It is also in this sense that the mind could become instantly enlightened.

The second reason for the cook’s skill is that he practices as much as possible, (“first began to cut up bullocks—After three years’ practice”). After long, continuous practice in accord with the “Dao”, the cook could “work with the mind and not with the eye”, so his mind “works along without the control of senses”. This is the supreme spirituality of cutting the bullocks, because his cutting has become a spontaneous expression such that he finally achieves freedom of movement. At this time, he even forgets his own existence and becomes at one with the bullock. His superb skills and exquisite artistry derive from a long-repeated practice until finally it all becomes “natural” and “automatic”; as Edward Slingerland puts it:

“It describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one’s spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless perfectly accord with the dictates of the situation at hand”. (Slingerland 2000, p. 300)

Likewise, in the view of Huineng, sentient beings must do the prajna practice “at all times”: “At all times to keep your thoughts free of ignorance and always to practice wisdom, this is what we mean by the practice of prajna” (Red Pine 2006, p. 21). Constant practice can lead to spontaneous enlightenment that automatically happens. As such, the initial awakening is never complete but is an opening, which requires subsequent cultivation in order to render it permanent. After continuous prajna practice without intentional direction, the awakened state grows fully natural.

⁹ Through years of disciplined practice, the cook has come to have an intuitive feel of the ox, which might be considered spontaneous action that can only be realized in practice, inch by inch. Yet, for better understanding, I still offer a descriptive analysis, in two points, of reasons for his exquisite skill: Subjectively speaking, the understanding afforded by the sense organs has come to a halt, resulting in the emptiness of his heart. The objective effect is that he can cleave to the natural contours, or heavenly patterns, of the ox.

3.2. Possibilities of a New Perspective on Ethics

Moreover, Huineng advised us to enter the world of the corrupting “Six Realms of Sensation”, instead of retiring from the society as a temple monk, and to not avoid getting involved in ethical relationships. The fulfillment of his doctrine lies in:

“To see all dharmas without being attached to any dharma, to reach everywhere without being attached anywhere, to keep your nature pure, so that when the Six Thieves pass through the Six Gates, they neither avoid nor are corrupted by the Six Realms of Sensation but come and go freely”. (Red Pine 2006, p. 25)

On that basis, his idea that enlightenment cannot be separated from the mundane world is also worth mentioning, as this can open up a new perspective on ethics. We have to live in a society with complicated structures and learn to play our own social role within such contexts; therefore, sudden enlightenment is not necessarily a mysterious union with a Dao far beyond this world. Huineng anticipated that we would “spontaneously wander”, as Zhuangzi puts it, within social structures and complicated ethical networks, practicing a state of mind that could facilitate performing gradual practices in sudden enlightenment. In turn, sudden enlightenment realized in the mundane world provides insight into ethical implications of the *Platform Sutra*.

However, the opposite viewpoint held by some scholars such as James Whitehill is also worthy of consideration. He criticized portraying the perfected moral life as a nonrational expressiveness, something natural, spontaneous, non-linguistic, and uncalculating, because this “Daoist-like” view of virtue as “natural, intuitive, skill/power” will result in a kind of ontological dismissal of morality and ethics (Keown 2000, p. 28). I would still express some reservations about his main idea, because his inference that a “Daoist-like” view of virtue gives rise to the dismissal of ethics is unconvincing. I will initially inquire about the “Daoist-like” view of virtue in Zhuangzi’s philosophy and see how it can contribute to understanding Huineng’s ethical thought.

4. Part 3

4.1. Two Dimensions Contributing to the Virtue of Spontaneity

As pointed out above, the key to spontaneity in Zhuangzi’s story about the cook’s consummate skill is to follow the Dao with a fasting heart¹⁰, leading to the state of Wuwei, defined as a Daoist virtue that comes from constant practice. This is also summarized in one sentence, “allowing the Heavenly within me to match up with the Heavenly in the world”, from another story by Zhuangzi about skillful performance¹¹. I will analytically expand, in two different dimensions, these two references to “Heavenly”.

The first “Heavenly” symbolizes a heart made empty and virtue-bearing through the practice of spiritual fasting, which implies a fundamental link between virtue and Heaven (the universe)¹².

¹⁰ Though Zhuangzi did not link the skill of the cook with the fasting heart directly, the cook’s consummate skill inherently requires what one might call a “fasted” heart, as I have analyzed in Part 2.

¹¹ In the Chapter “Mastering Life”, Zhuangzi told a story about Woodworker Qing, who carved a piece of wood and made a bell stand extremely well. When asked what art he had, he said he would fast in order to still his mind to the extent that four limbs and a form and body were completely forgotten, then he added, “After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the Heavenly nature of the trees. If I find one of superlative form and I can see a bell stand there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go. This way I am simply matching up ‘Heaven’ with ‘Heaven.’ That’s probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits” (Watson 2013, p. 152). It shows that the Woodworker has an intuitive feel for the natural patterns of the materials and is thereby able to act harmoniously with it, and this is the reason why his products are marvelous.

