

# Two Paths to Zen Enlightenment

Austin Che

June 5, 2000

What is enlightenment? I wish I were enlightened enough to say. Enlightenment, or something similar, is the final destination in some religions, while in other religions, enlightenment is only one step towards an even higher goal. The way that a religion views enlightenment is perhaps the most important factor in determining how one goes about achieving enlightenment and what one is expected to do in everyday life. Here we will trace how different views of enlightenment lead to the sudden and gradual approaches to enlightenment that is found in Zen Buddhism. While these two approaches seem to contradict each other, in reality, both can exist simultaneously, and the difference between the two is not as large as it initially appears.

In the history of Zen and Buddhism in general, there has been much debate about the process by which one reaches enlightenment. Traditionally Buddhism has advocated a slow and gradual approach to reach satori, the Buddhist enlightenment. Enlightenment, in this case, specifically means the extinguishment of all attachments and an escape from samsara, the cycle of life. This is a long process that occurs in stages, as illustrated by the Eightfold Path given by the Buddha to eliminate craving. In this model of enlightenment, it makes perfect sense to have stages, to have degrees of attachment.

The other Buddhist view holds that we are just deluded and we need to see our true nature. Under this view, to achieve enlightenment, we need to let

go of our delusions. Enlightenment occurs when we realize that we've had the Buddha nature all along. The gradual view is apparently inconsistent with this view, since there is no difference between our nature before enlightenment and our nature after enlightenment. This lack of difference implies that there can be no stages or degrees of progress. Either we realize our true nature or we don't.

With the coming of Zen, this more sudden approach appears to win out. But even within the Zen tradition itself, there has not been agreement that the sudden approach is the correct one. In the eighth-century, the main point of conflict between the Northern and Southern schools of Ch'an Buddhism in China, is whether the enlightenment experience is sudden or gradual. The North took the traditional Buddhist view of gradual enlightenment, while the Southern school took the sudden approach. Suddenness as an approach to enlightenment came to dominate Zen with the Platform Sutra, supposedly the words of Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch. The title of the sermon, "Sudden Doctrine of the Great Perfection of Wisdom," aptly describes the underlying theme throughout the sutra. Some have argued that the real author of the Platform Sutra was Shen-hui, one of Hui-neng's disciples, but whoever the author, this sudden theory of enlightenment aimed to provide a "epistemological-cum-ontological position opposed to that of early Buddhism" [1].

However, where does the difference arise between these two schools of thought? There are sudden experiences within the gradual school and vice-versa. "All Buddhist schools accept that the enlightenment experience at the very moment it occurs is a sudden event, but this is not the only meaning of Sudden in the Sudden Enlightenment School context" [3]. If that is the case, what is this distinction between sudden and gradual and why should we even care?

It is first important to clarify what is meant by sudden and gradual. The sudden view emphasizes intuition while the gradual view emphasizes effort. However, that doesn't mean that enlightenment is easy to achieve under the sudden view. With self-realization being such a major part of the sudden doctrine, the

one seeking enlightenment must have the courage to find enlightenment on his own. “It is thus conceivable that the sudden method might very well, from the standpoint of time, take much longer to attain than the gradual method” [7]. So gradual and sudden may be better defined not in terms of temporal differences. Although gradual could be in a temporal sense mean that it takes time to reach enlightenment, it could also be used in a spatial sense to mean that enlightenment comes in stages [1]. Therefore the basic difference between the two can be stated as follows.

The fundamental philosophical rift at stake in the controversy as lying between the understanding of enlightenment as a sudden leap into a state or realm of experience that is integral, ineffable, and innate and the understanding of enlightenment as a gradual process of accumulation (or reduction), as being describable, as having degrees, and as being susceptible to progressive cultivation. [2]

Along with these differing views of enlightenment, there is an inherent difference in ontology, or the way they view the Buddha and how our existence relates to him. Under the gradual view, the Buddha is a goal to achieve, and that we can become better persons if we could only become more like the Buddha. The gradual point of view sees the human condition as resulting from attachment, and thus enlightenment is in overcoming a bad habit. In the sudden view, we already are the Buddha. The sudden point of view sees the human condition as a result of an error in perception, and we just need to open our eyes, and see the Buddha nature within us. Being enlightened under this view doesn't make us any better than those who aren't enlightened. Thus the sudden doctrine focuses on the enlightenment, while the gradual focuses on the process of finding enlightenment.

