

GUO GU

PASSING THROUGH THE GATELESS BARRIER

Kōan Practice
for Real Life

“A very helpful guide to the investigation of the Zen kōan from a perspective not yet widely known in the West. Guo Gu (Professor Jimmy Yu) is a worthy heir to the great Chan master Sheng Yen. He provides lucid comments on each of the cases in the classic kōan collection, the *Gateless Gate*, inviting us into our own intimate encounter with Zen’s ancestors and our own personal experience of the great matter of life and death. Anyone interested in understanding what a kōan really is, how it can be used, and how it uses us, will be informed and enriched by this book. I highly recommend it.”

—James Ishmael Ford, author of *If You’re Lucky, Your Heart Will Break* and co-editor of *The Book of Mu: Essential Writings on Zen’s Most Important Koan*

“Guo Gu’s translation of *The Gateless Barrier* and his commentary reveal a fresh, eminently practical approach to the famous text. Reminding again and again that it is the reader’s own spiritual affairs to which each kōan points, Guo Gu writes with both broad erudition and the profound insight of a Chan practitioner; in this way he reveals himself to be a worthy inheritor of his late Master Sheng Yen’s teachings. Zen students, called upon to give life to these kōans within their own practice, will find *Passing Through the Gateless Barrier* a precious resource.”

—Meido Moore Roshi, abbot of Korinji Zen Monastery

“A fresh, original translation and commentary by a young Chinese teacher in the tradition of Sheng Yen. Finally, a commentary on the *Gateless Barrier* that can

take its place alongside Zenkei Shibayama's classic work."

—Jeff Shore, translator of *Great Doubt: Practicing Zen in the World*

"It is such a delight to read this book, a translation of many stories of enlightenment from the ancient Chan masters. Helpful for Chan practitioners as well as a general audience."

—Venerable Guo Yuan

ABOUT THE BOOK

Gateways to awakening surround us at every moment of our lives. The whole purpose of *kōan* (*gong'an*, in Chinese) practice is to keep us from missing these myriad opportunities by leading us to certain gates that have traditionally been effective for people to access that marvelous awakening. The forty-eight *kōans* of the *Gateless Barrier* (Chinese: *Wumenguan*; Japanese: *Mumonkan*) have been waking people up for well over eight hundred years. Chan teacher Guo Gu provides here a fresh translation of the classic text, along with the first English commentary by a teacher of the Chinese tradition from which it originated. He shows that the *kōans* in this text are not mere stories from a distant past, but are rather pointers to the places in our lives where we get stuck—and that each sticking point, when examined, can become a gateless barrier through which we can enter into profound wisdom.

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Kōan Practice for Real Life

GUO GU



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("Gateless Barrier") by Tianshi Kun

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This book is dedicated to my teacher, Master Sheng Yen (1930–2009), and my students. They made this book a reality. Without my teacher I would not have a life. Without my students, life would not have meaning. Special thanks go to Estelle Gerard, who transcribed all the talks diligently and made many editorial suggestions. Without her, this book project would never have started. I also thank Myosen Sprott, Linda Howard, Maria Williams, and Fran Berry for their assistance in preparing the manuscript for my edits. I would also like to thank Liz Shaw and John Golebiewski at Shambhala Publications for editing the manuscript. Finally, my gratitude to all the Chan lineage masters who kept the flames of the Three Jewels alive in successive generations.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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INTRODUCTION

The *Gateless Barrier* (Ch., *Wumenguan*; Jp., *Mumonkan*) is a thirteenth-century work that offers forty-eight entryways to wake up to your life. These entryways are presented as a “barrier” or checkpoint at a gate. They are short cases of life scenarios that show where you are stuck. The truth is, there is no gate or barrier. Where you feel stuck is precisely where you realize awakening or freedom. In other words, all of life’s ups and downs are opportunities to realize your true nature. This is why these checkpoints or entryways are “gateless.” The main message of this work is clear: You are already free. But knowing this is not enough. You have to live it. Take everything you meet as an opportunity that can free you from bondage. This book shows you how.

If you allow the entryways or cases in this book to stand as mere stories from the distant past, unrelated to your life, then even if you read this book a hundred times you will still meet barriers everywhere you go. But if you take these cases as insights to aspects of your life, then they will come alive and you will wake up from the slumber of delusion, vexations, and suffering. You will open up to wisdom.

Chan master Wumen Huikai (1183–1260), whose name actually means “open to wisdom [and realize] the gateless”

is the compiler of the *Gateless Barrier*. In 1228, he compiled and edited forty-eight cases of past Chan masters' interactions with their students, many of which involve awakening experiences. These short, insightful cases are called *gong'an* (Jp., *kōans*). Each case is followed by Wumen's own comments and poetic verses as pointers. The pointers show you how to approach and investigate each *gong'an*. In this book, I comment on both the *gong'an* and Wumen's pointers to make them more accessible.

Gong'an as Text?

Gong'an literally means "public case." The term comes from Tang dynasty civil court documents, referring to legal cases that must be passed or resolved by the magistrate. Chan masters draw on this judiciary metaphor to refer to the "cases" of certain past Chan masters and practitioners who have realized awakening and passed through the barrier of life. Just like magistrates who review, scrutinize, and pass judgment on legal cases, Chan masters started to compile and comment on the short sayings and encounters of earlier practitioners. Their comments, like the magistrate's verdict, evaluated the most important turning point or catalyst of those awakening experiences by giving readers pointers to insight, inspiring them to take up these cases as their own objects of contemplative investigation. These books became known as *gong'an* collections.

The genesis of *gong'an* collections is complicated. Chan and Zen scholars note that the stories in *gong'an* collections draw from mainly ninth-century Chan masters' biographies and discourse records. They also show that by the eleventh century, many Chan masters' discourse records already included a subgenre of texts called "verses on old [cases]," or *songgu*, which can be considered a precursor to *gong'an* collections of the twelfth century. This

suggests that by the eleventh century, the practice of commenting on earlier Chan masters' stories was already common. However, this is as far as scholars have gotten in historicizing the origin of gong'ans. I have found that in the *Wanling Record of Chan Master Huangbo Duanji*, which dates to the ninth century, Chan master Huangbo (or Duanji Xiyun, 751?-850) was already encouraging his students to "observe gong'ans." This suggests that at least one master referred to the word gong'an not as a literary work but as a method of practice as early as the ninth century. However, it is hard to say definitively that he was the progenitor of gong'an practice because there is only one instance, and it doesn't appear anywhere else in his discourse record. It may be possible that this instance was inserted by later editors. At the same time, we also can't deny that there was an oral tradition of gong'an practice before the eleventh century. History testifies that, by the time ideas are committed to written texts, they have already been circulating orally for a long time. Indeed, this early phase of oral tradition within Chan cannot be overlooked.

Gong'an comments are usually compiled by Chan masters' disciples, who put the cases together with their masters' oral comments from different teaching occasions without any order of profundity or sequence. The colloquialism and down-to-earth flavor of the comments are also preserved. An introduction to the final collection by the master might be added after all the cases were compiled and edited. Similar to the process of how Chan discourse records were compiled or how Buddhist scriptures were translated, many people's hands were involved in the production of a gong'an collection. The notions of authorship or copyright were much more fluid than in our modern times.

Gong'an collections are unlike other Buddhist writings. Gong'ans do not explain or reify any concepts. Their form

also reads more like transcripts of vivid encounters of life situations. They are not static, and their meanings change according to whoever reads them. Even though literary conventions were used in all gong'an collections, they cannot be reduced to mere literature, as if they were products of discursive exercises. In fact, they are really not meant to be "read" at all. They are, instead, meant to be engaged with and actualized. They *do* something to the readers and shape the lives of practitioners, rather than just presenting some ideas. This dynamic, performative dimension of gong'ans goes beyond the limits of what a "text" is. The *Gateless Barrier* is a great example—it became one of the most influential and beloved gong'an collections, more so than any other, like the *Book of Serenity*, compiled by Chan master Wansong Xingxiu (1166–1246) in 1224 or the *Blue Cliff Record*, compiled by Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135) in 1228.

Gong'an as a Method of Practice

Gong'an collections are much more than just books. As a method of spiritual cultivation, gong'ans are unique in the whole of Buddhism, and in all the history of human development, for that matter. There is really nothing like them. Before I explain how to use gong'ans as methods of practice, it is important to keep in mind that they come from everyday life situations and are meant to be engaged with. Thus, gong'ans cannot be studied or learned or analyzed. Discursive explanations of and intellectual speculations about life are not life. None of the gong'ans *tell* you what life is. They only put a spotlight on different aspects of life. The purpose is to show that all situations in life—its ups and downs—are opportunities to awaken to your true nature. To many people, they seem to be absurd, upside down. This is because most people live their lives in

an upside-down way—bound by their own rational thinking, concepts, and proliferation of notions about the world, which they take as the world. Thus gong'an turn us right side up, and free us from our own bondage. To engage in gong'an practice, then, is to use the cases as a method to investigate your life and what it means to live according to your true nature. This engagement is called investigating Chan.

Investigation, here, does not mean thinking. Thinking is always dualistic and discriminatory and has the tendency to reify things as real and unchanging. Ordinary people's thinking is a form of self-grasping. Thinking is by nature self-referential. Because it is self-referential, and filtered through words and language, it also reifies whatever people experience as out there, real, and separate. Being deluded by the thinking process, a sense of self and other come into being, and people are forever alienated from their experience.

This is not to say that thoughts themselves are the problem. The problem is the tendency to take the concept of a thing to be the thing itself. Because of this delusion, attachment arises and suffering follows. To investigate Chan is to use poison against poison: to use a gong'an as a springboard to realize that which lies before words, language, and concepts arise—your true nature, which can never be defined or reified or grasped.

Therefore, whatever concept you come up with about a gong'an is just another concept. It is not freedom. Gong'ans are not puzzles or problems to be solved. There's nothing to solve. The stories in gong'ans defy logic and force the discriminating, logical mind to become stuck—turning words, language, and concepts on their head—and thereby shattering self-grasping so practitioners can wake up to who they truly are. So the point is not to “solve” them. Use the gong'an to dissolve your self-referentiality or any fixation.

How do you do this? Gong'an use words and concepts to push words and concepts to their limits. This is what I mean by using poison against poison. Gong'an provide an impossibility, an impasse, so that you are left with a great sense of not knowing, impenetrability, and wonderment. They give you nothing to hang on to, so all words, concepts, and everything you have ever known about yourself, or this and that, falls away.

This sense of not knowing is most precious in gong'an practice. You must absorb yourself in the story of the gong'an and be completely engulfed by the irresolvable impasse it presents. This experience of impenetrability, wonderment, and irresolvable impasse is known in Chan as the "doubt sensation," or *yiqing* in Chinese. It is the great questioning mind. This is the whole point of the gong'an method. When this indescribable wonderment engulfs you and continues for a long time, permeating every aspect of your life, it is possible that a catalyst, such as a sound from the environment or a form that you may see, will suddenly shatter this great ball of doubt sensation. Along with this shattering, your self-attachment may suddenly drop away. When this happens, you see the world with new eyes, free from the filtration of self. Everything, then, comes to life for the first time. This is awakening. But that doesn't mean practice is complete. Your self-grasping may come back, so you must continue to practice.

This doubt sensation, or feeling of doubt, is *not* suspicion. On the contrary, it is established on the great conviction or faith that by using this method you can apprehend your original true nature, your intrinsic freedom. This doubt is more like a sense of wonderment, the feeling of not knowing but of acutely wanting to know. It is quite dynamic and alive—yet free from wandering thoughts and discursive thinking. The concentration developed through working with a gong'an is unlike traditional concentration methods of single-mindedness. This sense of wonderment or

questioning mind is undivided yet not stagnant, concentrated yet engulfing, encompassing everything in all daily activities in life.

During meditation, this sense of wonderment can get quite intense, reaching a point where words and language are completely dropped. In that state of nonconceptuality, the discriminating mind comes to a dead end and one remains open in wonderment. This is when the practitioner reaches a unified state of oneness, where self-referentiality is at its weakest. Chan masters call this the great death. Only when even this state of oneness is dropped can the practitioner come back to life. This is called the great life.

There are many ways to engage with the cases. It is often not necessary to reflect on the whole story of the gong'an. Each gong'an has a critical turning point that has the potential to transform delusion into awakening. This critical point, called a *huatou* (Jp., *wato*), can be the focus of one's meditation. You can think of *huatou* as a condensed version of a gong'an.

Huatou literally means "that which lies before words." If words and concepts are the thorny vines that bind and delude you, then *huatou* is the hatchet that cuts through them and frees you. This is the reason that the gong'ans are gateless barriers that both obstruct and liberate. They are barriers, obstacles, only if you are stuck with deluded, upside-down thinking. In truth, the obstacles are not obstacles at all but catalysts for awakening.

To meditate on the *huatou* is to investigate the essence of the gong'an. It is not always so easy to generate the sense of wonderment when meditating on a gong'an because it can be quite long. It is, after all, easy for practitioners to get caught up with all the ideas and words in the gong'an. Thus, for practical reasons, most Chan practitioners meditate just on the *huatou*. Here is a popular gong'an, the first in *the Gateless Barrier* collection:

One day a monk asked Chan master Zhaozhou Congshen, "Does the dog have buddha-nature?" Zhaozhou replied, "No!"

The dilemma here is that the Buddha said that all beings have buddha-nature, the potential to become awakened. So why did Zhaozhou say no? Moreover, in his commentary on this gong'an, Chan master Wumen said that this "no" is not the "no" that is the opposite of "yes." This means that you cannot understand it in terms of yes or no, having or not having, existing or not existing. In fact, this "no" (in Chinese, it is *wu*; in Japanese, *mu*) is completely impenetrable, unfathomable. Yet it contains the whole truth of buddhadharma! So what is it? What does it mean? You cannot *think* through it. It would be useless to come up with more concepts about it. When you work on this gong'an, you may think the "answer" is to bark like a dog—instead of using some words or language. This is also wrong! Yet you *must* know why Zhaozhou said *wu*. To simplify the meditation process of investigating this gong'an, meditate just on the critical phrase, the huatou, "What is *wu*?"

Chan master Wumen himself worked on this case for six long years before he had an insight. Wumen was a disciple of Chan master Yuelin Shiguan (1143–1217). One day, as Wumen was doing walking meditation, absorbed in the great wonderment of this huatou, a wave of drumming sounds from the kitchen suddenly shattered the great doubt that had been pent up in him for six long years. After his insight, he wrote the following verse to present to Yuelin to affirm his realization:

A thundering clap breaks through the clear blue sky in
broad daylight;
All beings on this great Earth suddenly open their eyes.

Myriad forms and the multitudes bow down together
As they dance and celebrate on Mount Sumeru!

When Yuelin heard this verse, he actually shouted at Wumen, “What the hell did you realize for you to come up with this garbage? Some ghosts or fairies dancing around?!” When Wumen heard that, he shouted back: “*Haaa!*” Yuelin then roared like a lion back at Wumen, to which Wumen repeated his verse, shouting, “A thundering clap breaks through the clear blue sky in broad daylight; all beings on this great Earth suddenly open their eyes. Myriad forms and the multitudes bow down together as they dance and celebrate on Mount Sumeru!” In that instant, hearing his own words, Wumen had another awakening. He completely broke through all traces of self-attachment. From that point onward, he was free in all situations—nothing could hold him back.

Self in Chan Buddhism

Chan, most commonly known in the West as Zen, usually refers to a school that emerged in Chinese Buddhism that places special emphasis on meditation—after all, *meditation* is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyāna* or *chan’na*. As time went on, the Chinese just dropped *na* from the term *chan’na* when referring to meditation. After centuries of adaptation and assimilation to the Chinese religious landscape, sometime around the sixth and seventh centuries certain group of meditators began to conceive of meditation in a unique way, different from traditional understanding of *dhyāna*. This group emerged as a self-conscious movement that redefined the notion of meditation to reflect the Chinese penchant for shortcuts, directness, and inclusivity. As a result of assimilating the highest Buddhist teaching on nonduality and selflessness,

these Buddhist meditation masters began to articulate *chan* in terms that collapsed the notions of path and destination, practice and realization, meditation and wisdom.

In the traditional Buddhist framework, practice involves technical concepts that have specific meaning and certain methods must be cultivated sequentially. For example, one must first uphold precepts, then engage in meditation, so as to generate wisdom. Chan Buddhism understands this linear scheme of the Buddhist path, articulated in early scriptures and treatises, as expedient means or conventional truth. Chan Buddhism, however, inspired by certain Mahāyāna scriptures, articulates the Buddhist path from the perspective of ultimate truth, or emptiness and nonduality. From this perspective, all beings are already awakened, the path is the goal, meditation is wisdom. Practice is like a baby trying to be a human being. A baby is *already* a human being. While a baby may not know how to walk or talk yet, that doesn't deny the baby's humanness. The true reality of all beings is intrinsic freedom or awakening. Delusion, vexation, and suffering are only the conditioned, temporary reality of all beings. This means even though you may be caught up with the vexations and challenges in life, these conditions do not define your true nature. This is the basic position of Chan.

What then is the role of practice? Is it even necessary if we're already awakened? Yes. Once when the Buddha was asked metaphysical questions about the origin of the universe and so on, he compared these questions to a person shot with an arrow asking what kind of arrow it was, where it came from, and so on. The Buddha said that what is most important is to remove the arrow and recover from the wound. This wound is the conditions of life: delusion, vexation, suffering—all the barriers you experience. Chan focuses on the most urgent matter. That is, there is, in truth, no arrow and no shooter.

Delusion, vexation, and suffering are inevitable. Yet, what may seem like delusion, vexation, and suffering is your greatest gift for transformation and liberation. Why? Because to practice is to discern these shadows until you find their cause: the self. When the self suddenly vanishes, the shadows of delusion, vexation, and suffering also vanish. How do you do this? Engage with a huatou or gong'an to realize that which is before words and language; generate the sense of wonderment and not knowing.

If you can realize this truth of no-self instantly, and if the power of your realization is strong enough, both the arrow and the shooter vanish. Yet old habits run deep and take many forms. Our illusory sense of self can come up with all kinds of stories and narratives and ideas that shape how we experience things. As long as there is a self, you will feel dis-ease, anguish, disturbed, and irritated. This is why genuine practice is necessary.

Self in Chan and Buddhism does not refer to your personality or who you consider yourself to be on a conventional level. You may think that to let go of the self is to detach from everything—to suppress your emotions, feelings, and thoughts or to simply ignore problems. That is wrong. “Self” refers to the fundamentally dualistic ways of experiencing the world: gain or loss, benefit or harm, good or bad, and birth and death. It is this way of experiencing the world that robs you of your life. These feelings and ideas hinge on a perception that within you there is an I that always stands at the center of the world and judges everything and everyone from that perspective. It is because of the I that you have a sense of gain and loss, benefit and harm, good and bad, birth and death. This I always seeks to preserve itself at all cost; it processes everything in its way. Everything that you have ever known in your life was put in motion because of this I.

This self is the source of grief. It projects and reifies its own vision of the world onto the world itself, assuming that

to be the sole reality. It seeks to preserve itself at all cost, processing everything *out there* as “things” to be possessed or rejected. In doing so, the self alienates itself and separates itself from the world of phenomena. This self can even take itself—your sense of who you are—as a *thing* as well, formulating narratives and images about itself. For example, you can come up with ideas of “I’m no good,” “I’m a loser,” or “I’m the best thing that has happened in So-and-So’s life.” You can make yourself feel miserable or inflated. You can alienate yourself from yourself. This sense of separation is the root of aloneness.

Aloneness can be scary because the self is separate from everything, and yet you have no idea what this self is. Who are you if stripped of all the props and stories—such as self-narratives, ideas, feelings, views, and knowledge that promise security—that you have created in your life? Beyond all the things that you have worked hard to possess, what is this void and separateness that you feel? Deep down you know that everything is unstable, subject to change. Even if you try to find this I, the seeker escapes your own grasp. Deep down you don’t know the answer to “Who am I?” In seeking, there is more confusion, inside and out. This is the inevitability of self-referentiality.

Chan teaches that the self or “I” is just an illusion, a by-product of the circularity and the complex workings of sense faculties, sense objects, and discursive thinking. There is nothing permanent or fixed about this self. In fact, its true nature is freedom, interconnectedness, and flow. I comes from non-I. You come from non-you. This means that your self-image, core values, and feelings come from many people, things, and interconnecting experiences. Not only do your experiences change, but everything, everyone changes, despite your ideas about them. The wonderful thing about this is that everything is possible, full of potential. Resisting this fluidity with fixation is suffering. If you examine the source of your misery, you will see that the

heart of the problem is this resistance to change. Why is this? Because the idea of the “I” is deep rooted.

Yet, your true nonabiding nature *is* freedom, the freedom of no-self. The truth is that moment to moment, there’s just aliveness and ever-new beginnings. As soon as you drop your baggage, it is left behind. There is no one forcing you to hold on to it. All the conditioning, acquired experiences, and knowledge do not need to be part of some fixed notions of “I” or “mine.” Life can continue to evolve wonderfully, connecting with others, without being a fixed “I.” Sure, you need a self on a conventional level, but you should never be bound by a fixed notions of I, me, or mine. This is the message of Chan.

A monk once asked a Chan master, “I want to be free. How do I attain freedom?” Isn’t this a common question for all spiritual seekers? The master replied to the monk, “Who’s binding you?” If you want to experience freedom, if you feel stuck in life, then take the gong’ans in this book as pointers to begin your journey to awakening.

This Translation and Commentary

Commenting on gong’ans is like chewing someone else’s chewed-up gum thrown on the floor. What taste is there? Why bother? Surely only a fool would do it. Chan master Wumen has already chewed up these cases of awakening stories of earlier masters. Now I have picked up his chewed-up gum. Can there be any taste left in it? Are the words in this book completely dead? This depends on you, the reader.

The *Gateless Barrier* was compiled in a time and place very different from our own. Wumen’s comments and poems addressed the needs of, mostly, Chan monastic practitioners. Our times are different. My comments aim to bring the relevance of these gong’ans back to life for

people like you, in everyday situations of family life, work, and friendship. It is up to you to see these gong'ans through the prism of your life. This is how to make each case come to life, to squeeze juice out of chewed-up gum. If you do this, you will find the book quite flavorful. In Chan, we call this process "a withered log sprouting new leaves."

My comments on the *Gateless Barrier* originated in my talks at the Tallahassee Chan Center on the first Monday night of each month that began on September 6, 2010, and ended on June 2, 2014. I gave the talks for my students in hopes that these gong'ans will inspire them to practice. A correct view and a strong practice is essential before Chan practitioners dive into the ocean of Buddhist scriptures and teachings. Scriptures are important, but if practitioners lose sight of their intent, their self-grasping can be reinforced and perpetuated. I gave talks on these gong'ans before I taught my students scriptural teachings and Buddhist doctrine because I don't want their practice to be tainted by concepts and theories and expectations. Contrary to what people may imagine gong'ans to be—absurd, irrational, fictional, and so on—they are actually wonderful methods to develop correct view and practice. However, they are not for the faint hearted, and a teacher's guidance is indispensable. I encourage you, the reader, to use this book in the same manner that I taught my students: as a guide to free yourself from views.

The path of Chan leaves no traces. I must admit that my words are worthless traces. They are worthless because they are not yours. You have to digest these gong'ans and my comments and make them your own. Without traces, how can one even begin the journey of awakening? Without signposts, how can the wisdom of Chan be brought to life? I have tried to bring these arcane stories in the *Gateless Barrier* to life in plain English and to show how rich and familiar they actually are.

Traditional Buddhist scriptural commentaries are usually expository in nature, laying out the theoretical underpinnings, the main tenets, and explaining terms or ideas clearly in a logical fashion. Commentarial treatises lead to knowledge. Gong'an comments are not expository, and do not lead to knowledge. Traditional gong'an comments do not give any concrete advice about so-called "practice." This is because the original context in which the gong'ans were set is Buddhist monasticism. Monks and nuns already know how to practice, so practical advice is left out. Yet, because of this lack of concrete advice for practice, modern people find them inaccessible and removed from daily life.

This book avoids the caveats of both traditional scriptural commentaries and gong'an comments. Had I taken either approach in making my remarks on this text, it would have killed the spirit in which gong'ans were meant to be used. I provide enough context and background in this book to make it accessible without being intellectual. My aim is to help you probe the way you live your life. In doing so, I give concrete advice on methods of practice and attitudes toward life.

There are a number of translations and commentaries on the *Gateless Barrier*, all of them presenting the Japanese Zen perspective. The present work is the first Chinese Chan commentary on the *Gateless Barrier* in the English language. I translated the cases directly from the original Chinese. Readers will notice that this translation differs in a number of places from existing English translations. Several dates of past Chan masters are also corrected in this current book. I have included an index of names in the back of the book, which provides both Chinese and Japanese pronunciation of names mentioned in this text for the benefit of those practicing in either Chan or Zen traditions. I have also provided Chinese characters for all

the names and terms in the index for those who read Chinese or kanji.

How to Use This Book

Most people come to read or study gong'an through the Japanese Zen perspective, one that is deeply shaped by the great Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1768), who classified kōans (the Japanese term for *gong'an*) into different levels. Over the centuries, his descendants in different sub-lineages set his kōan classification into different orders of investigation involving learning capping phrases, or poetic verses (more hints and signposts), that are connected to each case. These capping phrases became “answer books” to different kōans and served other purposes as well, partly as aids to better grasp the cases and partly to learn the form of Chan poetics. Zen students in the past used to spend a long time learning this formalized and highly literary curriculum. In the modern West, the cultural context has changed. There is no need to stick to a systematized way to engage in gong'an or kōan study. There's certainly no need to learn the literary culture of Chan in Chinese! Thus, in different Zen centers most teachers are not bound by the premodern way of doing kōan study. In Chan Buddhism, gong'an were never systemized. Naturally, I don't teach gong'an this way. I hope this book brings a breath of fresh air to gong'an or kōan practice.

My hope is to show you that the *Gateless Barrier* is your life. Like peeling away the skin of the lychee and removing the seed so you can eat the fruit, my comments have already peeled away the trappings of Chinese culture to reveal the essence of each gong'an. All you have to do now is just eat it! I can't chew the lychee fruit for you. Similarly, I can't practice for you.

This book provides perspectives that shed light on how you live, how you love, how you may be free. You can pick up any of the individual cases and contemplate them in your life. If, however, you plan to use the cases in this book as your primary method of meditation practice in the traditional way—using them as gong'an or huatou investigations—then you must receive proper instructions from a qualified Chan or Zen teacher.

Chan practice cannot be learned from books—the books are just maps. You need a guide. Even though teachers cannot walk the path of awakening for you, they can guide you so you don't go down the wrong path or waste your efforts. In real practice, much like walking in a new terrain, the map in your hand may look completely different than what you see. This book is not a substitute for having a teacher nor is it a manual for investigating gong'ans without the guidance of a teacher. If you don't have a teacher, find one.

If you are already working on a gong'an or kōan from the *Gateless Barrier* under a Chan or Zen teacher, then this book may help you see things in a new light. If you use a huatou or gong'an from this book in your seated meditation and daily life, my comments will fuel your sense of wonderment and questioning; they will also help you develop the ability to see through the veils of delusion, vexation, suffering so you can drop them and absorb yourself in steady questioning. You will learn not to practice like a tsunami wave that has great energy in the beginning but doesn't last. You will learn how patience, earnestness, and being steadfast are the key to nourishing the sense of wonderment. In daily life, each time vexations arise, just bring forth the huatou and give rise to the questioning mind. Doing so will divert attention from vexations and will quickly allow you to put them down. My comments in this book on various aspects of gong'an practice help you to do this.

If you are new to practice or to gong'an, this book is still helpful. It shows you how life and practice are inseparable. You may use this book to help you see different angles of your life; use it to reveal how you actually live your life; use it to expose your attachments to gain and loss, having and lacking, right and wrong, love and hate. In other words, even if you don't formally use the gong'an as a meditation method, you can use my comments as a mirror to reflect on yourself.

During retreats, under the guidance of a qualified teacher in a protected environment, it is all right for beginners to investigate the gong'an and huatou. This is because a qualified teacher is present. In retreats, if your mind comes up with different "answers" to the gong'an you're meditating on, say to yourself, "This is not it!" and let them go. Continue to investigate and absorb yourself wholeheartedly in the huatou. Since everything is taken care of for you in the retreat, you can completely dive in to the method and let go of everything else. In the beginning of practice, because your mind is still wrapped up with words and language, it is natural for it to give rise to all kinds of answers. But in principle, meditating on a huatou or a gong'an should not generate more concepts and notions. Allow them to die down. Gong'an or huatou practice is meant to give rise to the sense of wonderment and not knowing until you are completely engulfed by it in a unified state of oneness. When conditions ripen, a catalyst will shatter this oneness so the "I" drops away.

If you are a beginner to meditation, start with a method such as awareness of your breaths to stabilize your body and mind. Do this for some time until you are ready for meditation retreats. You have to first learn how to meditate in order to discern the difference between wandering thoughts and correct thought. At first, beginners may not really distinguish between the two. They think that their thoughts, view, and opinions are "theirs." They think they

may understand a gong'an when they are actually just following their passing, wandering thoughts. Passing thoughts are mostly based on misperceptions, fragmented memory, and random self-referential ideas—none of which express how things actually are. So when you meditate (on the breath, for example), learn to recognize thoughts and put them down; return to the breath. In time, by continually returning to the method, the power that wandering thoughts have over you will diminish. You will develop stability and maturity in your practice. When your teacher feels you're ready, you may formally start your gong'an or huatou practice.

Chan is not psychotherapy. Psychotherapy, to simplify its aim, is to clarify the self. Chan practice lets go of the self. There is really no need to find the source of the vexations or suffering. Simply see through them as props and fabrications of the self-referential mind, and put them down. Stop identifying with them, and you become grounded in the present moment, the task at hand, and how things actually are—instead of being caught up with the pattern of how you want things to be or how you wish things were different. This is why when you are free from these habitual patterns you become more grounded and congruent. In Chan, you have to have a stable self before you let go of self.

The principle in daily life is to keep the mind clear and focused on the task at hand. Every once in a while, you can bring forth the teachings in this book, especially when vexations arise. Develop a regular practice, find a good teacher, and use the teachings in this book to experience life. In time, you will be more receptive, and some of your old habits may no longer trouble you; even if your deeply rooted vexations might still be there, you will be able to work through them. One of the core teachings in this book is to learn to face, embrace, respond, and let go of fixations and vexations.

Chan is here, in the West, for you right now. This book brings the wisdom of Chan down from the clouds to earth, directly, to you. It opens the gate to the gateless barrier, and shows you how different situations in life are opportunities to practice. Chan, life, practice—all of these are just gateless barriers. Are you ready to freely pass through them?

Any merit or benefit you may derive from this book belongs to you, and to my teacher, Master Sheng Yen. May you realize the gateless barrier.

CASE 1

Zhaozhou's Dog

A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddha-nature or not?" Zhaozhou said, "*Wu!*"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

To study Chan, you must pass through the barrier of our lineage masters. To realize wondrous awakening, you must exhaust the ways of the [deluded] mind. If you do not pass through the barrier of the lineage masters and do not exhaust the ways of the mind, then all that you do would amount to being a spirit haunting the forests and fields.

But tell me, what is this barrier of the lineage masters? It is just this single word, *Wu*, which is also the gate of Chan—the gateless barrier of Chan. If you can pass through it, you will not only see Zhaozhou in person but will also be able to walk together hand in hand with all the generations of lineage masters, to see through the same eyes as they do and hear through the same ears as they do. Wouldn't that

be delightful? Do any of you want to pass through this barrier?

Arouse a mass of doubt throughout your whole being, extending through your 360 bones and your 84,000 pores, as you come to grips with the word *wu*. Bring it up and keep your attention on it day and night. Don't construe [this *wu*] as void or nothingness, and don't understand it in terms of having or not having. It is as if you had swallowed a red-hot iron ball that you cannot spit out—extinguishing all the erroneous knowledge and experiences. In time you will become ripe, and your practice will become pervasive and whole. Like a mute who has a dream, only you would know it for yourself.

Suddenly, [awakening] bursts forth, astonishing heaven and shaking the earth. It is like snatching General Guan Yu's sword into your own hands—slaying both buddhas and lineage masters as you meet them. On this shore of birth and death, you are free. You roam and play in *samādhi* in the midst of the six paths and four types of birth in all existence.

Still, how will you take up [Zhaozhou's *wu*]? With all of your life force to bring forth the word *wu*. If you can do this without interruption, then, like a dharma lamp, it takes only a single spark to [suddenly] light it up!

A dog, buddha-nature—

The truth manifests in full.

As soon as there is "having" or "lacking,"

You will be harmed and life will be lost.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Master Women is indeed very compassionate, revealing so clearly the key to practice and realization.

What is it that binds you? Why do you experience obstructions, barriers? All of the teachings in Chan and buddhadharma expose the truth about delusion, which is fueled by the discursive, discriminating mind. The discriminating mind is not your intelligence—you need that. Nor does it refer to your ability to distinguish between this and that, which is a natural function of mind. The discriminating mind is self-referential thinking—the assumption that there is an abiding, separate, independent “I” residing within you. It is this that robs you of your true nature. Its proliferation destroys lives, families, and nations. Thus, to “exhaust the ways of the mind” is to exhaust all the tricks of self-referentiality and grasping so you can “pass through the barrier of our lineage masters” and realize your inherent freedom. This is wondrous awakening.

If you examine closely, there is a sense of self that lies at the center of your every decision, view, feeling, and thinking. It seems permanent, separate from everything around you, and is seemingly autonomous. It is that which makes you feel you are who you are. But this self is just a deep-seated assumption, because what you actually experience internally is quite confusing, scattered, contradicting. Sometimes you feel this, other times you feel that. You doubt yourself, criticize yourself, and boast about yourself. In front of one person you may feel confident; in front of another, you may be weak. Rarely do you feel grounded, unified, or congruent. Yet despite these varied experiences, the conviction of an abiding self is strong. You rarely question its existence, even though you don’t really know what self means.

Even though you may not know exactly what the self is, you discriminate between this and that based on your sense of self. Yet there is absolutely nothing that is substantial

about this self—it's not the body and definitely not the ever-changing flux of feelings and thoughts. Recognize how deeply you trust in the mechanism of discriminating thoughts such as "having and lacking." How much of your life is vested in perpetuating this fundamental way of living?

How can you live without a sense of self? Actually, you can live much better, freer. The self is a fantasy; it is a construct that prevents you from experiencing the preciousness of every moment.

In Chan practice, it is not necessary or possible to theorize about what the self is. What is essential is to see through that which fuels it: the discriminating mind. To do this, you must collect its most superficial layer, which consists of scattered, fragmented thoughts. By focusing your mind, your discursive, discriminating thoughts will diminish. You will feel more grounded, your sense of self more congruent. You may even experience a unified sense of self—feeling inseparable from the environment, from the past and future. You may feel that all things change but your self does not. Even though this experience may fade away, the feelings from it will persist. Is this awakening? No. This is the unified self; there is still attachment there, but it is a state in which the discriminating mind is the weakest. When the unified self finally vanishes, that is awakening.

The absence of the discriminating mind does not mean that you lose your will to live, that you no longer care about anything, or that you can't discern what is right from wrong. It simply means that the false sense of an imagined, assumed self has vanished. Finally you are grounded, as normal as one can possibly be, experiencing the world as it is. The world becomes clearer. Everything exists except for your self-referentiality, your self-attachment. This is wisdom. Because everything is there, you see the suffering

and the joy and potential of all beings. Your actions respond intimately to all beings. This is compassion.

Having realized awakening is not the end of the path. Life goes on, and while you have tasted liberation, vexations may still return. And so practice continues, not for you or to “help” others. It continues in the most natural way by responding to everyone and everything without injecting your sense of self—the sense of gaining and losing, having and lacking, grasping and rejecting—into the midst of all that you experience. You simply respond to what the situation calls for.

Because self-grasping is absent, from your perspective there is no more gaining or losing and grasping or rejecting, as these dualities can exist only on the traces of self-referentiality. When they are not there, you can truly help living beings—your family members, your friends, people around you, and the world. This is “to walk together hand in hand with all the generations of lineage masters, to see through the same eyes as they do and to hear through the same ears as they do.” This is the bodhisattva path.

How do you engage in practice, then? Take up this gong’an, this case: “Does a dog have buddha-nature? *Wu!*”

Wu can be translated as “no” or “does not” or “lack thereof.” But in this case, *wu* is not a negation, as in: the dog does *not* have buddha-nature. Nor is it an affirmation. What we must bring forth is this sense of questioning, of not knowing, and of wonderment: neither yes nor no, having nor not having—what is it?

In the story the monk asked Chan master Zhaozhou Congshen (778–897) the question, “Does a dog have buddha-nature?” You can rest assured that the monk knew very well the basic teaching of Mahāyāna Buddhism that all beings have buddha-nature. Yet he asks this wonderful question. Some may think he is an idiot, asking the obvious. Others may interpret his question to Master Zhaozhou as: “Teacher, I have been practicing all of these years and I

know very well that beings, me included, have buddha-nature. But where is my buddha-nature? Why is it that I'm not awakened?" Still, someone may understand the monk's question as a test of his teacher: "Teacher, all beings have buddha-nature; does a dog have buddha-nature?" Presenting the problem in this way, he challenges the teacher to present the answer. "Teacher, show me!" Yet, avoiding the intellectual trap, the teacher just says, "*Wu!*" Had he answered, "Why yes, the dog has buddha-nature," then perhaps the monk would have had a follow-up question, "When is the dog going to be awakened and become a buddha?" All sorts of problems would have arisen.

Wu is to turn the cards around. To present you with *wu* would be for you to take up the question. So I ask you, "Show me your buddha-nature!"

You must bring every ounce of your being to the question: What is *wu*? It is neither having nor not having, neither yes nor no, so what is it? Nurture this sense of not knowing, of wonderment. Bring yourself from a fragmented, scattered sense of self to a concentrated self, focusing on this question. Then become one with this sense of questioning, of wonderment, of not knowing, until the whole world collapses into it and everything is consumed by it. This is the unified self. Master Women, the compiler of this case, calls this arousing "a mass of doubt throughout your whole being."

Some teachers may advise students just to be one with *wu*. This is not enough. Of what use is it to be one? To stay there in the oneness? The key ingredient is the sense of questioning, wonderment, not knowing. This sense of wonderment will prevent you from stagnating in a mere unified state and provide the condition to shatter the last bit of self-grasping. Traditionally, this questioning or wonderment is called the doubt sensation.

As mentioned in the introduction, doubt sensation or feeling is not suspicion but a deep sense of not knowing; it is a feeling of angst, wonderment, questioning—and an absorption in it. This means: “What is *wu*? Don’t know. . . . What is *wu*? Don’t know. . . .” Any answer that comes up is just a trick of the discursive, discriminating mind. You have to put it down and continue asking, “What is *wu*? What is it?”

There will be many fanciful answers. You may feel that *wu* is just emptiness, voidness—the truth of no-self. Wrong! That’s just a concept, another product of the discriminating mind. Therefore, Women says, “Don’t construe [this *wu*] as void or nothingness, and don’t understand it in terms of having or not having.” Many practitioners think they are enlightened when they sense that there’s an intuitive, nonconceptual understanding of emptiness, or *śūnyatā*. Somehow they feel wiser, calmer, and clearer. This is not awakening. If you *think* or *feel* you’re enlightened, you’re definitely not. Enlightenment is not a feeling; it is not a thought; it is not a state or experience. These concepts are results of separateness, dualistic thinking, self-grasping. Waves and lucidity (clarity and limpidity) have nothing to do with the true nature of water. Experience and nonexperience have nothing to do with the true nature of who you are.

Imagine that your world were made of Play-Doh, including every one of us. Then one day, the Play-Doh recognizes itself, “Hey, I’m made up of Play-Doh!” Why would Play-Doh feel that way? If the whole world were made up of Play-Doh, there’d be no need for a *notion* of Play-Doh. It is absurd for a Play-Doh person to think “I’m Play-Doh.” Is there such a thing as no-self or emptiness? No. If there were really something called no-self or emptiness, then this would just be another concept to attach to. Is there awakening then? Yes. Do we seek after it? No. We just practice.

The practice is to ask: What is *wu*? What is it? No matter what comes up when you ask, don't let go of this method until you reach a point where you are completely consumed by the question, as if "you had swallowed a red-hot iron ball that you cannot spit out." Who or why would anyone want to swallow a red-hot iron ball? The questioning, like the hot iron ball, once it is within you, will extinguish "all the erroneous knowledge and experiences" that you hold dear. It is because of your attachment to them that you are unable to see your true nature. Another way to describe the practice is this: it's as if you had just placed a burning-hot dumpling in your mouth—so delicious that you don't want to spit it out and yet so hot that you can't swallow it. Your meditation work should be like this. That's what you have to do when you are using the method; don't ever let go of it. In an intense Chan retreat, for example, you must be with it at all times, in all places: "What is *wu*, what is *wu*, what is *wu*? What is it? Don't know."

Wumen advises practitioners to apply themselves this way because his audience consisted of monastics. In modern times, we reserve this kind of practice for intense Chan retreats, under the guidance of an experienced teacher. If you practice this intensely outside of a retreat, you might not be able to function. During one retreat, a very diligent math teacher was practicing very intensely. After the retreat, back to teaching math at his university, somehow, as he was writing some formula on the board, he suddenly felt that he didn't know who was writing. *Wu* came back, and he naturally asked the question. He stopped writing, turned around, and asked his students, "What is *wu*?" Of course he soon snapped out of it, but his students must have thought he was nuts.

In daily life, although it is sufficient to maintain clarity and mindfulness of your actions when vexations arise, you might ask "What is *wu*?" to stop engaging in vexations, and when you can, return to your method. In your daily seated

meditation you may ask “What is *wu*?” However, if you want to use this case as your gong’an or huatou method, you will have to get permission from a teacher to ensure you are using it correctly.

You shouldn’t feel that this *wu* has nothing to do with you. You may ask yourself, “Who cares if the dog has buddha-nature or not? Actually, does this question have anything to do with dog or buddha-nature? No. It has to do with *you*. The real question is: Where is *your* buddha-nature? Who are you?

This method is a huatou that serves as a brick that you use to knock on the gate of Chan. In itself, the brick is meaningless. But it is useful to knock, to tap, to open up, to break through your fundamental existential dilemma about who you are. You cannot use it to intellectualize who you are—that would just be another form of discriminating thought. You just have to ask and generate this not-knowing. In time, through persistence, “your practice will become pervasive and whole.” When conditions are ripe, awakening will “burst forth, astonishing heaven and shaking the earth”—meaning, your whole world will change. For the first time you will experience the world without self-referentiality, grasping, fabrications.

This is “like snatching General Guan Yu’s sword into your own hands—slaying both buddhas and lineage masters as you meet them.” General Guan (160–219) lived in the Han dynasty. He supposedly won every battle he ever fought. This means that in every situation, without pretense, mediation, or fabrication, you are able to cut through discriminating thoughts—whether they are romantic notions about the buddhas or the lineage masters—and see things *as they are*. You will be able to both kill and give life. What you kill are your constructs; what you give life to is the life of all beings.

Living life through your discursive thinking is actually not living at all. You project all of your own likes and dislikes

onto the world around you. In doing so, you kill all opportunities and potentials; you live in your own world of having and lacking, of existence and nonexistence. You live a fragmented life of contradictions. But if you are free from discriminating thinking, which is the fuel of your self-referentiality, you will be able to give life to all life.

Isn't this delightful? Isn't this worth practicing for? The good news is that this freedom is your inheritance. It is not gained from outside you. All that you need in order to practice is already here. Yes, that includes all of your vexations, challenges in life, self-referential thinking.

These are the ingredients of the path, the way through the gate of Chan. Allow all of these to be *wu*; all there is to do is ask, "What is *wu*?" If you go through this gate, then you are free to live, as you are, on this shore of birth and death without changing your occupation or leaving your household life. You can "roam and play in *samādhi* in the midst of the six paths and four types of birth in all existence."

The "six paths and four types of birth" refers to all situations. *Samādhi* here means "oneness." So this statement means that in all situations of life, nothing is separated; there is no self-referentiality anywhere. At such a time, life becomes a playground in which to exercise wisdom and compassion—not for self or others but as a natural way to be. You then become that "single spark" that lights up all life. Otherwise, still living life in terms of having or lacking, you continue to harm yourself, whereby your life is lost.

CASE 2

Baizhang and the Wild Fox

Every time Baizhang taught, there was an old man who followed the congregation to listen to dharma talks. When the congregation dispersed, so would the old man. Unexpectedly, one day this elderly man stayed behind, so Baizhang approached him, “Who is it that stands before me?”

The old man said, “I’m actually not human. In the time of the ancient buddha Kāśyapa, when I was dwelling here on this very mountain, a student asked me, ‘Does a person of great practice still fall into cause and effect or not?’ I replied that he does not fall into cause and effect. As a consequence, I have been condemned to be a fox for five hundred rebirths. I now ask you, Master, for a turning phrase so as to release me from being a wild fox.”

Then he asked, “Does a person of great practice still fall into cause and effect or not?”

Baizhang said, “He is not deluded about cause and effect.”

At these words, the old man was greatly awakened. He bowed in reverence and said, “I have now shed this fox’s body behind the other side of the mountain. Please, Master, give me a funeral service due to a dead monk.”

Baizhang ordered the rector to pound the gavel to summon the assembly and announced to them, "After we eat, we shall hold a funeral for a dead monk." The congregation was puzzled and began to discuss the matter among themselves. They went to the infirmary, but there was no one sick there. They wondered why Baizhang was acting like this.

After their meal, Baizhang led the congregation to a cliff on the other side of the mountain, where he used his cane and dragged out the body of a dead fox from a crevice in the rocks. They then formally cremated the body as they would a monk's.