¹² For philosophers in ancient China, the original meaning of “Heaven” is “heaven and earth”, as well as the myriad things in the universe. It is in this regard that the two terms, “Heaven” and “universe”, are synonyms. As Kim-chong Chong said, “In the *Zhuangzi* this is largely a synonym for ‘nature’, that is, the natural world and its normal phenomena. These are referred to in the ‘Dazongshi’ as what heaven does, without implication of any anthropomorphic entity who brings about

As Slingerland puts it, “From Zhou times on, Heaven is also seen as the source of value or goodness: what Heaven wants is, by definition, good” (Slingerland 2014, p. 44). In the *Zhuangzi*, the virtue of Heaven is just emptiness, so a virtuous person is supposed to be one who develops the latent, empty virtue endowed by Heaven, hence he is able to treat things by means of Heaven’s virtue¹³. As I have shown, sudden enlightenment will happen on the condition that the mind has penetrated and experienced the truth of emptiness to avoid deluding thoughts, by continuously doing the prajna practice. If Heaven can serve as a wellspring of value from which the “emptiness” flows in the *Zhuangzi*, it is presumably possible, likewise, to discern in the prajna practice some root from which a certain virtue will thrive. Therefore, the charge that “Daoist-like” spontaneity results in dismissal of virtue is inaccurate; on the contrary, the ontological source in Heaven implies something that is higher and ultimate. The person who becomes part of something larger, by whatever practice, may gain virtue in some special form¹⁴, which is worth exploring.

The second “Heavenly” represents the “Heavenly Way”, referring to a path or physical way to do something in accord with the nature of a particular thing or of the whole cosmic order. Heaven, as the grounding of value and virtue, implies that the “Way” is characterized by inherent goodness and, in that sense, is seen as “the right way”, or the proper means of being a perfected and virtuous human being. Seen from the description of the cook’s carving in the story: “I go along with the natural makeup (依乎天理), strike in the big hollows (批大郤), guide the knife through the big openings (大罅), and follow things as they are” (因其固然), his consummate skill has two facets: One is “going along with the natural makeup” or “following things as they are”; by extension, it refers to the nature or natural tendency of things (i.e., the Heavenly Way), such as the lines, textures and rhythms of the ox (i.e., natural patterns or configuration of the ox’s joints). The other is “strike in the big hollows” or “guide the knife through the big openings”. The “hollows” and “openings” that the knife is guided through is a metaphor for the “emptiness” in which, it is suggested, the mind can roam freely. Furthermore, the two facets actually mean the same, in essence, because his behavior that conforms to the nature or natural tendency of things inherently requires that he dissolve himself, especially his own purposeful will, to an extent that his fasting heart can attain the empty state. Or conversely, only through following the Heavenly Way can the virtue-bearing sage be said to wander freely in the world with an empty mind.

Here, I have to emphasize that the seemingly identical English term “emptiness” actually covers two distinct Chinese words, with different meanings in Buddhism and Daoism. In Buddhism, “emptiness” is written as (空), meaning non-existence of the self-nature of things, whereas in Daoism it is written as (虛), which merely represents a tenuous spiritual condition akin to the circulating energy (氣)¹⁵. However, the shared characteristic, in both schools of thought, lies in non-attachment to outer

these occurrences” (Chong 2011, p. 325). In this sense, “the mysterious oneness of Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* is very similar to the “universal consciousness” in Chan Buddhism that I will mention later.

¹³ Zhuangzi personified “Heaven” as having the virtue of remaining empty, which humans ought to hold in great respect and undertake by self-cultivation. He stated that “he who has a clear understanding of the Virtue of Heaven and earth may be called the Great Source, the Great Ancestor” (Watson 2013, p. 99); “The Virtue of emperors and kings takes Heaven and earth as its ancestor, the Way and its Virtue as its master, inaction as its constant rule” (Watson 2013, p. 100).

¹⁴ In the *Zhuangzi*, the fasting practice should go deeper, to the extent that the sage is able to experience the ultimate truth of “Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me” (Watson 2013, p. 13); “Be content to go along and forget about change, and then you can enter the mysterious oneness of Heaven” (Watson 2013, p. 51). Such an experience then has a unique influence and profound implication on ethical standpoints described as “the sage harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in Heaven the Equalizer” (Watson 2013, p. 11).

¹⁵ With regard to understanding the concept of “Qi”, A. C. Graham explains, “The universe is not constituted from inert matter, it is a pool of energetic fluid, the Qi, out of which, through their endless cycles, things condense and into which they dissolve . . . within the cosmos as a whole it of course ascends as the air we breathe, while the more massive and inert Qi settles down below as the earth (as in man it coheres as the body). Within this cosmology the universe will be activated by the insubstantial free-moving air of Heaven” (Graham 1981, pp. 18–19). In addition, “Qi” is also pertinent to the highest spirituality. Burton Watson translates “Qi” as the “spirit” in the “fasting of the heart” (Watson 2013, p. 25). Kim-chong Chong also quoted Rur-bin Yang’s research on the so-called “knack stories,” indicating that “Yang describes cultivating the spirit (精神) through qi or ‘vital energy’ such that it permeates and transforms the sense organs, thus enabling the adept to achieve a deep-level consciousness” (Chong 2011, p. 336).

things and inner thoughts, and in never being distracted by them. Moreover, as Huineng's thought is explicit about the non-duality of Dharma and the world, the outward expression of an adept Chan master in his real practice resembles that of the Daoist sage. In other words, he also conducts himself in accordance with the Heavenly Way of outer things¹⁶. Insofar as the practitioner gains increasingly clear insight into the "Heavenly Way" in the wake of gradually fasting his mind, his cognitive performance is not so salient but is counted as the highest form that is naturally realized.

