The purpose of Buddhism is clarity; it is a search for clarity. To feel clearly, so as to avoid damaging passionate attachments; to see clearly, so as to be able to respond to circumstances in a positive and healthy way; to think clearly, so as to act with wisdom and compassion. One should advance from darkness to light, from debilitating attachments to true liberation, from ignorance to a knowing wisdom, from blind selfishness to insightful compassion. —from the author’s Preface

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IN SEARCH OF CLARITY
BY THE SAME AUTHOR


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Bodhidharma, Wall Contemplation, and Mixed Binomes

Off-the-Wall Speculations on the Origins of Zen Meditation

This is the second of only two essays in this collection that have not been published previously (in English, at least). I have orally presented these arguments on many occasions, including first at Indiana University and then many other venues in the United States, and at Komazawa University in Tokyo, with mixed reactions. I was especially surprised at the vehement response of a professor of the Zen Studies Department after my presentation at Komazawa University, who (despite my deliberately careful and detailed analysis of the various problems associated with common [and some uncommon] interpretations of biguan), insisted that the simplest and only possible understanding was that this term refers to the historical fact of Bodhidharma physically contemplating in front of a wall. The controversial (and ultimately unprovable) nature of some of my assertions and conclusions made me hesitant to publish it in English, but I present it here for what it may be worth, though the contents are far afield of my usual academic expertise. It is my hope that the arguments will spur further discussion on the meaning of Bodhidharma’s alleged “wall contemplation,” and draw attention to the use and significance of mixed binomes in Chinese Buddhist texts. I am especially concerned that it draws attention to the implications this topic of mixed binomes has for translation.

I wish to thank Liang Xiao-hong, a colleague at Nanzan University, for her encouragement and suggestions concerning Sanskrit-Chinese binomes, and also Jan Nattier and John McRae who read early versions of this paper and offered helpful suggestions and critiques. Jan Nattier
in particular identified many mixed binomes from the very early era of Chinese translation of Buddhist texts.

An earlier Japanese version of this essay was published many years ago after my oral presentation at Komazawa University as 「ダルマと『壁観』と梵漢合成語」 [Bodhidharma, biguan, and Sanskrit-Chinese binomes], in Komazawa Daigaku Bukkyōgakubu ronbū 駒澤大學仏教學部論集 35 (2004): 53–68.
One of the best-known scenes and stories in the East Asian Buddhist tradition is the legend of Bodhidharma sitting in front of the wall of a cave near the Shaolin temple, ostensibly for nine years until his legs fell off. Nowadays (in Japanese) this pose is usually referred to as menpeki 面壁 (facing the wall), a position regularly followed for meditation in Zen temples. However, this compound can be traced back only as far as the Song period in China, in the Song Biographies of Eminent Monks 宋高僧伝 (988 CE); in earlier times the term used exclusively was biguan 壁観 (“wall contemplation”; Jpn. bekigan).3

Biguan is usually translated “wall-gazing” or “wall contemplation,” but there is no non-Chinese equivalent in all the vast Buddhist meditation sutras and treatises. The origin and meaning of this term is quite ambiguous, and there are no explanations in the early texts or remaining documents anywhere near the time of Bodhidharma. The earliest

1. For a good example of Bodhidharma sitting in front of a wall, see the famous painting by Sesshu on “Huike offering his arm to Bodhidharma” 慈可断臂図 (https://v888.livejournal.com/249707.html). Daruma dolls—legless caricatures of Bodhidharma—are popular objects in Japan due to its symbolic ability to right itself even when pushed over. Thus it serves as a good-luck talisman for winning elections or perseverance in attaining other goals (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daruma_doll#Bodhidharma).

2. A common way to refer to Bodhidharma (in Japan) is menpeki baramon 面壁婆羅門, “the wall-facing Brahman” or menpeki daruma 面壁達磨, “the wall-facing [Bodhi] dharma.”

3. For the passage in the Biographies of Eminent Monks, see T 50.789c8–9. For a detailed discussion of this point see SUZUKI Kakuzen (1975).
appearance of this compound is found in the *Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices* 二入四行論—the only text that can be attributed with any confidence to the historical Bodhidharma—but only as a term (“peaceful-minded biguan 安心壁観”) and without explanation. As Sekiguchi Shindai, the prominent Japanese Tendai scholar, puts it:

The two-character term *biguan* that appears in the *Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices* is truly difficult to understand. If *biguan* means the same as “facing the wall” 面壁, and the character *kuan* 觀 is used in a verbal sense “to contemplate,” and it refers to facing a wall and gazing at/contemplating the wall, then the compound should be reversed to *guanbi* 観壁. From the form of the compound one can get the impression that “contemplation” is the noun, which is modified by the character *bi* 壁. In this case, what sort of qualification is meant by *bi*? To contemplate “like a wall” does not make much sense. Does it refer to the attitude or state of mind of one who contemplates? Or does it mean that one’s body is “like a wall”? Does it refer to a peaceful and steady state that is not distracted by any outside conditions, like a flame in a closed room protected by walls on all sides?

Sekiguchi points out that such an analogy for meditation is found in a Dharma talk attributed Huike 慧可 found in the *Lengjia shizi ji* 楞伽師資記: “learned people, who rely on letters and words, are like a candle [or torch] in the wind. They cannot dispel the darkness. Their flame will flare up and perish. If one sits purely, without [extraneous] affairs, this is like a candle in a closed room; such [a person] is able to destroy the darkness and illumine matters clearly.”