That night, Baizhang ascended up to the dharma hall and related the full story of what had happened. Huangbo then asked, "One wrong reply and this old man was condemned to be a fox for five hundred rebirths. If his reply had been correct, then what?"

Baizhang said, "Come here and I'll tell you." Huangbo then went up and gave Baizhang a good slap in the face. Baizhang clapped his hands and laughed and said, "I knew the [western] barbarian's beard was red but didn't know that red was the beard of the barbarian!"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

"Not falling into cause and effect"—why was he condemned to be a wild fox? "Not being deluded about cause and effect"—why was he released from the fox's body? If you have the eyes of insight, then you will know why, long ago on Baizhang Mountain, the old man won for himself five hundred lifetimes flowing with the wind.

Not falling, not deluded,

Two faces of a single die.
Not deluded, not falling,
Tens of thousands of errors!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Suffering and anguish are self-created. Happiness is what you make it. Yet what propels us to suffer and to experience happiness?

In Buddhism, the never-ending cycle of suffering is called *saṃsāra*. The whole Buddhist project is to transcend this cycle and to realize *nirvāṇa*, which is the extinction of greed, aversion, ignorance—those qualities that fuel this cycle. These three poisons operate on the basis of cause and effect. That is, when the three poisons as the cause are present, *saṃsāra* as the effect continues. When the three poisons are absent, *saṃsāra* ceases. When *this* arises, *that* too arises; when *this* ceases, *that* too shall cease. But who can transcend *saṃsāra*? One who awakens from the dream of *saṃsāra* and realizes that there is no self who transmigrates in it. This is Buddhism 101. In the case above, the old man's reply to his student's question is correct. So why was he condemned to be a wild fox for five hundred lifetimes in *saṃsāra*? Why a fox?

In premodern East Asia *imaginaire*, a fox is seen to be a shape-shifter, a trickster, a deceiver. Even though the old man's reply about karma, or cause and effect, was indeed true, from the Chan perspective he was a wild fox. Why? Because he himself was deceived by the illusion of *saṃsāra*, and in answering his student, he deceived others. Thus, *saṃsāra* continued for him, confining him for so long in suffering. So he begged Chan master Baizhang Huaihai

(720–814) to give him a “turning phrase.” This refers to words that can completely *turn*, delusion to awakening. How? By revealing the true nature of right and wrong, falling and not falling, delusion and awakening. Baizhang replied to the same question by changing only a single word, from not *falling* to not *deluding*. Does great awakening rest on the distinction of these two words? No. But precisely because the old man was holding on to words so tightly, expecting Baizhang to give him a “correct” answer, upon hearing such a lame one, one that completely threw him off, he experienced an awakening. In answering him, Baizhang shattered the old man’s attachment to right and wrong, falling and not falling, delusion and awakening.

Chan master Baizhang is one of the greatest Chan masters of the Tang dynasty. It was he who supposedly established the Chan monastic codes that practitioners follow. One may say that he was one of the chief contributors who institutionalized the Chan tradition. He is the thirty-sixth generation in a direct line from Śākyamuni Buddha in India. The name Baizhang comes from the mountain where he resided, Mount Baizhang, which means a precipitous cliff a hundred feet high. As the resident teacher of this mountain community, he regularly gave dharma talks to his students and the local people. One day, however, this old man stayed behind after the talk was over and the others had left. What transpired that day is of great importance to our present life. Why? Because we, too, are caught by the endless proliferation of right and wrong, falling and not falling, delusion and awakening.

That night Baizhang told the whole story to the rest of the assembly. That’s when his student Huangbo Xiyun challenged him. Huangbo, as the chief disciple of Baizhang, later became one of the greatest Chan masters in history. Their playfulness at the end of this case demonstrates that, like father, like son, they share the same awakening, which is beyond right and wrong but inseparable from right and

wrong. When Huangbo slapped Baizhang, he, of course, did not get angry but was delighted. Why? Wonderful! Wonderful, indeed! The barbarian has red beard; red beard belongs to barbarian!

Perhaps the red beard is not such a good analogy for our modern time. So let me translate this exchange in a way that you can understand. How wonderful! How wonderful! Men are males; males are men. Women are females; females are women. Similarly, not falling into cause and effect *is* not to be deluded by cause and effect.

Ordinary concepts evolve around right or wrong. Some people believe that it is wrong to think that awakened saints do not fall into cause and effect. When Baizhang says that awakened saints are not deluded by or blind to the workings of cause and effect, he is not denying cause and effect. However, if you believe that the terms *falling* and *deluded* are identical, then you are also wrong!

Why is it that in this natural world, with its natural order of things, you accumulate suffering? When you have something, you're satisfied. When you lose it, you are sad. The gaining and losing seem natural. Yet do you really gain anything? Do you really lose anything? When I was a young boy, I used to love playing with Play-Doh, kneading it into a person, a house, a dog, into all kinds of things. In the world of Play-Doh, there can be a man and a woman, a friend and a foe; something can be big, while other things can be small. I created stories about the things I made. Imagine a Play-Doh man or woman that thinks that life is about accumulating more Play-Doh, the more the better. When it can't have what it wants, it experiences a sense of loss and grief. Wouldn't you agree that in your world of Play-Doh, you are constantly afflicted by the winds of gaining and losing?

Throughout your life, all of your vexations and afflictions and everything that you do are governed by right and wrong, gaining and losing, having and lacking, freedom and

bondage. All of your suffering comes from the push and pull of duality. All! This is like the Play-Doh person mistaking other Play-Doh things as something else. Isn't this what you do, taking things to be other than what they are? You may believe that this Play-Doh Gucci bag is really much better than the Walmart bag. Or that this latest Play-Doh iPhone 6 is much better than model 5 or 4. When you think along these lines, your physical health, even your life—having it, losing it—impose great suffering.

Chan practice does not change you into a zombie or a stoic—lifeless, emotionless, without happiness or sorrow, without right and wrong, without gaining and losing. It makes you compassionate and wise. Deeply experiencing that you are impermanent, inseparable, and connected to everything and everyone around you in this world of Play-Doh is the wisdom of no losing and no gaining. Like the waves of an ocean. Each wave may feel independent, separate, but in fact it is one with the ocean. Actually, you can't even say it is "one," because there has never been an *other*. If in the world there were only men, would there be a need for the term *men*? Of course not. *Men* is only relevant when there's a notion of women. To see the inseparability of waves and ocean is wisdom; to act according to it is compassion. Losing sight of this reality, you are deceived by duality, separateness, the result of which is living as a fox for five hundred years.

The next time you have vexations, emotional affliction, ask yourself, "Why am I trapped in this fox body for five hundred years?" Remind yourself of the Play-Doh analogy and see if you have kneaded yourself into a fox again. Is there a need to knead, to construct, to rigidify yourself into anything? Success or failure, having or lacking, are relevant only in the game of Play-Doh. But what is also true is that if you are unattached to the identities of each Play-Doh figure, if you don't fabricate stories, anything is possible, and you will be okay with being anything.

A friend of mine had terminal cancer. He had practiced the teachings most of his life, but when he got ill, everything was thrown out the window—all of his practice, all of his knowledge of Buddhist doctrine. That is, until my teacher said to him, “What is it to be a practitioner?” That was a turning phrase for him. He realized that all of his life he had been constructing his own identity as a “practitioner.” His practice had been to substitute one thing for another, to knead one thing into another. Before he started to practice, he collected material goods. When he began to practice, he was collecting spiritual things. He was not truly practicing. When he heard my teacher, he put down the self that he had constructed.

He was miserable in the hospital when he first moved in. He couldn’t even take care of himself. After my teacher posed that question to him, he became like the sun, illuminating everyone on that hospital floor for the terminally ill. He realized that his life was like a small wave in the ocean. He became everything and everyone. He let go of the constructs, identities, experiences, and knowledge that had bound him. For example, he began to devote himself to all the patients on that floor, walking around with his rolling IV stand and a tube in his arm. He was the happiest man around, helping and cheering up everybody on that floor. He was spreading the dharma, not through Buddhist doctrine, but through his actions. The small wave became the ocean—yet when there’s only the ocean, there’s no longer need for the idea of ocean. He passed away peacefully, but he lives on in all of those affected by his practice.

With this, be *this* fully; with that, be *that* fully. When sad, be completely sad; when happy, completely happy. Through and through, become the wave, become the ocean, become the cause and the effect. How can you not be?

In all of life’s ups and downs, right in the midst of it, there is freedom. Have no fixed ideas of gaining and losing.

But if you get caught up with words, language, and concepts—"not falling," "not deluded"—then you will be merely substituting one Play-Doh character for another. Even though I say these words, and as a concept they may be relatively easy to understand, is not getting caught up easy to do? It may not be so easy.

When you face challenges or adversities in life, such as when someone blames you, or even pleasure, the ripples start rolling inside you; the waves are stirred and you become a small wave, losing sight of the ocean. That's why you need to practice. To practice is to develop stability and awareness. Once the mind is stable, you become aware of that which is truly relevant. Things are put into their proper perspective. The more stable you are, the more perceptive you become without relying on constructs or molds. If you are unstable, then, as in flickering candlelight, things are very hard to see. You perceive only fragments, shadows, or may even see things that are not actually there. If the candlelight is steady, the luminosity will be steady and things will be revealed clearly.

The practice of stability also means living harmoniously with others; this includes sustaining a moral, mindful life. Practice is not to get somewhere, to attain something that you don't already have, or to be someone you're not. Practice is to see what you already have, to be who you really are, to bring forth your true potential. Using the Play-Doh analogy, it is to be who you truly are. But if your mind is scattered and your emotions wild, you will not be able to realize this. Instead, you will be caught up with the gaining and losing of the infinite shapes of Play-Doh.

The awareness of connectedness, inseparability, dynamic malleability of Play-Doh is what Buddhism sometimes refers to as wisdom and compassion. The fact that Play-Doh has no fixed Play-Dohness is wisdom. The fact that Play-Doh has infinite potential to form into whatever it needs to be for the benefit of others is compassion. Practice is not

about becoming intellectually smart; it just means cultivating stability and awareness to see your true nature, the result of which is natural compassion and wisdom. A genuine realization of this insight is wisdom; your action based on that insight is compassion. It is so natural because it is who you are. That's the meaning of this gong'an. Don't get caught up with the words *falling* or *deluded*—they are “two faces of a single die.”

I've presented to you a new pair of glasses, a new way of looking at things, which may be useful as a signpost. But genuine practice is necessary if you are to be free from the captivation and repulsion of emotional afflictions that come from grasping and rejecting. If you are unclear, then take up this case and investigate: Observe within your life the mechanism that propels, shapes, or forms you in this or that way. Recognize whence it arises and where it goes. As you practice, you may notice that your mind is less and less swayed, pushed and pulled by the ripples in your heart and the winds in the environment. It is not that you want to get rid of these ripples, but ripples have their own causes and conditions, and in rippling, there's no water. In stillness, there are great waves. Limpid, clear water, transparent to the bottom, and muddy water, filled with ripples and gunk, have the same nature—the nature of wetness. This is the Chan view.

When you practice, you are not affected by wandering thoughts. When they arise, pick up the method—not because the method is better than wandering thoughts but because this is just what you do. The more you practice this way, the greater your inner power will be. This inner power is not the kind that is generated when you train your muscles to do this and that; then you gain something and lose it again. This power is the ability to instantaneously drop wandering thoughts and return to the method. This malleability is your true nature, which is free and liberates you from moment to moment. Try to hold on to your anger

24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. See how long you can hold it. You can't will it because it is of the nature of anger to be free, to liberate itself.

When you personally awaken to your self-nature, it will be like putting down a heavy load from your shoulders—your experiences, knowledge, concepts, and everything you have ever known—suddenly, the weight disappears. You are free. That is Chan. But until you come to know this personally, you had better work on this gong'an and ask yourself why you have been living the life of a fox. Investigate!

CASE 3

Juzhi Holds Up a Finger

Whenever he was questioned, Venerable Juzhi would hold up a finger.

One time, one of the boys in the congregation was asked by an outsider, a visitor to the monastery, “What is the essential teaching of Juzhi, your master?” The boy also held up a finger.

When Juzhi heard about this, he took a knife and cut off the boy’s finger. As the boy ran out howling in pain, Juzhi called him back. When the boy looked back, Juzhi held up a finger. The boy was abruptly, suddenly awakened.

When Juzhi was about to die, he told his congregation, “I got Tianlong’s one-finger Chan and have used it my whole life without exhausting it.” As his words ended, he died.



WUMEN’S COMMENT

Juzhi and the boy were not enlightened by the finger. If you can see into this, then Tianlong, Juzhi, the boy, and you

yourself are all strung through on the same string.

Juzhi made a fool of old Tianlong.
Holding up the sharp blade alone to test the boy,
Like the Great Spirit Julin who lifts his hand
effortlessly
And splits apart the great ridges of Mount Hua.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

One day, I will die. So will you. The importance is how you die, how you have lived. So, on the threshold of your death, it is worthwhile to reflect. Some people on the threshold of their death may not be able to reflect on anything, but if it is possible, it's worthwhile to reflect on these questions, either then or now "What have I done in this lifetime? Have I lived a blame-free life without regret? Am I at peace?"

I was looking up the website of the Western Chan Fellowship in England, whose guiding teacher, John Crook, also a disciple of my teacher Chan master Sheng Yen, died in July of 2011. John's last dharma talk, at least online, was given in May of that year. The title was something like "Just As It Is." He began the talk by commenting on the remarkable occurrence of life and all of its wonders: in summer there is heat; in the autumn, leaves fall; this is followed by winter and snow; and spring comes again. He said that the point of practice is to examine one's self, the wonders of our own being, and the wonders of the world that we live in.

It is truly remarkable and amazing that seasons change. Have you ever thought about that? We may have some scientific explanation for why seasons change, but we could easily look at it another way, such as, we grow old. How

amazing! So there is birth, and since you have a body, you will get sick sooner or later. Some people are always sick; some people are very healthy, and then they die all of a sudden, just like that. There is eventual aging; we all get old, and then there is death. All of these events are truly amazing. And in the process between birth and death, another amazing thing occurs: you get angry and jealous, or you become arrogant. In life there is also joy. Each moment presents you with different experiences. Because you see things differently, your world, in turn, becomes different. No matter how you shape the world that you have constructed through your experience or your knowledge, your life, whether miserable, happy, or joyful, is amazing, truly amazing.

The truth is that whatever you fabricate in your life, however you live it out, it's all good—IAG, as I say. Recognize it and be at peace. Don't make a "thing" out of it. To practice is to recognize this and to be able to return to the attitude of IAG even amid disturbance, even when you are not at peace. Practicing in this way is to practice in accordance with Chan principle. Why? Because peace is your true nature.

Why is it "all good," IAG, even though, obviously, life has challenges and problems? When you encounter a problem or challenge that you can do something about and you try your best to solve it, it's good. If you really can't fix it even after you've tried your best, then it's no longer your problem. It is only a problem when you see it as a problem and try to fix it. If you can't fix it, then it's no longer a "problem." So it's still all good. Most of us don't live like this, however. We try to fix things that are not in our power to fix. We try to change people to accord with our views of things; we try to fix the external world not only when it is not our business to do so but also when we don't even have the ability to do so. This is suffering. We make things our problem. Problems are not problems if you don't make

them so. The issue is: Have you tried your best? If you try your best, solutions will come.

In Chinese, the ability to be at peace amid difficulties is *anxin*—*an* is to be at peace, *xin* is heart or mind, so *anxin* means heart-mind at peace. That's really a test of your practice, because all situations in life are opportunities. When you face "problems," you make a "thing" out of them, and as a result you will definitely be disturbed. Examine that disturbed heart-mind that is not at peace and ask, "Why am I not at peace?" You may come up with all sorts of answers, but you must go deeper, beyond the superficial layer of discursive thinking, to your very existence, amid the not knowing. Continue to ask, "Why am I not at peace?" This becomes your life *gong'an*, your *huatou*.

Of course, this teaching does not imply that there are no objective problems in the world; we cannot deny that there are wars, criminality, and suffering. But in responding to them, trying to help to better the world, your heart must be at peace. If you cannot tap into this deep peace within, this true nature of yours, then you will inevitably create more problems.

All situations in life are opportunities that point to peace. Your practice is not to attain peace but to recognize that all are already at peace. In peace there's great activity. When you sit in meditation and you have many wandering thoughts, when you have drowsiness, when you have resentment, or feel this and that, know that all of these are manifestations of peace. Thoughts liberate themselves; they free themselves instant to instant to instant. If you get annoyed by wandering thoughts and discursive thinking, then you are adding fuel to the fire. But if your attitude is *anxin*, heart-mind at peace, you will be able to face them, totally accept them, not follow them or try to get rid of them. Amid all of this, recognize this inherent peace, amazingly revealing itself instant by instant. Then, and only then, will difficulties be resolved in their own accord. Don't

do it the other way around: don't try to find some stagnant peace by devising a strategy to get rid of your thoughts.

The key to practice is to recognize the sheer, remarkable amazement of all the manifold appearances, personalities, problems, and to be able to flow with them freely, without attachment. The panoply of your life then becomes the Chan hall. Practice is to realize peace amid all activities. Isn't that what you want, what you aspire to? Peace is the greatest blessing. In peace there's freedom, liberation, activity. Health is unpredictable; wealth, material goods—even more unpredictable. But peace is something you can do. It is actually choiceless because it is your nature. It is how things are. So do not be fooled by the myriad, fanciful phenomena of challenges and problems, like Chan master Juzhi's challenge to his boy disciple. If I were to comment bluntly about this case, I would say, IAG—it's all good!

Chan master Jinhua Juzhi (810–80) was a contemporary of some of the great Chan masters of that time, for example, Master Linji. His teacher was Hangzhou Tianlong (770–850). Tianlong's teacher was Damei Fachang (752–839), the subject of case 30. Fachang's teacher was Mazu Daoyi (707–88). These are all important Chan luminaries in our lineage.

Mazu is only two generations from the sixth ancestral master, Huineng (638–713), who was the most important figure in Chan and is the attributed author of the *Platform Scripture*. Often compared to Huineng, Mazu was also a great master in his time. It is said that in one of his intense retreats, he was able to bring eighteen or twenty practitioners to awakening. That's quite a number. What is even more impressive is that during his career as a Chan master, he had some 120 dharma successors. This is probably the highest number of people known to have been awakened under one Chan master. He is the progenitor of the Hongzhou school of Chan that flourished in the Jiangxi region, in southeast China. Many of the Chan masters in

the *Gateless Barrier* are directly or indirectly related to this line of Chan, Juzhi included.

Juzhi taught in several different ways, but he became known later on because of his one particular method of teaching; he was called One-Finger Juzhi. The text says that whenever he was questioned, whenever he taught, he would just hold up a finger.

The boy in the story here actually refers to a postulant. Traditionally, in a Chan monastery there are many young boys, postulants. They were sometimes given to the monastery by local villagers who were too poor to educate their children. The parents knew their child would get a good education there and had no problem if the child later decided to disrobe and return to lay life. Sometimes, when a Chan master wanted to find successors, through a tally he would choose young boys from the local village and train them. There would be an announcement made in the local villages to the effect that the monastery was seeking a new acolyte or attendant novice. The villagers were asked if they wanted their son to become a monk. Names would be submitted on a tally for the prognostication ritual, through which a candidate would be chosen. In fact, that's how my teacher, Master Sheng Yen, was chosen, among many other children. His family was very poor, and he had a great number of siblings. His name kept coming up as the one to be chosen to be a monastic through this ritual. The boy in the story is an attendant, an acolyte, ready to become a novice monk, probably Master Juzhi's attendant.

As Juzhi's attendant, this boy must have already witnessed all of his teachings. Every time the master was asked the question, "What is the meaning of buddhadharma?" or "What is the essence of your teaching?" he always raised a finger. So one time some monks came to visit the monastery to seek master Juzhi's teachings. Since he was away, it was, of course, the acolyte, the attendant, who received the guests. Perhaps upon

seeing that this young fellow was very bright, the visitors asked him, "What is your master's teaching?" The boy was a good imitator; he held up his finger. The guests were very impressed by it and word got around. When Juzhi came back to the monastery, he found out.

Among the variations to the story, the more interesting one is not the one recorded here in the case but one that goes like this: Juzhi comes back and says, "Oh, we had some guests today?" "Yes, Master." "So, what did they ask?" The boy answered, "They asked for the meaning of buddhadharma, and they asked for your style of teaching." "How did you respond?" The boy held up his finger. It was at that time that the master took out his knife and sliced it off. The boy was in such excruciating pain that he ran out of the room. He had been with the master for a long time; he was used to holding up his finger just like his teacher. So on his way out, Juzhi asked the boy, "What is the meaning of buddhadharma? Speak! Quickly!" The boy tried to hold up his finger. Except that his finger was gone. It was at that moment, when the boy saw that his finger was missing, that he became enlightened.

The case also tells us that when Juzhi was about to die, on his deathbed he still compassionately hoped that his students would understand what he was teaching. He urged them to practice. For that reason, although his disciples were all probably very familiar with his raised finger, he reminded them, "I have used this finger inexhaustibly." He had learned this gesture from Chan master Tianlong and had used it all of his life without ever failing to demonstrate the truth of Chan. After he said those words, he died.

There is a story behind how Juzhi understood Tianlong's finger. Actually, the name Juzhi does not mean anything, unlike other Chan masters' names, which often come from a place. *Juzhi* is actually a transliteration. He was given that name because, prior to becoming awakened, he always

recited a *dhāraṇī*, a mantra of Cundi Bodhisattva. The transliteration of *Cundi* from the Sanskrit is “Juzhi.” So he got his name because he always recited this mantra. Even during his solitary retreat practice in the mountain, which he did for many, many years, he recited this *dhāraṇī* on all occasions and at all times. *Dhāraṇī* and mantras are basically the same; both are incantatory spells, except that *dhāraṇīs* are slightly longer. So Cundi Bodhisattva, like all buddhas and bodhisattvas from the esoteric or tantric tradition, had his heart or core *dhāraṇī*, or mantra. Some people are aware only of the famous mantra of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion: *Om mani padme hum*. But in fact, Cundi Bodhisattva is one of the thirty-two manifestations of Avalokiteśvara, and there’s a special *dhāraṇī* associated with this form.

Juzhi practiced it fervently. It is customary for monastic or Chan practitioners to sojourn to different mountain sites to deepen their practice. One day when Juzhi was sitting right in the middle of his hut, a nun whose name was Shiji came barging in without introducing herself, in her thatched straw hat and carrying her other belongings. (*Shi* means “actual” or “true”; *ji* means “occasion” or “time.” One can say that her name means “true occasion” or “the occasion of reality,” which is metaphorical.) Shiji circled around him three times (this ritual of circumambulation three times, clockwise, dates back to the time of the Buddha), then stopped right in front of him. She said, “If you can say something, I will take off my hat.” She meant, “Either you’ve got it or you don’t. If you’ve got it, I’ll study with you. If you don’t, I’ll leave. Say something!” That was basically what happened. Juzhi was dumbfounded. He did not know what to say. It is not that he didn’t understand what she meant; hers was a typical expression. She was very direct and cut to the chase. Chan practitioners are sometimes like that.

As he remained dumbfounded, she circumambulated again three times. Afterward, she repeated what she had said, "Say something; demonstrate your understanding. Either you have it or you don't!" He just looked at her speechless. All Juzhi knew was the Cundi dhāraṇī. That's all he ever practiced during his whole monastic life. He felt great shame. He asked himself, "Is this dhāraṇī all I have? What is the meaning of buddhadharma? Why am I in this robe? Why did I leave the household life, abandoning my friends and family to be a monk? I gave up everything, and that is all I have?"

The nun left. He chased after her and said, "It's getting late. At least stay overnight." He was in shame and perhaps felt he could learn something from her. She turned around and said, "You've got it or you don't! Say something!" She was repeating herself. "If you've got something to say, say it. If you say something, I will stay tonight." But he couldn't, and he felt even worse. She left, and he started to pack up. He thought, "Solitary retreat? Forget it! I need a teacher. I can't go on living like this." As he was packing, a mountain spirit or deity appeared to him and said, "Don't bother. In a few days there will be a Chan master visiting here. Get ahold of him instead of wandering about, not knowing where you're going, looking for teachers. Just stay put."

You may scorn the idea of mountain deities, but there are all kinds of sentient beings in this world, and just because you don't see them does not mean that they don't exist. When a teacher is present, there are always dharma protectors nearby. Indeed, a few days later, Chan master Tianlong came by. He was so famous that Juzhi recognized him right away. He prostrated. Then the first thing he did was to relate to Tianlong the whole episode with the nun. We can well imagine what had transpired during those few day and nights. He must have been restless, churning in his mind, "Why can't I say something?" What the nun was

asking was for him to say something about his realization of buddhadharma. “What is buddhadharma?” It’s the job of monastics to know buddhadharma. They practice it. But what is it, really?

Juzhi’s heart-mind was not at peace. He must have spent those sleepless nights wondering, “What is the buddhadharma? What is the buddhadharma? What is the buddhadharma?” building up momentum until Tianlong arrived. In doing so, he made himself ripe for the latter’s teaching. After hearing Juzhi pour out his story in great detail, and his sincere questioning: “I couldn’t say a word to the nun; what is the buddhadharma, what is it, what is it?” Master Tianlong just raised his finger. Juzhi became completely awakened.

It is important to know that Juzhi’s intense questioning of what buddhadharma is was the key to his awakening. As a monastic, his task was to realize buddhadharma and share it with others. Yet he had not realized it and had nothing to show for his efforts. This internal struggle of not knowing what buddhadharma is was intimately tied to his own existential dilemma of not knowing who he was. From the perspective of Chan, this is the profound sense of not knowing, or of great doubt, without which practice would not be effective. As a practitioner, there must be a point in which you infuse your practice with this fundamental, existential dilemma. What is buddhadharma? What does it mean to be a practitioner? What is practice? How does it relate to my true nature?

Peace, anxin. Have you realized that?

Buddhadharma poses questions such as: Who are you? Are you your thoughts, your emotions? Are you the body? What is awakening? What is your full potential? At the threshold of your death, are you at peace? Have you lived a blameless life without regret? Buddhadharma is not the words you’re reading or the concepts you’ve learned. You

must say something of your own rather than regurgitate the words from the scriptures of others.

Tianlong's finger jolted Juzhi to awakening, but was he awakened by the finger? Later, Juzhi became a Chan master and had his own community, a monastery. With everyone he met, he also raised the finger. The issue here, however, as Wumen says, is that the finger is not why Juzhi or the young boy got awakened. It could have been a big toe or a slap in the face, or it could have been some words. I would add that those practitioners whom Juzhi awakened also did not get awakened by his finger. All of these methods are just expedient means.

The issue here is about being ripe to buddhadharma. If you are ripe, everything is a *shiji*, or "true occasion" for realization. Without that process of practice—being able to have your heart-mind at peace, allowing IAG to come alive inside you—a person can raise a finger or a big toe, give a shout or a slap, but nothing will happen.

If you can understand that, then Tianlong, Juzhi, the boy, and you are "all strung through the same string," meaning, you will all walk hand in hand like bosom buddies, as you will all have experienced the same taste of the peace in awakening, liberation. In fact, you all have fingers, right? Whether you have short ones or long ones, all ten or one missing—there is no long or short, no ups and downs, no sorrow or grief, no increase or decrease. You lack nothing. From the perspective of Chan, you already have peace. The practice is to recognize that and not create problems where there are none. IAG.

If you are the kind of person who likes to create problems for yourself and others, being caught up by your own ideas of who you are, of what the world should be, or of how the world has shaped you—just be at peace. Put it down. Everyone has baggage and stories about self and others. Sometimes you feel the most hurt by those who are closest to you—your siblings, your family, your friends. Don't react

to life if your mind is disturbed. It is not the right time if you are vexed, as reacting will make it worse. Don't bring your baggage when meeting others. Facing all of life's challenges, its ups and downs, even the blames and accusations thrust upon you for things you didn't do, remain at peace. Not being at peace comes from attachment to self. You want to defend, to protect, to justify yourself. Is there a need? No, at least not for the sake of your practice. When the opportunity arises, things will resolve of their own accord. You have that "finger." Your practice is to learn to use it.

If you get caught up by the constructs that you create or that other people create about you, even those used by Chan masters as expedient means—they have tricks up their sleeves!—then you are a fool. Of all the ways you could respond to the world, why do you choose frustration or anger? You choose this because you want to defend something that is not there. You feel defensive because you're vexed. Vexation is, for most people, the master that is manipulating all of their actions, decisions, views.

Yet the truth is, vexations are guests; they're really not the master. Responding to life through vexations is like asking a thief to clean your house. It is also like someone who uses a stick to hit you. Do you get angry at the stick or do you get angry at the person? At the person, of course. All of those who are mean to you are not in control; they're under the influence of vexations. They are merely the stick held by vexations. If you want to be angry at something, be angry at the vexations, not at that innocent person who is under the control of vexations.

Juzhi made a fool of old Tianlong.

Holding up the sharp blade alone to test the boy,

"Fool," here, simply means that he is actually in agreement with Tianlong. He was not fooled. When Chan

masters mock someone or praise each other, it means just the opposite. In the West, when parents introduce their own child, they will say, "My son is this and that; he is great; he has a college degree from such and such place," and so on. In the Chinese culture, when Chinese parents introduce their son, they will say, "My no-good son! He doesn't know how to do anything. . . ." This is a cultural difference; don't get caught up with the cultural forms. For the Chinese, the greater the son is, the prouder they are of him; yet they scold or belittle him all the more, especially in front of others. Like Confucius said, "When the eagle soars high, it becomes a great target." It's better to be low-key.

In the verse, the words, "made a fool of old Tianlong" tell us that he is really exemplifying Tianlong's great teaching by continuing the tradition as he lives out his life. And what does Juzhi do? He awakens the boy, albeit at the expense of one finger. It is, of course, pretty dramatic.

**Like the Great Spirit Julin who lifts his hand
effortlessly
And splits apart the great ridges of Mount Hua.**

The verse above goes back to Chinese mythology. From ancient times and even into the present, the Yellow River has continually changed routes in China. It is the second-largest river in the country and probably the sixth-largest river in the world. Legend has it that in ancient times this river was blocked by a great mountain, Mount Hua, which caused all kinds of floods. So this "Great Spirit Julin" came down from heaven and with one single stroke, broke the mountain in two. As a result, the Yellow River was able to flow smoothly. Mount Hua split into two parts, one tall and the other smaller, like a camel with two humps. Like that Great Spirit, Juzhi continued his teacher's teaching, enlightening his disciples and all of those who came into

contact with him—allowing their true nature to flow forth freely.

This true nature that flows freely is the reality that, in all situations and at all times, your heart-mind is at peace. If for some reason you've strayed from this truth, then ask yourself, "Why am I not at peace?" Ask with everything that you've got, without discursive thinking, just with the sense of not knowing. Ask until you've realized that you, Juzhi, the boy, and indeed all the buddhas are strung along the same string of life, here and now.

CASE 4

The Barbarian Has No Beard

Huo'an said, "Why does the Barbarian from the west have no beard?"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Investigation must be genuine investigation. Awakening must be real awakening. For this, you must see the barbarian in person. But when I say "see in person," it has already become dualistic.

In front of fools,
We must not speak of dreams.
"The Barbarian with no beard"
Adds confusion to utter clarity.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Practice is for fools, but it is very important. It brings us to ourselves, to confront ourselves. There's nothing like it in the world. It is precious. People in the world are not fools. They interact with other people, engage in many tasks, and amid all of these activities, they try to be smart in their manipulations, jealousy, arrogance, and aversion. They are so smart that they wallow in their own vexations. Sitting meditation is an appointment with yourself to be honest with yourself. You do this by working on a method of practice. This honesty is a fool's practice, where you try to put down all of your masks and tricks.

How you respond to all the thoughts that come up in sitting meditation actually mirrors how you usually deal with your problems in daily life. Recognizing this pattern is necessary because only when you take this first step of facing yourself on a regular basis will you become more grounded, honest with what you have to work with. In doing so, you will be able to affirm, face, and accept yourself. Only then will you be able to begin the process of maturing the self and seeing through it. It is in this sense that your practice is truly precious, something to be grateful for.

If you think you don't have the time to sit every day in meditation, then pick five occasions every day, for example at 8, 11, 2, 5, and 8 o'clock, or whenever, and during just one minute, relax, feel the body, and be with the task at hand in the present. Be with yourself. You can integrate this one-minute practice whether you're having a cup of tea or the first bite of your sandwich at lunch or climbing a flight of stairs or brushing your teeth. You can simply set up your cell phone to ring every three hours. Discipline yourself to stick to this one-minute practice five times a

day. Only one minute each. There is absolutely no excuse to say you don't have one minute.

In our modern technological society, great emphasis is placed on progress. How far has technology gotten us in terms of knowing the most fundamental truth of who we are? If you don't even know who you are, what you are, or have no control over yourself, are you not primitive? Are you not a barbarian, beneath all of your modern gadgets?

The present case, or gong'an, is very simple and direct. It's like the first case of this collection: "Does a dog have buddha-nature? *Wu!*" Yet all Buddhists know that a dog, like any other sentient being, has buddha-nature. Chan master Zhaozhou comes along and says, "*Wu.*" This case is similar. "The barbarian from the west" refers to Bodhidharma, the first patriarch in China in the Chan lineage. Legend has it that he was Indian, possibly even Persian, and that he had a beard.

In the Chinese language, the word *barbarian* has less of a derogatory connotation than in English; in Chinese it is just *huren*; *ren* means person; *hu* means foreigner. So the Chinese called all foreigners *huren*, whether the person was from India or Persia. Here the "barbarian from the west" is a specific designation for Bodhidharma. As mentioned earlier, Chan masters sometimes speak derogatorily about each other or of their own disciples as a way of actually praising them. Bodhidharma was the first patriarch, or lineage master; we look upon him as the founder of the Chan tradition. Although he was an obscure figure during his own lifetime, when this text was written, the legend that surrounded him had already penetrated into every aspect of Chinese culture. Respected by Buddhists and non-Buddhists, Bodhidharma had become a cultural icon, a common knowledge. There were numerous paintings of and poetry about him. He was *the* barbarian from the west with a beard.

One day Chan master Huo'an Shiti (1108-79) said to his students, "Why does that fellow from the west, Bodhidharma, have no beard?" knowing very well that he had a beard. This is equivalent to my saying, "Why does George Washington have no eyes?" Many practitioners have read the *Heart Sūtra*, which states: "no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind." What is that text talking about? Master Dongshan Liangjie (807-69), for example, the progenitor of the Caodong lineage of Chan, became a monk when he was very young. He was seven years old when his parents brought him to the monastery. His karmic roots were very good. So when this seven-year-old boy heard the line "No eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind," he touched his nose and his eyes and asked his tutor monk, "How come the text says no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind? Clearly I have eyes, ears, nose, tongue." His tutor was dumbfounded and couldn't answer. So he encouraged Dongshan to study with a Chan master. Eventually, Dongshan became a very great master.

Isn't it true that you have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind? Yet, clearly the *Heart Sūtra* says you have no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Isn't it also true that even with your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, you still do not know who you truly are? Between this having and not having: "Who am I?" Your gadgets and toys won't work here in helping you to realize who you are, what you are. You simply have no control of your emotions or thinking. You are constantly blown by the eight winds of pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and disrepute, gain and loss. You are a foreigner to yourself; you are that barbarian with no beard. To take this case, "Why does the Barbarian from the west have no beard?" seriously is the same as asking yourself, "Why is it that I have no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind?"

Investigation must be genuine investigation. Awakening must be real awakening. For this, you must see the barbarian in person. But when I say “see in person,” it has already become dualistic.

There are a couple of key words here that are extremely important. The word *investigation* is a translation of the Chinese word *can* (in the pinyin system of spelling, *c* is pronounced like a *ts* or *tz*, so the word *can* is pronounced *tsan*). *Can* is a very important word in Chan. It means absorbing, participating, investigating, being one with something. In a Chan retreat setting, a personal interview with the teacher is called *ducan*, which means a “one-to-one investigation” of something. This something is Chan—the reality or truth of awakening. So *ducan* is an occasion when you and your teacher mutually partake, investigate, participate, become one with awakening. This is an occasion when you present to your teacher your understanding of who you are, your realization, and the teacher checks whether your understanding is on the mark. Of course, interviews are also used as an occasion to bring up with your teacher the difficulties or problems you have in your practice. But in its original usage, *can* means to mutually participate, engage, investigate, and realize the truth.

The words *genuine* and *real* in the quote above are *shi* in Chinese. The term also has the connotation of being down to earth, solid, concrete, and earnest. What is your practice like when it is being down to earth, solid, concrete, and earnest? It is when your practice is in accordance with how things actually are—not how you want them to be or hope them to be. Together with *can*, practicing in a way that accords with how things actually are means to partake,

investigate, become one with awakening—where practice and awakening are not two. This is to be shi.

To do this, you must *be* your true nature, which is to be selfless, free, without fixity and rigidity. This is to be genuine. When I was in college I lived alone above a Buddhist temple in Chinatown in New York City. Because of family connections, the abbot gave me the loft on the fifth floor of that building for my own use. In exchange, I helped with the monastic affairs. I didn't practice at that temple, even though I lived there, but practiced with Master Sheng Yen in Queens. The abbot of the temple was Master Shouye (1908–2001), a great ascetic practitioner of our times. When in his twenties, he copied the whole *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, one of the longest Mahāyāna scriptures in the Buddhist canon, using blood from his fingers and tongue. What I learned from him can be summarized by four Chinese words that he wrote in the front matter of a book of gong'ans. The four characters are: *laoshi xiuxing*. *Lao* means “always”; *shi* means “to be genuine” (the key character described above); *xiu* means “to amend”; and *xing* means “to engage.” *Xiuxing* is usually translated together as “to practice.” So, put together, the four characters mean “always genuinely engage in practice.” This admonition is forever engraved on my heart.

“Genuine investigation” here means that your practice should not be based on some fantasy. It should be solid, concrete, real, and earnest in accordance with selflessness. It is something you must cultivate because your habit tendency is to be flighty and scattered, not to confront reality. You don't want to face things; you want to turn away from things. When you settle down in your seat in meditation, you don't really want to give yourself fully. Instead, you want to preserve your energy a little bit, to save it for later. Or some people like to take shortcuts in life in the things they do. When they come to practice, they also try to take shortcuts. That kind of practice is not called

genuine practice. Here we are told that in order to penetrate the meaning of “Why does the Barbarian from the west have no beard?” you have to take up this question with great sincerity and earnestness.

To practice like this is to awaken yourself. What kind of awakening? Genuine awakening is one that realizes your true nature—not false illusions or altered states of consciousness. There are many spiritual or religious traditions that foster altered states of consciousness—particularly by altering your experiences with sight or sound. Chan does not encourage exchanging one state of mind for another. Awakening in Chan is not a state of mind. Take, for example, a person who has lived all of his or her life wearing prescription glasses with red lenses. When the person looks at the world, the world is red. Chan practice and awakening are not about substituting one colored lens for another. Rather, they are about pointing out that you already have 20/20 vision, and so you need to do away with glasses. If, however, you feel you’ve gotten something or attained some “state,” rest assured that what you’ve gotten is just another illusion, an altered state of consciousness—just another substitutable object created by your self-attachment. This is why Wumen warns that “you must see the barbarian in person. But when I say ‘see in person,’ it has already become dualistic.”

If your perception changes in meditation, for instance, if you see light or infinite space and feel completely at ease, if you see things as being all beautiful, realize that there is still a “seer” and things “out there” to be seen or experienced. This is duality. The sense of self is still present. Even if you experience oneness, that everything is “just myself,” realize that in that oneness there is still a self. This is the Great Self, which must be let go of. You must see the “Barbarian” in person, face-to-face. This means that you must personally realize who you are without disguise. The Barbarian is not outside you; if you

think it is, then you are still in opposition—self and others, good and bad, having and not having a beard.

Wearing prescription glasses when you have 20/20 vision is foolish. It actually blurs your vision and confuses your mind. You are intrinsically replete with perfect vision, replete with awakening. The problem is you think you need glasses; you've taken the glasses as part of your identity. This is like mistaking your fleeting thoughts and restless emotions for who you are—so no wonder you're vexed and suffering. Who's thinking? Who's feeling? Deluded, your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind do not *truly* see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. Isn't this like not having eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind?

**In front of fools,
We must not speak of dreams.**

The phrase “In front of fools” has multiple meanings. In practice, you become great fools. My teacher used to call it the dead mind. What kind of mind is that? It is the mind that brings all vexations, discrimination, and opposition to their death. That mind does not discriminate. It is completely absorbed in the method. Is that enlightenment? No. There is still a method; one is still practicing. So the first level of meaning of “in front of fools don't talk about dreams” refers to becoming a fool who has no dreams. Usually people are not fools; they are very witty and smart; they take shortcuts in practice and life or come up with all kinds of dreams. As their self is very tricky, they must first face this slippery self, accept it, learn to stop dreaming like a fool, and then wake up. How? Use the method of practice.

The second level of meaning of this phrase “In front of fools, we must not speak of dreams” means that when teaching those who are ready—those who have already brought to death their dualistic, oppositional mind—don't talk of dreams. Just give them the direct, advanced

teaching of Chan. There's a Chinese saying: Don't play flute to an ox. This idiom means that the ox won't appreciate the melody or the beauty of the music you're playing—people will. Teachers must give the appropriate teaching to each student. Otherwise it is useless. Giving ox hay and grass to graze is appropriate. Playing music to those who appreciate it is appropriate. Similarly, as practitioners, it is important that you practice with earnestness. Don't be hasty or fanciful. Don't take other people's awakening as your own. You will have to practice genuinely—bring your vexations to death—before you realize that awakening is originally not separate from you. Just mouthing that will not work and will certainly not free you from vexations or suffering.

Awakening, or enlightenment, in Chan is not knowledge nor a concept nor even an experience (as in: "I experience this or that"). If it were, it would merely be replacing one pair of colored glasses with another. When a person actually takes off the glasses and sees the world for the first time, he or she experiences it as *completely* normal. It is not some fantastic altered state of consciousness or an extraordinary, supernatural state of mind. The person actually has completely come down to earth and sees things as truly normal, without any coloration or filter from self-referentiality. Labels, judgments, discriminations, categorizations of the world into good and bad, having and not having, are simply absent, and the world comes alive. Everything is astonishingly, naturally, and splendidly normal.

**"The Barbarian with no beard"
Adds confusion to utter clarity.**

How true this is! This line acknowledges your intrinsic freedom. Nevertheless, sometimes it is necessary to make waves when there are none, create problems so you can solve them. Why? Because you're too smart and need to

become a fool first, before you wake up from the dream of self. So you need to ask: "Why does the Barbarian from the west have no beard?" Please don't be smart and add fuel to the fire by spinning off all kinds of concepts and fantastic notions. Just focus on this "Why" and allow it to percolate, to simmer inside you, until all concepts and delusion subside. And when by chance you feel your beard, you will finally realize that you have none.

CASE 5

Xiangyan Is Up in a Tree

Master Xiangyan said, “It is like a man being up in a tree hanging on to a branch by his teeth, with his hands and feet not touching the tree branches at all. Beneath the tree there is someone who asks about the meaning of [Bodhidharma’s] coming from the west. If this man does not reply, he is evading the questioner’s question. If he does reply, he perishes. At such a moment, how could he answer?”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

Even if you have eloquence that flows like a river, it is totally useless here. Even if you can preach the whole great [Buddhist] canon of the teachings, that, too, is useless. If you can give an apt, appropriate answer, you bring back to life what before was a dead end and you put to death what before was your life’s path. If you cannot answer, wait for

the future when Maitreya Buddha comes, and then you can ask.

Xiangyan is blabbering nonsense;
His venomous poison is inexhaustible.
Making the mouths of patch-robed monks go mute,
His whole body is squirting demon eyes.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

This is a wonderful case. I'm speechless. If I say anything, I perish. If I don't say anything, I'm not doing my job as a teacher. Basically, Chan master Xiangyan Zhixian (812-98) is presenting an impossible scenario. A man up in a tree, hanging by his mouth clenched to a branch, and someone is asking him a life-and-death question. If he opens his mouth and answers, he drops and gets killed. If he does not answer, what about the question? Chan master Xiangyan himself experienced the limits of language, exhausted it, and finally brought to life his own life.

Xiangyan had a fabulous memory and was very intelligent. He was from Shandong Province in northern China. His teacher was Chan master Weishan Lingyou (771-853), who had studied with Chan master Baizhang Huaihai (case 2). Weishan knew that while Xiangyan had full potential, he was still stuck in the conceit of intellectualization.

One day Weishan said to Xiangyan, "I'm not going to ask you about the sūtras, the treatises, or all the teachings that you have learned. But I do want to know something from you. Tell me: Before you were born, what was your original face? Say something!" Xiangyan was dumbfounded. He searched through all the knowledge in his head but

remained speechless. After a while he came up with some answers. Weishan said, "No!" Then again, to the next answer, he replied "No!" And the next, "No!" Every one of his answers was slashed away. Xiangyan went back to his room. He searched through his notes on all the Chan talks that he had heard from all of his previous teachers but failed to find anything. This experience became his natural gong'an: "Before I was born, who was I?" This means, before discriminating mind, before thinking of good and bad, beyond your categorizations and constructs and discriminations, who are you? Xiangyan burned all of his notes and purportedly said to himself, "A picture of a cake cannot fill my stomach." With humility, he asked permission to leave Weishan, "I've nothing to say; I'm worthless. All of my studies have been a complete waste. From now on and for the rest of my life, I will be an undertaker. I hear that lately no one has been taking care of the grave of National Teacher Nanyang Huizhong (675-775). I'll just go and take care of his grave and live there." He lived there for many years. The question planted by his teacher, Weishan, "Before you were born, what was your original face?" always remained with him.

