

## Meditative Pluralism in Hānshān Déqīng

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One problem in the historical study of meditative practices is the lack of sources that go beyond discussing the wondrous effects of meditation and describe the concrete techniques thought to bring about such results.<sup>1</sup> Many meditative traditions prefer to go about this aspect of their spiritual training in silence, without explicating the methods or working mechanisms involved. However, there are exceptions, and one of them is the Chinese Chán master Hānshān Déqīng 憨山德清 (1546–1623). In his dharma talks 法語,<sup>2</sup> he often addresses lay and monastic meditators with detailed instructions on how to achieve the best results.

In his work as a meditation teacher, Hānshān often meets with disgruntled meditators complaining that years of practice have yielded little effect. He repeatedly explains that this is not due to problems with the technique itself, only with their own lack of diligence and proper practice. Although his dharma talks are prescriptive rather than descriptive in nature, they offer a detailed picture of his recommended forms of meditation, as well as the effects such practices are aiming at, and the assumed connection between practice and effect.

Both in terms of doctrine and practice, Hānshān is clearly rooted in the Chán tradition of keyword investigation stemming from Dàhuì Zōnggǎo 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163) and Zhōngfēng Míngběn 中峰明本 (1263–1323),<sup>3</sup> and he is among the spiritual ancestors of the early modern Chinese meditation master Xūyún 虛雲 (?1840–1959). However, he also transcends this tradition by including buddha invocation, sūtra recitation, mantra repetition, and the contemplation of the mind in his repertoire of recommended meditation techniques. This may be seen as an effect of what is usually referred to as late Míng syncretism, an attitude he shares with other famous Buddhist teachers of the time, in particular Yúnqī Zhūhóng 雲棲祿宏 (1535–1615), Zībó Zhēnkě 紫柏真可 (1543–1604), and Ōuyì Zhìxù 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), as well as laymen like Yuán Liǎofán 袁了凡 (1533–1606).<sup>4</sup> Thus, one might seek to contextualize Hānshān's meditative methodology by seeing it as a product of two lines of influence, a vertical (historical) line stretching back to Dàhuì and Míngběn and a horizontal (cultural) line including Zhūhóng, Zhēnkě, Zhìxù, Liǎofán, and others. As we shall see, however, history and culture need to be supplemented both with a larger comparative framework and a more detailed look into Hānshān's biography and the personal experiences that may have led to his choice of methodology.

## Ridding the mind of thoughts

In his autobiography, Hānshān relates how as a young monk he went around looking for a teacher who could help him to “some day get rid of all deluded thoughts.”<sup>5</sup> The notion of deluded thoughts (*wàngxiǎng* 妄想 or *wàngniàn* 妄念) is deeply rooted in Buddhist tradition and is not immediately translatable into everyday English. However, both in Hānshān’s dharma talks and Chinese Buddhist discourse in general, this notion is mostly treated as synonymous with a number of other words, all of which typically refer to the spontaneous flow of random or “stimulus-independent” thoughts that tends to fill our minds and make us digress from whatever mental task we are immersed in: *zániàn* 雜念 “diverse thoughts”, *zhòngniàn* 眾念 “all thoughts”, *zhūniàn* 諸念 “all thoughts”, *wànniàn* 萬念 “all [ten thousand] thoughts”, *xīnniàn* 心念 “mental thoughts”, and *niàntou* 念頭 “thoughts”. There are conceptual differences between these terms, but they all refer to the same natural flow of random thoughts, to the wandering mind. It is this flow that the young Hānshān is seeking to calm down, stop, or dispel.

He is not alone. The attempt at ridding the mind of thoughts has a long history within Buddhism. The very notion of *deluded* thoughts points to the assumption that such thoughts constitute obstacles to awakening, like clouds covering the sky. As a Buddhist, Hānshān is seeking a dimension beyond the cycle of birth and death. At the outset, “all men have this [dimension] within themselves naturally, not even lacking a hairsbreadth.” However, “the amassment of seeds of attachment, deluded thoughts and sensory rumination through countless aeons has lead to the strong and habitual tainting of the mind,” so that “the superb illumination is obstructed,” and people “pursue their activities amidst the world of body and mind and the shadows of deluded thoughts,” and end up “roving around in the realm of birth and death.” In full accordance with much Buddhist thinking, spontaneous thoughts are looked upon as obstructive residuals from a past that spans any number of individual lifetimes in the cycle of reincarnation. On the other hand, “if deluded thoughts melt away, one’s original substance naturally appears.”<sup>6</sup>

As I try to show in another chapter in this volume, the attempts at ridding the mind of spontaneous thoughts are not restricted to Buddhism, but occur in widely different meditative traditions originating in China, India, and Europe, including such disparate traditions as classical Yoga, Christian mysticism, and early Daoism. These practices cannot be assumed to stem from the same cultural sources. They have most likely emerged independently of each other and belong within widely different philosophical and religious systems. The fact that they all contain similar ideas about ridding the mind of spontaneous thoughts, therefore, needs an explanation that goes beyond the individual culture. Since spontaneous thoughts are a basic feature of the human mind, even when the individual is at rest, any attempt at ridding the mind of such thoughts seems to go against basic human nature. In some cases, such attempts may be explained as ways of getting beyond distractions that bring the mind away from its primary object, much like a college student trying to concentrate on his reading rather than daydreaming. However, the attitude toward spontaneous thoughts within meditative traditions goes beyond the wish to avoid distractions. Such traditions, whether conceived of as dualist, non-dualist, or squarely monist tend to build on a basic duality

between a phenomenal and a non-phenomenal dimension, where the ultimate goal of their various practices lies in the non-phenomenal dimension, while spontaneous thoughts are judged to be as deeply ingrained in the world of phenomena as is the body or any other material object. Spontaneous thoughts are typically considered to be particularly obstructive to the goal of reaching beyond the phenomenal realm, partly because they tend to cloud the mind, which in spite of its phenomenal nature is seen as a gateway toward the non-phenomenal dimension. The attempts at ridding the mind of spontaneous thoughts, therefore, must be seen in light of a cross-cultural (though not necessarily universal) urge to reach beyond the phenomenal dimension.

Such cross-cultural commonalities suggest that meditative concepts and practices are not only shaped by cultural contexts, but also by generic features of human existence. Such generic features form the basis, therefore, not only for instincts with an obviously biological foundation, but also for higher-level functions that are usually expressed within spiritual or religious traditions, *in casu*, the attitude toward spontaneous thoughts. This is not a deterministic view, since the generic features in question provide a range of different options, the attempts at ridding the mind of spontaneous thoughts by no means representing the only possibility, even within meditative traditions. Hānshān's meditative practice, therefore, must be seen as a product of at least three forces: generic features, historical and cultural contexts, and individual choices.

In the following, we shall look at the various methods recommended by Hānshān as antidotes to the flow of spontaneous thoughts. These are methods of meditation in the sense of attention-based techniques for inner transformation.<sup>7</sup> Some of the same methods are also used within ritual practice, with a less individual and more external emphasis, but while it is impossible to draw a sharp line between their meditative and ritual usages, I will mainly be concerned with the former. In particular, I shall look at the *focus* of attention in these meditative techniques, in other words, their different meditation objects.

## Spontaneous thoughts as meditation objects

According to Hānshān, spontaneous thoughts are like "dust covering the true mind." Without this dust, the true mind would be readily available to anybody, and all Buddhist teachings and methods would be superfluous. The presence of this dust, however, necessitates the use of provisional methods aiming to "purify the mind and expel the shadows of deluded thoughts and habitual tendencies," in order to ultimately "escape the cycle of birth and death."<sup>8</sup>

These provisional methods include meditation, and one of Hānshān's recommended forms uses the thoughts themselves as a meditation object, in an attempt to "fight poison with poison,"<sup>9</sup> a method that he often refers to as "contemplating the mind."<sup>10</sup> This method resembles the free association of psychoanalysis in that it directs the attention toward spontaneous thoughts without attempts at direct interference, though in contrast to psychoanalysis, Hānshān does not recommend content analysis of the thoughts, and even less their verbalization. Hānshān clearly regards this as

a fundamental form of meditation, more directly addressing the obstructions to awakening than any other form, and he often recommends its use alongside other techniques. For him, as in the typology of meditation in general, a basic distinction exists between meditation objects that are actively generated by the meditator (such as keywords, buddha-names, sūtras, and mantras) and spontaneous objects, which are present independently of the meditative practice. The use of spontaneous thoughts as a meditation object belongs to the latter category. The distinction is reminiscent of, though perhaps not quite identical to the ancient Buddhist distinction between concentrative meditation (*śamatha*; 止) and insight meditation (*vipāśyanā*; 觀).

Actually, Hānshān asks the meditator to direct his attention not to the thoughts themselves, but to a place beyond the thoughts:

Watch diligently the place where a single thought arises and ceases, to see whence it arises and whither it ceases.

