

Polishing the Causal Stream: A Pluralistic Reading of the *Platform Sutra* and a Parfitian critique of the traditional interpretation

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The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch is a pivotal text in Chinese Buddhist philosophy, traditionally interpreted as establishing the orthodoxy of the Southern “Sudden” school of Chan Buddhism while relegating the Northern “Gradual” school to a provisional teaching. To understand this schism, one must understand the mechanics of Buddhist soteriology: enlightenment fundamentally requires liberation from the “psychological stream”—the continuous, causally linked flow of mental states, habits, and karmic dispositions that perpetuates the illusion of a permanent self. This paper argues that the traditional interpretation fails to properly address this causal reality by making a fatal logical leap from necessity to sufficiency. By claiming that a sudden, propositional insight into the emptiness of the self is entirely sufficient for enlightenment, the orthodoxy invites antinomianism and dogmatically dismisses the Northern method of cultivation. Drawing upon Derek Parfit’s reductionist metaphysics and Gilbert Ryle’s epistemology, I argue that the Northern school’s gradual approach does not mistakenly reify a Cartesian ego but is rather strictly necessary to convert the propositional truth of emptiness (knowing-that) into the dispositional purity of enlightened living (knowing-how). Ultimately, this paper rehabilitates the *Platform Sutra* as espousing a methodological pluralism: true liberation requires both the sudden, conceptual destruction of the ego and the continuous, gradual cultivation of one’s dispositions.

1. Introduction

In Chinese Buddhist philosophy, the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* is regarded as the definitive manifesto of the “Southern School” of Chan Buddhism. The “Southern School” represents an alleged doctrinal divergence from the “Northern School”, with both branches being rooted in a historical Mahayana tradition descending from the shared “East Mountain” teachings of the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren.¹ The doctrines coincide in their understanding of enlightenment as a liberation from *Samsara*—the cycle of life and death—through a detachment from worldly desire. However, both schools diverge in their interpretations of what this detachment consists of, and how it can be achieved.

According to the traditional interpretation as established by Southern polemicists, the most salient soteriological differences between these schools can be represented in both their views of the nature of enlightenment and the method through which enlightenment is attained²:

According to the traditional interpretation, the doctrinal divergence illustrated above is the main rhetorical angle of the *Platform Sutra* with the text dramatising this schism through a pivotal narrative event: a succession contest wherein the learned head monk Shenxiu and the illiterate layman Huineng are framed as rhetorical opposites. While Shenxiu’s submitted verse advocates for gradual character cultivation, Huineng’s

¹John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 30–34. (Note: McRae thoroughly details Hongren’s “East Mountain Teaching” as the shared progenitor of both schools).

²The traditional interpretation can be traced primarily to the rhetoric of Heze Shenhui (684–758), a disciple of Huineng. In his *Treatise Establishing the True and False according to the Southern School of Bodhidharma*, Shenhui explicitly attacked Shenxiu’s lineage for advocating “gradual” cultivation. He condemned their practices—such as “freezing the mind to enter concentration” and “fixing the mind to view purity”—as dualistic errors that failed to apprehend the sudden, unconditioned nature of enlightenment. See John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 33–35.

Table 1.1: The Traditional Interpretation's Characterisation of the Soteriological Divide.

	Nature of Enlightenment	Method of Attainment
Northern School	A dispositional and recurrent state of purified moral and cognitive habits; the continuous maintenance of an unattached mind, free from worldly striving, which ultimately secures liberation from samsara and the cessation of suffering.	Gradual character cultivation, sustained meditation, and continuous moral vigilance to prevent moral defilement.
Southern School	An occurrent, transformative realisation of a propositional truth: the ontological emptiness of the self and the inherent purity of the mind, which directly results in liberation from samsara and the cessation of suffering.	Direct, unmediated intuitive awakening; a sudden paradigm shift that bypasses conceptual study.

verse characterises enlightenment as a sudden flash of insight into a reductionist ontology of the self. Within the narrative of the *Platform Sutra*, the outcome is decisive: the Fifth Patriarch acknowledges Huineng's verse as depicting the ultimate truth and crowns him the Sixth Patriarch.