Before Xiangyan left his teacher, he tried to get some instructions from him. Weishan said, "Even if I were to tell you the answer, it would be mine. If I do tell you the answer, in the future you will scold me; you will hate me. Now go!" Xiangyan, totally dejected, gave up on practice. All he did, day long, was to tend and sweep the grave. His hair grew long; he never even bothered to wear his monk's robe. He had naturally disrobed and lived in a hut by the grave. One day this natural questioning welled up inside him and overtook him, "Before you were born, what was your original face?" Suddenly, as he was sweeping, he heard the sound of a pebble as it hit a bamboo stem. At that single sound, all of his attachments completely vanished. He became greatly awakened. Xiangyan broke into tears,

then laughed, then cried again. He knelt down in the direction of his teacher, Weishan, and paid his respect by prostrating. He said, "If you had told me the answer, so many years ago, I would never have gotten here." He got up, cleaned himself up, packed up his bag, shaved his head, and returned to the monastery. Weishan asked, "What are you doing here?" Xiangyan presented him with a poem and read it to him. Weishan was delighted and accepted him back into the monastery. Later on, Xiangyan became a great teacher.

This is practice. This is the significance of Bodhidharma's coming to China. This is why Chan is being transmitted in the West. Without undergoing great perseverance—taking the teaching to heart, engaging in practice that is not dependent on intellectualization—one would never realize the meaning of one's life. There are certain questions that just cannot be truly answered with concepts and ideas. The very reason you practice demonstrates this clearly: Who is *it* that sits? Who is *it* that speaks? Who is the master here? Until you reach a point where words and language, actions, gestures, and gimmicks completely fall away, where nothing can reach *it* and nothing can touch *it*, you will never be able to resolve the fundamental question of life. What is *it*?

Some people think that Chan cannot be expressed in words but can be demonstrated through action. However, whatever can be demonstrated is still wrong. But how about the Buddha? He said so much for forty-nine years. Was he wrong? Are words wrong? Which do you think does a better job at expressing the truth, silence or gesture?

The problem is not the words themselves. Words may communicate ideas very well, but they may not help anyone. For instance, you may be telling the truth about something, but if a person does not want to hear the truth, your words will go right out the other ear. Often you cannot get a handle on the appropriateness of speech. Why is that?

Because you don't understand the workings of causes and conditions and cause and effect. Here I'm talking about not being able to perceive the disposition of people and situations—what needs to be done, what needs to be said, and when to be silent. You can't see that because most of the time you operate out of your own ideas of things.

Similarly, silence can help, but it can also hurt. Sometimes the less chattering you have in your head, the fewer fixations you have, the more you are able to connect with others and the world. In those moments, you can truly be with others without contrived intentions. There is a natural connectedness and peace. You relate to other people on a whole different level beyond words. It is miraculous, intuitive, and genuine. That said, there are situations that require you to say something. If you remain silent, the outcome may really cause more problems.

It's the same with actions. Actions, words, and silence may help but also hurt. A person can devote him- or herself for ten, twenty, thirty years to helping those who are suffering and still have a very strong sense of self.

So the real question in this case is: How to answer? How to respond?

This case is about your inherent freedom. If you are free and unbound by words or actions, silence or speech, then no matter what you say or do, you will not be fooled by Chan master Xiangyan's blabbering nonsense.

The whole context of this story is recorded in *The Transmission of the Lamp in the Jingde Era*: One time a practitioner asked Xiangyan, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the west?" (Bodhidharma is the founder of our tradition who purportedly came from India, west of China.) This meant, "What is his true teaching?" He went on to say, "Without speaking in terms of ultimate or conventional truth—without falling into extremes, what is his teaching?" That's when Xiangyan answered, "You must arrive at a point like a man up a tree, hanging on to it by

his mouth. He cannot speak, he cannot let go. Yet someone asks him a question and he must answer. What would you do?" Xiangyan's student, perhaps his attendant, actually provided an answer, saying, "I'm not going to ask about what the man is going to do when he is up in the tree or what he is going to say when he comes down from the tree." At that moment Xiangyan smiled in approval. But don't start tinkering with this reply in your mind, thinking: What does that mean? What does that mean? Is the key "before" and "after"?

The real point is to arrive at a place where *you* cannot advance or retreat, hold on or let go, speak or not speak. This is the way to resolve the most essential question about your own life: How to answer? How to respond? This is the means through which you will bring your wisdom life back to life and put your delusions to death.

Premodern Chan masters have described the state of working on the gong'an or huatou as chewing a hot iron ball in your mouth. Perhaps you may think, "Why in hell would a person chew on a hot iron ball in the first place?" Let me substitute an image for you: It is like chewing a hot, delicious dumpling—your favorite dumpling—right out of the boiling water. Since you love this delicious dumpling, you're not going to spit it out—even when it's burning hot. Yet you can't swallow it either because it would burn your throat. So here you are, chewing and blowing and trying to taste it, all at the same time. This should be the way to seize the huatou of "How to answer? How to respond"?

How do you respond to life without words and language, silence or gesture, right here, right now? Whatever you may come up with is certainly not the true answer. Whatever you may dig up from your mind is certainly not "it." There is no mind to dig—nothing is concealed. It is only because your mind, seemingly with a life of its own, is full of conflicting thoughts, with one moment different from

the previous one and the next, that you cannot answer the questions of life.

Xiangyan's advice is to keep on asking "How to answer? How to respond?" In fact, you should ask with all of your might, all of your being—as if you're holding on to a tree limb by your clenched teeth, with your hands and feet dangling in the air. If someone asks you a question—actually a question that you ask yourself—"What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the west?" Answer! You have to answer. If you don't answer, you're not compassionate. If you answer, you must die. What do you do? How delightful! How wonderful!

You must earnestly inquire about this until you come to a point when all of your discriminating thoughts of good and bad, words or silence, right or wrong, better and worse, success or failure, completely die. These mental states are totally irrelevant. All you have to do is generate, cultivate, and fuse with this sense of not knowing and wanting to know. What is it? What is it? This is the whole point of the *huatou*, or critical-phrase, method. Xiangyan has offered us a delicious, savory dumpling—you want to eat it but you can't. What do words or silence or actions have to do with this? Just chew on this "How to answer? How to respond?" This is the compassion of Xiangyan's nonsense.

To do this, you must meet the five Chan prerequisites for working on *gong'an* or *huatou* practice. These five prerequisites come from my own experience and what I have learned from my teacher. The first is to have great conviction and faith. The point of the *gong'an* or critical-phrase method is to generate the great questioning or doubt. As discussed earlier, in the introduction, this does not mean suspiciousness. It means the sense of wanting to know, the sense of wonderment about the most fundamental, existential question of your being. This great questioning is founded on great conviction in the method, in yourself, and in the teacher. Faith in the method means

to recognize that this unique Chan method has been passed down through generations. Other practitioners have personally engaged with this method and penetrated through to awakening. They have shattered through ignorance to wisdom. Faith in yourself means to recognize “I can do this” because the conditioning of vexations and delusions is not an intrinsic part of who you are. Vexations and delusions are originally empty. You are originally a buddha. The word *buddha* means “to awake.” Your original wakefulness is the wisdom of emptiness. Finally, you must have faith in the teacher. The teacher in Chan has one sole task: to help others to become awake. The teacher must have great skill and timing and the ability to see the workings of causes and conditions.

The second prerequisite is great diligence. Practice must be steadfast, continuous, and earnest. You should not practice hard only on retreats. Instead, practice should be more like a steady fine stream of water, which may be fine but is able to meander through all difficulties and persist without giving up. You must be earnest, unpretentious, whether you are in retreat practice or in daily life—working, sweeping the floor, or relating to people. Your practice must be fueled by a sincere, down-to-earth desire of wanting to know who you are. This means the meaning of your own existence is driving your practice. This is great diligence.

Connected to great diligence is the third prerequisite: great humility. Humility here is very different from guilt or the popular notions of shame. In Buddhism, humility is founded on recognizing that you really don’t know much of anything. For example, isn’t it true that you often fail even to recognize your own shortcomings and strengths? Yet you can be full of yourself. To have humility is to recognize this and aspire to improve. You may have the full potential to awake, but at the same time, you are responsible for all of your life choices and conditioning. So why do you choose

vexations over compassion? Delusion over wisdom? Why is it that you think you already know how to practice when you actually don't? It is because you fixate on upside-down thinking—on your own view of things. Recognizing this, you must generate humility and change.

The resolve to change naturally leads to the fourth prerequisite: great vows. This means that you vow to benefit others. Selfish practice begets selfish results. If the cause is like this, the effect will be like this. If you plant an apple seed, then apples will grow. If the cause is selfless compassion, then the effect will naturally correspond. This is cause and effect. In life, the reason you get yourself in trouble is that you think in a self-referential way, fixated on your own notions. You operate in life through forming categories in your mind, compartmentalizing and discriminating between this or that. So this fourth prerequisite means that you practice for other people, for the sake of not harming those around you. The truth is you are able to practice because of others. How can you learn anything without so many people's help, directly or indirectly? You must recognize this and generate a sincere wish to live for the benefit of others—not out of selfishness, not for your own enlightenment. This prerequisite is really the key. You may practice for your own benefit in the beginning—after all, it is normal—but as you practice you realize your connectedness to everyone, to everything, and you begin to expand from a narrow sense of self-concern to a greater sense of encompassing others. Only then are you embarking on the path.

The fifth prerequisite is a great question. What brings you to practice, deep down inside, is this existential question, "Who am I?" "What is the meaning of life?" "Why am I here?" You may consciously try to avoid such questions in life, but they are always in the back of your mind in some form or another, aren't they? Chan cultivates and nurtures that by turning it into a method. With great

concern, with a great question, you will have a great answer. If you don't have questions, there will be no answers. So, small question, small answer; big question, big answer; no question, no answer.

If you are able to fulfill these prerequisites, then, as the text says, you will "bring back to life what was before a dead end." What is a dead end? My teacher used to say that in Chan practice, in intense situations, you must become dead; you must have a dead mind—dead to all of your discriminations, all of your judgments, right and wrong, good and bad. Then you can bring it back to life—a path will be revealed. In Chan we call it "great death leads to great life." No death, no life. That is why the text continues: "You put to death what before was your life's path."

All the things that you are familiar with, that help you to navigate through your life—all of your judgments, discriminations, good and bad—while they're useful in daily life, in intense practice situations you've got to put them down. This includes all of your many survival mechanisms. Some people's survival mechanism is to shut down: someone is mean to them, they shut down; they're faced with challenges, they shut down. You learned your particular way of survival when you were young. Later, when things trigger memories of old relationships or of old childhood hurts, the same mechanism will kick in. Yet this is the barrier that prevents us from being free because they are really dead ends. From this state, you will come to life. You have to let go of your survival mechanisms, put them to death, and transcend them.

**Xiangyan is blabbering nonsense;
His venomous poison is inexhaustible.**

How is it inexhaustible? Because poison is able to destroy poison. Generations and generations of teachers have used it, just as I'm doing right now—encouraging you to take the

practice to heart. This “blabbering nonsense” is actually an interpretive translation. The term is *duxuan*, which derives from Duxuan, a poet in ancient China whose writings no one on earth could understand. He always signed the name Duxuan at the end of each poem. His real name was Du Mu (803–52). So basically, since *xuan* means “to select,” what Duxuan wrote after each of his poems was: “Selected by Du.” His poems never made any sense—they didn’t rhyme; they had no beginning, no end; this became his signature poetry. I guess back then one could become famous through all kinds of means. He was so renowned that his name became a stock expression, as in “This guy is being duxuan” or “This guy is like Du Mu.”

So when the verse says that Xiangyan is a Du Mu, it means that he is not making any sense. Yet here lies the key to Xiangyan’s genius. Smash through your logic! Caste away your conceptualizations and reasoning! Whatever *sense* you use to try to understand life will not suffice. Such was Xiangyan’s compassion. Such was his medicine for your sickness of intellectualization.

**Making the mouths of patch-robed monks go
mute;
His whole body is squirting demon eyes.**

This is a verse of praise for Xiangyan. It expresses the workings of great compassion. Guanyin Bodhisattva, or Avalokiteśvara, is the embodiment of compassion in Buddhism. She is said to have a thousand eyes in the palm of her thousand hands. Wumen says that these are all demon eyes, demon hands. Why? Her hands help to uproot all the demons within us. They are demon eyes and hands because in order to help you, Guanyin must use *your* poisons as medicine. Poison is a blessing—it depends on how you use it. Words and language can delude or liberate. Here, knowing your deep entrenchment in words and

language, Xiangyan puts you in a situation of conceptual impossibility and threatens your way of existence—hanging you on a tree by your mouth and asking you to say something. Isn't it true that you have always tried to live your life by your own ideas and notions? In order to truly answer him, you must become mute and put an end to common sense. Only by doing so will you realize your true nature.

Xiangyan has already presented you with a dead end. But he has also presented you with a way out, a life road. Which way will you take?

CASE 6

The World-Honored One Holds Up a Flower

At a gathering on Vulture Peak, the World-Honored One [Shakyamuni Buddha] held up a flower and showed it to the assembly. At that moment, everyone in the assembly was silent except Mahākāśyapa, who broke into a smile.

The World-Honored One said, “I have the treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa, the true form of no-form, the subtle and wondrous gate to the dharma, the special transmission outside of scriptural teachings not established on words and language. I now entrust it to Mahākāśyapa.”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

The Golden-Faced Gautama behaved as if no one [were capable among his assembly]. He turned the noble into the lowly and sold dog meat and advertised it as mutton, proclaiming it as marvelous. If the whole assembly had

smiled, how would the Buddha have passed on the treasury of the true dharma eye? If Mahākāśyapa had not smiled, how would the Buddha have transmitted the treasury of the true dharma eye? If you say that the treasury of the true dharma eye can be transmitted, then the old golden-faced man would just be deceiving villagers. If you say that it cannot be transmitted, then why did he approve of Mahākāśyapa?

Holding up the flower—
The fox's tail is already revealed.
Kāśyapa's smile—
Humans and devas are all bewildered!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

The Buddha often gave teachings at Vulture Peak (Skt., *Gr̥dhrakūṭa-parvata*), in Rājagṛha, India. Tradition has it that the Buddha gave teachings, only upon request, usually in the afternoon. In this case, the Buddha did not say a single word. He picked a flower and just held it up. Everyone was silent. They did not know what to make of it, except for Mahākāśyapa, or the Great Kāśyapa, the first lineage master within the Chan tradition in India. Twenty-eight generations later, Bodhidharma continued the teachings, thus becoming the father of the Chan tradition in China, which maintains this “wordless” dharma—embodied by the Buddha's holding up a flower—as its fountainhead teachings.

Mahākāśyapa's smile wasn't an elated laugh but a gentle smile, the kind one might give one's close friend after an event that both have shared. It is also like the smile two lovers share across the room upon glancing at each other,

after having lived a lifetime together as a couple. In that moment, there is no need for words. A smile would do, for only they know the life that they have shared, the challenges they have faced, and the sweetness of the union they have experienced. This was Mahākāśya-pa's smile. When he saw that, the Buddha, the Golden-Faced Gautama, acknowledged it with an unnecessary flamboyant performance—making a big fuss with “technical expressions” such as “the treasury of the true dharma eye; the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa; the true form of no-form; the subtle and wondrous gate to the dharma; the special transmission outside of scriptural teachings not established on words and language.” Indeed, he set up a trap for his assembly, and everyone fell in.

You can imagine most of the people assembled there just scratching their heads, asking, “What has just happened?” Mahākāśyapa, the most senior among the Buddha's closest disciples, probably sat in front; perhaps others saw his smile. But whether they saw the smile or not, it was not the smile that the Buddha was acknowledging. It was the natural expression of Mahākāśyapa's wisdom.

Despite Chan master Wumen's typical playful words of praise—that the Buddha was selling dog meat but advertising it as mutton, or comparing him to a trickster fox who deceives others—the real question is: What is it that is being transmitted? You may say perhaps that it is the awakening mind that's being transmitted. But this is not good enough because it is just an *idea* learned from books or other people. After all, how in the world can awakening be transmitted? If you say it cannot be transmitted, then you're wrong. Why did the Buddha approve of Mahākāśyapa's response then? If you say it can be transmitted, you're also wrong—you're calling the Buddha the biggest liar there is. The Buddha held up a flower and Mahākāśyapa smiled. Can you respond without

using any gesture, like holding up a flower or smiling? Can you respond without words or silence?

Some people may think that gestures are more direct, more powerful, that words fall short of a demonstration of one's realization. But actually, it is the same whether we demonstrate our understanding through gesture or words—one is no better than the other. The point remains, what is it that is being transmitted? If everyone already has *it*, what is the point of transmission? Is it something that only a small cluster of students like Buddha's close disciples have? Is there something special or marvelous about it? Is it something that needs to be made into a big fuss?

There are various translations of *treasury of the true dharma eye*. Translators often misunderstand this grammatical pattern, which, in this case, can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the person's understanding. The confusion lies in the words *true dharma*, as if there were correct or incorrect, right or wrong dharma. Yet the most important point is the *eye*. Most people see either right or wrong, correct or incorrect, which is why they don't have the dharma eye. What they see are their own constructs, ideas, and partial perspectives of things characterized by right or wrong, profound or shallow, holy or profane, yours or mine. It is because of these attachments that they don't see the buddhadharma and don't have the dharma eye that perceives how things truly are—that “the treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa, the true form of no-form, the subtle and wondrous gate to the dharma, the special transmission outside of scriptural teachings not established on words and language” are already transmitted, already here. This is the buddhadharma. To perceive that is to see the world through the dharma eye. *Dharma* or *buddhadharma* has many connotations. It usually means the Buddhist teaching; but it can also refer to the law, the order, and the obligation

of things. The word is usually not translated precisely because many meanings are present, especially within the context of Buddhism. Here it simply means how things are. The Buddha was not trying to impart some knowledge or concepts. The way of a seed is to germinate—that's the way it is with seeds. But germination will depend on various conditions. The way of a tree is to grow; the way of the wind, to blow; the way of water is to moisten; the way of the earth is to support. And what is the natural way of being human? Is it what Descartes says: to think? Is the true, intrinsic nature of human beings to have vexations, to generate emotional afflictions like anguish, jealousy, hatred, arrogance, and to cause suffering for oneself and others? No! Our true nature is compassion, which is the function of wisdom. And wisdom is to be free from vexations. It doesn't mean having knowledge or being smart.

To be able to *see* things as they are, to have the eye that perceives all, free from vexations, is to practice and realize the dharma. That's the meaning of the "treasury of the true dharma eye." Things are in a dynamic, wondrous flow of cause, conditions, and effects. Effect turns to cause for future effects through the coming together of conditions. These three are intimately connected, ever flowing. What makes dharma eye "true" is to perceive without getting in the way, without filtering and processing through gaining or losing, benefit or harm—things as they are, as empty of self.

In Chan, we sometimes talk about a reflecting mirror: whatever stands in front in that instant, as it is, the mirror reflects without self-referentiality, without a fixed view of what that thing is supposed to be, without judging it. The mirror just responds by reflecting. This is the natural order of things. Everything perfectly reveals itself, instant by instant without judgments, without labels. The natural order of your mind is to reflect like a mirror. You have the

potential to do this, that's why it is called "treasury." In its natural expression, how can you not smile when someone holds up a flower?

When I was an attendant monk to my teacher, he always picked on me the most. I was always there, right next to him, flaunting my own stupidity. He used to publicly humiliate me and falsely accuse me, just to see how I would respond. That was his way of presenting the treasury of the true dharma eye. Would I see it as dharma or would I see it as wrong accusation? His humiliation and accusation is that same flower that the Buddha held up. How would *you* feel in those situations?

When you have no vested interest in something, you won't see the workings of self-referentiality. Suppose I said, "You, we've been missing money from the donation box. I saw that you were the last one to leave. Do you know where that money is?" Perhaps your face would become red even though you had nothing to do with it. But your face becoming red shows that you are caught—the self block is there. As soon as the self becomes threatened or praised, it manifests immediately, right there, as an obstacle, a block.

The point of practice is to be fully humans, fully buddhas.

How? The first step is to see through the veil of these processes, to gain some mastery of not following after vexations, not being caught up with them. As you practice, you become more in tune with how things change and flow. How causes and conditions work dynamically, as opposed to your rigid ways. When you are more in tune with how things are, flexible, then all things have possibilities. Gain may not be gain; loss may not be loss; benefit may not be benefit; harm may not be harm. There will not be fixed notions of how things are.

No one would take an image reflected in a mirror as real, right? Does the mirror get caught up with images? No. Likewise, when you face suffering or painful situations, you can be with them fully and be at peace because there is no

fixed notion of pain; when you face happiness, you are fully happy without trying to hold on to it. Just like there is no separation between the mirror and the image reflected in it, there's no separation with the experiences of your life. The mirror's content is precisely that moment. So when you are sad, be fully sad and be at peace. When you're happy, be happy and be at peace. If you can't, you may understand this teaching as mere intellectual knowledge, which is why you must take the practice seriously.

Everything and everyone—instant by instant—already possesses the treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa, the true form of no-form, the subtle and wondrous gate to the dharma, the special transmission outside of scriptural teachings not established on words and language. What the Buddha did was merely to point out the obvious. It would be like my trying to sell you water even though you are already holding a full bottle. Please do not turn the noble into the lowly and sell dog meat and advertise it as mutton. Don't substitute your freedom for bondage.

You naturally have the beautiful smile of Mahākāśyapa. All you have to do is smile. So when you have vexations, when you see the wrongs of others, when you start thinking "I can't do this; I can't do that; I'm falling behind in my practice," and so on and so forth, smile and be at peace. Things that need to be done still must be done. In the process of practice, there is no seeking or trying to gain something, no expectations or losing something. A true, diligent practitioner never wants to engage in actions that will hurt him- or herself or other people. What drives the person is not gaining and losing, unlike most people who are driven by the self, but the recognition of compassion and wisdom within. In your heart, there should be no vexations or traces of the reflected image.

That said, if you are still seeking after water while holding a bottle of it in your hand, or are trying to get rid of

things in your life yet unwilling to let go of the grasping hand, then please take up this case and ask yourself: "Where is my treasury of the true dharma eye?"

CASE 7

Zhaozhou's "Wash the Bowl!"

A monk asked Zhaozhou, "I have just entered this monastery. I beg for your instructions, teacher."

Zhaozhou replied, "Have you eaten porridge yet?"

The monk said, "Yes, I have eaten."

Zhaozhou said, "Then go wash your bowl!"

The monk had an insight.



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Opening his mouth, Zhaozhou shows his liver and reveals his heart and guts. This monk had not truly listened [to Zhaozhou's words], calling a bell a jar.

Because it was so extremely clear,
It took so long to come to realization.
If you knew that candlelight is made up of fire,
Then the rice would have been cooked long ago.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

There is an eighth-century Indian Buddhist saint, Śāntideva, who had a saying: "If there were no paved roads—if everywhere you went the ground were full of rocks, pebbles, and other sharp objects—which would you do? Start paving the road wherever you go, or just put on a pair of shoes?" The point is, when you change your perception, no obstruction can harm us. It's not to say you shouldn't change what needs to be changed, but it is important, in the meantime, to change yourself first. In Chan, however, the view is that the road is already wide and open, flat and paved.

Strange, isn't it? Let me put it in a simpler way. You are free to drink water when thirsty and eat when hungry. In doing so, don't let your *self* get in the way.

This story is about a new monk who came to study with Chan master Zhaozhou. Through Zhaozhou's own story you can get a glimpse of what practice-realization is about. Zhaozhou met his teacher Chan master Nanquan Puyuan (748-835) when he was eighteen. Even at such a young age, he already knew how to practice genuinely. Nanquan was ill when Zhaozhou first came to practice with him, so Nanquan received him informally, while lying down. He asked Zhaozhou, "Where do you come from?" Zhaozhou answered, "The Temple of Auspicious Buddha" (*ruixiang si* in Chinese). Then Nanquan said, "Did you see the Auspicious Buddha while you were there?" Zhaozhou did not get caught up in conceptualization or intellectualization. He did not think, "Oh, the Chan master is testing me now; I must give a Zen answer." He was right

there in the moment and replied, "No, I am seeing a reclining buddha now." Nanquan immediately sat up and asked, "Who is your teacher?" Zhaozhou retorted, "It is good to see that you are still well, teacher."

When Nanquan asked Zhaozhou, "Who is your teacher?" people would normally take that to mean, "Who is your past teacher? Who have you been studying with?" To which people might usually answer, with mind dwelling in the past, "I studied with So-and-So and So-and-So," perhaps listing all the great masters that one has learned from in one's repertoire of teachers. But Zhaozhou answered, "It is good to see that you are still well enough to teach, teacher." Essentially, he was saying, "Right here, right now, I see you as my teacher." Impressed, Nanquan took him in as a disciple. So even at the young age of eighteen, Zhaozhou was intimately living in the present moment, unlike ordinary folks who are always living in the past or future. He was not trapped in concepts, ideas, and intellectualization of this and that.

Nanquan died when Zhaozhou was fifty-seven years old. He mourned his teacher for three years, then for the next twenty years he sojourned to different places to meet Chan teachers, perfecting his understanding. He began to teach only when he was eighty. Fortunately for us, he lived to be 120 and got to teach for another forty years. He is one of those incredible Chan luminaries. Nowadays people think they are teachers after reading only a few books. Or they study with a teacher for only a few years and want to visit other teachers. Still others vie for a piece of paper—a "certificate of enlightenment."

The traveling monk in the story may also have been sojourning to different monasteries, like Zhaozhou in his practice days, testing out his understanding, deepening it under various teachers. It was perhaps morning when Zhaozhou received this new monk, which is why, when he came and asked, "Can you instruct me?" Zhaozhou

responded, "Have you eaten some porridge yet?" The monk said, "Yes!" "Well then, go wash your bowl!" That's basically the story. So ordinary, yet so hard for many to see.

When Zhaozhou met his teacher, he was completely in the present, no past, no future, no baggage. For this visiting monk in the story, when asked whether he had eaten yet, he was dwelling in the porridge already eaten. He needed a good smack back to the present. But Zhaozhou was gentle with him and kindly brought him back to what needed to be done: "Wash your bowl. Leave no trace!" Trace of what? The past, and the belly full of porridge that he brought with him. Fortunately, this monk had good karmic roots. With a good horse, all one needs to do is show the whip and the horse immediately knows to gallop. Now I ask you: You've just finished a period of sitting meditation. How was your sitting? Good? Fold your towel and tidy up your seat.

**Opening his mouth, Zhaozhou shows his liver
and reveals his heart and guts.**

That is, he offers everything he has to his students with his kind, grandmotherly heart, without holding back anything. In Chan there is no secret teaching, no esoteric transmission, no empowerment needed. You are already empowered. When a student comes, the teacher offers whatever is needed, quenching the thirst of the seeking mind by snatching it away. The question is, are you ready to give it up? Are you ready to truly listen to Zhaozhou's words? Are you ready to call a bell a jar? Or do you think a bell is a bell, a jar is a jar?

Most translations render Wumen's comment in this way: "If the monk did not really grasp the truth, he would mistake a bell for a jar." That is, the monk truly grasped Zhaozhou's words; for this reason, he realized a jar for what it is: a jar. However, this is a superficial (logical)

reading. It is also a grammatically wrong reading by injecting words that are absent in the original Chinese—just to make it rationally sensible. The correct rendering is: “This monk had not truly listened [to Zhaozhou’s words], calling a bell a jar.” Here, Wumen points to the fact that the monk did not really understand Zhaozhou when he was asked whether he had eaten yet. He took a simple question on the surface level. His mind went to the past, dwelling on the porridge that he had eaten. It was only when Zhaozhou smacked him back to the present that he gained insight.

In the Buddhist monastery, bells are dome shaped and look like upside-down jars. Similarly, in life things may look the same, but they are different. When you experience the world through delusion, you experience the world as just a plain old world that you see every day. Yet when you experience the world without self-reference or grasping, the world is also just the world. However, the two are different. In the former, you don’t really see the world; in the latter, the world comes alive, as it is: the world.

Because that monk in the story had good fortune, Zhaozhou was able to teach with no reservations. When Zhaozhou revealed to the monk what needed to be done in the present, the monk had an opening experience. When the minds of the master and the student meet, awakening occurs, and the student gains insight into that which is so obvious in the present moment. The obvious shakes the earth and crumbles the heaven.

In such a state, does it really matter whether you call it buddha-nature, awakening, or delusion, or even if you call a bell a jar? When genuine meeting occurs between a teacher and a student, there’s nothing that stands in the way of that encounter. Such meeting cannot be fabricated, reproduced, premeditated, or contrived. What you can do as practitioners is do your part in making sure there are no obstructions within you, no baggage that you’re dragging around everywhere you go. Be in the present, here, now.

To do so takes genuine practice. You may be sincere, but if you are not truly engaging in practice, then you are stuck at a conceptual or intellectual level, dragging all kinds of baggage. Whatever the teacher says can be processed only through the baggage of concepts, categories, distinctions of good and bad, having or not having, with discriminating thoughts such as “Why did he say this or that? Is he testing me or not? Should I be giving a Zen answer?” These rational processes block you from perceiving things clearly and truly. They are unnecessary filters of your own biases accumulated since time without beginning. You need only to recognize how one person’s heaven is another’s hell to know the truth of these words.

Genuine practice is candlelight made up of fire and rice that was cooked long ago. Or as I often say, IAG. If you already know that this very mind of yours, this very heart, is no different from that of the buddhas, then candlelight is fire and rice is already cooked, even without cooking it. That’s the crux of this case. The problem is: Why isn’t your rice cooked?

The scriptures, Buddhist treatises, Chan stories, all point to the fact that everyone has buddha-nature, that this nature *is* all beings. In this case, Wumen uses the analogy of candlelight and fire. In the old days, candlelight was used as light. The light from the flame was used as a lamp. So candlelight, light, flames—they were essentially one and the same, inseparable. The form is the candle; light is its function. They are inseparable. Similarly, our true nature and its function are inseparable. Our true nature is freedom, and its functions are thoughts and feelings. Some people cannot see that candlelight and fire are inseparable. They may have a problem with fire. The problem is not the fire; it is our attachment to fire as separate, independent, and fixed. There lies the problem. The fire refers to our thoughts and feelings. They are not the problem here. It is our attachment to them, reifying them as fixed things, that

causes suffering. The true nature of thoughts and feelings is freedom. They liberate themselves instant by instant. They arise and perish according to causes and conditions. There's no self in them anywhere. Self, or "I," exists only when attachment is present. When self is present, thoughts and feelings are problems. You don't like this or that because the I is in the way. Liking or disliking comes from self-referentiality—a self is in the center of all of judgments and experiences. It is from that assumed reference that judgment of good or bad is made.

You get caught up with the particulars of this and that, in all the various appearances of the world, and don't see the obvious. In the complexity of daily life, in your daily interpersonal relations, it is certainly not difficult to lose sight of your true nature. You've learned to categorize the people you meet into friends, foes, or perhaps neutral—that is, those you don't care about either way. Where did these categories come from? Why are you caught up with the proliferation of your own narratives of this and that?

In a way, the foundation of Chan practice is to realize the obvious and stop getting caught up with yourself. To do this, you meditate on a method and strengthen your awareness, like an anchor. When you sit, just sit; when you walk, just walk. Even when you need to reflect and think about this or that at work, just do it—without injecting a self where there is none. If you discover that you have strayed off into habit tendencies—of thinking, fabricating in a self-referential way, constructing good and bad on the basis of that—bring yourself back to your method or to the task at hand, again and again. Eventually, you will develop focus and awareness, stillness and clarity—focus on what is actually happening clearly, the obvious task at hand. These two aspects of focus and awareness allow you to experience the wonders of the world without a self found anywhere.

You may ask, since there is no self, then how can you live? Will you lose your identity? Your memory? Of course not! In awakening, there can be subjectivity without subject, personality without a person, identity without grasping. Awakening has nothing to do with having or not having memory or intellect. The Buddha was extremely wise and eloquent. Some Chan masters were very skillful with words and were very well read in the scriptures. The difference is that there were no fixations or rigidity that got in their way.

Without focus and awareness, you will definitely get caught up with self-attachment. Why? Because self-attachment and its habits belong to the scattered, fragmented layer of mind. This is not to say that self is absent if you're free from scatteredness; it is just that you need to be at least free from the coarsest layer of the mind before you can have even an inkling of subtle forms of self-attachment. This is why genuine practice is necessary.

So, in Wumen's candlelight analogy, if the candle is very steady, then the luminosity of the fire expands throughout the room and you see things very clearly. This means that if the ability to focus, to stay with one thing, is present, it allows you to be clear, to be more deeply aware of what's happening. In the process of staying with that one thing, you understand the playful nature of your mind; you see right through all the fabrications, constructs, narratives, the judgments of yourself, others, and your environment. So these two aspects of focus and awareness are the foundation of Chan practice.

The more you practice, the more you become deeply attuned with how you operate. When you sit, your reaction, for instance, to wandering thoughts and drowsiness or other challenges actually mimics your habitual responses in life. But if you are genuinely practicing, you learn to meditate without adding anything to this moment, knowing that this moment is perfect, complete. It's all good! IAG.

Practice is not really about gaining this experience or that insight. It is simply not to contaminate the obviousness of right here, right now. Whatever it may be.

There is not a single opportunity in life that is not practice, that is not an occasion for awakening to the obvious. Yes, this includes the difficult boss and coworkers or the challenges of love and the trauma of disasters, human created or not. "Have you eaten porridge yet?" The monk replied, "Yes, I've eaten." Perhaps this monk had a bellyful of experiences and really thought there was something to them. Most of us are like that. "Where did you study before?" "I studied with So-and-So." "For how long have you studied?" "Oh, I've been practicing for decades." These are just attachments to having or not having, to the past or the future. Thus, Zhaozhou, cutting right to the chase, said, "Wash your bowl!" If you carry baggage, drop it. Then you can truly practice.

Even if you've experienced a great, powerful so-called awakening, drop it. Yes, a powerful, transformative experience can also become an attachment. However splendid an experience, it will leave a trace if you don't know how to practice. During your whole entire life you've carried with you the burden of your own baggage—your life story and the narratives you've told to yourself—through which you've filtered all of your experiences. All of a sudden, with awakening, everything is totally shattered, the burden lifted. Through this powerful insight, you can now see clearly that candlelight is made up of fire and that clear and filthy water both have the same nature of wetness. You are left with the sense that all of your life you have been wearing colored glasses to see the world. Whatever you see is color tinted. In taking off the glasses, you realize how colored they were. Seeing the world without coloration indeed leaves a very powerful impression. People may have many of these breakthroughs.

The more breakthroughs they have, the more they actually seem normal to practitioners. They're nothing special.

The first step in practice is to see through your baggage and not get caught up in it. Just return to the present, to the task at hand. Then, as you practice and gain a bellyful of experiences—more spiritual baggage—you have to drop them, too, and continue to practice. Even notions of further practice must be dropped until your bowl is completely washed clean. This is being a careful, skillful practitioner. With every opportunity that presents itself, every misunderstanding with your family members, every communication problem, every challenge you find yourself facing, every breakthrough, take care of the situation without injecting yourself into it. Have enough stability to allow the candlelight to illuminate. If your candlelight flickers too much because it is blown by the winds outside, sooner or later it will go out. So first learn stability and focus so that no wind can blow out the candlelight. The stiller the flame is, the more luminosity there will be and the more clearly will things reveal themselves.

If you got something useful from reading this, use it. If not, just drop it.

CASE 8

Xizhong Makes a Carriage

Master Yue'an asked a monk, "Xizhong makes carriages with wheels of a hundred spokes. Yet, dismantle the two parts, the front and the back of the carriage, and remove the axle, then what will the carriage be?"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you can directly understand, your eyes will be like shooting stars. Such an occasion is like a flash of lightning.

When the axle of the wheel turns,
Even the expert is deluded.
The four directions plus above and below,
South is to the north as east is to the west.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Chan Master Yue'an Shanguo (1079-1152) is Wumen's great-grandmaster and a contemporary of the famous Linji Chan master Dahui Zong'gao (1089-1163). Here he gives the example of Ren Xizhong, the legendary horse cart inventor who lived in the third century B.C.E.; all the Chinese people know him. What Yue'an is asking in this case is that if you take off the front of the beautiful one-hundred-spoke cart that Xizhong made and remove the back and also dismantle the axle, then what the hell is left of this cart? Where is the cart? Is it still a cart?

In the second century B.C.E., the Indian subcontinent was divided. There was a great king named Milinda who ruled northwestern India, what is now Pakistan. Prior to his becoming a great patron of Buddhism, he had challenged and persecuted Buddhism until he met Nāgasena (fl. ca. 150 B.C.E.), an arhat. King Milinda said to Nāgasena, "Oh, you are supposedly an arhat. You Buddhists talk about no-self. Yet, as I see it, clearly there is a self, for who is it that stands before me, wearing the brown robes? Who is it that has the shaved head? Who is it that is called Nāgasena? Tell me: What is this teaching of no-self?" Milinda wasn't really looking for an answer. He really didn't care to know what no-self is. He asked because he wanted to debate with Nāgasena. Faced with this situation, Nāgasena replied, "Your Majesty, you look delightful today; your countenance is wonderful. How did you get here today? Surely your Majesty didn't soil his feet? You must have had a carriage to bring you to this hall?"

The king replied, "Yes, indeed." Nāgasena continued, "Surely you know what a carriage is, Your Majesty?" And he went on to describe the King's beautiful carriage, which

must have had jewels and ornaments. The King replied, “Of course!”

Here is Nāgasena’s punch line—totally in the manner of a Chan master, but more polite: “Surely, Your Majesty must know what a carriage is because you know its function, usefulness; you’ve used it to get here. Please, Your Majesty, are the spokes the carriage? Are the wheels the carriage? And what about the front portion, the plank on which you stood, and the seat on which you sat? What about the sides? What about all the ornaments? Which one of these is called the *carriage*?”

The King was wise. He said, “None of those are the carriage.”

Nāgasena replied, “Excellent, Your Majesty! Likewise, which one of these do you see as Nāgasena: The name? The brown robe? Or the bald head? Or maybe the eyes? Or this aging body? Perhaps his mind? Which one of these do you call Nāgasena?” The King heard that and joined his palms, “Excellent, Nāgasena. Tell me more. Teach me buddhadharma!” The king was converted to Buddhism by Nāgasena, which was very auspicious, as Buddhism flourished under his reign.

Now, this is what Master Yue’an is asking all of you. Is your body you? How about your thoughts? Are your happy thoughts, or your negative thoughts, you? Since you have both happy and negative thoughts, which ones are the true you? Have you thought about this question? Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” But am I just these random thoughts? Who is thinking, anyway? Do we have any control over the thoughts? Can we put our minds on one single thing, for even five minutes, without scattering? We think about A, we think about B, about C, sometimes we think of things that make us miserable. To say that all of these are “me” is to be schizophrenic. To say none of these is me, and that there is a true me somewhere separate from these, is also foolish. If you want to know the path to

happiness in this life, you can buy the Dalai Lama's book called *A Path to Happiness*, but the message is the same as the one I'm going to tell you now. If you want to know the path to happiness, discover the freedom within.

There was once a retreatant who came to me for an interview. He was a sincere practitioner. When his life circumstances changed for the worse, he was able to take refuge in the dharma, and he reevaluated his whole life priorities. He went deeper into the practice, but there was still something he couldn't let go. He experienced an ever-present awareness, as if it were a "thing," which he called the observer, the witnesser. It became his refuge. Nothing in his life was secure; he had lost everything. Now the only reliable anchor was his awareness. I gently asked him, "When you fall asleep, when you lose consciousness, where is the observer then?" He said, "I don't know. That's why I'm here for the interview. I'm hoping you'll give me a method so I can become aware, in direct line to the observer, 24/7. Practice is my life now. When I sit, I am well, at peace, one with the observer."

I didn't want to pull the rug out from under him by telling him that this awareness was an attachment. I said, "Good, may I modify your practice a bit?" He answered, "Yes, please! That's why I'm here." I said, "When you reach a point of stability and calm, when this awareness is steady, ask, 'Who is observing?' Don't identify yourself with it. Don't be one with it. Keep asking. This is the way to true peace." All of us, at some point, in order to resolve our life's difficulties or challenges, create "things" to rely on. It's our survival instinct. We can have all kinds of notions about life, and also about death. Have you ever seen a dead person, perhaps a friend or a family member at a funeral? What lies in the coffin looks plastic, lifeless. Something is absent. Yet prior to that you may have had lively conversations with this person, or you may have fond, vivid memories of him or her. Seeing the corpse, where is that

person now? We deeply fear nothingness. It has become a “thing” for us. When we experience nothingness, we want *something* to counter it.

This is what this case is about—your own life and death, your own freedom in each and every instant without creating things. Life is not what you think it is. Nor is death. When you make death out to be a “thing,” you will be obstructed; you will have fear and regrets.

My mom was the most active, energetic woman I’ve known. When I was younger I thought that if anyone were going to live to 120 or 150, or forever, it would be her. She left a message on my phone a week before she died, “Hey, you haven’t called me for a while. Call your mom!” I kept telling myself I’d call her later. I never got to return her call. In my mind she would never die, she would be there forever. Less than a week after that voicemail, she died in a car crash. She was on her way back from Home Depot, getting supplies to refurbish a temple. The driver, her friend, sped up at an intersection in front of an eighteen-wheeler, thinking that they could make it. They didn’t. The eighteen-wheeler crushed my mom’s car. Parts of the car roof came down on my mother’s head. She died instantly. The coroner wouldn’t let us see her body because the skull was so badly crushed. When I heard the news, I was living in the Midwest. I rushed home, took care of the funeral arrangements. I had forgotten about the voicemail she had left for me. In the process of deleting old voicemails, I heard her voice again: “Hey, you haven’t called me for a while. Call your mom!” But where was my mom?

This case encourages you, if you don’t want to die with fear and regrets, to live your life fully, freely, without bondage. What is it to live unbound? It is not living without rules, like a free spirit. Rather, it is to be free from the shackles of vexations and deluded thinking—“things” that bind you wherever you are, whatever you do. If you do not

free yourself from bondage, then you will be forever deeply bound by this “thing” of self.

You may wonder, Who am I if not my body, thoughts, and experiences? Who is the observer? As all the parts of your body, thoughts, and experiences change in each moment, what do you call yourself? Buddhism does not advocate the idea that there is some kind of soul reincarnating one lifetime after another, after another, and so on. Yet it nevertheless teaches the cycle of rebirth that can shackle us. This seems like a contradiction. What is it that goes through rebirth if there is no permanent, unchanging self? The Buddha did not teach that there is a permanent “observer” that is ever present. When you enter a deep trance, or samādhi, where is the observer? When you get punched and knocked out or faint, where is the self? When you are in a coma, where seemingly there is no mental activity, why is it that when you come out of it, you still know who you are? How is it possible, if there was no continuity in that state, that once you woke up all the memories came back? How is this different from so-called death? This is a mystery each and every one of us must come to face and understand. When you understand, you are free, liberated, and awake from the slumber of delusion. This is what is meant by “If you can directly understand, your eyes will be like shooting stars.”

Śākyamuni Buddha, the historical buddha, was enlightened upon seeing a shooting star. Prior to that, he had vowed not to get up from his seat until he was enlightened. So he meditated under a tree for days. Finally, in complete exhaustion, he saw a shooting star, and in that last moment, on that threshold, he put down the self. He became free from grasping on to something that was never there in the first place. In that utter clarity, he just saw the star shooting. If you were also to put down your self-grasping, in an instant, a flash, you would see through the eyes of a buddha.

Shallow awakening experiences are like a flash of lightening, and you get a glimpse of complete freedom. All the burdens and baggage you have been troubled by throughout your life suddenly vanish as if a thousand-pound weight had been lifted from your shoulders. Everything comes to life. And you see the world without self-referentiality. But with a greater, more thorough awakening, you taste complete liberation.

The Tang dynasty Chan master Yongjia Xuanjue (665–713) is, in the Chan tradition, what we call a “one-night-stand Chan master.” He had a one-night encounter with the great sixth lineage master of the Chan tradition, Huineng. In their exchange of dialogue, Yongjia became thoroughly awakened. When he was about to leave, he bowed deeply and said, “Thank you.” Huineng asked him, “Why don’t you stay a night, as it is already getting dark.” Yongjia stayed for just one night.

Upon his awakening experience, Yongjia exclaimed, “The six realms of existence, of birth and death, are just like a dream!” That’s how thorough his experience was. When you know it directly, your eyes are like the eyes of the Buddha; your wisdom eye is like seeing a shooting star. All of the clutter of your delusions, vexations, concepts, words and language, drop off. Everything is readily present—it is only your self-attachment that is absent.

The verse says, “When the axle of the wheel turns, even the expert is deluded.” The axle of the wheel is *ji* in Chinese. *Ji* has many nuances. It can mean the mechanism; it can mean the axle; it can also mean the essence, the crux, the principle of all things. Wumen here is playing with words. He is saying, “If you understand the principle of how this gong’an turns, the essence of it, then you are liberated. But if you think *you* are an expert, you will be deluded.”

In Chan there is no expert nor beginner, no wisdom nor delusion, no holy nor common. These things are mere

constructs, ideas that you tell yourself. They are part of the script you write of your life. Does life really have a script? Is a carriage really a carriage? Is a chariot really a chariot? You may think that life does not have a script because death wipes all scripts clean to mere emptiness. This is also wrong. In Chan, emptiness *is* wonderful existence. If emptiness were just nothingness, what would be the point of practice? Why not just die and be liberated? Life, death, carriage, and chariot are just phenomena you create. In wonderful, selfless existence, all of your actions benefit all beings. Life permeates everything there is: “The four directions plus above and below, south is to the north as east is to the west.” Everything is already present, alive; you just need to stop fixating on carriages and chariots.