But is this really a critical difference between the two schools of thought? Tsung-mi says both goals are valid, and in fact, says that there are multiple

forms of enlightenment. He distinguishes two forms of enlightenment, the enlightenment of complete realization and the enlightenment of initial insight [11]. The path to Buddhahood contains a sudden initial insight, followed by gradual cultivation, and a final complete enlightenment. Thus, we can see that the sudden and gradual positions may simply be describing what happens on one path at different points.

Let us see how this sudden and gradual distinction works its way into the Buddhist lives. Under the sudden doctrine, anyone can become enlightened. You don't have to be a monk or be in a monastery. You just need a moment of inspiration. In fact, it almost seems as if becoming a monk goes against everything that's sudden in the sudden view of thinking. The more one does anything to attempt to achieve enlightenment, the further one will be from actual attainment. In terms of everyday life, under the sudden view you live like you always have been until the day you are struck with enlightenment.

Then what is the purpose of meditation, that all schools of Zen seem to value? If enlightenment is sudden, why do anything at all, as when enlightenment comes, it will come instantly. "Meditation cannot effect enlightenment because, strictly speaking, meditation and the passions it seeks to purge are ontologically empty and illusory" [1]. If one is to follow the doctrine put forth by Hui-neng, then meditation is not necessary, as he says in the Platform Sutra:

Some people teach men to sit viewing the mind and viewing purity, not moving and not activating the mind, and to this they devote their efforts. Deluded people do not realize that this is wrong, cling to this doctrine, and become confused. [9]

On the other hand, the sudden school doesn't advocate that you do nothing and wait to be struck with inspiration. At first it seems contradictory. How can the sudden school expect us to listen to them when their basic doctrine is that we don't need anything they can give us? I think the critical point is when

the meditation is done and for what purpose. Tsung-mi says, “If one engages in spiritual cultivation without having first experienced enlightenment, then it is not authentic practice” [12]. Meditation, and cultivation, can be done under the sudden doctrine just like it is under the gradual view. The only difference is that it must have been preceded by that flash of insight to make the meditation worthwhile.

Other forms of preparation, typically associated with the gradual school, can also be useful under the sudden view. “Sudden Enlightenment may come to one, but unless he or she is prepared to recognize it, and even more importantly to integrate it into his or her everyday psychological being, it will almost certainly come only to slip away” [3]. The analogy of rain falling on soil is very appropriate. The rain represents enlightenment and it falls equally on both fertile and infertile soil. We have no control over the rain, but when it does fall, we want ourselves, the soil, to be fertile. For that to happen, we need to have some preparation. The preparation should not be viewed as trying to make it rain, since we can’t do that. Rather the preparation is so we will be ready when it does rain. The same work, in the gradual school is seen as progress towards enlightenment, and in the sudden school as preparation for the moment of insight.

While this sudden and gradual distinction is an important one to understand, it is also not that important to fight over. Even Hui-neng, the “founder” of the Southern sudden school, agreed that the distinction may not be that important.

What is meant by ‘gradual’ and ‘sudden?’ The Dharma itself is the same, but in seeing it there is a slow way and a fast way. Seen slowly, it is the gradual, seen fast it is the sudden [teaching]. Dharma is without sudden or gradual, but some people are keen and others dull; hence the names ‘sudden’ and ‘gradual.’ [8]

Of course, while criticizing that the gradual school practitioners are dull, we

see that Hui-neng sees no difference in the ultimate goal, in the Dharma itself. The ultimate goal and intrinsic views of both schools are the same. The process is just slightly different.

If we go to the Northern school of Ch'an, home of gradualistic ideals, we can see that the sudden ideas are there also.

A further examination of Northern Ch'an writings, however, reveals that the Northern Line did not - as the author claims Shen-hui to have charged - reject the possibility of sudden enlightenment. The Kuan-hsin lun for example, clearly states that "enlightenment takes place in a moment." [5]

We have already seen that Tsung-mi believes the sudden and the gradual approaches are just parallel paths to the same destination. The Southern position can be characterized as "sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation," while the Northern position can be characterized as "gradual cultivation followed by sudden enlightenment." While the ultimate goal of Tsung-mi may have been to describe the Northern school in an inferior manner like Hui-neng did, what is important is that both approaches are equally valid, and the difference may come down to just a matter of preference. Neither the sudden nor the gradual school can exist without the other. "Any one position taken up to the exclusion of the others is, *by that very fact*, invalid" [10].

