

Graduate Students Seminar: New Perspectives on Chan (Zen) Buddhism

Professor Robert H. Sharf

Course description:

This course will focus on early Chinese Chan Buddhism (better known by its Japanese name, Zen), utilizing a variety of sources and perspectives. We will begin by looking at the ideological and sociological forces that contributed to the rise of Chan in the eighth century, as well as the doctrinal and ritual underpinnings (Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, Tantra) of Chan thought. Our primary sources for Tang period Chan consist largely of documents found in the "library cave" at Dunhuang, augmented by the writings of ninth-century Buddhist exegetes such as Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839) and Zongmi 宗密 (780–841). We will then turn to the transformation of Chan in the Song period, focusing on the emergence of the innovative new literary genres associated with Chan, including yulu 語錄 ("recorded sayings"), chuangdeng lu 傳燈錄 ("transmission of the lamp") and gong'an 公案 ("public cases"). Time permitting, we will end with selections from one of the most famous public case collections, the Wumenguan 無門關 (Gateless Barrier), compiled in the early thirteenth century by Wumen Huikai 無門慧開 (1183–1260). Our approach will draw from Chinese intellectual and social history, ritual studies, religious studies, literature, and philosophy. Primary readings in Chinese will be accompanied by English translations whenever possible, to accommodate students who don't know classical Chinese.