Building upon this narrative outcome, the traditional interpretation asserts three conclusions. First, regarding the *nature* of enlightenment, it concludes that an occurrent realisation of Huineng's metaphysics is entirely sufficient for liberation. Second, it dismisses Shenxiu's views entirely, claiming his framework of gradual cultivation is an elementary metaphysical error that reifies a non-reductionist self. Third, regarding the *method* of enlightenment, it asserts that the only means through which liberation can be attained is by sudden insight.

The objective of this paper is to challenge these interpretative conclusions by arguing that the traditional interpretation overplays the extent to which the narrative victory of Huineng should represent a corresponding dismissal of Shenxiu. While the *Platform Sutra* places great emphasis on the importance of "Sudden Enlightenment" and a reductionist ontology of the self, I argue that Shenxiu's views on the nature of enlightenment as a disposition attained through gradual cultivation are compatible with such an ontology. Ultimately, I claim that Huineng's soteriology must necessarily contain some aspects of Shenxiu's teachings to be tenable. To demonstrate this, we must re-evaluate the implications of the traditional interpretation and show that the three main soteriological conclusions it draws are unjustified.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I argue against the traditional interpretation's claim that propositional knowledge is sufficient for enlightenment by showing that this view leads to antinomianism, and thus cannot be an accurate reflection of the *Platform Sutra*. Consequently, the Northern view of dispositional purity is necessary to a tenable Chan soteriology. In Section 3, drawing on Derek Parfit, I demonstrate that the traditional interpretation misinterprets Shenxiu's ontology, and that the pedagogy of cultivating dispositions need not reify a non-reductionist self. In Section 4, drawing from Gilbert Ryle's thesis regarding the independence of propositional knowledge and dispositional skill, I argue against the traditional interpretation's view of the method of attaining enlightenment; because sudden insight is insufficient to build dispositional purity, the Shenxiu's teachings of gradual cultivation are strictly necessary to a tenable pedagogy of working towards enlightenment. Finally, in Section 5, I elaborate on why Huineng's propositional insight remains a necessary prerequisite for this gradual cultivation. This clarifies the narrative logic of the *Platform Sutra*, justifying the Fifth Patriarch's prioritisation of Huineng while exposing the root of the traditional interpretation's error: conflating necessity with sufficiency. Ultimately, I propose that the *Platform Sutra* should be viewed as espousing a pluralistic theory of enlightenment: one that defines the nature of enlightenment as both propositional insight and dispositional purity, and the method

of attainment as both sudden awakening and gradual cultivation. This synthesis, corroborated by Guifeng Zongmi, seamlessly integrates the doctrines that the traditional interpretation falsely forces into a mutually exclusive “Northern” and “Southern” dichotomy.

2. The key verses of the Platform Sutra

The philosophical core of the *Platform Sutra* and the source of the tension addressed in this paper is found in the first section of the Sutra, where two verses are presented at the behest of the Fifth Patriarch—the great master of the Baolin monastery—as a means of finding a successor. According to the Sutra, the verse contest would allow the Fifth Patriarch to determine which disciple had apprehended the deeper truth of enlightenment and could therefore lead the monastery towards an appropriate soteriology.³

The first verse, presented by the learned head monk Shenxiu, is a representation of the “Northern” school of Chan:

The body is a bodhi tree (*shēn shì pú tí shù*, 身是菩提树),
 The mind is like a bright mirror stand (*xīn rú míng jìng tái*, 心如明镜台),
 At all times we should diligently polish it (*shí shí qín fú shì*, 时时勤拂拭),
 and prevent dust from collecting (*wù shǐ rě chén āi*, 勿使惹尘埃).⁴

Within the narrative, Shenxiu’s verse is treated as an incomplete apprehension of the true nature of enlightenment, and he is described by the Patriarch as “unable to see the self-nature,” suggesting his framework is provisional rather than ultimate. After Shenxiu, the illiterate layman Huineng’s verse is revealed:

Bodhi originally has no tree (*pú tí běn wú shù*, 菩提本无树),
 The bright mirror also has no stand (*míng jìng yì fēi tái*, 明镜亦非台),
 Fundamentally, there is not a single thing (*běn lái wú yī wù*, 本来无一物),
 Where could dust arise? (*hé chù rě chén āi*, 何处惹尘埃)⁵

In contrast to Shenxiu, Huineng is celebrated by the Fifth Patriarch in private as having truly perceived the fundamental, unconditioned nature of the mind, thereby earning the secret transmission of the robe and Dharma, and the title of the Sixth Patriarch.