4. See T 85.1285c15–18: 故學人依文字語言為道者。如風中燈。不能破闇。焰焰謝滅。若淨坐無事。如密室中燈。則解破闇。昭物分明。

5. See, for example, in the *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止観, T 46.57b15–16: “If you are able to cultivate concentration, this is like a flame/candle in a closed room 密室中燈 that is able to destroy a great darkness.” The same image is used also the *Tiantai xia zhiguan* 天台小止観: The mind may suddenly experience insightful understanding, but even though you have clear wisdom, if you have not attained a mind of meditative concentration, the
(or “closed-room”) practices or metaphors, although there are no indications of a connection between the terms biguan and “a candle in a closed room.” Sekiguchi concludes: “In any case, the meaning and content of ‘peaceful-minded biguan’安心壁観 [as found in the Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices] is unclear.”

Various theories have been put forth to explain biguan, both historically and by modern scholars, but all agree on one thing: that it is an odd phrase that has no compelling or even satisfactory explanation, and that all explanations so far are admittedly speculative.

**Historical references and interpretations**

*Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices,* (see Yanagita Seizan, tr., 2016; English translation included in McRae, *Northern School*, 102–7)

As mentioned above, this text contains the phrase “to be of a peaceful mind in this way is biguan”如是安心者壁観. However, there is no explanation of the content of biguan. This text provides a strong historical link between the phrase biguan and Bodhidharma, but gives no clue as to what exactly is meant by the phrase.

mind [and its thoughts] with be scattered because the meditative concentration is slight. Therefore this is like the flame of a candle in the wind that cannot illuminate matters. Therefore the Dazhidulun says that if there is no mind of meditative concentration, then even though you have wisdom concerning emptiness, no-marks, and so forth from [the practice of] contemplation, this is a perverted wisdom and a crazy wisdom, so that you cannot escape the cycle of birth-and-death. At that time you should again cultivate cessation, and through this cultivation of cessation attain a mind of meditative concentration. By attaining a mind of meditative concentration, this is like a candle flame in a closed room如密室中燈, which can dispel the darkness and clearly illuminate matters. (T 46.467c12–15)


7. The best summary in English of these various theories is by John McRae; see his *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism* (1986), 112–15.

8. John McRae (1986, 103) translates this phrase: “such is the pacification of the mind—wall contemplation.”
Daoxuan’s 道宣 biography (645) of Bodhidharma in Biographies of Eminent Monks, Continued 续高僧传 (T 2060, 50.551b–c)

This is the earliest biography of Bodhidharma and had a great influence on the later tradition; it repeats the phrase “Such is a peaceful mind, that is, biguan...” 安心謂壁観 (551c6), and in a separate biography states that in comparison to the Hīnayāna teachings, “the merits of Mahāyāna wall contemplation are the most supreme” 大乗壁観功業 最高 (T 50.596c8–9). However, there is no explanation of the content of biguan, nor any hint of why or how it is “most supreme,” nor any indication of why “wall contemplation” would be so meritorious.

Yanagida Seizan, after a careful textual study of the Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices, concludes that “the tradition of Bodhidharma transmitted in the Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices ended with the period of Daoxuan’s Biographies of Eminent Monks, Continued and the Bodhidharma that lived on in later periods as the first patriarch of the transmission of the lamp was a Bodhidharma that had little or no relation to [the contents of] the Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices” (YANAGITA 1967, 429). We find here a clear break between the Bodhidharma of history and the Bodhidharma of later legend.

Zhiyan’s 智嚴 (602–668) Kongmu zhang 孔目章 (T 1870, 45. 559a–b)

The second Huayan patriarch Zhiyan mentions biguan in the second fascicle of his Kongmu zhang, as one of eighteen types of contemplation such as the contemplation of suchness 真如観, the contemplation of consciousness-only 唯識観, the contemplation of tathāgata-garbha 如来蔵観, and the contemplation of emptiness 空観, but there is no explanation of the content of this biguan.

Zongmi’s 宗密 analysis in the Chanyuan zhuquan jibu xu 禪源諸詮集部序 (T 2015, 48.397–413, see esp. 403c27–28)
Zongmi, in the earliest interpretation of this term *biguan*, writes, “Bodhidharma used *biguan* to teach people a peaceful mind; this involved externally stopping all conditions 外止所縁 [reminiscent of phrases from Zhiyi’s *Xiao zhiguan*] and internally lacking mental anguish (喘, “panting”), so that the mind is like a wall 壁 and one is able to enter the Way [and realize awakening]” (T 48.403c27–29). Zongmi is clearly trying to make some sense of the term “wall,” and this is the earliest (extant) attempt to it give a more metaphorical rather than literal meaning.

Later examples

John McRae (1986, 113) also mentions two later examples:

1. Huangbo Xiyun (d. 850), in the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德伝灯録 (T 51.219b3–5), who refers to Bodhidharma’s practice as one of physically facing a wall in meditation, an example of a literal interpretation which specifically identifies “facing the wall” with Bodhidharma, the “*biguan* Brahman” (寓嵩山少林寺。面壁而坐終日默然。人莫之測。謂之壁觀婆羅門).

2. A thirteenth-century Tiantai work, the *Kuangmen zhengtong* 釈門正統 (卍續蔵経 130, 907) which defines a wall in this context as the “nonentrance of sensory data (‘adventitious dust-like afflictions’) and false delusions” (客塵偽妄不入日壁).