4.2. New Light Shed on the Ethical implications in the Platform Sutra

The above critical point can enlighten our understanding about the implied ethics of the *Platform Sutra*. Although the meaning of practicing Dao or experiencing emptiness seems different from that of Zhuangzi, I insist that Huineng would probably agree with Zhuangzi on ways of acting towards the world, that is, to follow the nature of things or the natural fluctuations of situations on the basis of "no-self", just as Cook Ding's knife moves about in emptiness as long as it conforms to the Way of the ox with a "fasted" heart. This subject is thus pertinent to the role of virtue, as well as to the cognitive activity involved in Huineng's ethics.

It should be noted that, although I have analyzed these two uses of "Heavenly" in two different aspects, at another level the meaning common to both instances of "Heavenly" cannot be cut apart, as seen in the sentence, "allowing the Heavenly within me to match up with the Heavenly in the world". For Zhuangzi, as the heart becomes, in real practice, ever more empty in correspondence to the virtue of Heaven, the practitioner's insights will accordingly grow ever sharper, which makes him more faithfully abide by the Heavenly Way in action. In the field of Buddhism, the same issue involves how virtue and knowledge are actually woven together and interact on each other, so the relationship between them has become a perennially controversial issue that must be taken into account when reading the *Platform Sutra* and would contribute to comprehending its ethical implication if it can be better clarified¹⁷.

In the *Platform Sutra*, when one disciple asked Huineng what morality (virtue), meditation¹⁸ and wisdom (knowledge or insight) specifically mean for him, Huineng answered:

"When the land of your mind is free of error, this is the morality of your own nature. When the land of your mind is free of confusion, this is the meditation of your own nature. When the land of your mind is free of ignorance, this is the wisdom of your own nature". (Red Pine 2006, p. 36)

Altogether differently from the traditional understanding that makes certain distinctions among morality, meditation, and wisdom, Huineng proposed that the practice be applied directly in the mind-ground, as long as the self-nature is awakened through that. The morality, meditation, and wisdom are thus all constitutionally equivalent to one and the same thing—sudden enlightenment—although three names were given¹⁹. The unique efficacy of this proposal has escaped many scholars, who deny the function that morality (virtue) and wisdom (knowledge) may perform in

¹⁶ It is well-known that the Chan master is skillful in guiding people to become enlightened by means of the distinctive approach used in "Gong'an (paradoxes)". The master inspires learners by means of words, shouts or blows, according to different conditions and their levels of capacity, aiming to prompt them to gain enlightenment by themselves, which demonstrates the master's penetrating insights into the nature of outer things. I will elaborate this point in the following part of this essay, especially in "3. The Integration of Virtue with Knowledge".

¹⁷ In Damien Keown's view, the fundamental issue which any enquiry into Buddhist ethics must address initially concerns the relationship of ethics to the structure of Buddhist doctrine and practice. He formulated this problem in terms of the relationship between ethics (morality), knowledge, and the *summum bonum* and tried to solve the problem of how moral and intellectual goods relate to one another within the framework of Buddhist soteriology, which actually inspired the approach adopted in my research (Keown 1992, p. 8).

¹⁸ In the general sense, meditation is primarily a means for the promotion of and participation in the basic goods of morality and knowledge, as Damien Keown has pointed out (Keown 1992, p. 38).

¹⁹ Huineng said, "Once people realize their own nature, they don't differentiate between morality, meditation, and wisdom" (Red Pine 2006, p. 36).

the course of being enlightened, thus sliding toward what might be called “the transcendence trap”. For instance, D.T. Suzuki over-stressed anti-rationalism and antinomianism in Chan Buddhism from the satori perspective, and almost ignored its moral, “virtuous” dimensions²⁰; thus, the “awakening” dimension of Buddhist soteriology is so highlighted that the “virtue” is relativized and “knowledge” diminished. However, this is not the whole story.

In the next part, I will examine the concept of virtue, followed closely by knowledge. Exploration of these two ingredients and their relationship could highlight the salient feature of Huineng’s ethics.

5. Part 4

5.1. Virtue

The point that Chan practitioners cannot be bound by relative values such as right and wrong or good and evil, can be seen as Huineng’s radical idea. He said, “Our nature is free of error, free of confusion, and free of ignorance” (Red Pine 2006, p. 36). It shows that the self-nature is originally clean and perfect without being haunted by “wrongness” or “evilness”. Therefore, moral precepts need not be fulfilled. If Chan practitioners always do the prajna practice simply to retain the self-nature’s awakened state, that would be considered the “morality of self-nature”²¹.

We have pointed out, through the Daoist story about performance of high skill, how gradual practice is possible in the context of sudden enlightenment. When applied in ethical life, it is necessary to dissolve evaluations of right and wrong or good and evil, made by the established heart, so as to avoid attacking others’ standpoints with a self-righteous attitude. More precisely speaking, there is no need to distinguish whether or not rising and vanishing thoughts correspond to the standard of goodness, because any qualitative analysis and evaluative effort will hypostatize the originally empty nature of the thought. That means, no pain should be taken to become entangled in or struggle with successive thoughts, neither is it necessary to assess the quality of thoughts, but only to assure that the mind functions without attachments, just as the blade of Cook Ding’s knife slices into interstices without thickness and moves about empty space freely.