於妄念起滅處，一觀覷定，看他起向何處起，滅向何處滅。

This contemplation of *whence* and *whither* is meant to result in a realization that “there is no place where [the thought] arises or ceases,” making it evident that “arising and ceasing are baseless,” and thus bringing the meditator a good step toward a dimension beyond birth (arising) and death (ceasing). Furthermore, the contemplation of the arising and ceasing of a single thought is also meant to result in “this single thought appear[ing] in isolation” and “no longer being part of the stream of previous and later thoughts,” so that “all the mind’s dust has no place to settle.” This “superb medicine” will then “naturally pull away the root of the illness of deluded thoughts.”<sup>11</sup>

Hānshān also tells the meditator to ask himself “what are [the thoughts] after all” and “who is in the end the one making [the thoughts] arise and cease.”<sup>12</sup> He does not, however, explicate the function of these questions. Asking *what* the thoughts are may be similar to asking where they come from, thus once again directing the attention toward a point beyond arising and ceasing. Asking *who* is the one making the thoughts arise and cease may superficially point to the meditator himself. But who is after all the meditator? Most likely, the question has no ultimate answer. It is, in a Buddhist sense, empty or illusory, like the very notion of self.

The questions of *whence*, *whither*, *what*, and *who*, therefore, point beyond any ready-made answer. One could perhaps say that they point the meditator toward a non-phenomenal dimension beyond language, reason, and sensory perception.

As shown by Robert H. Sharf in this volume, the contemplation of the mind was promoted, and sometimes opposed, in early Chán circles during the Tang dynasty, almost a millennium before Hānshān. Even earlier, it was described in some of the first truly Chinese Buddhist meditation texts written by Tiāntāi Zhìyǐ 天台智顗 (538–97), who tells the meditator to contemplate his “greed” and his “anger”—as well as his “compassion”<sup>13</sup>—until there is no longer arising and ceasing<sup>14</sup>:

Without arising or ceasing, it is empty. Emptiness is truth, and when the truth is reached, the mind(’s activities) will cease.

不生不滅故即空。空即真真故心停。

Zhìyǐ also poses the *what* and *who* questions:

What is the cursing?

何等是罵？

And then contemplate who the one who is cursing is.

又觀罵者是誰。

He concludes in accordance with non-dualistic thinking:

The one who is cursing is equal to all the buddhas.

罵者與諸佛等。

Zhìyǐ's teacher Nányuè Huìsī 南岳慧思 (515–77) employs similar questions in contemplating the emptiness of the senses, as exemplified by the sense of smell below<sup>15</sup>:

Contemplate where this fragrance that you smell comes from, where it arises, where it goes off to, who is its recipient, and what its appearance is like. When contemplating like this, you will realise that this sensation of fragrance comes from nowhere and enters into nowhere and has no recipient and no appearance. It cannot be discriminated, but is empty and without existence.

觀此所臭香從何方來，何處生也，入至何處，受者是誰，相貌何似。如此觀時，知是香觸無所從來，入無所至，亦無受者，復無相貌。不可分別，空無所有。

Huìsī concludes that our “physical body” is “born out of the mind of deluded thoughts.”<sup>16</sup>

Using spontaneous thoughts as objects of meditation is, to my knowledge, primarily a Buddhist method, typically associated with the open contemplation of *vipāśyanā* (Chinese *guān* 觀). Outside the Buddhist context, there also exist methods with some resemblance to the contemplation of the mind. As I discuss further in another chapter in this volume, the Yoga Sūtra attempts to meet what are conceived to be “negative thoughts” (*vitarka*, including violence and other thoughts brought about by greed, anger, and illusion) not with suppression, but with attempts at seeing them in their larger contexts and thereby revealing their negative consequences. The Kashmiri Shaivist meditation manual *Vijñāna Bhairava* holds that the “state of Shiva” is manifested “wherever the mind goes, whether outside or within.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, though the attentiveness (*prosochi*), watchfulness (*nipsis*), and guarding of one's heart (*phylaki kardias*) advocated by Christian Hesychasts primarily aim to halt the thoughts before they enter the mind, they also sometimes include an element of observation and exploration<sup>18</sup>:

One type of watchfulness consists in closely scrutinizing every mental image or provocation.

In spite of a few such cross-cultural resemblances, however, the contemplation of the mind remains a specifically Buddhist form of meditation.



## Keywords as meditation objects

While emphasizing the contemplation of spontaneous thoughts, Hānshān recommends even more strongly the use of a keyword to drive away all deluded thoughts:

Whenever deluded thoughts arise, take up the keyword with force, and the deluded thoughts will cease by themselves.

若妄想起時，提起話頭一拶，則妄想自滅。

The term “keyword” translates two Chinese words, *gōng'àn* 公案 “public case” (= Japanese *kōan*) and *huàtóu* 話頭 “speech fragment”. There is a tendency that the term *gōng'àn* refers to well-known Chán dialogues from the past, while *huàtóu* refers to excerpts or formulas from such dialogues used for meditation purposes. Thus, when Hānshān tells his disciples to “use a *gōng'àn* as a *huàtóu*,”<sup>19</sup> the term *gōng'àn* clearly refers to stories that may or may not be used for meditation, while *huàtóu* is reserved for meditation uses. The compound *gōng'àn huàtóu* 公案話頭 reflects this distinction, referring to Chán dialogue fragments used as meditation objects, more or less like the single term *huàtóu*.<sup>20</sup>

Note, however, that Hānshān’s favorite keyword is the buddha invocation keyword, that is the formula “who is (after all) the one invoking the buddha”<sup>21</sup>:

Although there exist many keywords, the buddha invocation keyword most easily brings good effect in the world of dust and clamour.

公案雖多，唯獨念佛審實的話頭，塵勞中極易得力。

This keyword is not based on a Chán dialogue at all, but, as we shall see, on an attempt to utilize the widespread practice of buddha invocation for similar purposes. Still, Hānshān repeatedly refers to this keyword as a *gōng'àn*, as in the expressions “the *who* *gōng'àn*,” “the buddha-invocation examination *gōng'àn*,” “the buddha-invocation Chán-investigation *gōng'àn*,” and “the buddha-invocation *gōng'àn*.” He also occasionally (though much less frequently) refers to the same keyword as a *huàtóu*, as in the expression “the buddha-invocation examination *huàtóu*.”<sup>22</sup> It seems, therefore, that Hānshān does not make a consistent semantic distinction between *gōng'àn* and *huàtóu*. While well-known Chán dialogues from the past are always referred to as *gōng'àn*, excerpts or formulas from such dialogues used for meditation purposes may be referred to as either *gōng'àn* or *huàtóu*. In this latter sense, this chapter translates both as “keyword”.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to spontaneous thoughts, keywords are meditation objects actively generated by the meditator during meditation. Since most of the keywords build on quotations from well-known stories, their wording is usually more or less fixed, though the length of the excerpt used for meditation varies, as in the following three variant keywords based on one and the same story:

“Does even a dog have buddha nature?” Zhàozhōu said: “No.”

狗子還有佛性也無？州云無。

“No.”

無。

“A dog has no buddha nature.”

狗子無佛性。

Even the *who* keyword, which is not based on a story, is quite stable in its wording, though the initial *zhè* 這 “this” and the sentential adverb *bìjìng* 畢竟 “after all” are optional:

Who is (after all) the one invoking the buddha?

(這)念佛的(畢竟)是誰？

In addition, Hānshān sometimes represents 這 “this” by the graphic variant 者 and once by the more literary synonym *cǐ* 此. In a single instance, he leaves out the word “Buddha” 佛: “Who is after all the one invoking?”<sup>24</sup> But these are just minor exceptions to the general rule of a fixed wording.

Apart from the *who* keyword and the poetic line “Originally not a thing is,” all the keywords mentioned by Hānshān in his dharma talks refer to well-known Chán dialogues between a teacher and a student. A few of them resemble the *who* keyword in containing a question from either a student or a teacher, but most of them quote answers from presumably awakened teachers (see Table 7.1).

In terms of illocutionary force, there is not much difference between the keywords formulated as questions and those formulated as answers, since the answers are, at least on the surface, quite absurd and serve to amplify the force of the question rather than providing a solution. Both the explicit questions and the questions for which a keyword provides an answer regard fundamental issues concerning self and buddhahood. If anything, the absurd answers reinforce the idea that the solution needs to be found outside the realm of language, logic, and rationality. The *no* keyword provides an answer that goes against Mahāyāna doctrine (according to which all things have buddhahood), the *dried shit* keyword an answer that literally pulls a lofty question down into the dirt, the *let go* keyword a paradoxical answer (since there is supposedly nothing left to let go of), the *Mt. Sumeru* keyword is a seemingly irrelevant, though potentially meaningful, answer to a simple yes-no question, while the *cypress in the courtyard* keyword and the *three pounds of linen* keyword bring the attention away from lofty questions and back to the here and now. The *originally not a thing is* keyword is neither a question nor an answer, but also seems to point to a realm beyond rational understanding.