There are certainly more examples of the use of *biguan* in historical Buddhist texts (a simple search of the sat Database provided fifty-seven instances of the compound 壁観 in the Taishō canon), but these suffice to show that the meaning of the term is very ambiguous and has been interpreted throughout history in many different ways.

9. See McRae (1986, 113) for further details and other names and variant interpretations, see especially McRae’s notes on pages 305–6. He outlines, for example, the interpretation of Lü Ch’eng, who “suggests a connection with the ‘totality-sphere’ techniques of meditation (कृःत्सना-आयतना, or kasīṇa-āyatana in Pali). Lü’s idea is that in order to contemplate the element earth one begins with a disk of mud erected on a frame in front of oneself, rather in the form of a wall.”
MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

SUZUKI Daisetsu

D. T. SUZUKI, in an essay on “Daruma-Zen and It’s Conceptual Background” (1968, 37) follows the lead of Zongmi in interpreting biguan symbolically or metaphorically (“like a wall”) to refer to a type of meditation or state of concentration in which all contact with outside conditions is stopped or severed (諸縁を絶する). Since a wall is something that stands between and marks a separation from the “inner” and the “outer” realms, “wall” symbolically refers to a cutting off or separation from the outer realm. Thus, Suzuki says, biguan implies “protecting” the inner true nature and rejecting the outer, external “afflictions.” He concludes that “as of now, due to a lack of documentation, we cannot reach a conclusion as to what concrete actions are specific to biguan that allow one to reach a ‘peaceful mind’.”

SEKIGUCHI Shindai 関口真大, in 『天台止観の研究』(Studies on Tiantai/Tendai Zhiguan/Shikan)

SEKIGUCHI’s analysis of the ambiguity of biguan has been quoted above. After a lengthy discussion, he concludes that in later texts “the terms biguan and ‘facing the wall’ are used interchangeably and synonymously. In China it was very easy to identify the two terms. Thus the legend of the ‘wall-contemplation Brahman’ who sat ‘gazing at the wall for nine years’ was born” (1969, 262–3).

Thus Sekiguchi goes so far as to say that the Bodhidharma legend was based on a literal interpretation of biguan, and not the other way around. Sekiguchi is the only source I have found who suggests this idea so directly.

SUZUKI Kakuzen 鈴木格禅, 『壁観』試論 (Speculations on biguan)

In a detailed two-part essay already quoted above (1975–1976), Suzuki Kakuzen provides a sophisticated and detailed analysis of the term and its use in historical sources, and then argues (tentatively, as an admit-
tedly speculative exercise, and in contrast to those who would read “wall” metaphorically) that we can take *biguan* literally, to mean “to contemplate a/the wall.” Much of his essay is an attempt to show a connection with meditation practices in temple-caves 石窟寺院 in India, practices which reached a peak around the time of Bodhidharma (fifth-sixth century).

Suzuki opens his essay by pointing out the ambiguity of *biguan*:

*biguan* may have been introduced by Tanlin [in his introduction to the *Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices*], and not a term used by Bodhidharma himself. Or, it may be that a third party other than these two introduced the term to describe Bodhidharma’s contemplative practice, and that Tanlin merely recorded it. In any case, there exist no documents to prove any of these theories. Does *biguan* describe the external form of Bodhidharma’s practice? Or is it meant metaphorically to refer to some special characteristic of the meditational contemplation of Bodhidharma? Or was it just a way to refer to meditation? None of these options can be proven. *Biguan* is certainly an ambiguous and vague term. The only fact known for certain is that a kind of method of meditation termed *biguan* was at some point in history attributed to the methods taught by Bodhidharma. (Suzuki 1976, 26)

Kamata Shigeo 鎌田茂雄 on the 『禅源諸詮集部序』

Kamata Shigeo, in commentary to his translation of Zongmi’s *Chan-yuan zhuquan jibu xu* repeats much of the material I have covered above, adding that “There is absolutely no mention at all of *biguan*
in the works of Shenhui or in the [early Chan history] *Lidai fabao ji* [Records of the Dharma-treasure through the Generations].” At the end of his comments he adds, “There is a cave for meditation in Taiwan in which one meditates while completely surrounded on all sides by a wall; this indicates that in later times *biguan* referred to a method of meditation in which one is literally surrounded by physical walls.”

Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山: A unique interpretation

Yanagida Seizan, the greatest of contemporary scholars of Chan/Zen history, has put forward a somewhat original interpretation of *biguan*, preferring to interpret it metaphorically. He writes:

..."wall contemplation" in itself constituted the Mahāyāna contemplation of nonsubstantiality.... Actually the metaphor of the wall had already appeared in the *Dazhidulun*’s passage on the mindfulness of the body.... It was a metaphor for the inanimate, the unconscious (*mushin*, or *wuoxin* in Chinese).10

In essence, *biguan* means “the wall contemplates,” not “one contemplates a wall.” One becomes a wall and contemplates as such. What does one contemplate? One contemplates *śūnyatā*. One gazes intently at a vibrantly alive *śūnyatā*....

When Bodhidharma first arrived in the Northern Wei, he presumably sat alone in meditation in such a cave [with countless numbers of buddhas and bodhisattvas carved into all four walls]. His was not a practice of “facing a wall,” but of becoming a wall and witnessing himself and the world. He saw the emptiness of history, he saw the truth of identity of unenlightened person and sage. I believe that this was the origin of the word “wall contemplation.”

