

A black and white photograph of a stone archway. The arch is made of rough, textured stone. Through the opening, a bright, hazy landscape is visible. In the foreground, several plants with small, round leaves and tiny flowers are growing through the base of the arch. A thin, dark branch or wire hangs down from the right side of the arch.

**Knocking Gently on the Door of Chan**  
**On the Practice of Huatou**

Chan Master Guo Ru

## Dedication

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不為自己求安樂

但願眾生得離苦

*Not seeking joy and peace for oneself only,*

*Hoping that all sentient beings depart from suffering.*

Gently Knocking on the Door of Chan  
By Chan Master Guo Ru  
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## Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	01
<b>Author's Preface</b>	09
<b>The View</b>	17
<b>The Practice</b>	29
<b>Attitudes</b>	67
<b>Torpor, Pain and Other Problems</b>	85
<b>Forceful Guidance</b>	95
<b>Practice in Everyday Life</b>	101
<b>Enlightenment</b>	111
<b>What a Splendid Life</b>	121
<b>Silent Illumination and Huatou</b>	127
<b>Glossary</b>	139



## Introduction

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### Chan Master Guo Ru

Chan Master Guo Ru is the abbot and resident teacher of Chan Grove, a temple he founded in Taipei in 2011. Born in 1951 in Taiwan, at the age of twelve he became the first novice disciple of Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009). Master Sheng Yen, widely recognized as one of the most eminent teachers of modern Chan Buddhism, was founder of Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery in Taiwan, as well as the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, both in New York State, USA. When Master Sheng Yen was in solitary retreat for six years in the mountains in Taiwan, and then later studying at Risho University in Tokyo, Master Guo Ru lived and studied with his grandmaster Dong Chu, who was Master Sheng Yen's Dharma master.

When Master Sheng Yen returned to Taiwan after earning a doctorate in Buddhist literature, Master Guo Ru resumed his studies under Master Sheng Yen, putting particular emphasis

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on practicing meditation. He later served as Director of the Chan Hall at Dharma Drum Mountain, assisting Master Sheng Yen in guiding meditation retreats. In terms of formal education, Master Guo Ru received a bachelor's degree in Chinese literature from National Taiwan Normal University, and his master's degree from the University of Georgia in the USA. He also studied at the Eastern Buddhist Institute of Buddha Light Mountain in Taiwan (now known as Fo Guang Shan Tsunglin University).

In 2005 Master Guo Ru received Dharma transmission from Master Sheng Yen, thus becoming a Dharma heir and a Chan master in his own right. Since then, Master Guo Ru has continued Master Sheng Yen's mission to promulgate the Chan of the Chinese patriarchs. He has taught the Buddhadharma in Taiwan, China, Malaysia, the United States and Canada, and often leads Chan retreats outside Taiwan.

In addition to being a thoroughly schooled and a compelling lecturer on Buddhist Dharma, Master Guo Ru

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is noted for his skillful and expedient use of energetic vocal expressions to urge his students on, as well as his wielding of the so-called "incense board" to provoke them into greater effort. Both of these practices are much in the manner of famous Chan masters of the Linji tradition. When exhorting practitioners with shouts and challenges, or striking their shoulder with the incense board when they are sitting in meditation, he is exhorting them to confront the present moment, to become acutely receptive to their own state of mind, whether abiding in ease or struggling with adversity. At such a moment, when the student is shocked into a keen alertness of his or her situation with no escape, he or she is stimulated to practice with greater diligence, thus giving rise to the sense of doubt, which is the essence of "investigating Chan." When this doubt sense arises and is allowed to develop, the ground for possible realization is auspiciously established. Seen in this light, the shouting and striking, when used with skill and timeliness, are in truth acts of compassion from

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teacher to student.

Even so, Master Guo Ru has a gentle and comforting manner. Before every retreat, he patiently explains the purpose and meaning of the shouting and the incense board, and promises to use them appropriately. At the same time, being forthright and direct, he also says that he will use such methods on the spot, without hesitation or holding back, depending on the needs of the student at the moment. As such, he is doing what many Chan masters of countless generations past have been doing for their own students, with results that still reverberate today.

### **About *Knocking on the Door of Chan***

This book is the English translation of 禪門輕叩 (*Knocking on the Door of Chan*), which was published by Chan Grove in Taiwan in 2011. A decision was subsequently made to publish the book in English to fulfill Master's Guo Ru's wish to make

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it available to his Western students, as well as to share the Dharma of Chan with others. The lectures in this book are for the most part a compilation from a 10-day Chan retreat given by Master Guo Ru at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center at Pine Bush, New York, in June of 2009. A smaller portion came from a 7-day Chan retreat at the Dharma Drum Mountain Vancouver Center in July of 2009. The "Postscript" chapter is from a 7-day Chan retreat he led at the Dharma Drum Mountain affiliate monastery in Taoyuan, Taiwan, in May of 2011. The appendix, "Silent Illumination and *Huatou*" is a compilation from talks given at the 2009 retreats at Dharma Drum Retreat Center and the Dharma Drum Mountain Vancouver Center.

The central theme of *Knocking on the Door of Chan* is a method of meditative concentration which is unique to Chan Buddhism called "*huatou*" (also practiced in Zen as "*wato*"). It is a method which, while simple to learn, is quite challenging in practice, compelling a dedicated practitioner to drop all mundane and fleeting concerns in order to "investigate Chan."

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When practiced with skill and intense focus, the process generates a “sense of doubt,” which the practitioner endeavors to resolve and even shatter, in a deep experience of realization. In this book, Master Guo Ru talks about this process as one of working through one’s delusions to discover that “making life perfect with all its imperfections depends on skill and clarity of mind, which comes from seeing with wisdom.”

It is our hope that readers of this book, whether or not they have had some experience in the practice of *huatou*, will find it instructive and inspiring. For those who have never practiced *huatou*, hopefully this book may spark an interest in attending a *huatou* retreat under a qualified master. For those who have already experienced the mystery and wonder of *huatou* practice, hopefully, this book may inspire them to further deepen their realization through practice.

For now we leave you with these words by Master Master Guo Ru:

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*What are you seeking, where are you heading?  
What is your true mind, what is your true life?  
Everything is already perfect, every moment is complete.  
When you are no longer seeking, it’s right there in front of you.*

**Ernest Heau, New York**



## Author's Preface

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It is my belief that there is no need to say anything about the Dharma, since the Buddha gave us all the words of wisdom that we need. However, because I owe a debt of gratitude to the Buddha, to my mentor Master Sheng Yen (“Shifu”), and to all the great masters from the past, I’ve talked quite a lot in order to share what I’ve learned, including the teachings in the scripture, as well as the details of the practice methods. I hope that this can help people not to waste time fumbling on the Buddhist path. Otherwise, they may get extremely frustrated in their practice without the slightest idea of the reason why.

Frustrated is what I used to be. When I learned the *huatou* practice from Shifu, I often had a hard time, feeling as if my head was about to explode, as if I was about to throw up blood. I felt hot all over, which was very uncomfortable. It was different from the breath-counting practice, in which I felt more and more at ease and the pain in my legs turned into a refreshing sensation.



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By contrast, the *huatou* practice can be very tricky. In the past, Shifu didn't give much explanation about this practice. It was often near the end of an intensive retreat when we practitioners had become peaceful in body and mind that he required us to investigate *huatous* like "Who is dragging this corpse along?" "What is your original face?" "Who is it that is being mindful of the Buddha?" or "What is *wu*?"

How were we supposed to investigate Chan? We had no idea, but we tried very hard to keep asking the *huatou* without getting distracted from it: "What is *wu*? What is *wu*? What is *wu*?" This *huatou* gave me a really hard time, making my head swim and causing a dull chest pain. I looked like a robot with a long face. When I walked, I simply walked without looking around or recognizing what I saw, but I was like a fish out of water. Finally, I went to ask Shifu for advice, and he replied, "Who told you to practice this way?" I told him it was because I was afraid of losing the *huatou*. Then he asked, "Afraid to lose? Then what is 'not to lose'?" What? Not to lose? My

confusion got worse.

Practicing intensively for a long time, I came to a dead end; at that point, I decided to relax, and continued asking the *huatou* in a gentle way. To my surprise, I didn't lose the *huatou*. Only then did I realize that I could practice *huatou* in a relaxed manner. However, without the previous concentrated effort, the relaxed questioning would have resulted in losing the *huatou*. I continued practicing this way, and little by little, the sense of doubt became more and more pervasive until it turned into a big doubt mass. For about twenty days, I didn't know where I was. As usual, I got up on time every morning to hit the wooden board for the morning call. I knew when I was sitting in meditation or eating meals, but I didn't know how I was able to perform these activities. My mind was not making discriminations, and I did not perceive the natural environment. At mealtimes, I was not aware of the rice in my mouth. At night I hit the bedtime board and then went to sleep. It felt as if my sleep lasted for a split second before it was

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time to hit the morning board again. I didn't even know if I had really fallen asleep. Day after day, I was clear without any other deluded thoughts or distractions but retained the sense of doubt all the time.

According to the written records, some practitioners in ancient times worked so hard on the practice that they forgot to put on their trousers after they used the outdoor toilet, and directly returned to the meditation hall to continue their sitting. That actually happened. At that time practitioners usually took off their trousers and hung them outside the latrine before using the toilet. But it was not too embarrassing, for there were only male practitioners in the meditation hall, and they could simply put on the trousers once they found themselves only in underpants.

There were cases in which practitioners got lost after going to the toilet. They stayed where they were, at a loss as to which way to go, because their mind was totally occupied with the doubt mass. At this point a hit of the incense board or a timely

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shout from the teacher could be powerful enough to help them move smoothly from the state of unified mind to no-mind, which they also left behind to finally reach the state of true mind. Then they suddenly got out of the state and discovered the "true face" of everything. This shows the great power of investigating Chan with forceful methods of guidance.

Old and ill as I am, as a Buddhist, I've inherited the Dharma lineage of the Chan School and have the responsibility to help you understand and realize your "true face." Therefore, I would like to serve as a stone which you can use to knock at the "door of Chan." But it is up to you to open the door.

### **Acknowledgments**

There are so many incredible causes and conditions that must come together to make a book possible. I am very grateful to every one of them. To name just a few, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to I Jung Fang who translated

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this, my first book in English. If not for her deep knowledge of Buddhadharma, it would have been difficult to present this book properly. Much thanks to Lisa Shen who compiled the lectures in this book from various sources. Thanks also to Ernest Heau, who edited the English text and prepared the glossary. Thanks to Echo Bonner and Harry Miller who provided editorial assistance. Echo has attended several of my retreats, and also did the oral translation on some of them. She catches my teachings well. Thanks also to the many people who recorded and transcribed these and other talks of mine. Everyone I mentioned who made this book possible has contributed their time and energies in order to bring Buddhadharma to readers like you. My wish is that you gain some benefit from reading this volume.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Master Sheng Yen, my lineage master of many years, for his compassion and wisdom, and for his lifelong dedication to sharing the Buddhadharma with all sentient beings.

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**Guo Ru**  
**Abbot, Chan Grove**  
**Taipei, 2014**



## The View

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### Being a Buddha Right Here and Now

There is an interesting *gong'an* from the Chan School: A master asked his disciple: “Imagine that you have climbed to the top of a tree and you are hanging from a branch with both hands. But then, I tell you to let go of the branch with your left hand, and after you do that, I tell you to let go of the branch with your right hand. To prevent yourself from falling, you have to clench the branch between your teeth. Now someone on the ground below asks you,

“what is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?” But if you utter a single word, you will surely fall and suffer serious injury, if not death. In such a dilemma what would you do?

To solve the dilemma, we have to know the distinctive feature of Patriarch Chan. What makes it different from other approaches is the emphasis on establishing the right view, namely to see clearly that you yourself are a buddha, right here and now. If there is just one thought devoid of discrimination, attachment or misapprehension, then at that moment, the mind is pure, and your mind is the same as that of the Buddha. But why can't we realize it? Why does the stream of deluded thoughts still continue? That's because, caught in the notion of an ego, we always discriminate and make comparisons in whatever we see, hear or perceive in the external world. This results in craving or aversion, followed by any number of defilements. The cycle of birth and death is thus perpetuated.

The Buddhist scriptures say that defilements are fundamentally empty. Then why do we need any method to eliminate them or to attain buddhahood? We will find that our nature is pure if at the present moment our thought is devoid of the notion of an ego, or that of a person, or is free of discriminations and arguments such as right vs. wrong, good vs. bad; or as the *Diamond Sutra* says – we are free from the notions of the ego, person, sentient being, and life span.

The constant sense of self-existence is the notion of an ego; the sight of the landscape and surroundings in the external world is the notion of a person; the consequent arising and passing away of all thoughts, like young and old, beautiful and ugly, or good and bad, is the notion of a being. Due to the firm grasp of these thoughts, the arising of discrimination and attachment at the sight of any form is the notion of a life span. The stronger the discrimination and attachment, the more thoughts arise and pass away.

Caught up in discrimination and attachment, we find our mind full of scattered deluded thoughts. But if we can let go of all discrimination and attachment in one single thought, these notions suddenly disappear. Then that thought is in accord with the Buddha's pure mind and with the reality of all phenomena as well. “To suddenly disappear” is similar to seeing everything clearly and knowing what is seen with a unified mind in sitting meditation, without the discrimination of the sixth consciousness, or the self-attachment of the seventh consciousness.

Don't regard yourself as a deluded ordinary person, and think there are still defilements to cut off with diligent practice before you can become a buddha. That is the deluded view of ordinary sentient beings. This view that there are defilements to be cut off with diligent practice is also part of the Mahayana Chan Buddhist teachings, which begins with the establishment of philosophical concepts by first explaining these defilements and then pointing

to their empty nature. The practice of Patriarch Chan, however, is the direct realization of the mind; as long as one can let go, a thought of awakening makes one a buddha, and there is nothing to practice.

Let's go back to the *gong'an*. The disciple answered, "The solution is not to climb up the tree in the first place." All this trouble can be avoided if you don't climb up the tree. So why do you insist on climbing the tree? Why do we tie ourselves up and then take great pains to break loose? Why do we have to get attached to defilements and fight against them, when they do not exist in reality?

### Spontaneous Realization of the Instruction

Chan points directly to the mind. It helps us see clearly right here and now that our mind is no different from the Buddha's, and that if we let go, our mind is the Buddha's mind. That's why we often find the expression in the Chan records, "spontaneous realization of the instruction" (*yen-xia jian-de*), which means "without conceptualizing or thinking" – coming to sudden realization instantly upon hearing the master's teaching.

Master Linji Yixuan (d. 866) said, "Those who realize with the first sentence are qualified as the teacher of buddhas and patriarchs, and those with the second sentence, the teacher of all the heavenly and human beings, while those with the third

can't even help themselves." "To realize" (*jian-de*) means "to understand." "To realize with the first sentence" means to spontaneously be in accord with the sentence the moment it is heard. Also found in the Buddhist scripture is the expression "realization before the utterance" (*yen-qian jian-de*), referring to being in accord before anything is spoken. In both cases, one can be the teacher of buddhas or patriarchs of the past.

If being in accord comes through verbal expressions, then that is the realization with the second sentence. Take the dialogue between Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638-713) and his disciple, an ex-general named Huiming (n. d.). The patriarch asked Huiming, "Without discriminating between good and bad, what is your original face?" If Huiming answered without thinking, "No discrimination between good and bad is exactly my original face," and thus came into accord with the instruction, that is the case of realization with the second sentence. Those who can do it are as good as the teacher of all the sentient beings in the human world and heavens.

When it comes to the third sentence, which means being confused about the instruction, or gaining some understanding only after speculating about it, such people are not ready for realization. According to Master Linji, they are still confined to the cycle of birth and death. The main point of Chan Buddhist teaching lies not in what is learned after we hear the instruction, but in our realization and awakening with the help of the

instruction, or the insight into our pure nature right here and now without verbal explanations. The true mind is formless and beyond language. If it is understood only in certain forms or functions, then it is too late. Those who realize with the first sentence are likely to be hit or rebuked, not to mention those who are still confused with the instruction.

### **Directly Pointing to the Mind**

It is because of misapprehension and attachment that we are still confused even with instruction. Huineng said, “With a single thought of awakening, one is the Buddha.” With our discrimination, attachment, and deluded thoughts, we are not awakened and turn out to be deluded ordinary people. A long time ago, there was a government official who didn’t understand awakening. He asked a Chan master, “How is it that a thought becomes deluded?”

The master gave no response but remained seated in meditation. Guessing the master missed his question, the official asked again, “Shifu, why does a thought become deluded and cause the cycle of birth and death?”

But the master still kept silent. Slightly puzzled, the official tried for the third time with great respect, “If in reality we are the same as the Buddha, why do defilements arise in our pure mind? How do deluded thoughts and attachment arise?”

Again, there was no reply. Devoted Buddhist supporter as he was, the official couldn’t help thinking at this moment, “The master is always ready to answer my questions. Why does he keep silent and show no compassion for me today?”

As soon as this thought came to the official’s mind, the master opened his eyes and smiled, saying, “This is the arising of deluded thought and falling into the cycle of birth and death.”

As long as there is no discrimination and argument, the deluded mind is the true mind. Since in reality all is perfect and no deluded thoughts or attachments exist, where is the defilement? With no defilement, what is there to get rid of? The problem is that we often “misuse our mind,” so Chan masters have had no choice but to resort to various methods to help us let go of discrimination and attachment. This is mental training, not simply study. It directly deals with the mind and points to the mind. Our mind is the true mind right here and now, as long as we let go of deluded thoughts and attachment.

### **It’s Really Hard Work, Sir Don Quixote!**

“To let go” means to put aside all discrimination and argument. With diligent practice, deluded thoughts will disappear. Never look on these thoughts as real enemies and fight against them. Otherwise, you are like poor Don Quixote, imagining himself a great armored knight on horseback, bravely marching forward

while the enemy is really nothing but a windmill. Do you think he is foolish? In fact we are even more foolish than he. Defilements or deluded thoughts do not exist in reality, but they stay with us because we are attached to them and won't let them go.

Here is a story you may be familiar with: Once upon a time, an old monk and his young disciple left their temple in the mountain for some important matters. Perhaps due to the recent rain, as they reached the foot of the mountain, they found the stream had risen higher than before. There was a young married woman standing by the stream, sighing in despair with a worried look on her face. The old monk came up and asked her what the matter was. The lady said she had to go back to her parents' home for an emergency, but she could not cross the stream.

"Then let me carry you on my back across the stream," said the old monk. As he was old enough to be her grandfather, and the villagers usually treated monks and nuns with great respect, the lady accepted his offer of help without regarding him as an ordinary man. After they got to the other side of the stream, the young monk kept silent all the time. The old monk noticed his unusual behavior and asked, "Is anything wrong?"

His disciple shook his head silently. After a while he finally got his nerve up to ask, "Shifu, don't you always advise us to keep away from women? How could you carry a woman on your back across the stream?"

Hearing this, the old monk couldn't help smiling. He replied,

"Silly boy! How poor you are to carry her in your mind all the way, while I carried her on the back for only three minutes!"

Most of the time, we are no different from that young monk. We get attached to what is seen or heard and keep it firmly in our mind. Though past experiences fade away over it, an extremely painful memory may suddenly come to mind and entangle us. We carry it on the back, on the shoulders, or drag it behind us for a long time, or even throughout our lives. That is the attachment sentient beings won't let go.

If you want to cut them all off, it will wear you out. How long do you think it will take to get rid of such a multitude of defilements? It's like not eating the watermelon sitting right under your nose, while trying to drive off the buzzing flies. How can you chase them all away? Similarly, it is impossible to get rid of all the deluded thoughts and old habits we have formed since time without beginning. The best way is to ignore them. With diligent practice of our method, once we can see clearly with our mind, the defilements no longer exist. After all they are just our deluded thoughts and attachments. If we eat watermelon with concentration, the flies will go away once we finish the fruit.