During meditation, keywords are made the objects of “investigation” (*cān* 參, *jiū* 究 or *cānjiū* 參究) and “examination” (*shěn* 審, *shěnsí* 審實 or *shěnwèn* 審問). Though obviously based on the enigma posed by the keyword, the main aim of such investigation and examination is not to find an answer, and certainly not a rational or logical answer, but rather to create an intense sense of doubt (*yí* 疑, *yíqíng* 疑情 or *yíxīn* 疑心). In sharp contrast to doctrinal Buddhism, in which doubt figures on the list of obstacles to meditative progress, Hānshān urges the meditator to “heavily add a sense of doubt” during meditation. The enigma posed by the keyword will

**Table 7.1** Discourse functions of keywords in Hānshān's dharma talks

Keyword (short form)	Speech act	Role relation
Who is the one invoking the buddha? 念佛的是誰	Asking a question	Meditator to himself
The Sixth Patriarch: "Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil, what is your original face?" 六祖不思善不思惡如何是本來面目	Asking a question	Teacher to student
All dharmas return to the one, where does the one return to? 萬法歸一，一歸何處	Asking a question	Student to teacher
No. 無	Answering the question "Does even a dog have buddha nature?" 狗子還有佛性也無？	Teacher to student
The cypress in the courtyard. 庭前柏樹子	Answering the question "What's the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?" 如何是祖師西來意？	Teacher to student
Three pounds of linen. 麻三斤	Answering the question "What is Buddha?" 如何是佛？	Teacher to student
Dried shit. 乾矢橛	Answering the question "What is Buddha?" 如何是佛？	Teacher to student
Let go! 放下著	Answering the question "When not a thing is anymore, what then?" 一物不將來時如何？	Teacher to student
Mt. Sumeru. 須彌山	Answering the question "When no thought arises, are there still mistakes?" 不起一念還有過也無？	Teacher to student
Originally not a thing is. 本來無一物	Poetic line written to display awakening	Awakened student to teacher

then create a "lump of doubt" filling the mind until it is "clogged," so that "thoughts no longer arise." If one "keeps practicing without distractions at all times, wherever one is," in the end this "lump of doubt will burst apart," "the cycle of life and death will immediately be broken," and the meditator will "instantly see his original face."<sup>25</sup> Rather than posing an obstacle to meditative progress, therefore, doubt



becomes an essential and necessary element, without which meditation will yield no result:

This is why they say that with little doubt there will be little awakening, with great doubt there will be great awakening, and with no doubt there will be no awakening.

所謂小疑小悟，大疑大悟，不疑不悟。

The method of keyword investigation, then, consists in the investigation and examination of any one of the keywords referred to in Table 1, with the aim of generating such a strong and all-compassing sense of doubt that there is no place for deluded thoughts and the mind is eventually brought beyond its ordinary functioning to a realization beyond all phenomenal understanding.

Keyword investigation is among the few forms of meditation that originate in East Asia, with no direct parallels outside this region.<sup>26</sup> It is usually regarded as a unique product of the Línjì 臨濟 school of Chán Buddhism. Hānshān traces its historical origins to Línjì's teacher Huángbò Xiyùn 黃檗希運 (d. ca. 850), but agrees with modern scholarship that its intensive use only began almost 300 years later with Dàhuì Zōnggǎo, from whom Hānshān inherited the notion that “with great doubt there is bound to be great awakening.”<sup>27</sup> In Dàhuì's rhetoric, the indecisiveness of doubt contrasts with the certainty of awakening, and the ultimate goal is to activate or actualize the sense of doubt so as eventually to “crush” the “root of doubt.”<sup>28</sup> Like Hānshān, Dàhuì emphasizes the continuous investigation of the doubt itself:

I call on you, sir, to investigate the spot where the sense of doubt has not yet been crushed, and not to let go of this investigation at any time, whether you are walking, standing, sitting or lying down.

願公只向疑情不破處參，行住坐臥不得放捨。

The keyword is a tool for focusing this attention to the doubt:

A monk asked Zhàozhōu: “Does even a dog have buddha nature?” Zhàozhōu answered: “No.” This one word is the knife that will crush the sense of doubt relating to life and death.

僧問趙州：“狗子還有佛性也無？”州云：“無。”這一字子，便是箇破生死疑心底刀子也。

According to Dàhuì, the doubt generated by the keyword represents all doubts, including the basic existential doubt that stands in the way of true awakening:

All thousands or ten thousands of doubts are at bottom only one single doubt. When you crush this doubt by means of the keyword, all thousands and ten thousands of doubts will instantly be crushed.

千疑萬疑，只是一疑。話頭上疑破，則千疑萬疑一時破。

While Hānshān inherits this concern with doubt from Dàhuì, his focus is slightly different. Dàhuì takes the doubt itself for granted and is mainly concerned with crushing it, while Hānshān, as we have seen, actually encourages the active generation of a sense of doubt. This is not Hānshān's own innovation, since the change of emphasis

is already evident in Zhōngfēng Míngběn some 300 years earlier. As to the notion of investigation, it is already present in Dàhuì and much more prominent in Míngběn, though in both cases only using the single term *cān* or the more neutral term *kàn* 看 “to look at; to observe,” in contrast to the strong emphasis and diversified vocabulary related to investigation and examination in Hānshān. Thus, while Hānshān’s method of keyword investigation owes much to his predecessors, it also differs from them, not only in his preference of the *who* keyword rather than the *no* keyword, but also in the nuances of the investigation and examination involved.

If we go beyond Buddhism, there are some parallels between the absurd replies involved in many keywords and the “holy madness” found in a number of both Asian and European mystical traditions,<sup>29</sup> though Hānshān keeps this madness within bounds by restricting it to dialogues used as objects of keyword investigation, as opposed to the openly crazy behavior for which both earlier and later Chán teachers were renowned. There are also parallels between the keyword questions with no answers and the contemplation of unsolvable conundrums in other traditions, such as the *Vijñāna Bhairava* of Kashmiri Shaivism<sup>30</sup>:

The unknowable, the ungraspable, the void, that which pervades even non-existence, contemplate on all this as Bhairava [the absolute]. At the end illumination will dawn.

Another possible parallel is the insistence in the fourteenth-century English work *The Cloud of Unknowing* that its recommended intensive contemplation of God and nothing but God will be frustrated by the “cloud of unknowing” that forever separates Him from us, similar to the “doubt” created by keyword meditation. Thus, both a historical and a larger comparative perspective may help us get a full picture of the nature of keyword investigation.

## Alternative meditation objects

Dàhuì sees keyword investigation as a unique way of relating to doubt, bluntly dismissing all other forms:

If you abandon the keyword and seek to generate doubt by means of other texts, or to generate doubt by means of scriptures and teachings, or to generate doubt by means of ancient *gōng'àn* stories, or to generate doubt in the midst of everyday worries and cares, then this will all be in the realm of evil demons.

若棄了話頭，卻去別文字上起疑，經教上起疑，古人公案上起疑，日用塵勞中起疑，皆是邪魔眷屬。

Compared to Dàhuì, Hānshān seems much more open to alternative methods:

Whether by keyword investigation, buddha invocation, mantra repetition or sūtra recitation, as long as you believe firmly in your self-mind, steadfast and unwavering, you are certain to escape the cycle of life and death.

不論參禪念佛持咒誦經，苟能的信自心，堅強不退，未有不出生死者。

In the end, Hānshān sees even keyword investigation as just a provisional means, which may be dispensed with once the aim has been reached, like a tile used for knocking on the door:

Although its effects come easily, it is just like a tile used for knocking on the door; eventually it must be thrown away, it's only that we have no way but to use it for a while.

雖是易得力，不過如敲門瓦子一般，終是要拋卻，只是少不得用一番。

Just as the tile may be replaced by some other suitable tool, so may keyword meditation be replaced by other meditative techniques. In the following we shall look at the three alternatives most frequently discussed by Hānshān in his dharma talks: buddha invocation, sūtra recitation, and mantra repetition.

### Buddha-names as meditation objects

As we have seen, buddha invocation (Chinese *niànfó* 念佛) features heavily in Hānshān's repertoire of keywords, the keyword "who is (after all) the one invoking the buddha?" directly referring to this practice. For Hānshān, the invocation of the buddha Amitābha (Chinese *Āmítuó fó* 阿彌陀佛) is an integral part of keyword investigation:

With the buddha-invocation examination *gōng'àn* you simply use Amitābha Buddha as a keyword (*huàtóu*). Just use the Amitābha Buddha phrase as a keyword, and do the examination practice.

念佛審實公案者，單提一聲阿彌陀佛作話頭。就將一句阿彌陀作話頭，做審實工夫。

However, when Hānshān praises the power of buddha invocation to rid the mind of thoughts and reveal one's true nature, this also applies to contexts that do not involve keyword investigation:

If you recite the buddha's name in your mind repeatedly and without interruption, so that your deluded thoughts vanish, your mind's light is manifested, and your wisdom appears, then you will become a buddha's dharma body.

若念佛心心不斷，妄想消滅，心光發露，智慧現前，則成佛法身。

Buddha invocation was (and still is) a much more widespread meditative and ritual practice than keyword investigation. Hānshān can safely assume that all the people he talks to, both laymen and monastics, know the practice well and have much experience with it. Thus, his discussions of it are likely to reach a larger audience than his discussions of keyword investigation. The importance of buddha invocation for the *who* keyword is only one reason for his interest in this practice.

