PART ONE

THE GENEALOGY OF LINEAGE
CHAPTER ONE

BUDDHIST NOTIONS OF SUCCESSION AND TRANSMISSION IN INDIA AND PRE-CHAN CHINA

Introduction

The idea of religious lineage, of claiming “spiritual” descent and thus authority from particular religious figures, is only one element in Chinese Buddhism, but it is an important one. The widespread acceptance of religious lineage has shaped not only institutions but the fundamental self-conception of many groups. Many different cultural sources and historical situations have contributed to the development of religious lineage, and in this chapter, we will consider the most crucial sources and circumstances.

In analyzing the development of various concepts of religious succession, transmission, and lineage in Indian Buddhism as well as early and medieval Chinese Buddhism, up to the appearance of Chan lineage, I have deliberately tried to avoid a teleological approach focused on the ultimate appearance of Chan lineage. Religious lineage emerged in several forms of medieval Chinese Buddhism and is, I argue, a widespread phenomenon of which Chan lineage is but one, albeit prominent, form. In studying the steps taken toward a full-blown notion of religious lineage originating in India and culminating in a line of Chinese patriarchs, I present each development as worthy of attention on its own, not as part of a march toward an inevitable outcome.

Religious lineage in Chinese Buddhism has been examined by scholars interested in a wide spectrum of overlapping topics, including the nature of Chinese Buddhist ‘schools,’ the historicity of Chan and Tiantai lineage claims, the emergence of new Buddhist literary genres, the influence of Buddhism on the medieval Confucian notion of daotong 道統, or ‘transmission of the way,’ the history of traditional Chinese education, and the development and periodization of Chan practices, institutions, and doctrines. By bringing together these often disparate discussions, we gain an overview of the emergence of religious lineage