### **The Easy Method**

If we can follow the principle of "eating watermelon with concentration," meditation practice is quite easy. According to



Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163), the Chinese master who advocated *huatou*, all his life he taught people nothing but “the easy method,” so that they could practice with the simplest and most direct method to become enlightened. How simple? One day the Buddha was preparing to give a Dharma talk in a hall. Right after the Buddha sat down, Manjushri Bodhisattva said, “With insight, the Buddha’s Dharma is the Dharma as it really is.” Then the Buddha stood up and left without saying anything. In the case of Chan Master Mazu Daoyi (709-788), there’s this story: One day when Mazu approached and was about to take the teacher’s seat, his disciple Baizhang Huaihai (720-814) picked up his mat and left before Mazu could sit down. Mazu then also left in silence.

Now you’re practicing meditation with me. I would say, “Why do you leave behind your own treasure preferring instead to rush about? I can give you nothing, so please go back to where you are, and find your own treasure.” If you follow my advice, we can say goodbye right now. That is the simple approach. But old habits die hard. If we are told the easiest method, we can make the greatest trouble. So first we have to establish the right view. Then when we work hard on the practice, we won’t torture ourselves.

In the first place, we need to know that with one single thought without any discrimination, we are the same as the Buddha. So we should practice as a buddha, taking the pure mind as the original cause of buddhahood. When we are faced with all the things in the world, we are aware that each and every

phenomenon is dependent on a variety of causes and conditions. In that case, there is nothing permanent. Then why do we get attached to the sense of self? If we are aware of the existence of the external world without attachment or confinement to it, that is liberation.

Moreover, never entangle yourself with defilements. Some people think they must sit still in meditation to calm their minds, or that they have to make great effort to get rid of their multiple defilements. We can’t say these approaches are wrong, but these practitioners are caught in the notion of deluded ordinary people. In dealing with defilements, if we are caught in the notion of our own body and mind and in the defilements, we have to take great pains to remove them. As the Buddha explained, no phenomenon really exists. So who caused your defilements? Where are the defilements? Why are you splitting hairs, causing yourself so much trouble? You are like the strong man in the story who strikes out in empty space with one heavy blow after another, and finally lies on the ground exhausted, panting: “I have beaten up so many enemies. I’m exhausted!” But no one else sees his enemies. Your defilements are like empty space. Do you really think you’re practicing diligently by striking so hard?



## The Practice

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### **Patriarch Chan: To Drive out One Wedge with Another**

The most distinctive feature of Patriarch Chan can be succinctly expressed as “directly pointing to the mind and seeing the true nature in order to become a buddha.” In other words, the spirit of Patriarch Chan lies in its emphasis on “seeing the true nature instead of meditative concentration or liberation”; it tells us how to see our true nature clearly. If we can penetrate into all that our nature is endowed with, then in that moment of liberation, we are

also endowed with meditative concentration.

All the Buddha's teachings are meant to cure our mental afflictions. However, once these teachings achieve the remedy, more often than not we become attached to them. To use an analogy, suppose a log is embedded in a crack on a stone wall. Obviously, it could be driven out with another piece of wood. The second wood, usually a solid block, serves as a wedge and remains embedded in the wall after the log is forced out. That is the reason why the Chan School dispenses with common practice methods such as reciting mantras or the Buddha's name. Some practitioners use these methods in order to gain more blessings, prevent misfortunes, or to eliminate karmic obstructions. Even though this helps them to remove the first wedge – defilements – they often unwittingly cling to the second wedge – the method. As the ancient sages put it, “We have to “drive out one wedge with another.” We have to remove the second wedge as well, so as to see emptiness and true wisdom. The method of *huatou* is what we use as the second wedge.

### No Abiding

In the common gradual practices like *samatha-vipassana*, or the four meditative levels in the form realm and the four in the formless realm, practitioners focus on a single object with contemplation or mindfulness to transform the lax and distracted

mind into a unified and relaxed state. At the same time, they are clearly aware of whatever happens in the process, including all the mental and physical changes, and the connection between the mind and the object. Then, by means of the analysis of the object as emptiness, the perception of the object's nature as emptiness, or the perspective of dependent arising, they perceive with wisdom and penetrate the unified body and mind without abiding in it, and thus see the profundity of all phenomena.

As these methods help us practice step by step, we experience gradual progress and improvement in body and mind and have a sense of solidity. Patriarch Chan is different from this gradual process; it helps us to arouse a sense of doubt and keep it in mind in the very beginning, and then to constantly deepen the practice with the sense of doubt. With this method, we will also achieve a unified and relaxed state, and know clearly any change or sensation in our body and mind, just as we do with gradual meditation methods. But we don't recognize these changes on purpose or pay attention to them. We are aware of their arising and let them go, devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to the questioning, until we are naturally connected to meditative concentration and wisdom. (This state is the same as the unified and relaxed state which one reaches with such methods as *samatha-vipassana*.) In *huatou*, we keep questioning until all the mental and physical sensations disappear.

The *huatou* practice of Patriarch Chan takes away any

dependence on body and mind, or even the dependence on the Buddha's teachings. As the patriarchs admonished, "Don't turn to the Buddha, the Dharma or the Sangha for help." Everything is to be eliminated, to be denied over and over again, whether it is the understanding of the awakened or ordinary people. Even the thought of denial should be given up. With no dependence, all forms of mental cognition suddenly perish. Then we really become one with the sense of doubt and the doubt mass. Therefore, in this meditation practice, we need to have the right view in the first place: that there is nothing we can abide in. We never rely on anything or stay in any mental or physical state. We use *huatou* only to unify our body and mind so as to arouse a sense of doubt. So don't try to get any answer or anything from the *huatou* itself. To abide anywhere is not meditation practice. If we can arise from the doubt sense, naturally we can realize that "the mind functions with no abiding."

### Investigating *Huatou*

*Huatou* practice can be traced back to a dialogue between Sixth Patriarch Huineng and General Huiming, who chased after the master for his robe and alms bowl, symbols of Dharma transmission in the Chan School. But when Huiming caught up with the patriarch, rather than steal his robe and bowl, he begged to be taught the Dharma. Master Huineng asked him, "When

you make no distinction between good and evil, what is your original face?" Quite a few people think "making no distinction between good and evil" means that we ought to make our mind go completely blank. That is a big mistake. In fact, it means to have no attachment to such forms as good and evil, right and wrong, or gain and loss. If we consider these forms to be real, attachment arises and is followed by discrimination, which leads to actions, and thus the cycle of birth and death. What we have to do is to avoid extremes while seeing all phenomena as they really are. That is what "the original face" really means.

In the very beginning, the Sixth Patriarch told us, "Since nothing really exists, where exactly is the defilement?" The human mind is perfect and pure. As long as we see our own pure nature, we are buddhas here and now. We don't accept such a simple fact, but become attached to forms and have all kinds of discrimination, and get caught up in situations. That obscures our pure mind. And we think there is something which is contaminated by the defilement and which needs to be scrubbed and wiped clean before it is bright again. In that case, Chan patriarchs had no choice but to offer something like a *huatou*, so that we could have something to chew over to get a sense of our own practice.

The term "*huatou*" (literally, "the head/source of a word/thought") refers to what exists before a thought is conceived and uttered. What has not yet been spoken is in fact not a "word" (or "hua" in Chinese). But even the unspoken can be taken as words

if any sound or image about it arises in the mind. What then is that which exists before it is conceived and uttered? Is it the “true mind”? Or is it the “original face with no distinction between good and evil?” If we don’t get it, we need to ask, to investigate. That is called investigating the *huatou*.

A good *huatou* is elusive. It is a “living word” which corners us in a dead end, stopping all thought and imagination in our mind. In contrast, if a *huatou* arouses various speculations and discriminating thoughts, it is a “dead word.” An example of this would be how you react to the question “What does ‘Buddha’ refer to?” You may have a clear idea of who the Buddha was, and believe that he was one who not only became enlightened, but helped others to do the same; who was perfect in blessings and wisdom, and who was endowed with three insights and six supernatural powers. You may also think of Amitabha or any other buddha. Even the thought “I also want to become a buddha” may come to your mind. But because this question results in mere speculation and random thought, it is a “dead word.”

During meditation retreats, at first Master Sheng Yen did not restrict us to any one *huatou*. We were sometimes taught to ask, “Who is being mindful of the Buddha?” or “Who is it before birth?” In the walking meditation period, he thundered, “Who is dragging this corpse along?” In the sitting period, he exhorted, “Who is sitting here with mortal flesh?” Closely related to our lives, each of these questions aroused a sense of doubt.

According to my personal experience, “Who is dragging this corpse along?” was the most useful *huatou*. Who was I once my breathing stopped? I was more closely connected to such a *huatou* because I had suffered from a very serious illness and thus feared death. It was easier for this *huatou* to arouse a sense of doubt in me. After a sense of doubt arose, I often felt “something seemingly appearing before my very eyes.” It was as if a beam of light appeared in my mind, as if there was something or some state I could hold on to or attain. It is inaccessible if we try to get into it. Only when our mind has no intention can we gain access.

Once entering the state, we will find it wonderful, or even believe it to be enlightenment. We will be doomed with such a misconception, for it is merely a physical and mental change in the state of meditative concentration. Many people are stuck in this state, believing they are enlightened, and thus get trapped in the practice of “wild Chan.” Therefore, such a *huatou* as “Who is dragging this corpse along?” or “Who is sitting here with mortal flesh?” may sometimes make Chan practitioners mistakenly believe that there is something to pursue, to obtain, that there are “a truly existing object,” “a real practitioner,” and even “an attainable state.” In that case, it is impossible to be connected to the true mind of purity. So in his later meditation instruction my master adopted the *huatou* “*wu*” (literally, “nonexistent”) advocated by Master Dahui Zonggao.

The *huatou* “What is *wu*?” is derived from a *gong’an*: Chan

Master Zhaozhou (778-897) was asked, “Does a dog have buddha-nature?” Sometimes he answered in the affirmative, but at other times he answered “*Wu*,” meaning “no” or “non-existent.” Most people understood when the answer was affirmative, for according to the Buddhist scripture, “all sentient beings are endowed with the same wisdom and virtue as the Buddha,” and it was believed that all sentient beings could become buddhas in the future. But it was a puzzle when the master gave the negative answer. So people began to investigate why a dog would not have buddha-nature.

The purpose of this practice is to arouse a sense of doubt with a *gong’an*. You may wonder, “Both dogs and I are sentient beings. If dogs don’t have buddha-nature, do I have it or not?” Thus the *gong’an* gives your mind something to work on so that at first you are caught in the situation of inherent existence, where there is something real you can investigate; something real you can cut off. This way you can at best reach the original bright essence of the pure mind. In other words, your consciousness is crystal clear without any fluctuation, and performs various wondrous functions and virtues. The problem is that you can hardly get connected with the true wisdom of emptiness because you are entangled with meditative concentration, and a certain wondrous form of the mind. What’s worse, you may even be caught in demonic states, just like the fifty false states caused by the five aggregates (skandhas) which the *Shurangama Sutra* enumerates.

In view of this problem, Dahui Zonggao suggested distilling

the *huatou* down to “*wu*.” With “Dogs have no buddha-nature” as the *huatou*, you may think of dogs, yes or no, and so on. Then you are still caught in duality. With nothing but the word “*wu*,” the simplest *huatou*, no thoughts of good versus bad, or right versus wrong, will come to your mind. The word “*wu*” is as sharp as the vajra (“diamond”) sword, which can cut through all defilements. Keeping the *huatou* in mind with a sense of doubt, we can eliminate a variety of practice problems such as distraction and torpor. However, if we try to grasp this precious sword, we are sure to get wounded, for it is not something that inherently exists; it is but a tool. Our intention to hold it brings harm.

In the beginning this *huatou* enables you to deal with a variety of problems in practice. As you advance, it can also help you penetrate illusory appearances. Because “*wu*” reminds you that these situations are not real, you won’t stay in them. It is true that the *huatou* “What is *wu*?” is special, but if it does not work for you, certainly you can try “Who is dragging this corpse along?” or “Who is the owner of this mortal flesh?” or some other *huatou*. Whatever you adopt, the key is to do nothing but keep the *huatou* in mind as you practice it. As is often quoted in the Chan School, “Both the mental and verbal paths come to an end.” Any path of thinking, discrimination, or speculation is blocked and there are no verbal expressions. The moment you find nothing to ask and no forms of body and mind, all of a sudden you are in touch with the pure nature, and “the cause of neither arising nor perishing”

becomes one with “the consequence of neither arising nor perishing.”

The investigation of a *huatou* can be divided into five phases: to raise, to keep, to ask, to investigate and to watch the *huatou*.

### To Raise the *Huatou*

In the beginning of *huatou* practice, it is vital to take a proper attitude. Practitioners should be eager to dissolve their perplexity by adopting this method consistently so that they can have a clear idea of what “*wu*” really is. Such an eager attitude is an expression of enthusiasm, a heartfelt urge to reach the ultimate achievement. Strictly speaking, this attitude is also deluded. But it motivates us to understand and achieve something. Without it we lack momentum and cast doubt on the method itself. In the initial phase, please don’t let go of the method just because I teach you not to have any attachment or discrimination.

All too often we are easily distracted by our own deluded thoughts or external objects. So we lose track of our mind soon after we start to raise “*wu*.” Whenever we get connected to deluded thoughts and defilements, we lose the *huatou*. At this moment we have to bring our mind back to the *huatou* again, which is called “raising the *huatou*.” Therefore, “to raise” implies an alertness with which we observe ourselves to see if we stay with the method at present, and to raise the *huatou* as soon as our

mind strays from it.

As we raise, lose and resume the *huatou* repeatedly, we simply know what is happening with an ordinary mind. We don’t have to blame or doubt ourselves, thinking, “Why do I have so many obstacles? How come I sank into torpor or got distracted by deluded thoughts again?” Even the thought of introspection or repentance is not needed in diligent practice. All we have to do is to raise the *huatou* all the time. That is indeed the diligent practice of concentration. Otherwise, as soon as discrimination or argument arises, many other scattered thoughts follow. Even if there are positive thoughts, they are part of the mind of arising and perishing, too. Then it is a practice of the distracted mind. As we raise the *huatou* “What is *wu*?” we should neither assume the existence of “*wu*” nor grasp any sound or image of the word. We just keep our mind on the *huatou*, asking what it really is.

### To Keep the *Huatou*

The second phase is to keep the *huatou* – instead of just repeating the *huatou*, we keep being mindful of it. In other words, we fix the *huatou*, together with the sense of doubt, to our mind. so that we will not lose it so often. Because we have too many deluded thoughts, it is necessary to constantly keep the *huatou* in mind until we are hardly influenced by deluded thoughts or external situations – until there seems nothing in between the *huatou* and

us. We know we are practicing this method and staying with it without letting up. The moment we become aware that we've lost it, we raise it again right away; the moment we find ourselves attached to any situation, we let go of attachment to the situation and resume the sense of doubt, practicing the method diligently.

While we are keeping the *huatou* in mind, we need to arouse a "sense of doubt." In other words, we must first feel an urge to search, a strong curiosity to know what it really is. Simply sitting there and raising the *huatou* without keen mindfulness of it, we are likely to sink into torpor or be trapped in idleness. "What is *wu*?" is not a factual description, but a question. The main point lies in "*wu*." Because it is quite abstract, there is nothing our mind can get attached to. We have no concrete answers to hold on to, either. We may feel dull or meaningless over time. So we need to link this question to our lives. Only then will this question become powerful and make us really feel something about it.

### To Ask the *Huatou*

What does it mean "to link this question to our lives"? What should we do to link our lives to the *huatou*? In 2009, I directed a ten-day *huatou* retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York State. When it was time to share experiences, one of the practitioners mentioned hearing a sudden shout from the proctor monk during walking meditation: "Who is it that is walking?" He

was taken aback and struck by a thought, "At the age of fifty-five I don't even know who's walking right here!"

When such a shock appears, we apply it to the questioning. For instance, we can ask ourselves why we inquire about "*wu*" when it is really our own existence that we experience. But in the final analysis, who is "this existing living being"? "*Wu*" does not mean the absence of our physical body or the phenomenal world. According to the Buddha's teachings, "*wu*" is the key to the ultimate truth of all phenomena in the universe, including our lives. Why, then, is this ultimate key "*wu*"?

Another participant said he focused so much on the practice that he felt as if his breathing was about to stop, which made him afraid he was dying. This will make some people tense. If this problem gets worse, they may stop sitting practice. This is due mainly to attachment to the form of body and mind. In fact, if they pay no attention to their breaths, they will still continue breathing.

Our fear comes from ignorance about the truth of life and death; if in our practice we can use that fear, we can then connect practicing *huatou* to our life. For example, we can tell ourselves: "Sooner or later, this life will come to an end, but why did the Buddha tell us there was neither arising nor perishing?" If we continually ask a *huatou* this way, we connect the *huatou* practice to our actual life, and we can eventually arouse a sense of doubt based on our body and mind. Naturally, we will develop a solid and clear sense of doubt, which makes it possible for us to



practice well and move on to the next phase: investigating *huatou*.

### To Investigate the *Huatou*

To investigate a *huatou* means to examine it; we need to look deeply into the *huatou* and get to the bottom of it. To find the answer, it is no use searching high and low; all we have to do is to question it to such a degree that we see nothing else; that we are almost overcome with the concentrated sense of doubt; that we seem to be forced into a tight corner with no way out. We keep investigating the *huatou* like this until the whole universe is nothing but doubt; we keep questioning what we see, hear, and think, until all the functions of consciousness stop. Then, at the sound or sight of something, like a falling flower, comes the “Eureka!” moment. Therefore, the purpose of this practice is to stop our consciousness, that is, to stem our mind-stream.

*Huatou* investigation can also be subdivided into three levels: joining, merging, and examining. A *huatou* is something “empty” but seemingly “existent.” It is simply a sense of doubt. We want to catch it but we try in vain. Sometimes we seem to be able to grasp it, but it suddenly vanishes, and we can do nothing about it. So we have to keep it at all times and all places, without a single moment of interruption. We even make it part of our body and mind. This is what it means to join the *huatou*.

Only when the *huatou* is integrated with our body and mind, when the sense of doubt becomes part of our existence, do we

reach the first level of the investigation. That is why during intensive retreat, we can't let go of the *huatou* and the sense of doubt, whether we are walking, standing, sitting, lying down, doing daily chores, having meals, going to the toilet, or doing any other activity. Once the *huatou* is gone, something else takes its place in our mind. Then our practice is interrupted and we are unable to go any further.

When we can make ourselves inseparable from the *huatou*, we enter the second level – merging with the *huatou*: when the sense of doubt is mixed with our body and mind, there is no distinction between one and the other. It is analogous to mixing water and milk powder: the result is a glass of milk and we can no longer separate the milk powder from the water. At the first level of joining, though we take the *huatou* and sense of doubt with us all the time, we still have the notion of a body and mind which can practice, together with the method which is practiced. We simply join them together with the power generated from our practice, but we still feel the separate existence of both. As soon as we reach the level of merging, the body and mind which can practice and the method which is practiced then become one. The mixture of both performs many functions.

While our body and mind gradually merge with the method, the mind, which pays attention and arouses a sense of doubt, as well as the forms which we seem to be able to grasp as a result of contemplation, will fade and become more and more obscure.

That is not because our mind falls into greater confusion; on the contrary, it becomes more peaceful. In this tranquility, we may find it odd that the *huatou* seems vaguer; we even doubt if it is still there, since we seem to have greater difficulty feeling it working. Actually this is the best time to practice well.