### Sūtras as meditation objects

In one of Hānshān's dharma talks, we hear of a monk who has vowed to recite the Lotus Sūtra for the rest of his life, but is not satisfied with the results of his practice.

Instead of suggesting that the monk switch to keyword investigation, Hānshān urges the disgruntled monk to keep up his sūtra recitation. He insists that the choice between sūtra recitation and keyword investigation “is but a matter of taste.”<sup>31</sup> In both cases, the failure to reach awakening is a result of the way the method is being performed, not of the technique itself:

Reciting sūtras without reaching awakening is just like investigating Chán without seeing your self-nature, the result of a lack of genuine practice.

持經而不悟心，與參禪而不見性者，總非真行。

Like keyword investigation and buddha invocation, sūtra recitation is also explicitly mentioned as a way to rid the mind of thoughts:

Try to pick up this book [the Platform Scripture] and read it, and deluded thoughts, distortions and defilement will melt like ice and break like tiles all by themselves.

試取此卷讀之，不覺妄想顛倒情塵。自然冰消瓦解矣。

The effect of the three methods is considered to be more or less the same.

## Mantras as meditation objects

Yet another practice sometimes recommended by Hānshān is the (probably mostly mental) repetition of mantras.<sup>32</sup> In some cases, mantra repetition is looked upon as a beginner’s method that makes it easier to enter onto the path of self-cultivation:

It seems that for someone with a genuine motivation and a fear of the life and death cycle, mantra repetition is a good way of entry.

看來若是真實發心，怕生死的，不若持咒入門。

In this it resembles sūtra recitation, and the two are often mentioned together. Their relative ease of practice also make them suitable as last resorts whenever keyword investigation and the contemplation of the mind meet with obstacles:

When the keyword loses its power, or the contemplation of the mind fails to illuminate, and you can’t find a way out, you must worship the buddhas, recite sūtras, and repent, and you must secretly repeat mantra kernels, and use mudras to dispell [the obstruction].

話頭用力不得處，觀心照不及處，自己下手不得，須禮佛誦經懺悔，又要密持咒心，仗佛密印以消除之。

In addition, like the recitation of sūtras, mantra repetition is also looked upon as a complete practice in itself. Again, disgruntled monks who have been practicing mantra repetition but are disappointed with the results are urged by Hānshān to keep to their practice:

When you have repeated your mantras for thirty years without effect, it is not because the mantras are not efficacious, only because the repetition of mantras is

done with an inefficient mind, as if you were pushing an empty cart downhill, your mind set on rolling along, with no effort made at all. With this mindset you won't see any effect either in this life or in innumerable aeons to come.

禪人持明三十年無見效者，不是咒無靈驗，只是持咒之心，未曾得力，尋常如推空車下坡相似，心管滾將去，何曾著力來。如此用心，不獨今生無驗，即窮劫亦只如此。

You don't understand how to use it to discipline your habitual tendencies and crush to pieces your deluded thoughts, but instead nourish your unawakened mind with your attachment. That's the only reason why there is so much effort and so few results.

不知借以磨煉習氣、破除妄想，返以執著之心，資助無明，故用力多而收功少耳。

Hānshān returns to the image of the tile used to knock on the door:

You only want to have the door opened, so you don't need to care about what the tile in your hand is like.

只是要門開，不必計手中瓦子何如也。

In the end, the disgruntled monks are told, there is no fundamental difference between mantra repetition and keyword investigation.

Mantras are understood to have magical properties, and the emphasis is more often on their power to counter diabolic forces than on their concrete effect on mind wandering:

Relying on the power of the mantra is sufficient to counter this demon.

仗此咒力，足敵此魔。

However, since "all diabolic realms are thought to be born out of deluded thoughts,"<sup>33</sup> the difference is probably one of language rather than reality. References to demon-like beings often occur in the description of keyword investigation as well, as when it is said to "make the spirits and ghosts weep and wail and hide their traces."<sup>34</sup> Like other meditation objects, therefore, mantras are also seen as efficient antidotes against deluded thoughts.

## The question of syncretism

One possible explanation for Hānshān's openness toward alternative forms of meditation lies in the general syncretist atmosphere of the late Ming period. The late Ming saw a number of attempts to reconcile the "three teachings" (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), as well as different schools of Buddhism (in particular Chán and Pure Land), and even Confucianism and the more obviously foreign religion Christianity. Hānshān does not relate to the contemporary influx of Jesuit Christianity, but can plausibly be argued to be a typical representative of both three teachings syncretism and Chán and Pure Land syncretism.<sup>35</sup>

With regard to the three teachings, Hānshān had studied the Confucian classics in his childhood and early youth, and his interest in them continued even after he became a Buddhist monastic. He wrote well-received commentaries on the Confucian classic *Dà xué* 大學, the historical work *Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳 (also much revered by Confucian scholars), and the Daoist classics *Lǎozǐ* 老子 and *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子. Throughout his life he was held in high regard not only by Buddhists, but also by Confucian men of letters. He repeatedly claimed the unity of the three teachings:

The three teachings represent the same truth.

三教本來一理。

The three sages represent the same substance.

三聖本來一體。

In these respects, Hānshān was a typical representative of the three teachings syncretism, which was particularly popular in the late Ming, though it had much earlier roots.

As for Chán and Pure Land syncretism, its doctrinal background is sometimes traced to the early Song dynasty monk Yǒngmíng Yánshòu 永明延壽 (904–75).<sup>36</sup> For Hānshān, however, the amalgamation of the two is primarily a question of practice and less a doctrinal issue. The inclusion of various forms of buddha invocation in a Chán doctrinal setting also had a history of several centuries, and became particularly widespread from the fourteenth century onward. The origin of the buddha-invocation keyword, as used by Hānshān, is not entirely clear.<sup>37</sup> What has often been overlooked is the fact that Dàhuì himself relates the following *gōng'àn* story:

Zhàozhōu addressed the crowd saying: “You shouldn’t pass your days idly. Practice invocation of the buddha, invocation of the dharma and invocation of the sangha.” Then a monk asked: “How about students practicing invocations on their own?” Zhàozhōu said: “Who is (are) the one(s) practicing invocations?” The monk said: “Without a partner.” Zhàozhōu said: “You donkey!”

趙州示眾云：“不得閑過。念佛念法念僧。”便問：“如何是學人自己念？”州云：“念者是誰？”僧云：“無伴。”州叱云：“這驢！”

This story not only refers to the practice of buddha invocation in a Chán setting, but even contains the crucial question of *who* the one(s) invoking the buddha is (are). While not yet developed into a fixed method, this passage may have provided the inspiration for the development of the *who* keyword.<sup>38</sup> Apart from this, different ways of combining Chán and Pure Land practices into a single practice began to appear in the fourteenth century, including the use of the phrase “Amitābha Buddha” and then “Who is the one invoking the buddha?” as a keyword. By Hānshān’s lifetime, the buddha-invocation keyword had become a common practice, and Hānshān was only one of a number of famous monastics who recommended it over any other keyword. Another even more famous monk who did so was Yúnqī Zhūhóng, with whom Hānshān was acquainted.<sup>39</sup>

As we have seen, however, Hānshān’s acceptance of non-Chán methods goes even one step further. He not only includes the Pure Land practice of buddha invocation,



but also sūtra recitation and mantra repetition. When he urges people to keep to their practice of sūtra recitation and mantra repetition rather than switching to his own favorite method of keyword investigation, this is primarily an expression of a negative attitude toward indecisiveness:

You should not do this one day and that another day.

不得今日如此，明日又如彼。

In his emphasis on steadfastness, Hānshān resembles many of his Chán Buddhist predecessors. This emphasis does not go counter to the notion that Hānshān and his contemporaries were tolerant syncretists.

There are, however, several other problems with the syncretist explanation. First of all, there are well-known conceptual issues surrounding the term syncretism,<sup>40</sup> and there are serious questions as to the existence of a Pure Land School with which Chán could enter into a syncretic relationship.<sup>41</sup> In our context, however, the main question is to what extent the so-called syncretist impulses in Hānshān and many of his contemporaries are real expressions of tolerance toward alternative ideas and methodologies, and to what extent they are grounded in other motivations, including, perhaps, both power tactics and emotional issues.

Let us start with the one type of syncretism that we do not find in Hānshān's writings, the one that includes Christianity. We have no way of knowing how Hānshān would have reacted to Christianity, but we do know that some of Hānshān's contemporaries, such as the Buddhist monastics Zhūhóng and Zhìxù, who are also generally thought to be syncretists, reacted very negatively to the new arrival, and considered it heterodox.<sup>42</sup> Zhūhóng attacked it from a combined Buddhist and Confucian point of view, while Zhìxù attacked it from a purely Confucian point of view, using his regular name rather than his monk's name, and thus disguising his identity as a Buddhist monk, no doubt in order more easily to win the hearts and minds of the Confucian gentry—hence, a mild form of power tactics. At the very least, this suggests that late Ming syncretism is highly selective in its tolerance.