2.1. The traditional interpretation

According to the traditional interpretation initially published by Southern polemicist Shenhui and later accepted by standard Chan historiography, the reason for Huineng’s rhetorical victory lies in how these verses map onto a fundamental ontological dispute. In Western analytic terms, this debate directly parallels Derek Parfit’s distinction between non-reductionist and reductionist metaphysics of the self.

According to this view, Shenxiu’s verse espouses a non-reductionist metaphysics of the self. Because the verse makes a distinction between the mind (“Mirror Stand”) and its transient attachments or impurities (“Dust”), it is claimed that Shenxiu implies that the mind is a container that exists independently of its contents. In modern metaphysical terms, Shenxiu is accused of positing a “Further Fact” of identity: a substantive, unchanging self that exists over and above the stream of experience.

However, this substantive self is incompatible with the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of *Anicca* (impermanence)—because *Anicca* posits that all phenomena are in a state of constant, interdependent flux, the existence of a permanent, unchanging, and independent essence or soul must be rejected.⁶ The traditional orthodoxy thus uses this rhetoric as a means of discrediting Shenxiu’s view. According to this interpretation, because

³Philip B. Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 128–129.

⁴Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 130.

⁵Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 132.

⁶Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), 32–34.

Shenxiu commits a fundamental metaphysical error, his practical teachings must be dismissed as a category mistake. If there is no permanent, underlying entity to accumulate defilement, the act of continuous purification is logically incoherent, since one cannot polish a non-existent ‘mirror’. Therefore, the gradual method is tolerated within the Southern narrative only as a remedial crutch designed solely to prevent practitioners with ‘dull faculties’ from falling into grave moral error.

The traditional narrative then frames Huineng’s verse as the welcome reductionist reply: by asserting “The mirror has no stand,” Huineng denies the existence of some ‘further fact’ about the self, moving away from the problematic non-reductionism that Shenxiu apparently posits. Crucially, the traditional orthodoxy goes even further: it concludes that because Huineng is right about the ontology of the self, the nature of enlightenment is constituted merely by a propositional understanding of this ontology.

This conclusion is problematic for two primary reasons. First, it uses Huineng’s rhetorical victory to justify a dangerous view of enlightenment that is likely to lead to antinomianism. It assumes that because Huineng holds the correct reductionist view of the self, an occurrent understanding of this metaphysical truth is inherently sufficient for enlightenment. Second, this narrative is extremely uncharitable to Shenxiu, prematurely reducing his gradualist pedagogy to an elementary metaphysical mistake.

2.2. Semantic ambiguity and Huineng’s ontology

To demonstrate why treating this propositional knowledge as sufficient is fatal to Chan soteriology and precisely how it invites the threat of antinomianism, we must first clarify the exact reality Huineng is describing. This requires a close analysis of his main metaphysical claim: “fundamentally, there is not a single thing” (*běn lái wú yī wù*, 本来无一物). The main challenge in understanding this assertion lies in the key term “a single thing”, which is semantically overloaded. Depending on how we interpret this phrase, the verse generates three entirely distinct and mutually exclusive ontological claims:

Reading 1: The Nihilistic Reading (“Single thing”= Anything)

If “a single thing” is read as ‘anything’, then the statement denies the existence of any objects (variables) whatsoever within the domain.

$$\neg \exists x(x = x)$$

Reading 2: The Anti-Monistic Reading (“Single thing”= One thing)

If the word “single” is read instead as a numerical quantifier designating one, then the statement denies that there is exactly one object within the domain (meaning there is either zero or more than one object).

$$\neg(\exists x(x = x) \wedge \forall x \forall y(x = y))$$

Reading 3: The Anti-Pluralistic Reading (“Single thing”= Distinct thing)

If “a single thing” is read as a substantive, independent entity possessing inherent existence, then the statement denies the existence of boundaries, or of distinctness between objects. It asserts that there are no distinct things in the universe.

$$\neg \exists x \exists y(x \neq y)$$

Which of these readings is the most plausible? We can immediately reject Reading 1 (Nihilism), as it is directly incompatible with the rest of Huineng’s soteriology. An empty universe precludes the possibility of the experiencing mind and sudden awakening, which are the foundations of Huineng’s brand of Chan Buddhism. Furthermore, elsewhere in the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng explicitly states:

“Emptiness includes the sun, moon, stars, and planets, the great earth, mountains and rivers, all trees and grasses, bad men and good men, bad things and good things, heaven and hell; they are all in the midst of emptiness.”⁷

⁷Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 146.