CASE 9

Great Penetrating and Supreme Wisdom

A monk asked Master Rang of Xingyang, “The Buddha of Great Penetrating and Supreme Wisdom sat at the site of enlightenment for ten *kalpas*, but buddhadharma did not appear to him. How was it that he did not achieve the buddha path?”

Master Rang replied, “This question is most appropriate.”

The monk said, “Since he sat at the site of enlightenment for ten eons, or kalpas, why did he not achieve the buddha path?”

Rang said, “Because he did not.”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

You may know the old barbarian, but you are not allowed to understand him. If an ordinary person knows, he becomes a sage. If a sage understands, he becomes an ordinary person.

Putting the body at ease is not as good as putting the mind to rest.

If you can put to rest the mind, the body will not be worrisome.

If you can put to rest both body and mind,

What need is there for gods and immortals to sanction or assist you?



GUO GU'S COMMENT

One day a monk approached Chan master Xingyang Qingrang (910-80) with an obvious question known by all monks: Although the Buddha of Great Penetrating and Supreme Wisdom sat at the site of his impending enlightenment for ten immeasurable kalpas, or eons, why was he not awakened to the truth of reality? After all, Śākyamuni Buddha sat for only six days and became enlightened on the morning of the seventh day after practicing austerity for six years. Master Qingrang basically didn't answer him. Had he answered him, he would have diffused the momentum of practice and taken away the chance for the monk's own awakening; the wisdom life of that monk would have been killed. Instead, Qingrang just fueled the monk's questioning by stating, "This is a very good question; most appropriate for you to ask!" As we can see from the monk's retort, his mind was now churning: Since he sat at the site of enlightenment for ten eons, or kalpas, why did he not achieve the buddha path? The master replied, "Because he did not." The story does not say whether the monk got awakened by these

words or not. Maybe by the end of reading this case you will be enlightened?

Wumen's comment mentions the word *barbarian*, which, in medieval China, refers to anyone from the west of China. In this context it actually refers to Śākyamuni Buddha. The term is not derogatory; on the contrary, it is a polite way of addressing someone who is intimate. Chan masters often say the opposite of what they mean. So Wumen's comment should be read as, "You may know the Buddha, but you are not allowed to understand him." In the original Chinese, the two verbs *to know* and *to understand* have the exact same meaning here. Wumen is basically saying, "You may know him, but you are not allowed to know him." Here lies the essence of this case.

In our information age, people come to know many things indeed. Everything is accessible. News, general knowledge, the world, and spiritual paths. In the West, many people have come to know of or have heard of the Buddha; they know that there is such a thing as the Buddha, or the Buddha way, but do they really know about the Buddha or the Buddha way? What people know perhaps most intimately is their love and hatred, likes and dislikes, their life problems, vexations, old habit tendencies. Do they know a way out of these entanglements? To sincerely strive to seek out the path of freedom from them is rare. This is why, as Wumen states, if an ordinary person knows the path of liberation, that person becomes a sage. But why does Wumen say that if a sage knows the path of liberation, he becomes an ordinary person? This is because the more you study something, the more you realize how little you really know. If you study a subject and think that you know it, then whatever you know may not be worth knowing.

Human progress—your own spiritual maturation—comes from not knowing, from being open to and discovering new things beyond what you already know. To know something is to kill the very thing one knows. If something can be

reified into a “thing” to be known, then that thing is already dead—stagnant and lifeless. So if a sage thinks he knows this or that, he becomes an ordinary person. It is only ordinary people who think they know everything. You can observe this in daily life. Sometimes people who know a lot are very humble; they admit to what they don’t know and don’t try to conceal it. Those who try to conceal what they don’t know or exaggerate and boast about what they know are ordinary people who in fact know very little.

Wumen’s verse says, “Putting the body at ease is not as good as putting the mind to rest.” You may also observe that those people who are caught up with preserving their bodies from old age, wrinkles, and sickness are people who are not really at peace. They busy themselves with attachments to this and that. The more attached they are, the more they become agitated. If you live a healthy life cultivating your mind, freeing yourself from vexations, then the body will take care of itself and will not be a burden to you or become a source of worry. This unfortunately is not what ordinary people try to do. It is not their fault and they should not to be blamed; our whole materialist world conditions us in this way. Magazines on racks, television episodes, movies, all of them project a particular view of happiness that under most circumstances are a source of suffering. They project beautiful people, making ordinary folks who try to imitate them feel bad about themselves, since they can never live up to those perfect images. Therefore, instead of worrying about external things like physical appearance and health, to the extent that you can, use this vehicle to understand who you are and to resolve your dis-ease. If you can put down all the issues of both body and mind, even the gods and immortals will have nothing on you. Therefore, the verse says, “What need is there for gods and immortals to sanction or assist you?”

Ordinary people always seek outside themselves for approval or assistance. They behave the same way when

they come to spiritual practice. Some people practice religion to seek the approval or grace of God, while others engage in spiritual practices to experience special signs or miracles or knowledge—as if they were outside of their own being. What are all of these if not the constructs, narratives, and discourses that we’ve created throughout human history? Certainly they have helped human beings, but they have also created much suffering. If you can put to rest your attachments to your constructs, your stories of this and that, which give rise to craving and aversion, then you will be at peace. This is liberation; this is nirvāṇa. When you’re at peace, your environment will be at peace—at least to you. This is not to say that there is no objective reality out there that needs to be improved. You improve what is necessary but not through a mind of vexations: craving, aversion, and ignorance. You engage with the environment and with others with peace of mind.

The essence of this gong’an is that you are not truly at peace with yourself. To be at peace is to be content. To be content is to be free from craving. To be free from craving is to be free from aversion. To be free from aversion is to realize that awakening or buddhahood is already perfected. Yet when you relate to others, if you don’t see your own shortcomings and limitations, then you see those of others. Some people see their own flaws readily, while others don’t see any flaws at all within themselves but find fault with the world and discriminate against others. With each encounter, you automatically compartmentalize and categorize people into friend, foe, neutral, good, bad, beneficial or harmful. Little do you know that you are actually controlled by these things, because what is beneficial to one person may not be so to someone else. These deeply ingrained constructs, categories, and concepts control every one of your actions; you mistakenly think them to be who you are, to be what defines you. Because of your attachments to them, you lose sight of

reality, how things really are, thus creating problems for yourself and those around you. The source of the challenges and difficulties you have with others, and those that you face within yourself, is gaining and losing, a sense of lacking, self-disparaging thoughts such as thinking you're not good enough to do this or that. But the truth is that, with your shortcomings, knowledge, and experiences, you are perfect just as you are. It is not that you look perfect or have no vexations or flaws but that you are perfect with these flaws, perfect with these limitations.

Practice is like climbing a glass mountain covered all over with oil. Climbing is an impossible task, as you will slide down with every step you take. But it is still important to keep on going because in the process of dealing with this oily glass mountain, you'll discover your survival mechanisms, your patterns of behavior, and your own vexations. Similarly, people have all kinds of reactions during practice: some, when they have a lot of wandering thoughts, will fight through by telling themselves to concentrate more assiduously. Others will easily give up, thinking everyone else is doing well except them. Still others practice, practice, practice, but when they get to a very nice, calm place, they all of a sudden become very fearful and don't want to go any further. They wonder, "What if I get enlightened, will I recognize my girlfriend? My boyfriend? My wife? My husband? Will they recognize me?" They worry even about enlightenment. All the things that manifest in you, all of these reactions, are what practice is all about. Amid all of these challenges and imperfections, you learn and discover how to be at peace, not to accept them passively but to see right through to their true nature—the nature of emptiness, or freedom.

All the things that you have learned, all of your habit tendencies and reactions, are not you. They are the result of accumulated experiences that have shaped your environment; this, from the Buddhist perspective, goes

beyond this life. All of your reactions and tendencies come from the karmic baggage that you carry on your shoulders. How you react to things is the result of your planting the seeds that will eventually manifest. It is like a Santa Claus bag into which no one but you has put any presents. When you eventually reach down into the bag and grab something, if most of the things you've put in are quality, then you'll most likely pick up something good. If most of the stuff in the bag is not very good, then the chance is high that whatever you pull up will not be so good. The acts of reaching into the bag and pulling things out are the occasions or circumstances through which karma ripens. They are your reactions and vexations.

A person who always victimizes herself, putting herself down with "I'm no good; I can't do this or that," will most likely find things of that nature in her bag. And accordingly, when meeting with some difficulty, the same kind of attitude will manifest. Even within one lifetime you can perpetuate a way of responding to the same circumstances. It is like planting a seed that sprouts and grows. In order to help it grow, you have to give it nourishment and the proper growing conditions. Nourishing the plant is a process of habituation. You may have picked up your own habits when you were young, from seeing the way people relate to one another. An apple seed will not become an orange tree. A seed can grow only because it meets with various conditions. A change in one condition changes everything else. For example, if two seeds are planted at the same time but a large tree blocks the sun from one of them, it's likely that the sheltered plant will grow smaller than the other. Both seeds had full potential, but one had limitations. That is why, when you plant seeds within your own mind—in other words, when you put things into your karmic bag—for example, seeds of generosity, you tend to be generous. Then when circumstances or conditions ripen, your response will be of the same type as the seed you

planted. You plant a seed through every little action of body, speech, and mind.

Every little thing that you do affects the whole globe, the whole environment. If you're not aware and don't take care of the little things that you do, like eating all the food you place on your plate and being frugal, you will not cherish other things either. To eat all the food you take is to cherish it, as you see the whole world in it. In all the little things that you do, you are constantly projecting, constantly implanting your own seeds.

Everything you face, all that you are, is the site of enlightenment. It is not that your vexations and habit tendencies are perfect, but your true nature is. It is like the water in a cup—its nature or essence, wetness, is the same whether the water is dirty or clean. Should you be defined by all of your vexations, habit tendencies, constructs, and stories you create about this moment? Or is there something deeper? This is the core of the issue here. Why doesn't a buddha become a buddha? It is like climbing the oily glass mountain. If you were not already a buddha, there would be no chance for you to become a buddha. But you are clouded by everything that makes you not a buddha.

The Buddha of Great Penetrating and Supreme Wisdom sat at his site of impending enlightenment for ten kalpas. Why didn't buddhadharma appear to him? This would be like someone saying, a human being is diligently trying to become a human being. After he sat there for ten years, why isn't he a human being yet? How can Master Qingrang reply to such a question? He can't answer that question for the monk. That would spoil the fun of his climbing the glass mountain, of discovering what it is that actually obstructs him from realizing that he is actually a human being, with a body and a mind. Beyond that, you don't need a god, a deity, or a spirit to tell you that.

That said, you do have to realize that which prevents you from realizing this and to know what it truly means to live in your true nature, to be a human being through and through. When you live by your true nature, you naturally appreciate yourself, others, and all things. Naturally you will not be wasteful or harm your environment. In your meditation practice, you won't make a chore out of getting rid of vexations or wandering thoughts.

In the Chan practice of silent illumination, the first step is to practice the meditation method of "just sitting." This is hard for most people because when they sit they don't want to just sit—they want to *do* this or that. They want to get rid of vexations or attain liberation. They want blissful states; they don't want to sit with scattered thoughts and drowsiness. So the antidote of just sitting is a cure of gaining and losing, craving and aversion—the same culprits that cause your suffering. In the practice of just sitting, thoughts liberate themselves and you can just be—freely at ease—sitting.

The true significance of the Buddha of Great Penetrating and Supreme Wisdom is none other than that of being you. In Chinese, "great penetrating" is *datong*. *Tong* means thorough, through and through. *Da* means great. The next two words are *supreme wisdom*. What is wisdom? Wisdom is emptiness. What is emptiness? Relationships. So you are made up of non-you; you are related to everything else, everyone else. In Chan, when a person gains insight into wisdom, which is insight into the nature of emptiness, it is, at the same time, the realization of compassion. Wisdom and compassion are not two wings of a bird—they are actually the same thing. Wisdom is interconnectedness; emptiness is relationships. When you become relationships, you become everything else. Amid relationship, nowhere is there attachment or self-referentiality. This is the meaning of supreme wisdom. Gaining, losing, wanting, rejecting—

they are all based on self-referentiality and attachment. You mustn't lose sight of who you actually are.

So the case is: Why is it when you sit here, buddhadharma or reality does not appear to you, you buddha of great penetrating and supreme wisdom? Why is it that when you sit, not for ten kalpas but for thirty minutes, reality does not manifest? When are you going to be called a buddha? Why are you not enlightened? That's the question. If you understand this, you will become a sage. But for those already enlightened, they will not entertain such thoughts of ordinariness or sagehood, delusion or enlightenment. These constructs belong to the realm of words and language, constructs and narratives. The problem is not words and language, constructs and narratives, but our attachment to them—taking them as who we are.

Learn to be at peace—be sad at peace, be happy at peace—be at peace by seeing through, by being the wisdom and compassion, the emptiness and relatedness, that you are. In climbing this oily glass mountain, be at peace. Continuing to practice in this way, you will find one day that true knowing is not from knowing more but from *not* knowing. This is how to work on this case: Why is it that the Buddha of Great Penetrating and Supreme Wisdom does not know that he's the Buddha of Great Penetrating and Supreme Wisdom? Why is it that the reality of who I am doesn't know reality? One day, tomorrow or ten years from now, through a catalyst, perhaps from reading this case again, you will suddenly discover that you are already on top of the glass mountain. How delightful! You are already human.

CASE 10

The Destitute Qingshui

A monk named Qingshui asked Master Caoshan, "I am poor and destitute. I beg you, Master, relieve my distress."

Caoshan called out, "Acharya Shui!"

Qingshui responded immediately, "Yes?"

Caoshan said, "You have already drunk three bowls of our family Qingyuan's home-brewed wine, and yet you still say you haven't wet your lips!"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Qingshui misses the occasion. What was he thinking? Caoshan with the eye [of enlightenment] profoundly discerns the potentials of those who come to learn. Nevertheless, tell me, where did Acharya Qingshui drink the wine?

Destitute like Fan Dan
But with the spirit of Xiang Yu,

Though he has no way to earn a livelihood,
He dares to contend with the richest of them [that is,
Shi Chong].



GUO GU'S COMMENT

In traditional Chan training, this case is about post-awakening practice, so it may be particularly difficult to understand. However, we need not see it that way. What is difficult is that this case is set in a premodern context foreign to us. Moreover, *Wumen* also makes allusions to ancient Chinese lore, all of which make the case obtuse. To put this case in the modern context of our lives: Qingshui, an accomplished practitioner, comes to question Chan master Caoshan Benji (840–901), the cofounder of one of the two most influential Chan schools that still exist today, and essentially asks: “I have nothing left—nothing to grasp, nothing to obtain—and no attachments. What more is there to do?” On the one hand, this was a gesture to seek instruction; on the other, it was a challenge.

How do you teach a man who has let go of everything? You let go of the *notion* of having let go and start living. This is why Caoshan yells out, “Acharya Shui!” “Yes?” he replied. Caoshan then continues: “What a response! Having had your fill of the finest home-brewed wine of Qingyuan, you still claim that you have nothing!” The *wine of Qingyuan* refers to Chan master Qingyuan Xingsi (671–741), a main disciple of the sixth patriarch, Huineng, and the progenitor of the Caodong lineage of Chan. *Having his wine* means having already received the teaching of this lineage.

In this case, the monk responds to Caoshan's call but does not recognize his own response as the most natural function of the awakened mind—the response to what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, and thought. He dwells in what Chan refers to as “dead emptiness,” or that stagnant void of holding on to nonattachment—the state of being “destitute.”

Wumen in his comment highlights the crux of this case for us all: Under what occasion have you drunk the wine? Why are you already full? This is a good reminder that as a practitioner, you must put yourself in the same situation as Qingshui. You may think to yourself, “I’m just beginning,” but that’s not really the point. Don’t think this case necessarily involves someone seasoned or advanced in practice. Beginners or advanced practitioners are all the same. Put yourself in this situation and ask, “How is it that I am already drinking the wine?”

The fundamental principle in the Chan tradition is that each and every sentient being is replete with the wisdom and compassion of a buddha. You only have to discover it and exercise it. It is not a matter of your acquiring more spiritual experiences or losing worldly things. No. In each moment, here and now, wisdom and compassion are ever present. So now tell me: How is it that you are already drinking the wine?

**Destitute like Fan Dan
But with the spirit of Xiang Yu,
Though he has no way to earn a livelihood,
He dares to contend with the richest of them
[that is, Shi Chong].**

Fan Dan (b. 112) was a famous but poor Han dynasty man. He lived humbly and frugally but became a cultural hero through his filiality and diligence. Legend has it that he married the daughter of the richest man in town, Shi

Chong. They lived happily and raised a family. Shi Chong had disowned his daughter before they got married and never saw her again. Later, when Shi Chong found out that Fan Dan and his daughter were earning a good living and had become wealthy, he set out to visit his daughter and Fan Dan. Shi Chong was quite impressed and was embarrassed at the same time because he had previously scorned Fan Dan. But as luck would have it, a year later, Fan Dan and his wife lost everything they had by helping victims of a natural disaster. They were still happy, even though they were now again living in poverty.

Xiang Yu (232–202 B.C.E.), a great general of the late Qin dynasty, was another cultural hero. Xiang Yu had won many difficult battles. The significance of Wumen's connecting Fan Dan with Xiang Yu in his verse comment is that Qingshui was also destitute, yet through intense practice, he had great power like General Xiang Yu. Although he had no way of earning even the simplest livelihood, he dared to contend with the richest of them. He dared to challenge Chan master Caoshan.

Although Qingshui was already advanced in Chan practice, he still sought out instructions. Most people who think that they have already accomplished great things will not humble themselves to others. But this is the spirit of a Chan practitioner: a beginner or one advanced in practice; everyone is the same. It doesn't really matter what you have—how long you have practiced or what kind of insights you have had—if you can, in an instant, be free from the shackles of having or not having, gaining and losing, being rich or poor, then anything you do will be a function of wisdom, of enlightenment.

The problem is that most of us are confined by what we know, what we experience, what we gain and lose. You need only examine your own life to see that nearly all of the vexations, emotional afflictions, challenges that you face come from your own sense of gaining and losing, having

and not having, wanting or rejecting something. Isn't it true that these define you and shape your wants and needs? Why is this so? Are you born with these values? Why do you allow them to constrict you? Longtime practitioners know the Buddhist teachings of emptiness and no-self and the basic core principle of detachment. They know that most of their troubles come from attachments to gaining and losing, having and not having—me, my, yours, and others. So they detach themselves from everything. Actually, the problem doesn't lie with these objects or values; the problem comes from our automatic identification with these things that govern all of our choices. We lose sight of the fact that these are just conventions, temporary phenomena that help us navigate through our daily life.

There is something so fundamentally liberating within you that naturally frees you from moment to moment. Yet you miss it and settle for more ideas and constructs. Even the teaching of emptiness or nonattachment is a construct that some attach to. People may mistake this inner freedom for some kind of blissful state such as nothingness or emptiness. Or if they are clear of wandering thoughts, they think that is emptiness. No, it is not. Emptiness is everything right now; it is the dynamic flow of our connectedness to everything; it is our natural ability to respond from moment to moment. It is fullness, connectedness, and relationships. It is the free response to the world, without being obstructed, without injecting a self into all situations, in everything that needs to be done.

People are usually so caught up in their knowledge and experience of what they know and don't know that all of their responses are filtered through their opinions, discriminations, experiences, and the way they compartmentalize things. Their responses come from the way they have been conditioned; they respond to things in a certain way, unintentionally, without awareness. They are

not truly responding, just filtering information, caught up with habit patterns, words, language, and construct. This is responding with attachment.

People also live in a world that conditions them into thinking they lack something, that they are inadequate. For example, you see in magazines what beautiful people are supposed to look like, and you try to live up to that image because you think you should look like that. Television programs show houses of celebrities—all the bling, bling they have and you don't have. Chan tells us that you lack nothing. But it is hard to have confidence in the thought that you lack nothing.

See through the veil of the very mechanism and habits that drive you, that shape your opinions, discriminations, and experiences and the way you relate to the world. Don't mistake them for who you are. This mistaken identity is the culprit preventing you from seeing your true nature. It causes many problems and much grief in life. So as beginning practitioners, you should not think in terms of being beginners—let that go; likewise, seasoned practitioners should not think that they have acquired much experience—they need to let that go. The point of practice is for you to understand what is *before* the notion of being a beginning or a seasoned practitioner, to understand who you are before these constructs, before you get mistakenly involved with grasping conditions. If you can do this, you will see that you are already full—that you have already drunk three bowls of master Qingyuan's finest home-brewed wine. As long as the illusion that you still lack something is there, you will continue to seek.

As a Chan practitioner, practice hard but do not entertain ideas of gaining and losing, having and lacking. Don't mistake what arises in meditation as me or mine, self or others. Please don't turn your practice into some fixed ideal of this or that. Sit, accept, and open to what is already within. If you get caught up with constructs and ideas, you

will be stuck. Your true nature is free like the air you breathe—unobstructed, yet filling all spaces. Your life is also like that.

As long as you hold on to fixed opinions, discriminations, experiences, you suffer the consequences of your own attachment. You lose sight of the obvious. You can't see the fullness of possibilities, of blessings and meaning. You cannot see that things are actually free. I was recently at some friends' house. The couple was telling us how they met and eventually got married. The Japanese friend came to the United States in December 1999 on a visit, not only to see her husband-to-be, who was living in New York, but also to go to Times Square to witness that world-famous crystal ball drop on New Year's Eve and ring in the year 2000.

People from all over the world come to see that ball drop; they start forming lines in Times Square as early as 8:00 a.m. on December 31. One problem is that people must hold their urine for a great many hours, as there is no store open. Many wear adult diapers or urine bags. If one steps out of the line to find a bathroom, one will lose one's spot and won't be able to come back. So our friend came all the way from Japan to see the ball drop. She and her fiancé were in line from 8:00 a.m. that day. By 11:30 p.m., he couldn't stand being there any longer and said, "Let's go home!" Our Japanese friend got really upset: "We've been here all day and you want to go home *now*?" The man was older and tired. They went home.

Although this event had taken place a number of years before she related it to us and she could now talk about it in a seemingly lighthearted way, I could see that she was still a little upset that her then future husband had wanted to go home only minutes before the ball dropped. Her fixed idea about seeing the ball drop had taken hold of her all of those years, and she couldn't get free of it. I said to her, "Perhaps you should think of it in another way: It's

precisely because you went home when you did that you can tell this wonderful story now. That's what makes it so funny. Had you had the same experience as everybody else had, your story would not be so special. It would be the same as thousands of others' who saw the ball drop after hours of waiting. But you had a unique experience, leaving Times Square at 11:30 p.m., after waiting there the whole day. That's what makes it such a fabulous story." The young woman thought about this and said, "Yes, thank you!"

Sometimes we categorize some of our experiences as negative, and we carry the feeling for the rest of our life. Similarly, our traumatic experiences of the past have already happened—they cannot change. However, their meaning continues to change—if you allow it. You can use your painful experience to help other people going through the same thing rather than carry it around on your shoulders as a burden. People who hang on to their negative experiences are forever bound by their traumas but also by their fixed ideas of those experiences. What seem to be difficult experiences may turn out to be blessings. What appears to be good fortune now may not be so in the future. You should not attach to your ideas of whatever you are experiencing in life.

The strength of your hold on ideas can be diminished through practice. The more you practice correctly, with the right attitude of not getting caught up with gaining and losing, having and not having, the more you are able to be free and realize that, in each and every moment, you are already drinking the best home-brewed wine of Chan.

CASE 11

Zhaozhou Discerns the Hermits

Zhaozhou went to a hermit's place and asked, "Is there? Is there?" The hermit held up his fist. Zhaozhou said, "Shallow water is not a place to dock a big ship." And he left.

Zhaozhou went to another hermit's place and asked, "Is there? Is there?" The hermit also held up his fist. Zhaozhou said, "Able to give and able to take; capable of killing and capable of saving." He made obeisance.



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Both raised their fists. Why is one affirmed and the other denied? Tell me: Where is the fault? If you can utter a turning word here, then you can see that Zhaozhou's tongue has no bone in it. He can hold up and put down freely. While this is so, these two hermits have also exposed Zhaozhou; they saw right through him. If you say that one hermit was better than the other, you do not have the eye

to investigate and learn. If you say that there is no better or worse, you also do not have the eye to investigate and to learn.

Eyes like shooting stars,
Conditions like lightning.
The blade that kills;
The sword that brings life.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

This is another case involving Zhaozhou. Here we meet him during his years of sojourning to various places to sharpen his understanding of Chan, after his teacher Nanquan had passed away. In this story, there is something extraordinary in his confrontation with these hermits.

Zhaozhou lived at a time of great turmoil, of political persecution of Buddhism, of burning of temples—a destruction much greater than what Tibet has witnessed in the twentieth century. He lived at a time when Buddhism was practically wiped out. All the monasteries were destroyed; monks were laicized. People fled. That is one of the reasons Zhaozhou was sojourning in the mountains during that time of upheaval and persecution. He spent twenty years visiting different teachers who had fled to mountains to hide and live as hermits. They had been forced to give up their monastic vows. Although many of the doctrinal schools of Buddhism basically collapsed, Chan flourished. Because Chan monks adapted, they survived and continued to deepen their practice. Their influence became far-reaching. When the next emperor came to revive Buddhism, Chan came back with great force.

Any situation is an opportunity to practice, even people who persecute you. The wonderful thing is to live freely in all situations. People provide you with opportunities to cultivate patience and compassion. They serve as a mirror to expose your vexations, limitations, anguish, and shortcomings. Zhaozhou embodies the spirit of Chan and teaches you that in your modern context, you are facing the same situations as he was.

Another extraordinary fact about Zhaozhou is how he approached life. In his *Discourse Record*, his teachings are always succinct, to the point. One can see that in his sojourning, when learning from different masters, he always cut to the chase: “Is there?” “Is there?” Is there what? Is there anyone there? He is referring to something much deeper and what matters most in your practice—your realization. Have you realized your original nature, that which is free from vexations, limitations, anguish, and shortcomings?

Imagine that you are a hermit, meditating, practicing in your hut. A guy barges in the door, shouting, “Is there?” “Is there?” You know what he is asking, otherwise you could have said, “Did you knock?” “Is there tea?” “Yeah, I have tea.” You know exactly that Zhaozhou is asking if you have realized what is most important to a practitioner: Have you realized who you are?

For one who has had an awakening, practice is not over and self-grasping is not completely gone. No. Continued practice is necessary because self-attachment will reemerge. Self-attachment is like having sunburned skin. When it manifests, you immediately know, and it doesn’t feel good. Zhaozhou had practiced for forty years and still needed to study with other teachers to deepen his practice. If you have had an experience of awakening and continue to practice, you will be very sensitive to your own vexations when they arise. You will know when the self is present and

also when it is present in others. If people don't practice, they will not be sensitive to this.

When Chan practitioners meet, at least in Zhaozhou's case, they don't go through the usual formalities of "Hello, my name is So-and-So; I'd like to study with you. Perhaps we can exchange some ideas." Zhaozhou just opened the door and said, "Is there?" The Chinese phrase here is: *youmo, youmo*. In Chinese this has the flavor of: Have it or don't have it? Exist or not exist? Present or absent? In Chinese you don't need a subject; verbs can stand alone as a complete sentence. Very often in classical Chinese language, a very beautiful language, the subject is absent. Imagine growing up in this linguistic environment in which you don't even have to think about "I" all the time.

So when Zhaozhou asked, the first hermit responded with a fist. Zhaozhou said, "Shallow water is not a place to dock a big ship." What is he talking about? He wasn't being arrogant, saying, for instance, "My boat is too heavy or too big to dock here." He was just saying "Thank you," and left. The second hermit had the exact same expression—he, too, raised a fist. But to that monk's expression Zhaozhou said, "Wow! You can take and give; kill and bring things to life," and he paid his respects. The story ends there.

Upon hearing this, you may think, "Hum, maybe it was the gesture, the body language; perhaps it was the facial expression that made Zhaozhou act the way he did. Perhaps the first monk was still in doubt when he raised his fist and the second monk was more assured." This would be the wrong approach to understanding this case. This is why Wumen gave us a hint when he basically said, "Both hermits responded the same way. Why did Zhaozhou approve of one and disapprove of the other? Where is the flaw, where is the problem?" And that's the key. This is the critical phrase: What is the difference between the first monk and the second monk? What is the difference? Meditate on that like this: Where is the flaw? Where is the

error? And pushing this even further: Why did the two hermits see through Zhaozhou?

The way to try to get a handle on this case is to keep questioning it. If you meditate like this, you will generate the sense of great questioning. If you rely on logic, you will get nowhere. If you think that one hermit is better than the other, you don't have what it takes to investigate Chan. If you think that they're equal, you also don't have what it takes to investigate Chan. This is the generosity of Wumen. He forces you to have nowhere to advance, nowhere to retreat.

Eyes like shooting stars,

This refers to Śākyamuni Buddha's experience when, after six years of extreme self-inflicted asceticism, he still had not experienced enlightenment until, ready to give up, he looked up in the sky and saw a shooting star. At that moment, everything dropped away—all attachments, all self-referentiality. He was enlightened. He then understood the workings of causes and conditions. Enlightenment is not something willed, not something gained. If something can be gained or had, you can lose it.

Conditions like lightning.

The "conditions" here refers to all that is within you and everything out there—all things in themselves are the wonderful interconnectedness of conditions. These connections are exactly where they need to be. Chan has expressions like "two arrows meeting in midair." There is no luck involved here. That is how precise and accurate the natural workings of conditions are—a stimulus and a response, like an image and its reflection in a mirror. Your true nature is like a mirror reflecting. Does a mirror ever think, "Perhaps I should reflect this way or reflect that

way?" An image comes in front of it and it is immediately reflected. In fact, if the mirror is not warped and does not have too much dust on it, it reflects exactly what is in front of it. What makes a reflection inaccurate, hazy, is our self-grasping.

**The blade that kills;
The sword that brings life.**

This blade is not a blade that really kills people; it is the blade of wisdom that cuts through ignorance. Whatever sentient beings need, an awakened person responds right away to whatever is needed at the moment. When I was a young novice, I used to be proud of my meditation experiences and insights. As I mentioned earlier, my teacher, Master Sheng Yen's way of teaching me was to simply squash that arrogance. He would often ask me do a task, then publicly embarrass me or find opportunities to scold me, "What did you do that for, you idiot!" Everyone would laugh at me as a result. My immediate reaction used to be to reply, "You told me to do that!" I would argue in my mind about how wrong he was. In truth, he was right. My arrogance needed to be squashed, killed. He reflected exactly what I needed to see: my own attachment. His compassion gave me a life.

Chan teachings can kill and give life. What is killed is your ignorance and attachment; what is brought to life is your wisdom life. There is no fixed way to teach or practice. One can practice in the mountains like a hermit, or one can practice in one's office in daily life. Everything is an opportunity. How are you able to bring your true nature back to life? Are you putting to death your own wisdom life in daily situations? If a challenge comes and you say, "Here, talk to my hand, I'm just going to ignore you"—then that's killing a situation. If you think thus, you definitely don't have what it takes to practice Chan.

Now that I have explained the basic gist of the story, what is left is whether you have it or don't. What is it that you need to have, what is it that you don't have? Is it even possible to own it? Is it even possible to lose it? In your own life, why is it that in one situation one response is accepted, and in another, the same response is rejected? Are you killing opportunities in your life? Or are you experiencing them to bring your wisdom to life? Why is it that when you respond to one thing, to one person it is helpful but to another it is not so helpful?

The way to understand this case is to apply it to yourself. The single most important thing is your buddha-nature, your potential to be awakened. It is that which animates everything; it is the nature of emptiness, selflessness. Without emptiness you can't be full. This cup is empty because it is made up of everything that is not a cup. Without selflessness, you cannot be who you are now. All the challenges in life are the shooting stars and mirror conditions like lightning. They bring you back to life, bring you closer to your true nature.

External circumstances, appearances, your internal judgments and notions—all are like the fist that is held up by the hermit. Is your boat able to dock? Or is it perhaps so big there is nowhere it can dock? Are you able to see that these situations are both favorable conditions that kill your ignorance and opportunities to give life to your wisdom? What is the difference between the two monks' response in the story? Take a look at responses that you receive in daily life and your own reactions to them.

If you are unable to use the opportunities in life as practice, then ask yourself, "Why is it that although both monks had the same response, one monk's was accepted and the other was rejected?" "Why is it so, why?" Or next time you have vexations, ask yourself, "Is there? Is there?" Let these questions exhaust themselves until you have nowhere to go, nowhere to dock. Then this gong'an will

come alive. If you are able to see through the situations of life, then you'll see through the absurdity of Zhaozhou's words and realize that his tongue has no bone in it. You will go beyond his affirmation and denial, having and no having, existing and not existing, present and absent. You will be free.

CASE 12

Ruiyan Calls His Master

Every day, Master Ruiyan would call to himself, “Master!” Then he would answer himself, “Yes?” Then he would say, “Be wakeful! Be alert!” “I will.” “From now on, don’t fall for people’s deceptions.” “No, never!”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

Old man Ruiyan is both the buyer and the seller, creating all sorts of facades of gods and demons. Why use them? One who calls, one who answers. One who is awake, one who doesn’t fall for deceptions. If you recognize him, you are still not right. If you try to imitate him, you’re holding wild-fox views.

People studying the way do not know the real
Because they accept only their old discriminating
consciousness as themselves,
Which is the root of birth and death since endless
kalpas.

Fools call this the original person.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Ruiyan lived during the Tang dynasty and studied with Chan master Yantou Quanhua (828-87). In this case, who is Ruiyan calling? Is it "Ruiyan Shiyuan" (820-933)? Do you think he is calling himself? Do you think he is walking around every day talking to himself, or using his calling as a reminder for himself? If you think so, then you have missed the point of the story.

Every Chan master has his or her own style of teaching. The context of this story is that when Ruiyan passed away, one of his students went to another Chan master, who asked him, "Where are you from?" He answered, "I studied with Ruiyan." "Why are you here if you studied with Ruiyan?" "My teacher passed away." "Demonstrate his teachings to me." Ruiyan's student said, "My teacher would often ascend to the throne in the dharma hall and address himself: 'Ruiyan?' 'Yes!' 'Don't be deceived by others!' 'No, never!' He would begin his talks like this." We know that this was not a senile old man talking to himself. It was his teaching style.

You can also rest assured that his teaching was not about some mindfulness practice or some kind of self-reminder to the effect that when you encounter difficulties in your life, you recall the teaching that all things are illusory, that they come about through causes and conditions, that everything is impermanent.

Certainly, it is necessary and helpful to incorporate the buddhadharma in your daily routine, even using it as a mirror to reflect your own life: Do I do things that I know I

shouldn't? For many of us, not only do we do things we shouldn't do, but more, our own thoughts sometimes contradict each other or may even be harmful to us. You need not worry about other people deceiving you; your own thoughts do this just fine. Harmful can include wallowing in thoughts of self-pity, depression, self-aggrandizement, and craving and aversion. You pour all of your energy into your thoughts, so that you become completely drowned. Your own dark thoughts pull you deeper and deeper. An interesting question is: Why do you do this? Who is the master here? Who is the one who governs your life, makes decisions about this and that, about right and wrong?

At this level, you practice to try to be master of yourself and not be pushed and pulled by fleeting thoughts and emotions. Instead, you uphold the precepts as a guide, a principle, not as commandments that limit you but like a mirror that reflects what needs to be done, or like a light tower at night, in the middle of the ocean, to guide you through the dangerous waves. With the precepts, you learn to do what is right in different situations: Will this action lead to more suffering, or will it lead to peace and happiness?

However, if you use buddhadharma as a ruler to measure yourself, to feel bad about yourself, then your practice is like putting on a facade, especially if you use ideas to suppress wandering thoughts, to suppress desire, jealousy, and hatred. This is not practicing buddhadharma at all. This is a kind of spiritual substitution practice. For this reason, Wumen says, "If you try to imitate him, you're holding wild-fox views."

Wild fox is an expression in Chan Buddhism that describes those cunning, witty practitioners who have read a lot about Chan, who act like they're enlightened. As discussed earlier, the fox in East Asian culture is understood negatively, as a trickster. So Chan masters use this metaphor to describe practitioners who act like they're

enlightened but who, in truth, are not. These practitioners are usually intelligent; they have read a lot and know all the right answers. If you ask them a particular gong'an, they will respond immediately. Ask them about buddhadharma and they will talk about nonduality and emptiness. In Zen there are lots of folks like that. If asked, "Who is the master?" they may give a shout, "*Katz!*" Or they will hit the floor with their palms. These acts mimic past Chan masters such as Linji or Deshan.

Wumen talks about "facades of gods and demons." Ruiyan plays both roles, the god and the demon, the master and the disciple. If you think he is suggesting that there is a master beneath the veil of the facades, that there is some true person, a true identity that is you, then you have fallen into delusion. For this reason, Wumen says, "If you recognize him, you are still not right." This is like a person who thinks that enlightened people should act a certain way and so walks around acting like an enlightened person.

You cloak your true nature with facades or veils. These include your roles in life as father, mother, friend, perfectionist, or failure. Sometimes the way you behave is just horrible; other times you are saintly. The issue, of course, is not about these roles or how you behave. The problem lies in taking them as real, as fixed, as who you are. You have to search deep within and be utterly honest with yourself and ask who you really are. There is no deeper inner self or true self to speak of here; nor should you mimic others you think are better than you. Wumen suggests:

**People studying the way do not know the real
Because they accept only their old discriminating
consciousness as themselves,
Which is the root of birth and death since
endless kalpas.
Fools call this the original person.**

The discriminating consciousness here refers to all the facades you wear in daily life. Of course you should take up your responsibilities, your roles in daily life. Yet sometimes your attachment is so ingrained that questioning who you are does not even occur to you. The way you behave in life is all that you have ever known. When you encounter a view opposite to the one you hold, you say it's the other person who is wrong and you are right. When you are challenged—when your views, opinions, or feelings are threatened—you believe that what you hold on to defines you; it is what makes up who you are. To deny that is scary.

Yet you are so much more. You are so much more precious, so much freer than fleeting emotions and changing views, which are precisely the workings of discriminating consciousness. If you identify this as yourself, then that is the root of birth and death, *samsāra*—the cycle of birth and death.

I recently attended a talk on Buddhism. The speaker, not a Buddhist, described the Chan realization of no-mind as an annihilation of consciousness so as to awaken to the “oneness of the true self.” That's neither the correct view of buddhadharma nor the Chan position on no-mind. Some people believe that consciousness is deluded, fleeting, and that beneath this superficial layer there is some kind of entity that is beyond or behind this changing facade. They call this the unchanging self. One of the greatest problems this leads to is an attachment to something in the abstract, something that is beyond space and time. So, to naturally come out of this kind of view, we need to get rid of space and time, to get rid of that which is changing, that which is deluded. This would be the natural implication that leads to the duality. It can be quite dangerous, as it can lead people to shun society, disengage with it, since, after all, the world is just an illusion. From the perspective of Chan, this is just another illusion.

There is nothing behind consciousness, nor can you trust this consciousness. This “master” is not someone or something that is an unchanging entity behind all of your discursive thoughts and fleeting emotions. Since you cannot trust your spiritual well-being to your thoughts and feelings, to your discriminating consciousness, then what can you trust? That is how you should meditate on this case: “Who is this master?” This places you in a position where you cannot attach to any notion of master or self. This is a great place to be, where you can neither advance nor retreat.

Similarly, you should not think of all the roles that you play, identifying all of your judgments and feelings, as your self. When you go home, you’re a father; when you are among friends, you are a friend; when you are among kids, you are a parent; when you are before your teacher, you are a student. When you are angry, when you are happy, when you are jealous, when you are generous, you mustn’t think that behind all of these selves there is some kind of fixed identity and that if somehow you can get rid of some of them, you will find the true one or you will become greatly enlightened. That would be wrong.

How should you proceed in your practice? Here’s an example. In the Yuan dynasty there was a great Chan master, Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238–96), who had a very solid practice. He always followed the precepts and was mindful day and night. He went to study with Chan master Xueyan Zuqin (1210–87). Xueyan asked, “What’s your practice?” Gaofeng replied such and such and mentioned that he was his own master. The teacher said, “Oh? You are your own master! During the day, are you able to be your master?” Very confidently, Gaofeng said yes. The master asked, “Under all circumstances, in favorable conditions such as when someone praises you, or in challenging conditions, are you able to be your own master?” Gaofeng replied, “Yes.” Then the master asked, “How about in sleep? Are

you able to be the master when you sleep?" Gaofeng said, "Yes!" He could control his dreams, remain mindful, and not break precepts. Then the master laughed, "Congratulations! But what about when the master is absent? Where is he? Who is the master then?" That left Gaofeng dumbfounded. He had never thought: "Who is the master? Who is this master?"

In Gaofeng's puzzlement, Xueyan said, "Just that! Stay with *that*!" Gaofeng couldn't sleep; he tossed and turned all night long, asking himself, "Who's the master? Who's the master? Who the hell is the master? Who's preventing me from doing this, from doing that? Who's upholding the precepts? Who's having no wandering thoughts? What happens if he is not there? If he is not there, what's left? Absent? Present? Exist? Not exist? Who is he?"

Master Xueyan had given him a wonderful present. The next day Gaofeng went to Xueyan, who just beat him, which pushed further his sense of wonderment. This lasted for several weeks, until one night while lying down, deep in his wonderment, Gaofeng's pillow dropped to the ground, forcing his head to jolt. Pillows in those premodern Chan monasteries were not like our modern down- or cotton-filled pillows but were hard, as they were made of bound bamboo sticks. The pillow made a crisp sound as it hit the floor. As soon as Gaofeng heard it, he became completely enlightened.

Now, you can try throwing your pillow down and see if that will help you reach enlightenment. No, it won't. You must go through the same diligent practice that Gaofeng went through. Or you can take the shortcut and just directly ask: "Who is the master?" But please don't accept the answers that may come up. They are merely the workings of discriminating consciousness—more facades that delude you. If you think you have found your true self, original person, or true master, then you are dead wrong. Just keep on asking. This kind of shortcut practice is most

effective in intense seven- or ten-day Chan retreats where you can bracket your daily life and completely dive into this practice. That's why it is called a shortcut.

In daily life, however, I suggest that you take the first approach, where Gaofeng was a master of himself day and night. Follow the precepts; sustain your mindfulness throughout the day; don't waste your time dreaming of this or that at night. When you make yourself ripe for intense practice, you can then dive directly into working on the huatou: Who's the master?

You are not any one of these facades—not even the one where you think you're a Chan practitioner. These are not the culprit. The culprit is your attachment. Don't try to get rid of wandering thoughts or delusion. Simply ask, until you find yourself in a conundrum of not knowing, in a state of great wonderment. We call this the fundamental questioning or the original investigation. It does not matter if you practice silent illumination or huatou or gong'an or mindfulness of breath. This wanting to know who you are must always be present, relatively speaking; it is something that you return to. And if you think you found it, let me reread from *Wumen's* commentary again, "If you recognize him, you are still not right. If you try to imitate him, you're holding wild-fox views."

CASE 13

Deshan Carries His Bowl

One day Deshan left the hall carrying his eating bowl. Xuefeng said, "The bell and drum have not sounded yet; where are you taking your bowl, old man?" Deshan heard it and returned to the abbot's quarter.

Xuefeng described this to Yantou. Yantou said, "Deshan, who is supposedly great, does not understand the last word."

When Deshan heard about this, he sent his attendant to fetch Yantou and asked him, "So you don't approve of me?" Yantou secretly whispered his intentions to Deshan. Deshan heard it and left it at that.

The next day when Deshan went up to the teacher's seat, sure enough, the way he taught was not the same as usual. In front of the monks' hall, Yantou clapped his hands and laughed loudly. He said, "This old man does have the last word. From now on, no one in the world will be able to cope with him."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

As for the last word, neither Yantou nor Deshan could ever dream of it. Examine this closely for the sake of posterity. Those two are like puppets at a makeshift show.

If you recognize the first word,
Then you will know the last word.
Last and first
Are not the word.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

The case involves three different Chan masters. The first is Deshan Xuanjian (782–865), who is one of the greatest Chan masters in the Chan tradition. People called him “Diamond Zhou” because his commentaries on the *Diamond Sūtra*, the *Vajracchedikā*, were so learned. The *Diamond Sūtra* is quite short, but Deshan’s commentaries are quite long—many, many chapters. He obviously had a lot of words to say about this short text. Here’s a story of how he came to understand the futility of words.

Chan Buddhism at this time was just a budding regional movement in south and west China, but it was causing a lot of ruckus in the whole Buddhist community. Deshan was originally a sūtra commentator; he went down south with a satchel full of his commentaries on the *Diamond Sūtra*. He was ready to teach those Chan practitioners what Buddhism was all about. When he came to a southern town after a long day’s travel, he went to a small street stand. A small, gray-haired elderly woman was there selling

desserts. Desserts in Chinese are called *dianxin*, which literally means “delighting the heart-mind.” When Deshan asked for some *dianxin*, the elderly woman asked, “You’re not from around here, are you?” Deshan answered, “No, I’m from the north, where people are educated.” The woman responded, “What is that you’re carrying?” He replied, “You wouldn’t understand, old lady; it’s my commentary to the *Diamond Sūtra*.” She went on, “Oh, so many scrolls, so heavy. . . . I have a question about this *sūtra*.” The woman went on: “The *Diamond Sūtra* says that the heart-mind cannot be attained in the past, present, or future. It is ungraspable. With regard to this *dianxin*, which one of your heart-minds wants it? If you can say something, you get a free dessert to delight your heart-mind.” Deshan just stood there, dumbfounded, ashamed. He decided to burn his commentary. He felt that if an old woman in this town could defeat him, of what use was this commentary with all of its words? Then he thought that there must be a Chan master in this town. So he asked the old woman about it. She named Chan master Longtan Chongxin (ca. 753–852), a master of the Caodong lineage. This man later became Deshan’s master.