At the same time, “wall contemplation” includes the idea of “turning back the brilliance in counter illumination (*ekō henshō* 偲向返照, or *huixiang fanzhao* in Chinese), the wonderfully bright radiance of the setting sun. Or the inconceivable function of the mirror, which illuminates each and every thing in existence.... It is well to point out that

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[such ideas] begin in the Chan of Bodhidharma along with this difficult yet strangely appealing expression, “wall contemplation.”

John McRae’s discussion of biguan

As mentioned above, John McRae (1986) provides the best summary in English on the history and various interpretations of biguan. He lists various historical appearances of the term, and briefly mentions a few modern interpretations. After presenting Yanagida Seizan’s relatively original and controversial interpretations (quoted above), McRae concludes, “I suspect that it would be difficult to defend the translation of biguan as ‘the wall contemplates’ before a hypothetical sixth-century audience of native Chinese speakers. Yet the line between ‘contemplation like a wall’ and ‘a wall contemplating’ is very fine: to achieve the former would be tantamount to achieving the latter” (McRae 1986, 114–15). He then discusses how this understanding of biguan fits with the two aspects of the static and the dynamic, and the correspondence with the idea of the “two entrances” in the Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices. He concludes, “the reader may object that these static and dynamic aspects of religious practice are not both immediately apparent in the term biguan. I cannot deny this. I will not claim that this analysis constitutes a definitive and unchallengeable interpretation of biguan and the entrance of principle. However, it does provide a key to the comprehensive interpretation of early Chan religious doctrine” (McRae 1986, 115).

Later, in his Seeing Through Zen (2003), McRae takes up the subject again and picks up on a passage in Zhiyi’s Mohe zhiguan where śamatha is compared to a wall. He adds:

12. See the Mohe zhiguan (T 46.58a18–19): “Cessation is a wall-like concentration: the eight winds of evil notions cannot enter therein” 止是壁定八風惡覺所不能入 (translation in Swanson 2018, vol. 2, 859). Zhanran’s commentary (T 46.305c21–27) on this passage explains that “wall-like concentration is like a room having four walls so that the eight winds cannot enter. If you attain cessation you can be free from the various evil notions in this and the transcendent realm…. The rooms of a wall also exempt you from the eight
This usage by Zhiyi and Zhanran seems to fit the Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices very well: “wall contemplation” in that text might be considered to mean “fixed in samatha or concentration meditation, without allowing the eight winds of good and bad fortune to influence one at all.” Whether the specific reference to the eight winds applies to Bodhidharma’s treatise or not, the general sense of “wall contemplation: as the solid exclusion of distractions fits well with the “entrance of principle” [in the Two Entrances].

Although this metaphoric explanation seems reasonable, it was apparently not transparent to the members of the later Chan movement, who eventually introduced the more graphic image of Bodhidharma sitting in front of a cave wall. The issue is profoundly irresolvable, and we should take clear note of the uncertainty that exists. (McRae 2003, 31)

John Alexander Jorgensen on “looking from on top of a wall”

John Jorgensen, in his MA dissertation for the Australian National University (1979), refers to a line in Sima Qian’s Shiji about “looking from on top of a wall” (ts’ung bi-shang guan), which Jorgensen glosses as “to be an onlooker, to be uninfluenced by what is going on around you” (1979, 196), perhaps as in “all along the watchtower”? McRae (1986, 306) notes: “The implication is that Bodhidharma’s wall contemplation might involve a similar sense of detachment from the world. Even more significant, Jorgensen cites an “adamantine wall samādhi” in the Suiziyi sanmei attributed to Huisi (194). According to this text, when Śāriputra was once in the samādhi in question, a demon hit him so hard with a club that the reverberations were felt in all the worlds and times. Śāriputra, however, was unaware of the blow, and after coming out of samādhi knew only that the skin on the top of his head felt a bit unusual. The power of this samādhi is reminiscent of the frozen solidity referred to elsewhere.”
Tibetan translation of *biguan*

There is a Tibetan translation of the *Lidai fabao ji*, where “frozen/devoted dwelling in *biguan*” 凝住壁觀 is translated “dwelling in the light” or “dwelling in insight” (“Iham mer gnas na,” Pelliot. 116–6; “rtsig nos la bltas pabshin na” in Poussin 710; see SUZUKI 1976, 43–4; OBATA 1975 and 1976). I am not able to explain how *biguan* can be translated as “dwelling in the light,” but it is curious that the term is interpreted without relying on the idea of a “wall.”

**Summary of historical and contemporary interpretations**

Although there are certainly more examples that could be discussed (and I regret that my examples come mostly from Japanese sources and do not include possible discussions in modern Chinese), the above examples are more than enough to illustrate both the ambiguity of *biguan* and the variety of interpretations that have been attempted to explain it. The various historical and contemporary interpretations that I have briefly summarized are quite diverse, but have two factors in common: they agree that the meaning of *biguan* is unclear and speculative, and they take *bi* to mean “wall” (whether literally, physically, symbolically, or metaphorically). I agree with the first factor, that any and all theories concerning *biguan* to date are highly speculative. I would like to continue the tradition of wild speculation by disagreeing with the latter factor; that 壁 originally meant “wall.” I would suggest that *bi* originally did not take the literal meaning “wall,” but was a transliteration of the Sanskrit “*vi*,” the first syllable of *vipaśyanā*. My hunch is that *biguan* is a “mixed binome”: a combination transliteration/translation for *vipaśyanā*, or “insight meditation.” In other words, *bi* is the transliteration of *vi*, *guan* is the translation “contemplation.” *Biguan*, then, did not originally mean “wall-gazing.”
or “wall contemplation,” as was believed and passed on for centuries by the later tradition.