However, the state in which no stains exist in the mind does not signify the disappearance of ethics, or transcendence beyond good and evil. On the contrary, as the enlightened person experiences deeper and deeper emptiness in his practice, he can finally “get united with a greater being than himself or [be] absorbed in it”, and the atomic-like individual “melts away into something indescribable, something which is of a quite different order from what he is accustomed to” (Suzuki 1956, p. 105). In the investigation of Walter Terence Stace, this mystical experience is rooted in “cosmic consciousness”, which is similar to the concept of the first “Heavenly” in the *Zhuangzi*. Moreover, the universal oneness perceived by “cosmic consciousness” is none other than the true source of morality. He emphasized that the universal “One” (“Unity”) grasped by “cosmic consciousness” is the ultimate source of ethical values, rights, and duties, and is that part of human experience from which moral feelings (such as a feeling of sympathy or love) arise, thereby motivating the practitioner to live an altruistic and selfless life that is morality-oriented or committed to social ethics (Stace 1961, pp. 332–33).

Next, I will investigate the attributes of mystical experience in Huineng’s thought, according to his understanding of “oneness” and then explore the ethical implications. Huineng states:

²⁰ This point is clearly revealed by James Whitehill (Whitehill 1987, pp. 9–33). A further remark by Whitehill appears in a later publication: “Consequently, a view of the Buddhist virtues from this standpoint tends insistently to relativize and diminish the ‘virtue’ in the *summum bonum* of ‘awakened virtue’, until there is only the ‘awakened One’, beyond good and evil” (Keown 1992, p. 28).

²¹ Huineng said, “When the land of your mind is free of error, this is the morality of your own nature” (Red Pine 2006, p. 36).

“One Practice Samadhi (一行三昧)²² means at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, always practicing with a straightforward mind ... Deluded people who cling to the external attributes of a dharma get hold of One Practice Samadhi and just say that sitting motionless, eliminating delusions, and not thinking thoughts are One Practice Samadhi. But if that were true, a dharma like that would be the same as lifelessness and would constitute an obstruction of the Way instead. The Way has to flow freely”. (Red Pine 2006, pp. 132–33)

From the quotation above, it is evident that the “oneness” experienced shows non-duality of Dharma and the world, which manifests the spirit of a Perfect Doctrine (圓教). Huineng’s oneness is such an experience that, whatever the circumstances, no mental attachments are allowed with any of the myriad things in the world. It is necessary to break down the fences between “inside” and “outside”, “subjective” and “objective”, so as to do the prajna practice in the mundane world and on real things such as walking, staying at rest, or dealing with problems in every circumstance of daily life. Only by means of these true touchstones can the practitioner’s consummate state of mental self-cultivation be realized. However, non-duality demonstrated in the course of practicing a straightforward mind does not eliminate distinctions of the myriad things. Diversities among things are affirmed, pluralities and colorfulness are valued, although their empty essence must also be grasped. In this light, Stace’s theory on two types of mystical experience is not applicable; rather, the oneness experienced through the prajna practice involves a multiplicity of all things, including various individual persons.

Based on this kind of fundamental “oneness”, it would be reasonable to infer that Chan practitioners can not only show universal love and compassion for all beings and express it in the active service of mankind for the sake of common salvation, but also take the well-being of others into account within one’s own values, deliberation, and behavior. The feeling of selfless “love” that flows from this source, enables him to embrace the world in front of him wholeheartedly, to see all creatures from their own perspective, to respect their ways of life, and to affirm the significance of their existence and their preferences.

Moreover, “non-dualistic mystical awareness” seems to imply that the practitioner, being enlightened, is never disturbed by moral issues and thus bears an awakened virtue that is not concerned with distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong. However, Huineng expressed his views on moral virtues as follows:

“Our nature contains the ten thousand dharmas. That’s how great it is. And the ten thousand dharmas are our nature. To see humans and non-humans, both the good and the bad, good dharmas and bad dharmas, without rejecting them and without being corrupted by them, this is to be like space. This is what we mean by ‘great’”. (Red Pine 2006, pp. 20–21)

Huineng described the self-nature as an empty sky and saw its openness and tolerance as the ultimate value that symbolizes the “great”, so he actually did not slide toward “the transcendence trap” and fall into an amoral perspective. Moreover, the suggestion that “you must not throw them (evil & good) aside” is more convincing as proof that Huineng still has a moral concern, on the basis of his affirmative value. This can be elaborated in three points. Firstly, awakening the self-nature means

²² Red Pine made a good commentary here, clarifying that “Samadhi” is a Sanskrit term that refers to the concentration of the mind on a single object to the point where the separation of the object from the subject disappears. In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Seven Hundred Lines*, Manjushri asks the Buddha, “Bhagavan, what is One Practice Samadhi”? and the Buddha replies, “When the Dharma Realm (ed. another name for what we might call the universe) has but one attribute, and you focus all your efforts on the Dharma Realm, this is what is meant by One Practice Samadhi”. In the meantime, Red Pine states that Huineng uses this Buddhist term somewhat differently. “For Huineng, it is the practice to be engaged in at all times in all places with a straightforward mind (i.e., see one’s own nature)” (Red Pine 2006, p. 134). Additionally, Bernard Faure made a thorough study on the one-practice samadhi in early Chan and pointed out “Huineng and Shenhui ... reshaped it according to their own purposes, using it as the main instrument in their criticism of the Northern School and its seated meditation” (Faure 1986, p. 107).

dissolving the identity of “self” so that it becomes as empty as possible; it is selflessness that makes a person have strong motivation to behave morally²³ and avoid being disturbed by evil thoughts. Secondly, in terms of treating others, the great “emptiness” breeds the virtues of openness and tolerance, even to evil. Finally, with a clear realization that ignorance is deeply and chronically rooted in all human beings, and with the penetrating insight that every happening has its inevitable cause that serves as a Karmic seed and will bear its due fruits sometime²⁴, the enlightened practitioner shows sympathetic understanding and immense pity for evil. In the *Daodejing*, there is a saying that goes, “The sage has no fixed mind, she takes the mind of the people as her mind. I treat the good as good, I also treat the evil as good. This is true goodness. I trust the trustworthy, I also trust the untrustworthy. This is real trust” (Lao 2005, Chapter 49). This is the real virtue of the sage in the Daoist manner, which is comparable to the ethics in Chan Buddhism. Embracing evil with an inclusive and open mind also connotes the non-dual spirit of Huineng’s philosophy, and therein lies real morality.