To go back to the first Patriarch, Bodhidharma, we hear him talk about both enlightenment by reason, that is sudden enlightenment, and enlightenment by practice, which is found in gradual enlightenment.

Many roads lead to the Path, but basically there are only two: reason and practice. To enter by reason means to realize the essence through instruction [scriptures] and to believe that all living things share the same true nature, which isn't apparent because it's shrouded

by sensation and delusion. ... Without moving, without effort, they enter, we say, by reason.

To enter by practice refers to four all-inclusive practices: suffering injustice, adapting to conditions [karma], seeking nothing, and practicing the Dharma. [4]

It seems that almost everyone on either side, and even people not on any side, agree that both the sudden and gradual views are important and are not incompatible. Winston King, a phenomenologist of religion, “concludes that there is really no difference between sudden and gradual attainments of enlightenment.”

“Suddenness” or “gradualness” of enlightenment... appears to depend primarily upon emphasis and/or point of specification. One may choose to emphasize the prior preparation... and call it “gradual”; or one may stress the experiential breakthrough and call it “sudden.” [1]

So, we know that on the surface, there are many distinctions that can be made between sudden or gradual enlightenment, that appear to be incompatible with each other. What is delusion? Is it just a matter of perception, as the sudden school would like to have us believe, or is it a matter of attachment? Can there be partial enlightenment? What about action? Should action be consciously cultivated or should it be spontaneous? But if we look more deeply into the fundamental beliefs and issues, we see that this distinction disappears and making the distinction may not be that important after all. However one wants to view sudden and gradual, the core issues will be the same in both, and the differences are minor compared to the common ground they share.

We can view the gradual and the sudden approach as just two different paths that eventually come back together. In the gradual approach, you first try to know oneself and to study one’s mind. And this brings the understanding to

forget one's mind, and reach enlightenment. The sudden approach skips directly ahead without first building up one's understanding. In a sense, the gradual approach involves the construction followed by the deconstruction of what one has built. The sudden approach immediately goes for deconstructing everything one knows. Tang Huyen says, "So quick awakening or slow awakening, it all comes down to the same thing: whatever time you have taken to build up your mass of delusion, it will take the same amount of time to build it down, if ever" [6]. We can also see it clearly in Tsung-mi's model, where each step towards enlightenment undoes one step in the process of delusion.

The whole issue here has dealt with the question of what enlightenment really is. It is one thing at one time, and another at another time, and sometimes it is both things at the same time. The sudden and gradual debate is simply a natural extension of this question. Enlightenment may be sudden today, gradual tomorrow, and both sudden and gradual the day after. Perhaps the question shouldn't be what is enlightenment, but rather, what is enlightenment not? Gradually or suddenly, whichever one believes, in the end, we can all be satisfied in whatever enlightenment we attain.

**Notes**

1. <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-PHIL/ivan.htm>
2. Luis Gomez, University of Michigan, "Purifying Gold: The Metaphor of Effort and Intuition in Buddhist Thought."  
<http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-JOCP/gregory.htm>
3. <http://www.wgn.net/~karunadh/sudden.html>
4. Bodhidharma's Sermon, Red Pine, "The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma." North Point Press, New York, 1987.
5. Robert Zeuschner, University of Southern California, "Sudden and Gradual in the Division Between the Northern and Southern Lines of Ch'an."  
<http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-JOCP/gregory.htm>
6. Tang Huyen on the newsgroup alt.philosophy.zen
7. Philip Yampolsky, Platform Sutra, p. 116
8. Philip Yampolsky, Platform Sutra, p. 163
9. Philip Yampolsky, Platform Sutra, p. 137
10. Gregory, Sudden Enlightenment Followed by Gradual Cultivation, p. 281
11. Gregory, Sudden Enlightenment Followed by Gradual Cultivation, p. 283
12. Gregory, Sudden Enlightenment Followed by Gradual Cultivation, p. 286