The merging process consists of the mental and physical changes experienced by practitioners of the four meditative levels in the form realm and the four in the formless realm. Or, as my master put it, there are several stages of unification: mental and physical, internal and external, subjective and objective, temporal and spatial, and so forth. These forms of unification give rise to various sensations as the *huatou* practice and sense of doubt deepen.

For example, as the distracted mind in the desire realm reaches the first level of meditative concentration (*dhyana*) in the form realm, namely the arising of the first unification, there appear joy, happiness, thought-conception (*vitarka*), discursive thinking (*vicara*) and the merit of “one-mind.” Thought-conception and discursive thinking are the capability of illuminating awareness, which enables us to know phenomena clearly all the time – everything from the changes in phenomena to subtle transformations of our body and mind. Chan practitioners are not muddle-headed at all, but very clear and sensible.

After unification in the first level of meditative concentration appears, our gross bodily sensations gradually become subtle

and most of them turn into feelings. Let me illustrate this point with an example: some practitioners feel their bodies are gone at a certain point in sitting meditation. That is because they put aside the gross attachment to the body and thoughts about it in the desire realm. At the same time, with the unified mind and the arising of joy and happiness, such strong desires and emotions as gluttony, lust, greed and anger fade away. What emerges instead is a special mystical or religious experience the practitioner has never experienced before meditation practice. From this particular experience develop the four divine emotions of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Completely dwelling in the unification of body and mind, we gradually lose the strong inclination to discriminate in favor of, or against various external objects. Thus we feel what exists in the external world is integrated into an organic whole, but we can’t explain why it is the case. Then, often full of gratitude and joy, we are willing to share everything with others and stay in peace and harmony.

This is how our body and mind functions in meditative concentration after the *huatou* practice calms our mind. It can also be attained with other meditation methods such as contemplation or gradual practice approaches. However, with these approaches we tend to abide in the unified state once it is reached, and it is hard to let it go. On the other hand, with *huatou* practice we will undergo various physical and mental states and move on to

deepen the practice without abiding in any of these states, for we keep a sense of doubt all the time.

When we are really on the right track in Chan practice, meditative concentration and wisdom are sure to arise. For lack of thorough understanding, some people fail to see the point of practicing the *huatou* method, which seems to them nothing but idle questioning while sitting in meditation. As a matter of fact, simply with a *huatou*, we can attain the sensations in the four meditative levels in the form realm and the four in the formless realm. Or we can have the insight to “penetrate the emptiness of the five aggregates,” which the *samatha-vipassana* practice brings. In the first level of *huatou* investigation, our mind still fluctuates with changing situations. It is not stable. Once we reach the second level of merging, knowing we must practice the Buddha’s teachings, we naturally practice diligently without anyone else pushing us.

As we go further to the third level of investigating – examining the *huatou*, the unified mind turns into no-mind, which goes beyond description. It is the same as the “the purification of mindfulness by equanimity” in the fourth meditative level of the form realm. There is no conceptualizing whatsoever, but the unified mind still works. Some practitioners who reach this level drop not only deluded thoughts and defilements, but also the sense of doubt. At this point, if they don’t get out of this state, they are very likely to get caught in the four meditative levels of the

formless realm. At this level it seems there is no mind to perform any function, and no object to be investigated or questioned. In such a state, if we keep following our method, under the right conditions at the right time, we can break through the pitch darkness and see the light of our perfect true nature.

It is impossible to jump into the third level without the real experience of the first two levels, except for practitioners of the greatest potential in spiritual practice, who are actually few and far between. How long each level takes and when one can move on to the next level will vary from person to person, depending on each person’s spiritual potential, blessings, and various causes and conditions. In fact, we don’t need to worry about these matters. What counts is to cherish each present moment and practice diligently. As Buddhist followers, we don’t live this life in vain if we can penetrate the truth of our lives and realize the profundity of all phenomena. If we practice to a lesser degree, we only increase some blessings. No matter how deep our meditative concentration is, we at best enjoy heavenly blessings in the form realm.

As the pitch darkness is broken through, we still continue our practice. But now we make effort to maintain the awakened state, which is the last phase—watching the *huatou*.

## Functions of the *Huatou*

The method of *huatou* practice is simple. All we have to do is to wholeheartedly keep the *huatou* and the sense of doubt. We think of nothing else and let go of everything. Never be too clever by half wondering “How could everything be ‘*wu*’? It’s impossible!” This way it would be hard to connect to the *huatou*. But this reaction may stem from misunderstanding or lack of confidence in the method. Actually, I found myself in similar situations when I first learned Chan practice in intensive retreats with my master. Even with such a simple method as counting the breath, I couldn’t count the numbers from one to ten over and over again. I was constantly distracted by wandering thoughts. I either forgot to stop at ten and start over at one, or lost track of the number. I got more and more restless, wondering what was the point in counting these stupid numbers. But the breathing continued without my counting, didn’t it? Finally, I was too bored to go on with this method, so I made up stories in my mind. I was the screenwriter, director, main character and viewer of my “movie” until I was so tired I couldn’t watch or act in these scenes which came up one after another in my mind. Well, then, why not start to count my breaths again? To my surprise, this time I used the method pretty well.

So if you’ve tried your best to practice a certain method but still can’t calm your mind, just let it be. The wild mind will get tired after it reaches its limit. At this point a casual try with the method can bring pretty good results, as my first retreat experience

showed. Soon after I resumed the method of breath counting, wandering thoughts disappeared and I knew each number clearly. Then those numbers also died away, but my mind remained as clear as crystal. It’s really interesting. I tried to stop my mind from wandering but in vain, but once I could use the method well, no wandering thoughts showed up even if I wanted them to come.

Our deluded mind likes to get attached and wander. It is not until we begin to practice that we realize the meaning of “monkey-mind” or “wild horse-mind.” Even without external objects to cling to, there are still a host of past memories in the mind. That’s why the best way is to corner the mind, making it unable to play any tricks. Then it is easier to calm down. However, as we fight fire with fire, we should make sure not to get distracted by external objects; otherwise we won’t keep close attention to our wandering thoughts. Wandering thoughts come from the mind and it gets exhausted in the end. But it is hard to stop if we set our six sense organs loose and let them get attached to their external objects.

In *huatou* investigation, the mind performs various functions: with all sorts of attachment and thoughts, the deluded mind comes and goes as internal and external situations arise and pass away. So we make our mind stay with the *huatou*, a boring and meaningless sentence. If we let go of all the thoughts and expectations, the mind will be at a loss and finally lose its power. Because the *huatou* we practice with is “*wu*,” or non-existence,

there is no trick to play, just as we will not see a movie, waiting in front of a blank screen.

We usually cling to objects, just as we identify with characters in a movie, whatever type it is, and keep thinking about it after the movie is over. The mind which chases after objects arises and passes away. Since the *huatou* as an object is not at all fascinating in itself, our mind won't chase after it as we keep mindful of it. Naturally, the mind which is used to getting attached will calm down little by little. This is the first function of *huatou* practice.

The second function is to make us keep questioning and having a sense of doubt, so that our mind will not be caught in nihilism or moral indifference. Some people are very peaceful in sitting meditation but are not aware of the external situation, in which case, it is impossible for wisdom to arise. Some who practice breath counting find themselves in the same situation. As they reach a point at which all the numbers disappear, they dwell in tranquility but know nothing. The mind loses its functionality and becomes dull. They look calm and free but it lasts only for a while. This state disappears over time, and again their mind discriminates objects and chases after them, which leads to defiled actions and the cycle of birth and death.

True Chan practice makes us see things as they really are, and deal with them as such. That is true wisdom. So when we raise the *huatou*, the mind still functions but it is not the consciousness which is attached to objects, nor is it caught in moral indifference

or meditative tranquility. In other words, the mind still works but has no delusion; it is no-mind which fulfills its functions, the no-mind which is exactly in accordance with the Buddhist path. That is Dahui Zonggao's teaching: keep a sense of doubt in the mind but don't expect anything, think of philosophical teachings, care about change in the body or mind, or ask how you feel about the *huatou* after practicing it. In short, all we have to do is to practice hard with our mind until there is no attachment whatsoever.

Whether it is a sensation or an experience, as long as we still have feelings about it, it is a "form." In fact, feelings are forms. As "all the forms are false," they ought to be given up. Then the mind with attachment stops; only the seeing mind exists. This is the real function of *huatou* investigation.

If we practice with confidence, proper attitudes and diligence, our body and mind will transform in the end. As long as we keep the practice until our body and mind are one with the *huatou* and generate real power, whatever we do is the manifestation of wisdom and compassion. With sudden realization, our world view will be broadened. There is no trouble but that which deluded ordinary people are asking for.

### **Pure Mind as the Causal Basis of Buddhahood**

Facing what we see, hear, or sense with a deluded mind, we have discriminations – love, hate, and so forth. We find this person

amiable but that person unpleasant, this sound pleasant but that food awful, and thus abide in that object. Even when the object is no longer present, whether it was something heard or seen, the impression persists in our mind. We carry these burdens with us all the time. This is “the mind that arises and passes away,” or “the mind of birth and death,” namely the main cause of our cyclic existence. The *Shurangama Sutra* states that a key point of Chan practice is to take the mind of neither arising nor perishing as the real and original cause of buddhahood. If we practice with a deluded mind or the mind of arising and perishing with intention, attachment or discrimination, we are unlikely to get rid of delusion, however hard we try. Just as it is impossible to make a bowl of rice by cooking sand (an analogy found in sutras), so is it a “mission impossible” to develop a true mind of neither arising nor perishing by practicing with a deluded mind.

Where, then, is the mind of neither arising nor perishing? It is right in our mortal flesh, in our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, in whatever we see at present. Nowhere else does there exist a “mind of neither arising nor perishing.” The pure mind of neither arising nor perishing is the mind devoid of discrimination, argument and speculation. When we practice *huatou*, we simply keep a sense of doubt, asking “What is *wu*?” Or “Who is dragging this corpse along?” Or “Who is being mindful of the Buddha?” Just keep this state of mind. Just let the mind work like that. This is the true mind of non-discrimination and non-doing.

If we only speculate about the *huatou*, whatever answer we come up with is discrimination created by the deluded mind. That way, we will never see the true mind. But as long as we know how to practice the method, we just follow it in investigation – don’t interpret it based on Buddhist scripture and philosophy; don’t try to understand it through your feelings of body and mind, either. Even expecting certain effects signifies a mind of attachment, discrimination and intention. In the process, our body and mind will undergo some changes due to concentration on the practice. For example, we may feel sore, numb, painful or itchy sensations; after our body and mind calm down, we may experience meditative bliss, tranquility and ease. As we go on with the investigation, some “almost perfect wisdom” may even come to our mind and we may seem to get some insights into the question. However, whether it is the sensation or feeling in body and mind, or any insight, we have to let it go until there is nothing to leave behind. Only then will the true mind manifest itself. Actually, the real *huatou* is present even before we think of it and express it in words. As long as we stay with our pure mind and see without a deluded mind, we will ultimately see our own pure nature. The key is simply to see clearly what “the pure mind” is. This is the case whether we trace buddhahood back to its root cause, or examine how the cause leads to the ultimate fruit of buddhahood. Once we stray away from the pure mind, all practice is false; the Buddha even called this false practice “demonic.” We

should never mistake our everyday practice of prostrations, sutra-reciting or sitting meditation for diligence, if it is based on a mind of attachment, discrimination or arising and perishing, for then, we are attached to forms. No matter how hard we practice, our mind is occupied by demonic thoughts.

### Introspection into Our Own Nature

Investigating *huatou* does, in fact, involve a mind of attachment which we use to replace all other attachments, until there is nothing left to cling to. With this method, we try to be mindful of whatever happens in our sense organs in everyday life. In other words, we look within ourselves and know our own nature. Whether we eat, sleep or work, we practice the method. Don't think it is diligent practice to sit in meditation in the Chan hall, laboring over the *huatou*. At the sound of the chime at the end of a sitting session, our mind of cyclic existence emerges and makes us cry quietly "Ouch, it hurts!" when we are troubled by some bodily pain. If it hurts in any particular place, we just give it a gentle massage, and focus the mind on the *huatou* at the same time, asking "What is *wu*?" Since it is "*wu*," or non-existence, there are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind. Then who is experiencing the pain? This way we stay with the method.

When we see with our eyes, hear with our ears, feel sensations with our body, taste with our tongue, smell with our nose, or harbor thoughts, the mind of arising and perishing appears as

discrimination, craving, judgments (right versus wrong, or good versus bad) come and go with the presence and absence of objects. Once such a mind arises, we have to investigate, and ask ourselves "What is the mind discriminating about? If it doesn't discriminate, what is it then?" According to the Buddha, neither arising nor perishing lies within phenomena that arise and perish. As we see things through our eyes, both the objects of the eyes and the mind arise and perish. So what is it that neither arises nor perishes? Our body changes all the time; sooner or later it will become old and die. The Buddha taught us that true being exists right in this impermanent body – made from the four elements of earth, water, fire and wind, and the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness. This true being transcends space and time, and neither arises nor perishes, but comes and goes through our six sense organs at ease with brilliance. What is this true being? If you keep asking in this manner, you are then investigating *huatou*.

We don't have to torture ourselves while investigating *huatou*. The *Shurangama Sutra* teaches us to "use our sense organs without consciousness." In other words, while we perceive objects through the six sense organs in daily life, those faculties function but we have no attachment or discrimination. At the same time, we not only see clearly what is happening, but also contemplate what it is all about. We keep questioning with the method of *huatou*. The mind performs the function of seeing but has no

discrimination, until even the seeing disappears as well. At that time, the true mind emerges.

### **Keep the Same Practice Whether in Motion or Stillness**

*Huatou* investigation is simple and efficient – we just raise a *huatou* and keep questioning until all the possible answers are exhausted and sense of our body and mind vanish. Then we can really enter the sense of doubt. If we still have the feeling that “I’m practicing the method,” “I’m in the sense of doubt,” “I’m keeping the sense of doubt,” and the like, it is the mind’s manipulation. We have to go beyond the doubt mass of the one-mind and reach the state of no-mind. No-mind is not necessarily enlightenment; at this point we haven’t yet experienced the true mind. But if we continue the practice we may become enlightened when the time and conditions are ripe for it – whether we see a blossom, or hear a dog bark, or noises on the street. Take for example, a Chan practitioner in the past who was suddenly became aware of the true mind and became enlightened as he walked past a nightclub and heard flirty talk between a hostess and her client. The true mind can be found everywhere. As long as we adopt the right method and practice without discrimination or a deluded mind, it is easy to connect with our true mind.

Chan practice is not confined to sitting on a cushion while investigating “*wu*.” Instead we should stay with the sense of doubt, moment after moment. Sometimes we feel relaxed and

tranquil, sitting at ease on the cushion as we smoothly practice the method. That is the “entry to, or abiding in meditative concentration.” Any meditative concentration with the features of entry, abiding or departure is preliminary. As soon as we leave this state, the stable mind is gone. This is not the true meditative concentration, or the “great Shurangama concentration,” as the *Shurangama Sutra* calls it. It means there is no delusion or discrimination in worldly matters and sensual experiences, but we see clearly what is happening, perform all functions wonderfully, and are at ease. That is the real great concentration. Patriarchs in the past already showed us this excellent practice method, namely the practice of every day life, whether it is fetching water and firewood, eating and drinking, or going to the bathroom.

We should always keep the sense of doubt, whether in sitting meditation or daily activities. If we keep the same practice in both motion and stillness, then that is true practice. When the sense of doubt stays and the mind is clear without moral indifference, discrimination or attachment, then the pure mind is present. In the end we leave behind all physical and mental reactions, and the sense of wisdom which manifests itself. There is no more arising and perishing. At this moment, the cessation of all the unsatisfactory experiences appears.

This is the wonderful wisdom of the Chan patriarchs, which is based on the Buddha’s teachings. They didn’t give too many lectures but taught people to practice with the simplest and most



effective method. If we only practice *huatou* in the meditation hall but fail to stay with it once we go back to everyday life, we will disrupt our effort, and thus hardly get anywhere in the practice. We should stay with the *huatou* and maintain the sense of doubt whatever we do, at any place, at any time. “What exactly is it?” As soon as the mind of arising and perishing appears, we know it is deluded and go on with the inquiry. Right at that moment, we leave behind delusion. As we have nothing to leave behind, the true mind arises.

There is neither arising nor perishing in the mind that really sees clearly any object or situation. King Prasenajit once asked the Buddha, “How do we know there’s a mind that neither arises nor perishes?” The Buddha replied with a question, “How old were you when you first saw the Ganges?”

“At the age of three,” said the King.

“How old are you now?” asked the Buddha.

“Sixty-two.”

“Do you see any difference in the river?”

“Not at all; the water is still water.”

“What’s the difference between you as a little boy and you now?”

“I was energetic with soft skin when I was young, while my strength is on the wane and I’m weighed down with age,” answered the King.

This conversation shows that our face and body will change

but the mind that can perceive and know the river does not change. This changeless knowing mind is the true mind. To be able to see one’s true mind is to see one’s true nature, to see one’s buddha-nature. In reality the true nature of our mind neither arises nor passes away. It is pure without fluctuation. That’s why it is possible to remove the deluded mind. Having no discrimination, argument or attachment, we leave behind delusion here and now.

### Mindfulness

To make the sense of doubt pervasive, we have to first devote ourselves to being mindful of the *huatou* and focus on the sense of doubt. Being mindful means firmly fastening our whole being to the *huatou*, making the two inseparable. It is like a woman who is fully occupied with the memory of her beloved living far away, as described by a well-known Chinese poet Li Qing Zhao (c.1084-1155). We have to keep the sense of doubt all the time. According to the chapter in the *Shurangama Sutra*, “Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprata’s Perfection in the Mindfulness of the Buddha,” to keep being mindful is to “focus the six sense organs on mindfulness and purify the mind-stream.” In other words, we don’t “shut” our sense organs, but direct them all to the object, knowing it clearly without discrimination, attachment or yearning for deluded thoughts. Letting go of all the sensations and feelings of body and mind, we simply practice the *huatou* by keeping up

the inquiry. If we can purify our mind-stream this way, the sense of doubt will naturally become pervasive.

In the same chapter, mindfulness is likened to the constant memory between mother and son, whose deep affection makes them keep each other in mind, even though they live separately. We should always keep the same mindfulness in *huatou* practice, devoting ourselves to the questioning, to the sense of doubt, until there are no forms or feelings of body and mind. At this moment we have no idea where we are. We have nothing to do with whatever is around us in the external world. We have no other thoughts but a clear sense of doubt in the mind. Only with this mindfulness can we make the *huatou* pervasive and expansive.

If we practice the method well, eliminating all deluded thoughts, attachment, argument and discrimination, we can then realize what the Buddhist scriptures describe as the certainty of seeing the Buddha – in the present or in the future – simply by being mindful of the Buddha. Here, “the Buddha” refers to “the pure reality,” namely our true mind of purity. And being mindful of the Buddha does not only mean reciting his name; as long as we connect with our pure mind, any method will do. For example, when we have difficulty in sitting meditation, we can do prostrations until we feel peaceful and at ease in body and mind; we can do this until we have no deluded thoughts or distractions. That is also being mindful of the Buddha. If we always keep the Buddha in mind, we will then have no deluded thoughts and our

pure mind will naturally emerge. Then we are sure to see the Buddha, or our true nature of purity, now or in the future. Even though we remain in the burning house of the three realms of cyclic existence, we can be as nice and cool as lotuses in a muddy pond.

### Don't Be Trapped in Words

When we investigate *huatou*, it is as important to focus our mind on the practice as to avoid being trapped in words. If we just hold onto the word “*wu*” and get caught up in it, we are “trapped in word.” What should we do to avoid this trap and the arising of thoughts? We simply remain mindful of “*wu*,” putting aside any thought or mental activity. Since it is “*wu*,” all forms are false. Everything is perfect, for ultimately all is empty of inherent nature. Therefore, form is emptiness and emptiness is form. What exists at present is “*wu*.” If we are caught up in the word “*wu*,” repeating it over and over again, we abide in the form of a word. No matter how hard we investigate, we dwell in the illusory form with deluded thoughts. The pursuit of “*wu*” as something tangible indicates purposefulness, and a mind with a purpose is not true mind.