This passage serves a crucial philosophical purpose: it definitively populates the ontology. Because the nature of emptiness encompasses the phenomenal world, the domain of discourse cannot be empty, and the nihilistic reading must be rejected. Furthermore, the rhetorical structure of this passage eliminates Reading 2 (Anti-Monism). Huineng deliberately lists the vast pluralities and dualities of the phenomenal world, including the good and bad, heaven and hell, only to immediately collapse them into the singular concept of “emptiness.” From this we can surmise that he is not advocating for pluralism but trying to dismantle it.

Therefore, we are left with Reading 3. When Huineng asserts “there is not a single thing,” he is using the formulation $\neg \exists x \exists y (x \neq y)$ to make a mereological claim that denies the existence of boundaries and distinctness. In standard logic, the statement “no two things are distinct” is logically equivalent to the universal affirmation of identity: $\forall x \forall y (x = y)$ (everything is identical to everything else). When we combine this anti-pluralistic premise ($\forall x \forall y (x = y)$) with our rejection of the nihilistic reading, the conclusion is that Huineng is asserting that there exists *exactly one* thing $\exists x (x = x \wedge \forall y (y = x))$.

This conclusion that reality is an undifferentiated whole is grounded in the broader textual tradition of Chan Buddhism. In the *Platform Sutra* and wider Mahayana literature, this singular underlying reality is explicitly identified as the inherently pure Buddha-nature (*fó xìng*, 佛性). The denial of pluralistic boundaries is the ontological equivalent of the Chan doctrine of non-plurality, which posits that there is no substantive metaphysical division between ordinary sentient beings and the enlightened Buddha.

2.3. Monism and Antinomianism

This brings us to the core tension. While Huineng’s metaphysical monism aligns with the broader Mahayana doctrine of Buddha-nature, the traditional interpretation weaponises this ontology to make an unjustified conclusion regarding the nature of enlightenment. The orthodoxy assumes that because reality is an inherently pure, unpartitioned whole, the mere propositional realisation of this metaphysical truth is sufficient to *constitute* enlightenment.

However, this cannot be the case. Treating propositional knowledge as the sole requirement for enlightenment invariably leads to antinomianism: the dangerous theological doctrine that moral laws, ethical habituation, and behavioural precepts are no longer binding. If enlightenment is reduced to a sudden flash of conceptual insight into the underlying purity of reality, it implies there is nothing left to do, and that the everyday Buddhist practice of continuous moral cultivation is rendered useless. Under this view, one could grasp the monistic ontology while continuing to engage in harmful behaviour, justifying their actions under the guise that “all things are already the Buddha-nature.”

This antinomian outcome is unacceptable for two reasons. First, it is practically disastrous for the Chan tradition, which is premised on the idea that Buddhist practitioners must aim to alleviate real-world suffering. Second, it would be unable to account for other sections of the *Platform Sutra*.

For example, in Chapter 6, Huineng explicitly confers the “Formless Repentance” (*wú xiàng chàn huǐ*, 无相忏悔) upon his disciples, commanding them to actively repent for past and future sins arising from ignorance and deceit. Crucially, he does not merely ask them to realise the abstract emptiness of these sins; he explicitly demands that they “awaken to [their] own errors and **reform** [their] past evil.”⁸

This pedagogical mandate refutes the traditional interpretation’s claim that a sudden flash of propositional understanding is sufficient to constitute enlightenment. The act of “[reforming] past evil” inherently requires a functional, temporal separation between past karmic defilement and present moral action. It demands a continuous ongoing change in psychological habituation and behaviour, beyond a change in metaphysical understanding. If a practitioner only possesses the propositional knowledge that everything is one with the Buddha-nature, yet remains acting in a manner that brings more suffering to the world, they cannot be enlightened according to the doctrines of Chan. Therefore, the nature of enlightenment must necessarily include a dispositional purity alongside propositional insight.