Imagine, if you will, the following scenario. Sometime before or during the time of Bodhidharma (during or before the fifth to sixth century AD) and somewhere in China (or along the Silk Road), some person—perhaps even “Bodhidharma” himself—used the compound biguan as a mixed transliteration/translation of *vipaśyanā*, a general Buddhist term for “insight meditation” or “contemplation.” Perhaps the character *bi* was chosen deliberately as a pun (as is the case with many characters used for transliteration: there is an attempt to find, among many with acceptable phonetic sound, the one with some meaningful connection), since meditation often involved proximity to a wall. Perhaps it was chosen randomly and was not meant to imply “wall”; perhaps the related and more common 璧 or 畔 was used, and the homonym 璧 was substituted later. Soon, perhaps almost immediately thereafter, the term was taken literally (by the bulk of the Chinese public who knew no Sanskrit) to contain the meaning of “wall.” Eventually the association with *vipaśyanā*, if it was ever clear at all, was completely forgotten. If originally the term had nothing to do with a wall but was somehow associated with Bodhidharma, it is possible (as Sekiguchi speculates) that the legend of Bodhidharma’s nine-year contemplation sitting in front of a wall grew from a literal misreading of the character *bi*. The term did not reflect history, rather, legend grew from the name. By at least the Song period the meaning “wall” was cemented by the substitution of the unambiguous term “facing the wall” 面壁. All speculations (even Zongmi’s metaphorical take) on the meaning of *biguan* assumed a literal meaning for *bi*.

With this in mind, let us take another look at the original phrase in the *Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices*—the compound “peaceful-minded *biguan*” 安心壁観 (or “to be of a peaceful mind in this way is *biguan*” 如是安心壁観). Is it not reasonable to think that perhaps this is a translation of *śamatha-vipaśyanā* (“calming and contemplation”), the basic twofold structure of Buddhist meditation
(although the two-character 止観 took hold as the standard translation quite early)? Anxin 安心—understood as “calming the mind”—is as good a translation of śamatha as one could imagine. Although in later developments (especially in the Pure Land tradition) anxin came to imply a sense of assurance of one’s salvation (through the power of Amida’s grace), definitions of anxin in its earlier form read much like an explanation of śamatha itself.

One might object that anxin is a translation with no transliteration; why not the same for vipaśyanā? It seems that while the two-character anxin is necessary for śamatha, the single character guan 觀 is sufficient for vipaśyanā. However, if only three characters were used (安心観), it would be too easy to misinterpret this as one term (“peaceful-minded contemplation”), and upset the Chinese penchant for balance. Perhaps the transliteration bi- was introduced to maintain the two-character-four-character balance. Once again this is quite speculative.

There are other possible objections to this interpretation. The ancient pronunciation of 壁, according to the authoritative Edwin Pulleyblank (1991, 34), is “piek” or “pεjk,” closing with a “k” sound and making it unlikely as a transliteration of just vi.13 Again, the character 壁 was seldom used for transliteration of Buddhist terms (壁 and 開 were more common). I did find one exception: a copy of a text (『諸経要略文』, T 85.1205b7) discovered at Dunhuang translates pratyekabuddha as 壁支佛 (see McRae 2003, 30–1 and 160). The use of 壁 and 開 for transliteration makes it not unlikely that the homonym 壁 could be substituted.14

13. Pulleyblank, in a personal correspondence to me, emphasized this point while expressing doubt about the use of 壁 for vi, though he did not rule it out as impossible. The ancient reading of “piek” for this character explains why the modern pronunciation for this character in Japanese is “heki.”

14. Morohashi (vol. 3, 266) includes the following examples of the character 壁 being used in transliteration: 1. 壁立司 (bilisu, “pirate, bandit, traitor”), the transliteration of a vernacular phrase from Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang; 2. 壁爐 (bilu, “wall-oven”). Morohashi explains this as an “oven placed on the wall,” but then adds that it is a Manchurian stove called a *pechka (ペチカ). It may be possible that this is another case,
A further wrinkle is that in both examples from classical texts—安心壁観 from the Two Entrances and Four Teachings, and 壁定 in the Moho zhiguan—the explanation is closer to śamatha than to vipaśyanā.

Despite these objections—none of which are insurmountable—if, indeed, bi is a transliteration of vi, the first syllable of vipaśyanā, then the speculations on the meaning of biguan throughout history based on the meaning of bi as “wall” are misplaced. Is it possible, then, that biguan originally referred merely to Buddhist “insight contemplation,” perhaps even to Buddhist meditation in general? This theory is quite speculative, to be sure, but not any more (or less) so than all the other speculative theories about what biguan may mean.

The second half of my article deals with a final possible objection to this theory; that the Chinese never “mixed” translation and transliteration in rendering Buddhist terms into Chinese, and that therefore such a compound is unlikely. I will show that this is not the case and that, indeed, “Sanskrit-Chinese mixed binomes” are quite common.

Mixed binomes 梵漢合成語

The most obvious objection to my theory that biguan is a mixed transliteration/translation of vipaśyanā—and one that has been brought up consistently and almost spontaneously by many scholars with whom I have discussed this idea—is that compounds taken into Chinese from the Sanskrit were either fully transliterated or translated, and not mixed. I will spend the rest of this essay showing that this is not true.15 Though it is most commonly the case that Buddhist like biguan, in which bi is a transliteration of the first syllable of pechka, to mean “the pechka oven”?