Where then, is the real “*wu*”? While we abide in the external world through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, we perceive whatever is present with prajna, or profound wisdom, leaving behind all the discrimination and duality; we realize that

ultimately the external world neither arises nor perishes, neither comes nor goes. The moment we connect with true nature, we see it for what it really is. However, it is not vital whether or not we see the true nature; with correct practice of the method and right circumstances and time, we are sure to get enlightened. We don't have to look forward to it, or marvel at it, for it is the innate treasure each and every one of us has. We don't get it from anywhere else or from others. The problem is that we haven't found it yet.

The external world is nothing but “*wu*.” It is impossible to have a pure practice with a “pure mind” that exists separately from our six sense organs and their objects; we need to stay with the six sense organs and their objects to realize why the world is “*wu*.” Doing walking meditation at a quick pace during the retreat, we ask ourselves, “Who is dragging this corpse along?” Obviously, “I” am walking fast, so how come it is “*wu*”? This is a sense of doubt. The real investigation of any *huatou*, for example, “*wu*,” is practiced with our sense organs and the external world. It is no use just holding onto words.

A retreat participant once asked me, “I investigated a *huatou* in the meditation hall, but during the break, another *huatou* came to my mind. Can I go on with the second one?” If the *huatou* is not sought on purpose, but the sense of doubt arises naturally from your body and mind and the existing situation, such as “Who is eating?” and “What is it to eat all day long but chew nothing

at all?” then you can certainly continue with that. On the other hand, if you intentionally turn to another *huatou* because you feel bored with the long investigation of “*wu*,” then you are caught in deluded thoughts and discrimination. Actually, as long as you keep focusing on the investigation, you will break through.

### No Attachment to the Form

In itself, the *huatou* does not make any sense; it merely serves as a means of quieting down thoughts. As soon as all defilements, wrong views, deluded thoughts, attachments, and even the thought of the *huatou* perish, our pure mind emerges. So don't try to determine what the *huatou* means, or attempt to find an answer; otherwise you will be trapped in the “form.” However, for beginners who need a starting point of practice, it is necessary to introduce a “pure essence” or “a true self” which seems likely to be searched for. As they practice well enough, they will be told that this kind of practice is still caught up in forms, and that true practice requires abandoning all forms. In the practice of Patriarch Chan, abiding in the arising and perishing of physical and mental forms makes one, at best reach worldly meditative concentration, including the four levels of concentration in the form realm and the four in the formless realm.

My master once said some Westerners preferred the *huatou* “Who am I?” and that there could be some hidden problems in

that. It's because the body composed of the four elements and five aggregates has long been mistaken for the "true body," and the mind with discrimination, argument and attachment for the "true mind." Thus, the deluded mind is used in investigating the *huatou* "Who am I?" Finally, when one reaches the tranquil and unified state in meditation, the "small self" becomes the "great self," the distracted mind becomes the unified mind, and the self image will be more powerful and seem real. One can even feel that the whole external world comes from within and assume oneself to be the "lord of the universe." A case in point is the heavenly demon in the desire realm, who has proclaimed the experience of inconceivably wonderful abilities and powers in spiritual practice, believing he created the world and thus had the control over everything.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha asked Ananda why he renounced the world and became a monk. Ananda replied that he decided to follow the Buddha's example and lead a monastic life because he admired the Buddha's thirty-two wonderful physical signs. Most of the time, we act in the same way. At the sight of some object, we discriminate, judge and compare, and then desire it, or avoid it. This is the mind of arising and perishing, which comes and goes with the object. Even when we admire the Buddha's wonderful attributes, it is with a deluded mind. The true mind neither arises nor perishes. To make Ananda realize what the "true mind" was, the Buddha asked him, "Where is the

mind, which decided to lead a monastic life for the wonderful appearance?"

Ananda attempted several answers, such as "inside," "outside," "in the middle," "in the sense organs," and "in the objects of sense organs." They are in fact deluded thoughts. If we are caught in the form of body and mind, identify the four elements, the five aggregates, and the six sense objects as the "I" in "Who am I," then our practice is still based on a deluded mind that arises and perishes. In the end we just make the small illusory self bigger and bigger, but the mind of arising and perishing remains, but the true mind is nowhere to be found.

My master instructed practitioners to leave behind everything but simply keep the *huatou*. "To leave behind everything" means letting go of all the discrimination and argument. In the practice, whatever the situation is, we just focus on the *huatou* and investigate it earnestly, without thinking, discriminating or abiding in the form of body and mind. We do this until there are no forms of motion and stillness, no forms of body and mind, no mind and its objects, no duality, no arising and perishing. At this point appears the true cessation, the pure mind.

The same is true of daily life. True practice means "staying with forms without attachment." It is not to avoid or deny the existence of forms, but to reduce attachment by understanding the Buddha's teaching that everything comes and goes with certain causes and conditions. In other words, with the insight that

“penetrates the emptiness of the five aggregates in the profound practice of perfect wisdom,” we put aside attachment and see our existence as empty, the objects of our sense organs as empty, and whatever happens as empty. That is “staying with forms without attachment.” What a free and happy life it is!

## Attitudes

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### **Firm Determination**

After encountering difficulty in practicing *huatou*, some people think that it is not the right method for them. Others practice *huatou* diligently and make good progress. But they fear that it can only calm the body and mind, and fail to help them out of the cycle of birth and death, given that they can hardly control themselves in the face of serious illness. So when they are confronted with imminent death, they turn to the recollection

of the Buddha as their practice method, believing they can completely rely on Amitabha Buddha as long as they sincerely keep him in mind. Still others either make no breakthrough in meditation practice, or achieve some particular experience in meditative concentration. The moment they hear about certain miraculous methods, or of someone who can cure serious disease or foresee the future with supernatural powers, they give up Chan practice and follow their “newly found wonders.” People change their minds under the influence of various physical and mental conditions in response to certain situations.

In the *Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Dahui Zonggao* there is a letter to a lay practitioner, Miao Ming. The Master listed “seven manners of Chan,” namely the seven attitudes a Chan practitioner should have. He reminded Chan practitioners as follows: “To cultivate the mind, you should know the crucial move to make. First of all, firm determination is a must. Don’t change your mind in any situation, whether it is favorable or not. Don’t be influenced by any mistaken teachings.” Here, “the crucial move” refers to the “eye” of freedom. This is compared to placing the playing piece on the ideal point on the board in the game of Go. Dahui is saying that since you are determined to cultivate the mind, you must know what the best placement is from the very beginning.

In Chan, the crucial move is to make up your mind to practice the method, to make an unshakeable determination. As the second half of the quote goes, “Don’t change your mind in any situation,

whether it is favorable or not. Don’t be influenced by any mistaken teachings.” In the process of Chan meditation, no matter what situation you encounter, you must be determined and allow nobody to hold sway over you. Keep away from abnormal deeds or practice methods. Resolve to continue your practice come what may. Some Chan practitioners keep their body and mind in good condition and mistake it for enlightenment. However, they fail as they come face to face with the test of disease, death or disaster. That’s because they have merely reached the unification of body and mind but they haven’t seen the true nature. Unable to penetrate the reality of life, they are caught up in the form of their body and mind when death or disaster comes their way.

According to Buddhist scripture, the Buddha also had some physical disorders late in life, such as backaches and rheumatism. So his attendant-disciple Ananda was often asked to give the Buddha a massage. In the *Sutra on Chan Practice* there are quite a few massage therapies. It is thus clear that the Buddha still experienced aches and pains. What makes him different is that he was fearless and carefree, knowing clearly illness and aches are simply physical phenomena. By contrast, ordinary people get stuck in the suffering of old age and illness and develop deluded views. They are not only tortured by physical disorders but also anxious about the approach of death.

As is narrated in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, before passing into parinirvana, the Buddha received his last meal offered by a

blacksmith named *Cunda*. The food contained *sukara-maddava*, a rare and precious wild mushroom. After the Buddha ate it, he found it poisonous and hard to digest. So he asked *Cunda* to give him all the mushrooms in the meal but serve the community of monks with other food, like the sweet porridge. He also asked *Cunda* to bury in a pit whatever was left over of the mushroom lest animals eat this poisonous food. Puzzled as he was, *Cunda* followed the Buddha's advice. After the meal, the Buddha departed. He suffered severe diarrhea all through the journey. In his final days of life, he walked along slowly, teaching the Dharma and explaining the practice on the Buddhist path to his disciples in spite of dire physical pains. In the end he passed away in a sala grove.

When I was a young monk and did not really understand the Buddha's teachings, I also wondered, "What does 'neither birth nor death,' mean if such a great being as the Buddha couldn't avoid death?" Later on I realized that the awakened still have birth and death. All worldly phenomena come and go. It is right at the moment of their arising and perishing that we recognize the meaning of "the existence of neither arising nor perishing within the flux of arising and perishing." That is truly "neither birth nor death." It can't be grasped in words; it must be investigated and penetrated.

When we see the reality of life and death, we won't get involved in their appearances and will have no fear or

misconception. Even at the last moment of life, we can still remain clear and mindful. In fact the Chan School talks more about no-mind instead of mindfulness. No-mind does not refer to the absence of thoughts or consideration; it refers to the clear knowledge of the object without defilement or attachment; it is to be detached from the form present in the moment, as well as to the attainment of no form, no thought and no abiding. Since the original thought is found nowhere, how can there be any successive thoughts concerning one's own birth and death?

Birth is death, and vice versa. There is neither arising nor perishing. According to the *Heart Sutra*, "Form is not other than emptiness and emptiness is not other than form; form is precisely emptiness, and emptiness is precisely form." In reality there is no old age or death; nor is there cessation of old age or death. The truly awakened have such wisdom, which makes them free and composed in the face of life and death. They stay calm and at ease even if threatened with death at the hands of bandits. Whatever we do, we are certain to reap the consequences. Buddhist practice does not help us shun the results of our own actions, not even for the Buddha. To "terminate our karma" does not mean the elimination of action, but the elimination of attachment to the physical and mental results of our previous actions. We take it well without any unpleasant feelings and thus we don't create more action in suffering.

"Liberation" in Buddhist terminology is no fantasy. It means

that one clearly knows the reality of birth and death with no misconception, and one takes the consequences of all past actions calmly, living every day at ease in every situation. The liberated do nothing special except to keep this way of living all the time. What makes them different is that in the past they were confused, but at present they are clear about what to do, without being attached to that clarity. In a word, we must have confidence in meditation practice, firmly convinced that it will definitely help us out of our misconceptions, and end the cycle of birth and death.

### **Constant Mindfulness of the Matter of Birth and Death**

After making a firm determination, as Dahui Zonggao pointed out, we should “always keep in mind the matter of birth and death you will soon face.” We should be constantly aware of the frailty of human life and give top priority to the matter of birth and death. As we all know, time flies. What if we haven’t practiced well enough to solve the greatest matter of life at the time of death? How can we slack off? Therefore, the second key point in practice is to be aware of the dreadful nature of endless birth and death, the preciousness of every moment, and the urgent need for diligent practice. Patriarchs in the past wrote the word “Death” and hung it in the most noticeable places in order to deal with the problem of idleness and laziness. There was once an imperial spiritual advisor who went so far as to sit in meditation on the edge of a precipice

to dispel his torpor. This way he had to stay alert lest he tumble over the cliff.

Great practitioners strive for spiritual growth and never ensure their survival at the expense of the practice on the Buddhist path. Failing to get somewhere on the path, one can’t put an end to the cycle of birth and death. With no fear of death, however, one can break out of the cycle, and thus address once and for all the great issue of cyclic existence, not only in this life but in endless lives to come.

### **Simple Mind**

Then, Dahui Zonggao used an analogy: “Suppose you fall deeply in debt to someone and can’t pay it off. The creditors are like guards posted around every entrance of your house, so you’re afraid, anxious and eager to clear the debt. With such a mindset, you partake in the Buddhist path to awakening.” With huge debt we are on full alert for a knock on the door, worrying that the creditors want their money back right away, and we’re short on cash. We should keep a similar state of mind in practice. Who is our creditor? As long as we crave life and fear death, we are in debt to Yama, the god of the dead. But if we resolve the matter of cyclic existence, we owe him nothing and he can’t snatch us at the time of death.

Before awakening to the truth of birth and death, we are in



constant fear and anxiety, which will never end until we settle this debt. In such a predicament, we had best not fantasize that the Buddha or anyone else will help us. We've got to pay off our own debt. But what should we do? There is no other way but to practice diligently, and always keep the debt of birth and death in mind as if the instructions were glued to our eyes. As long as we are still in debt, there is no escape. Constantly alert and anxious to clear the debt, we "partake in the Buddhist path to awakening" and move towards enlightenment, but we do not stray from the path of cultivating the mind.

Dahui continues: "If you practice by fits and starts and lack complete confidence, you are even worse than illiterate common people in remote villages. Why? Though they don't have enough knowledge in many respects, they are not blocked by unwholesome views or knowledge; they just stay ignorant." Many practitioners lack perseverance; they work hard in the meditation hall, but when the chime signals the end of a sitting, they forget all about the *huatou*. This is practice "by fits and starts." They are sometimes confident, but sometimes disturbed in meditation practice. When they fail to use the method well, they wonder if the method is right for them, or if it could really help them out of the cycle of birth and death. That is the lack of "complete confidence."

In spiritual practice, we must firmly believe that the method we're practicing is the best. In debt for millions of dollars, we will repay it one day if we keep practicing diligently. Otherwise, as

Dahui said, we are even worse than illiterate villagers in remote areas. Ignorant of the civilized world, they are not biased by many incorrect views or too much knowledge. They are generally innocent and not sophisticated, unlike us civilized people whose thoughts tend to proliferate and complicate simple matters.

Those who just have too much experience and knowledge may sit in meditation and compare their present situation or method with past experiences. This is what Dahui Zonggao called "unwholesome views or knowledge." We should just put aside everything in the past and focus on the present method without comparison or analysis. Only with a simple mind can we do spiritual practice well. It is best to keep our mind as simple as possible; fully convinced by our teachers, we ought to follow their instructions. It doesn't mean that we have to worship them as gods or only listen to what they say, and not make the effort to cultivate the mind or practice in daily life. This would be to "remain ignorant."

### **Strong Aspiration**

In his letter, Dahui Zonggao made another important point about the power of aspiration: "With aspiration in previous lives one can meet a true master who guides and teaches with skillful means. What difficulty could there be in the Buddhist practice? An ancient sage once said, 'There are no intentional obstructions

in the world; nor are there lies in the Buddha's teaching.' But nowadays when people fail to make a breakthrough, they can't help but say they are blocked by the world." If we vowed, either in this or a previous life, to practice the Buddhist path for spiritual growth and personal realization of our own true mind, we will meet a true master to instruct us by skillful means. Then we may see our own true mind, and solve the problem of cyclic existence.

Dahui Zonggao told his disciple that with the teacher's wonderful guidance, he should cherish the opportunity to practice diligently. The realization of the truth and cessation of the cycle of birth and death are sure to follow. We should be confident in ourselves as well, for we must have made vows and had strong aspiration in past lives to get the opportunity to practice now. We should always work hard and never waste this golden opportunity.

Linji Yixuan, founder of the Linji lineage of Chinese Chan, admonished practitioners to have strong determination and aspiration for the Dharma, even at the expense of their lives. A dialogue between the first two patriarchs, Bodhidharma and Shenguang Huike (487-593 CE) shows how strong the aspiration could be. It happened when Shenguang begged Bodhidharma to instruct him in the Dharma. He was determined and waited patiently for the first patriarch's instructions through the freezing winter night, his legs buried knee-high in snow. Finally, Bodhidharma broke the silence, "What do you want?" "I want to learn the Buddha's teaching of ultimate liberation from the cycle

of birth and death," replied Shenguang. How did Bodhidharma respond? He said, "With little virtue and wisdom and strong arrogance and heedlessness, do you think you deserve this supreme teaching?"

Even Shenguang, who later became the second patriarch, learned the Dharma the hard way. Strong determination and aspiration in spiritual practice are essential. So we shouldn't believe that spiritual practice is a piece of cake. Just as plants survive storms and become strong, we must endure hardship to foster indomitable spirit.

Again from Dahui's letter: "An ancient sage once said, 'There are no intentional obstructions in the world; nor are there lies in the Buddha's teaching.'" Buddhist practitioners look far and wide for masters. They are sometimes impeded by high mountains, large rivers or oceans, lives at risk. But nature doesn't hinder them. We practitioners mustn't take obstacles or difficulties on the journey as not possible to overcome. If we realize that "obstacles" do not exist in reality, nothing can change our mind from attaining buddhahood, however perilous the journey.

The Buddha didn't mean to cheat us either; he provided expedient means to guide us because, without that guidance, we fail to grasp the ultimate truth. That's why even after expounding the whole Buddhist Canon, he said that in forty-nine years of speaking the Dharma, he had said nothing; he also said that there was no nirvana, and no one to enter parinirvana. And though he

said that the present mind was the mind of a buddha, he also said there was no buddha. The Buddha didn't lie – it's just that, until we are really delivered from suffering, we cannot understand why there is no buddhahood to attain, and no sentient beings to deliver. But after we see the reality of birth and death, we have no confusion whether we can attain buddhahood.

As Dahui said, “But nowadays when people fail to make a breakthrough, they can't help but say they are blocked by the world.” The real obstacles are not in the natural environment, physical and mental conditions, or in other difficulties; our confidence, determination and aspiration are what really matter. When faced with obstacles, we blame it on the ripening of seeds from past actions, or we just say that we are unfortunate. We are impeded when we cannot change the situation. Some people feel discomfort from physical and mental reactions on retreat. Without determination, perseverance, strong aspiration, sincere repentance and diligent practice, people waste their time on retreat, and end up with regret and lamentation.

When I attended the seven-day retreat under the guidance of my master, it was far more challenging than it is now. To make matters worse, I suffered from physical disorders at that time. The pain almost killed me, so I decided not to take part in any more retreats. But as the next retreat came, I thought it was worth going to. Human life is fragile. There's no need to be afraid of suffering. The harsh training in those retreats actually helped me a lot later

in life. I found that as long as I made effort willingly, all the pain disappeared because of the aspiration to work hard. So whenever I suffer physical setbacks, I always receive medical treatment with repentance and never worry about the result. I believe if I accept the obstacles resulting from my past actions, nothing worse will occur.

Physical pain and disorder have been part of my life since I was in my twenties. I've been living in the shadow of death. Besides kidney disease, something is wrong with my nasal cavity, which causes sleep apnea. To top it all, a tumor was found in my brain and I suffered from hemiplegia. I didn't have health insurance, and each Western medical treatment would cost at least NT\$2,000, which was about half the monthly salary a public servant earned thirty years ago. In my grandmaster's opinion, I should have solved the problem on my own, for I was an ordained monk and regarded as an adult. Actually I couldn't afford Western treatment, so most of the time I tried Chinese medicine. But Chinese herbal medicine was quite expensive, too, and didn't work well for me. I had loose bowels every time I took it. That made the physical pain worse. Under these circumstances, all I could do was to look for some free medical treatment.

I tried acupuncture in the head, around the eyes, and all over the body. The needle could be as long as 50 centimeters. Over the years, I had tens of thousands of needles positioned in my body. The deeper the needle was inserted, the greater pain I

suffered. Sometimes a fluff of dried mugwort was burned with the acupuncture needle. In each acupuncture treatment, I felt as if I was being tortured in hell. It showed how terrible my past actions had been.