As for the three teachings syncretism, there is no doubt that Hānshān despite being a Buddhist monastic still entertained a lifelong love and enthusiasm for the Confucian and Daoist classics. His commentaries on these classics grow out of his genuine interest, as well as perhaps a wish to reconcile the various strands within his own spiritual orientation. His Confucian and Daoist writings do not seem primarily to be motivated by power tactics, although they may indeed have endeared him to the Confucian gentry of the time, including such famous Neo-Confucian friends as Gāo Pānlóng 高攀龍 (1562–1626) and Qián Qiānyì 錢謙益 (1582–1664). On the other hand, his form of syncretism differed in important respects from the one most widespread among Confucian scholars. While the dominant view in the late Ming was that “the three teachings converge in Confucianism,”<sup>43</sup> clearly placing Confucianism at the top of the pyramid, Hānshān places Buddhism on top. He argues that “the sages set up teachings of varying depth to accommodate different circumstances,” and while he calls Confucius the sage of the “human vehicle” and Lǎozǐ the sage of the “heavenly vehicle,” all the Buddhist sages transcend these realms, the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas “transcending the human and the heavenly,” the bodhisattvas

“transcending the two vehicles,” and the buddha “transcending the sacred and the profane.”<sup>44</sup> His commentaries on Confucian and Daoist classics likewise are firmly based within his Buddhist worldview. Thus, his view of the three teachings is not so much syncretic in the strict sense of the term as it is inclusivist. In Timothy Brook’s words:

Inclusivism seeks to explain the ideas and forms of a religious tradition in terms of another. In effect, it reduces the content of one to that of another. When one religion is brought within the ideational system offered by another, the former is regarded accordingly as an inferior, incomplete, or “failed” representation of truth.<sup>45</sup>

Hānshān looks upon Confucianism and Daoism with love, but clearly sees them as incomplete and shallow compared to Buddhism.

What about Hānshān’s Chán and Pure Land syncretism, or the expanded version that also includes sūtra recitation and mantra repetition? There is no doubt that his own preference is for the combined Chán and Pure Land practice of buddha-invocation investigation. This method is even considered to be superior to more established forms of Chán keyword investigation, such as the *no* keyword favored by Dàhuì and Míngběn. Buddha invocation, sūtra recitation, and mantra repetition without the element of Chán investigation are also held in high regard, but sometimes only as ways of entry or as last resort when the more advanced technique of Chán investigation fails. In fact, Hānshān thinks that for these methods to become effective at a more advanced level, they need to add the element of Chán investigation. We shall return to this issue below.

What is important to note is that Hānshān’s tolerance of alternative forms of meditation is by no means all-embracing. There are many well-known forms of Buddhist meditation that he never mentions, including breath- and body-based techniques and loving-kindness meditation, both of which are discussed in detail in the book *Jìngzuò yàojié* 靜坐要訣 by the lay scholar Yuán Liǎofán,<sup>46</sup> who like Hānshān had also learned to meditate from the Chán teacher Yúngǔ Fǎhuì 雲谷法會 (1500–75). Even the most famous Chán alternative to keyword investigation, the technique of silent illumination (*mòzhào* 默照), is only mentioned once, and then using a highly derogatory phrase inherited from Dàhuì: “the typical heretical Chán of silent illumination.”<sup>47</sup> He shows much more respect for non-Chán methods like buddha invocation, sūtra recitation, and mantra repetition than for the alternative Chán method of silent illumination.

The open, eclectic, and inclusivist attitudes of the late Ming most certainly provided an atmosphere that made it easier for Hānshān and his contemporaries to include and show respect and tolerance for alternative meditative methodologies. As we have seen, however, this openness was highly selective.

## Early experience

What, then, explains Hānshān’s inclusion of some methods and exclusion of others? One possibility worth exploring is that he included methods with which he had

made an early acquaintance. This might account for his emotional affection for these methods as well as his technical proficiency in them.

We know that Hānshān's early encounter with the Confucian and Daoist classics led to a lifelong interest and enthusiasm for these texts. According to his autobiography, he was in his fifteenth year when he started serious study of the Four Books (*Sì shū* 四書) of Confucianism, and he had memorized them completely from beginning to end the following year. We also know that he came in contact with Buddhist monastic practices at an even earlier age. How much is his selection of favored meditation techniques influenced by his early experiences?

According to his autobiography, the first meditation-like practice Hānshān came in contact with was the recitation of sūtras:

I was in my ninth year. While studying in a temple, I heard monks reciting the Avalokiteśvara Sūtra, which can save the world from suffering, and I was delighted. I asked a monk to teach me the basics, and after reading [the sūtra] cursorily, I was able to recite it.

予九歲。讀書於寺中，聞僧念觀音經，能救世間苦，心大喜。因問僧求其本。潛讀之，即能誦。

He was praised by his mother for his ability to recite "like the old monk."<sup>48</sup> In his thirteenth year, he was taught how to recite the Lotus Sūtra, and he followed up with a number of other sūtras in the following year. It is likely that this very early encounter with the recitation of sūtras provided a basis for his positive attitude toward this practice.

According to his autobiography, Hānshān practiced intensive buddha invocation after having entered monkhood in his nineteenth year, partly inspired by his reading of the *Extensive Records of Zhōngfēng* 中峰廣錄, in which Zhōngfēng Míngběn advocates both keyword investigation and buddha invocation, though urging practitioners to choose one and not mix the two. Since Hānshān had not yet learned keyword investigation, he opted for buddha invocation, and with astonishing results:

So with full concentration I invoked the name of the buddha day and night without interruption. Soon I saw Amitābha Buddha in a dream one night, appearing and standing in the air. I saw the brilliant contours of his face clearly just where the sun had set. I knelt down and felt endlessly infatuated. I also wished to see the two bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and then their upper bodies also appeared. After that, I could always see these three holy men clearly before my eyes, and I had faith that my self-cultivation would be successful.

乃專心念佛，日夜不斷。未幾，一夕夢中見阿彌陀佛，現身立於空中。當日落處，睹其面目光相，了了分明。予接足禮，哀戀無已。復願見觀音勢至二菩薩，即現半身。自此時時三聖，炳然在目。自信修行可辦也。

The experience of such rewarding dream visions of the Pure Land trinity must have played an important role in his continuing passion for buddha invocation as a meditation method.

According to his autobiography, Hānshān learned the Chán investigation of the *who* keyword in the following year. Again his practice was very intensive:

Originally I didn't have the knack of self-cultivation and was much distressed by this, so I offered incense and asked for help. My teacher instructed me in the investigation of the buddha-invocation keyword. After this I practiced investigation and invocation without stop. For three months I was as if in a dream and took no note of the other monks or everyday tasks.

初不知用心之訣，甚苦之，乃拈香請益。大師開示，審實念佛公案。從此參究，一念不移。三月之內，如在夢中，了不見有大眾，亦不知有日用事。

In the process, Hānshān got seriously ill, but after having prayed and promised to atone for his bad karma, he fell sound asleep and got miraculously well again. His single-minded investigation of the keyword was such that even when he went to the market, he continued his meditation as though he were sitting in the meditation hall. Again, it is easy to understand that such intensity of practice would leave its mark on Hānshān and make him continue to teach keyword investigation for the rest of his life.

Thus, the early experience of sūtra recitation, buddha invocation, and keyword investigation may provide an explanation for Hānshān's great respect for these three practices. As for the fourth type of meditation that he often mentions, the repetition of mantras, there is, however, no indication that this practice was equally a part of his early experience. In Hānshān's autobiography, it is seldom mentioned, and not at all before he is in his fiftieth year. Early experience, therefore, can hardly account for Hānshān's inclusion of mantra repetition in his favored repertoire of meditation techniques.

## Language beyond sound and meaning

What the four types of meditation that Hānshān favors do have in common, apart from their Buddhist orientation, is the fact that all of them, in one way or another, build on linguistic utterances. Keyword investigation is based on a question or an enigmatic dialogue or a fragment thereof; buddha invocation builds on the name of Amitābha Buddha or, less often, other buddhas or bodhisattvas; sūtra recitation uses entire sūtras, from the very short *Heart Sūtra* to the long *Lotus Sūtra*, or fragments thereof; and mantra repetition builds on pseudo-Sanskrit phrases typically seen as magic spells. In contrast to the meditation types ignored or discouraged by Hānshān, therefore, all four techniques are examples of language-based forms of meditation.<sup>49</sup>

This does not imply that the methods in question are recitative in the traditional sense. Plain recitation only plays a modest role in these techniques. In spite of their linguistic basis, they do not primarily consist in the pronunciation of meaningful linguistic utterances.