If we look back to the *Zhuangzi*, a similar question also exists in some scholars’ understanding of his ethical proposition. As Zhuangzi stated, “the sage harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in Heaven the Equalizer”. It seemingly provides some evidence in favor of the relativist reading and amoral position²⁵. However, Zhuangzi’s further explanation has proved that this is not the whole story:

“What do I mean by harmonizing them with the Heavenly Equality? Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument”. (Watson 2013, p. 17)

It is obvious that Zhuangzi’s advocacy of “rests in Heaven the Equalizer” intrinsically recommends that we follow things as they are, meaning that everything in the world has its own natural pattern which is beyond any dispute and which represents the ultimate value of Dao that Zhuangzi recognized as the “appropriate” way to follow. This issue is thus tied up with the concept of “knowledge” that Huineng also had to confront²⁶.

5.2. Knowledge

The concept of “knowledge” should first be clarified in the *Platform Sutra*, since it has a very distinctive connotation in Huineng’s thought. In general, knowledge stands for the intellectual dimension or for qualities of the mind, denoting intellectual excellence and grasping truth as its object.

²³ The teachings of Confucianism have provided great examples of the precept that selflessness leads to morality. Feng Youlan offers a good explanation in terms of the mysticism in Mencius’ theory. He cites Mencius’ words, “all things are completely within us. There is no greater delight than to realize this through self-cultivation” and elaborates in this way: “In other words, through the full development of his nature, a man can not only know Heaven, but can also become one with Heaven. Also, when a man fully developed his unbearing minds [intolerant of another’s suffering], he has within him the virtue of human-heartedness, and the best way to human-heartedness is the practice of zhong (忠) [loyalty] and shu (恕) [reciprocity]. Through this practice, one’s egoism and selfishness are gradually reduced. And when they are reduced, one comes to feel that there is no longer a distinction between oneself and others, and so of distinction between the individual and the universe. That is to say, one becomes identified with the universe as a whole. This leads to a realization that ‘all things are complete within us’” (Feng 2007, p. 124).

²⁴ As Huineng usually refused to be engaged in conceptual and theoretical discussions of Buddhist doctrines, there is little conceptual explanation and theory-building about Karma. However, it does not mean he has no consciousness of it. In the *Platform Sutra*, we can still find several evidences that demonstrate karmic consequences taking place in an instant-to-instant sort of cause-effect sequence in his theory. Moreover, see (Zeuscher 1981, pp. 411–12).

²⁵ For instance, Philip J. Ivanhoe comments on Chad Hansen’s relativist reading, that sees only the Heavenly point of view, as not human and merely a “view from nowhere”, which would probably result in an amoral stance, such as what Robert Eno considered “ethically inadequate”, thus leaving room for evil (Ivanhoe 1996, p. 200; Eno 1996, p. 143).

²⁶ The Dao (i.e., Way) refers to the “appropriate” way. There are many “ways” to do something, but “Dao” (or Way) is the most appropriate one which lies in conforming with the natural pattern of things, in Zhuangzi’s view (I have to admit that different people hold different views on “appropriateness”). In this sense, it is an issue related to “knowledge” and worth being explored further, in that obviously one may know very well that he/she should choose an appropriate way to do something, but it is still possible for him/her to choose an improper one. It is not a problem of subjective “will”, but it pertains to the grasp of an objective “knowledge”.

For the Northern school, knowledge can be acquired by meditation, leading to wisdom²⁷. However, Huineng said:

“This Dharma teaching of mine is based on meditation and wisdom. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that meditation and wisdom are separate. Meditation and wisdom are of one essence and not two. Meditation is the body of wisdom, and wisdom is the function of meditation. Wherever you find wisdom, you find meditation. And wherever you find meditation, you find wisdom”. (Red Pine 2006, p. 10)

For him, meditation is not sitting in a meditative state but is a mental mode of “no-thought” or “non-form”, that is, internally seeing the original nature and never being confused by deluded thoughts or outer forms, which is understood as the tenet of sudden enlightenment. Wisdom is simultaneously attained as sudden enlightenment happens, which is the source from which true knowledge, or insights are derived. Huineng compared “wisdom” to the “sun and moon” and said:

“Our nature is pure like the clear sky above, and our wisdom is like the sun and the moon, our wisdom is always shining. But if externally we become attached to objects, the clouds of delusion cover up our nature, and we can’t see it” (Red Pine 2006, p. 16). It is worth noting that Yampolsky annotated the same paragraph in the Platform Sutra in a subtly different way.