If this dispositional purity is practically necessary, as Huineng’s own repentance rituals demonstrate, then the dismissal of Shenxiu’s verse is premature. Shenxiu’s instruction to “diligently polish” the mirror represents the exact conceptual framework required to execute the behavioural changes that the traditional interpretation abandons. To save Chan practice from the complacency of the absolute, a more charitable

⁸Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 143–144.

interpretation of Shenxiu's gradualism is in order. We must reinterpret his verse not as an incorrect metaphysical claim, but as a practical and behavioural framework for maintaining dispositional purity.

This rehabilitation, however, presents a significant philosophical hurdle: how can this be done without risking a problematic, non-reductionist ontology of the self that Shenxiu seems to imply? To resolve this tension, we require a philosophical framework capable of distinguishing between the metaphysical subject (which Huineng rightly targets) and the psychological continuum (which the traditional reading inadvertently discards).

3. The Parfitian Solution

Derek Parfit's reductionist metaphysics in *Reasons and Persons* provides precisely the analytical vocabulary needed to resolve this tension. Parfit allows us to strictly separate the question of identity (the metaphysical subject) from the question of survival (the psychological continuum), revealing that the "Sudden" and "Gradual" approaches are not mutually exclusive, but rather address two entirely distinct ontological categories.⁹

To map Parfit's framework onto the Chan debate, we must first understand his distinction between two rival views of persons:

Non-reductionism (The Cartesian View): this view holds that personal identity is ensured by a "Further Fact", or a separately existing entity, such as a Cartesian Ego or a Soul, that remains distinct from the brain and body.

Reductionism (The Bundle View): Parfit, aligning with Hume and orthodox Buddhism, holds that a person is not a separate underlying entity, but a composite bundle of interrelated mental and physical events. For the Reductionist, personal identity is constituted solely by Relation R: psychological connectedness and continuity (memory, character, and causal links).¹⁰

Applying these categories provides the necessary lens to interpret Shenxiu without uncharitably reducing his view to non-reductionism. Rather than thinking of Shenxiu's verse as reifying a "Further Fact" about the self, we can interpret his verse as a necessary pedagogy regarding Relation R.

3.1. Identity vs. Survival: The Independence of Relation R

To understand why this pedagogy regarding Relation R remains practically necessary, we must utilise Parfit's distinction between identity and survival. Parfit argues that what matters in personal existence is not the persistence of a "Further Fact" (identity), but the preservation of relation R (survival).¹¹ The traditional interpretation correctly identifies Huineng's verse as a metaphysical attack on the "Further Fact." Huineng's assertion that there is "not a single thing" simultaneously asserts a Buddhist monism and attacks the idea of the Cartesian Ego, aligning with the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* (no-self). However, the dismissal of Shenxiu leads directly to antinomianism because it overlooks a crucial reality: the negation of the "Further Fact" does not negate Relation R. Even in a strictly reductionist universe where there is no permanent self to 'own' experiences, the causal stream of psychological continuity continues to flow. Mental state M₁ (e.g., a moment of anger) remains causally connected to mental state M₂ (e.g., a disposition toward violence) via memory and psychophysical causality. This causal chain exists independently of the ontology of the "Further Fact." Ignoring the necessity of regulating Relation R is what leads the traditional interpretation towards antinomianism.

Therefore, when Shenxiu commands practitioners to "diligently polish" the mirror, we should not read this as the reification of a non-reductionist view of the self. Rather, it is the necessary pedagogical mechanism for managing Relation R, where Shenxiu is addressing the causal reality of the psychological continuum. Just because the "polisher" and the "mirror" lack an independent, substantial existence does not mean the causal links between immoral thoughts and harmful actions cease to operate. Gradual cultivation

⁹Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 215.

¹⁰Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 216–217. See also David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6.

¹¹Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 255. Parfit argues that "Identity is not what matters in survival."

is the essential practice of purifying the causal stream, and it is the only way to make sense of Huineng's command for "formless repentance" and avoid antinomianism.