## Beyond sound

With regard to sound, these practices typically take place in silence. Keywords are formed as linguistic utterances, though they are “taken up” mentally rather than verbally. They are “contained [or spread out] in the chest” and then “investigated quietly,” in order to “fill and stop the faculty of thought.”<sup>50</sup> Although the phrasing of each keyword is fairly uniform (with some variants, as we have seen), there is no indication in Hānshān’s writings that the phonetic aspect of the keyword utterance plays any significant role.<sup>51</sup> The nominal classifier used when counting them is *zé* 則 “item,” not *shēng* 聲 “sound.”<sup>52</sup>

In buddha invocation, the sound aspect plays a more obvious role, and the phrases used are counted using the classifier *shēng* “sound.” Still, even buddha invocation is primarily a mental thing, as when the meditator is asked to “take up the phrase ‘Amitābha Buddha,’ clearly and uninterruptedly in the mind,” “invoking the buddha with one’s mouth but with an impure mind” being considered of little use.<sup>53</sup> The verb *niàn* 念 is ambiguous and may refer both to mental thinking and verbal recitation, though a less common verb, *chēng* 稱 “to call; to name; to say,” refers more explicitly to recitation.

In sūtra recitation, the sound aspect also plays a more obvious role, at least sometimes. It was the sound aspect of sūtra recitation that Hānshān’s mother praised when she first heard him recite a sūtra. The verb translated here as “recitation,” *sòng* 誦, usually refers to recitative practice involving actual pronunciation, even chanting, though it may also take place mentally. The verb *chí* 持, literally “to hold; to keep,” may be used for any kind of object that is kept in focus during meditation. Two verbs for reading, *dú* 讀 and *kàn* 看, are also used, and while the former is often associated with audible reading, the latter actually has as its basic meaning “to see.” Furthermore, the soteriological effect of working with sūtras is sometimes also believed to come from writing (*shū* 書 or *xiě* 寫) a copy of the sūtra, with no sound aspect involved. Finally, even when the effect of working with sūtras is linked to its audibility, this does not always come from one’s own recitation, but may also come from hearing (*wén* 聞) others reciting it:

As soon as he heard a phrase from the sūtra, he suddenly realised the nature of the self-mind.

一旦聞經一語，頓悟自心。

Most of the classifiers used to count sūtras (or parts of sūtras) relate to the material or structural aspects of books, not to their sound aspect: *juǎn* 卷 “roll; scroll,” *bù* 部 “part”; *cè* 冊 “string; scroll”; *zhāng* 章 “chapter”; *háng* 行 “line”; and *yǔ* 語 “phrase.”

The most common indigenous Chinese terms for mantra are *zhòu* 咒 “spell” and *zhēn yán* 真言 “true speech,” both of which point to the linguistic aspect of mantras, the former also to its magical nature. Mantras are usually looked upon as being part of the Tantric “secret teachings,” and the secrecy surrounding them suggests silent repetition rather than loud recitation. Their mental nature is emphasized in phrases like “repeating (lit. holding) a magical mantra in the mind (lit. heart).” Sometimes mantras are compared to keywords, and have in common with them the fact that they are typically assigned



by a teacher to a student, with an emphasis on the importance of “inscribing [them] thoroughly in the mind and keeping [them] constantly in the thoughts.”<sup>54</sup> Mantras are also called *xīn-zhòu* 心咒, literally “heart spell,” emphasizing the effect they have on the mind rather than their verbal recitation. With mantra repetition, the most common verbs are *chí* 持 “to hold; to keep” and *tí* 提 “to take up; to hold,” none of which indicates recitation. There are, however, also examples of more explicitly recitative verbs, especially *sòng* 誦 (or *sòngyǎn* 誦演) “to recite” and sometimes *shuō* 說 “to say.” Note, however, that even such recitation may be done in secrecy and silence, as suggested by the compound *mì-sòng* 密誦 “secretly recite” (not found in the Hānshān material). The only classifier used with mantras in the Hānshān material is *háng* 行 “line,” referring to writing rather than speech.

## Beyond meaning

With regard to semantic content, the main emphasis does not lie on the meaning in any of the four types of meditation object recommended by Hānshān.

This is most obviously true of mantras, which are typically meaningless to the human mind, even if they are sometimes assumed to have secret, symbolic, or divine meanings that only the gods and the illuminated mind understand. Both Hānshān and others often refer to them as “secret speech” with “secret meanings.”<sup>55</sup>

In keywords, the semantic content is not unimportant. For instance, Hānshān tells the meditator to reflect on “why does [Zhàozhōu] say ‘no?’”<sup>56</sup> thereby clearly relating to the semantic content of the *no* keyword. This reflection, however, has no rational solution, but is only a means to generate a doubt that will fill the mind and thereby stop the stream of thoughts:

You should not seek to understand the keyword, but only use it to generate doubt and to chop off and block out all deluded thoughts.

不是要明話頭，只借話頭發疑，斬截妄想。

Hānshān ridicules those who presume to understand the keyword:

They only look for an answer in the keyword itself. They look and look, and suddenly they come up with something intriguing and say they have reached awakening and present a *gatha* that they recite, as if it were a wonderful thing.

只管在話頭上求。求來求去，忽然想出一段光景，就說悟了，便說偈呈頌，就當作奇貨。

Like his predecessor Míngběn, Hānshān refers to keywords as “insignificant speech” 無義味話. From its superficial existence as a meaningful utterance, therefore, the keyword is transformed into a technical element beyond questions of ordinary semantic meaning.

Buddha names and sūtras are more obviously meaning based. We shall see, however, that in Hānshān’s recommended use of them even they are transformed into technical elements producing doubt, their meaning aspect fading into the background.



## Generating doubt

All these four forms of meditation, therefore, build on a language in which both phonetic form and semantic meaning gradually dissolve. This move may be understood as a conscious turn away from rational thought. All of the meditation objects in question take as their point of departure concrete linguistic (or, in the case of mantras, pseudo-linguistic) phrases that are somehow understood to refer to or represent the ultimate truth of buddhahood: keywords referring to discussions of the nature of buddhahood, invocations to those who have achieved buddhahood, sūtras discussing doctrinal issues relating to buddhahood, and mantras thought to represent the buddha mind.<sup>57</sup> However, since the ultimate truth lies beyond the language and logic of the phenomenal world, lingering on the meaning aspect of these objects will not bring the practitioner the deeper awakening that he seeks. Instead of reflecting rationally, he needs to enter into the all-encompassing doubt potentially generated by the meditation object:

Doubt it over and again, doubt it until your mind is like a wall, with no room for the generation of any other thought.

疑來疑去，疑到心如牆壁一般，再不容起第二念。

Doubt here becomes the vehicle that leads to the total mental absorption often associated with the higher states or stages of meditation, leaving no room for the “deluded thoughts” that otherwise distract us.

The generation of doubt in Chán investigation has much in common with the use of questions concerning *whence*, *whither*, *what*, and *who* in the contemplation of the mind. The introduction of the *who* keyword from the fourteenth century onward makes the connection more explicit, not only merging keyword investigation and buddha invocation, but also bringing in an element from the contemplation of the mind as described by the early Tiāntāi teachers. In the following statement concerning the *who* keyword, Hānshān goes one step further and also adds the question of *whence*, relating to the “arising” of the keyword:

Gently take up the buddha-name again, and contemplate with full absorption whence the buddha-name arises. After 5 or 7 invocations, deluded thoughts no longer arise. Then add the feeling of doubt, and explore who is after all the one invoking the buddha-name.

緩緩又提起一聲佛，定觀這一聲佛畢竟從何處起。至五七聲則妄念不起。又下疑情，審這念佛的畢竟是誰。

In the following statement regarding the *no* keyword and the *who* keyword, Hānshān asks questions of *whence* (arising) as well as *whither* (ceasing):

But this investigation and examination is only a way of observing whence this word *no* or this word *who* arises, and whither it ceases. You only look at the point of arising and ceasing of this thought, in order to see the source of rising and ceasing.

然此參究審實，只是觀此無字誰字，起從何處起，落向何處去。只看者一念起落處，要見起滅根源。

And in the following statement about keywords in general, Hānshān asks questions of *whence* and *what*:

From there you gently but forcefully take up the keyword, turn back and look at the point where it arose, to see whence it arose and after all what it is.

從此緩緩極力提起話頭，返看起處，從何處起，畢竟是個甚麼。

When a monk who has been repeating mantras for thirty years complains about the lack of results, Hānshān tells him to add the element of Chán investigation, helped by a question that uses the word *what* but in effect asks *who* the one repeating the mantra is:

Just treat your mantra mind as your keyword . . . Just as the effect is about to take hold, add a strong feeling of doubt, observe it deeply, and explore what the one forcefully repeating the mantra after all is.

就將持咒的心作話頭。就在正著力處，重下疑情，深深觀看，審問只者用力持咒的畢竟是個甚麼。

While the use of buddha invocation as a basis for keyword investigation had already been around for a couple of centuries before Hānshān learned it from Yúngǔ, Hānshān may have been the first person to apply the same type of transformation to mantra repetition. He concludes that “if you can repeat the mantra this way, it is the same method as Chán investigation.”<sup>58</sup> In the process, questions originally belonging to the contemplation of the mind have been used to activate the sense of doubt.

Hānshān is less explicit about the transformation of sūtra recitation into keyword investigation. There are no examples of sūtra recitation accompanied by the questions associated with the contemplation of the mind, and the element of doubt is never specifically mentioned in the context of sūtra recitation. Most of the time, Hānshān is simply concerned that those who recite sūtras should do so with a proper mind-set. He does, however, explicitly identify sūtra recitation and Chán investigation:

Sūtra recitation is keyword investigation, and Chán investigation is sūtra recitation.