“The purity of the nature of man in this world is like the blue sky; wisdom is like the sun, knowledge like the moon. Although knowledge and wisdom are always clear, if you cling to external environments, the floating clouds of false thoughts will create a cover, and your own natures cannot become clear”. (Yampolsky 1967, p. 142)

It is obvious that Red Pine takes “wisdom” and “knowledge” as a single concept, expressed binomially as “sun and moon”, which he treats jointly, whereas Yampolsky still makes a distinction. Their renderings, subtly different but both legitimate, imply that “knowledge” in the *Platform Sutra* is not used in an intellectual sense but connotes awakening the nature to achieve wisdom. Moreover, closely paralleling the path to spontaneity in Daoism²⁸, the mind’s cognitive function, which is to acquire objective knowledge, is to some extent diminished and excluded²⁹. That is because cognition, perception, and conceptualization, from which knowledge is generated and formed, would at some level disturb the intuitive and sudden experience of seeing into the self-nature. However, as we have seen from the story in the *Zhuangzi*, the consummately skillful cook still possesses knowledge gained during practical training, although his mind is completely empty, as if “fasting”, in the ultimate spontaneous state. Since human beings must use the intellectual mind to live in the real world and solve real problems during their lifetimes, Huineng accepted this fact and never disdained cognitive activity and the objective knowledge obtained.

²⁷ Suzuki reckons that, for the Northern School, the separated, meditational practice is seen to be a necessary prerequisite for wisdom, though its drawback is, “Dhyana (meditation) became the exercise of killing life, of keeping the mind in a state of torpor and making the Yogins socially useless, while Prajna (wisdom), left to itself, lost its profundity, for it was identified with intellectual subtleties which dealt in concepts and their analyses” (Suzuki 1981, pp. 32–33).

²⁸ Zhuangzi criticized and reflected on the misuse of cognitive ability. For instance, in the Chapter, “The Secret of Caring for Life”: “Your life has a limit but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger. If you understand this and still strive for knowledge, you will be in danger for certain!” (Watson 2013, p. 19); in the Chapter, “In the World of Men”: “Virtue is destroyed by fame, and wisdom comes out of wrangling. Fame is something to beat people down with, and wisdom is a device for wrangling” (Watson 2013, p. 22). Furthermore, Zhuangzi was regarded as one of the negative elements that prevented the practitioner from embracing the Dao in the process of self-cultivation. In addition “fasting of the heart”, the most well-known method of practice is “sit down and forget everything” (坐忘). For example, “I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything” (Watson 2013, p. 53). It aims to highlight the importance of discarding intellectual knowledge in the path to becoming a Daoist sage.

²⁹ Red Pine made a note to explain the “Prajna wisdom”, saying, “Prajna means ‘before knowledge’, and knowledge, according to the Mahayana, is just another name for delusion” (Red Pine 2006, p. 127). This does spell out the negative dimension of knowledge and its obstructiveness to wisdom, though I still hold some reservations on this point.

On the one hand, in principle, every means that can help the practitioner become enlightened is advisable. Huineng stated: “Originally there was no teaching about the Four Vehicles. But because the capacity of the human mind has four levels, the Dharma has the Four Vehicles” (Red Pine 2006, p. 39). Although his proposition on sudden enlightenment is deemed the Supreme Vehicle and must be ranked as the highest priority, the other three Vehicles³⁰, which are seeing, hearing, reciting, and understanding the Dharma, are not belittled. For instance, it is recorded in the *Platform Sutra* that a priest named Fada had been reciting the Lotus Sutra continuously for seven years. Notwithstanding proficiency in the Dharma, his mind was still deluded and he did not know where the true Dharma lay. Huineng, using the metaphor of nurturing a flower’s opening, urged him first and foremost to “open” the true wisdom of the Buddha, which is the Lotus Sutra’s one-vehicle Dharma, rather than to “open” the worldly “wisdom” of sentient beings that would create evil, attended by stupidity and delusion. Nevertheless, he added later in the sutra that the Buddha’s teaching is divided into three Vehicles in order to benefit the deluded. The varieties of the Buddha’s teaching are for the convenience of different practitioners, hence their importance. This indicates that a certain level of cognition and reflection is still called for, which stands in strong contrast to the view within Chan scholarship that all practitioners who aspire to enlightenment must discard knowledge generated by “discriminating thought”. Therefore, Huineng articulated the relationship between “sudden enlightenment” and “knowledge” as: “When you develop the understanding of a buddha, you read the Lotus. When you develop the understanding of an ordinary being, the Lotus reads you” (Red Pine 2006, p. 38).

On the other hand, he believed that only on the premise of being enlightened can cognitive activity function properly and the knowledge obtained and utilized be restored in an authentic form. The well-known portrait concerning the three stages of Chan practitioners’ spiritual development is offered by Qingyuan Xingsi 青原行思 (671–740), the great disciple of Huineng:

“Before starting to engage in Zuochan (meditation) thirty years ago, this old monk saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. Afterwards, by obtaining wisdom through personal experience and finding an entry into enlightenment, I did not see mountains as mountains. Now that I have found a resting place, I again see mountains only as mountains and rivers only as rivers”. (Wudeng Huiyuan, cited in Gu and Guo 2017, p. 251)

The three situations are often interpreted as three phases of self-cultivation for a Chan practitioner, from seeing objects as permanent, inherently existing things to penetrating into their essence of emptiness but clinging to it, and finally to a fuller, dialectical understanding of the world and his life. The third stage, of again seeing mountains only as mountains and rivers only as rivers, represents a new worldview of the practitioner who has experienced the empty essence of all things and inner thoughts and thus was never attached to them, and *yet kept from clinging to emptiness either*, so everything still truly exists but has new significance in his world of meaning. We can infer, from the accepted interpretation of this, that cognitive activity with knowledge in itself, if compared to mountains or rivers, would also be reaffirmed in the supreme spiritual stage by Huineng, provided the practitioner does not attach to it.