Acupuncture proved ineffective, so I turned to electroshock therapy as someone else suggested. Each treatment cost NT\$500 and I spent money for nothing but suffering. In the first treatment the therapist set a certain voltage and the procedure started, but it didn't cause much reaction in the right side of my body paralyzed by the brain tumor, except for muscles contractions. So he raised the voltage but to no effect. He had no choice but to go higher. There was a time limit on each procedure and it was about five or six minutes when electric current shot through my body, it brought extreme discomfort and waves of nausea. The torment lasted thirty minutes and finally came to an end.

A week later I went for the same treatment. This time the therapist set the highest voltage that the human body could endure. I could almost smell my flesh burning as the strong current passed through. It lasted less than one minute but I felt as if it had gone on for years. I clenched my teeth so hard they almost broke into pieces. Unfortunately, the result was the same. It didn't work. The therapist told me no more treatment was necessary, for in the fifteen years of his medical practice I was the second patient who underwent the therapy at such a high voltage. I was curious about the first patient receiving the same treatment and learned that he

had died.

Compared to the training in meditation retreats under my master's guidance, these medical treatments were no big deal. Shifu was very strict at that time. No one was allowed to change their posture before the end of a sitting period. My legs hurt so much that I could hardly walk or touch them. To my surprise, I found my physical conditions improved little by little. While electroshock and acupuncture didn't work, meditation practice turned out to be effective. Maybe it was because in sitting meditation, the physical pain ran to the innermost nerves and triggered energy circulation, thus stimulating the paralyzed side of my body.

Before we are proficient enough in practice, we are sure to be troubled by such obstacles as diseases and misfortune. When I suffered from physical pain, I couldn't afford medical treatment and education, so I had to chant Buddhist texts at funerals as a means to pay my bills and tuition fees. I felt miserable. I was not even qualified to take part in religious service because I was not skilled enough in Buddhist chanting, which is indispensable in the ritual. That made me an object of ridicule. In the monastery all the sangha members were supposed to take turns conducting liturgy. When it was my turn, I had to ask for a leave of absence from school so that I could do my duty in the monastery. I was a boarder in that monastery, whose abbot agreed to pay my medical care. But when I applied for the money, the treasurer-monk

questioned harshly: “Why don’t you go ask your own monastery for money? Instead, you turn to us for what we’ve sweated blood to earn?”

I felt sad and resentful about that snobbish Buddhist circle, which was full of calculation and dispute but short on compassion. All I could do was to accept it as obstructions caused in my previous lives. If I were given a helping hand, that would be a blessing; if not, that was reasonable. Why should I blame others? After I practiced meditation under the guidance of my master, I realized that my predicament was caused by lack of friendly interactions with others in past lives. Practice also made me see those who helped me with harsh methods as great bodhisattvas spurring on my progress.

This is my commentary on Master Dahui Zonggao’s teaching based on my personal suffering in body and mind. In our life journey we can’t avoid obstacles. But with spiritual practice we can deal with them and make them part of the preparation for the attainment of the Buddhist path. The training I received in intensive meditation enabled me to not only accept the results of my past actions but also explore my inner life, overcome personal suffering, and feel compassion for those who also live in suffering. It is well said that hardship fosters a sense of fulfillment that makes life worthwhile.

### Dahui Zonggao’s Letter to Layman Miao Ming (Excerpts)

To cultivate the mind, you should know the crucial move to make. First of all, firm determination is a must. Don’t change your mind in any situation, whether it is favorable or not. Don’t be influenced by mistaken teachings. Always keep in mind the matter of birth and death you will soon face. To use an analogy, suppose you fall deeply in debt to someone and can’t pay it off. As the creditors are like guards posted around every entrance of your house, you’re afraid, anxious and eager to clear the debt. With such a mindset, you partake in the Buddhist path to awakening. If you practice by fits and starts and lack complete confidence, you are even worse than illiterate common people in remote villages. Why? Though they don’t have enough knowledge in many respects, they are not blocked by unwholesome views or knowledge, but just stay ignorant. . . .

With aspiration in previous lives one can meet the true master who guides and teaches with skillful means. Then what difficulty could there be in the Buddhist practice? An ancient sage once said, “There are no intentional obstructions in the world; nor are there lies in the Buddha’s teaching.” But nowadays when people fail to make a breakthrough, they can’t help but say they are blocked by the world.

– *The Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Dahui Zonggao*



## Torpor, Pain and Other Problems

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What is really meant by “practice” is that we deal with any physical and mental conditions arising anytime during meditation. I will now discuss some of these common practice problems.

### Torpor and Laxity

Torpor mainly arises from our failure to go all out investigating the *huatou*. If we can put all our energy and attention into the

practice, asking ourselves mindfully, “What exactly is it?” our mind will become clearer. On the other hand, if we become quieter in sitting meditation, we may naturally fall into torpor. In such a case, we should feel sorry and just raise the *huatou* again. Never let your body and mind be loose. Since we have made up our mind to practice on the Buddhist path, we have to devote ourselves to it, instead of idling away our precious life. Remember, time flies.

If you find that lack of determination to practice has become a habit, you can hardly aspire to practice diligently. You will follow your habit, thinking, “That’s how I’ve been practicing and there’s nothing wrong with it.” Then you are trapped in your own habit and feel sleepy the moment you sit in meditation. We do live a busy life, but if you take meditation practice as a chance to recharge your batteries or relax for a while, and thus sit on the cushion for a rest, you will get nowhere in the practice. What’s worse, you will take a casual and careless attitude to the Buddha’s teachings and admonitions.

To deal with this problem, we need to keep the matter of birth and death in mind all the time, for the urge to solve the problem of the cycle of birth and death is a must. We need to spur ourselves on to make great vows and aspirations. As long as we concentrate on the practice earnestly, torpor or laxity won’t be our problem. The key lies in the real determination to practice diligently and to have a genuine sense of doubt. Without them we won’t

derive much power from the *huatou* practice and we will easily fall into torpor and laxity. All we have to do is to focus on the *huatou*, asking ourselves, “What exactly is my true mind, or pure essence – the same as the Buddha’s?” “Where is it?” and “What is it in reality?” Let’s practice the method step by step by asking questions like this until our mind is totally clear without any other thoughts or distractions.

However, don’t go to the other extreme: some people repeat “What is *wu*?” with their eyes wide open so as to avoid torpor. They put more and more effort into it, and get louder and louder. It is a waste of energy to exert oneself in repeating the question simply out of fear of being hit with the incense board. The purpose of *huatou* practice is to cut off deluded and distracted thoughts and arouse a sense of doubt. It is a non-abiding method in accordance with reality. If we try very hard to repeat the *huatou* just to avoid torpor or the incense board, we are abiding in appearances and will go astray. Once attached to the non-abiding method, we cause it to lose its life force.

### Physical Pain and Boredom

After sitting all day long in the retreat, parts of our body may get sore, numb or painful. As time passes by, we may even seem to find it hard to practice the method. Another common situation is that we may feel bored after the novelty of *huatou*

investigation wears off. To repeat the same question is like chewing on something tasteless. The boredom increases little by little, especially as nothing meaningful or significant comes as the result of the investigation. This practice does not engage our consciousness, which is always attracted to new things and running after external forms. That's why we feel bored, and even constantly change from one *huatou* to another.

In the early days of my master's instruction in meditation retreats, we were given several *huatous*. So if I got tired of one, I simply picked up another. It seemed fun. But actually that's because I didn't make any progress in the cultivation of my mind. I felt bored and restless. As I meditated on a new *huatou*, another series of deluded thoughts arose. To use an analogy, suppose a fence stands in our way – we can't jump over it however hard we try; then we find a gap in the left side of the fence, so we manage to squeeze through it and move on. After a while, however, the path is blocked again, we go round the other way but later meet the same obstruction. Forced into a tight corner, we can't help but "kill" the fluctuating mind to stop myriads of deluded thoughts.

Therefore, it is right at this moment of struggle – when the discriminating mind is most active and powerful – that we can practice the best. Without such great power, the mind can't abide in any forms, and it would be hard for us to deal with this discriminating mind. Therefore, as Chan Master Dahui Zonggao said, we should rejoice at this point and keep working hard with

this method, instead of giving up. It's true that our physical and mental conditions might make a day feel like years, but as Fifth Patriarch Hongren put it, "There's no use in learning the Dharma without knowing what your true mind is." What is our true mind? Where exactly is it? We have to ask about it seriously so as to understand ourselves thoroughly and thus really help ourselves. To learn the Buddha's teachings is not to rely merely on revering a statue of a Buddha, or delighting in spiritual experiences, but to discover our own pure mind and resolve the fundamental problem of defilements and cyclic existence.

### Attachment to Inner Tranquility

Another common situation in meditation retreats is called "attachment to inner tranquility." In sitting meditation, if we lack the sense of doubt or curiosity about the *huatou*, but simply keep mindful of the question, our body or our breathing, over time we will fall into the attachment to inner ease. This may occur even when we have no deluded thoughts or strong attachments, no distractive forms of body and mind, and no discrimination between the thinker and the thought.

As we encounter external objects with the five senses and the mind, our consciousness attaches to such objects, and makes discriminations and comparisons. That is the deluded mind, which leads to the cycle of birth and death. Even without the sense data



of specific external objects, our mind is full of deluded thoughts and other objects it reacts to. The attachment to inner tranquility is consciousness that abides independently of the five senses and their objects. At this moment, the sixth consciousness ceases discrimination and keeps latent for the time being; it remains an independent consciousness, while the seventh consciousness still clings to the seeds in the eighth consciousness (storehouse consciousness), taking them as inherent existence, as the source of life, as the real "I." This tranquility is at best the states of the four meditative levels in the form-realm and the four in the formless-realm. As such, this is not liberation, and we can't really uproot the deluded consciousness of cyclic existence.

We can avoid this situation if we put aside everything else and focus on the *huatou*, and keep mindful without discrimination and investigate the *huatou* with a sense of doubt. By contrast, if we just sit on the cushion, and enjoy physical and mental tranquility, we are none other than ghosts hovering around their dead bodies. It is not conducive to spiritual practice, just as a stone remains the same no matter how long it stands immersed in cold water. So we still have to enthusiastically investigate *huatou*, to calm and unify body and mind, while the six sense organs are in contact with their objects and their corresponding consciousnesses arise. Then we go on to put aside the thinker and the thought. We go further to let go of emptiness and what it is empty of, until finally there is neither arising nor perishing. That is cessation, and the true pure

essence manifests itself.

Why do people fall into attachment to inner tranquility? Because there is no wisdom in their mindfulness, they still cling to pleasant meditative states; they are thus trapped in the ease and tranquility. In the practice of *huatou*, we must abstain from either attaching to tranquil states or be lacking in wisdom. What counts in Chan practice is sincerity. Without concerted effort and solid practice, without true understanding of what cyclic existence is all about, we simply deceive ourselves and others that we are practicing the Buddhist path. How sad a state of affairs that is!

### **An Outburst of Emotion or Energy**

Before we begin the spiritual practice, our mind is distracted and stubborn, not very sensitive to what is around us. But after practicing for a while, it would be better to calm and unify body and mind and show more tender loving care to others. But sometimes people on retreat become emotional, bursting into tears or laughter. It's not a problem once in a while; but if it is frequent and people become slaves to their emotions, there is something wrong with their practice. One should be his or her own master. On retreat, different people face different situations. For example, in an early retreat, I happened to sit next to a young Marine Corps officer. In the middle of a sitting, he suddenly began sobbing his heart out and couldn't stop crying until he was exhausted and fell

to the floor. I was shocked and didn't have the slightest idea what miserable experiences or trauma he had suffered. My master came over to care for him. He gave him a gentle massage, and permitted him to lie down and sleep throughout the afternoon.

Before this occurrence the officer was unable to cross his legs and sit in the lotus posture. He was as restless on the cushion as I was. But after he got up from the sound sleep in the afternoon, he sat still and stably for one or two meditation periods without a break. And his face glowed as if he was bathed in the Buddha's light. How I envied him! I told myself, "Cry! Cry your eyes out! Then the master will take care of you kindly. You can also enjoy a good sleep." But despite great physical pain and strong annoyance, I couldn't shed a tear.

What I experienced was another situation. After some practice, I finally learned how to use the method. Then, in a sitting session, a flow of energy arose from my abdomen and reached the chest, which made my heart pound fast. I was nervous, feeling as if my heart were about to explode. I wanted to turn to my master – who sat right next to me – for help, but then remembered his advice that we should avoid craving for and clinging to the physical body. He said if one died on retreat, the dead body would be placed somewhere under the table until the end of the retreat and then sent to be cremated. At the thought of this, I gave up the attempt to seek help.

My experience of the strong energy flow might have

something to do with a childhood injury. When I learned to ride a bike as a kid, I went downhill but didn't know how to apply the brakes. Seeing the bike gathering speed, I couldn't help but pull the handlebars back. The bike stopped suddenly and the handlebars hit me right in the chest. I felt as if I would throw up blood! I couldn't move for at least twenty minutes. But I didn't worry about myself. What I worried about was the amount of money I had to pay for the damage to the bike. So I dared not tell my *shigong* (grandmaster), who was taking care of me at that time.

Coming back to the retreat, the energy flow ran through my heart and soared into my head. One side of my body felt cold, the other hot. My body began to swell up. It is not easy to arouse such an energy burst, either because we don't sit in meditation for a long time, or because we give up the lotus posture as soon as our legs hurt. But my master asked us to keep the same posture until the end of a session. That caused the accumulation of energy and its smooth circulation. That is not the purpose of Chan practice, though. You should pay no attention to any change in emotions or sensations during *huatou* practice. Some people suggest that we shouldn't choke back tears if we can't help crying in sitting meditation. If it happens once or twice, it is acceptable. But the third time, you deserve a hit with the incense board.

Our body and mind will undergo some changes in spiritual practice. Don't judge whether it is good or bad. Don't worry if

some problems arise, either. Generally speaking, even though you may be pushed hard in *huatou* practice, you will be alright unless you suffer from some mental disorder. As you are almost driven over the edge, don't make yourself more nervous and cry bitterly about the answer you don't know at all. Just remain enthusiastic about investigating *huatou*. You must abstain from emotions in spiritual practice. That's because as soon as you are controlled by your emotions, you are caught in the forms of body and mind. That is no practice at all.

## Forceful Guidance

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*When a Chan master uses a forceful approach to guidance it can become stormy, but the shock can bring the deluded thoughts of a practitioner to a sudden stop, and at that moment, they may be able to clearly see the purity of their true nature.*

### Forceful Guidance Fosters Great Practitioners

Some practitioners are wary of being struck on the shoulder with the incense board, or they are dubious about the reason for this

particular form of guidance. But in fact, the use of the incense board can be helpful to Chan practitioners. Practitioners falling into torpor or laxity may be hit, or hear someone else being hit. Either occurrence can startle them into concentrating on the method and practicing harder. Sometimes practitioners are sitting pretty well and they still get hit. This can be puzzling to them, but it may be because the teacher sees that they are attached to meditative concentration, enjoying bliss or tranquility, and leaving behind the sense of doubt. In this case, the hit is meant to get them out of the trap of meditative concentration.

When we feel the hit on our shoulder or hear the sound, we can suddenly detach from physical and mental conditions and experience clarity of mind, without discrimination or attachment. We temporarily distance ourselves from our mind-stream's continuous discrimination and deluded thoughts. At the same time, we see deeply that we are always acting with such a mind-stream and we generate attachment in response to external objects or situations. At this point those who practice well know clearly that they are not falling into torpor, nor do they have deluded thoughts. In that clarity a real sense of doubt can arise: "What is *wu*?" What is it really? All thoughts of body and mind are shed, so the depth or clarity of the doubt becomes more obvious.

Most practitioners who give rise to the "doubt mass" without any discrimination or sensation will abide in meditative concentration. As a result, they fail to investigate deeper into the

*huatou*. At this moment the unexpected hit of the incense board can startle them into letting go of the *huatou* or sense of doubt they've held onto. The *huatou* is gone, the mind is nowhere to be found, the whole world shatters into pieces, and all of a sudden... they experience awakening. When used in a timely way, the incense board can be conducive to spiritual practice. It can also help guard against laziness and idleness.

### Wonderful Functions of Forceful Guidance

How was it possible, for Dahui Zonggao to guide dozens of people towards enlightenment in a single night? He did not do it by first raising the *huatou* and instructing them step by step; instead, he adopted forceful approaches like striking them with the incense board and challenging them verbally. Practitioners soon became detached from all thoughts of body and mind, without being attached to their own detachment. This is how pure mind manifests. The Chan school calls these forceful approaches "pincers and hammers," by which the Chan master uses certain expressions and skillful means to cause the student to abandon all thoughts and attachments, to instantaneously become one with the pure mind and reality, without thinking.

That is traditionally described as "the meeting of two arrowheads" – when the Chan master shoots the "arrow of guidance," the student ought to immediately meet it with the

“arrow of proper response.” If both “arrows” meet exactly at the tips, the Dharma can be said to have been successfully transmitted from teacher to student. However, if the student has the slightest hesitation, he will be “shot dead.” This is vigorous training, full of unexpected beatings and thundering. It comes so fast that one has no time to reflect, not even the time to think about escaping. Failing to experience awakening directly following the instructor’s questioning, the student will “die a tragic death,” as the scripture says. This is because one is caught up in the form of body and mind when deluded mental activity arises, and that is evident to the enlightened teacher. For this reason, many people are afraid of such forceful approaches. As a matter of fact, for those who have practiced diligently for years but made little progress, this training often helps them turn over a new leaf. The smashing of atomic nuclei under great force can produce large amounts of nuclear energy. Likewise, under the forceful approach, our unbreakable form of body and mind can be shattered into pieces in an instant.

Nevertheless, one should not expect to get enlightened because of a beating, shouting or other forceful approaches. If the student is not ready, all the beating and shouting is in vain. But if the student practices well enough and keeps the mind tender and flexible, with no deluded thoughts other than the sense of doubt, then under suitable conditions enlightenment will come. It is like Chan Master Xiangyan Zhixian (d. 898), who was scything grass and got awakened by the sound of a dislodged pebble hitting a

bamboo stalk. Or like or Master Dongshan Liangjie (807-869), who reached enlightenment when he walked across a bridge and saw his reflection in the water. Enlightenment does not necessarily come in the meditation hall. As long as you work hard on the practice, perhaps you will get enlightened someday when you are hit unexpectedly by a baseball thrown by some kid.

### **Lasting Joy Due to a Kick by the Chan Master**

I practiced by fits and starts when I first followed my master’s meditation instructions. I couldn’t use the *huatou* well, but felt pain all over or got distracted. As he began to apply forceful approaches, these problems soon disappeared. Of course I was uneasy in the face of his combative manners, especially when we stood face to face, with him staring at me, incense board in hand, as if he was going to hit me anytime. I was so nervous I felt like I was about to faint. I once attended several seven-day retreats in a row. I prepared quite a lot of answers to my master’s questions. I thought the first answer pretty good, the second one to the point, and the third also marvelous. Finally, I was at a loss which was the best. But actually they were all produced by the discriminating consciousness or the concentrated mind. None of them came from the true mind.

When it was my turn to go to the private interview, I gave those prepared answers and whether they were right or wrong,

I was still struck. I got another hit before I could utter my reply. There was no escape from the hit of the incense board even if I stared at the master speechless. At that time, I experienced entering a mass of doubt. I knew where I was; I also knew my master approached me and asked me questions. I was sure of the answer, but I couldn't utter a word. He kicked me hard, so I fell to the ground but soon resumed the upright sitting position. I didn't feel the slightest pain at all, nor did I blame him. There was totally no thought in my mind. I just stayed in the mass of doubt, doing nothing, yet knowing what was going on. That was a strange and wonderful experience.