Although 壁 was not used often for transliteration, the related 壁 was used more frequently. One example; 壁流離 (biliuli [or, in Middle Chinese, piajk luw lia]) transliterates vaidurya (Skt)/veluriya (Prakrit), terms related to the Greek beryllion or berullos, a gem stone. However, I was not able to find any examples of this term as a mixed binome (such as the possible 壁石).

15. Showing that this is the case does not prove that my speculation concerning biguan
terms were either fully translated or fully transliterated, especially as Buddhism and the translation of Buddhist texts became ensconced in Chinese culture, examples are sufficiently common (including some very basic and common Buddhist terminology) to show that “mixed binomes” are not unusual, and that the case of biguan as such a mixed binome would not at all be unique.

Despite the insistence of many scholars that the Chinese did not mix translation and transliteration, there are a variety of terms used to refer specifically to the phenomenon of Sanskrit-Chinese mixed binomes. Perhaps the most straightforward is the modern Japanese term 梵漢合成語, or “Sanskrit-Chinese amalgamations” (Miyasaka 1987). Mochizuki’s encyclopedic 仏教大辞典 and Nakamura Hajime’s Iwanami 仏教辞典 (1989) use the term 雙舉 (or 双拳) or 併舉 (“dual usage”). Sudo’s 仏教故事名言辞典 (1982) uses the term 唐梵重標 (“overlapping Tang-Sanskrit expressions”). The eleventh century Buddhist dictionary Shishi yaolan 釈氏要覧 (t 54, no. 2127) contains the term 華梵兼名 (“concurrent Chinese-Sanskrit terms”), and Oda’s 仏教大辞典 from about a hundred years ago uses the term 梵漢 雙舉 (“dual use of Sanskrit and Chinese”). Liang Xiao-hong, a former member of the Peking Academy of Sciences and my Chinese consultant on this topic who helped gather examples for this paper, has in the past used the term 梵漢合璧詞 (“a term combining Sanskrit and Chinese”) in her work on the influence of Buddhist terminology on colloquial Chinese. (The use of 璧 in this case is coincidental.) This variety of terms to refer to the same phenomenon does suggest that mixed binomes, though not extremely unusual, are nonetheless not so common that it engendered the use of a standard term for the practice.

Recently Jan Nattier has pointed out (in personal correspondence with me in 2003) concerning ancient Central Asian languages that such “bilingual binomes”

as vipaśyanā is necessarily true, only that the objection to my theory on the basis of the lack of mixed Sanskrit-Chinese binomes is invalid.
... are referred to by scholars of Central Asian languages by the Greek term *hendiadys* (pr. Hen-di’-a-dis) “one via two,” i.e., one idea expressed by two words, usually nouns—though in Greek and Latin the two nouns are usually connected by the word “and” which is not the case in Central Asian languages. In English, the two items are usually adjectives rather than nouns, e.g., “nice and warm” or “good and mad.”

In Central Asian and Chinese texts, what distinguishes a *hendiadys* is the fact that it is a binome consisting of two terms: one a foreign word, and one a native one; examples abound in, for example, Uygur Buddhist texts, where Buddhist terms are often represented by a combination of Chinese and Uygur, e.g. *tsui ayïγ qïlïnč* “sin [Ch.] evil deed [Uyg.].” In actual practice the first (foreign) noun is often understood to be an adjective qualifying the second (domestic) noun, e.g. **禪定** “chan [type of] stabilization,” in other words, the type of meditative focus known as **chan** [or, *dhyāna*].

Note that in *all such binomes the foreign term* (whether a Chinese term in an Uyger text, or an Indic term in a Chinese text) comes first, and is thus to be perceived by the target audience as an adjective qualifying the second (indigenous) noun. The same phenomenon can be observed in modern English Buddhist vocabulary, e.g. the expression “**vipassanā** meditation.”

This, precisely, is the pattern I am suggesting for **biguan** as “**vipaśyanā** meditation,” and we can find many examples of such mixed binomes in Chinese Buddhist vocabulary.

**Examples of mixed binomes**

The following are some examples of Buddhist terms that are Sanskrit-Chinese mixed binomes, many of which are basic Buddhist terms in common usage:

| 禪定 (dhyāna or jhāna; meditation, Zen); 禪思 (dhyāna; “ch’an reflection”) |

The full transliteration of *dhyāna* is **禪那**; the more commonly used **禪定** combines the transliteration 禪/禪 (Chan, Zen) with the translation 定 (“steady, stable, concentration”), a character often used by itself
to translate samādhi. Thus the term “Zen” itself is a transliteration, not a translation. Zazen 坐禅 is also a mixed binome, with the transliteration coming second, after the character for “sitting.” 禅 is used as an unusual mixed binome for dhyāna as one of the six pāramitās in Zhiqian’s 支謙 early translation of the Vimalakīrti Sutra (T 474, 14.520a28, 524b1, 525a18).

三昧定 “samādhi concentration” (for samādhi)

三昧 is the transliteration of samādhi, 定 “stabilization/concentration” is the translation. This “trinome” is used often in Lokakṣema’s 支婁迦識 translations (see T 224, 8.470b22) and other archaic texts (T 1507, 25.32b23, 38b13).

