Note: This is an introduction to the translations of Mind Inscription *and* Mind-King Inscription*,* Primary Point *Summer 2012, pages 22-25.*

Introduction to *Mind Inscription* and *Mind-King Inscription*

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Many Zen practitioners and students are familiar with the poem *Xinxin ming,* usually translated as "Faith in Mind" or "Trust in Mind." The two poems translated here, the *Xin ming* and *Xinwang ming,* were published together with the *Xinxin ming* in an appendix to the *Jingde chuandeng lu,* the "Jingde Transmission of the Lamp," the most famous and widely accepted traditional Chinese record of the early transmission of Zen.

There are a few interesting characteristics that stand out when we look at these three poems together. Even though they are attributed to legendary figures in early Zen history who lived in different places and times, they share a consistent focus on the term *mind* (*xin* 心, sometimes also translated as "heart/mind") and a particular argument about the importance of mind—so much so that they appear to have been written in dialogue with one another. Their titles seem to make them naturally appear as part of a series. (The word *ming* literally means "inscription," as an engraving on stone, or figuratively something that should be preserved in one's heart/mind). The compilers of the Jingde text obviously thought they belonged together. And, arguably, they seem to make one interconnected statement about the purpose of Zen practice.

The reason, many modern scholars suggest, is that these three inscriptions are likely not poems written over several centuries in different locations, but rather the products of one, much later, school of Zen—that is, they were not written in the sixth or seventh century but most likely in the late ninth century, during the same period of doctrinal dispute and schism that produced the division between the Northern and Southern schools (that is, the schools traditionally associated with Shenxiu and Huineng, the supposedly rival dharma heirs of Hongren, the fifth patriarch). After they were written, for reasons no one knows, they were misattributed backward in time to other, more famous teachers, about whom little was actually known. The *Xin ming* was said to be the work of Niutou Farong (594–657), the *Xinwang ming* was ascribed to a great Buddhist layman and saint, Mahasattva Fu (497–569) and the *Xinxin ming* was ascribed to Sengcan (Seng-t'san), the third patriarch of Zen (d. 606)

The school that most scholars now believe produced these poems is the Ox-Head (Niutou) school of Zen, which is named for a mountain that still exists today within the city limits of Nanjing in southern China. The Ox-Head school played a pivotal but short-lived role in the history of Zen during the Tang dynasty. Although almost nothing about its origins is reliably known, the official transmission story of the school states that the founder, Niutou Farong (putative author of the *Xin ming*), received transmission from the fourth patriarch, Daoxin. Several generations later, during the time of the schism between the Northern and Southern schools—which fought over the transmission of the *fifth* patriarch—the Ox-Head school existed, at least to some degree, as a "third way," or neutral arbiter between the two, because it claimed an earlier origin point. One Ox-Head teacher is quoted as saying, "I do not accept either the Northern or Southern schools. The mind is my school."

The Ox-Head school had a brief period of prominence and political favor, but in the tenth century (the beginning of the so-called "Golden Age" of Chinese Zen, during which the most famous Zen masters lived) it lost popularity and gradually died out. However, its ecumenical and broad-minded tradition and the texts it produced (most of which are now lost) were enormously influential on the development of later Chinese Zen. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, Japanese scholars of Zen, including D. T. Suzuki and Yanagida Seizan, began bringing to light documents associated with the Ox-Head school that were discovered in the Dunhuang library—a trove of ancient Chinese manuscripts discovered by European explorers in the far west of China in the early twentieth century. These Oh-Head texts from Dunhuang included two prose works, the *Wuxin lun* (Discourse on No Mind) and *Jueguan lun* (Discourse on Cutting Off Perceptions) that had been lost for nearly a millenium. By comparing the textual similarities between these prose texts, the three mind inscriptions and the *Platform Sutra,* attributed to Huineng, and by tracing references to these texts in other sources, Yanagida Seizan and other scholars concluded that all of these works were likely composed by unknown writers in the Ox-Head school toward the end of the ninth century. The Ox-Head school, it is now widely believed, originally composed these texts as an attempt to synthesize the views of the Northern and Southern schools and prevent a permanent schism in Zen. (Suggestions for further reading are below.)

Why is it important to correct the historical record in this way? From my point of view, the most important reason is that this scholarship can unearth texts and voices that have been lost in the canonical history of Buddhism. In some cases, those voices may be those of women or laypeople who were considered less important than politically powerful monks. In this case, the mistaken attribution of these texts (and the historical obscurity of the Ox-Head school) has made it difficult to appreciate how powerfully they belong together. Whether or not they were written by the same person (as they may have been) isn't as important as the fact that they were likely produced in dialogue with one another. It's as if, many centuries from now, future scholars of Zen looked at texts from the Kwan Um School, like Dae Soen Sa Nim's *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* and Zen Master Wu Kwang's *Don't Know Mind*, and decided that they must have been produced by teachers living in different places around the time of George Washington. What would be lost through such a misinterpretation?

The *Xinxin ming* is widely known in our school through the translation of Zen Master Hae Kwang. The *Xin ming* exists in one English translation that is widely available: the book *Song of Mind* by the late Taiwanese Zen master Sheng Yen. But the *Xinwang ming* has never been translated into English, to my knowledge. In these translations I've tried to keep the references and vocabulary consistent, so that the many parallels between the texts stand out. I've also added notes to each poem to clarify certain expressions and concepts as best I can.

Suggested Reading

Philip Yampolsky. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

John McRae, “The Ox-Head School of Ch’an Buddhism.” In *Studies in Ch’an and Hua-yen,* edited by Robert Gimello and Peter N. Gregory. Honolulu: Univerisity of Hawaii Press, 1983.
John McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism.* Honolulu: Univerisity of Hawaii Press, 1987.
John McRae, *Seeing Through Zen.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
Robert Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise.* Honolulu: Univerisity of Hawaii Press, 2002.

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