There is an anecdote in *Records of Chan Masters*. One day Monk Shuiliao (n.d.) asked Master Mazu (709-788), "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" Instead of giving a direct answer, the master asked Shuiliao to make a prostration. The moment Shuiliao prostrated himself, Mazu kicked him on the chest, knocking him to the ground. Shuiliao rose to his feet full of joy, saying "Countless samadhis and wonderful truths lie in the tip of a hair which is thoroughly penetrated." A single hair contains innumerable wonderful merits and approaches to the Dharma. You may think that Master Mazu behaved rudely, but to show his gratitude, Venerable Shuiliao blissfully bowed to Mazu.

## Practice in Everyday Life

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*Lotus blossoms grow out of muddy water; without the mud there would be no pure lotus blossoms. Spiritual practice is like that – to seek enlightenment by retreating from this world of defilement and suffering is as likely as finding horns on a rabbit.*

### Gratitude

We are fortunate enough to be able to learn the Buddha's teachings and to practice them, so we should sincerely feel

grateful for the help of others, even if we are given something as modest as a handful of sesame seeds. Without gratitude, we can get nowhere in the spiritual practice. If we appreciate and cherish our good health and precious time, and the people and things around us, we can feel the infinite bliss of life. Buddhists have five points to ponder at mealtimes: the very first point reminds us to think about “all the efforts and contributions of others to make this meal possible.” The food on our table doesn’t come easy – every grain of rice or wheat takes some farmer’s toil and sweat. Everything around us is the result of many people’s collective effort. So we should make good use of food and not waste it.

We shouldn’t take anything for granted: family, friends, colleagues, or even strangers. Otherwise, our attachment to self will grow stronger as time goes by. We will tend to get critical and resentful of others and thus easily become disturbed physically and mentally. As Buddhists, we should constantly feel grateful and reflect: “Do I deserve all the favor others have done for me? What have I done for others?” We should be grateful for everything at all times. Those who are grateful can become one with nature and universe.

## Repentance

We often fail to see our own physical and mental problems clearly. With strong self-attachment we find ourselves faultless,

making it hard to feel repentant or determined to leave the cycle of birth and death. However, after practicing diligently for a period of time, our mind gradually becomes more flexible and observant, enabling us to see our own defilements and feel sincerely repentant and grateful. This allows us to gradually put aside all views, preferences and cravings based on the self-sense and arouse the aspiration for buddhahood. This is practice in accordance with the Buddha’s teachings. Without an aspiration for buddhahood, it’s difficult to achieve anything in spiritual practice. Most of the time, our deluded thoughts and distractions are so strong that we can’t clearly perceive our own body and mind. Even though we learn the Dharma, and even if it touches our hearts, we hardly derive real spiritual strength from it.

## The Aspiration for Enlightenment

In the *Gandhavyuha Sutra*, which is the last chapter of the *Avatamsaka (Flower Ornament) Sutra*, there is a young lay pilgrim named Sudhana. He represents enthusiasm, effort and practice on the Buddhist path to enlightenment. In this sutra, most of the great practitioners he visits to seek the Dharma are laypeople from different walks of life. This suggests that we all can take on the Buddhist mission and never lose the determination to learn and practice the Buddha’s teachings. Sudhana travels to 110 cities and visits 53 masters. This is no easy task. Even

today it is quite inconvenient to journey to many places in India; it is scorching hot and living conditions are poor. In the past the monks who wandered around to visit different masters often traveled through mountains and across rivers. Beasts, bandits and diseases could come along at any time. But their aspiration for great teachers' guidance made them fearless.

Such is the striving of monastics. What about lay practitioners? The young pilgrim Sudhana sets a good example. A practitioner on the bodhisattva path must have the same eagerness to support and learn the Dharma to attain buddhahood. Sudhana's pilgrimage shows us that practice on the bodhisattva path is not limited to monks and nuns, but open to everyone. After we ultimately realize enlightenment and return to the beginning, we find that there is fundamentally nothing to practice and nothing to attain. As Manjushri Bodhisattva taught Sudhana nothing but the way to arouse aspiration for enlightenment, we practitioners should follow his example.

What is the aspiration for enlightenment? It is a great vow to learn the Buddha's teachings in order to influence and transform all sentient beings. Don't waste your life and noble spirit; don't indulge in sensual pleasures and defilements. It doesn't mean that you have to escape from the world or abandon your family. Not at all! Instead, you should stay in your present life, family and occupation, while practicing diligently, applying the Dharma to daily life. That is the aspiration for enlightenment and the

practice of the bodhisattva path. For example, if you specialize in computer science, you can make a living, help others, or even spread the Buddha's teachings with your expertise. Then you are a manifestation of a bodhisattva.

According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, when the Buddha became enlightened, he said, "All sentient beings are endowed with the Buddha's wisdom and merit, but fail to attain enlightenment because of delusion and attachment." Our minds are no different from the Buddha's but we are ordinary sentient beings because we still live in ignorance. Therefore, the real aspiration for enlightenment is to find the true mind that is the same as the Buddha's. The aspiration for enlightenment is not only a vow to remove personal defilements, end cyclic existence, or attain buddhahood, but it includes a strong wish for all sentient beings to be delivered from suffering and to live in happiness. To become a buddha, one shouldn't turn to outside influences or do anything for a purpose, such as deliberately accumulating blessings, merit and perfect wisdom in order to attain buddhahood. Buddhahood is actually the natural result of benefiting other sentient beings. To practice for personal gain, to eliminate obstacles due to past actions, to escape cyclic existence, to attain Buddhahood – all this is the mind of craving. It is the mind of delusion, the mind of arising and perishing, not the true aspiration for enlightenment.



## No Pain, No Gain

My master told us of his practice experience as an international student in Japan. He once went to an intensive meditation retreat in winter at a temple deep in the mountains. It snowed heavily but there was no heating in the temple. All the practitioners shivered with cold but still worked hard on their practice. In the meditation hall everyone faced outside and the proctor monk walked around and inspected them. Those who fell into torpor or changed postures would be hit with the incense board. At night everyone slept in the hall. It was so freezing that they could hardly fall asleep unless they were tired out. After sleeping for one or two hours, they woke up with cold and continued their practice.

At mealtimes, two monks did the dining hall duty by putting food in all the practitioners' bowls. Each got hot congee, two slices of pickled radish and a little salt for breakfast and supper. Rice was served for lunch, together with the "arhat dish," a typical monastic food in the Tang dynasty: vegetable broth, including roots, stalks and leaves. It contained very little oil, mostly without mushrooms or tofu. It was traditionally said in the Chan monastery, that the best food offering was the "snowflake dish." Here, "snowflake" described the thin-sliced tofu floating in light broth. Sometime practitioners were lucky enough to be given some more tofu and oil. The broth contained so little oil that the leftover soup could be used to do the laundry. The congee served in the evening was made of the leftovers from lunch. Other

than the three meals, there was nothing to eat. That was the food prepared in the intensive meditation retreat, even in the dead of winter. The practitioners had no choice but to eat whatever was served.

Despite bitter cold, some practitioners still had to shovel away snow outdoors as part of their daily chores. The thick cotton monastic coat couldn't keep them warm, so the only way to drive away the chill was to work hard and sweat. The indoor chores, such as cleaning the Buddha hall and passages, were not easy either. Practitioners had to kneel down and wipe the wooden floor clean with rags, which often caused frostbite in their hands. Today there are vacuum cleaners and mops in meditation centers but in the intensive retreat practitioners must do without them.

This severe practice lasted three months. Practitioners had to endure all the hardship throughout the retreat. Severe as it was, those who were really enthusiastic about spiritual practice stayed. Many young Japanese took it as a precious experience in life. A lot of people came from around the world to receive this training, which goes back more than a thousand years in Japan. By comparison, an intensive retreat today is a piece of cake. As the saying goes, "No pain, no gain." Chan Master Huangbo Xiyun (d. 850) said, "The plum tree is in full blossom only in the depth of winter." This arduous practice is powerful. As the great Confucian philosopher Mencius (372-289 BCE) stated, "When Heaven is about to prepare a person for a great mission, he will

first be put through challenges and ordeals to stimulate his mind, strengthen his character and develop his abilities.” One who is unable to stand the hardship of retreat, afraid of the incense board, attached to and craving for body and mind, will never continue with spiritual practice.

The chicken-hearted can hardly get anywhere on the Buddhist path. It is true that we don’t necessarily have to undergo difficulties to practice the Dharma, but given that the obstructions of our past deeds are so powerful, how can we deal with them without diligent practice and true wisdom? Li Qing Zhao (1084-1155) said in a poem, “I’m afraid my skiff can’t move on because it’s overloaded with my disturbances.” We have a myriad of disturbances. Without diligent practice, we can do nothing about them. But if we can take disturbances as challenges and use them to train our mind and strengthen our character, then we can begin the process of fulfilling ourselves.

In the early days on retreat we ate a bowl of rice together with the arhat dish. Any slight change of posture in meditation would bring a hit of the incense board. We did walking meditation barefoot outdoors. The summer weather in Taiwan was boiling hot. The brutal heat made us dizzy and the concrete ground burned our feet. In fast walking meditation, tiny stones often lodged in our soles, but there was no time to remove them, for as soon as we slowed down, we would be hit with the incense board. When it was finally time to stop, everyone took out the stones in

great pain. These scenes are etched in my memory.

In meditation practice we should learn to accept everything in life, so that we can go through future challenges and not be thwarted by anything. Though we have good health and mental peace at present, what if we confront illness, old age, suffering and disasters? As we can go through difficulties, we have wisdom and real power to deal with such difficulties. Practitioners take adverse situations as opportunities to make progress in spiritual practice.

After the Buddha understood birth, aging, sickness and death and their causes, he found the path to liberation and practiced it himself. He practiced for many lifetimes before he attained buddhahood, and he still had to spend six years in arduous practice when he was Shakyamuni. He showed that the real liberation from suffering comes from accepting and dealing with it. Life is full of great power, wisdom and compassion, but we only realize the full of flower of wisdom if we work hard and have no regrets. We must strive with all our might and never slacken our practice.



## Enlightenment

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*Once during an intensive Chan retreat, my body experienced a strong burst of energy which soared upward, coursed through my heart, and reached the acupuncture point – the baihui – at the top of my head. Some people would mistake this experience for enlightenment. Actually, it was just the free circulation of energy (qi) released by meditation. When the body's qi meridians are open and the energy can flow smoothly, physical pain is alleviated and the body feels healthier. But it would be quite a mistake to think of this kind of experience as enlightenment.*

### Three Levels of Practice

The Chan School often speaks about enlightenment and seeing the true nature, but there is much misunderstanding about this, so I would like to make some clarification. Whether our practice method is meditation, prostrations, mindfulness of the Buddha, or reading sutras, the first step is to have the right intention. We pay full attention to the method, because whatever our practice, we can't achieve anything without concentration. At the second level of practice, the mind is empty of thoughts. By this I do not mean torpor or sleepiness, but no thoughts arising. For example, in listening to the Dharma, we clearly know we are listening without thinking about it. We simply let every word of the Buddha's teachings enter our mind. We don't depend on intellectual thinking but still grasp each point. It is better understood this way than with intellectual thinking. That's because we distance ourselves from the true meaning as soon as we discriminate the Dharma with deluded thinking and consciousness.

At the third level, we clearly know our own existence and surroundings without being influenced by the environment. Even when there is no *huatou* in our mind, we can keep the sense of doubt. At this point, we have realized the true mind which "sees clearly without discrimination." There are wonderful functions of body and mind that the enlightened are endowed with, but the physical and mental limits haven't been completely transcended. There is the wisdom which can "see clearly," but

some past experiences still remain. Therefore, it is not yet true enlightenment. Anyone who claims this as enlightenment is an imposter

The *Heart Sutra* says, "There is neither old age and death, nor cessation of old age and death." This means that there are no phenomena of arising and perishing, such as "old age and death," and no phenomena of liberation, such as "the cessation of old age and death." The sutra also says, "There is neither wisdom nor any attainment." In other words, what is negated is not only the existence of any phenomena of arising and perishing and that of liberation, but also the existence of any wisdom that results from the cessation of the cycle of birth and death. Also negated is the existence of any attainment that results from eliminating defilement and ignorance with wisdom, and the consequent achievement in spiritual practice. We do not see our true nature of purity until we reach the point of neither wisdom nor attainment.

### Light and Shadow Near the Entrance

Most practitioners remain in the "one-mind" state of the third level. But if they become attached to unified mind, and think they know everything, they are actually caught up in the form of phenomena without truly seeing reality. In Chan, that state is called "light and shadow near the entrance," which means mistaking the illusory light and vision for something really

existent. As the unification of the mind deepens, the mind becomes clear and one experiences the same perfection of wisdom and merit as the Buddha's. The veil over reality is lifted and many truths emerge in the mind. All phenomena enter the mind smoothly and one simply sees things as they are.

A master who hasn't really penetrated reality will congratulate a practitioner on reaching this state, but the truth would be that he or she does not have solid grounding in practice. It is merely light and shadow near the entrance, merely the inner light in the blink of an eye. Therefore, we practitioners need the guidance of true masters who are worthy of the name, who can verify our experience according to the Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. The *Shurangama Sutra* refers to this state as "attachment to inner tranquility." It appears when one practices to the extent that the sixth consciousness stops functioning, the "self" of the seventh consciousness seems to be subdued, but is really not completely removed, and the eighth consciousness, or the wonderful functioning in the seed of enlightenment (*tathagata-garbha*), feels as if it is solid and liberated. As a matter of fact, this is not even the "purification of mindfulness by equanimity" at the fourth meditative level, let alone seeing the true nature.

At the sight of the "inner light," or at the point of unified state of mind, we also feel perfect and free. But among the fifty false states caused by the five aggregates, this is the one which arises from the cessation of the aggregates of sensation and cognition,

while the aggregates of volition and consciousness still remain. There are no forms of arising and perishing, no forms of body and mind, but discrimination between the thinker and the thought still exists. We need to let go of "emptiness" and "what it is empty of" until there is neither "cessation" nor "that which has ceased." That is true enlightenment.

If we still seek a great breakthrough, and hope spiritual practice will bring special feelings, sensations, and wonderful experiences, we are still connected to the deluded mind. If we see the true nature, we will see the discriminating consciousness and the five aggregates as both false and true. In this state, we know what the true mind is and what is false. We see all phenomena as equal, while we also know clearly the nature and distinctive features of each and every phenomenon. Those who are really endowed with the wisdom of selflessness will not be influenced or trapped by the words of "great masters."

### Practice after Enlightenment

If we have really seen the true nature, we have a clear mind all the time. It doesn't mean that we have no thoughts – only the dead have no thoughts! After seeing the true nature, we can deal with everyday matters as usual, but we keep the sense of doubt generated by the investigation of *huatou*. That is the "perpetual concentration" that Chan Master Zhaozhou Congshen (778-897)

described. That is the real power of practice. At this point it is not necessary to ask “What is *wu*?” or “What is it in reality?” There is no form or sound of the *huatou* itself, except for knowing that it is not ultimately settled, and that body and mind have not fully connected with it. Moreover, though we know that in reality all phenomena are empty and intrinsically still, we haven’t performed the wonderful functions after seeing emptiness and stillness, nor have we developed the perfect universal wisdom of the Buddhas and great bodhisattvas. And, we have yet to acquire the skillful means to help sentient beings clear up their confusion. This is why we need to continue our practice.

Another reason why we must continue practicing is that we haven’t completely eliminated habit tendencies formed throughout many lifetimes, and they still influence us. Of course, as this happens, we can continue to practice the method and keep away from negative karmic influences. But we are dependent on the method and the intention to practice. So we have to ask ourselves: If in reality everything is empty and still, why do karmic influences still cause physical and mental disturbances? Am I not really enlightened? Or is there no such discrimination of leaving or remaining, since the forms of arising and perishing and the emptiness of phenomena are two sides of the same coin of reality?

Actually there is neither leaving nor remaining where we are, but continuous practice is needed to connect our lives with reality.

For example, in dealing with sensual craving and lust, we practice with no attachment to the form of body and mind, no notion of truly existent defilement to be eliminated. We simply go through various experiences to verify the emptiness we have seen. After enlightenment we practice according to the true nature, according to the reality of all phenomena. Despite the perpetual practice in daily life, we have nothing to practice, nothing to wish for, and nothing to attain.

You may ask, “After seeing the true nature, how long does it take to be ultimately liberated?” With continuous practice and insight, nothing can stop you. It is only a matter of time before you attain buddhahood. A thought-moment can be tens of thousands of years, and vice versa. If your mind is trapped in defilements and suffering, every moment feels like an eon; if no thoughts arise, eons fly by in a twinkling. I used to be very much regimented in my daily practice – performing a certain number of prostrations and reading scriptures for a set period of time. But when defilements arose, I fell into a spiritual black hole and felt reluctant to practice without knowing why. I felt bored and found life meaningless. I was not frustrated, I didn’t like to act like that, but I couldn’t help it. I fell into the hole and got out of it without rhyme or reason. And then I went on with my practice. After some time I was able to overcome these difficulties and resume my practice.

This is the situation we encounter when we reach unification

of mind with physical and mental tranquility. We are trapped in the form of voidness and feel as if our mind suddenly lost its center of gravity. Life seems unfocused. Our mind seems to go blank and stops functioning. We feel afraid, lost and helpless. But those who lack diligence and have a mind of calculation and craving are unlikely to face a situation like this. Generally, we fail to resist the impact of tangible situations in daily life, not to mention these unfathomable defilements. However, after we see the true nature of the mind, we won't be trapped in the forms of these situations which come and go.

Whatever we encounter, whether it is Buddhist scripture and philosophy, or people and things around us, they can give us true guidance in practice. We know spontaneously that everything we encounter – earth, water, heat, air, space, consciousness, views, the five aggregates, the six sense faculties and their corresponding objects, six consciousnesses, and so forth, all derive from the true nature of our mind and are thus pure and perfect. We face every situation here and now without attachment and see everything and everyone as they truly are.

That's why great practitioners sometimes seem emotional; but they are simply expressing their feelings, which come naturally from a mind without delusion. It is like a mirror which reflects everything – they see clearly what is happening and express corresponding emotions but are without discrimination or attachment.

These explanations are meant to remind all practitioners to move on and not abide anywhere. It is especially so as one reaches the state of one-mind. With the unification of mind, one sees everything as perfect and wonderful, and feels completely at ease. As a Confucian philosopher Wang Yongming (1472-1529) described, "All the people on the street are saints." Because of no discrimination and attachment, a small flower contains a myriad of universes, a blade of grass is a buddha, and a single thought lasts forever without arising and perishing. But it is a mistake to abide in this state.

While we practice, we needn't be curious about what it is like to be enlightened. It is inconceivable. The more curious we are, the more baffled we will be, as though obscured by the London fog. The best course is to have no expectation, no pursuit, but only a thought from the true mind, "What is *wu*?" We know clearly that there is a sense of doubt in the mind and keep it until we reach the end. Then we will naturally reach enlightenment. Chan Master Xuyun (1840-1959) admonished his disciples, "Spiritual practice refers to continuous training in daily life." As long as we keep practicing our method and connect with our own body and mind, we will realize the Buddha's teachings over time. Before we become awakened, we will have solved all problems, so we can do without enlightenment, which is nothing but a conventional signifier.



## What a Splendid Life

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As you turn to this page, it means this written teaching is coming to an end. Everything in the world manifests as formation, continuation, decline, disintegration, impermanence, arising and perishing. As Buddhists we should see in all impermanent phenomena the original face of neither arising nor perishing. It doesn't mean that we negate the causes and conditions of these fluctuating phenomena, but that we have to see the ultimate reality of permanence in everything that seems to come and go, and to cherish the causes and conditions of each and every phenomenon.