The character 魔 was created in China by combining the radical “demon” 鬼 (for the meaning) with the phonetic radical 麻 (radical #200, for the reading) specifically to transliterate the Sanskrit “Māra”—the “evil one,” “the destroyer,” “the personification of passions,” the tempter of Śākyamuni of Buddhist legend. The first transliterated character 魔 is combined with numerous Chinese characters to form mixed binomes, including 魔術 and 魔法, that is, “magic.”

檀家 (dānapati; patron, donor); 檀施 “dāna-giving” (for dāna)

The full transliteration is 檀越; this term refers to patrons of Buddhist activity. In its incarnation as the Japanese danka 檀家, it still refers to patrons of Buddhist temples but more specifically to the families “belonging” or “registered” to a certain temple—the “household” 家

16. In fact, 魔術・魔法 and “magic” are related, though distant, philological cousins, and their phonetic similarity is not a coincidence. The Indo-European root ma (part of the Sanskrit māra, māya, etc.) also appears in the ancient Persian mogh/magus, the Greek μάγια (mageia) and μάγος (magos), and the Latin magicus (recall the three Magi of Christmas legend fame), and eventually to the English magus, mage, magic, and magician. See also Victor H. Mair’s article on “Old Sinitic Myag, Old Persian Magus, and English ‘Magician’,” (1990) in which he links the Persian magus with the prehistorical Sinitic myag 武 (“martial”), the warrior-king as shaman/mage.
that “supports” a temple.\textsuperscript{17} 檀施 “
\textit{dāna}-giving” (for \textit{dāna}, the first character for transliteration, the second character for translation) is found in \textit{T 361, 12.280b19} (an early translation of a Pure Land sutra by Loka-kṣema, in a non-standard list of the six \textit{pāramitā}.

懺悔 (\textit{kṣama}, confession, repentance; Jpn. \textit{zange}, sange)

The character 懺 has no meaning in itself but is a transliteration of \textit{kṣama} (the full transliteration is 懺摩); combined with the translation 悔 (regret, confess), it indicates Buddhist repentance.

塔婆 (\textit{stūpa} or \textit{thūpa}, pagoda)

In this case the first character is a combination translation (the character means “tower”) and transliteration, and the second character only a transliteration, for stupa, the towers or mounds built for housing the Buddha’s relics. The compound 塔廟 would be a more clear case of a mixed binome, with the second character meaning “shrine” or “mausoleum.”

尼姑 (\textit{bhikṣuni}, Buddhist nun)

Usually the full transliteration 比丘尼 is used for \textit{bhikṣuni}, but this compound 尼姑 is also found; it is a mixed binome with the first character a transliteration of the final syllable \textit{ni}, and the second character indicating “female” (lit. mother-in-law, aunt, or woman). Other mixed binomes using this pattern include 尼戒 (nun precepts), 尼房 (nun residence), and 尼師 (nun master).

刹土 (\textit{kṣetra}; land, country)

The first character 刹 is the first syllable (\textit{kṣe}) of \textit{kṣetra}, land or country, and the second character translates the same. The character is often used in compounds to indicate Buddhist temples, coming from the nuance of \textit{kṣetra} as “sacred territory.” Early examples of this use can be found in translations by Lokakṣema (\textit{T 224, 8.438a18}; \textit{T 280, 10.445a–17. The English word “donor” may be distantly related to the Sanskrit \textit{dāna}.
b), and by Zhiqian (T 225, 8.486a23 and b20, 499c18; T 281, 10.450c8). The compound 佛刹 refers to a Buddha-land.

梵天 brahmā, Brahmā gods, Brahmā heaven; 梵行 brahma-carya, “Brahmā conduct”, that is, “celibacy”; 梵志 brahmaṇa, “Brahmā-mind” or just “Brahma”

All examples of 梵 used to transliterate Brahmā, and the second character translating the meaning of the compound, or rather, the transliteration modifying the translated character.

砂(沙)糖 (śarkar, śkarā [Skt.], sakkharā [Pali]; sugar, saccharin)

Though not a Buddhist term, this word (like the syllable ma) connects Eastern and Western languages from Japanese and Chinese to Sanskrit, Persian, Arabian, Latin, and English. The first character 沙 (later 砂) is a transliteration of the Sanskrit śarkar, or the Pali sakkharā, and the second character translates 糖 “sugar.”

大鴈塔 (“Large goose pagoda” or “Mahāyāna pagoda”) and 小鴈塔 (“small goose” or “Hīnayāna pagoda”)

Pagodas built in the seventh century at the request of Xuanzang to house Buddhist texts. Henrik Sorensen (in a personal communication) claims that it is a mixed binome for Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna; 大 and 小 a translation of mahā and hīna, and 鴨 (yen) not a “goose” but a transliteration of yāna.

鉢盂 (pātra; the begging bowl)

The first character 鉢 (which also means “bowl” or “pot”) is the first character of鉢多羅, the transliteration of pātra, the monk’s begging bowl, one of the few items a monk was allowed to own and carry. The character 盂 means “bowl” (and is also used for transliterating the name Ullambana 盃蘭盆). The Shishi yaolan 釈氏要覧 (T 2127, 54.279a2) explicitly explains this term as a mixed binome (鉢盂即華梵兼名也).
僧衆 (sangha; the assembly of monks and nuns)

The first character 僧 is from 僧伽, the transliteration of sangha, the assembly of monks and nuns. The character 衆 means “assembly.” ODA (1929, 1076a) specifically defines this compound as a mixed binome (梵漢雙舉 “dual use of Sanskrit and Chinese”).