Deshan could easily have answered the old woman’s question through Buddhist texts, but he was honest with himself. In your day-to-day life, isn’t it true that you have answers to everything? How often do you admit your own mistakes? Many of your survival tactics are quite slippery—so slippery that you actually believe you know it all. The old woman was asking something quite essential: What is the mind?

Deshan later studied hard with Longtan. One time he was conversing with Longtan deep into the night. He had all sorts of questions that he poured out to Longtan, until it reached a point when Longtan just said, “It’s getting late. You’d better return to your quarters.” Deshan, filled with unresolved questions, opened the door to the abbot’s room

and said, "Ah, it's getting dark out." Longtan said, "Well, then, let me give you a lantern." He lit it, saying, "Take it." Just as Deshan went to reach for it, Longtan blew out the light. At that moment Deshan gained complete enlightenment.

Have you ever noticed that while a candle can be quite bright, shining outward, right underneath it there's always a shadow? All of your words and concepts are like the light from the lantern, which shines outward but remains dark in the center. You may be quite smart with your ideas of things, but you are dark with regard to who you are. All of your questions about life, just like Deshan's questions, lead you further and further away from the place that needs the most light.

The second person in the case is Xuefeng Yicun (822-908). He was the kitchen monk. He first studied directly with Chan master Dongshan Liangjie, who, together with Caoshan Benji, founded the Caodong lineage (Jp., Sōtō school). Xuefeng had gained some understanding while practicing with Dongshan, but the latter told him, "Your causes and conditions are not here. Go see Deshan." So Xuefeng went to Deshan's congregation and practiced there. When he first met Deshan, he asked, "In the custom of your school that has come down from high antiquity, what teaching is used to instruct people?" Deshan replied, "Our tradition has no verbal expressions, nor does it have any *teaching* to give people." Xuefeng said, "Do I have any share of this matter then?" Xuefeng just whacked him with his staff, "What the hell are you saying?" In that instant, Xuefeng had his first breakthrough. Since Xuefeng had been the kitchen monk at Dongshan's monastery, when he left he took with him only his cooking utensils. Naturally when he studied under Deshan, he also became the kitchen monk.

One day Xuefeng was a little late, perhaps in preparing the food for lunch. The bell and drum mentioned here were

the signals for lunch in a monastery. Because the food wasn't prepared yet, no signals were sounded. Yet Deshan came to the cafeteria with his bowl in hand. Xuefeng said to Deshan, "The bell and drum did not sound yet. What are you doing here with your bowl?" Deshan was docile and went back. The next thing you hear, Xuefeng describes this to another master, Yantou Quanhua, who is a third figure and later became the teacher of Ruiyan, in case 12.

Yantou was already awakened, six years younger but senior to Xuefeng. We don't get the full story in this case, but the full context is that Xuefeng was somewhat arrogant when he related the story to Yantou: "I one-upped our Chan master today. After I told our abbot, Deshan, that it's not time for lunch, he just returned to his room." Xuefeng was quite proud that Deshan had nothing to say; he began spreading words around about how he put the abbot in his place.

Xuefeng didn't know that practitioners "left no trace" behind their actions. But here, there were a lot of traces left in Xuefeng's mind. He still held on to what had happened. Even though he'd already had an awakening experience, albeit a shallow one, in this instance his mind still dwelled in the past. When Yantou heard this, wanting to help his dharma brother, he set up a trap for him. "Ah, I guess you're right; Deshan, in his old age, he's lost it. He has become senile; he does not have the last word!" The word got around, not only Xuefeng's telling of what happened but especially Yantou's comment. Why? Because everyone knew that Yantou was awakened and what he said must be true. No one knew that Yantou was setting Xuefeng up. When Deshan found out from Yantou what his intentions were, the next day he gave a particularly splendid talk. Yantou pretended to be delighted and exclaimed, "Deshan does have the last word after all! All under heaven would not be able to cope with him."

This caused a big commotion. For whom? For Xuefeng. Xuefeng went to Deshan requesting an interview. He thought he would confess to the master, but little did he know that Deshan was sitting there waiting. So Xuefeng bowed, and just as he was about to open his mouth, Deshan grabbed the stick and *wham!* This caused more angst in Xuefeng, "Why did you hit me?" Deshan asked, "Why did you come here?" Xuefeng replied, "I came here for a question." Deshan replied, "That's a mistake!" Xuefeng held that in his heart. For years, even after Deshan passed away, he had not resolved this sense of questioning where was he wrong.

Later Yantou took Xuefeng under his wing. Yantou by this time was already deeply awakened. Before Deshan died, Yantou decided to leave, and Xuefeng tagged along. Xuefeng was still struggling with that incident, which became a natural great doubt, or irresolvable question for him. On their trip to Mount Ao in Hunan, whenever Xuefeng was meditating, Yantou would just go to sleep, purposely. Whenever Xuefeng wanted to ask about this question that bothered him, Yantou would pretend to be busy and avoid him. In time Xuefeng's sense of doubt or questioning grew bigger and bigger until he couldn't stand it anymore. One evening they stayed in a run-down, abandoned shrine to avoid a snowstorm. Xuefeng, as usual, was sitting all night; Yantou was prodding him, testing him: "Go to bed; you have to sleep; we have a long journey ahead of us tomorrow." Xuefeng replied, "I can't; I can't." "What do you mean, you can't? Go to bed and sleep. It's time to sleep, so sleep!" Xuefeng replied, "I have this unresolved problem inside me, preventing me from falling asleep all of this time that we've been traveling."

Yantou said, "So you have a problem; let's hear it." He got up, yawned, and then said, "What's your problem?" Xuefeng said, "It could be traced back all the way to when I was with Deshan. Remember that time when I thought I

had one-upped our master, Deshan? And then you came along and said he had the last word. I went to ask him what this was all about so I could repent; I was going to ask him other questions for instructions, but before I even opened my mouth he smacked me and asked me why had I come to him. I told him I had questions, and he said that was a mistake. I couldn't understand why." Yantou replied, "All of this crap you're telling me is just describing events; describing what you did, what you got, what you gained, what you understood, what you didn't understand. Who the hell has all of these questions?" Upon hearing that, Xuefeng's wonderment shattered; he was thoroughly awakened. Later he became a great Chan master in his own right and produced several influential disciples.

The effect of his wonderful great doubt lasted for years. As practitioners, this is extremely precious, because the whole point of gong'an or huatou practice is to generate this great doubt. The greater the sense of wonderment, the more thorough the awakening. Most practitioners remain in this state for maybe a few days or weeks, but Xuefeng was in this wonderment for years.

As for the last word, neither Yantou nor Deshan could ever dream of it. Examine this closely for the sake of posterity. Those two are like puppets at a makeshift show.

What kind advice! Wumen encourages you not to side with either of them or attach to any of their words. In practice you have to come to your own understanding of things. You have to know yourself through and through. No words or concepts will help you to do this. You must let go of them to truly understand that you are endowed with the precious gem of wisdom. How do you bring this wisdom to life? If you merely mimic others, you become like a puppet

on strings—you are not your own master. If you try to have the last word, you yourself will never know “*the word*.”

If people have something to say, they should say it from within. No need for mimicry or puppetry—no need to put up a performance for others to see. Yet how often do you behave for others to see? This is to shine the light of your lantern outwardly. Instead, turn your light around and shine it within. Everything that you do or say or think as a practitioner should genuinely come from yourself.

Yantou was truly a skillful teacher in this case. He planted a seed in Xuefeng that blossomed into a powerful enlightenment. That’s a beautiful thing that Chan masters do. Their sole task is not to answer their students’ questions conceptually but to instill deep within them the desire to find their own answer to things—to illuminate their own minds and see their own self-nature. One of the strategies that Chan masters have always used is to draw the person out of his or her shell, and then they can go for the kill, if you will.

If you had a question and your teacher were to answer right away, it would be like deflating the power that you’d accumulated—like blowing air into a balloon and letting it out. This would never lead to the great questioning mind, that sense of urgency of wanting to resolve your existential dilemma: Who am I? So a teacher’s job is to create problems where there are none. Awakening can be likened to a flame that a skillful teacher keeps fanning until one day it gets so strong that at the right moment, with just one sudden blow, the teacher puts it out once and for all. Or it’s like blowing air into a balloon until it gets huge, and then, with one prick of a needle, it suddenly bursts. In such a moment, the student will suddenly drop all attachments. This takes hard daily practice.

In daily life it is important to examine yourself: when you meet difficult situations, is your light shining outwardly or inwardly? Do you still have that urgency to try to explain

yourself, justify your view, and get the last word? Do you see the mechanisms of your own vexations when they arise, and do you justify them? If you are unsure whether you have this tendency or not, please try to practice this for just one week. This will be your homework. Whenever you think you have the right answer and others disagree, observe how you feel at the moment. Is there dis-ease? Are you uneasy? If you think you have the correct answer to things, then you have killed that situation and nothing can be learned. While this is just a rudimentary level of Chan practice, a lot of practitioners, unfortunately, don't even know how to do this. I hope you can practice this for a week to get a sense of what I'm talking about.

Practicing in this way, all situations in your life will become opportunities. Your practice will not be limited to sitting. It doesn't matter how people treat you; it doesn't matter what other people project on you; it doesn't matter if you are right or wrong. Don't try to have the last word.

Right and wrong create vexations. If you have vexations, you are already wrong, already in bondage. Even if you are doing some virtuous deed such as protesting to save the earth or help the poor, if you have vexations, you are wrong. Your mind is not at peace. I'm definitely not saying you should be passive. The point is: have no vexations—don't inject your self-grasping into the tasks you do.

CASE 14

Nanquan Kills a Cat

Master Nanquan saw that the monks from the eastern and western quarters were arguing over a cat, so he held it up and said, "If any of you can say something about it, you save the cat. If you cannot say anything, it will be killed." No one in the assembly could reply, so Nanquan killed the cat.

That evening Zhaozhou returned from a trip outside the monastery. Nanquan recounted the story to him. Zhaozhou then took off his sandals, put them on top of his head, and walked out. Nanquan said, "If you had been there, the cat would have been saved."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Now, tell me, when Zhaozhou put his sandals on top of his head, what did he mean? If you can utter a turning word here and now, then you will see Nanquan did not carry out the imperative in vain. Otherwise, danger!

If Zhaozhou had been there,
He would have carried out this imperative in reverse:
He would have snatched the knife away,
And Nanquan would be begging for his life.

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GUO GU'S COMMENT

You know that not killing is the first of the five precepts in Buddhism. The second precept is not stealing. The third is no sexual misconduct. For monastics, it's no sexual conduct. The fourth is not lying or deceiving others. The fifth one is no alcohol or addictive drugs. Moreover, it is against the monastic precepts to own an animal, much less dispute about cats. Owning animals is considered uncompassionate. So from the very start, even before the monks were arguing about the cat, they have already erred. Owning animals is not compassionate because animals should be free; they should not be restrained for one's own pleasure. Some people may say, "I love pets!" Yes, you love pets, but what does this have to do with the animal? I'm not advocating not having pets. When I was in college, living in Chinatown above a temple, we had a very nice cat, as well as mice and rats that freely roamed. The cat would simply look at them as if to say, "How are you guys doing?" Irrespective of temple rules about holding animals, many temples had them. Owning and not owning a cat is not the issue here. Neither is killing and not killing.

Buddhist monasteries are typically divided in two: the eastern and western quarters. One day, monks from these two quarters were arguing about the ownership of the temple cat. Perhaps the temple had an infestation of mice or other rodents, so each quarter wanted the cat.

Nanquan seized the opportunity. He grabbed the cat, raised it, and said to the monks, "Since you are arguing, if you can say something, the cat will be spared. Otherwise, it will be killed." Nanquan Puyuan was the teacher of Zhaozhou, who is figured in this present case. We have already met both men in case 7. Allow me to give a few more details about Nanquan. With his parents' permission, Nanquan left home at age ten to become a monk. A novice for many years, he studied the scriptures and the *vinaya* (code of discipline) until he received full ordination. He was a highly learned master who studied the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* as well as the Madhyamaka teachings on emptiness, but eventually gave it all up to practice with Chan master Mazu Daoyi. After his awakening, at about age thirty-eight, a couple of years before Mazu passed away, he went to Mount Nanquan to deepen his practice. He remained there for thirty years without leaving his hut. It was only later, when practitioners found out about him and sought him out to teach, that he began to do so. He always taught his students to go beyond grasping and rejecting. This case is no different.

You may think of this story as a teaching about ethics or even a teaching about letting go. If you think along these lines, puzzled about why Nanquan would do this, then you are going about it the wrong way. The cat would already be dead. All of these stories, or gong'ans, including this particular one, where one may question whether Nanquan actually killed a cat or not, are methods of practice. Gong'ans present something quite relevant to your own life. So you cannot think of them from an intellectual viewpoint such as, in this case, what the cat or the killing represent, or worse, what the ethical teaching is here.

Some Zen teachers say that the cat represents buddha-nature, therefore they comment on buddha-nature: for instance, that it cannot be killed. Other teachers will focus on the cutting itself instead of on the cat. For example,

Dōgen comments, “One cut, one piece.” Usually, when we cut something in half, it becomes two pieces. How can it still be one piece? Does it mean it’s not cut? Dōgen sets up another gong’an for you to ponder.

I disagree with all of them. This case is not about ethics, nor is it about attachments. So what is it about? Please do not stir up wandering thoughts, conceptualizing in your head, thinking, “If it is not about A and not about B, how about C?” If you think about this case in this way, it will lead you further away from the significance of this story.

Isn’t it true that in each moment of your life, you tend to make decisions based on yes or no, right or wrong, killing or giving life? In doing so, you become bound by your experiences, your knowledge; or worse, you simply go with your feelings at the moment. Nanquan, in holding up the cat, was not holding it himself. He was not holding it up, asking people about buddha-nature; he was not going to kill or not kill. In that moment, he was reenacting the real-life scenarios of each moment of your life, each moment of your decisions. Whenever you make a decision to do something, whenever you make a choice, what do you rely on? That is how to examine this case. If there is anything you rely on, you have killed the cat. If you are relying on anything, you are killing the person you are interacting with, the task you are doing, or whatever situation you find yourself in. With no hesitation, Nanquan shows you how to live your life.

The key to practice is twofold: not to rely on anything and not to seek anything. This is not to say that you become stoic or inactive or that you practice some Daoist philosophical notion of nonaction. In life you rely on your knowledge to work, to relate with other people, to help those around you, to help your cat. But most people, in the process of using their past experiences and their knowledge, are not really using them. They are simply enslaved by them—enslaved by right and wrong, good and

bad, benefit or harm. Again, I'm not promoting the idea that concepts and experiences are useless or that feelings are useless. However, you should know that in order to truly use them you have to be free from them. The slightest reliance on them leads to bondage; the slightest seeking pushes whatever you seek further and further away. If you don't understand these principles, then Nanquan would have carried out the imperative in vain, and as Wumen said, your life would be in danger.

Why? You need only to examine the way you live your life to know. Are you free? Do you feel a sense of lack? How do you respond to those around you, to family and friends, to situations? How do you respond from the depth of your being without reliance, without seeking? That's the task of the practitioner. To live your life on that level is truly difficult. That is why this is a difficult gong'an to realize. You have to know the ins and outs of all of the mechanisms, the patterns of thoughts and feelings through which you operate, through which you navigate in daily life. Just reflect on how you feel when you meet a new person—automatically, your mind churns. You are compartmentalizing, categorizing: "This is a good person; that's a bad person." You are categorizing or judging that person by the way he is dressed or by the way she looks. Based on what? What are you relying on for these judgments? If you are relying on your experiences, feelings, intuitions, then you are killing the cat. You are killing the person you are with and the situation you find yourself in. That is the scenario of your life. How sad is that!

You filter the whole world in this way, and *kill* everything in sight. How can anything live? So first you must expose your habits of killing. You first have to turn on the light in the room of your heart, discover just how thorough this pattern is through which you process everything, moment to moment. If you're not careful, not only do you put yourself in danger, you also place others in great peril.

Aren't you always putting those closest to you in danger in difficult situations?

If Nanquan were here today, perhaps he would not hold up a cat—especially not in front of the animal rights people—but he would hold up a knife to the dearest person in your life and ask: “Say something or else I will cut him [or her] in two!” How would you respond? How would you respond without relying and seeking? Or perhaps he would hold up something that you love, such as your car, your treasure, your bankbook, your new 4G cell phone, and say: “Say something or else I will cut it in two!”

Compassion, love, and generosity must be part of your practice, but ultimately, you must face that single moment, the realization of the true meaning of these teachings. What are true compassion, love, and generosity? Why can't we realize them in our lives? What are the steps to overcome the difficulties we have? The way to integrate buddhadharma in your life is to engage with what I call the “four-step program” of facing, embracing, responding, and then finally letting go of problems. All of the Buddhist teachings encourage you to face your problems. Once you can face them, you have to embrace them, then respond to them, and eventually let them go. There are many Buddhist teachings that show you how to cultivate these four steps appropriately in life. If you're angry, you meditate on loving-kindness. If you're covetous, you meditate on generosity. These teachings are there to help you, for example, to transform you first from a neurotic person to a “normal” person. Once you become a normal person—you who can face problems, embrace them, respond to them—then you should be able to let go of whatever problems you have. To be able to let go of them is to be truly compassionate, loving, and generous. But you have to go through these steps in this order. Otherwise whatever you do may just be worsening the problem.

The fact is, whatever you cannot let go of will become a source of pain for you and others. This is death. If you cannot let go of those you love—if you try to possess them—you will unintentionally harm them. But if you can let go, then you can truly love—without self-interest, self-referentiality. This is to give life.

There is no fixed amount of time you need in order to go through the four stages of facing, embracing, responding, and then finally letting go in order to live the life of wisdom and compassion. All four stages can happen in an instant. The point is, to see yourself and your actions in daily life clearly, you must first be able to turn the light around. All scenarios that come your way are opportunities for you to save the cat. If you can save the cat, then it's all good. If you can't, you'd better practice! And practice doesn't mean patching gold leaf on a smelly, filthy toilet to make the outside look good—some people are all about “being Zen” on the outside. Nor is it about becoming compulsive about cleaning the smelly toilet—some people engage in practice like there's no tomorrow; they take vexations as real. As long as you do that, vexations will always bind you. Practice is also not about denying the toilet. People of this type always mouth “emptiness and nonduality,” proclaiming that life is like an illusion, a fabrication of the mind. All talk—no practice!

As for Zhaozhou's response in this story, putting a pair of sandals on his head, that's a good one! What would you do if you were there? Remember that it is Zhaozhou's answer, not yours. Nowadays, practitioners read a lot of books about Chan masters shouting, hitting, and acting in strange ways. So in response, they sometimes do that too. Please don't do that. Walk your own path. Don't shout or hit anything. Be careful! Don't put yourself and others in danger.

Wumen, in his compassion, presents us with a verse:

**If Zhaozhou had been there,
He would have carried out this imperative in
reverse:
He would have snatched the knife away,
And Nanquan would be begging for his life.**

Maybe Zhaozhou should have threatened Nanquan's life, to give him a taste of the knife and see how he would respond. If you ask me, knowing Zhaozhou, had he been there, he would not have been carrying "the imperative in reverse." What's the use? A simple "CUT!" would do. That in itself would be sufficient to make Nanquan beg for his life.

Don't let your mind churn again with questions like "What does *that* mean?" Just investigate this deeply. Who is the cutter? Where is the cat? At the tip of the blade, may you bring all to life.

CASE 15

Dongshan's Three Rounds of Blows

When Dongshan came to study with Yunmen, Yunmen asked him, "Where have you just come from?" Dongshan said, "Chadu." Yunmen asked, "Where did you spend the summer?" Dongshan said, "At Baoci Monastery in Hunan Province." Yunmen asked again, "When did you leave there?" Dongshan said, "The twenty-fifth day of the eighth month." Yunmen said, finally, "Today I give you three rounds of blows!"

The next day Dongshan went back to ask about this, "Yesterday you bestowed on me three rounds of blows, but I do not know where I was wrong."

Yunmen said, "You rice bag! You've been through Jiangxi and Hunan Provinces and you go about it like this?"

At this, Dongshan was greatly enlightened.



WUMEN'S COMMENT

At that moment, Yunmen immediately gave Dongshan the fundamental provisions and enabled him to come to life through another road so that the family would not be lonely and desolate.

Dongshan spent the night in the sea of affirmation and denial. When morning came, he went again to Yunmen, who again exposed him thoroughly. Then and there Dongshan was directly enlightened, and he was not impetuous by nature.

So I ask you, did Dongshan deserve the three rounds of blows or not? If you say he did, then all the grasses and trees and thickets and forests deserve them. If you say that he did not deserve the blows, then Yunmen becomes a liar. Only if you can understand clearly here are you able to share the same breath as Dongshan.

The lion teaches its cub the secret.
When the cubs jump up, the lioness kicks them down.
For no reason, she gives a blow over the head.
The first arrow only nicked him, but the second went deep.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Chan master Dongshan Shouchu (910-90) figures quite prominently in gong'an literature and is not to be confused with Chan master Dongshan Liangjie of the Caodong Chan lineage. Dongshan Shouchu succeeded Chan master Yunmen Wenyan (864-949), one of the greatest luminaries in the classical period in the history of Chan. When he was a young monk, Yunmen is said to have been an exemplar, poised and eloquent in speech. He supposedly had a

fabulous memory. With only one glance at a scripture, he was able to memorize it. As a Chan master, he is best known for his terse, direct answers. Sometimes he would give an answer of only one Chinese character, brief but right to the point. He often spoke from the perspective of awakening, which does not fixate on monk and lay, men and women, good and bad, right and wrong. Surely you have your own life experience. This case asks you: What is neither right nor wrong, beyond your fixations? The present case took place upon Dongshan and Yunmen's first meeting and describes wonderfully the inner workings of the doubt sensation, the mind of wonderment, in gong'an practice. Moreover, through this story, we get to see the workings of causes and conditions between teacher and student.

In the Chan monastic tradition, after five years of ordination and studying the codes of conduct, a monastic typically sojourns to different places in search of a teacher under whom to practice. This case took place some years after Dongshan's ordination, when Yunmen was already quite old. It is common that when a monk newly arrives at a monastery, he is questioned and sized up by the teacher. The few words they exchange will help the master understand the newcomer's spiritual caliber before he is welcomed into the community. The first meeting is also important for the student to measure his affinity with the teacher in question.

The purpose of Chan practice is to resolve the great matter of life and death, to realize awakening. In American colloquial parlance, this "great matter" corresponds to the spiritual yearning to resolve the existential question of "Who am I?" For example, out of all the things you could be doing at this moment, you have chosen to read this book. What is this something deep inside you that motivates you to do this? What is it that drives you to practice meditation, to find freedom? That is the great matter that the

practitioner should never forget. This is the beginner's mind, the foundation, the root. Chan practitioners are ever mindful of this.

Of course, some people come to practice for many different reasons, such as for health reasons, to reduce stress, to live a happier life, or they come because someone has dragged them to meditation. People may not be driven by any existential question, but sooner or later everyone must come face-to-face with it.

One's meeting with a teacher may seem quite ordinary, but it was not so for Dongshan and Yunmen. Dongshan was from Guizhou Province, basically in the middle-western region of China. Yunmen was living in the south of China, more than a thousand miles away. There is no question of Dongshan's earnestness in seeking out Yunmen to help him; he was prepared to travel over many mountains by foot, a thousand miles over a long period of time. Which he did. Along the way, he apparently stopped at other places, such as the Baoci Monastery in Hunan Province.

The first question Yunmen asked was, "Where are you from?" Very naively, Dongshan answered, "Chadu, my home town." Yunmen then asked a second question, "Where did you spend the summer?" This may have taken place in October, when the summer retreat had ended. Dongshan replied, "At Baoci Monastery in Hunan Province." "When did you leave there?" "August 25." Chadu is in Guizhou Province in the center of China. Hunan is right below but next to it. Jiangxi Province is right next to Hunan Province, and Guangdong (Canton) in the south is where Yunmen lived. Dongshan crossed three provinces just to get to Yunmen. The southern provinces of Jiangxi and Hunan were the strongholds of Chan during that time. There were many Chan masters there, which is why, when Yunmen called him a rice bag, he added, "You've been through Jiangxi and Hunan and you go about it like this?" meaning, "You've

been visiting teachers in these regions and this is how you practice?!"

As I mentioned earlier, the key to gong'an or huatou practice is to generate what is called the doubt sensation or the questioning mind—the mind of wonderment, not knowing, angst, with regard to the gong'an or huatou. It is through engaging in this great sense of questioning, of doubt, of wonderment, of not knowing that it is possible for the deluded mind to go from a scattered state to a concentrated state, from the concentrated state to a unified state, and from the mass or block of the unified state or oneness to a sudden shattering of it. This is Chan awakening.

This case is actually very straightforward, quite simple. Yunmen merely set Dongshan up in the "sea of affirmation and denial"—and caused Dongshan to question where he was wrong, why he was not affirmed. Dongshan traveled three provinces trying to seek out Yunmen, but Yunmen just threw back at Dongshan the great matter of life and death—something that must be discovered personally within. This matter cannot be known through concepts, books, doctrine, or ritual. It is not something outside you that you can seek after. It is not an answer that others can give you. Because you don't know, you go through life feeling dissatisfied, anguished. You go through life caught up in all of your patterns.

It is very hard for teachers to touch the heart of one who thinks he knows everything. Don't you think you know everything? Isn't it true that usually as soon as you hear something, your mind immediately starts churning, relating it to your own ideas and experiences? The problem is that these accumulated life experiences, feelings, and knowledge do not truly define you. If you strip them away, then who are you? That's the question.

Your experiences, feelings, and knowledge are pretty random—they come and go; you change your mind quite

often. How reliable are they in helping you navigate life's ups and downs? If you were raised in a particular family, you would have a particular set of experiences. If you were raised in another, you would have a different outlook on life. It seems that you are a mere product of random events, tossed around by the wind of causes and conditions. If something happens somewhere and you happen to be there, you have that experience. If you are in another spot, your experience will be different. So, free from these experiences, who are you?

Your sense of who you are varies according to the type of person you are. One type knows everything. Another feels like they know nothing and deserve nothing. Even when they're happy, they always blame themselves, thinking, "I don't deserve this happiness," or at least, "Oh, my happiness will be gone soon!" People of yet another type always feel like they're being victimized, that throughout their life other people have done them wrong and are the cause of their suffering. For them, anything negative that happens is always somebody else's fault. There's still another type of person who placates, who always wants to please everybody—friends, family, husband, wife, colleagues. So one hundred people will each experience a unique sense of who they are. No matter what kind of survival mechanism or sense of self you have, there is an underlying current of dissatisfaction, of dis-ease.

These patterns or survival mechanisms help you navigate through life and live your life the way you know how to; however, they often cause you and other people problems and suffering. They are like unreliable broken-down crutches that you use to walk. And in a sense, no matter how precious these patterns are, how much you cherish them; how comfortable you are with your elaborate structures of patterns, beliefs, and coping mechanisms and defend against their dissolution, you *must* question them: Do they define me? What is my true nature?

The Chan approach is ultimately to expose the unreality of these strategies and reveal your inherent nature of freedom and awakening, which is your birthright. Because some people may not be ready for this, I have devised steps of practice and laid out stages of the path for you. These steps and stages refer to the four-step program described earlier and stages of meditation from scattered mind to concentrated mind to unified mind to no-mind. I have also included many teachings for daily life and other signposts of the path throughout this book. These can lead you to a point where you will be strong enough to let go of everything that you have ever known, everything that gives you a sense of security.

When you are ready, the task of your teacher is to pull the rug right out from under you and, as if there were a knife right at your throat, leave you at a place where you cannot advance, cannot retreat, cannot go left, and cannot go right. Pressed with this method, you suddenly realize the uselessness of vexations and let go. That's what Yunmen did for Dongshan.

The series of exchanges between Yunmen and Dongshan is a setup for dropping self-attachment. The timing has to be right. The teacher has to be clear-eyed so as to recognize the timing and the spiritual caliber of the student. Yunmen recognized Dongshan as a person with a great practice, who had just finished an intensive summer retreat, and thought he had potential. So he presented a problem where there was no problem. He stirred up a wave just when the water had calmed and become motionless. Dongshan was shielded by his ease and stability, honesty and straightforward mind. Thus Yunmen finally said, "I give you three rounds of blows." This was to plant in Dongshan—because this guy had no sense of doubt—the seed of right and wrong, affirmation and denial: a natural doubt sensation. Because he was forthright and honest, down-to-earth, he was ripe.

The phraseology of “three rounds of blows” is borrowed from the legal punishment system in premodern China. Each round of blows is ten strikes to the body. Everyone in premodern times would know this. It is something that a judge or a magistrate would say to a criminal on trial. Here, Dongshan was exposed and on trial for his own benefit because it led to his sleepless night of churning in the sea of right and wrong—wallowing in wonderment and angst—and was followed by great awakening the next day when he approached Yunmen again.

The first arrow only nicked him, but the second went deep.

The first arrow is Yunmen’s planting of the seed of doubt; the second arrow is telling Dongshan that he was a good-for-nothing rice bag. All night long Dongshan wallowed in the sea of affirmation and denial: “Why was I wrong? Why was I wrong? Yes. No. Yes. No. Was it that I said this? Was it that I said that?” You have to put yourself in that situation to understand. The very first thing that Dongshan said to his teacher the next day was not “How are you, sir, this morning?” It was: “You granted me thirty blows. I do not know where I was wrong. Tell me, tell me, where was I wrong?” This is the manifestation of the great-doubt block. He was blocked and had become a block of not knowing. What a wonderful gift!

Yunmen had rekindled that spark in which all practitioners begin their journey of practice. Yet sometimes you forget your imperative of wanting to know your true nature and you get caught up with the bliss of spiritual practice, such as calming and clarity. It is up to the teacher to prod those of you who are ripe, to draw you out of the slumber of bliss and your comfort zone—and go for the kill! Have you ever tried to help people who don’t need or want your help? You can’t help them; you have to make them

wonder, make them think that you have something they don't have. Then they come to ask you questions. You never help a person when the person thinks he or she already knows the answers or when the person hasn't asked for your help. To teach requires expedient means.

I remember in the monastery, because I was the youngest monk, I was always sent to be in charge of the children and teenagers at the Buddhist summer camp. I liked kids. The lay members of the monastery always wanted to send their offspring to spend time with me. Meanwhile, how many teenagers do you know who like to go to Buddhist summer camps? Most likely they were forced by their parents to be there. So basically, I had to deal with a group of kids who mostly really didn't want to be there. But I had a few things up my sleeve. I spoke English, and that was cool for Chinese kids. I was also a skateboarder and had competed when I was young. That was also cool for them. Moreover, I had been in a hard-core punk band—which was just what won them over. So I shared stories with them, told them about my skateboarding days and of my punk rock days. They'd say, "Hey, this monk is pretty cool. He was a punk rocker?" "Wow, you were in that band? How did you become a monk?" I first told them those things to draw their interest, and then I'd come in for the kill! Once they were in the palm of my hand, I taught them something that they would never have dreamed of doing: sitting meditation.

Similarly, once Dongshan was in the palm of Yunmen's hand, wallowing in the sea of affirmation and denial, Yunmen went for the kill. Even though I'm revealing the secret of a Chan teacher's method to help people, still, you have no idea when I'll be drawing you out and going for the kill. It could be anything. The real question is, are you ripe for such a teaching? For this reason, Wumen turns this case around and encourages us to be in Dongshan's shoes:

So I ask all of you, did Dongshan deserve the three rounds of blows or not? If you say he did, then all the grasses and trees and thickets and forests deserve them. If you say that he did not deserve the blows, then Yunmen becomes a liar. Only if you can understand clearly here are you able to share the same breath as Dongshan.

It is up to you to take up this case and bring yourself to the point where yes is wrong and no is also wrong. How will you respond? Your knowledge and experience won't help you. They are just the result of random, fleeting, unreliable conditions. You must respond to Wumen's question, as in life, without the dualistic mind of vexations. Can you do that? Can you share the same breath as Dongshan?

Some people travel a great distance to practice at my center. I don't call them rice bags, because that is a Chinese cultural expression. They may not even eat rice that often. I do, however, ask them this: "Coming and going here and there, is this the way you live your life?" Next time someone scolds you and you get angry, or next time you become jealous or envious or you desire things you don't need, ask yourself this: "Coming and going here and there, how am I living my life?" Treasure yourself.

CASE 16

The Sound of the Bell, the Seven-Piece Robe

Yunmen said [to his assembly of monk practitioners], “The world is so vast and wide—why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

All who learn Chan and study the path must avoid following sound and pursuing form. Even so, awakening to the path by hearing sound or illuminating your mind by seeing form is quite ordinary. Little do you know, patch-robed monks ride on sound and hover over form and yet, with each circumstance, illuminating [this great matter] and taking up each and every wondrous opportunity. But even so, tell me, does the sound come to the ear, or does the ear reach out to the sound? Even if sound and silence are both forgotten, when you reach this point, how do you understand words? If you use your ears to hear, it will be

difficult to understand. But if you listen to sound with your eyes, you will be on intimate terms with reality.

If you understand, all are one and the same;

If you do not understand, there are thousands of differences and distinctions.

If you do not understand, all are one and the same;

If you understand, there are thousands of differences and distinctions.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

If you have been practicing for a long time but are still unclear about what Chan is or what Buddhism is, then this is the case for you. Gong'an comments are not expository explanations of how things are. If they were, it would create more problems, as there would be more questions than answers. Texts such as this one are really meant for those seasoned Chan practitioners who have already established a good foundation in the teachings. The kinds of problems they encounter in practice are not what ordinary people encounter; their obstacles come from the routine regimen of rigorous, dedicated practice. Texts like this do not give or explain answers; they put an end to problems.

Some people who have practiced for a long time sometimes think they already know how to practice, and they become arrogant. Or in their practice during meditation they may have had many and sometimes powerful experiences. But these experiences do not particularly reveal who they are or how things actually are. They are more like altered states of consciousness. Those practitioners may have seen light; they may have

experienced an intuitive understanding of the scriptures; or they may have experienced some samādhi states. When they speak about the dharma, they back their words with personal experiences. They are full of confidence. Yet, because their experience has not helped them let go of their self-attachment, without their knowing it, their self becomes more solid than before.

Another type of problem that arises with seasoned, long-time practitioners is that they are so familiar with the ups and downs of practice that they find a place where they can rest peacefully, accepting things as they are. They are deeply comfortable with where they're at. This can be a problem, especially when they have not personally experienced awakening, or if they have lost that urge, that drive to practice. For them, things are just fine. When bad things come, they say, "Oh, it's karma." When good things happen, they say, "This, too, shall pass; it is impermanent." So they rest in this kind of stasis.

Some of you may think, "Since I've just begun the practice, will this teaching benefit me or not"? The key is not to have too many concepts when you encounter a teaching but to see if anything jolts you, makes you wonder or become aware of certain aspects that you were blind to before. Allow these challenges to resonate within you; keep them in the back of your mind. Put yourself in this story, in the assembly of Chan master Yunmen.

As with the previous case, Chan master Yunmen exercised his wisdom. He ascended the dharma seat and basically said that the sky is so vast, so great, you have such freedom in your life, where nothing binds you; why, then, in hell did you put on your robe when you heard the bell ring? Why do you let signals and bells govern your life? Putting this in another way: You are so free. Why do you get up when you hear the alarm ring in the morning? Why do you go to work? Why is it that you do the things you do? Why do you engage in Chan practice?

In Chan monasteries, the bell and other instruments govern the activities of the day. Before a dharma talk, a monk strikes the temple bell. When monks hear it, they put on their robes. The five-piece robe is for novices or for fully-ordained monks or nuns on ordinary occasions. The twenty-five-piece robe is reserved for abbots to wear for special occasions. A seven-piece robe is what a fully ordained monk or nun wears for formal occasions such as attending a dharma talk. So here, the bell rings and the monks put on their robes.

If you reflect on why you get up in the morning when the alarm rings, you may think that if you don't go to work you'll get fired. Yunmen is not functioning at that level. Yunmen is not questioning your obligations or talking about the kind of freedom that allows you to do whatever you want.

In general, practice involves distinguishing between what are wholesome and unwholesome, beneficial and harmful, skillful and unskillful activities—especially with regard to others. You must not hurt people, you must not hurt yourself, and the most obvious way to avoid suffering for yourself and others is to be careful of your reactions to form and sound. Because of your attachment, you are easily affected by what you hear and see. Therefore, the text says that all who learn Chan and study the path must avoid following sound and pursuing form.

If you examine your life, you will see that when you are miserable, when you're feeling frustrated, when you are anguished, it's because you have heard something from someone, or you have seen something you didn't want to see. You are conditioned to see things a certain way. In practice you have to see through the veils of your conditioning, the process through which you ritually and habitually relate to those around you based on your own standard of actions and words. For example, you may see someone walking down the street, and without much self-

awareness you are already categorizing and judging that person as this or that just by the way he or she is dressed. Or if that person says something, your discriminating mind is already at work: Is what the person is saying beneficial or harmful to me?

While seeing and hearing cause vexations, when vexations are absent, sound and form can also liberate. After getting an MA degree from the University of Kansas, I wanted to take a year off to prepare my PhD applications. I went to Boston, as I wanted to attend Harvard to study with a certain professor. That was a very stressful time in my life. I had one friend in Boston with whom I moved in temporarily. I thought I would easily find a job within a week or two, then get my own place and go on with life according to my plans. I was greatly mistaken—there were no jobs in Boston for someone like me with an MA degree in religion. It took me a whole month to find work. As I didn't want to take advantage of my friend, I finally took the first job I could find, that of a doorman, and moved out. It was a low-paying job. I had to wear the required blue polyester suit and stand on the ground floor of a large corporate building filled with new graduates with MBA degrees. My job was to check their identification cards, "Can I see your ID, please? Okay, you can go in." "No, ID? Sorry, you can't go in." It was interesting how people treated me there.

Not one of my doorman coworkers ever went to college; I'm not even sure if they all had high school degrees. They were minorities, either black or Hispanic. As the only Asian person at the place, I stood out like a sore thumb. It was especially odd to me when Asians with MBA degrees were obviously trying very hard to avoid acknowledging me as one of their own as they went in and out of the corporate building. During this time I was preparing for my GRE test (Graduate Record Examination) for the PhD application. In one pocket I had a list of GRE words, and in the other, math

equations. So between one “May I see your ID please” and the next, I was memorizing words or math formulas to prepare for my test. Most people ignored me. Some looked down on me. It felt rather strange to be looked down upon and alienated by people who were seemingly categorizing me into a certain stereotype. What I saw and what I heard were wearing me down.

I learned a lot of slang during that time. One particular phrase I heard a lot from my doorman colleagues was, “Yo man, it’s all good; it’s all good.” I call it “IAG.” One time, several young professional men and women were walking by me as I said my routine, “May I see your ID, please?” They stopped chatting, showed me their IDs, then broke into laughter and walked away. In that moment, I overheard two fellow doormen talking and one saying, “It’s all good!” Suddenly, everything dropped away. I said out loud, “IAG! It’s all good!” How wonderful! The humiliation was good practice.

What is form? What is sound? When you encounter a difficulty in your life, an impasse, solve it. If you can solve it, it’s good. If you can’t solve it, it’s still good, as it’s no longer *your* problem if you can’t solve it. It’s only a problem when you solve it. So when you encounter challenges in life, when you are obstructed by form and sound—it’s all good!

In your own dream of vexations and obstacles, you are already so busy. Why are you busying yourself living in somebody else’s projected dream of you? People looked down on me in my silly polyester suit, repeating the same words over and over. They formulated an image of me. But that image was *their* image. What did it have to do with me? If you feel sad, humiliated, you are affected. If you ignore it, pretend it’s not there, you are also affected. Reacting to a dream is an illusion. Yet the sky is so vast and wide, why aren’t you free?

In the beginning of your practice you have to figure out, examine within yourself, just how much you live in dreams in all the projections that you have on the world through your interaction of sound and form. Avoid fabricating form and sound. This doesn't mean that you move into the mountains and isolate yourself from the world. No! You live amid form and sound, and through them you see freedom. True practice is to "ride on sound and hover over form, and yet with each circumstance, illuminating [this great matter] and taking up each and every wondrous opportunity"—it's all good! And if you discover that somehow it's not all good, then you need to examine form and sound a little closer because they are a mirror reflecting your true nature. The greater the obstacle, the clearer the reflection. Wumen provides a hint: "Does the sound come to the ear, or does the ear reach out to the sound? Even if sound and silence are both forgotten, when you reach this point, how do you understand words?" Some seasoned practitioners say that "sound and form are okay; they don't bother me." Wumen says that when you have reached this point, you must still manifest form and sound. Tell me, what is this realization?

I got an e-mail recently from someone who has been practicing for many years. She'd had the opportunity that summer to do a long retreat, a couple of months by herself somewhere in the mountains. She wrote me a very beautiful e-mail describing her experiences as "utter tranquillity." What was there but the sound of the birds in that cabin, the Amish people rolling by in their horse cart, and her meditation? It was a very beautiful, peaceful time, she said, with no vexations, no projections or categorization, no compartmentalization. I wrote to her briefly, "What did you realize?"

She wrote back: *Silence*. Then she included a short poem by Zen master Ryokan (1758-1831) from a book she was probably reading. I guess, in her mind, the poem expressed her realization. So, "Here, read this!" was how she

presented her realization to me. I didn't respond. At that point, I knew she was not ready for any teaching because she was quite satisfied with what she had found. Anything I might have said either would have offended her or might not have been very useful. Had she said, "I'd like to come see you," then things would have been different.

When Wumen suggests, "If you have found silence and peace, are you free in noise and chaos?" he is not saying, "When you reach silence then there's just silence." No! When you reach true peace you should be free, at ease, in sound and form. True practitioners ride the wave of sound and freely intermingle with form.

Last month a student said to me, "I really can't work well in meditation; I really don't get it. I have a lot of wandering thoughts." Is that bad? Suppose that person had said, "You know, Guo Gu, your method really works; I just experienced total silence. Meditation is peace; I'm so glad I found this place." Is that good?

For busy modern people, peace is good. Very seldom do you have peace; perhaps when you're on vacation, away from administrative work, away from this and that, you can have peace. Tasting candy only once in a while makes it just that much sweeter. Parents reward kids with candy. They know candy is bad for their teeth, but once in a while it's okay. If you don't allow them any, then you're too strict. If you give them candy all the time, you're not a good parent. Similarly, if one is not a skillful teacher, then the student gets offended, especially after a couple of months of experience with silence. If you challenge your students' personal experience, they start questioning anything you say.

Wumen says, "If you use your ears to hear, it will be difficult to understand. But if you listen to sound with your eyes, you will be on intimate terms with reality." Some of you may be wondering, "I don't think we covered this topic in biology; how can one hear with eyes and see with ears?"

There are insects, animals, and different types of fish that don't have eyeballs yet know when a big hungry predator is coming their way. There are blind people who "see" people better than those who can see. The passage is not talking about supernatural powers. It is questioning you, asking if you are bound by your senses.

Wumen's verse is even more puzzling:

**If you understand, all are one and the same;
If you do not understand, there are thousands of
differences and distinctions.
If you do not understand, all are one and the
same;
If you understand, there are thousands of
differences and distinctions.**

Usually, if one does not understand the form or sound one perceives, one is probably stuck in the distinctions, discriminations, or differences in ideas and notions. If one does understand, then the form and sound probably conform to one's own preconceived ideas. However, Wumen, being a compassionate teacher, says that whether you understand or not, there are different forms and sounds everywhere; whether you understand or not, everything is also just the same. What is same? What is difference? Do these words "same," "different" define what you see and what you hear? Are you bound by the categories you create? Forms and sounds are not the issue. Being bound by them is. It cannot get any simpler than that.

The important point is that you have your own understanding and experience. But there is more. This gong'an is asking you: Despite your understanding and experience of things, why is it that when you see something beautiful you are enamored? When you see someone you love die, why is it that you feel sorrow? Why is it that when

you hear a pleasant sound, like a praise, you respond in a certain way? Why is it that when someone calls you names, you feel uncomfortable? Are your emotional responses predictable? Do you respond to form and sound in a patterned way? Where is your freedom?

I'm amazed by all who practice week after week, year after year—despite the physical discomfort, wandering thoughts, and drowsiness. I'm not saying that you should not practice. Of course you should. You have to discern what motivates you to seek out a spiritual path to practice. Are you bound by form and sound?

CASE 17

The National Teacher's Three Calls

The national teacher called his attendant three times, and each time the attendant responded. The national teacher said, "I thought I wronged you, but actually, it is you who have wronged me."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

With the national teacher's three calls, his tongue fell to the ground. With the attendant's three responses, the radiant lights harmonized one with the other. The national teacher was old and lonely; he pressed the ox's head down to make it eat grass. But the attendant would have none of it; delicious food does not suit one who is already full. But tell me, where was he wrong? When the country is at peace, talented men are esteemed. When the family is wealthy, the youngsters maintain their composure.

He makes people wear iron fetters with no openings,
Incriminating his descendants so none can be at ease.
If you want to prop open our gate and support the
family,
You must climb barefoot up the mountain of knives.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

The story involves a master and an attendant disciple. This is a very intimate kind of dharma relationship, perhaps closer than that of a teacher and a student. An attendant is someone who takes care of the teacher day in and day out—sometimes for decades. In fact, he or she has to wake up before the teacher and go to bed after the teacher has gone to bed. In attending to all the material needs of the teacher, the attendant observes and learns from the teacher directly, especially the teacher's vows and life mission. The attendant inevitably, through osmosis, takes those vows and that mission as his or her own. But first the student must understand the teacher, take care of the teacher's needs, starting with material requirements. Even though their relationship is close, a good attendant disciple will not simply copy the teacher's actions but will instead come to his or her own being. This takes genuine practice and realization. Such is the gong'an here.