One might object that the syntactical structure of Shenxiu's verse contradicts this interpretation and commits him to a non-reductionist ontology. By utilising nouns like "mirror stand" and "dust," in a subject-copula-predicate form ("The body **is** a bodhi tree"), he appears to be hypostatizing the mind, treating it as a substantive container. However, a closer reading of the original Chinese text reveals this to be a functional analogy rather than a strict identity statement. While his first line uses the copula to assert "The body *is* [*shì*, 是] a bodhi tree," his second line deliberately shifts to a simile: "The mind is *like* [*rú*, 如] a bright mirror stand." From this, we can grant that Shenxiu is not making a non-reductionist claim about the self but is instead utilising an analogy to highlight the mind's capacity to reflect reality clearly or be obscured by passing phenomena.

Furthermore, the syntactical phrasing is likely a byproduct of pedagogical necessity. Language is inherently dualistic; the very syntax of a behavioural imperative requires a grammatical subject and object. To describe the stewardship of the mental stream without using the convenient shorthand of a "mirror" and "dust" would require a cumbersome, technical circumlocution that would be pedagogically inert and perhaps even more opaque to the average practitioner.

Thus, Shenxiu adopts a pragmatic "intentional stance." Just as a modern biologist might say "the gene wants to replicate" without literally ascribing conscious desire to a molecule, Shenxiu commands his monks to "polish the mirror" without literally ascribing a permanent Cartesian soul to the practitioner. He is utilising conventional language to point toward necessary practical action. Once we strip away this grammatical hypostatisation, we can accurately reconstruct the underlying logical form of Shenxiu's verse. When he commands his practitioners to "diligently polish" and "prevent dust from collecting," he is fundamentally asserting that there is a causal sequence of mental states that requires continuous regulation.

In Parfitian terms, we can map his metaphor directly onto the mechanics of Relation R. The "dust" is not a physical property attached to an underlying soul, but rather the causally salient factors within the psychological continuum, such as fleeting thoughts of greed, anger, or ignorance. If the person at time T₁ allows this "dust" to settle by reinforcing a habit of ignorance, the person at time T₂ will inherit those dispositions via Relation R. "Polishing," therefore, represents the precept of regulating a particular causal stream so that future psychological states develop the correct moral dispositions. The traditional interpretation, by fixating exclusively on Huineng's negation of the "Mirror," throws out the baby (Relation R) with the bathwater (the "Further Fact"). It leaves the practitioner with a metaphysical theory, but without a practical method to address the continuity of their conditioned habits. By utilising Parfit, we successfully vindicate Shenxiu's verse as necessary framework for understanding the dispositional nature of enlightenment.

4. The epistemology of enlightenment with lessons from Ryle

Having established that the nature of enlightenment inherently requires dispositional purity (the purification of Relation R), we must now turn to the method of attainment. A defender of the traditional interpretation might concede that the nature of enlightenment necessarily requires a dispositional aspect, but resist the idea that the method of attaining enlightenment requires gradual cultivation by contending that a sufficiently profound, sudden propositional insight would automatically generate these dispositions.

However, drawing upon the epistemology of Ryle reveals why this argument must fail. Ryle would call such a view the "intellectualist legend": the false assumption that intelligent, skilful action is merely a derivative of theoretical knowledge, or that to "know" a truth is to automatically be able to act upon it. In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle argues against the view that performance is merely the execution of a recognised rule. He distinguishes between two cognitive categories:

Knowing-That (Propositional Knowledge): the possession of information or theoretical truth (e.g., knowing *that* a bicycle functions via gyroscopic force).

Knowing-How (Dispositional Skill): the capacity to perform a task or navigate a domain (e.g., knowing *how* to ride a bicycle).¹²

¹²Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 27–32.

Crucially, Ryle argues that these two categories are fundamentally distinct and irreducible: one can possess propositional knowledge in a subject matter but lack the corresponding dispositional skills, and vice versa. Applying this to the Chan debate reveals a crucial point. If one accepts that the nature of enlightenment requires the conditioning of one's causal stream (which the preceding sections have established is necessary to avoid antinomianism), then mere propositional knowledge of emptiness will not automatically manifest this dispositional state. Huineng and Shenxiu thus address two distinct epistemological categories of the same soteriological goal. Huineng's verse concerns the propositional knowledge of the nature of the self in relation to the universe, while Shenxiu is espousing the pedagogy of the dispositional skill of living according to this ontological reality. The error of the methodological monism promoted by the traditional interpretation is the belief that Knowing-That (the sudden realisation of emptiness) automatically generates Knowing-How (the dispositional capacity to live without attachment). This is demonstrably false. A person who wishes to be healthy may fully grasp and believe the proposition that "smoking is unhealthy" (Knowing-That) while completely lacking the dispositional capacity to actually quit (Knowing-How).