持經即參究，參究即持經。

How can sūtra recitation and Chán investigation be different things?

持經與參禪豈有二耶。

Both are equally demanding:

When the ancients practiced Chán investigation, they would always be willing to spend thirty years of hardship. Now the sūtra [that you are reciting] has ten thousand parts, so anything less than thirty years will not suffice.

古人參究，必拌三十年苦心；今經萬部，非三十年不足。

And both may eventually lead to the same result:

How can you say that only Chán investigation can bring to an end the cycle of life and death, while sūtra recitation cannot bring to an end the cycle of life and death?

豈獨參禪能了生死，而持經不能了生死乎？

The relationship between advanced sūtra recitation and Chán investigation is quite close.

## Inclusivism

By adding the elements of investigation and doubt, including the *whence*, *whither*, *what*, and *who* questions originally associated with the contemplation of the mind, Hānshān in effect transforms buddha-names, sūtras, and mantras into keywords, largely leaving behind their original functions as devotional evocations, holy scriptures, and magic spells. On the surface, therefore, Hānshān meets other meditation methods with an open mind, but he does so primarily by turning these methods into variants of keyword investigation. The only other use he sees of them is as introductory practices for mid- and low-level practitioners.

With regard to meditation, therefore, Hānshān remains an ardent follower of keyword investigation, to the extent that other methods are only accepted if they can be subsumed under the same basic methodology. His position in this respect resembles his position with regard to the three teachings, where Confucianism and Daoism are subsumed under Buddhism and treated as less complete versions of the same vision. In both cases, Hānshān should not really be regarded as a syncretist in the strict sense, but as an inclusivist.

Interestingly, although Hānshān is loyal to the principles of keyword investigation, and although he knows a number of regular keywords that are based on *gōng'àn* stories from the Chán tradition, he clearly prefers to use and recommend a keyword that has inclusivism built into it: the buddha-invocation keyword, which, as we have seen, not only merges keyword investigation and buddha invocation, but also includes the *who* element originating in the contemplation of the mind.

## Hānshān's meditative methodology

To sum up, Hānshān's favored repertoire includes two main types of meditation, one in which the meditation object consists of the spontaneous thoughts naturally passing through the mind (contemplation of the mind), and one in which a meditation object based on linguistic or pseudo-linguistic elements (keyword, buddha-name, sūtra, or mantra) is generated by the meditator during meditation. Both types are seen as means to reach to the other side of the "deluded thoughts" that usually occupy the mind, in order to approach a dimension beyond the rational and sensory phenomenal world, to see one's "original face."

In the most prototypical cases, each of these two types of meditation has its own technical features and a specialized vocabulary. The contemplation of the mind includes the following two elements:

1. directing the attention toward spontaneous thoughts
2. contemplating the arising (*whence*) and ceasing (*whither*) of spontaneous thoughts, searching in vain for a point beyond their arising and ceasing, and

further contemplating the nature of these thoughts (*what*) or the nature of the one having the thoughts (*who*)

Meditation by means of a self-generated object, on the other hand, starts from the following basic structure:

1. generating the meditation object
2. generating doubt by investigating and examining the meditation object, the meditation process or the meditating person, eventually becoming completely absorbed in this doubt

As we have seen, Hānshān often mixes elements from the first type of meditation into the second, most notably by using the *who* keyword as his main self-generated meditation object, but also by asking questions of the arising (*whence*) and ceasing (*whither*) of this and other self-generated meditation objects, as well as of the ultimate nature (*what*) of the object. He also routinely uses verbs originally associated with the “contemplation” of the mind to refer to the process of Chán “investigation” or “examination,” in particular *qù* 覷 “to look; to gaze” and *guān* 觀 “to look; to observe,” in addition to the more neutral verb *kàn* 看 “to look; to see.”

Hānshān is less prone to mix elements from the second type of meditation into the first. In spite of the similarity between Chán “investigation” (*cān*, *jiū*, *cānjiū*) or “examination” (*shěn*, *shěnsí*, *shěnwèn*) and the “contemplation” of the mind, the verbs describing the former are never used to describe the latter. In a letter to a householder, Hānshān once mentions the element of doubt in the context of the contemplation of the mind:

When you do not understand where [the thought] arises, you should not refrain from doubting. When your doubt reaches its utmost, you will naturally attain complete understanding.

不知起處，莫道不疑。疑至極處，當自了知。

In his dharma talks, Hānshān never mentions the sense of doubt in such contexts, only in the contexts of meditation on a self-generated meditation object. Note, however, that Hānshān believes even the contemplation of the mind will lead to full meditative absorption (*dìng* 定 or *sānmèi* 三昧, from Sanskrit *samādhi*), with all thoughts being crushed to pieces, notions that are traditionally linked to meditation with a self-generated meditation object. To some extent, therefore, the blurring of the distinction between the two forms of meditation goes both ways.

Reading Hānshān’s dharma talks with a view to intertextual features, one easily gets the impression that the talks are but a pastiche of what others have written before him, a mosaic of elements from a long tradition of Buddhist meditation. Indeed, Hsu (1979) feels he needs to excuse his interest in Hānshān, since the latter’s philosophical thought is not particularly original. By looking at the relationships of Hānshān’s meditation techniques to those of the early Tiāntāi teachers and to Dàhuì Zōnggǎo, Zhōngfēng Míngběn, and other Chán teachers, this chapter has examined some of the vertical (or historical) lines underlying Hānshān’s meditative methodology.

This chapter has also examined some of the horizontal (or cultural) lines linking Hānshān to his contemporaries—to other scholars and Chán monastics of the late Ming period. We have seen that a majority of them shared several concerns, most obviously the issues relating to syncretism. The scholars, some of whom like Hānshān doubled as Chán monastics, tended to display a combined admiration for Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, while the Chán monastics tended to mix a good dose of Pure Land doctrine and methodology into their Chán practice. Again, therefore, Hānshān does not appear to be particularly original.

This chapter has also briefly discussed the links between Hānshān's Buddhist approach to meditation and the approaches found in less closely related or completely unrelated traditions, in particular classical Yoga, Christian mysticism, and early Daoism. While cross-cultural similarities in the meditative approach to spontaneous thoughts have been discussed more thoroughly in another chapter in this volume, they are mentioned here to emphasize that Hānshān's (and anybody else's) approach to meditation is also partly shaped by generic features relating to the nature of the human body and mind.

While such historical, cultural, and generic elements do go a long way in explaining Hānshān's meditative methodology, they still do not represent the complete picture. In spite of all the external influences, there was also ample space for individual choice and creativity. Culturally, Hānshān resembled his contemporaries in simultaneously espousing Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, but he differed from the majority in favoring Buddhism rather than Confucianism, and he presented his own inclusivist vision of the relationship between the three. Historically, Hānshān's meditation techniques pick up elements from the Tiāntāi teachers as well as Dàhuì, Míngběn, and other Chán teachers and Buddhist traditions, but he sometimes combines these elements in original ways. While the application of Chán investigation to buddha invocation was well known long before Hānshān, applying the same approach to mantra repetition and, less clearly, sūtra recitation seems to be Hānshān's original contribution. Finally, the extensive cross-pollination of the contemplation of the mind and the meditation practices that employ a self-generated meditation object may also represent an innovation, which began with the *who* keyword long before Hānshān's lifetime, but which Hānshān brought a good way further. The main innovative feature of Hānshān's meditation practice, therefore, lies in the combination of elements more than in the elements themselves.

A comparison of Hānshān and the late Ming scholar Yuán Liǎofán illustrates well how an individual's contribution matters just as much as the context in which the individual operates. Like Hānshān, Yuán learned meditation from the famous Chán monk Yúngǔ Dàhuì. In Yuán's treatise on Buddhist meditation, however, there is no sign that his approach comes from the same source as that of Hānshān, since none of the same forms of meditation is covered. We do not know whether this is because Yúngǔ chose to teach his two students different techniques or because the students chose to pick up different aspects of Yúngǔ's teachings.

In spite of the many historical, cultural, and generic influences, therefore, Hānshān's dharma talks are more than just a mosaic of quotations, borrowings, allusions, influences, and cultural clichés. Even if all its separate pieces could be derived from

other sources, the way these pieces are put together attests to the presence of a subject with his own distinct experiences, an individual who makes his own personal choices. Sung-peng Hsu may be right that Hānshān was not a particularly original philosopher, but this was because philosophy was not his main concern. When it comes to meditative methodology, we have seen how Hānshān combines a heavy historical and cultural legacy with his own unique contributions in his attempt to help others reach beyond the thoughts and ultimately seeing their “original face.”



example is the statesman, general, and scholar Zēng Guófān (曾國藩 1811–72) who set up a daily regimen for himself that read:

1. The practice of reverence: With rectitude and solemnity, at all times maintain a sense of trepidation. When not engaged with affairs the mind should be centred in the abdomen, when responding to affairs keep the mind concentrated and undistracted. 2. Quiet-sitting: In your daily practice you need not restrict yourself to any specific time. When the opportunity presents itself, sit in utmost quietude and embody the mind of benevolence as the *yáng* energies come to life and return to the origin. Make your posture correct and solemnly conform to the cosmic ordinances, like an upturned cauldron.