This case is about the national teacher, Chan master Nanyang Huizhong, and his attendant, Danyuan Yingzhen (ca. 765–864). In order to be a national teacher, one has to be a great master, able to counsel the emperor. This particular case took place when Huizhong was already one hundred years old. One day he calls his attendant by his name, perhaps: "Danyuan!" In the old days, in the ancient

classical Chinese, one responded to the call with “Yo!” which can be roughly translated as “here” or “exist.” Here, Huizhong calls the attendant three times, saying nothing the first two times, but after his third call to his attendant, he says, “In all of these years we’ve been together, I thought I had wronged you, but actually, it is you who have wronged me.”

What is the meaning of this? A Chan teacher has nothing to say in particular. For him, it’s all good—each and every one of his or her disciples is perfect. A teacher sees the student’s buddha-nature and responds from that perspective, even though the disciple comes with problems, vexations, difficulties, and challenges in life. You may think that it is your various problems in life that have brought you to practice, but it is actually your perfect buddha-nature that has brought you.

Maybe you feel a sense of dis-ease in your life; you feel troubled and you want to do something about it. Just think about all of those people who don’t come to the dharma to practice. After all, why should people embark on the practice, twist their legs into a pretzel and sit like that for an hour and a half? People who come to the dharma are usually sensitive people who feel a need to practice. It is for this reason that the teacher speaks out and teaches, even though he or she knows very well that there is nothing to teach. All of your difficulties, anxieties, vexations, and challenges are created by the mind. Yet you are wired up in such a way that you completely give in to your own construct. In life you paint a tiger and become frightened by it. It is you who have painted it!

In personal interviews with the teacher, you approach the teacher and share your difficulties: “I want to practice; I want to resolve my gong’an; I want to attain Buddhahood; I want to do this; I want to get rid of that.” Although the teacher knows the pointlessness of all of these concerns, that they stem from the fantasy of habit tendencies and

vexations, that all you need to do is just let go, the teacher can't simply tell this to the students. The teacher has to complicate this a little because students are complicated—yes, you tend to want complications. Perhaps the teacher talks about various topics, such as the method, the correct attitude in practice, or maybe the teacher encourages the students to relax. The more complicated or esoteric the teacher's comments are, the more they will seem convincing. Students become grateful to the teacher for all the accumulated years of knowledge that he or she is passing on to them. Meanwhile the teacher has really said nothing.

I thought I wronged you, but actually, it is you who have wronged me.

It is precisely Huizhong's pointless calls and Danyuan's selfless responses that make this case so wonderful—a splendid meeting of minds. The statement above can be rendered, “How touching! You and I speak the same language. I throw you some construct, some garbage, and you throw it right back at me. Good job!” As a teacher, I must apologize to my students and to you, the reader. All the useless words I've passed on to you, creating more fabrications and constructs in order to teach you, amount to nothing really. But how will you respond?

If someone calls you three times and does not say a single word, would you get frustrated or annoyed? You may even get annoyed after the first time. When I was a young novice, my teacher would call me, “Hey, boy!” I used to feel uneasy hearing those words because I knew that I had done something wrong, and if I hadn't, I'd think, “What does he want now?” The reason behind my dis-ease was that Master Sheng Yen was like a clear mirror or a radiant spotlight. The mirror reflects everything: a flaw here, a problem there. My ignorance was completely exposed in

front of him, with nowhere for me to hide. On a daily basis, he pointed out my problems to me—sometimes not with words but with his look or smile. At other times he would ask a simple question, double-checking that I had done everything I needed to do. Somehow, I often managed to forget a few things I needed to do for him. The dis-ease I felt had reasons and was bound up with my own attitudes toward my teacher, whom I saw as a mirror. Don't you ever feel like that toward someone you greatly respect? But such feeling is strictly your own—it has nothing to do with its being imposed by the person you so respect. It is you who cannot be your own being. Autonomous. A teacher has nothing particular he or she wants to say or do.

Of course, having a teacher is quite helpful, especially when you encounter a difficulty or a problem that stems from vexations. The benefit of going for an interview is that in the teacher's presence, not only do you see your own flaws and stupidity, you may actually feel the absurdity of the question—and that you do not have a problem at all. On many occasions as I went before my teacher and said, "I have a question," and he would say, "Yes, what is it?" there was such power in his presence that I soon felt my question was just silly. Then I would say, "I don't think it's a problem anymore." Yet before I brought the question to him, I could get all wound up, entangled by my own hang-ups.

In this case, however, there is a call and a response, a call and a response—three times—freely, without any obstacles, without any hesitation. Both Huizhong and Danyuan have no hang-ups. That's why Wumen says, "With the national teacher's three calls, his tongue fell to the ground." This means that there's really no need for Huizhong to say anything. In his old age, Huizhong's heart has become too kind, like that of a grandmother. Realizing this, Huizhong makes this comment about his attendant, "It is you who have wronged me," meaning, you have done well.

With the attendant's three responses, the radiant lights harmonized one with the other.

This expression means that the radiance of the lights fuses into the other without any obstructions at all. How can lights obstruct anything? There is no boundary between this and that light. There's nonobstruction. The attendant's response was without obstruction; the wisdom of the teacher and the wisdom of the disciple interfused, intermingled freely. It is like a mirror responding to a mirror. Or like a stamp and a seal. Or a teacup and its lid that fits perfectly. It is not like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole. This is what Chan calls a mind-to-mind seal, or mind-to-mind transmission. What is being transmitted? Nothing! Both teacher and disciple are perfectly present; there is mere recognition of that.

For some of you, when someone calls you once, especially your superior, you often have some problems with that call—you start to think of this and that, reacting to the call with your own projections. You may respond with fear or with annoyance. And if someone calls you three times, surely by the second time most of you would respond with some irritation, "What do you want? Spit it out!" The teacher called three times, and the disciple's response was without vexations; it was as if he had called out into an abyss and the echo answered. An echo has no self; the response also has no self, and yet there is a response. It would be wrong to think, "Since I have no self, there's no need to respond to that old fool who is trying to press me down."

For most of you, if someone called you three times without saying a word, something would stir up within you. For this reason, Wumen says:

He pressed the ox's head down to make it eat grass. But the attendant would have none of it; delicious food does not suit one who is already full.

Danyuan was not disturbed at all. He was content; his practice was already ripe, and he had already come into his own. There were no vexations left.

That said, in daily life one still naturally responds to the calls of others—even if one is already awakened. It is not that you no longer need to do your job or can do whatever you want. Just like in this case: Danyuan was an attendant to Huizhong; he still responded to each of Huizhong's calls. Yet with each response, no vexations. This is the principle of practice in life. It is as simple as that. If you still entertain vexations, then you have hang-ups. Let them go, and respond.

Don't respond with some clever repartee. For some people, when a Chan master asks them a question, their thoughts start spinning a thousand miles an hour. "Wooo, this is a special question; maybe I should respond this way or that way. Maybe [the true meaning of his calling is that] he is really calling my buddha-nature? How do I respond to that? Maybe give a shout? Or slam the ground with my palms?" Once, my teacher was giving a dharma talk to the general public at a university, somewhere in the Midwest. There were hundreds of people present. At the end of his talk, he asked, "Is there anyone who has a question?" A gentleman, either a Zen practitioner or someone who must have read too many Zen stories, slammed on his wooden chair: "*Bam!*" and said, very confidently, "All of this talk is like talking about a menu. Where is the meal?" Master Sheng Yen casually smiled, "You want a meal? Come to my seven-day retreat that begins tomorrow. There will be plenty of meals for you." And everyone just laughed. Let me

emphatically say: There is no need for any of this kind of game. The best way to respond to the calls of life is with sincerity—a response that comes from your heart, that comes from your being. There is no need to mimic past Chan masters. There's no need to put on a facade or mask for any act.

You must ask yourself: What are the roles that you take on in your daily life? The different hats that you wear? Do you take these roles and hats as yourself? Chan practitioners respond to situations without putting up a facade. Even if you are a great actor or actress, as soon as you act, have you lost your true identity?

When you are humble and sincere, you can receive teachings. From today onward if someone calls you, maybe your loved one, maybe someone that you know, or maybe even a difficult person, know that the person is your mirror. How do you respond to the calls? Do you respond freely, without obstacles? Are you like lights that blend, fuse with other lights? Or do you set up some barriers or respond with annoyance or suspicion: "What does he or she want now? What did I do wrong now?" Your responses reveal who you are, what you need to work on in practice. The key is: work on your shortcomings, but know that you're perfect. It's all good. Be at peace, because you don't lack anything from outside yourself. The path is within you. Please don't resort to old habits and patterns. Otherwise you become like the ox that's not full. When someone presses on you to eat grass, you automatically start munching. Be the ox that's already full.

In the story, Danyuan would have none of it, as he was already full. This is an extraordinary case. The attendant is fully enlightened, as is the teacher. Yet the attendant is still serving the master. This is where Chan tradition differs from worldly teachings. Nowadays, when a student learns an art—or thinks he or she has learned it—the student rushes off to be a teacher. There are even practitioners who

practice in order to become teachers. This is an upside-down mentality. That's the mind of grasping and rejecting, the mind of vexations. In Chan, practitioners stay with the teacher until that teacher passes away, and then they go on practicing several more years. If causes and conditions push you to be a teacher, then you teach. If causes and conditions do not, then you don't need to teach.

Some people fancy themselves to be compassionate practitioners and take the vow, "May I, lifetime after lifetime, be reborn and practice the dharma so that the dharma will spread, and wherever I go, may my luminosity help others." This is a nice vow, but it is garbage. Such a big self in this statement! The dharma doesn't need *you* to propagate it. There is nothing to teach and there's nothing to learn in the buddhadharma. Only when we are vexed is there buddhadharma. The ox needs to eat grass only if it is hungry. The grass is relevant only when there's an ox.

My teacher has already passed away. He no longer pushes my head down to eat grass and says, "Gobble up!" So now everyone I meet is my teacher. When someone asks me a difficult question, it's like saying, "Guo Gu, eat grass!" When you share with me your experience and troubles, that's grass. In all situations of life, in interactions with people and events, these are opportunities to eat grass. My practice is no ox, no grass, yet I eat grass. That is my way of repaying my gratitude to my teacher. This is how the teaching of Chan is carried on, and someone must carry on the family tradition. This someone must practice very hard, and the causes and conditions must be ripe. That's the meaning of Wumen's

**If you want to prop open our gate and support
the family, You must climb barefoot up the
mountain of knives.**

In order to practice hard, you must personally come to realize Wumen's question "But tell me, where was he wrong?" In other words, Huizhong calls three times and Danyuan responds without vexation. It seems that Huizhong did something that was unnecessary. Is this why Wumen says he was wrong? Please do not think of this wrong as the opposite of right. Yet what does wrong mean? This is the critical phrase or *huatou* in this *gong'an*.

In all situations of life, do no wrong to self and others. Facing the call of life, if you find yourself doing wrong, admit it. Take up the responsibility. If you find yourself doing something right and become proud, ask, "Where is the wrong?" The next time someone calls you and you get frustrated, meditate on this: "Where is the wrong?" If you respond with vexation, that's the wrong. You're eating grass even though you're already full.

Most people are caught up in right and wrong. Chan practitioners must not wrong themselves and others. Still you must realize the "Where is the wrong?" that is beyond right and wrong. Keep asking.

He makes people wear iron fetters with no openings, Incriminating his descendants so none can be at ease.

What a wonderful teacher! A *cangue* is an instrument of ancient China for prisoners. Basically, it is made up of two big wooden planks with holes for the hands and for the neck. They are put together and then locked, and you carry this big piece of wood around on your shoulders like a prisoner. It's not like nowadays when simple handcuffs are used, and with your hands you can still hit the police and get free. If you're walking around with a fifty-pound solid piece of wood around your neck, there is no way you can escape to someone's house and blend in with everyone. Is Huizhong making us wear iron fetters? No, he has a

wonderful iron cage without holes. Is there such a thing? No! Don't be trapped by words of right and wrong—or any of the words you hear in life or any of the situations in which you find yourself. If you find yourself eating grass or wearing an iron fetter, bring forth the huatou “Where's the wrong?” But know that there is in reality no grass or fetter. There's also no ox. If you don't understand this personally, then continue to bring forth this questioning.

CASE 18

Dongshan's Three Pounds of Flax

One time when a monk asked Dongshan, "What is buddha?" Dongshan responded, "Three pounds of flax."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Old man Dongshan had learned a bit of oyster Chan: as soon as he opens his shell, he shows his liver and guts. Nevertheless, tell me, where, or how, do you see Dongshan?

The abrupt utterance of "Three pounds of flax!"
These words are close to the truth, but the intention is even closer.
Those who talk about yes or no, affirm or deny,
Are just yes and no people.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

The case is actually very short. Some person asked this Chan master Dongshan, "What is buddha," to which he said, "Three pounds of flax." I can assure you that there is more to the story than meets the eye.

So this case involves Dongshan Shouchu, whom we have already encountered in case 15, and one of his students. "What is buddha?" is a question that is actually quite relevant to Americans. In a sense, you are at an advantage, since your mind is not cluttered with notions of what a buddha is. Over thousands of years, Buddhists have developed very sophisticated philosophical understandings about not just who Śākyamuni was but also the notion of buddhahood and what that entails. Be thankful that your mind is not cluttered with these theories.

Chan arose as a reactionary movement against scholastic Buddhism, a movement toward personal experience and away from theories and doctrines. Since Chan as a movement had already developed for about two or three hundred years as a self-conscious movement, you can be sure that this monk, in this tenth-century context, is asking about something else. In Chan the question "What is buddha?" has a fundamental meaning: What is it that constitutes buddha, in other words, his awakening? The question can thus be simplified to "What is awakening?"

This question is something that touches the very heart of you. Where is your freedom? Why are you not free? Perhaps this is what drives you to practice for ten, twenty, thirty years. So when the monk asks Dongshan, it is

perhaps out of a deep spiritual crisis. Dongshan answers, "Three pounds of flax!" Why this answer?

Wumen's comment and verse are worth considering:

**Old man Dongshan had learned a bit of oyster
Chan: as soon as he opens his shell, he shows
his liver and guts. Nevertheless, tell me, where,
or how, do you see Dongshan?**

Another way of saying this would be: Dongshan, without hesitation or reservation, completely reveals to the student the liver and guts of Chan, of awakening. *How do you see Dongshan?* Do you see that he's not holding anything back? That he is so compassionate in his teaching?

People have all kinds of theories about "Three pounds of flax." For example, some people may think, "Three pounds of flax . . . ah, yes, his mind was in the present moment; perhaps he happened to wear a thick robe that weighed approximately three pounds, and because Zen is everywhere, all things manifest true Zen. So he could have picked up anything and just said it." Or "Perhaps it was winter and monks were wearing layers and layers of heavy robes? Or maybe when Dongshan heard the question, he had just received some new fabric from the market?" If you go along those lines, you are very far from what's at stake here. This is not to say that these answers are wrong but they are just conceptualizations and have little to do with the aim of this gong'an.

Our discriminating mind is characterized by yes and no, affirmation and denial, such as "I like this, I don't like that; this is good, and that is bad," and by thoughts like "I understand now: everything is buddha-nature, enlightenment is everywhere." All of these are products of the discriminating mind. So how do you see the liver and guts—the heart of Chan—in this answer?

You would have to meditate on “What is buddha? Three pounds of flax! Why? Why is buddha three pounds of flax?” This is the *huatou*, or critical phrase, of this *gong’an*. Arouse an earnest desire to resolve this. Embrace the not-knowing—this is the way to see the liver and guts of Dongshan.

**The abrupt utterance of “Three pounds of flax!”
These words are close to the truth, but the
intention is even closer.
Those who talk about yes or no, affirm or deny,
Are just yes and no people.**

Words come from intention. If you want to get to the heart of this case, don’t stick to the words—get to the heart. The way to “see Dongshan” is definitely not through “yes or no, affirm or deny.” You can extend this to good and bad, having and lacking, understanding and not understanding, liking and disliking, grasping and rejecting, and birth and death. If you go down this path, then you’re simply just a person of yes and no.

One evening I was talking with my mother-in-law from Japan. She was very curious as to why so many people in the United States are interested in Chan practice. I may be generalizing, but I told her that there are two types of people who come to practice, for an infinite number of reasons. Basically, in the first group are people yearning to find something, to resolve something, or perhaps to get rid of something. People in the second group are not looking for anything. They may have come because their friends dragged them there, or they may have read some books on Buddhism. Or since they’ve heard there’s a teacher in town, out of curiosity they’ve come to check out what this is all about. But they don’t have a need. So teachers in the West have to work extra hard to create a *need* where there is none. They have to sell a product that no one is

necessarily interested in buying. I told her that in Asia, anybody can open a temple and people will come; all you need to do is open the door. If there's a Buddha statue, people will offer incense there. You don't have to work too hard—just open a temple, set up a Buddha, have a little donation box, and you'll be fine. But here in Tallahassee, you may get only a few dollars in the donation box, and since you have to pay the rent, you have to sell all kinds of products, invent all kinds of buddhadharma, in order to make ends meet. Yet, in this process, buddhadharma comes alive.

In a culture like ours, one that favors the discourse of science, or in one that perhaps favors magic or extraphenomenal activities, whatever the country's natural tendency is, that side of it may be emphasized. In our times, people who come to practice lead very busy lives; there is suffering and anguish between short moments of joy. People face challenges in life, and most of their survival strategies are diversions or evasions, with the thought that time will heal. Some people who may have had a very traumatic experience often divert their attention to something else. After a long time, as they forget about it, the experience will thin out. Time heals everything—so the saying goes.

People may also busy themselves with various activities so their question or problem is temporarily forgotten, submerged under distractions. People even approach spiritual practice as one more thing to busy themselves with. They get involved with this practice, that initiation, that empowerment, or this or that method. The form of the practice can also make them forget not only their pain but also events in their past. Thus, it is the task of the teacher to find ways to help people in the first group: those who come to practice to specifically find ways to resolve their anguish or suffering. It is also the teacher's task to stir people of the second group by creating problems where

there are no problems, to come up with scenarios such as “What is buddha?” or “Three pounds of flax!” and tell them that they really have to meditate on that.

In practice, the most important part for you is to have a sense of earnestness. People often lose this quality in the course of their practice, in the course of their life. In earnestness, you will maintain your inner fire and give rise to a sense of wanting to know, of urgency, of existential dilemma. Chan Buddhism teaches that you do not have to suffer, to feel anguish, to choose jealousy and arrogance. You do not have to feel angry when challenged. So why is it that you do? What is it that drives you? Although your buddha-nature, your full potential, is freedom, you choose to live in the shackles of grief and dis-ease: you get upset, or you are happy when one of your enemies gets in trouble, and so on. The flame of earnestness will burn these obscurations away.

If you think that vexations—anger, jealousy, arrogance, craving—are normal, then you belong to the second group of people. You have become so accustomed to vexations, to anguish and suffering, that you think that is your nature, that is who you are. No! You are so much more than that. These are the conditions that bind you, form and shape you into a certain type of person. There’s freedom waiting to be discovered beyond the confines of passing emotions and ideas. So what is buddha?

Although you may have understood this, that you are free, you may still think, “I am free and yet I am confronted with all kinds of scattered or wandering thoughts, with obstructions everywhere I turn.” For instance, when you sit, you may feel obstructed by drowsiness; when you stand, you’re bothered by physical pain; or when you interact with others, you’re annoyed by certain personality types that you may not like. You’re actually in a good place if you come to this realization, as you recognize that you can do something about it. It is worth reflecting on, over

and over again, observing yourself in daily life, in your interactions with others.

It is from that place that you examine “What is buddha?” In other words, “What is it that is free within me?” Especially in moments of conflict, ask, “Am I free?” If you are bound by your behavioral habits and vexations, then you should be ashamed. You could approach the issue by saying to yourself, “This is not me; I got tricked again by my habit tendency, my patterns of behavior. Stop.” What is it that is free in that moment? If you can do this, you will not fall into the trap of yet another conceptualization, the practice that I call spiritual substitution. Aren’t you substituting your freedom in each moment for bondage?

“What is buddha?” must be examined amid suffering: when two people who once loved each other are now separating; when two people who, though they hate each other, always tend to meet; when you dislike yourself; or when thoughts are in conflict, even in your own mind. This case is one of those in-your-face confrontational ones: if you don’t know what buddha is, if you don’t have the ability to tap into the source that already gives you freedom in each moment, then three pounds of flax is as good an answer as any.

We can guess how much a typical bronze Buddha statue weighs at a dharma center—perhaps twenty or thirty pounds? “Thirty pounds of bronze” would be a good answer. Some people want to become the kind of buddha that sits motionlessly, unmoved by anything—like a statue. So they strive to sit in perfect posture meditating for a long time in peace. Yet as soon as they get off the cushion, they exchange their peace for vexations. Others come to practice with great fervor; however, after five, ten, fifteen, or twenty years, they have forgotten about the fire or the flame of earnestness inside them—they are quite settled into the routine of practice and have no more questions. They have become “easygoing” or “carefree,” seemingly

unattached: if the wind blows from the left, they float to the right; if the wind blows from the right, they float to the left. In Chan we call this kind of peaceful practice a rock soaking in cold water. Its meaning is that for a hundred or even a thousand years, the rock will remain a rock, lifeless—nothing will have changed. Another expression is “hiding in the dark ghost cave, on the black side of the mountain.” It’s always dark on that side of the mountain because that’s where the sun doesn’t shine. These people are inside the pitch-black cave where nothing happens; they mistake that for nonattachment or liberation. What a pity!

When you face challenges in your daily life, or when you discover vexations, have the courage and earnestness to bring up “Where is buddha? That’s where you see Dongshan’s liver and guts.

CASE 19

Ordinary Mind Is the Path

When Zhaozhou asked Nanquan, “What is the way?” Nanquan said, “The ordinary mind is the way.”

Zhaozhou said, “Can one strive for it or not?” Nanquan said, “When you strive for it, it recedes.”

Zhaozhou said, “If we don’t try, how do we know it is the way?”

Nanquan said, “The way is not something known or not known. Knowing is false perception. Not knowing is just being oblivious. If you truly arrived on the way that is free from doubt, you would realize that it is vast like open space, through and through. How is it possible to impose affirmation and denial?”

At these words, Zhaozhou was suddenly awakened.



WUMEN’S COMMENT

Nanquan was questioned by Zhaozhou, and he cracked like scattering tiles and melting ice—unable to dredge out the

confusion. Even though Zhaozhou did awaken, he still had to investigate thirty more years.

In spring there are hundreds of flowers. In autumn
there is the moon.

In summer there are cool breezes. In winter there is
snow.

If there were no hang-ups with triviality,
Such would be the most splendid season.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

This case is utterly clear! In an earlier case Dongshan asks what is buddha. Here Zhaozhou asks, "What is the way?" The way or buddha are essentially the same. Yet all the concepts you have about practice or buddhadharma will not help you here. They also will not help you resolve your problems in life. What will help is to take this gong'an as a mirror and recognize your misunderstanding, where you have erred. The key to Chan practice is to drop the colored glasses through which you mistakenly perceive the world—it's not about picking up a better pair of glasses or polishing them to make them shiny. Thus practice does not produce the freedom you already have. It merely removes the obscurations.

There are several key ideas here: the way or path, and how to practice it. What is the way, or *dao*? The way, or the *path*, in premodern China is a loaded term. On the one hand it refers literally to a path to walk on. On the other hand, it refers to the order of things, the way things are. The term in this context refers to both meanings. The way

things are is the path one should walk on. How? It is to be ordinary.

What is this “ordinary mind”? Is that the mind that you’re having now, with which you are reading these words? Is this something to practice, something to strive for? The more you practice to seek it, the further away it recedes. You may then say, “Okay, if we don’t practice it, then what the heck am I doing in my practice?” If you don’t practice, how do you know that you will actually recognize the path? How do you know that what you’re doing is right or wrong? The fact is, it’s not about knowing. Anything that can be known is delusion. What about not knowing? Not knowing is just stupidity.

If you truly arrived on the way that is free from doubt, you would realize that it is vast like open space, through and through. How is it possible to impose affirmation and denial?

Practice does not produce awakening. Cultivation will not lead you to the way. To push Nanquan’s analogy of bit further, consider the spaciousness of a large room; does your presence in it obstruct its spaciousness? Does furniture hinder the spaciousness of the room? No. Whether you make a mess of the room or you clean it up, its spaciousness is not affected. Practice is like cleaning furniture or putting it in order. Is it useful? Depends. If you get caught up with cleaning or moving furniture around, then it’s not so helpful—you probably cause many people in the room vexations. If you clean knowing that furniture does not obstruct space, clean just to clean, then it is helpful for all who use the room. “Affirmation and denial” refers to all the problems that may arise from practice, or from cleaning the room. Affirmation may be the virtues of practice; denial may be the vexations one tries to get rid of.

All of which are just furniture. From the perspective of spaciousness, however, nothing obstructs the way—IAG!

This is not to say, “Oh, since everything is originally fine whether I clean the room or not, why bother cleaning?” No. That is also wrong. This is why Wumen pointed out that even though Zhaozhou did awaken, he still had to investigate thirty more years. Yes, Zhaozhou continued to clean the room and move furniture around. In Chan meditation halls, everything is very clean and tidy. Chan practitioners are taught to leave no trace behind. Cleaning or not, Chan halls are already pure. Do we clean? Yes! This is practice. This is awakening. Practitioners learn to purify their body, mind, and the world around them without notions of purity. Most of you soil the place everywhere you go—after you eat the table is a mess; after you go to the restroom, the toilet edges are dirtier. You have to clean. Yet irrespective of clean or dirty, pure or impure, if you genuinely have no doubt whatsoever as to your true nature, then you are free, already pure. There are no obstructions. This is the “ordinary mind.”

This expression, “Ordinary mind is the way,” is from Mazu Daoyi, Nanquan’s own teacher. Everyone comes to practice with a certain expectation or anticipation. Why is it that you anticipate? What do you expect to gain or lose? Is it the sense of dis-ease, dissatisfaction, you feel in your life? You have expectations and anticipation because you have doubts at the most fundamental level, doubts about who you are. Is there a voice within you telling you that you lack something? You begin to question the routines of your daily life, such as Why am I going to work, or to school? Why do I need to earn a living? So I can support myself or my family—what for, really? Is it because I want to be happy? Am I not happy? Our world capitalizes on this sense of “Is this it?” If you think you’re ugly, there are cosmetics. If you have wrinkles, there are antiwrinkle gels. If you feel angst, there is yoga and meditation. There are also drugs,

alcohol, and all the addictions that people resort to in order to fill the emptiness inside.

Some people come to Chan or Zen practice to fill the void. If you're in Japan, you're in luck, as in that country there are answer books to all of the gong'an, with poetic verses known as capping phrases. Each poetic capping phrase matches a gong'an beautifully. So if you practiced gong'an, or kōan, with these source books, you would make real progress. Unfortunately, as there are thousands of these capping phrases, you might spend a heck of a long time finding the best capping phrase to match your gong'an. We don't have these source books in Chan. So you are doubly out of luck.

In Chan practice, it is most important to first discover what obstructs and creates vexations or emotional afflictions in our hearts. We use methods to face them, embrace them, respond to them, and eventually, let them go. This means that you will no longer live in the shelter of vexations. You come out in the open and see the vastness of everything. If you don't actually engage with yourself this way, there's no hope of release. Practice is not about gaining freedom but about realizing what obstructs you. Vexations obstruct; you must recognize that: face it, embrace it, respond to it, then let go of it. This is what we call the four-step program of Chan.

Anything that you cannot let go of in your life, whether it's an idea, an ideal, or an object; a person, or a thing, will be an obstruction. Does it mean that you should just leave everything behind and literally move to a mountain? No. The Chan way is to completely immerse in the world and not be obstructed by it. This is because the obstructions are nonexistent—they belong to the fantasy world you construct. There's actually nothing that obstructs you. The key is to let go, then to recognize this. The power behind your recognition to actually let go and be free comes from practice. Sadly, some people often recognize what needs to

be done but still cannot let go of any of their attachments. They are emotionally bound. For Chan practitioners, the world becomes an arena where you realize wisdom and express your compassion. If you think that you need to literally relinquish everything, deny everything in order to be free, then you are holding on to an attachment to “freedom.” All of the teachings are merely pointers that you may uncover your intrinsic, original freedom. When you are freed, all things are free. That’s what is meant by “it is vast like open space, through and through.”

Thus, essential Chan practice is not about emulation, gaining, or changing this into that, and it is definitely not about imposing your spiritual ideal on old views you uphold. If you want to know what the way is, ordinary mind is the way. As a rule, you don’t see things as so ordinary. You make a big deal out of everything, turning it all into a concrete, rigid, unchanging obstacle in order to “overcome” or “get rid of” it. You make “a thing” out of something that is originally not a thing.

Decades ago, driving with my teacher and others to look at a property in upstate New York to build our Dharma Drum Retreat Center, we parked the car at a spot overlooking the site. Everyone but me and one other person got out. We noticed a pile of brown stuff in front of us on the road. The person said, rather annoyed, “Look at that! Someone brought their pet here, let it poop on the road, and didn’t even clean it up! That is so unethical. And just down the street there’s a station with plastic bags; the person could easily have picked up after the pet and left the environment clean.” I just sat there, without reacting. She righteously stomped toward the pile holding a plastic bag and was about to clean up the mess when she suddenly turned around and yelled, “They’re only pine cones!” And she smiled. When I heard that, I simply joined my palms: it was a wonderful teaching. We so often make something out of nothing. We have great ideals, principles, morals, and

also vexations based on misperceptions. This is a simple example of it, but we do it all the time, from moment to moment. We can hold a grudge against a friend for thirty years, even though his or her behavior has obviously changed, as people change every moment whether they want to or not. Some people cannot call their friends, even their family members, because of their view or perception. We make our judgments of people in our daily life; we compartmentalize them into different categories: a friend, a foe, a neutral person.

The way to respond to the situations in life is to experience the world with an ordinary mind, to simply be free from seeing through colored glasses. This ordinary mind is a mind or heart without judgment, discriminating thinking, prejudice, vexations. So ordinary that it is the most normal way of being. The relationship between practice and awakening involves being free in the midst of daily life, free from what obstructs you, from what creates suffering, vexations. But it is hard to do because your years of habitual tendencies, patterned ways of thinking, have shaped you into every possible neurosis except being ordinary. You are constantly discriminating between good and bad, between "I want, I don't want," "I like, I dislike." This is hard to shake free from. That's the core of the issue here; the task is to have concrete methods to free yourself from this. First you practice in a simpler environment, then you practice in the complexity of daily life. "Simpler environment" means daily meditation practice, group practice, retreat practice. In daily life, you practice to be free. If you can do that, then in the complexity of daily life, in challenging times, threats and praise, you will have the ordinary mind. In times of gain and loss, fame and defamation, praise and ridicule, joy and sorrow, you respond with an ordinary mind.

How do you respond when troubles, calamities, disasters, personal challenges face you? The way you habitually

respond to them shows the level of your vexations; it shows the level of attachment and delusion and suffering; it shows how far you have strayed from the ordinary mind. The difference here between vexations and wisdom (unordinary and ordinary mind) is perception. If you perceive that meditation is important even though your legs are in great pain, you will endure it. But if you see little value in meditation, even though you may have the same level of pain as the first person, you will be miserable. If you think there is something to be gained from meditation, such as “I’m going to get enlightened” or “I’m going to be blissed,” then perhaps the level of your suffering will be reduced. Your biases color your experiences. Your discrimination between good and bad, right and wrong, gain and loss, beautiful and ugly, life and death, are anchored in a false sense of “I,” as if it were something permanent, separate. You only need to examine yourself closely to know that there’s nothing that is unchanging—not even your opinion or sense of identity.

If someone blames you for something you didn’t do, observe your need to defend yourself, to justify, to find justice. That need is vexation. It is not to say that you shouldn’t correct things when they are wrong; correct them with peace of mind, with an ordinary mind. If others don’t accept what you say, it’s all good—accept with an ordinary mind. If a certain person yells at you, or blames you for something you didn’t do, it is *that* person’s story. So why do you want to play a role in someone else’s drama? This is a fantasy. It’s as if you were watching a play and you suddenly jumped onstage to be part of it. Why would you want to do that? Similarly, you already project so much onto the world, you already have so much chatter and clutter in your mind, why would you want to take on that of other people? Recognize your vexations, accept them, respond to them, and let them go. Put down the colored

glasses, drop the facade. Remember the four-step Chan program.

With daily practice, in more complex situations you will actually have a chance to survive vexations. Very simply, practice involves, first, being aware of the present moment. You need a method to do that, to bring your mind from the past and future into the present. If you observe your vexations, you will see that they are always colored by past and future, by anticipation, expectation, past coloration. So in order to see things clearly, you need to be in the present, to see things as they are, without filtering them through your colored lenses. To do that, you need to practice. But don't practice to be enlightened. Practice to be free from these patterns. A concrete method is the breath or just the simple act of sitting. When the mind strays off from sitting, you bring it back to sitting, to this act of sitting, to being in the present. How do you know you're sitting? Your body is sitting. You have a posture in sitting. If the mind is full of wandering thoughts, this is not sitting. When the body is sitting, the mind is sitting. Since it is very hard to do, we give people something more complex but easier, for example, following the breath or investigating the huatou. An example would be, "What is the meaning of ordinary mind?" Ordinary mind is the way. What is the ordinary mind? Meditate on that. To every answer that comes up, tell yourself it is not right. Because if you come up with an answer, you will become satisfied, "Ah, I got it!" And if you think you got it, then you lose it. Everything that can be "gotten" is delusion. Whatever you get is your habit pattern, your vexations, and your biased perception.

In practice, the more you strive and seek, the more it is separate from you. So should you not practice? If you don't practice, how do you resolve the fundamental question or dilemma about the relationship between practice and enlightenment? How do you know that you're doing it right?

Practice is not about right or wrong. If you think you know something or that you've gained something, some truth, you are far, far from it. These days there are practitioners who are fond of saying that the "don't-know mind" is the way. If you misunderstand this and think that not knowing is the way, then that's just escaping from the problem. The don't-know mind is not about doing nothing about things, nor is it keeping a blank mind. The wisdom in this lies in the context of the gong'an or huatou practice. You have to want earnestly to resolve the sense of not knowing, wonderment, and angst that you experience with regard to the critical phrase you're meditating on. If you resolve it, you will have no more doubt. However, if you think that one awakening is enough, then you're wrong. As I said earlier, after Zhaozhou's awakening, he continued his practice for thirty years. What was he doing in those thirty years? He was applying the ordinary mind to all situations of life. Whenever he complicated things with his projections and vexations, he returned to the ordinary mind.

Nanquan was questioned by Zhaozhou, and he cracked like scattering tiles and melting ice—unable to dredge out the confusion.

Nanquan, being so compassionate, spills out everything in plain words, causing Zhaozhou to be awakened. But why does Wumen say he was unable to dredge out the confusion? Because he has already said too much, and the consequence is thirty more years of practice for Zhaozhou. In fact, it's more than thirty years. After Nanquan passed away, Zhaozhou sojourned to different teachers and met other practitioners for twenty more years to refine his practice. Indeed, sometimes if a teacher is too grandmotherly kind, telling the students everything, the students cannot stand on their own. Still, such kindness is

necessary sometimes because people's causes and conditions differ.

In spring there are hundreds of flowers. In autumn there is the moon.

In summer there are cool breezes. In winter there is snow.

**If there were no hang-ups with triviality,
Such would be the most splendid season.**

Here Wumen adds more words on top of Nanquan's verbosity. I, too, fall into this error. The verse above describes what is most obvious, ordinary, and for that reason, it is most appropriate. In summer there is a cool breeze. The coolness eases the heat. In winter the snow is beautiful, but it can be devastatingly cold, chilling down to the bone. In autumn there's a moon, but the moon waxes and wanes, and it can also be covered by dark clouds. In spring there are wonderful flowers, but all flowers wither and die. Birth and death are always together; good and bad intertwine. In the midst of these ups and downs, you face them with peace of mind, the ordinary mind.

All things, as they are, are already complete. Is there a need to meddle with them? To insert your own self-referentiality amid everything? Isn't that extra? Of what use is it to inject your self into your relationships and various affairs? Doing so is to trivialize them. Not doing so is what is meant by not having hang-ups. Please recognize your hang-ups in life, accept them for what they are, respond to them by not adding anything to complicate them more, then you can eventually let go of them. This is the Chan way. This is the practice of the ordinary mind.

CASE 20

A Person of Great Power

Master Songyuan said, “Why can’t a person of great strength lift his own foot?” “[Because] he speaks without using his tongue,” he continued.



WUMEN’S COMMENT

It must be said that Songyuan spills his guts but no one takes up his challenge. But should there be one, let that person come to my place for a good, thorough beating. Why so? “If you want to authenticate genuine gold, observe it in fire.”

Lifting a foot, he kicks over the fragrant ocean.
Lowering his head, he sees the four meditation
heavens.
One whole body—ungraspable.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Chan master Songyuan Chongyue (1139-1209) practiced extremely hard as a layperson. Later in his life he became a monk. Before he was ordained, he already had some insight or awakening experiences. His question to you, "Why can't a person of great strength lift his own foot?" cuts through every discriminating, discursive thought you have. It is not something you can somehow reflect on or ponder and apply to life. Yet in life's every situation, this is precisely the question you should be asking yourself.

Songyuan is the only contemporary master of Wumen's to be included in the *Gateless Barrier*, which shows Wumen's respect for him. When Songyuan died at the age of seventy-one, Wumen was only in his twenties, at the peak of his practice. Songyuan's words, "Why can't a person of great strength lift his own foot? [Because] he speaks without using his tongue" became so famous that everyone knew them, including the people who read the *Gateless Barrier* during that time. In fact, Songyuan had another famous saying: "Why is it that a person who has great awakening cannot let go of his discriminations?"

Songyuan himself underwent great practice, a practice of great blazing fire. He first studied with Chan master Dahui Zong'gao as a layperson. Dahui was the greatest advocator of the gong'an and huatou practices. One night after Songyuan heard Dahui mentioning another great master, he packed up his bag and left to go study with that master. As soon as he heard this master's name, he had suddenly felt a strong urge to pay him a visit. Sure enough, he had his first awakening experience under that master. He later

visited other teachers. He became like a person with whom you simply can't debate. He knew all the Zen sayings and how to respond with a quick, witty saying and gesture. That is, until he met his match: Chan master Mian Xianjie (1118-86). Upon first meeting him, Songyuan demonstrated his understanding. Xianjie just smirked at him. It was a powerful smirk. It made Songyuan so uneasy that he began to have doubts about his own understanding. He asked himself, "Am I wrong? Why was I wrong?" He plunged into the practice even more deeply, forgetting to sleep and eat.

One day after Songyuan became Xianjie's attendant, the monks gathered in the master's bedroom. One of them asked, "Master, what is the meaning of 'not Buddha,' 'not mind,' and 'neither mind nor Buddha?'" This is a phrase from another gong'an. Upon hearing this, even before Xianjie gave an answer, Songyuan's doubt was suddenly shattered. He realized great awakening. He then uttered these words, "Speaks without using tongue." This was his awakening declaration. Later on, before he died, spilling his guts out, he gave these two lines to his students, "Why can't a person of great strength lift his own foot? [Because] he speaks without using his tongue." Here, Songyuan reveals the secret of Chan. That's why we have this gong'an.

Your ability to practice depends on your ability to integrate the teachings and make them your own. There are many ways to practice. One way is to use the teachings, but not as patches of gold that you decorate yourself with to make you look good, to mask your shortcomings. My teacher used to say, "Engaging in genuine practice is like opening and cleaning a thousand-year-old toilet. You have to dig out and scrape off all the encrusted feces and urine." For some people, practice is like painting gold leaf on the toilet commode and then spraying it with Febreze or some other air freshener so that from the outside it looks very

beautiful, very valuable. This is useless because on the inside the stench is still strong.

All you need to do with that old toilet is clean it. To make it clean you have to open the lid and scrub and perhaps clean the piping, too, because if it is clogged, the pure water won't come through to make it flush. So it's important to thoroughly clean out this thousand-year-old toilet. You clean not just for your own use but for everyone to use, because everyone is connected.

Practice in this context means that when you face difficulties, challenges, praise, or blame, you drop your survival mechanism and just respond to what is needed. You practice to practice, and to practice means to let go and offer yourself. You may have the idea that you practice Chan as part of your bodhisattva path. Yes, that's true, but the bodhisattva does not think of him- or herself as a bodhisattva. You don't help others thinking that you're helping others or expect a thank-you in return. Otherwise, every time you help, you ask, "Where is my receipt?" or "Where is my thank-you?" Then practice becomes an exchange. This is the worldly attitude. Chan practice is inseparable from the world, but it is not the worldly way. Next time you offer yourself to someone and they thank you, reply, "Thank *you* for giving me the opportunity."

Songyuan provides you with another way to practice. He asks, "Why can't a person of great strength lift his own foot?" Of course he can; but that is precisely the point! When I was out walking recently, I saw three fellows through the window of a martial arts center. They were doing bench presses, lifting weights. So what Songyuan is asking is, "Why is it that these three strong fellows lifting weights can't lift a single pound?" He even presses on, "If you try to say something, then say it without your tongue."

Do you know that your ability to articulate, to speak, largely depends on the tongue? The shape of your tongue, whether it is long or short, will determine the

pronunciation of words coming out of your mouth. Now, you wouldn't be able to speak, eat, taste, and so on if your tongue were cut out, as it plays a vital role in these activities. The flavor of Songyuan's words is that someone is speaking yet is not saying a single word.

The purpose of all gong'an is for you to personally put yourself in the situation of the gong'an, not to think it through in an intellectual, moral, or ethical way but experience it directly. All gong'an point to your true nature, to who you are, to your full potential as a buddha. Everyone is a buddha. This is Chan's position. Yet how far have you strayed from your buddhahood?

When I was in high school, the gym class was all about bodybuilding, weight lifting. I was pretty skinny, while other students would bench-press 225 or 250 pounds. People asked each other, "How much do you press?" No one would ever admit to pressing zero. Isn't that in direct opposition to this case? Generally, people want you to know what they have and what they can do. From the perspective of Chan, the world is upside down. If you want to know Chan, you have to admit that you really don't have anything. Don't even know who you are.

What Songyuan is saying is, "Why is it you have no mouth (when you have a mouth)? Why is it that you have no eyes (when you have eyes)? Why is it that all day long you walk from here to there, yet you have not walked a single step?" What does that mean? Can you walk? You develop all kinds of ways to help yourself walk in life. But in truth, when you walk, you don't lift a single foot; when you talk, the tongue is not used.

It must be said that Songyuan spills his guts but no one takes up his challenge. But should there be one, let that person come to my place for a good, thorough beating.

Wumen says that Songyuan has given you everything he's got—telling you how to practice, how things actually are, but no one is able to take up the challenge. Although he reveals to you exactly what the enlightened state is, no one understands. Actually, Wumen's comment is a play on words, because when Songyuan died, he had no successor. So, literally, no one took up his challenge. Therefore on one level, no one took up the mantle or the challenge. Yet Wumen continues, "But should there be one, let that person come to my place for a good, thorough beating." Why?

It should be clear by now. Ordinary people do things for their own gain. "Now I can bench press 225 pounds and I can make sure everyone knows it." Maybe you have more muscles on the outside, but what about on your inside? If you think you gained something, even a spiritual awakening, then that is an attachment. Certainly, although Songyuan had many insights and awakening experiences before he met Xianjie, Xianjie just laughed at him.

People may think that awakening is the solution to life's problems. So they seek after it with all of their might. Little do they know that it's only the beginning of genuine practice—practice continues without end. Why? Because for most people, their meager awakening experiences quickly revert to self-grasping. Even awakening can be grasped as a "thing." This is the downfall of many seasoned practitioners and teachers, especially when they are put in the position of authority. Teachers must practice even harder, more carefully, lest their position goes to their head. In recent years, many scandals involving teachers have been exposed. These scandals happen primarily because of careless practice or a practice that is not thoroughgoing. This results in the suffering of all parties.

You may say, "We're all human." But this is not good enough. You're not humans, you're buddhas. You should, then, behave like a buddha. Practice like gold. Please don't

settle for less; don't take garbage as gold; don't take vexations as wisdom. For this reason, Wumen says:

**If you want to authenticate genuine gold,
observe it in fire.**

The implication is that in order to turn gold into a real gem, one needs to get rid of or melt away the encrusted rot and other gunk that covers it. That's why one puts it through fire. If the temperature is high enough, the gold can be shaped. This means that people who think they got some "realizations" must let go of them. Otherwise it will harm others in the long run. A genuine practitioner must go through training like blazing fire; a genuine practitioner can discern or authenticate only through a blazing fire. I'm not talking about self-immolation but to put yourself to the test, to melt away the crust, the gunk, the rocks, the earth, so that your genuine gold can reveal itself.

How do you do this? Through hard training. This is very important. A teaching that is too easy, that sounds too good to be true, is not that useful. If I were to say, "You are intrinsically a buddha, so good-bye. Now go, be a buddha and do whatever you want, since you are originally enlightened" and leave it at that, this would expose me as an irresponsible teacher. Yes, although you are originally a buddha, I invite you to come to a retreat, to sit for twelve, sixteen hours a day, to go through the hard training of dropping away your encrusted earth and rocks that cover your gold.