Similarly, a practitioner may realise that the ego is an illusion yet still react to the world with ingrained habits of anger and greed because their psychological stream—or the causal momentum of Relation R—has not been properly conditioned. Thus, Shenxiu's gradual method is the necessary bridge between metaphysical theory and ethical reality. Only the gradual re-habitation of the causal stream can remove the "dust" of conflicting desires. The Northern method of gradual cultivation is therefore necessary to attain the dispositional nature of enlightenment.

5. The Pluralistic Synthesis: Narrative Logic and the Necessity of Insight

If Shenxiu's method of gradual cultivation is strictly necessary to prevent antinomianism and achieve enlightenment, one might ask: why does the *Platform Sutra* dramatise his apparent defeat? Why did the Fifth Patriarch prioritize Huineng's verse, award him the title of the Sixth Patriarch, and seemingly dismiss Shenxiu?

The answer lies in the epistemological sequence of enlightenment. While Shenxiu provides the necessary method (Knowing-How), Huineng provides the strictly necessary metaphysical target (Knowing-That). If a practitioner engages in moral cultivation without first realising the propositional truth of emptiness, their practice is spiritually blind because it lacks a definitive soteriological goal. Without the orienting framework of the reductionist-monist metaphysics—which explicitly directs the practitioner toward absolute detachment from worldly desire—the advice to cultivate one's moral character degrades into mere conventional morality. This is why without Huineng's ontological assertion, Shenxiu's mandate to "diligently polish" the mind is incomplete: it reads as generic ethical advice on how to be a "good" person within the illusion, rather than a radical method for escaping it. Because such practitioners are still attached to the concept of a persistent self achieving a worldly goal, they remain fundamentally trapped within *samsara*.

This clarifies the narrative logic of the *Platform Sutra* and justifies the Fifth Patriarch's prioritisation of Huineng. Huineng's verse was chosen not because it represented the entirety of enlightenment, but because it represented the indispensable metaphysical target. His sudden, propositional destruction of the "Mirror Stand" acts as a vital safeguard. It ensures that when a practitioner engages in cultivation, they are regulating a causal stream (Relation R) rather than feeding an ego.

It is here that we can expose the root of the traditional interpretation's error. The orthodox commentators saw the Fifth Patriarch rightfully crowning Huineng because his ontological insight was strictly necessary to transcend conventional morality. However, they made a fatal logical leap: they conflated this necessity with sufficiency. They weaponised Huineng's narrative victory to assume that because sudden insight was the mandatory first step, the subsequent gradual cultivation of the causal stream was entirely obsolete.

However, the text of the *Platform Sutra* itself resists this claim of sufficiency, demonstrating that once the metaphysical target is acquired, Shenxiu's gradualist ideas are quietly adopted. As discussed in Section 2, Huineng actively confers the "Formless Repentance" upon his disciples, demanding a continuous, ongoing vigilance to reform past and future karmic defilements. Furthermore, after receiving "sudden insight," the Sutra depicts Huineng living in obscurity among hunters for over a decade as a means

of cultivating his dispositions.

Ultimately, the *Platform Sutra* should not be read as the victory of one mutually exclusive set of doctrines over another, but as espousing a pluralistic theory of enlightenment. The nature of enlightenment must be defined as both propositional insight into emptiness and the dispositional purity to live according to it. Consequently, the method of attainment strictly requires both sudden awakening (to destroy the ego and secure the metaphysical target) and gradual cultivation (to purify the causal stream).

5.1. Historical Precedents for Methodological Pluralism

The necessity of methodological pluralism was explicitly recognised by the Tang Dynasty scholar-monk Guifeng Zongmi. As a patriarch of both the Huayan school and the Heze lineage of Southern Chan, Zongmi was uniquely positioned to diagnose the sectarian failures of his era. He observed firsthand that the strict methodological monism of the radical Southern School was actively leading to the exact antinomianism warned about in this paper.