Therefore, I would like to repeat some advice here. First, don't become trapped in words. I constantly remind people to just practice diligently. There was once a practitioner on retreat who was assigned to take care of the bonsai plants. He sat there attentively trimming a small plant little by little. Three days passed and he didn't finish trimming even one bonsai. I told him that what he was doing was not practice but being trapped in words; he was trying to remove all distractions from the present thought, and focusing on what was happening without deluded ideas and discrimination. In fact, though he was engaged in the practice, it is just the preliminary measure. While our minds are badly distracted, we need this measure to concentrate. However, in dealing with everyday matters, if we act at a snail's pace like this fellow and fail to take everyone and everything into consideration with insight, how can we live in this world? If all Buddhists behaved that way, no one would want to learn the Buddha's teachings.

True concentration refers to clearly knowing what is happening without speculating on the future with personal discrimination and attachment or clinging to the past. If your job is to cut the grass, just do it; if it is to trim twigs, just do it; whatever your task is, just do it with wisdom. Don't mistake this for discrimination. Don't make a fool of yourself after learning the Dharma. Instead, you should become wiser, make good use of what you've learned or experienced and attentively do your duty

as well as possible.

As we face situations in daily life, besides keeping a peaceful mind, we need wisdom with which to see clearly. We had better not be controlled by emotions or consciousness in a fluctuating mind, but try to see things with a simple mind or one-mind. You are on the right track if in the process you don't get caught up in personal views, discrimination or moods, but simply know what to do and try your best. As to the result, it doesn't matter if it meets your expectations. This way you truly live in the present moment.

Given the causes and conditions in a certain time and space, you have tried to cherish and make the most of them, so you don't have to care about the result or strive for something better. There's no need to compare with others or yourself. Once trapped in comparison, your mind gets entangled in discriminations, attachments and arguments. Under these circumstances, how can you concentrate on the present job or practice? Moreover, it will take more effort later on to deal with a situation that you did not attend to properly in the first place.

When our mind becomes calm, we see that so-called differences and conflicts derive from our own discrimination and the failure to act with wisdom. For example, I'm observing the bonsai on the desk; I see plants, stones and dead wood, which are all arranged artistically. But without wisdom one may see nothing but some grey stones and decayed trees. Our consciousness is

easily caught in discrimination and argument. The problem is that there are always discriminated phenomena that we long for. That's why we suffer a lot. If we can let go of discriminated forms and see them as a whole, what is present in front of us is harmonious and beautiful. At the same time we see different forms in the whole and appreciate the artistic arrangement of these forms. Seeing this way, we can find the bonsai full of life. This is a perfect world, a perfect universe.

We not only experience suffering, emptiness and impermanence, but we also find life's eternity, happiness, self and purity. We need wisdom to do so. Whatever we see or encounter, we should first go beyond the differences and duality among phenomena and discover equality, harmony and unity in life. And then in the harmony and unity we skillfully see the differences, with which we enrich and harmonize our lives.

Life is full of various changes. That is its true face. Therefore, arising and perishing are also perfect forms in the world. Imperfections are part of the perfect life. In other words, without them life wouldn't be perfect. Do you get it? But how to make life perfect with all its imperfections depends on skill and clarity of mind, which comes from seeing with wisdom. Take the art of the Japanese Zen garden for example: there are neither trees nor lawn in the garden, only gravel which is raked daily by monastics to create the visual effect of ripples. Sitting on the deck and appreciating this simple landscape with no arising thoughts, we

won't feel bored but find the diversity and beauty of life.

The subtler and more concentrated the mind is, the fewer deluded and discriminating thoughts there will be. And aesthetic sensibilities will be pervasive in the mind. Even a dead leaf will be seen as the manifestation of splendid and perfect life; listening attentively, we will hear it whispering its experience of all the beauty in life without regrets. True life is free and easy like that. If we can exceed our own physical and mental limits to experience everything around us, the universe, or even the dharmadhatu, we will see why the Buddha said that life is infinite. Then why do we have to narrow our focus and argue about trifles?

Even if we haven't thoroughly penetrated into the reality, as long as we see the world with selfless wisdom, give up personal views to eliminate discrimination, and then see the perfect, harmonious and unified whole, we will discover how rich and splendid life is!



## Silent Illumination and Huatou

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*All the Dharma lineages in the Chinese Chan schools have their own skillful means for guiding practitioners. Such is the case with the Silent Illumination method of the Caodong School, and also the huatou method of the Linji School. While these approaches are clearly different, they also share the same origin and destination. During a 10-day retreat at Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York in 2009, I answered questions that some Western practitioners had about these two methods. At a 7-day retreat at the Dharma Drum Vancouver Center in 2009, I also explained*

*the two methods. This article is a result of bringing together those explanations in the hope that they may be of some help to Chan practitioners.*

### **The Process of Practice**

All the methods of meditation practice are meant to transform our distracted mind into concentration, unification, and finally insight into our own pure mind. The method of Silent Illumination starts with keeping the mind silent; this helps us to reach the clarity of the unified mind. With no other deluded thoughts or discrimination, we then use a method to illuminate the original true mind of clarity. Here, “to illuminate” means seeing our original essence of purity with a clear mind. On the other hand, with the *huatou* method, we investigate physical and mental defilements thoroughly. If so many defilements and difficulties exist in the cycle of birth and death, why investigate “*wu*,” which means “non-existent”? We keep questioning this until all the functions of our consciousness cease, including attachment, discrimination and thinking. At this point the true mind manifests. So this *huatou* method starts with the defilements of cyclic existence and helps us to reach formlessness. As no forms arise, there is no intentional action in the body and mind. At that time, we realize that the essence of defilement is enlightenment. Therefore, there is neither attainment nor loss. This is the

difference between the methods of *huatou* and Silent Illumination in the process of practice.

### **Essential Qualities**

The starting point of Silent Illumination is the contemplation of dependent arising. Practitioners will experience various changes in the form of body and mind – from the distracted mental state to the harmonious state, to the unified state and finally, the perfect mind of purity. At the same time practitioners clearly know that these physical and mental changes and experiences are provisional, i.e., dependent on causes and conditions, and are unreal. But as practitioners, they still pay attention to every provisional change and arising, and as they get to the reality, they see no forms and no formlessness either. This is a method of dependent arising which emphasizes the provisional.

The practice of Silent Illumination was started in the Caodong lineage of the Chan School, and the method focuses on the transformation and interbeing of the mind. The Linji lineage of Chan, on the other hand, adopted the *huatou* method, focusing on the contemplation of the reality of all phenomena as emptiness. The emptiness of one thing is the emptiness of everything. With either method one can finally reach the same destination, namely the wonderful true wisdom which sees things as both empty and provisional. On the one hand, Silent Illumination relies on the

contemplation of the provisional; one practices with a provisional mind and provisional objects. On the other hand, *huatou* depends on realizing direct knowledge of everything as non-arising and empty, as spontaneously existent. Despite the difference of approach, both methods help one move from the illusory dream of cyclic existence to the reality. They both have their distinctive qualities.

### A Sense of Doubt

In daily life we can adopt both methods; that is, we use Silent Illumination to see clearly the sense of doubt arising in the *huatou* practice. For example, while we're drinking tea, we are clear about what we're doing and we can ask: "Who is drinking tea?" With Silent Illumination we can clearly see external objects and fluctuations in our mind; we won't be distracted by the external world or discriminate about what we perceive. This way our mind remains pure and harmonious. But if we abide in this state, we will dwell in silence without ever seeing our true essence of purity.

Therefore, we have to let go of all situations while practicing Silent Illumination. To abide in any situation without detachment is "attaching to silence." Strictly speaking, this would not be true Silent Illumination. What we should do in practicing this method is to see our own true essence and, after there are no deluded

thoughts and distractions, discern what the true mind of purity is. Then we can achieve true realization in the Chan practice. In other words, when our mind has become very peaceful practicing Silent Illumination, we should ask, "What is this peace, in reality?" Purity, peace and distraction are simply certain sensations or feelings. The pure mind and the distracted mind seem different, but they are actually the same mind. Since it was distracted before and is unified now (however short-lived), what exactly is the true mind that can transcend the previous distraction and the present unity? When the forms of both distracted mind and peaceful mind are not present, what is the true mind? This questioning turns out to be just like *huatou* practice. In a word, we can arouse a sense of doubt even with Silent Illumination, just as we do in the *huatou* practice.

### Investigation or Discernment?

In Chan there are the phrases "*can huatou*" meaning to investigate *huatou*, and "*jiu mozhao*," referring to discernment in Silent Illumination. Strictly speaking, there is little difference between the two, for both help one to clearly see one's own true mind, the true nature. But in practice they are not exactly the same. A Westerner who attended a ten-day retreat in New York asked such a question, which I did not seem to encounter in Asia. This attitude of getting to the bottom of the Buddhist practice is

admirable. Knowing exactly how to practice the method, we can avoid mistakes in the process.

In Chinese, “*can*” (pronounced “tsan”) and “*jiu*” are similar in that there is almost no distinction in the literal meaning. The difference manifests in actual practice. “*Can*” may mean “joining” or “putting together.” In *huatou* practice, the sense of doubt arising in the process creates many disturbances in our confused mind. Instead of avoiding this state, we clearly join and remain in it. We don’t care how chaotic the external situation or inner world is, and we have no discrimination or argument. At the same time we further ask: “What in reality are the essence and form of such chaos?” This is “*can*.” It is like space, which is full of dust but not separate from it – the space abides in dust. Without dust, there is no space.

It’s intriguing that “*can*” is used in *huatou* practice. It is right at the moment when our mind is full of defilements and worries that we neither overlook nor avoid the defilement and worry, but investigate the truth in the present unsettled state. As long as we keep investigating, the reality of defilement and ignorance will reveal itself. To speak the truth, both defilement and ignorance arise from delusion. And the deluded mind results from a confused thought arising in the true mind. So there is no truly existing deluded mind or defiled mind. When one puts aside discrimination and argument for even a thought-moment, the deluded mind turns into true mind at that moment. That’s why *huatou* practice doesn’t

require the elimination of defilement in the first place. The *huatou* practitioners stay in defilement and realize that its true essence is pure.

Silent Illumination, on the other hand, emphasizes “*jiu*,” which means discernment – seeing something clearly that is unclear to the ordinary mind. The word “clear” (“*ming*”) has two meanings: used as a noun, it refers to “clearly visible reality,” which one has to discern and experience. Used as a verb, it means to see with wonderful clarity; as an adverb, it means clearly discerning with wisdom when one has experienced the true essence of purity. Since it is “discernment,” clear experience is needed, and the practitioner has to keep clear and calm physically and mentally. To sum up, in *huatou* practice we stay in confusion and ignorance to investigate its reality, while in Silent Illumination we discern the true clarity in the clear and calm body and mind without other deluded thoughts or distractions.

### Which Method Is Right for Me?

As a matter of fact, if we have enthusiasm for the practice, any method is right for us. The key lies in our determination and having a thorough understanding of the method. With my own *huatou* practice, I clearly experienced sensations and feelings in the body and mind within a short time, I was able to let go of the experience and connected with the true mind of purity. I didn’t

abide in physical and mental sensations and feelings all the time. But with other methods I dwelled in those states for a while before moving on. Since *huatou* is about “*wu*” or nonexistence, there is nothing to abide in. So practitioners can proceed faster. Moreover, under forceful guidance, they can suddenly detach from their body and mind, which is experienced seldom with other practice methods. That’s why *huatou* practice can help people go beyond their physical and mental limits to experience the Way.

In the early days of my master’s guidance, he taught the *huatou* practice. Later on, with various causes and conditions, including the decline of his energy and modern people’s overuse of intellectual thinking, he preferred to teach the Silent Illumination method, regarding it as more practical. It is true that the *huatou* method is more difficult to practice. Like capturing the moon in the water, *huatou* practitioners try to rely on something to practice with, but in vain. With something to hold onto – like praying to the Buddha every day – they may detect some progress in their practice, but are totally at a loss about what to do when they “can’t find the Buddha anywhere.” That is a crisis in *huatou* practice. But this crisis can be very helpful, for sentient beings tend to become attached to visible forms, and in *huatou* investigation we teach people to negate and detach themselves from forms. If they do that, then the form at the present time is the true form.

People often ask, “According to my spiritual potential, should I practice *huatou* or Silent Illumination?” Actually, these two methods are not different; they are both needed. If Silent Illumination practitioners feel nothing but clarity and peace in the end, that is wrong and has nothing to do with liberation. That was why in Silent Illumination retreats my master finally gave practitioners a *huatou* to investigate, like “Who is dragging this corpse along?” or “Who is it that is being mindful of the Buddha?” The purpose is to lead those who came to physical and mental tranquility to the true experience of meditation.

The practitioners of Patriarch Chan must meditate directly on true mind. The Silent Illumination practitioners practice in the same way with the unified mind after they reach the unification of body and mind. The direct meditation on true mind is *huatou* investigation; to investigate the doubt is what Silent Illumination is all about. In fact, silence in itself is the essence which neither arises nor perishes, neither comes nor goes. The true Silent Illumination practice is to investigate, discern and experience it. Great masters in the past often said, “In silence one keeps illuminating; in illumination one remains silent” or “clarity of silence and illumination.” Silence is the essence; to illuminate on the basis of the essence avoids discrimination and makes true practice.

I have emphasized over and over again that you mustn’t practice with delusion. All you have to do is to arouse a sense of

doubt with no discrimination or recognition, leaving everything else behind. That is so-called “functioning on the basis of silence.” Though you haven’t truly realized silence, the deluded mind of discrimination and attachment has been put aside. Only the functioning of the mind remains, which is the “true mind.” “Illumination” refers to the knowledge of all these mental functions. Moreover, in illumination there is always silence; in other words, in illumination one stays in the true mind and at the same time tries to know what it really is. That is the true Silent Illumination, not random illumination.

Why did Dahui Zonggao frankly criticize the Silent Illumination practice as wrong? It was because many practitioners failed to truly understand the teachings of Chan Master Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157), the most eminent exponent of Silent Illumination. The critics mistook the practice for inactive illumination. The truth is that each quote from Master Hongzhi encouraged investigation and discernment in the practice. While these two masters, Dahui and Hongzhi, belonged to different lineages and advocated different methods, they were not adversaries but good Dharma brothers. Once when Dahui Zonggao’s monastery was short of food, Master Hongzhi helped by sending food and money. He didn’t stand by saying, “It serves you right. Now no one will criticize me.” Later he even entrusted Dahui Zonggao with organizing his funeral. It is clear they were truly good friends but helped sentient beings in

different ways. If you really want to judge who is better, there is neither silence nor illumination. Who is it that is making the discrimination?





## Glossary

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**Ananda:** One of the ten major disciples of the Buddha, Ananda was also the Buddha's personal attendant for the last 25 years of the Buddha's life. He was also a first cousin of the Buddha's on their fathers' side. Ananda was gifted with extraordinary memory and remembered all the sermons that the Buddha gave at which he was present. At the first council of 500 arhats which took place after the Buddha's parinirvana, Ananda was called upon to recite the sermons of the Buddha for the sake of compiling the Buddha's teachings. Ananda was also instrumental in persuading the Buddha to allow nuns to enter the Sangha.

**Arhat:** (Sanskrit, "worthy one" or "noble one") An arhat is a practitioner who has thrown off all the hindrances and attachments of cyclic birth and death, has completed the path to enlightenment, and will not experience another rebirth. In other words, has attained nirvana. Stated in terms of the stages of the path, an arhat is one who has attained the four fruits

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of the shravaka: 1) stream enterer, 2) once-returner, 3) non-returner, and 4) arhat. In Mahayana Buddhism, the arhat path is considered to be one of personal liberation, not the ideal path, which is that of the bodhisattva. “Arhat” is also one of the ten epithets to describe the Buddha. See **Bodhisattva, Mahayana**.

**Baizhang Huaihai (720-814)**: One of the most eminent Chan masters of the Tang dynasty, and a Dharma heir of Mazu Daoyi. One of Baizhang’s main achievements was to establish the rules of monastic life. This codification of monastery life became the basis of many independent Chan monasteries, thus furthering the spread of Chan. See **Mazu**.

**Bodhicitta**: (Sanskrit, “awakened mind” or “bodhi-mind”) Depending on usage and context, bodhicitta may refer to the aspiration to realize enlightenment, or it may refer to the actual realization of enlightenment. As a central idea in Mahayana Buddhism, it has various meanings: 1) the altruistic mind

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of enlightenment which aspires to buddhahood for the sake of helping sentient beings; 2) the genuine actualization of enlightenment, awakening to the true nature of reality and buddhahood; 3) selfless action. Arousing bodhicitta is the first step in establishing oneself on the bodhisattva path. See **Bodhisattva**.

**Bodhidharma (?-ca. 528 CE)**: Arriving in China as a solitary monk from India – or by some accounts, from Persia – Bodhidharma was considered to have introduced the style of meditation and practice that ultimately became Chan Buddhism. He is therefore considered to be the founder and first patriarch of Chan. Though he left few written teachings, his brief treatise *Two Entries and Four Practices* is a keystone doctrine among all the teachings of the Chan masters since then. See **Patriarch Chan**.

**Bodhisattva**: (Sanskrit, “awakened being”) “Bodhisattva”

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is a term with varied meanings depending on the usage and context: 1) an honorific used with certain great enlightened beings in Buddhist teachings, such as Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and Manjusri Bodhisattva; 2) a term that describes a practitioner who has given rise to bodhicitta and aspires to become enlightened while delivering sentient beings; 3) a practitioner who has received the bodhisattva precepts and taken the bodhisattva vows; 4) especially in the Mahayana tradition, as a polite form of address to refer to any practitioner, or even non-practitioners. See **Bodhicitta**.

**Breath-counting:** A basic method of sitting meditation used in the Chan School in which the practitioner counts exhalations from one to ten, continually repeating that while keeping the mind concentrated on the act of counting. The purpose is to calm and settle the mind. Breath-counting can be used as a practice in its own right, or as a preliminary to other practices, such as *huatou* and Silent Illumination. See **Huatou**, **Silent**

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### **Illumination.**

**Buddha-nature:** A buddha (Sanskrit, “awakened one”) is a sentient being who has attained thorough enlightenment and is therefore liberated from the exigencies of conditioned existence in samsara, the cycle of birth and death. However, Buddhist teaching especially in the Mahayana School, also holds that human beings, indeed, all sentient beings and even non-sentient beings possess an inherent nature that is not fundamentally different from that of a buddha. With this concept in mind, the purpose of practicing the Buddhist Path is to ultimately realize one’s innate buddha-nature.

**Caodong:** The Caodong School (Japanese, Soto) is one of the two major lineages of Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen still extant, along with the Linji School (Japanese, Rinzai). The school is typified by the practice of Silent Illumination whose major proponent in later years was Hongzhi Zhengjue. Silent

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Illumination has been called the “method-of-no-method” because it requires only that the practitioner focus on the act of sitting to bring the body-mind to a “silent” state in order to “illuminate” the true nature of mind and self. See **Hongzhi, Silent Illumination.**

**Caoshan Benji (840-901):** Credited by some historians of Chinese Buddhism as a co-founder of the Caodong School, but not all historians agree. He was a disciple of Dongshan Liangjie, of whom there is more certainty that he was a founder of the Caodong School. See **Caodong.**

**Chan Buddhism:** Chan is a major tradition of Chinese Buddhism whose special characteristic is the practice towards enlightenment by directly contemplating the mind to realize its true nature as buddha-mind. “Chan” is the Chinese transliteration (from “channa”) of the Sanskrit “dhyana” which means “meditative concentration.” This signifies the

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central role of contemplation in the practice of Chan. As part of the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, Chan practitioners are exhorted to follow the bodhisattva path of postponing their own enlightenment in order to unconditionally deliver sentient beings. See **Arhat, Mahayana.**

**Concentration:** See **Meditative Concentration**

**Consciousness:** In the early Buddhist sutras, consciousness was described as consisting of the five sense consciousnesses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) plus a sixth consciousness, that of mental activity, or cognition. This sixth faculty integrates the information of the senses and perceives the world. In experiencing the world, these six “primary” consciousnesses operate together, resulting in sentient beings generating a separate sense of self. With the development of the later Mahayana tradition around the second and fourth centuries, the Yogacara School, while accepting the

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validity of the six primary consciousnesses, expanded the description of consciousness in order to explain how the self experiences reality, as well as how it accumulates karma and transmigrates through the cycle of birth and death. The development of this line of thinking resulted in the definition of two additional levels of consciousness beyond the original six: the seventh and the eighth consciousnesses. At the risk of oversimplification, the seventh consciousness can be called the “ego” since it is the faculty which processes the continuous stream of the data of the primary six consciousnesses, and forms the concept of the self, and along with that all the afflictions of having a self. The eighth consciousness is called the “ground” or “storehouse” consciousness because – based on the experiences of the seven other faculties – it “stores” all the impressions, as “seeds” which become causing conditions for future rebirths. Therefore, the eighth consciousness is the faculty that survives the current lifetime of the individual sentient being, ensuring that any residual karma will be

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contributive conditions for transmigrating in the sea of samsara. See **Samsara**.