See Zēng Guófān (1995, ch. 4, p. 60). Neither Hé Líng hàn nor Zēng Guófān can be considered Neo-Confucian philosophers in the strict sense but both men were mainstream intellectuals steeped in Neo-Confucian spiritual culture and its values. Their daily conduct is representative of a life lived in a world thoroughly permeated by the Neo-Confucian spirit.

## Chapter 7

- 1 I am grateful to participants at the 1st International Conference on Ganhwa Seon at Dongguk University, Seoul, in August 2010, in particular Robert Buswell, Misan Sunim, and Ryan Bongseok Joo, for their useful comments on an early version of this chapter. I have also profited from responses at other similar occasions, including lectures at the Dharma Drum Buddhist College in Taiwan in 2010 and the biannual meeting of the European Association of Chinese Studies in 2012, as well as comments from Gunnar Sjøstedt.
- 2 Hānshān's dharma talks constitute Chapters 2–12 of the *Old Hānshān's Sleepwalker Collection* 憨山老人夢遊集; they are quoted here from [tripitaka.cbeta.org](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org). His dharma talks have received less scholarly attention than his autobiography, which has been discussed in detail by Hsu (1979), Bauer (1990: 407–21), Wu (1992: 142–62), Struve (2012), and Lu (1971).
- 3 On Dàhuì, see Levering (1978), Yü (1979), and Schlütter (2008); on Zhōngfēng, see Heller (2014).
- 4 On Zhūhóng, see Yü (1981); on Zhēnkě, see Cleary (1989); on Zhìxù, see Sheng Yen (2009a) and McGuire (2014); for a general overview, see Sheng Yen (2009b) and, for a slightly later period, Wu (2008).
- 5 絕他日妄想.
- 6 人人本具，各各現成，不欠毫髮；無始劫來，愛根種子，妄想情慮，習染深厚；障蔽妙明；在身心世界妄想影子裏作活計；流浪生死；若妄念消融，本體自現。
- 7 See Eifring (2016a).
- 8 真心之塵垢；淨除妄想習氣影子；了脫生死。
- 9 以毒攻毒。
- 10 觀心；for early Chán uses of this term, see Sharf's contribution to this volume.
- 11 起無起處，滅無滅處；起滅無從；一念自孤；前後不續；一切心垢，亦無地可寄；妙藥；妄想病根自拔。
- 12 看他畢竟是何物；畢竟是誰起滅。
- 13 貪欲；瞋恚；慈。

- 14 From Zhìyǐ's work *Sì niàn chù* 四念處, quoted here from [tripitaka.cbeta.org](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org).
- 15 From Huìsǐ's work *Suí zìyì sānmèi* 隨自意三昧, quoted here from [tripitaka.cbeta.org](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org).
- 16 色身; 從妄念心生.
- 17 *yatra yatra mano yāti bābye vābhyantare'pi vā*; Lakshman Joo (2002: 137), Bäumer (2004: 173f.).
- 18 St Hesychios the Priest, "On Watchfulness and Holiness: Written for Theodoulos," translation quoted from Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware (1979–99, vol. 1, p. 164).
- 19 提一則公案為話頭.
- 20 Alternatively, it may be interpreted as a coordinative compound meaning either "gōng'àn and huàtóu" or "gōng'àn or huàtóu."
- 21 (這)念佛的(畢竟)是誰.
- 22 誰字公案; 念佛審實公案; 念佛參禪公案; 念佛公案; 念佛審實的話頭.
- 23 See further discussion in Schlütter (2008), Schlütter (2013), and Schlütter (2016).
- 24 念的畢竟是誰?
- 25 重下疑情; 疑團; 扼塞; 心念不起; 於日用一切時, 一切處, 念念不移; 疑團迸裂; 從前生死, 頓然了卻; 頓見本來面目.
- 26 Cf. Eifring (2010).
- 27 大疑之下必有大悟.
- 28 破/拔/斷; 疑根.
- 29 See Feuerstein (2006) and Linrothe (2006).
- 30 *yadavedyaṃ yadagrāhyaṃ yac-chūnyaṃ, tat-sarvaṃ bhairavaṃ bhāvyaṃ tadante bodha-sambhavaḥ*; Lakshman Joo (2002: 150f.), Bäumer (2004: 185f.).
- 31 但由學人欣厭不同.
- 32 *Chí zhòu* 持咒, also known as *chí míng* 持明; mantras are also referred to as *zhēnyán* 真言 or *tuólúóní* 陀羅尼, the latter from the Sanskrit term *dhāraṇī*, with slightly different meanings.
- 33 一切魔境從妄想生.
- 34 只教神鬼皆泣, 滅跡潛蹤.
- 35 On different aspects of Hānshān's syncretism (or ecumenism, eclecticism, inclusivism, etc.), see Cài Jīnchāng (2006), Gāo Língfēn (2010), Lín Wénbīn (2001), Epstein (2006), Hsu (1975), Jäger (1999a, b), and Kieschnick (1992).
- 36 Shih (1987: 1992).
- 37 See Shì Yīnqiān (1999) and Schlütter (2013).
- 38 While Dàhuì himself is certainly no syncretist, Levering (2013) sees his concern with the moment of death as an attempt to show that keyword investigation can deal with the same concerns as Pure Land Buddhism, with which it was in sharp competition.
- 39 On Zhūhóng's mixed Chán and Pure Land practice, see Schlütter (2013). On the contact between Hānshān and Zhūhóng, see Goodrich (1976: 1273).
- 40 Brook (1993b), Yü (1981), and Lo (2008).
- 41 Sharf (2002b).
- 42 邪; see Foulks (2008) and Yü (1981).
- 43 Lǐ Zhì 李贄 (1527–1602) wrote an essay titled "On the notion that the three teachings converge in Confucianism" 三教歸儒說, see Lǐ Zhì (1974: 200). Cf. Brook (1993a: 72) and Brook (1993b).
- 44 故聖人設教, 淺深不一, 無非應機施設; 人乘; 天乘; 超人天; 超二乘; 超聖凡.
- 45 Brook (1993b, 14).
- 46 Yuán Liǎofán (2013).
- 47 尋常默照邪禪.
- 48 似老和尚.

- 49 Hānshān also mentions the technique of visualizing oneself sitting in the middle of a big lotus flower illuminated by the buddha's own radiance and then accompanied by the buddha Amitābha and the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. This, however, is not treated as an independent form of meditation, but as a supplementary technique accompanying buddha invocation.
- 50 提/提撕/提起; 蘊 [or 橫] 在胸中; 默默参究; 塞斷意根.
- 51 Some late Ming Chán practitioners seem to have called out the buddha invocation and even the keyword aloud, see Schlütter (2016).
- 52 In Chinese, all nouns are usually preceded by classifiers with similar functions as English *piece* in *a piece of music*, and the semantics of the classifier often reflects the meaning content of the noun itself.
- 53 單單提起一聲阿彌陀佛, 歷歷分明, 心中不斷; 口說念佛, 心地不淨.
- 54 密教; 心持神咒; 切切記心, 時時在念.
- 55 密言; 密意.
- 56 因甚道無.
- 57 Hānshān says: "My mind is at the outset a secret mantra" 我心原是祕密咒.
- 58 若能如此持咒, 與參禪豈有二法耶.

## Chapter 8

- 1 See, for example, the *Śvetāśvatara* Upanishad.
- 2 Devotion to a formless Lord also stands at the center of Sikh religious and meditative practice, see Myrvold (2016). Historically, Sikhism is probably best viewed as a sant lineage that developed into a self-conscious religion within the cultural and political circumstances of premodern and colonial Punjab. Its founder Guru Nanak is contemporaneous with the early saints, and his verses are in the same vein as theirs, with frequent references to the guru and the saints' multivalent *śabda* ("sound" or "word," usually seen as *sabad*). The Sikh canon itself points to a connection to a broader sant tradition: it contains a section of verses of "devotees," the majority of whom are saints, including Kabir.
- 3 The references to Kabir's verses are from Tiwari (1961).
- 4 For a sound treatment of Kabirian textual scholarship and the historical background of the early saints see Vaudeville (1993).
- 5 On the relationship of the Naths to Kabir and the saints, see Offredi (2002). She emphasizes that Kabir was not simply under the influence of the Naths but responded to them creatively.
- 6 These include especially Sundar Das the younger and Rajab; on the latter see Callewaert (1978).
- 7 Dwivedi's best-known work pertaining to sant tradition (1971) is devoted to Kabir. Although the book—entitled simply *Kabir*—has been highly influential, some of its major presuppositions have been disputed. Dr. Dharamvir (1999), understanding Dwivedi to have subsumed the low-caste and nominally Muslim Kabir too closely into brahminic Hinduism, has written a strong polemic in Hindi; for a more balanced critique in English, see Horstmann (2002b).
- 8 This volume contains selections from an extensive manuscript compiled by Maluk Das' successors, of which I have seen a photocopy.

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