To resolve this crisis, Zongmi argued for a definitive synthesis of Huineng and Shenxiu's views, formalising the doctrine of "Sudden Awakening followed by Gradual Cultivation" (dùn wù jiàn xiū, 顿悟渐修). Zongmi recognised that sudden insight into the ontological reality of the self (Huineng's monism) is not the culmination of the Buddhist path, but merely its prerequisite.

To illustrate how these two seemingly opposed methodologies must seamlessly integrate, Zongmi utilised a series of powerful phenomenological metaphors in his *Preface to the Collected Writings on the Source of Chan*. His most famous case study compares enlightenment to the birth and maturation of a child:

"It is like a child being born all at once. At the moment of birth, its limbs and faculties are completely formed, no different from those of an adult. However, its physical strength is not yet mature. It requires many months and years of gradual nourishment before it can eventually become a fully functioning adult."¹³

This metaphor directly maps onto our previous analysis. The "sudden birth" represents Huineng's propositional realisation of the Metaphysical Subject: the sudden, occurrent understanding that one's fundamental nature is entirely identical to the Buddha-nature. Ontologically, the infant is fully human, just as the practitioner is fully Buddha.

However, Zongmi explicitly warns that this ontological completeness does not translate into immediate practical capacity. The "gradual nourishment" represents Shenxiu's pedagogy. Even after the "Further Fact" of the self is destroyed conceptually, the practitioner's psychological continuum including their behavioural dispositions and cognitive habits remains intact. Zongmi utilises a second metaphor to explain this lingering causality:

"It is like the wind blowing across a pond. The wind may suddenly cease, but the waves subside only gradually. The wind of ignorance may suddenly be extinguished by awakening, but the waves of habitual defilements can only be eliminated through gradual cultivation."¹⁴

In Parfitian terms, Zongmi is illustrating the independence of Relation R. The sudden cessation of the "wind" is the conceptual destruction of the Cartesian Ego. But the "waves," which represent the causally linked mental states of anger, greed or selfishness, will continue to linger. If practitioners do not try to actively calm the waves after the cessation of the wind, they fall victim to antinomianism.

By collapsing the false narrative of mutual exclusivity, we can therefore conclude that a Chan conception of enlightenment is neither exclusively an occurrent realisation nor merely a dispositional state; it is the necessary, pluralistic integration of both. It requires both the sudden, conceptual destruction of the "Self" and the gradual regulation of one's causal stream.

¹³Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 228.

¹⁴Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism*, 228.

6. Conclusion

The traditional interpretation of the *Platform Sutra* commits a fundamental categorical error: it conflates the necessity of Huineng's metaphysical insight with soteriological sufficiency. By weaponising his narrative victory, the orthodoxy dismisses Shenxiu's teachings as an elementary ontological mistake, thereby enforcing a dogmatic methodological monism. As this paper has demonstrated, this orthodox view is philosophically untenable. Regarding the nature of enlightenment, treating propositional knowledge of emptiness as sufficient invariably invites antinomianism. Consequently, dispositional purity must be recognised as a necessary constituent of enlightenment. Furthermore, through the lens of Parfitian reductionism, Shenxiu's verse is exonerated from accusations of non-reductionism; his mandate to "polish the mirror" is not the reification of a Cartesian Ego, but the necessary pedagogical stewardship of the psychological continuum (Relation R).

Regarding the method of enlightenment, Ryle's epistemology reveals that sudden, propositional insight (Knowing-That) cannot independently generate dispositional purity (Knowing-How). Therefore, Shenxiu's method of gradual cultivation remains necessary to convert propositional understanding into ethical reality. Ultimately, a tenable Chan soteriology based on the *Platform Sutra* requires the pluralistic synthesis historically proposed by Guifeng Zongmi. The *Platform Sutra* should not be read as a contest between mutually exclusive doctrines, but as an exposition of a plurality of doctrines required for enlightenment. By rejecting the traditional interpretation's false dichotomy, this analysis reveals that Chan Buddhism is not merely a mysticism of sudden insight, but a sophisticated framework of reductionist virtue ethics.

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