**Cycle of Birth and Death:** See **Samsara**.

**Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163):** An eminent master within the Linji tradition, Dahui was a great exponent of the practice of *huatou*. In fact his dedication to *huatou* practice also led him to become a vocal critic of the Silent Illumination method because he thought it often led to quiescent but non-productive practice. The major exponent of Silent Illumination at that time was Master Hongzhi Zhengjue, but aside from their philosophical differences, they were friends. Dahui was famous for having helped over 128 disciples to attain realization. He also had many lay disciples with whom he communicated by letters that have become a part of the literature of Chan. See **Hongzhi, Huatou, Linji**.

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**Desire Realm:** See **Samsara**

**Dharmadhatu:** (Sanskrit, “dharma realm”) From an objective standpoint *dharmadhatu* consists of the totality of all phenomena seen as conditioned and empty, while at the same time, pervasive with true being, or suchness. From a subjective standpoint, *dharmadhatu* is the state of mind which perceives the true nature of existence.

**Dhyana:** (Sanskrit, “meditation-absorption”) State of meditative absorption achieved through cultivation of one-pointed mind (samadhi). The wider meaning of dhyana refers to any meditative practice in Buddhism where the purpose is to train the mind towards enlightenment. The narrower meanings of dhyana refer to deep and progressive meditative states whose precise meanings depend on the method being practiced. See: **Four Levels of Concentration of the Form Realm, Four Levels of Concentration of the Formless**

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**Realm, Meditative Concentration, Samadhi.**

**Dongshan Liangjie (807-869):** A principal founder of the Caodong School of Chan. See **Caodong**.

**Eighth Consciousness:** See **Consciousness**

**Emptiness:** (Sanskrit, *shunyata*; Chinese, *konxing*) A central concept in Mahayana Buddhism referring to the absence of a substantial, unchanging, and abiding “self” in all physical and mental phenomena. Perhaps the best known expression of emptiness in the scriptures is spoken by the Buddha in the *Heart Sutra*: “*Form is not other than emptiness and emptiness is not other than form; form is precisely emptiness, and emptiness is precisely form.*” This says that everything that we experience as “form” (phenomena) is without enduring “self” and therefore, “empty.” This can be partly explained through the law of conditioned arising together with the law

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of dependent origination. The law of conditioned arising says that all phenomena come into being, experience change, and eventually pass away; in other words, are impermanent. This being the case, no phenomenon can be said to have *enduring self-identity*. The law of dependent origination says that phenomena exist in a milieu of coming to being only through interactions among myriad other conditions and forces, and therefore nothing has *separate and independent self-identity*. However, it would be a mistake to think of emptiness as either some kind of substance or essence; and equally a mistake to think of emptiness as voidness, except in the sense of “void of selfhood.” Finally, understanding emptiness as a concept is not the same as actually experiencing emptiness itself. As such, Mahayana Buddhism teaches that emptiness is the result of practicing Buddhadharma to the point of actually realizing the self as “empty.” This realization can be called “awakening,” “bodhi,” or “enlightenment.” See **Mahayana, Skandhas**.

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**Five Aggregates:** See **Skandhas**

**Four Levels of Concentration of the Form Realm:** This refers to the four dhyana levels that are progressive stages in meditative concentration in the realm of form. All the four dhyana levels are states free of the five hindrances of craving, aversion, sloth, restlessness, and doubt. Furthermore, these four form dhyanas are characterized by inward *concentration* of the mind, as distinct from the four formless dhyanas which are characterized by outward *expansion* of the mind. Although the differences between the four levels of the form realm are complex to describe, they are generally characterized as: 1) relinquishing desires and unwholesome factors, i.e., the five hindrances; 2) absence of discursive thinking; 3) feelings of joy and well-being; and 4) equanimity and clarity of mind.

**Four Levels of Concentration of the Formless Realm:** As with the dhyana levels that characterize the form realm, these

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are progressive dhyana levels that characterize the formless realm. Where the dhyanas of form are concentrative, the formless dhyanas are *expansive*. Although the differences between these formless dhyanas are complex to describe, they are generally characterized as attainments of: 1) infinite space, 2) infinite consciousness, 3) nothingness, 4) neither perception nor non-perception.

**Gong'an:** (Chinese, “public case”; Japanese, *koan* ) A *gong'an* is a saying or anecdote from the records of the Chan masters that is used as a means of “investigating Chan.” The purpose is to focus the mind and create a “doubt sensation” to the point that all attachments and dualistic thinking are dropped, and the practitioner experiences a breakthrough – the direct perception of Buddhist “emptiness.” The *gong'an* can be resolved only by abandoning logic and reasoning, directly generating and breaking through the doubt under natural causes and conditions. Famous *gong'an* encounters were recorded and

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used by masters to test their disciples’ understanding, or they served as a catalyst for enlightenment. In Chan, *gong'an* practice is closely associated with the practice of *huatou*. See **Huatou**.

**Hongren, Daman (601-674):** Recognized as the fifth patriarch of Chan Buddhism, well-known for having transmitted the Dharma to Huineng as the sixth patriarch of Chan. See **Huineng**.

**Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157):** Hongzhi was an eminent monk and scholar who wrote many seminal texts in the Chan canon, including a collection of *gong'ans* with his commentary called *The Book of Serenity*. Somewhat ironically, Hongzhi was a leading exponent of the method of Silent Illumination, which was criticized by other masters of his time, including Dahui Zonggao, an exponent of *huatou*. Despite this, Hongzhi and Dahui had a cordial relationship. See **Dahui, Huatou**,



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**Silent Illumination.**

**Huangbo Xiyun (d. 850):** Eminent Tang dynasty Chan master who was a disciple of Master Baizhang and a teacher of Master Linji. By the time he died he had transmitted the Dharma to thirteen disciples, of whom the most prominent was Master Linji. See **Baizhang, Linji.**

**Huatou:** (Chinese, “head of a thought”; Japanese, *wato*) *Huatou* is a meditative practice unique to Chan and Zen in which one investigates an enigmatic question, such as “What is your original face?” or just a single word, “*Wu*,” to give rise to a “doubt mass” that, when resolved, can lead to realization of emptiness. The method can only be penetrated if the practitioner abandons the conceptual and discriminating mind while continuously practicing the *huatou*. In Chan, *huatou* practice is closely associated with the practice of *gong’an*. See **Gong’an, Zhaozhou.**

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**Huike, Dazu (ca. 487–ca. 593):** Legend has it that the monk Huike’s zeal to learn from Bodhidharma was so great that to demonstrate his sincerity, he cut off one of his arms while standing knee-deep in snow. According to the story, Bodhidharma then accepted Huike as a disciple, and eventually transmitted the Dharma to him. Bodhidharma and Huike are recognized as the first and second patriarchs of Chan, respectively. See *Bodhidharma*.

**Huineng, Dajian (638-713):** The sixth patriarch of Chan, who became enlightened as a young man when he overheard someone reading aloud from the Diamond Sutra. After joining the monastery of Fifth Patriarch Hongren at Dongshan, Huineng received transmission from the latter to become the sixth patriarch. At the time, Huineng was still a layman and did not receive the vows of a monk until years later.

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**Incense Board:** (Chinese, *hsiang-pan*; Japanese, *kyosaku*)  
A thin, flat wooden board traditionally employed by a Chan or Zen meditation master or teacher to strike the shoulder of a sitting practitioner to stimulate more diligent effort, or to rouse them out of torpor or laxity. The purpose is not punitive but rather to help the student, and somewhat paradoxically, it is also used on a practitioner who is in an advanced state of “ripeness” and is meant to stimulate them to realization. In Chan Buddhism, the use of the incense board was most prevalent in the Linji lineage; in modern times the use of the incense board is less prevalent. See **Linji**.

**Linji Yixuan (d. ca. 866):** The founder of the Linji (Japanese, Rinzai) School of Chan Buddhism during the Tang dynasty. Linji was famous for his vigorous style of exhorting his disciples to greater effort, using shouting and striking as expedient means. The Linji lineage still exists today, along with its counterpart tradition, the Caodong (Japanese, Soto).

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See **Caodong**

**Mahayana:** (Sanskrit, “great vehicle”) The name applied to the later schools of Sanskrit-based Buddhism based on the teachings of the Madhyamika (“Middle Way”), as enunciated by the Indian scholar, Nagarjuna (ca.150-250). The fundamental teaching of the school is the “emptiness” of all phenomena. The term Mahayana was used by its adherents partly to distinguish themselves from the earlier schools of Buddhism, which they referred to as Hinayana (“small vehicle”). The distinguishing characteristic of Mahayana practice is the bodhisattva path in which one defers one’s own enlightenment in order to deliver sentient beings. This is distinct from the goal of personal liberation as espoused in early Buddhism. Today the Mahayana tradition consists mainly of East Asian schools (Chan, Zen, Pure Land, Tibetan, Nichiren, and other variations), while earlier Buddhism is mostly represented by the Theravada traditions.

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**Manjusri Bodhisattva:** Among all bodhisattvas appearing in the Mahayana Buddhist sutras, Manjusri is considered to be most transcendent in wisdom. Although called a “bodhisattva,” Manjusri is considered in Buddhist doctrine to be a fully attained buddha. As such, he is said to be the Buddha of the Eastern Pure Land, just as Amitabha is the Buddha of the Western Pure Land.

**Mazu Daoyi (709-788):** One of the greatest teachers in the Chan tradition and one of the most colorful, Mazu was a second-generation disciple of Sixth Patriarch Huineng. As a teacher he was one of the most influential in developing the methods of directly contemplating the nature of mind as buddha, and the use of vigorous methods of cultivating sudden enlightenment.

**Meditative Concentration:** A generic term referring to any meditative practice of focusing on a single thought, object,

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or method in order to bring the mind to a firm and stable one-pointed state. As such, it also includes the overlapping terms “dhyana” and “samadhi.” In early Indian Buddhism the achievement of dhyana was classified as the four dhyanas of the form realm and the four dhyanas of the formless realm. While these eight dhyana states are also called samadhi, they are not necessarily the samadhi of enlightenment, which is sometimes referred to as the ninth samadhi. This distinction corresponds roughly to the “relative samadhi” and “absolute samadhi” as conceived in Tibetan Buddhism. But regardless of the distinctions, these are all states of meditative concentration. See **Dhyana, Samadhi.**

**Nirvana:** (Sanskrit, “extinction”) Nirvana is state of having overcome all mental defilements and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsara); that is to say, when all worldly attachments and desires have been “extinguished.” Correspondingly, nirvana is the state of being free from karma,

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the chain of cause and effect. See **Parinirvana, Samsara**

**Original Face:** The term “original face” is synonymous to other terms that refer to one’s true nature as one that is entirely free of attachment to the sense of having a separate self. As such, “original face” is sometimes used interchangeably with such terms as “true nature,” “original nature,” and “buddha-nature.” The meaning and use of “original face” is exemplified in the exchange between Sixth Patriarch Huineng and the monk Huiming, who wanted Huineng to teach him Dharma. Huineng asked: “Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil, what was your original face before your mother and father were born?”

**Parinirvana:** (Sanskrit “total extinction in nirvana.”) Whereas the term “nirvana” refers to the state of one having achieved “extinction” (or “cessation”) from the conditioned existence of samsara, parinirvana is more emphatic in that it refers to the nirvana of one who has totally departed from the realm

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of physical form and existence. The underlying meaning is that nirvana can be achieved while one is still alive, but parinirvana is the nirvana of one who has passed beyond the physical realm. For example, when the Buddha became enlightened he achieved nirvana, but he still lived for another 45 years. For this reason, the death of the Buddha is referred to as his parinirvana, i.e., beyond nirvana in being the nirvana without any residues of karma. Thus, the term parinirvana is usually reserved to refer to the passing of great practitioners, such as a great arhat, a great bodhisattva, or a buddha..

**Patriarch Chan:** A term that broadly refers to the lineage of great Chan teachers beginning with Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. As such, the guiding tenets of so-called Patriarch Chan can be found in the saying: “A special transmission outside the scriptures, not relying on words and letters, by pointing directly to the mind, realize one’s true nature and attain buddhahood.” In terms of practice, for the

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Chan patriarchs, this meant that practice was more about contemplating the mind than just study and rituals, and that Chan practice is also found in daily living, not just inside monasteries and meditation halls.

**Samadhi:** (Sanskrit, “make firm”) In general, samadhi refers to a state of meditative concentration in which one has reached a degree of single-minded absorption where the sense of time is foreshortened or even temporarily lost. Someone in deep samadhi for hours, upon coming out of samadhi, may think only a few moments had passed. There are many levels of samadhi from shallow to deep enlightenment. In Buddhism, samadhi is not equated with enlightenment so long as the practitioner still retains a sense of self. See **Dhyana, Four Levels of Concentration of the Form Realm, Four Levels of Concentration of the Formless Realm.**

**Samatha-Vipassana:** (Sanskrit, “calming-insight”) *Samatha-vipassana* is a two-stage practice in which calming the mind

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(*samatha*) is the preliminary to arriving at insightful awareness (*vipassana*) in which one contemplates the activity of the mind itself, especially as it relates to gaining insight into the reality of impermanence, suffering, non-self, and the like. The practice of *samatha-vipassana* is especially prevalent in the Theravada tradition, but it was also a foundational practice in the Chinese Tiantai School. To a degree, *samatha-vipassana* also echoes the Chan method of Silent Illumination insofar as the silent aspect is also a process of calming the mind, and the illumination aspect is also process of gaining insight into the mind. See **Silent Illumination.**

**Samsara:** (Sanskrit, “journeying”) The continuing cycle of birth and death that sentient being are immersed and remain in, as long as they carry a karmic burden. As long as one is in samsara, one will be reborn into one of its three realms: the desire realm, the form realm, or the formless realm. Inhabitants of the desire realm include hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals,

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human beings, jealous gods, and heavenly beings. The inhabitants of the form and formless realms are spirit beings at various levels, depending on the conditions of their rebirth. But by and large the form and formless realms can be considered as “spiritual” realms. To fully transcend samsara, a sentient being must practice to achieve complete cessation of the process of producing new karma. When this is accomplished, one enters the state of nirvana. However, Mahayana Buddhism teaches that samsara and nirvana are not two different realms: the difference is within the mind of the sentient being – one mired in accumulating karma, the other totally liberated from karma.

**Seventh Consciousness:** See **Consciousness**.

**Sheng Yen (1930-2009):** Eminent contemporary Buddhist master, born in Shanghai to a farming family, who became a novice monk in a Chan monastery at the age of thirteen. During the height of the Communist revolution, he was

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inducted into the Kuomintang Nationalist army and was sent to Taiwan when the government retreated to Taiwan. During his army years in Taiwan, he had an encounter with Chan Master Lingyuan Hongmiao (1902-1988) with whom he experienced realization. After leaving the army he returned to monastic life, taking vows again under Master Dong Chu (1907–1977). During this time he spent six years in solitary retreat in a mountain domicile. After that experience, wanting to learn as much as he could about Buddhadharma, he enrolled at Rissho University in Tokyo. There he earned a master’s and a doctorate in Buddhist Literature in six years. After matriculating, he returned to Taiwan, and shortly thereafter, went to the United States in order to teach Chan Buddhism. There he established the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, New York. When Master Dong Chu passed away, Master Sheng Yen returned to Taiwan to resume abbotship of Dong Chu’s Nung Chan Monastery. In 1995 Master Sheng Yen established Dharma Drum Mountain, the monastery and

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educational complex located in Jinshan Province, Taiwan. In 1999 he established the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York State. He passed away peacefully in Taiwan, on February 3, 2009.

**Silent Illumination:** (Chinese, *mo chao chan*; Japanese, *shikantaza* ) Silent Illumination is the method of meditative concentration in which the sitter focuses with full attention and effort on the present moment of sitting in meditation, leaving behind all other concerns and allowing the mind to gradually settle into “silence” of its own accord. For this reason, the method is sometimes called the “method of no method.” One may also say that this silence is an expression of intrinsic self-nature in which fundamentally, there is neither arising nor perishing. When the mind eventually achieves a deep level of silence, it enters the “illumination” phase and experiences expansive spaciousness and acute clarity. This spacious clarity is “illumination,” which is to actually experience that in self-

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nature, there is neither arising nor perishing, and therefore in reality, there is neither gain nor loss. When this state is persevered in, it is possible to experience Chan realization, or enlightenment. In Chan Buddhism, Silent Illumination is associated with the Caodong School (Japanese Soto). Its principal exponent was Master Hongzhi Zhengjue of the Song dynasty. See *Samatha-Vipassana*.

**Six Sense Organs:** In addition to the traditional sense organs of eyes, ears, nose, tongue and touch, Buddhism considers consciousness, or mind, to also be an “organ.” See **Consciousness**.

**Sixth Consciousness:** See **Consciousness**

**Skandhas:** (Sanskrit, “aggregates” or “heaps”) According to Buddhism, a sentient being is composed of the five aggregates of form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. The skandha of form is the material component, while the

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remaining four are mental in nature. When they operate together, the five skandhas create the illusion of separate existence and the notion of self or ego. See **Consciousness**.

**True Nature:** See **Buddha-Nature**

**Xuyun (1840-1959):** Master Xuyun (“Empty Cloud”) was one of the most eminent modern Chan masters. As a monk he practiced profound austerity while at the same time being active in teaching, writing, spreading Dharma, and restoring and establishing monasteries. Remaining in China during the Communist revolution, he was captured and tortured by soldiers. Xuyun was one of the leading modern exponents of the practice of *huatou*. See **Huatou**.

**Zen:** Zen Buddhism was transmitted from China to Japan around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, after which Zen Master Dogen Kigen (1200-1253) became its most famous proponent. The

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name “Zen” is a transliteration of the Chinese “Chan” (fully “channa”) which in turn is the transliteration of the Sanskrit “dhyana” referring to the methods of meditative concentration developed in the Hindu and early Buddhist traditions. See **Chan, Dhyana**

**Zhaozhou Congshen (778-897):** Zhaozhou was one of the most eminent Chan masters of the Tang dynasty, and one of the most often quoted. He was particularly noted for his idiosyncratic and unconventional methods of teaching and speaking, and among Chan masters he is one of the most represented in several *gong’an* anthologies. Perhaps his most famous single *gong’an* is the one where he was asked if a dog had buddha-nature, and he replied “*Wu*,” meaning “non-existent” or “no.” This seeming contradiction of a fundamental Mahayana teaching has intrigued Chan masters to the point where this one syllable, “*Wu*” (Japanese *mu*) is the most frequently used *huatou*, as in the question “what is *Wu*?”