須福 (Sudhana; “very rich,” “good wealth”; proper name of a lay figure who appears in some sutras as one who meets the Buddha)

The first character 須 is used frequently to translate the Sanskrit su; 福 means “blessing” or “riches.” Full transliterations of the name are 須陀那 and 須達那, with 善財 as a translation. This name is found as 長者須福 in the opening section of the Maiden *Nāgadāna [Dragon Gift] Sūtra 龍施女経 (T 557, 14.909c9), translated into Chinese in the third century by Zhiqian (Tche K’ien), and as either fully transliterated or translated in various versions of the Candragarbha-sūtra 月蔵経.18

Also, the name Sudhana is perhaps most famous as the protagonist of the Avatamsaka-sūtra, who visited fifty-three masters in search of the true Dharma (T 9.676a–788b).

安般守意 (breathing and mindfulness meditation: ānāpānasmytri)

Mixed transliteration/translation (“quadnome”) used for the 『佛説安般守意経』(Sutra on ānāpānasmytri, T 602), attributed to An Shih-kao 安世高 in the mid-second century, one of the earliest translations of a Buddhist text into Chinese. 安般 is the transliteration of ānāpāna, and 守意 translates smṛti.

菩薩大人, 菩薩大士 “bodhisattva great person” (bodhisattva-mahāsattva)

Another mixed “quadnome” with the first two characters 菩薩 a transliteration of bodhisattva, and the last two characters 大人 大士 translate

18. See, for example, T 397[15], 13.374–381, translated by Narendrayaśas in the sixth century (NATTIER 1991, 293).
mahāsattva. This quadnome appears hundreds of times in Dharma-rakṣa’s work (see T 169, 3.411a23 and 28c24)

阿夷行 “ādi-practice” (for ādikarmika, “beginner”)

A translation of ādikarmika (“beginner”) would be 始業 or 初習業位, but Zhiqian’s translation of the Vimalakīrti Sutra (T 474, 14.522b29) uses the mixed trinome 阿夷行比丘 (a beginner monk).

There are undoubtedly more such examples of mixed binomes, but these suffice to show that the practice was not uncommon, especially in the early period of translating Buddhist texts in China (around second to fourth century), represented by translators such as Lokakṣema and Zhiqian. It is striking that even such important and basic terms—such as 禪定 and 懺悔—are mixed binomes, and it is thus quite possible that vipaśyanā could have been been expressed with a mixed binome such as biguan.

**Conclusion**

I believe I have shown that mixed binomes are not so unusual as to disqualify the idea that biguan is a mixed transliteration/translation; it is not true that “such things were just not done.” This does not in itself prove that my hunch is correct; however, it is not any more speculative than the other theories concerning bi as “wall.” As with the other speculative theories, I have found no “smoking gun,” no definitive evidence proving that my hunch is correct. On the other hand, I have discovered nothing that presents an insurmountable, or even difficult, obstacle to the idea, or that would definitely prove my speculation as incorrect. The conclusion that indeed biguan originally was a mixed transliteration/translation of vipaśyanā, and not a description of a historical event or practice of wall-gazing by Bodhidharma, is as compelling as any other explanation.

Some final questions: Who cares? Why is this important? What are the implications, and what does it mean to conclude that biguan did
not refer to contemplating a wall but was a translation of vipaśyanā? To those within the tradition—such as Zen monks at Eiheiji who meditate facing the wall (menpeki), ostensibly following in the footsteps (as it were), or following the historical example of Bodhidharma—the answer is probably “not much.” The practice of facing the wall in meditation has over one thousand years of tradition to prove its worth; it does not necessarily rely on the historicity or historical precedent of Bodhidharma’s experience. Even so, the Bodhidharma legend as story can still be rich and meaningful in the Zen tradition and wider social context. Again, it is difficult to exaggerate the popularity and widespread use of the Bodhidharma image (at least in Japanese history and culture). Proving that the idea of “wall-gazing” is a historical mistake would have as much effect on the Bodhidharma image in popular culture as proving the non-historical origins of Santa Claus. In this sense the analysis and historical reconstruction of biguan as a translation of vipaśyanā is of “merely” academic interest.

Being of merely academic interest, however, is still important, at least to some people. If biguan is indeed a translation of vipaśyanā, this sheds new light on one aspect of the early development of Buddhism in China. It is another piece in the puzzle of what happened historically in this complicated development. It suggests a picture of Bodhidharma (the man of history, not legend), as one who, rather than offering a totally new practice, transmitted a much more traditional Buddhist practice (śamatha-vipaśyanā); perhaps Bodhidharma was “merely” a vipaśyanā master? And, it provides a hint for how at least one aspect of the Bodhidharma/Zen legends developed; as a story—the “invention of tradition”—which grew out of the unconscious misinterpretation of a single, simple Chinese character.

Finally, even if the “biguan is vipaśyanā” theory does not pan out, the heretofore overlooked idea of Sanskrit-Chinese mixed binomes in the translation of Buddhist terms should be of interest to scholars of East Asian Buddhism as a compelling feature of the transmission and translation of Buddhist terms into Chinese. For example, early
Chinese translations can be clarified if some terms are recognized as mixed binomes. Patterns of transliteration and translation may offer hints on the evolution of Buddhist terms in Central Asia on their way to China, and offer insight into the history and art of translation. It is my hope that the phenomenon of mixed binomes will serve as a useful perspective to clarify the early Chinese translations of Buddhist texts and contribute to a better understanding of the development of Buddhist terminology in China.

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