I remember in the monastery, once, the visit of a monk of some notoriety who had been the attendant to a great teacher. Master Sheng Yen and I went to the main hall to receive him. From a distance, seeing the visitor making prostrations, my teacher saw an opportunity and turned to me, "You know, Guo Gu, this monk used to be a great attendant to Master So-and-So, who used to scold him and

make fun of him. But the monk never retaliated or resisted. No vexations!" He sighed and said with longing, "Such a great attendant!" Of course, upon hearing these words I began to reflect on my own behavior as an attendant and felt so ashamed. Sheng Yen was talking as if he wished he had an attendant like this. Then he said, "Do you know why he didn't get chased away?" My teacher had to actually spell it out for me, spilling his guts, just like Songyuan. He answered his own question: "It's because he knew how to practice buddhadharma in all situations, all situations." I felt so ashamed. I was clearly at the lowest spiritual level, where my teacher had to spell things out so clearly. He continued, mercilessly: "What a good attendant. Do you see how good he was?" At this point I was in tears. I changed after that. This is an example of putting yourself to the test, putting a practitioner in the furnace.

My teacher also used to publicly humiliate me because he knew that it would get to me. It got to me because of my own self-attachment. "You think you're a good meditator? You're a good monk? A good practitioner? Let's try some public humiliation and see how you respond!" Self-attachment is very slippery. Most of the time, especially in the monastery where everything is basically peaceful, our self-attachment cannot be seen. Where everything is going well, there are no opportunities to discover hidden vexations. So the teacher creates that opportunity. Our sense of self arises when we are challenged or threatened.

During a recent retreat, several practitioners seemed to have had vexations actually caused by me, the teacher. I challenged them and put them to the test. During my evening talk, one person shared how he had a powerful experience of clarity. I just laughed at him. He was annoyed and blushed red. Why? Only through challenges can a teacher see how practitioners respond, see their spiritual capacity and whether they are ripe or not. Without this method, how will the teacher know what kind of teaching is

needed? Wumen says, "If you want to authenticate genuine gold, observe it in fire."

Buddhism's notion of self-attachment is not about personality or character but has to do with our self-image, self-referentiality, that assumption that "I am such and such and this and that." That is self-attachment. People have such strong opinions that they think all of their ideas are theirs. They are not. Their opinions come from learning and interacting, from the books they read, from going to seminars and workshops. Everything comes from everything else. Guo Gu comes from non-Guo Gu. Opinion comes from nonopinion. But people have this strange assumption that their opinion and views are theirs. This false notion must be relinquished. Views may seem innocuous, but this basic sense of possession is extremely dangerous. It is because of this grasping that people experience suffering and that even teachers transgress their precepts.

People sometimes misunderstand Chan or Zen; they think the methods are rather wild, unreasonable. But the teacher is using these techniques only as expedient means to train close disciples or students. Teachers, of course, may make mistakes in assessing the readiness of their students. If a harsh teaching method is used too soon, the student will not get benefit but will get discouraged. However, when the student is ready, the teacher knows that the vexations will change into a great source of power.

Lifting a foot, he kicks over the fragrant ocean.

Lowering his head, he sees the four meditation heavens.

The first two lines of Wumen's verse refer to traditional Indian Buddhist mythology, which states that in our universe, or cosmos, there are four different world systems that surround a center. The center is Mount Sumeru, a

mountain surrounded by an ocean called the Fragrant Ocean. We live to the south of Mount Sumeru in a world called Jambudvīpa. Essentially, this verse says that a person of great strength is the master of the cosmos. When he lifts his foot, he kicks over the Fragrant Ocean. When he lowers his head, he looks down on the four dhyāna, or meditation, heavens, which are abodes of pure form. In Buddhism these states are still not liberation but temporary abodes of rebirth from samādhi practice. What this verse says is that a great person of power has full control over the universe.

One whole body—ungraspable.

How can we be the master of the universe? We may think that this man of great power is like a giant, so tall that he walks over the four dhyāna heavens. The truth is, he cannot be grasped anywhere in the cosmos. He is nowhere to be seen. Something that can be seen can be gotten. Something that is gained has form and can be lost. We are not talking here about gaining and losing, existence and nonexistence, having and not having. Wumen is talking about selfless wisdom. What do you say to this? Wumen asks us to finish this verse.

All of these words, yet I have not explained anything. “Why can’t a person of great strength lift his own foot?” “[Because] he speaks without using his tongue.” All day long, you talk. Are you using your tongue? Have you said anything? If you think you have said something, then come to my place for a good, thorough beating!

CASE 21

Yunmen's Dried Shitstick

When a monk asked Yunmen, "What is buddha?" Yunmen said, "A dried shitstick."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

It can be said that Yunmen was too poor to prepare even a simple meal and too busy to write a composition. In response, he took a shitstick and propped open the gate [of our school]. The rise and fall of the buddhadharma can be witnessed here.

Like a flash of lightning
Or sparks struck from flint,
In the blink of an eye,
It is already gone.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

There is no cultural barrier with the language in this case, so there's no need to explain the translation. It is utterly clear! In case 18, someone asked Dongsan Shouchu the same question, to which he replied, "Three pounds of flax." Now someone asks his teacher Yunmen, "What is buddha?" and he says, "A dried shitstick." They did not have soft toilet paper in premodern China, so they used leaves, scrap paper, water, and all kinds of other items to wipe themselves. To clean the toilet area, they used a bamboo stick like a shovel. So when asked, Yunmen said that bamboo stick is buddha. Wumen said something extraordinary:

It can be said that Yunmen was too poor to prepare even a simple meal and too busy to write a composition. In response, he took a shitstick and propped open the gate [of our school]. The rise and fall of the buddhadharma can be witnessed here.

Many teachers can perhaps sit down and compose book upon book with the intent of spreading buddhadharma. But none of those words really mean anything. There are actually authors who don't even practice but write about Buddhism, or people who have no experience of the heart of Buddhism yet create elaborate treatises about it. Similarly, while there are great chefs who use all kinds of ingredients to make delicious foods that not only taste good but also look good, there are actually people who write cookbooks, discuss dishes and ingredients, but don't really cook. I once tried to cook something by following a recipe but gave up because it was too complex. And where does

the food go? From our mouth to our stomach and out the other end. Yunmen was too poor to bother with cooking either a feast or a simple meal. Yet even people today are still chewing his shitstick—the core of the Chan tradition “can be witnessed here.” Where? Right here with this shitstick.

**Like a flash of lightning
Or sparks struck from flint,
In the blink of an eye,
It is already gone.**

That’s pretty fast! What has already gone? As soon as you hesitate, it’s already gone. Hesitate about what? The meaning of the shitstick. What do you think of when you read this case? When the abbot of the Providence Zen Center, who represents the Korean Chogye order in the West, came to Tallahassee to visit, we gave a teaching together, sharing memories of having studied with our teachers. As Mark, the abbot, related a story about his teacher Seungsahn Haeng and shit, I mentioned a story about my teacher and feces. An elderly man came to me afterward and said, “I really don’t understand Chan.” He continued, “Tonight you spoke about feces. In the Chan discourse records there is the line about Yunmen’s shitstick. I don’t understand it. What is it talking about?”

Now I ask you, the reader, when you read this case, how did you feel when encountering that response to “What is buddha?” What happened when you read basically that the answer was a toilet cleaner? Did that startle or shock you somewhat, or did it make perfect sense? Or did it stop you in your tracks? What gut response did you have to the word *shit*?

“Yuck!” is the ordinary response. It is quite interesting how we respond to feces. We all have ideas about what we see, what we hear, what we touch and smell. If we get

caught up in our ideas, we miss the point. We don't really see things the way they are. We see our own story about these things, and then we get all agitated and irritated.

On November 25 a few years ago, my wife gave birth to a baby girl. Everyone congratulated us. A month later, I returned to Taiwan because I got the news that my father was ill. By the time I got there, he had passed away. Everyone sent me condolences. How do we respond to birth and death? Why is it we congratulate when there is birth and send condolences when there's death? This is natural. Some may say that it's how we live between birth and death that defines us. My father had lived an honorable life. I will teach my daughter to live her life honorably and to see life and death as inseparable, as an opportunity to awaken her humanness. The way you live, your sense of direction, shapes you and gives your life meaning. Think about how you have shaped your own life and how you have authored it.

One of the most important parts of practice is earnestness. When you are earnest about your life, about the things that you do, you will be careful not to take things for granted; you will pursue what is meaningful. Vows shape your pursuit and aspiration. When you have vows, you have direction. And when you have direction, you won't get lost; otherwise you float aimlessly. Vows should not be for material gain but for something wholesome and useful that can bring forth the best in you, to benefit others. You then live as truly human. When you can live as a human, you begin to live as a buddha.

To live as a buddha is to live fully, freely, in birth and death. But most people's response to birth and death is a kind of escapism. They welcome birth and run away from death. They feel happy about birth and sad about death. Between birth and death they pursue a life of escape. They run from the inevitability of death and try to hold on to life. And in that course, they make all kinds of mistakes. Your

practice is not only to understand birth and death but to *fully* live out birth and death in one continuum. The question is: Are you living out your life fully, with all of your potential, your aspirations, your capabilities? Or are you living your life selfishly? Are you contributing to humanity, to your fellow human beings? If so, in what ways? If not, why not? If you aren't, how can you call yourself a human being? Being part of this species is your connection to your fellow human beings.

Yunmen's shitstick is related to this. You will get some understanding of this gong'an when we examine Yunmen's life a little. Yunmen was one of the greatest Chan masters in the history of Chan. He lived during the classical period in a time of turmoil, after one of the most devastating persecutions of Buddhism in China. This happened from the end of the Tang dynasty (618-907) into the Five Dynasties (907-60) and the Ten Kingdoms (902-79), just before the Song dynasty (960-1279). Local warlords ruled in China in this period and divided the country into pieces; hence it is called the Five Dynasties and the Ten Kingdoms.

Yunmen left home to become a monk at about age sixteen. He studied the vinaya, the Buddhist monastic codes, or precepts. We can equate this to studying how to be a human being. His first teacher, with whom he stayed for many years, was a precept master. Afterward, with a very solid foundation of buddhadharma in how to conduct oneself according to the vinaya, he felt the need to further his practice, to experience buddhadharma personally. He had studied how to become a human being, but now he wanted to be one. So he sojourned to meet many different teachers until he came across the one who opened the gate for him, allowing him to enter the ocean of dharma, in other words, to awaken. That master was Muzhou Daozong (780-877), the monk who also helped the great master Linji Yixuan (767-866) to become enlightened.

During the Buddhist persecution, Muzhou left monastic life to take care of his ailing mother, living in a hut with her, making and selling straw sandals. After his mother died, and even after Buddhism was allowed to flourish again, he continued living in that hut. Although Muzhou remained a lay practitioner, he was nevertheless a great teacher, and his name and fame spread widely. Thus, having heard about him, Yunmen sought him out to study with him.

When Yunmen finally found him, three times he tried to get into Muzhou's hut to seek instruction, and he was refused each time. The third time that Yunmen knocked on Muzhou's hut, Muzhou asked, "Who the hell are you?" Yunmen answered, "Wenyan." Yunmen was still known as Wenyan at that time.

So Muzhou asked, "Why are you here?" Yunmen replied, "I'm still unclear about myself." He had been studying the buddhadharma, mastering the vinaya, yet he was still unclear. He must have felt like one studying ingredients in a cookbook, or menus in a restaurant, as he asked himself, "Who is it that is reading the menu?" "Who is it that is eating the meal?" I said that studying the vinaya is like studying how to be human. Perhaps he was unclear as to what it is like to *be* human.

After each of the first two knocks on the door, Muzhou had cracked open the door, but as soon as he saw Yunmen standing there, he quickly closed it. At the third knock, Muzhou cracked open the door again. But the third time, when Wenyan said, "I'm still unclear about myself, please open the door!" Muzhou opened the door but said something very peculiar: "A stone drill of the Qin dynasty—useless crap!"

Every Chinese person in premodern times would have known what that meant. In 221 B.C.E., Qin Shi Huang (260–210 B.C.E.) became the first emperor to unify China. To improve communications throughout China, or more accurately, so that he could communicate universally

throughout his empire, Qin Shi Huang unified Chinese script from the many different forms used in writing. It was during that period that the wheel was invented, and it was he who began to build the Great Wall of China. His last project idea was to erect a magnificent stone palace for himself. In order to build his palace, a drill strong enough to penetrate and carve stone had to be invented. As the great palace did not get built before Qin Shi Huang's death, the stone drills became useless.

So Muzhou's answer while slamming shut the door, "Useless crap!" was in response to Yunmen's inquiry, "I'm still unclear about myself"—that is, he wanted to know about *me*, *I*, and *self*. Yunmen was bewildered by that answer but still tried to push in. He stuck his foot out, thinking Muzhou would not close the door on him if his foot were in the way. Wrong! Muzhou shut the door and broke Yunmen's foot, and in that excruciating pain, Yunmen realized full awakening. Though from that time on Yunmen was crippled and walked with a limp, he had now discovered that all along, he had been none other than human. His question "unclear about myself" was truly a "useless piece of crap."

Yunmen studied with Muzhou for three years, then was sent by him to Chan master Xuefeng Yicun. Yunmen was a monk; Muzhou, a layperson. It is usually laypeople who study under monks, not the other way around. But a true practitioner has no hang-up in that regard. The right attitude is that as long as a person can teach us, whether that person is old or young, a monk or a layperson, we will study with that person. You will remember that Zhaozhou was like that, too. At sixty, after his great awakening, he began his journey to refine his practice by visiting other Chan masters. However, Muzhou felt that Yunmen's affinity was with Xuefeng. So he sent him there.

Indeed, Yunmen studied with Xuefeng until his late thirties and received his seal of approval. He then

sojourned for ten years, refining his practice under various teachers. He finally settled down and stayed with a friend, Chan master Lingshu Rumin (ca. 862–918) until Rumin's death. Yunmen then took up the mantle of a teacher at that monastery. Later he moved to Cloud Mountain or *yunmen*, from which he got his name, and taught there for the next twenty years, until his death. He received students from all over China and supposedly had eighty-eight dharma heirs.

Yunmen became famous for his “one-word Chan,” as he often replied to questions with just one word. He was a great teacher. (There is a good English translation of his discourse record by Urs App: *Master Yunmen*.) During the Ten Kingdoms, one of the kings favored him in his region and bestowed on him the purple robe, which symbolized imperial recognition and the rank of National Teacher, the highest honor. Yunmen is featured in many different cases in this current collection of gong'an and also in the *Blue Cliff Record*, another well-known collection of cases, originally compiled by Chan master Xuedou Zhongxian (980–1052), a descendant of the Yunmen line of Chan. Later, Chan master Yuanwu Keqin commented on Xuedou's compilation, which became what we now know as the *Blue Cliff Record*.

Within Chan Buddhism there are five different lines. Yunmen is the founder of one of those schools. During the Northern Song dynasty, two schools within Chan were the most powerful and influential: Linji and Yunmen. However, by the end of the Southern Song dynasty, in the thirteenth century, the Yunmen line had been absorbed into the Linji line. Now we have only two existing lines of Chan, the Linji and the Caodong. Caodong rose to prominence in the later period of the Southern Song dynasty. I give this little bit of history to show the importance of Yunmen. We can see that from his answer to the monk, Muzhou's style of Chan rubbed off on Yunmen—aggressive, abrupt, but most direct.

Yunmen could not have been more direct in replying to the monk's question "What is buddha?" when he said, "Shitstick!" You often experience the world through your own ideas, concepts about what is good and bad, what is pure or filthy, what to like, what to fear. You have many ideas about the world. This case cuts through all of these ideas and fundamentally questions how you live your life, how you experience birth and death. Most of us are merely caught up in our opinions of life and are not alive to how things are. So often you turn into a great advocate for your point of view and then hold negative opinions of those who may have different opinions from yours.

We recently showed a film at the Chan center called *Forks over Knives*, a film that advocates vegetarianism from a medical perspective. People who get attached to this concept may become great advocates of vegetarianism, criticizing meat eaters. You become a member of one faction and criticize another. Do you cling to a particular view or party and then allow that to govern your decisions, your choices? I am a vegetarian and encourage others not to eat meat, but there's no need to criticize others in order to show the superiority of being a vegetarian. In seeing the wrong of others, you yourself are already wrong.

In the same way, most people get caught up in Buddhism. They use it to measure other people instead of applying the teaching to themselves. In Chan we call that a dream. The task of Yunmen is to wake his disciples up from their dreams. "What is buddha?" "A shitstick!" This is something that people would never expect to hear. Yet he was actually saying something that accords with the scriptures. For example, in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, one of the longest Mahāyāna scriptures, one finds, "What is buddha? Buddha pervades all things, the whole universe; it is identical to everything." So why wouldn't buddha be a shitstick or a bronze statue? Yunmen is not saying anything blasphemous; it is your own ideas, your expectations, that

blind you. Still, maybe you feel a bronze statue is a better substitute for buddha?

Cut to the chase and ask, “What is buddha?” This is just like Yunmen’s own question: “I’m still not clear about myself.” Monks read in the scriptures that all beings are buddhas; this monk may have been wondering, “Who am I? Am I a buddha? I don’t feel like a buddha. . . . I’m still unclear about myself.” Yunmen got a dose from Muzhou, “You’re unclear about yourself? A useless piece of crap!” Just like those useless stone drills that the Qin emperor had made but were never used. The questions, “I’m unclear about myself,” “What is buddha?” “What is buddha-nature?” “Who am I?” are all so useless, yet so wonderful.

The uselessness of this question is like the man looking for his own head in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. One day a man suddenly had a peculiar thought, “Hum, where is my head?” He began asking people, “Have you seen my head?” It was, of course, resting on his shoulders. But because he got caught up with this questioning, he began to take it seriously and kept going about asking, “Where is my head?” This is like Yunmen when he was still unsure of himself, and like you, and especially those people who use the huatou as a method, “Who is the master?” or “What is Wu?” or “Who am I?” It is a ridiculous question, yet you have to come face-to-face with it, earnestly work through it, and personally realize how ludicrous this question is. Your intellect won’t help you here—you know that already. When you have vexations and are troubled, do concepts like “I shouldn’t be troubled” or “Just put down vexations” actually help? Not so much. So you have to sincerely question until you’ve personally resolved the question.

Similarly, you’re a human being. What is it like to be a human being? Are you living fully as a human should? Are you deluded by your life? What is governing your life? Is it greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, and suspicion? If it is, then aren’t you just a puppet held by the strings of these

vexations? Until you can break through the shell of self-grasping, you have to ask silly questions such as “What is buddha?” or “What is a human being?” or “A dry shitstick?” without using your intellectual, rational thinking, biases. Instead, the key is earnestness.

The rise and fall of the buddhadharma can be witnessed here.

“A dried shitstick” cannot be taken conceptually. Whether buddhadharma flourishes or perishes depends on whether this dried shitstick is able to cut through the layers of conceptualization, of your dream, and allow you to wake up to who you are. If you allow *shitstick* to become merely another concept, then you will have contributed to Buddhism’s demise.

**Like a flash of lightning
Or sparks struck from flint,
In the blink of an eye,
It is already gone.**

Flash of lightning, sparks from flint—these happen in the blink of an eye. They are impermanent. Buddhadharma is not understood with fleeting thoughts and concepts. If you try to understand it with that, then it evades you.

As a rule, as soon as you hear or see something and concepts and labeling arise, its essence vanishes. As soon as you give rise to concepts about your experiences and reify them, you kill the *experiencing*. You don’t really live in the liveliness of *this*—moment to moment. Yet, how fast you give rise to judgments, biases, proliferation of ideas. It happens every day, at every moment. Flash of lightning, sparks from flint, blink of an eye—do you see how habituated you are, how tightly you are shackled to your concepts, your labeling, your discrimination, and how fast

they arise? You live in them. How is this not like living in a dream?

So when you practice, say, meditating on the breath or silent illumination or huatou or gong'an, you meditate on this moment, *here*. No abstractions of concepts, labels, judgments, discrimination—just as it is, on the method. You train yourself to do that first, at least for thirty minutes every day, in the simplified space of meditation. The key to this first step to practice is not to react to wandering thoughts or whatever may arise in sitting that pushes and pulls you. You learn to give yourself space from the churning of your concepts and discrimination. You see them arise, you accept them, and then you go back to your method. If they arise again, okay, then go back to the method. Do this again and again. Having a disciplined practice, in time you will not be swayed by the ups and downs in the complex space of daily life.

When a situation aggravates or annoys you and anger arises in daily life, you will naturally be able to give yourself space and not identify with it. Only then will you see and be close to what is actually happening in the moment. This is the second step, where life with all of its challenges and temptations begins to nourish you, provide opportunities to strengthen you.

The third step is that not only will you *be with* what is actually happening in the moment, talking or listening to someone or seeing something, but you will see the nature of mind, the nature of who you are—that you are human. Men is made up of males; women is made up of females. The third step is awakening. You will realize that adversities or favorable situations become the catalyst to let go of self-grasping.

The fourth step might be to continue to practice and experience awakening again and again and again—until you become truly normal, fully human, and completely natural.

It is important to be clear as to what to do in your practice. What is the shitstick? Where is the shitstick? During a talk, I once badgered one of my students, and his face got all red—that's where the shitstick is! When my teacher humiliated me publicly when I was a novice monk, that's where the shitstick was for me. When someone provokes you, you may think that person is the shitstick. As you practice, you learn to appreciate that, in fact, you are the shitstick. But what is this shitstick in your life? What is it? May you fully avail yourself of this question.

CASE 22

Mahākāśyapa's Temple Flagpole

Ānanda asked Mahākāśyapa, “Besides the golden robe, what else did the Buddha transmit to you?”

Mahākāśyapa yelled, “Ānanda!” Ānanda replied, “Yes?” Mahākāśyapa said, “Take down the temple flagpole in the front gate.”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you can utter a turning word here, then you will personally realize that the assembly on Vulture Peak has not yet dispersed. If this were not so, then why is it that, since antiquity until now, Vipāśyin Buddha still could not realize the sublime even though he had long set his heart on it?

The question is not as intimate as the answer.

Whose eyes have strengthened from this [truth]?

The elder calls, the younger responds—the family's shame is fully exposed.

A spring outside of yin and yang.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

The Chan tradition claims to be a tradition that passes on, through successive generations of teachers, a special transmission of teaching separate from the written scriptures. This lineage of teachers can be traced all the way back to Śākyamuni Buddha in India, more than twenty-five hundred years ago. This case is about this dharma transmission, but it does not exclude anyone. It includes you. This case directly points to what it is that has been transmitted. In other words, to the essence that is being passed on through generations of practitioners within this lineage. I invite you to investigate this directly, personally.

Mahākāśyapa was one of Śākyamuni Buddha's ten closest disciples. He had a great practice, great determination, and great wisdom. He was also known as the most ascetic practitioner. It was he who succeeded Śākyamuni as the leader of the Buddhist order, after the Buddha's passing. Ānanda, on the other hand, was young and handsome and had a fabulous memory. After the Buddha reached great enlightenment, he went back to his father's palace and expounded teachings to his family and everyone there. When he left, he brought with him many converts, people who, upon hearing his teachings, decided to join the sangha. This included the Buddha's own six-year-old son, who then became the youngest monk, and Ānanda, the Buddha's younger cousin.

What we have here is, basically, a scene taking place after the Buddha has passed away. Ānanda knew that everyone would be under the leadership of Mahākāśyapa.

Out of curiosity, he asked Mahākāśyapa, “What else did the Buddha transmit to you, aside from the robe and bowl?” In Chan, the robe and bowl—added on to transmission stories by people much later than the Buddha’s time to embellish the special status of Chan—are objects of entrustment of the awakening. In later times, people also came up with paper certificates to symbolize the transmission of mind.

Nothing is really transmitted in dharma transmission—it is just an acknowledgment, but people tend to mystify it or make a big deal out of it. It is an acknowledgment that recognizes the debt of gratitude a student has to the teacher and the teacher’s entrustment to the student to ensure that the teaching continues. What is important is gratitude and responsibility. Dharma transmission is not to be vied for, it is not an object of attachment, it does not legitimize one’s awakening; it is an expression of gratitude, especially in this ephemeral world.

Even the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, is not excluded from impermanence. He is said to have taught for forty years and was eighty years old when he passed away. Ānanda acted as his attendant monk for most of this period. Ānanda presented a big contrast to Mahākāśyapa, who was known in the community as the greatest ascetic and a most diligent practitioner. On the other hand, Ānanda was characterized as having a great memory. As the attendant to the Buddha, Ānanda heard just about all the teachings that the master gave and was amazingly able to reproduce them all because of his excellent memory. However, he seldom applied the teaching to himself. When the Buddha passed away, Ānanda was still unenlightened, unlike all the other arhats, or liberated practitioners, in the order.

In the mendicant tradition of the Buddha’s time, he and all of his disciples had traveled to different regions, teaching along the way. The Buddha specifically requested his disciples, especially those who had reached liberation, to go in the direction opposite to his and spread the

teaching. So once he was liberated, Mahākāśyapa, along with the other arhats, left the sangha to spread the teaching. The story goes that Mahākāśyapa was not around when the Buddha passed away. As was the custom, the Buddha's body was prepared for cremation, but on that day, even though his disciples tried several times to light the funeral pyre, as soon as it was lit, the fire would immediately go out. This went on until Mahākāśyapa finally arrived on the scene. In his presence, the fire lit up by itself.

Mahākāśyapa was meant to be the one to conduct the Buddha's funeral as well as to oversee the order. After the Buddha's death, a few monks commented, "Finally . . . the old guy is dead. Now we can do what we want." Having overheard this, Mahākāśyapa called a council so that all the Buddha's major teachings would be recited, collected, and passed on. Ānanda, with his great memory, had to be there. But Mahākāśyapa wouldn't allow it because he was not enlightened. This turned out to be a blessing, because for all of his life, even after he became a monk, Ānanda had relied on his cousin, the Buddha. He was able to repeat all of his teachings verbatim but had never been a serious practitioner, as he always felt that the Buddha would save him.

Mahākāśyapa said to Ānanda: "The council meeting will be held in a few days. If you are not an arhat by that time, you will be excluded." Ānanda was very saddened by these words—he felt rejected. At the same time, it spurred him on to be diligent. The old master he had relied on all of his life had passed away; he no longer had anyone to teach him, to rely on. He felt like an abandoned orphan. To make it worse, his sangha leader, Mahākāśyapa, his own older dharma brother, rejected him, refusing him participation in the council because he was not liberated. Out of great desperation, relying on himself, he became an arhat.

The written records of Buddhist history tell us that all who ever got awakened did so either while walking, lying down, sitting, or standing. Ānanda was the only person to reach awakening not in any of these postures—he did it while falling down. He became liberated in midair as he collapsed from physical and mental fatigue from practicing so hard. He practiced continual sitting meditation, but that did not work; then he tried walking meditation until he was physically exhausted and delirious. With that sense of earnestness and the pressure of the limited time he had to become awakened, he forgot where he was. However, on the evening of the day before the council meeting, he practiced so hard that he finally collapsed. In the sensation of the present moment as he was falling, self-grasping suddenly dropped from his mind. He became fully awakened.

You may have experienced leaning forward as you're dozing off during sitting, and unless really fatigued, suddenly jerking back to wake yourself up. Ānanda woke himself up from dozing off, and at the very moment he was falling down, with all four limbs off the ground, he achieved arhathood—great awakening. The next morning he went straight to the council of the arhats to which he had not been invited. All the arhats wondered what he was doing there, since they knew he was not enlightened—all except Mahākāśyapa, who clearly saw Ānanda's countenance. The old monk joined his palms. He knew immediately that there was now something different about Ānanda, that he was now awakened. Mahākāśyapa invited Ānanda to join the council and to recite from memory all the Buddha's scriptures. You may wonder about that change in Ānanda that Mahākāśyapa perceived: it is not necessarily something physical. If it were physical, you'd probably want to learn how to imitate Ānanda, to walk like him and be recognized as a master.

The present case happened after Ānanda was enlightened. Yet Ānanda still asks Mahākāśyapa what else the Buddha passed down to him. The answer from Mahākāśyapa is quite interesting: “Ānanda!” “Yes?” “Take down the flagpole.” What a wonderful response! A call, a response. Is there anything else needed? What need is there for anything to be transmitted? Back then, the flagpole had some specific social function. In the Buddhist tradition, just before a dharma discourse was about to happen, a signpost was displayed. During the Buddha’s time it was a pole announcing that the master, namely the Buddha, or one of his high disciples was about to give a talk. Later, in Chan monasteries, the signpost became the ring of the bell, like the situation in case 16.

The question in the present case could be compared to one of my students asking me, before I give a talk or a teaching, “Guo Gu, you received the seal of approval from Master Sheng Yen; tell me, what did he transmit to you?” And I’d call out my student’s name and ask him to turn off the mic—and then just leave. Could it be that I had a tiring day and didn’t feel like teaching? Or simply, the teaching was over; it was already given?

The present case is also similar to the time the Buddha transmitted the dharma to Mahākāśyapa. According to one particular scripture, Śākyamuni Buddha supposedly did this on Vulture Peak. As was described in case 6, he ascended the seat, looked at everyone, picked a flower from the ground, and held it up. No one understood what the Buddha was doing. His disciples may have thought, “Is the master getting old? Is he now appreciating flowers?” Only Mahākāśyapa understood and smiled. The Buddha was not as crude as Mahākāśyapa, who yelled out Ānanda’s name, or those Chan masters who slam the door on seekers or whack them to jolt them into awakening. No, the Buddha was much gentler: he just held up a lovely flower. When the Buddha saw Mahākāśyapa smile, he immediately said, “I

have the treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa, the true form of no-form, the subtle and wondrous gate to the dharma, the special transmission outside of scriptural teachings not established on words and language. I now entrust it to Mahākāśyapa.” Everyone in the assembly was dumbfounded, all asking among themselves, “What has just happened?”

Now I ask you: What did the Buddha transmit? Mahākāśyapa calls and Ānanda responds. What does that mean? What is this calling? What is this response? If you have embarked on Chan practice, you will know that this practice is about intimacy, but not intimacy of the worldly kind. Practice is about coming to know something so close, so near. It is knowing personally who you are, even as you sit in meditation, counting your breaths or aware of the breath, in and out, in and out. It is not about being pushed and pulled by wandering thoughts or discursive thinking or drowsiness but about maintaining the clarity of in-the-moment awake. In this process, you become intimate with the immediacy of the present, dropping off the clouds of deluded, discursive thinking. We drop the facade, the masks, the games we play, and bathe in the stream of experiencing without self. What else do we need?

Besides the golden robe, what else did the Buddha transmit to you?

What could Mahākāśyapa say to such an unnecessary question? Ānanda is like a person who is already drinking water and then asks, “Is there more to this water than water?” Women urges us to investigate the reality of who we are, what *this is*, right here and now:

If you can utter a turning word here, then you will personally realize that the assembly on Vulture Peak has not yet dispersed. If this were

not so, then why is it that, since antiquity until now, Vipasyin Buddha still could not realize the sublime even though he had long set his heart on it?

Vipasyin is a buddha of antiquity—the first of the seven buddhas mentioned in early scriptures—at one time the teacher of both Śākyamuni and Maitreya. What this sentence means is that if we can't realize the truth of Mahākāśyapa's call to Ānanda, or that there is nothing more to this water than the water we're drinking each and every moment, then Vipasyin Buddha has himself never attained the truth, and Śākyamuni and Maitreya have never gotten the truth either.

There is no truth other than this. Can you offer a turning word? A turning word is a word or phrase that turns delusion to awakening, that demonstrates awakening. Say something! Say something to demonstrate your personal understanding. If you can do that, you can turn this ludicrous case around—turning words—and it would be as if the Buddha were still giving his teaching on Vulture Peak, that he is still holding that flower, and that you are the one smiling.

The buddhadharma is widely available to you, in this moment, within you. Find it! Don't you see that Vipasyin Buddha has already reached awakening? So have Śākyamuni and Maitreya. In fact, so have you. The dharma has already been transmitted. If you can't shoulder the responsibility of this transmission, then take up Wumen's cue:

**The question is not as intimate as the answer.
Whose eyes have strengthened from this [truth]?
The elder calls, the younger responds—the
family's shame is fully exposed.
A spring outside of yin and yang.**

The whole point of Buddhist or Chan practice is intimacy. Not intimacy with someone else, not intimacy with some text, not with more concepts or ideas—but intimacy with the truth that you are. Just free yourself from clutter, delusion, and self-referentiality. The answer is already here; the treasury of the true dharma eye and the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa are already here. That’s why the question is not as intimate as the answer. If you can realize this, then your wisdom eye will blaze with strength and power.

By saying, “The elder calls, the younger responds—the family’s shame is fully exposed,” *Wumen* is actually praising the interaction between Mahākāśyapa and Ānanda. Recently, when I picked up a cup of water, I saw how the water reflected the light of the room in a fragmented way, through tiny ripples. The light through the water and the water and the light were not different. Many people get caught up with words and concepts, which is like the ripples of the water in my cup. When you are caught up with ripples, you cannot reflect too well—everything becomes fragmented. Yet the natural function of the water is to reflect, just like the role of the teacher is to call the student, to call forth the student’s buddha-nature. The role of the student is to answer, to respond without self-reference. This is to bring to life your awakening. This is the kind of springtime that is beyond the workings of yin and yang. Yin and yang, in Chinese ancient philosophy, is that which complements and gives rise to everything—including the changing of seasons—in the world of rising and perishing, coming and going. But here, spring is beyond this world of impermanence, beyond saṃsāra. This is not to say that *Wumen* suggests there’s some kind of permanent thing *out there*. No. The “spring outside of yin and yang” is beyond existence or nonexistence, arising and perishing, coming and going. To put it bluntly, it is nirvāṇa—but why use such a concept? Better to just cast away

what it is not. This is completely unfathomable, if you use the mind of arising and perishing to think about it.

How do you live in the changing seasons of yin and yang and realize that which is beyond it? How do you dispel the clouds of delusion so you can actually see the moon? Recall what I said about intimacy—as you are, reading these words, feeling the presence and the weight of your body. Be *here* and share this intimacy with all of your being; say something! The next time you make a decision; when you generate vexations causing you trouble; or when you give other people trouble with your jealousy, anger, and so on, come back and say, “The treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa, is already transmitted, already here!” Then take full responsibility. Why have you chosen to express anger or vexations, spreading them to others around you, especially those whom you love? Why did you choose to give up your treasury of the true dharma eye and wondrous mind of nirvāṇa for vexation? Let it go; stop the game. There’s nothing to gain outside this moment free from self.

Practice is not about getting a glimpse of the moon. There is no moon! Nor is there some kind of permanent spring season. Practice is not about producing blissful states or religious experiences or awakening. Practice is only about *not* getting caught up with changing seasons and dark hovering clouds. When these are suddenly not there, you will realize that the “spring outside of yin and yang” or the moon itself has vanished. And together with that, vexations are also gone.

CASE 23

Not Thinking of Good or Bad

The Sixth Ancestral Master was chased by Ming all the way to Mount Dayu. The ancestor saw Ming coming, so he placed the robe and bowl down on a rock and said, "This robe symbolizes entrustment [of the dharma]. How can it be taken by force? Take it if you want it."

Ming tried to pick it up, but it was as immovable as a mountain. Ming hesitated and became frightened. He retorted, "I came for the dharma—not the robe. Please teach me, postulant."

The ancestor said, "Not thinking of good, not thinking of bad, at just this moment, what is your original face?" At this, Ming was greatly awakened. His whole body was dripping with sweat; in tears, he bowed in reverence and asked, "Is there any other significance beyond this secret teaching and meaning?"

The ancestor said, "What I have just told you is not a secret. If you turn the light around and illuminate your own [original] face, what is secret is right there."

Ming said, "Though I followed along in the congregation at Huang mei, I've never had insight into myself. Today I received your instructions and had an opening, like a

person drinking water who knows for himself whether it is cold or warm. I shall regard you as my teacher, postulant.”

The Sixth Ancestral Master said, “If this is so, then both you and I take Huangmei as our teacher. Let us protect and uphold this [teaching].”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Regarding the Sixth Ancestor, his actions came from a state of emergency. In his grandmotherly kindness, he peeled a fresh litchi fruit, removed the pit, and then placed it in your mouth. All you have to do is swallow it!

It cannot be described or pictured;
Nor can it be praised enough—so quit your struggle.
The original face has never been concealed;
Even if the world extinguishes, it cannot be destroyed.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Chan practice is about clearing away obscurations or barriers. A general method such as awareness of breath is used to develop concentration and awareness. Then the practitioner can move on to two distinct methods: The first is called huatou or gong'an, which is meditating on a story that involves Chan awakening like this case. The second is a method of “no method,” the practice of silent illumination, where the practitioner's mind rests nowhere

and attaches to nothing while maintaining its clarity. Japanese Zen calls this method *shikantaza*, or just sitting. Of course. It is used beyond just sitting; it can be extended to all areas of life. These two methods are unique in Buddhism—they represent the heart of wisdom and compassion. Why? Because they accord with the nature and function of awakening. When one realizes awakening, one also realizes that there are actually no barriers after all.

Awakening in Chan is not an altered state of consciousness—or any “state” for that matter. It is resting in the functioning of the nature of mind, without self, without grasping, without any obscurations. It is definitely not a state of oneness or bliss. It is what is called our original face. I have mentioned this point in a previous case, but as a reminder, the *nature* of the space in a room is not affected by how much furniture is in it or how dirty or clean the room is. Realizing one’s true nature can be compared to realizing the nature of the space in a room. The furniture may seem like obstacles to the room, but from the perspective of the room, they are not. It is precisely because of the openness of the room that furniture can be in it. The emptiness of the room allows for all kinds of furniture and possibilities. The room is the nature of mind; the furniture, the states of mind.

As if caught up in the furniture in a room, you find yourself obstructed by your vexations, discriminations, labels, and habits. However, although you can hold a grudge for a very long time, can be angry and have all sorts of suffering or anguish as a result, these states actually do not affect your true nature. Therefore, Chan meditation is not about zapping into some blissful state but recognizing your intrinsic freedom—who you really are and your potential—and living accordingly. Once you have some personal experience in this, the path of practice becomes

much clearer; you can work on your shortcomings, such as anger, without becoming caught up in them.

To see the room's potential, its openness, you must first turn on the light. If it's a mess, clean the carpet, the windows, the floor, and so on. But if you don't turn on the light but instead start cleaning in the dark, you may bump into the furniture and trip over it and get hurt. This case is that light. It clarifies what awakening and practice are about.

This case, "Not Thinking of Good or Bad," involves one of the greatest Chan masters in the history of Chan, Master Huineng. His name means "capable of being wise" or "wisdom's ability." Some people may think that wisdom will make them intelligent or will change them into some kind of superhuman being. Huineng was illiterate and poor. His own awakening demonstrates that wisdom is not dependent on intellect, knowledge, and status. He symbolizes the spirit of Chan.

This story comes from the *Platform Scripture*, which has a biography and contains a compilation of recorded sayings by Huineng. It occurred when Huineng was still a postulant, after having received the dharma transmission from Daman Hongren (602-75), who told him to run away from the monastery at night. The next day Huiming went after Huineng. Fortunately, this text is easily available in major bookstores. Before discussing the gong'an, some background about Huineng is necessary. He lived during the apex of the Tang dynasty. His father, originally an official in northern China, was banished to the south after his official status was stripped away for an offense unknown to us. He also died soon after Huineng was born, leaving Huineng and his mother in abject poverty. Huineng, a very filial son, chopped and sold wood to support his mother. One day, at age twenty-eight, as he was passing by a certain street on his way home from the market where he had sold his firewood, Huineng heard someone, perhaps a

monk, chanting the *Diamond Sūtra*—the quintessential scripture on the wisdom teaching of emptiness. As he was illiterate, he had never come across this scripture. He listened intently and had a deep insight when he heard the words “nonabiding, mind arising.” Nonabiding is the nature of mind; it is our inherent wisdom and ability to be awake—like the inherent openness of a room, unobstructed by the furniture in it. *Mind* here refers to bodhi mind, or *bodhicitta*, the altruistic mind of compassion to save all sentient beings. So essentially, this line expresses the inseparable union of wisdom and compassion. A mind not caught up with anything is free, and because of this freedom it is able to give rise to genuine selfless compassion for all.

Huineng asked the person, “What is it that you’re chanting?” The man answered, “It is the *Diamond Sūtra*.” Huineng asked, “Where can I obtain more teachings on this text?” The man replied, “I got my copy from a very famous and great Chan master, Hongren; he lives up north, at Mount Huangmei. It is a great travel distance from here, if you wish to see him.” Huineng was troubled, as he very much wanted to study with this teacher Hongren, but being filial, he had to find a way to take care of his mother. It is said that a patron gave him a sum of money for his mother’s needs, knowing his desire to study Chan. It took him thirty days by foot to reach Hongren at Mount Huangmei.

Daman Hongren belonged to a new movement within Buddhism: the Chan tradition, which at that time, among other things, was a reaction against Buddhist scholasticism, the intellectualization of Buddhism. Prior to the emergence of Chan, Buddhism in China was still very much shaped by Indian Buddhism. Chan can be said to be the first true Chinese form of Buddhism. Chan master Hongren represents this tradition as the fifth ancestral lineage.

When Hongren met Huineng, he asked him, "Where are you from?" Huineng said, "I'm from Lingnan, in the south." At that time, all the large, prosperous cities in China were in the north. The Fifth Patriarch said, "Lingnan? In the south there are only uncivilized people. What makes you think you can study Buddhism?" Huineng immediately retorted, "In terms of buddha-nature, there is no north or south. Even though I am illiterate, I am the same as you." Huineng was a lay commoner dressed in rags, now among Buddhist monastics, which, simply put, were "professional practitioners" of Buddhism. Hongren was very astonished and delighted by Huineng's words.

Huineng continued, "My mind keeps producing wisdom. I believe that not being alienated from my own nature is important. This nature itself seems to be a field of blessings." Hongren, feeling perhaps that Huineng would be harmed by jealous monks, said, "Stop! Say no more. Go to the mill and pound the rice. That will be your job here." Manual labor like pounding rice was the duty of temple workmen and postulants. These people typically live at the monastery to help run it. Sometimes, it is a preparatory stage prior to becoming a monk.

In order to protect him, Hongren sent him to do work in the granary. Later on, Hongren went to that area and asked Huineng, "Do you understand why I sent you here?" "Yes, I do." Hongren continued, "Your task is to pound the rice; do it single-mindedly." "I will." Huineng single-mindedly pounded the rice and prepared the food. In monasteries of the Chan tradition, the task considered the most precious, the most conducive to practice, is not necessarily sitting in the Chan meditation hall but doing manual labor. Many people who come to the monastery are first sent to do kitchen duty or to work in the granary. Many seasoned practitioners voluntarily choose to work in these places. One day some eight months after Huineng's arrival, Hongren went to the granary and saw Huineng pounding

the rice. It takes a lot of work to separate the rice from the husk: using a huge mortar, one has to first pound hard and then step on it with the foot. In monasteries of the time, meals consisted mainly of congee (watery rice), especially when there were many monks to feed. For instance, Hongren supposedly had more than a thousand monks living at his monastery.

Hongren asked Huineng, "Is the *rice* ready?" He replied, "It's been ready for a long time!" Hongren at that time was already old. He struck the floor three times with his staff. Huineng took this to mean "the third watch of the night." So that night Huineng went to Hongren's quarters and Hongren expounded the *Diamond Sūtra* to him. Huineng's mind was completely illuminated. Hongren then transmitted to him his own monk's robe and begging bowl as a symbol of entrustment of the responsibility to continue the Chan lineage.

The day before, something quite interesting had happened. Hongren addressed the larger assembly, saying, "I want to find a successor. Therefore, today I ask that you come up with a verse to demonstrate your realization."

The head monk, Yuquan Shenxiu (605–706) wrote a poem. Everyone was in awe of it, reciting it throughout the monastery, especially since Hongren had said, "It is good." Besides, Shenxiu was the head monk and therefore the leader of the monastery after Hongren. His four-line verse went something like this:

The body is a tree of bodhi;
The mind is like a clear mirror stand.
Polish it diligently, time and again,
Not letting any dust gather.

While Hongren praised it, he knew that Shenxiu was not yet awakened. That day Huineng was working when he heard someone recite that verse around the granary. He

asked, "Who wrote that?" The monk answered, "You don't know? The master is retiring and wants to find a successor. He asked all of his monks to come up with a verse demonstrating their realization. This one is from Shenxiu." Huineng asked, "Can anyone write a verse?" "Yes!" As Huineng was a postulant, way too busy to go around the monastery, he'd had no idea this was happening. Huineng then asked the monk to take him to the section of the wall where Shenxiu had written his verse. Since Huineng was illiterate, he asked someone to write his own verse, right next to Shenxiu's:

Bodhi originally is not a tree.
A clear mirror has no stand.
Originally there is not a single thing;
Where can dust collect?

Everyone was astonished. The news reached Hongren. When he saw these lines, he asked, "Who wrote that?" "That postulant, in the kitchen." Hongren ordered, "Have someone scratch it off quickly!"

It was the next day that Hongren went to the granary and summoned Huineng to meet him in his quarters at night and secretly transmitted the robe and bowl to him. That night Hongren also warned Huineng, "You must leave the monastery tonight. Take the ferry boat." Huineng said, "I'm from the south; I'm not familiar with the mountain routes here." Hongren said, "I will take you personally." Hongren took Huineng to the docks and told him to go into hiding. "Come out and teach when you're ready."

For three days, Hongren did not give any teachings in his monastery. People may have thought something was wrong, that perhaps the master was feeling ill. The head monk went to inquire about him and to report to the assembly. Finally, Hongren addressed the assembly, saying, "I am old. The teaching has already been passed down." Now

everyone throughout the monastery was asking, “Who is it, who is it?” Hongren answered, “The one who is capable!” The only person in the monastery *capable of wisdom* was Huineng.

This is where the gong’an picks up: one of the monks, an ex-general by the name of Huiming (“Ming” in the gong’an), was furious about this. He was a big, brash, straightforward individual. He picked up his belongings, jumped on a horse, and went chasing after Huineng. According to the text, Huiming easily caught up with Huineng.