Finally, I have to reiterate that the connotation of “knowledge” is in fact equivalent to “wisdom” in the context of *Platform Sutra* and it can only be attained by the prajna practice, whereas worldly “intellectual insights” are accessible by many methods. That is the radical difference between the two kinds of knowledge. Huineng also held the opinion that if the prajna practice is done, intellectual knowledge would be set straight and by no means go astray. More than that, in an enlightened state, knowledge (in the intellectual sense) and virtue are integrated and cooperate with each other

³⁰ In the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng detailed that the other three Vehicles: “Observing, listening, reading, and reciting make up the Small Vehicle. Becoming aware of dharmas and understanding their meaning make up the Middle Vehicle. Putting the Dharma into practice makes up the Great Vehicle” (Red Pine 2006, p. 39). They are all relevant to the cognitive ability, along with objective knowledge.

harmoniously. Although Huineng was not concerned to explicitly expand on their relationship, it is still possible to make an inference from his theory and rhetorical tone, which I will explore further.

5.3. The Integration of Virtue with Knowledge

In a perfected, spontaneous state of Daoist self-cultivation, the practitioner can allow the Heavenly within him to match up with the Heavenly in the world, but in the ultimate sense there is no split between the two dimensions of “Heavenly”, which respectively signify the subjective virtuous state and objective nature or natural tendency of things. As far as the ethical life is concerned, “harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in Heaven the Equalizer” does not mean abandoning distinctions of right and wrong; rather, it is a flexible attitude, based on refusal to hold fixed notions of what is “right” and “wrong” arising from the established mind. With the clearest insights into the nature or natural tendency of things, the interaction of the Daoist sage with other people can be tailored to the unique characteristics of particular individuals, particular time and circumstances³¹, which constitutes the unique moral dimension of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. This point shares a striking similarity with Huineng’s idea.

For Huineng, an enlightened person is able to act appropriately in every occasion, he can behave with good intention and find expression in right actions, since morality does not contradict cognitive activity and the ensuing knowledge³².

Firstly, the virtuous person in an enlightened state can adjust his behavior according to the nature of things. For example, in the course of edifying others, a Chan master who has profound concern for saving people from affliction is also skillful in guiding people to become enlightened. The most distinctive approach is the use of “Gong’an” (paradox), which serves as an ingenious means to undermine learners’ habitually rational thinking. The master inspires learners by means of words, shouts or blows according to different conditions and their levels of capacity, makes tactful directions, and gives instructive clues, alluding to the truth in subtle ways to make them illuminated³³. In the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng preached his teaching to different disciples such as Zhicheng (志誠), Fada (法達), and Zhichang (智常) according to their various degrees of consciousness, sensibility, and personal background.

Secondly, the enlightened virtuous person is adept in adapting himself to various situations and ever-changing circumstances. Brook Ziporyn has drawn an analogy between the mind and a mirror to explain the meaning of genuine knowledge in the *Zhuangzi*. He first argues that we human beings

³¹ Jesse Fleming elucidates Zhuangzi’s philosophy of love from the perspective of “inborn natures”: “Zhuangzi emphasizes that species all have their own inborn natures (which successful trainers of monkeys, horses, and tigers all know, respect, and act in accord with), and that all individuals have their own unique ‘virtue’ (de), or potentiality to be fulfilled” (Fleming 1999, p. 386). Based on this, he arrives at the conclusion, “one’s interactions with friends, clients, students, etc. must be tailored to the unique characteristics of that particular individual, and that particular time and circumstance” (Fleming 1999, p. 386). Professor Fang Wanquan 方萬全 in Taiwan analyzes theoretical errors caused by mistaking Zhuangzi for an advocate of agnostic, relativist, and amoral views; finally, he draws the conclusion that, for a Daoist sage, there does exist the criteria of judgement to distinguish right and wrong. Zhuangzi’s “moral consciousness”, which is rooted in non-action and the empty spiritual state, is so acute that the “moral requirements” of specific circumstances could faithfully show up in his awareness. Moreover, the judgement criteria originating from his moral consciousness are precisely built on discerning heavenly or natural discriminations among things (Fang 2014, pp. 167–92).

³² Dan Lusthaus introduces a bifurcated pair of categories of his own to distinguish between two types of epistemic motives or operations (proscriptive epistemology and prescriptive epistemology), and he clarifies that Huineng’s move is to deconstruct Shenxiu’s proscriptive epistemology with a prescriptive epistemology, one which takes as its only imperative the direct seeing of the mirror or mind itself, i.e., reflecting things as they are and having no standpoints though practitioners may cling to or project meanings into, what they see reflected (Lusthaus 1985, pp. 170–78). He also implies that, similar to other schools of Buddhism, Huineng actually posited the same dependence of ontology on epistemological construction.

³³ Dan Lusthaus mentions, “Chan is not ‘non-rational’; koans (Gong’an) are unsolvable questions which have answers. Even today when a monk has an Awakening experience, he is grilled with koans and he must spontaneously and unhesitatingly answer them” (Lusthaus 1985, p. 174). It indicates that Gong’an serves only as a special “method” to help the practitioner become enlightened, so the startlingly disjunctive phenomena such as Chan blows, shouts, etc., can only be appreciated within the context of Chan training.

should let go of attachments to ideas, just as Buddhism proposes, thereby retaining an empty mental state, just as a mirror does not “store” images of things previously reflected. Then, he says:

“The utmost Man uses his mind like a mirror the mirror has its own activity, its own trajectory, derived from the emergent value of the situation and from the mirror’s placement it is the ‘present this’ that the mirror reflects or, rather, responds to”. (Ziporyn 2013, p. 123)

That is to say, the sage is able to respond promptly once the “present this” emerges and he behaves appropriately in the light of different situations, without planning or scheming, just as a mirror that has its own position and perspective reflects changing situations around its specific placement. In fact, there are many stories in the *Platform Sutra* telling about Huineng’s ways of reaction to external things. As an enlightened man himself, he not only raises and answers questions ingeniously, but also inspires and illuminates disciples in conformity to distinct situations. In one story, Shenxiu sent his disciple Zhicheng to secretly learn Huineng’s Dharma on sudden enlightenment. When Zhicheng heard the Dharma, he was at once enlightened and awakened to his original mind. Since he was unable to gain awakening under his teacher Shenxiu in the Yuquan Temple, he asked for instruction from Huineng. There, a dialogue follows:

Master Huineng said, “If that’s where you’re from, you must be a spy”.

Zhicheng said, “I’m not a spy”.

The Sixth Patriarch said, “And why not”?

Zhicheng said, “Before I spoke, I was. But now that I’ve spoken, I’m not”.

The Sixth Patriarch said, “It’s the same with ‘affliction is enlightenment’”. (Red Pine 2006, p. 35)

Responding to the specific incident with inspiring methods of education, Huineng drew on “affliction is enlightenment.” The epithet, “spy”, was removed from Zhicheng when Huineng preached the sermon to him; in the same way, it is at the moment when passions are dispelled by the awakening of one’s own mind, that enlightenment happens. The story shows how Huineng, as a wisdom master whose virtue is highly respected, can intelligently find the proper way to offer effective teaching to students.

The integration of virtue with knowledge testifies to the coherence of non-duality in Huineng’s fully perfected doctrine. Morality and knowledge are two sides of one coin; they accompany each other in gradual prajna practice and simultaneously reveal their true essence in an appropriate situation, provided sudden enlightenment is achieved. In a word, the uniqueness of Huineng’s ethics, in effect, exposes the most distinctive character of the *Platform Sutra*: Sudden enlightenment and gradual practice, morality and knowledge in ultimate combination and harmony, all of which deserve further reflection.

6. Conclusions

In the opinion of most scholars, sudden enlightenment characterizes Huineng’s thought, at the expense of diminishing the dimension of gradual practice. However, that assertion is not only incommensurate with the actual process in real practice for a Chan practitioner, but also runs counter to abundant textual materials in the *Platform Sutra* that apparently show that Huineng attached great importance to self-cultivation in a gradual manner. However, we cannot avoid the problem of how gradual practice is truly realized, since sudden enlightenment always takes place as an act of one moment, by awakening one’s own self-nature, whereas gradual practice has a goal to be achieved, which requires tireless efforts. I try to address the problem from the perspective of the famous story of Cook Ding in the *Zhuangzi*. The key to Daoist spontaneity is following the Dao (nature or

natural tendency of outer things) with an empty heart through long-time practice. Likewise, the Chan practitioner is required to do the prajna practice, that is, clearly seeing into and truly experiencing the Dao (emptiness of outer things and inner thoughts) without attachments, allowing the mind to function freely with an empty mindset and never struggling with deluded thoughts. After continuous prajna practice in this way, the awakened state grows fully natural.

Moreover, the notable feature of the prajna practice is its realization in the mundane world constituted by complex relationships, but in that case, will the perfected “Daoist-like” enlightenment give rise to transcendence of ethics? By investigating further Cook Ding’s story from the perspective of “allowing the Heavenly within me to match up with the Heavenly in the world”, a description that sums up the secret to Cook Ding’s exquisite skills and also provides the key to understanding the connection of virtue and knowledge in Zhuangzi, I attempt to elucidate the roles that two pivotal elements—virtue and knowledge—play in Huineng’s ethics. Firstly, as the Daoist sage who maintains an empty heart-mind is regarded as manifesting the potential virtue endowed by “Heaven”, which represents the ultimate value, and as even experiencing the mysterious oneness of the empty heart-mind, similarly, the Chan practitioner who has experienced emptiness of all things as well as his own self would probably gain a “universal consciousness” from which the true moral feelings could flow and thus lead to moral actions. In the meantime, diversities among things are affirmed, pluralities and colorfulness are valued, and the well-being of others within one’s own world of significance is taken into consideration, given the unique attributes of mystical experience in Huineng’s theory. Secondly, the usage of “knowledge” in the *Platform Sutra* is equivalent to seeing the self-nature to gain wisdom, thus referring to the prajna practice *per se*, while “knowledge” in a general sense is still retained as long as it contributes to enlightenment. Just as the interaction of the Daoist sage with outer things can be tailored to their natures and natural tendencies (particular individuals, time, circumstances, etc.), which are specific forms of the “Heavenly Way”, the enlightened Chan practitioner (for instance, the Chan master) can also find appropriate ways to fulfill their moral concerns. In this way, morality and knowledge in fact accompany each other in a truly enlightening condition of life. Thus, the unique ethical insights gained from integrating gradual practice with sudden enlightenment in the *Platform Sutra* actually embodies the characteristics of perfection, especially the non-duality of Dharma and the world, as well as the experience of emptiness and re-affirmation of various myriad of things.

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