“This robe symbolizes entrustment [of the dharma]. How can it be taken by force? Take it if you want it.” Ming tried to pick it up, but it was as immovable as a mountain. Ming hesitated and became frightened. He retorted, “I came for the dharma—not the robe. Please teach me, postulant.”

The words “entrustment [of the dharma]” pierced right through Huiming’s heart. *Entrustment* in Chinese is sometimes translated as “conviction.” Here it does not mean faith or belief; it means the seal of approval, like a stamp. The impression made from a stamp has the same image as on the stamp itself. So *entrustment* really means “oneness” or “identity.” Identity of what? Hongren’s mind and Huineng’s mind were identical; their minds were one in accordance with the workings of buddha-nature—awakening.

Huiming replied, “No. I came here for the dharma. Please teach me, postulant.” Huineng responded with the most condensed teaching of Chan—he cut right to the chase:

Not thinking of good, not thinking of bad, at just this moment, what is your original face?

Like all practitioners of meditation, Huiming was used to reflecting on his own flaws, to introspection and watching his mind. He knew very well that the mechanism of the discriminating mind, of like and dislike, of good and bad, was what drove each and every decision in his daily life. Many people go again and again to a dharma center. Despite the leg pain and the discomfort, they still go. Perhaps you are one of them. What is it that drives you? Perhaps you feel a lack, or anguish inside, and you want to improve something. You want your life to be other than what it is. If you are used to observing yourself, you see that at the foundation of all of your decisions and your experiences, when you are vexed, angry, or jealous, the core of your anguish has to do with your liking and disliking; good and bad. When you have leg pain and you don't like it, it is because you want this moment to be other than what it is. Yet at the same time as you have "don't like," you already like something else. Like and dislike, good and bad, are always bound together. It is the most fundamental duality you experience day in and day out. It has become your sense of who you are.

Huineng, here, is asking Huiming to put down everything he has known about himself and see what is there. What is the freedom that is not bound by good and bad, like and dislike, birth and death? Had he stopped at merely "don't think of good or bad," it would not be Chan or buddhadharma. It would simply be stupidity. If this "not thinking of good and bad" were all there was to gaining enlightenment, then it would be very easy: all you'd need is to get yourself hit over the head with a hammer, go into a coma, and there, you'd be enlightened! Huineng was actually asking, what is it, right here and now, that is already free from this duality, this separation? Is the space in the room ever affected by furniture? How can it be? Put it down!

Immediately upon hearing Huineng's words, Huiming was greatly awakened. His whole being trembled, and sweat covered his body; then, in tears, he paid reverence to Huineng.

When you are sitting and don't like having many wandering thoughts, you feel that there are obstructions. Know that nothing obstructs us; thoughts liberate themselves, moment to moment to moment. What need is there to *do* anything about wandering thoughts? In their natural state, thoughts are already free in their nature. And so you sit with peace of mind; you sit at ease, clear and free, wakeful and still. This is the genesis of the silent-illumination method—the methodless method in Chan mentioned earlier. Yet what is your sitting like? Isn't it true that even in sitting you are busy? When you're sitting, you're too often minding this or minding that, for instance, your neighbor who is moving too much or sounds such as a car passing by. When you "just sit," just mind your own business. Just sit. It is not a state of oblivion; you're sitting—body and mind sitting. You are clearly aware of the reality of sitting, with no wandering thoughts. This is silent illumination, the actualization of your "original face."

At this, Ming was greatly awakened. His whole body was dripping with sweat; in tears, he bowed in reverence and asked, "Is there any other significance beyond this secret teaching and meaning?" The ancestor said, "What I have just told you is not a secret. If you turn the light around and illuminate your own [original] face, what is secret is right there."

Even though Huiming had this first entry or opening, a first glimpse of awakening, he asked, "Is there anything more? This can't be *it*, can it?" Huineng answered, "I told you. That's it!" This word *it* (Ch. *mi*) has been translated as

“secret” but can also be understood as “intimate.” The secret is within you. Be intimate with it. How? Turn the light of your awareness around—stop chasing after this and that. From the perspective of the room, furniture is no barrier.

Technically speaking, Chan training doesn’t “lead” to awakening. From the Chan perspective, buddha-nature, awakening, or freedom is something intrinsic to your very being. It is already here, from one moment to the next. This means the room has always been open and spacious; there may be reasons why furniture is there or not there, but even when it is there, the room is still open. Unfortunately, because of your continual entanglement with your own views, with what you think is good and bad; with what you construct as like and dislike; likable, not likable, you create all sorts of suffering for yourself and others. You have identified with the furniture. In fact, that’s all you see. You’ve lost sight of the room. Suffering can be great indeed, with people going to war and killing each other because of it, condoning all sorts of inhumane activities, subjecting others to harsh labor, and so on. Underlying each nation’s political agenda is this “I want, I don’t want. I like, I don’t like.” It’s the same culprit—the self—that spreads from one individual and expands to the whole nation. Your concepts and ideas can also do great things and bring goodness and prosperity to humanity—if only they are free from self-referentiality, self-concern. Therefore, in itself, the furniture of liking and disliking is not the culprit, although it has the great potential to be.

If you want to engage in Chan practice in your daily life, you have to be intimate with the way your heart, your mind operates. It does not matter if you are meditating or pounding rice. Actually, the best time to observe the self is when you are defensive, when you are threatened, or when you are challenged by another situation. In your reaction, you can instantly see your grasping—your like and dislike.

It's right there. In that moment, put everything down, see through these constructs. They are not barriers to your original face. But to do this, you have to actually engage in practice.

Regarding the Sixth Ancestor, his actions came from a state of emergency. In his grandmotherly kindness, he peeled a fresh litchi fruit, removed the pit, and then placed it in your mouth. All you have to do is swallow it!

Wumen says that Huineng is so kind in spelling everything out to you. He not only peels the skin of the litchi fruit for you but also puts it in your mouth. All you need to do is chew it. No one can do that for you, but let me show you how to actually chew it.

A basic method of Chan practice is to be aware of the breath as a meditation method. When you have wandering thoughts or are falling asleep, immediately bring your awareness back to your method. You need not get angry or impatient with yourself. Thoughts such as “Why do I have wandering thoughts? I have to concentrate, concentrate . . .” only reinforce your habitual pattern of grasping and rejecting, like and dislike, and good and bad. You just need to bring back your awareness gently, immediately. There is no need to contrive, to generate anything else, to add oil to the flame. You just bring it back. That exercise will train you to be more mindful of what is happening in your daily life. The next time someone yells at you, just see this anger—and put it down. Regain your composure of being the spacious room. Allow all things to be, and relax. This is the “light” that illuminates the room. The cleaning part is not to identify with anger.

It cannot be described or pictured;

**Nor can it be praised enough—so quit your struggle.
The original face has never been concealed;
Even if the world extinguishes, it cannot be destroyed.**

Awakening is readily available to you. You live with it; you bask in it from one moment to the next. It is not that you have lost your true nature; nor is it something that you gain from engaging in spiritual practice or something you struggle with. If it were something that could be gained from outside, like a psychological state that you can zap into while in meditation and zap out of as easily, that would mean it was not real. It would probably be just another construct that you have created.

This “quit your struggle” is a rough translation—the best that I can come up with—but it doesn’t fully convey the meaning, which, in fact, contains the whole path of Chan. The Chinese here for *struggle* means bearing suffering, toil, difficulty, and striving. As long as there’s duality, there will be struggle because there is for and against, grasping and rejecting, good and bad. Isn’t this what characterizes everything you do in life? When this struggle suddenly stops, you will see for the first time that awakening has nothing to do with that. It’s like water trying to get wet or wind trying to blow. This is your true nature; it is not an experience, not a state, and not knowledge. Experiences come and go. *State* makes it sound like an altered state of consciousness. It is definitely not some learned concept or idea.

That said, awakening has many different levels. There can be shallowness and depth. Even though water is water, wind is wind, and awakening is awakening, according to the depth of your own grasping, you can have a flash of your true nature, then return to delusion. This would be a shallow experience (for lack of a better word). It passes and

you realize that you still have a lot of attachments. The difference is that now you have at least personally *tasted* the absence of delusion—you have tasted the litchi. No one can fool you about what it tastes like anymore. This means that you know what vexations are, what self-grasping is. You know how the mind's mechanism functions and you're not tricked by it. Self-grasping will reemerge because its mechanism is so deeply ingrained.

Vexations are like a volcano eruption. If you have seen your self-nature, then when the volcano is about to erupt, you will be able to calm it. That's what post-awakening practice is about. You won't allow a vexation to spew out, because if it does, it will hurt those around you. How do you calm it? You see the nonexistence of vexations. This is wisdom. You will be able to engage with the world fully, more than ever before, and because your actions of body, speech, and mind will not stem from self-grasping, they will benefit others. This is compassion.

Wisdom does not give rise to vexations; compassion has no opposition. There's no ownership. They are not *yours*. They are just the most natural and needed response to everything and everyone. Even if you no longer existed, this functioning of wisdom and compassion would continue to be.

So this is how to chew on the litchi. If you want to know its taste personally, then take up this case and ask, "Not thinking of good or bad, what is my original face?"

CASE 24

Apart from Words

A monk asked Fengxue, “Words and silence imply *li* and *wei*. How can one penetrate and be free from both without error?”

Fengxue replied:

“Reminiscing about Jaingnan in March,
Where the partridges sing
Is where the hundred flowers emit fragrance.”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Fengxue's activity functions like lightning. When there is a path, he [immediately] walks it. But why does he not cut off the tongue of the former [poet]? If you gain intimacy here, then you will naturally find a way out. Put aside the samādhi of eloquence—say something about it!

With unrefined words of no backbone
He imparts the meaning before it was even spoken.

The more you ramble on,
The more you lose your way.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

As this case makes allusions to Chinese philosophy and literature, it may be hard to understand even the surface meaning of the case. However, this case, or gong'an, is actually quite simple. Words and silence do not hinder each other. But if you're entangled by either, especially when you are caught up in your proliferation of words, ideas, and notions, you lose your way.

Here is basically the gist of this case: A monk asks Fengxue about being free from the duality of words and silence, and Fengxue replies by citing a famous poem of no special significance. Wumen says the poem doesn't even have backbone or substance to it and comments that before the spoken word, the truth is already revealed anyway, so there's no need to ramble on and on about it in the first place. In fact, any damn poem would do just fine!

The main person in this story is Chan master Fengxue Yanzhao (897-973), who is the fourth generation descended from Chan master Linji Yixuan. By the beginning of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126), three of the five main lineages of Chan—the Yunmen, Weiyang, and Fayan lineages—had all dissolved, with only the Linji and Caodong lines remaining. Fengxue was the most important Linji Chan master at the beginning of the Northern Song. In his time, during the Five Dynasties, he was known as Kuangzhao, not Yanzhao. The Chinese character change was forced on everyone during the beginning of the Northern Song because the first Song emperor's given

name was Kuangyin, and no one in the empire was allowed to have the characters *kuang* and *yin* in their names. Fengxue was the place he later became associated with, and it became part of his epithet.

You may perhaps understand this case better through Fengxue Kuangzhao's own life. He left the household life in his late twenties. He was learned and well versed in Confucian classics. His family was prosperous enough for him to receive a proper education at a time when most people were illiterate. His level of study was high enough that he could take the civil service examination, which was imperially sponsored. There are different degrees of examination—local, provincial, national—and anyone who passed the highest level automatically became high officials in the imperium, which was how the Chinese recruited officials. Both his father and brother had taken that examination and had high expectations of him passing it too. But when Fengxue arrived at the capital to take it, he just left. Had he taken the test, he could easily have become a local government official. Instead, he decided to become a Buddhist monk. He studied the Tiantai philosophy but felt it unsatisfying, so he gave it up. He decided to visit various Chan teachers of his day, including Chan master Ruiyan, the subject of case 12. Finally he met a monk named Shoulan, the attendant to Chan master Nanyuan Huiyong (860–952), and was so impressed that he went to visit the master himself and eventually became Nanyuan's dharma heir.

When Fengxue first met Nanyuan in the abbot's quarters, the latter asked him, "Where did you come from?" "I was on a summer rain retreat and met your attendant monk, Shoulan," Fengxue replied. Nanyuan said, "Oh, really, what did he say to you?" to which Fengxue replied, "He encouraged me to always be my own master." Nanyuan whacked him as soon as he heard that and said, "Get out! What use is a monk who has already accepted his defeat?"

Fengxue was shaken by these words. He couldn't understand their meaning. All along he had been holding on to "the one" who understands, the one who should be one's master. To Nanyuan, that was like holding on to something that is bound to fail. Why? Because there is no such a thing as the self.

Fortunately, this sense of not knowing and wonderment about why he was wrong remained with Fengxue in all of his daily activities. He couldn't penetrate it. As he worked as a gardener at the monastery, one day Nanyuan went to the garden to check out how he was doing. Holding his staff, he asked "How do folks in the south discern this staff?" Fengxue replied, "They think it's something special. How do you discern it, Master?" Nanyuan said, "With this staff, the patience of the unborn [is born]. In meeting circumstances, resort not to asking the teacher!" Upon hearing that, Fengxue was greatly enlightened.

Fengxue had always resorted to relying on something or someone else. When he studied Tiantai doctrine, he relied on the scriptures; when he was sparked by Shoulan to study Chan, he relied on the surface meaning of being one's own master. Now when he was asked what Linji Chan was about—symbolized by the staff—he replied that it was special, as if it were something outside of him. Finally, Nanyuan scolded him, making this basic point: "Don't rely on anyone outside of yourself! The unborn wisdom of awakening is here!" The "unborn" in Buddhism refers to the nonarising of delusion. Nanyuan's words shattered Fengxue's wonderment and cut right through his intellectual mind.

How do you respond to words and silence in life? Aren't you wrapped up in ideas and words? As soon as the teacher asks you a question, such as, "What's your understanding of Chan?" your mind starts to spin with answers, "It is this or that." Some Zen people mimic earlier masters, giving a shout or slamming the floor or remaining silent. All of these

responses are wrong. Words and language cannot describe reality; all expressions are constructs. Silence is not a better response, in case you thought it was.

This is the point of the monk who questions Fengxue: “Words and silence imply *li* and *wei*. How can one penetrate and be free from both without error?” The words *li* and *wei* come from a philosophical treatise by the fifth-century Buddhist master Sengzhao (384–414), a student of Jiumoluoshi, or Kumārajīva (344–413), the great translator who accurately and eloquently helped to establish a correct understanding of Buddhism in China. In this treatise, Sengzhao used very Chinese notions to convey the Buddhist teaching in the way he understood it. The word *li* refers to the *li* graph, the sixty-fourth hexagram of the *Yijing* or *The Book of Changes* (commonly known in English as the *I Ching*)—an ancient divination text. It symbolizes ultimate truth, transcendence, essence, and subjectivity. *Wei* means subtlety; it also refers to the manifold manifestations or functions of the *li*. “*Li* and *wei*” is a Chinese philosophical way of describing the world through opposites. Setting up *li* and *wei* as opposites here refers to words and silence as opposites. This way of framing things assumes that essence and appearance, root and branches, ultimate and conventional realities, words and silence, are separate from each other. Not getting caught up in this duality, Fengxue simply cites a famous poem by Du Fu (712–70), one that any Chinese person would definitely know. The poem was composed after Du Fu visited the southern Yangtze River (that is, Jiangnan) during a beautiful springtime in March. He wrote:

**Reminiscing about Jaingnan in March,
Where the partridges sing
Is where the hundred flowers emit fragrance.**

This passage is not only famous but also describes something that is actually happening. What do flowers *do* besides look pretty? They emit fragrance. What do birds *do*—not just partridges but any bird? Sing, call, and chirp. There is no self in there anywhere. The interesting thing about Fengxue's reply is that he is not even using his own words. There's no need to reply to questions with originality. Why? Because the very question, in the way that it is framed, is already wrong. The truth is, there is no need to reveal "the truth" of how things are, or the teaching of our school, or to defend anything through words—it is already right there, right now. Everything is readily apparent and natural. In citing someone else's poem that describes the workings of nature without self-reference, his own reply is absent of a subject.

Fengxue's response points out something that is very natural, in the natural world. The truth is here. You, in your own way, naturally live out your life every day, every moment. Everything, as such, is all good. You are already fundamentally free in the most natural way of being. A flower that emits fragrance, a bird that sings, a person who responds. None of these need any self. If your job is a waitress, serve. If your role is to be a mother, love your children. Whatever you do, just do.

Is that how you usually do things? You tend to complicate things, don't you? You mistake the natural and dynamic functioning of your mind and body as needing a referential subject to attach to. You may naturally assume subjectivity in response to a particular role, but you do not necessarily need subjecthood. Perhaps you can substitute the ancient philosophical paradigm of *li* and *wei* with your own paradigm of modern science.

In the Zen-Based Stress Reduction Workshop I lead, I discuss the science behind self and brain. The brain has an extraordinary and sometimes very useful function of simulating selves and events that help you navigate

through daily life. This simulated sense of who you are helps you make decisions; it helps you help others. But that simulation is based on learned neurological patterning, fragmented memory, and continual perception. It is unstable and unreliable. Essentially, you have mistaken the brain's natural ability to momentarily simulate a self—a permanent sense of *me*, *I*, and *mine*—in response to different circumstances, which activates different regions of the brain, to be who you are.

Even in the brain there is no unitary sense of self; you generate different selves as a by-product of neurological synapses and patterns in different regions of the brain. The reflective self of witnessing what you're doing is generated by the neuroconnectors of the anterior cingulate cortex, the upper-outer prefrontal cortex, and the hippocampus. The emotional self of knowing you're angry, jealous, and threatened is seated in the limbic system—amygdala, hypothalamus, part of the basal ganglia, and upper brain stem. The narrative self of perceiving yourself as having a history, that you are this or that kind of person, comes mainly from midline cortical structures, temporal and parietal lobes—between the back and the front of the head—and other systems. Finally, all of these layered experiences are mediated by your brain's perception of the body's ongoing engagement with the world—think of your experience of being *here* and perceiving the world as being *out there*. The point of all of this is that your sense of self, or rather, selves, is simply interconnectivity.

Buddhadharma considers this self a product of dependent arising. It is conditioned by various past experiences that continue to habitually influence how you experience the world. Repeated habits continue to strengthen certain neurological associations between events and feelings so that, when you interact with people or assess the situations you're in, you continue to experience them through your own idiosyncrasies. You rely on an imagined and unstable

processor to make decisions, much like the way one might rely on a pair of, say, green lenses to see the world. Of course the world becomes green. Some analogies of this process include how you may see a rope and think it's a snake; how seeing someone looking at you in a certain way makes you feel that perhaps something is wrong with you or the person wants something from you; or how you constantly tend to read people's minds even though what you are reading is actually products of your own conditioning; or how you habitually think something negative is going to happen or you are anxious about certain things even though most of your worries never actually materialize. Only to find out later that none of it was true. Your "readings" of yourself and others are wrong because these readings are based on faulty processors. At the base of these experiences is grasping.

In the question "Words and silence imply *li* and *wei*. How can one penetrate and be free from both without error?" the problem has never been words or silence but the mistaken grasping of the natural functioning of our brain to divide self and others, words and silence, bondage and freedom, right and wrong as real. This is how things become unnatural to such a point that you have a problem with flowers emitting fragrance or you get annoyed when birds sing or you become distressed when challenged.

I'm not suggesting the colored glasses through which we filter the world are completely useless. No. There is a history regarding why the glasses became the way they are. You still need glasses to see the world, but in using them, don't become used by them. You can readily take them off when not needed. Everything has value and is useful, even your thinking mind. Longtime practitioners sometimes think, "When can I stop these wandering thoughts that keep coming on and on and on?" So you like peace and don't like wandering thoughts. But since having thoughts is a natural function of the brain, that's not where

the problem lies. To be human is to have thoughts. The problem is grasping at the images filtered through the colored lens.

Who says the truth cannot be expressed by words? Who says silence or gesture is better? When you're free, everything is free. Words and silence, gesture and stillness do not hinder—only self-grasping does. The Chan master can use anything to give a teaching: he can borrow someone's words or use words from the sūtras, especially for those people who are well read and knowledgeable, and who, in their youth, had to memorize Du Fu's poem. Citing something they will resonate with is an appropriate teaching. So how do you transcend words and language? How do you get to know the truth? Haven't you heard the sound of birds? They sing. Haven't you smelled flowers? They have fragrance. Just be as you are! Free.

Birds go "*chirp chirp chirp*"; flowers emit all kinds of fragrance. A mother will tell her daughter: "Clean up your room!" A server will say, "May I take away your plates?" That's it! Whether or not the daughter cleans her room, the mother should not allow it to become vexatious. Whether customers say "thank you" after you take their plates is another business. There is no self anywhere; everywhere there's freedom. When self-grasping exists, there's only bondage and vexations.

Fengxue's activity functions like lightning. When there is a path, he [immediately] walks it. But why does he not cut off the tongue of the former [poet]? If you gain intimacy here, then you will naturally find a way out. Put aside the samādhi of eloquence—say something about it!

When you don't inject a self where there is none, every activity is like lightning—natural and free—and everywhere a path opens as soon as you take a step. How can it not be

this way? When you're blocked, there's no path. A path is only a path when you start walking, functioning, responding—all in a most natural way. All things are like this. You just need to walk! You just need to stop injecting a self into whatever you do, and then everything opens up. This is intimacy; this is to be intimate with how things are, how you and everything truly are: free.

My teacher used to say: "If you're smart, serve everyone; if you're not so smart, do more manual labor and offer yourself to the community. But don't think that a monk who cleans the toilet is somehow less than the monk who memorizes and lectures on scriptures." When I was a beginning novice in the monastery, every morning monks had the task of sweeping leaves in the parking lot. It was an endless and ultimately pointless work: the leaves kept on falling and the area was never free of them. I just wanted to get on with the job and soon be done so I could get to my meditation practice. Frustrated after a month, after I had figured out the quickest way to sweep up the foliage, I complained to my teacher: "These people are sweeping from left to right, from right to left, and make all these piles of leaves all over the place. They're totally unsystematic in the way they're going about this—not at all productive. If you'll assign me to the task, and to me alone, I'll have it done in half an hour. Just get them to do something else. I can't work with them." My teacher said, "No. Everyone must do it together." "Then it will take two hours just to sweep," I complained. Later I discovered my own stupidity. I was using a measuring tape to size up everyone else and everything to classify them as right or wrong, valuing, for instance, sitting meditation work over sweeping, as if menial work were not practice.

Leaves fall; monks sweep. Natural. Sweep not to get on with meditation, not to beautify the monastery, not even for the sake of others who visit the monastery. Yet sweep. There is no self anywhere. Realize that you create your own

obstacles and, habitually, your own afflictions in daily activities. Genuine practice is just the opposite; you see through your daily activities clearly. You sweep away self-referentiality so there's naturalness and harmony with all that is.

As for the samādhi of eloquence, or freedom in communicating this or that, it's all good. Don't you know that "the more you ramble on, the more you lose your way?"

CASE 25

The One from the Third Seat Preaches the Dharma

Master Yangshan dreamed that he arrived at Maitreya's palace and sat on the third seat. One of the venerable ones there beat the gavel and announced, "Today, the one on the third seat will preach the dharma." Yangshan then got up, beat the gavel, and said, "The Mahāyāna teaching is apart from the four propositions and cuts off the one hundred negations. Listen carefully, listen carefully!"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Tell me, did he preach the dharma or not? To open his mouth is to fail; to shut his mouth is to lose. Neither opening nor keeping it shut, he is still as far apart [from the truth] as 180,000 miles.

Under clear, broad daylight,

This guy is dreaming of talking in his dream!
Conjuring up all kinds of bizarre and strange things
To deceive the congregation.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Everything comes together because of causes and conditions; everything ceases, also, because of causes and conditions. This is the way the world works. The coming and going, arising and ceasing of all things belongs to the world of illusions. Nothing lasts, yet everything is possible. To live fully in this world you need to know the workings of the world, the workings of causes and conditions. You will have to learn to (1) *wait* for the conditions, (2) *recognize* conditions, (3) *adapt* to conditions, and (4) *create* new conditions. Usually people just react to causes and conditions without seeing things clearly. Instead of merely reacting, you must cultivate the wisdom and the compassion to do these four practices. You must learn to see things not with tunnel vision, from a self-referential viewpoint, but in a holistic, interdependent, and connected way. These practices will help the quality of your life. When you can fully engage with this dreamworld of causes and conditions, then causes and conditions themselves cease to be and you awaken from the dream. You fulfill all the wonderful teachings and help everyone.

Chan master Yangshan Huiji (807-83) was heir to Chan master Weishan Lingyou, mentioned in case 5. Together they formed one of the five Chan lineages: the Weiyang school of Chan. Yangshan was a great master, very witty and sharp. Each Chan master has his or her own style: some are humorous and sarcastic, others may be rather

laid back, still others may be confrontational and aggressive—like Linji who, in demonstrating his awakening, jabbed his teacher three times in the stomach to express his joy. Yangshan, from the record of his teachings, seems to be a very lively fellow, a bit on the wild side. His last name was Ye. At fifteen he tried to leave the household life to become a monk, but his parents did not allow it, as they wanted him to get married and produce sons. Mind you, old China was a patriarchal society where sons were very important. He again tried to leave home at age seventeen, but his parents urged him to marry. In those days, people married young, sometimes even at fourteen or fifteen. His parents had found him a wife, but he refused to marry her. Using his body to protest, he cut off the pinky and ring fingers of his left hand. In my book *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence in Chinese Religion*, I write about the wide variety of austere practices found in Chinese religion, copying scriptures in one's own blood, cutting off one's fingers, and self-immolation—some of which are still practiced today.

In premodern times, people typically used their body to demonstrate certain cultural values and virtues. The body was an instrument or a site where sanctity was negotiated. This kind of self-sacrifice and austerity in Buddhism may not be so popular among American Buddhists, but it has always been part of the East Asia Buddhist tradition. When Yangshan cut off his two fingers, his parents finally got the message and allowed him to become a monk. His resolve had been heard loud and clear.

Usually novice monks are eager to become ordained as full monastics. But not Yangshan. He remained a novice for a long time, visiting different teachers to sharpen his understanding. In fact, he was still a novice when he first met his teacher Weishan, who asked him: “You’re a novice. Do you have a master or not?” One could interpret his question in two ways: “Do you have a teacher, a master

you're studying with?" Or "Who is your master? Who is the person who is making decisions to go left or right, to practice this and that? Who is the one within you who tells you what to do? Are you just following your own wandering thoughts or are you your own master?" Yangshan said, "Yes, the master is around." Weishan asked, "Where is he?" Yangshan got up, walked from west to east and then sat down. He could have done just about anything. Weishan remarked, "This fellow is not ordinary," and accepted him into the congregation to practice.

At a later time, another interaction took place between the two. Yangshan asked, "Where is the true buddha?" Weishan replied, "*Ahh*, the wonder of thinking nonthinking! Turning the light around to realize the inexhaustible. When thoughts exhaust themselves, return to the source and you'll realize that both nature and the manifold appearances are ever-present. Noumenon and phenomenon are nondual. Such is the true buddha." Upon hearing this, Yangshan became thoroughly awakened.

One day, sometime after his awakening, Yangshan was just hanging out; he walked up to the first seat—meaning, the head monk of the monastery—and the head monk made a comment about how delightful the light rain had been on that day. Yangshan immediately seized the opportunity and caught the monk off guard by asking, "What's so delightful about it?" The monk was unable to respond. Yangshan said, "Ask me, then," and proceeded to say, "*Ahh*, delightful rain!" The head monk asked, "What's so delightful about it?" Yangshan stuck out his hand and let the rain drop on his palm, then pointed to it.

In Tallahassee, summer can get quite hot. A nice rain is always a delight. You may find the rain delightful, too, but if it continues for a week, you may find it annoying and say, "It's raining again!" There is nothing particularly delightful about rain. Yet just the fact that it is raining is itself—like all things—sufficiently delightful. Every day is a good day;

every moment is a good moment. Like I always say, IAG—it's all good!

Causes and conditions come and go; good and bad interchange. There is nothing to verbalize about it. Everything changes; but precisely because everything changes, everything is alive and dynamic. IAG! You just have to “listen carefully, listen carefully!” Then you will see.

In your life, you should be able to hear the dharma being preached everywhere by everyone. In adverse situations you may think, “Things are bad,” but what's so bad about it? Who is thinking they're bad? In the same way, if you think something is so wonderful, I ask you, “What is so wonderful about it?”

What do you do when you meet adversity or people who present you with challenges? Recognize buddhadharma! Sitting in meditation is nice and lovely. But afterward, when facing troublesome people and situations, do your old mechanisms and habit patterns return? If so, then your sitting practice is useless. You have to first learn to recognize causes and conditions. If things don't go your way, flow and adapt. In the meantime, wait. If things just need a little nudge, you can create the proper conditions for them to flourish. One way to create new circumstances is to better understand yourself, to understand the other, to know when to advance or to retreat. If you know yourself and know others, then you will know when to advance or to retreat. So what must first be done is to clarify yourself and the situation. You have to be careful of your initial emotional, conceptual reaction to adversity so that no vexations are expressed. In your life, the purpose of practice is to dissolve vexations in a way that will not harm others. Thus everything you meet in life reveals the wondrous workings of dharma.

Most people have a lot of wandering thoughts during the day, and in dreams, all kinds of garbage comes out. How do you recognize causes and conditions with all of your

wandering thoughts? If you're swirled about by conditions, you will certainly not be able to do anything. You will be a mere puppet on strings, controlled by causes and conditions. So first you must have a steady meditation practice. But this is not enough. You have to integrate meditation into your life.

I teach a one-minute Chan to my students, as described earlier: Pick five times throughout a day, or five activities, and for one minute, relax your body, allow your breath to be natural, and be clear while doing the task at hand. Ground yourself in this moment's task, whatever that may be. The principle is to relax, to be natural and clear. You can choose to do this, for example, when you are making tea or answering the phone or getting dressed in the morning, and so on. Just one minute at a time, five times a day. Do this in addition to your formal sitting meditation practice. These moments will then permeate the rest of your day. If you vow to practice *every moment*, however, then most likely you will not be able to do it. So just start with five one-minute meditations.

Once you can integrate the principles of meditation into your life, you will be calm enough to recognize the workings of causes and conditions. Inevitably, at some time as you practice this method, as you're trying to relax, something will go wrong: someone may step on your foot, or you make your tea and you run out of sugar, or someone says or does something that aggravates you. These are wonderful opportunities. As these things happen exactly when you are consciously practicing, you will see vexations as they arise. You will remember not to get caught up in them and to relax, be natural, and clearly go back to the task at hand. This is the first step in not getting caught up in causes and conditions.

I recently provided some "opportunities" to two of my students: one laughed at me as a response. The other stopped talking to me for three days. If you think that's

bad, I could tell you more of the outrageous things my teacher used to do to me. The point is, life is full of opportunities—not obstacles. To know how to use them is to know the workings of causes and conditions.

This case begins with Yangshan dreaming that he was in the presence of Maitreya Bodhisattva, the next Buddha to come to this world, who now supposedly resides in Tuṣita Heaven. There are other Buddhist masters who have dreamed that they were in the presence of Maitreya. In fact, it is not an uncommon phenomenon. Modern scientists do not agree on the significance of dreams, but neuroscientists do say how our perceptions are completely fabricated, that they are simulations of the brain. You simulate your own self-image, even though it may not be who you are. You may have clear memories of events—but scientists demonstrate that memories are actually unreliable. They are mere reconstructions that blend information stored in long-term memory with skewed current states of mind as the events are occurring. Your mind—independent of the fact that you are dreaming or awake—can function just fine. Dreams can seem extremely real to you, so real that you can have just as strong an emotion as when you are awake. So what distinguishes dream and wakeful states?

Aren't you in a dream? Is this not the dream of self and others, having and lacking, fear and joy, coming and going, arising and ceasing? So in broad daylight you, too, are dreaming of talking—and acting, and thinking—in your dreams. Yet these simulations usually become your reality, and they enslave you. You think the simulations are actually real, that it is how things really are. But what is real? Everyone is talking in their dreams, and they don't know they're dreaming.

Yangshan is able to speak the dharma in his dreams. Or does he? He said:

The Mahāyāna teaching is apart from the four propositions and cuts off the one hundred negations.

The world of causes and conditions is not the realm of awakening. How does one go beyond causes and conditions, beyond the four propositions of affirmative, negative, both affirmative and negative, neither affirmative nor negative? But isn't this the way you experience the world? You either affirm something, think it's real, or you negate something. Sometimes you're unsure of things, so you come up with clever ways of saying that things both exist and don't exist. Or you think that things neither exist nor don't exist. The "hundred negations" refers to the refutation of all kinds of argumentation. To say that the Mahāyāna teaching, of which Chan is its culmination, is beyond the four propositions and the hundred negations is to say that logic, reasoning, and everything that you can ever come up with in your conceptual mind will never grasp how things actually are.

The fourfold teaching of causes and conditions I mentioned above is meant to help you live better, to adapt to situations, to be more flexible. In recognizing and cultivating conditions, you dissolve your *self* in the workings of conditions. You let go of conditions. This is to be apart from the four propositions and to cut off the one hundred negations.

Did he preach the dharma or not? To open his mouth is to fail; to shut his mouth is to lose. Neither opening nor keeping it shut, he is still as far apart [from the truth] as 180,000 miles.

This is now a question to all of you. If you say yes, you're wrong. If you say no, you're also wrong. If you say both yes

and no, or neither yes nor no, you're still terribly off the mark. Those are the four propositions right there. This is like saying the target is over here and yet you are shooting over there. So now, answer me, Did he preach the dharma or not?

This case is about the wordless teaching of ineffable buddhadharma. Anything that can be spoken of, that can be conceived of, constructed mentally, or fabricated, is conditioned. Yes, although there's no such thing as buddhadharma, teachings can still be given according to the needs of people. When the Buddha was about to pass away, he gathered his disciples and said, "I've been teaching for almost forty years and yet I have not said a single word." The Buddha led a busy life. He traveled in all directions, to different parts of India, to help people. Always talking and talking and talking.

**Under clear, broad daylight
This guy is dreaming of talking in his dream!
Conjuring up all kinds of bizarre and strange
things
To deceive the congregation.**

In dreams, you do dream things. Things must be done—not for oneself, but they must be done. Engaging in your daily affairs, don't inject your self into everything you do. There is no self, no others, no engaging. This is the correct view. Chan master Xuyun, or Empty Cloud (1840–1959), the great-grandmaster in my Chan lineage, was one of those monks who often traveled to different regions to renovate dilapidated temples. He was a builder. Someone once asked him, "Since everything is impermanent, why are you rebuilding all of these old temples? They'll only become ruins anyway." This would be similar to someone saying, "Why do we need to eat; we'll just get hungry later anyway." What kind of question is that?

When Wumen says that Yangshan is deceiving the congregation, he is actually not criticizing Yangshan but praising him for what he has done for the Chan tradition. Like all the great masters in the Chan lineage, both Wumen and Yangshan are talking in their sleep, dreaming in broad daylight. If you think they are not dreaming, or that when they wake up they will have no more dreams, then that kind of thinking is itself a dream—a grave misunderstanding of buddhadharma.

CASE 26

Two Monks Rolled Up Blinds

Once, the great Master Fayán of Qingliang [Temple] was about to give a teaching before the midday meal. He gestured with his finger at the blinds, and at that two monks went to roll them up. Fayán responded, “One gains, the other loses.”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Tell me, who has gained and who has lost? If you obtain the eye [of awakening], you will perceive how Fayán himself failed. That being said, don't try to fathom this in terms of gain and loss.

Rolling it up: the great space is utterly clear and
bright,
But this open spaciousness does not accord with our
tradition.
When even emptiness is let go of,

Then not even the slightest breeze passes through [the blinds].



GUO GU'S COMMENT

This particular case is terse; it doesn't seem to make much sense. How wonderful! If you want to enter the gateless barrier of Chan, you must not only drop your common sense, which helps you navigate through daily life, but also your *own* common sense, intellectualization, concepts, and feelings that blind you. If you are to realize your true nature, you must also strip away everything else, including experiences of luminosity and clarity. If you can do so, you will find yourself already inside the gateless barrier of Chan. Clear away all that blinds you.

Back in the thirteenth century there were no windows; when the blinds were opened, there were simply no boundaries of "inside" and "outside"; everything was just openness. Similarly, practitioners think that meditation is about attaining some insight or fantastic states of emptiness. There are even teachers out there who talk about inner light and clarity. These are not Chan.

How do you practice then? You dive into the abyss of gain and loss, right and wrong, yet at the same time you know that there's no gain or loss, right or wrong. Gong'an typically present traps of duality—because this is how ordinary people live their lives—and entice you to fully exhaust your grasping of duality. So with this case, you have to ask yourself, Why is it that when both monks roll up the blinds, one gains and the other loses? Meditate on this until you're completely at a loss, when you simply cannot come up with anything. Yet allow this earnest mind of

wanting to know force out your wits and all of your attachments.

Chan master Fayuan Wenyi (885–958) was so kind that he pointed out a road for practitioners in posterity. For that you should be grateful. This story does not say what happened to the two monks, whether they gained insights or not. The point is, how do you understand this case?

Let's begin with Wumen's verse. It may seem cryptic at first, but it actually makes perfect sense if you relate it to your life and practice.

**Rolling it up: the great space is utterly clear and
bright,
But this open spaciousness does not accord with
our tradition.**

"Open spaciousness" consists of two Chinese characters: *tai* and *kong*. *Tai* means "great"; *kong* means "space, emptiness, openness." This is the same character used for the emptiness presented in the *Heart Sūtra*. Together they stand for all the blissful experiences practitioners may have, such as insights of emptiness, openness, clarity, oneness, and flow. While these are wonderful experiences, please do not take them as Chan—they do not accord with the principle of Chan. This principle, which I have rendered "tradition"—has the double meaning of the Chan tradition or school and the essence or principle truth, which refers to selflessness.

**When even emptiness is let go of,
Then not even the slightest breeze passes
through [the blinds].**

Insights of emptiness, openness, clarity, oneness, and flow are not selflessness because in them there is still a self that experiences. Why? Because deep down there's still

gaining and losing, right and wrong, having and not having that lie at the core of these experiences. Therefore, usually people who have had these experiences believe deeply that they have gotten or attained something. What happens when we open the blinds? There is no barrier between inside and outside: there is oneness, and the space is clear and open. Similarly, when practitioners experience a sense of release, they take it as awakening. It is not. Even when there is a feeling of release or emptiness, or oneness of inside and outside, you have to let go of self-grasping.

Who has gained and who has lost? If you obtain the eye [of awakening], you will perceive how Fayan himself failed. That being said, don't try to fathom this in terms of gain and loss.

Here, in this case, self-grasping is expressed with the duality of gain and loss. But there are many faces of this basic way of relating to the world. Buddhism talks about the eight winds. They are the feelings of gain and loss, defamation and recognition, praise and ridicule, and sorrow and joy. These feelings arise because there is a sense of self. When you let go, no wind can blow you away; no wind can *blind* you. The eight winds include all of your vexations in daily life, all of the challenges and difficulties that you face, the suffering that you have. They are intimately related to words and language. Think about this: words and language are structured around dualities. The most fundamental is the way you relate to everyone, such as people at work, friends, and family. Duality and opposition is how you live your life.

You polarize all of your experiences in daily life without much awareness. You walk down the street, observe that certain people are dressed a certain way, and instantly you categorize them as being this or that type of person. Even some teachers react this way toward students. If students

behave a certain way, a teacher may label them as this or that. Waiters and waitresses sometimes judge customers as good or bad by the way they communicate to them. Your mind naturally compartmentalizes experiences. It's normal. In fact, you are hardwired to do that. It detects threat and pleasure, for example. This mechanism has actually helped us survive as a species. It only becomes a problem if you attach to them, identify them as me and mine and I.

You need to distinguish between right and wrong, between what you should or should not do; if you no longer have values, you will not be able to survive. So these skills are part of you, hardwired in you. This ability to discern right and wrong is not the problem. The culprit is that you are *attached* to these views as yourself. You let discriminations take the driver's seat, allowing them to govern all of your behaviors instead of reflecting on things more carefully, in a non-self-referential way that sees things from other people's perspective.

In Chan practice, success or failure is not determined by how well you sit in meditation. Whether you're able to sit in full lotus or not, for a long time or not, with a concentrated mind or not, is not Chan. You only need to drop that which blinds you: vexations. One time, when I was a novice in the monastery, attending to my teacher, he asked, "Guo Gu, get me a cup of water." When I brought him the water, he said, "Why did you bring me water? I told you tea." Of course, my mind immediately started to spin all kinds of ideas of how he was wrong and I was right. I was caught up with his words. How foolish! Just get him a cup of tea.

Practice is a drastic measure to uproot the poison of duality. Indeed, discernment is not the issue here, but in order for you to truly see that and not get caught up habitually by discriminations, it is necessary to make you go through the process of completely letting go of discernment, discrimination. When you experience that which is completely free from duality, then you will come to

know your true nature. Your eye of awakening will open up. Only then will you not be so easily caught up with the manifold faces of gain and loss, right and wrong, having and not having. You will personally know that duality is to be used in the world but that all along you have been used by it.

Fayan was not always a Chan master. He was once an exegete who was also caught up with words and language. Before he took up Chan practice and became awakened, he studied scriptures, especially those from the Yogācāra, or Consciousness-Only, school. This school advances that all things are created by mind and provides a theoretical model of the mind, which it divides into eight distinct layers of consciousness.

On one rainy day, Fayan was staying over at a rather shabby monastery. Very proud of his learning, he was sharing his understanding with the rest of the monks there, explaining how everything is constructed by the mind. Fayan had no idea that among the crowd was the abbot of the temple, Luohan Guichen (867–928). Luohan asked Fayan, “How about this big rock outside, in front of the courtyard, is that created by the mind? Is that inside or outside the mind?” The Yogācāra doctrine teaches that nothing is outside the mind. Fayan replied, “Everything is within the mind.” Luohan continued, “That rock is in your mind?” Fayan replied, “Yes, the rock is in my mind.” Luohan laughed, “Why would you want to carry a rock in your mind? It’s so heavy!” Fayan was dumbfounded, unable to utter a word. He realized that Luohan was not an ordinary monk, so he stayed behind and studied with him, eventually realizing awakening.

For the sake of helping you, Fayan sets up the current case so you can dive in and investigate. If you’re awakened, you will see this case as just another trick up his sleeve. How wrong he is! How grateful you should be for his

compassion. If you're stuck, all you can grasp is gain and loss, right and wrong.

CASE 27

Not the Mind, Not the Buddha, No Things

A monk asked Nanquan, "Is there a teaching that has not yet been told to people?"

Nanquan said, "There is."

The monk asked, "What is that teaching that has not yet been told to people?"

Nanquan replied, "It is not mind, not buddha, not a single thing!"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Nanquan was asked [by this monk], and so he completely gave away all of his family treasure—he lost much.

Repeated admonitions harm one's virtue.
Wordlessness is truly efficacious.
Even if you had crossed oceans,

I would not have told you!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

A teacher is a teacher because of his or her students. Because there are many types of students, there are many teachings. The teacher's own practice is not perfect; it is in time perfected through interacting with students. When to give teachings? When not to? When to be explicit? When to be silent? What do students need to hear in a particular moment? Chan practice, on many levels, is about intimacy: getting to know yourself and others. Through your interactions with others, you come to know yourself. You know your own limits; you know the needs of others. The practice is continuous. Even teachers practice; the practice never stops.

Intimacy is the topic addressed in this case, the relationship between teacher and students. Recently, one my graduate students at Florida State University graduated and left Tallahassee. He is already missing the time that he had there. He went to China to study and teach and will then go on to a PhD program. The relationship I had with this student was unique. Often when I said something to him, our minds would meet; he knew what I was thinking. When such intimacy is present, the teacher can really help the student, as there is trust and a real meeting of minds. We call this karmic connection or karmic affinity.

There are times when we first meet people that we immediately feel close and the relationship flows easily. At other times there is no karmic affinity. Recently a student began studying with me. I assigned him a particular task. He is overconfident. Without understanding what was

required, he said, "That is very easy—too easy for me!" I replied, "Okay, but you still need to do the work. Go through the process. If it's too easy for you, you can help the others to do it." At every turn, this student challenged whatever I said. Such challenges are actually good, as they provide me with some kind of basis for learning, although not so much learning for that student. When there is a barrier, it's very hard to allow the teaching to get through. It's like a cup full of water; not a drop more can be poured in.

A teacher's cup may also be full. In the context of Chan teachings, the teacher's practice is to respond as selflessly as possible to what is appropriate for the student. When a teacher is not selfless, when self-attachment is present, when ulterior motive or agenda is there, problems will be there. A barrier will have formed and the student will not receive help. In short, when the self is there, nothing flows; the teacher will not be able to reflect and to respond to the needs of the student. Things will not be seen clearly. The teacher's advice, therefore, will be inappropriate for the student.

I am very grateful to my teacher, who was the most congruent person I have ever met. As his attendant I was always with him; I got to see him onstage and off, alone and with people, in public and in private. I can't say that I never saw him get angry or express the presence of self, but 99 percent of the time, he was selfless. When a teacher's practice is advanced, we would do well to listen to him or her and allow what the teacher says to sink in.

How do you know when a teacher's practice is solid? You actually don't know because usually you see only the teacher's public persona. Except on rare occasions, most people don't usually interact with and observe teachers on a personal level. So it takes some shopping around and clear observation. There are some very basic things to observe: First, does the teacher uphold or break the

precepts? Second, does the teacher have the correct views about buddhadharma? Although as beginning learners you may not be so familiar with the buddhadharma, you can use the principles of impermanence and selflessness, in addition to your common sense, to see if his or her teachings accord with them. Third, does the teacher have bodhi mind? *Bodhi* usually means “awakening,” but here it means whether or not the teacher’s daily activities reflect selflessness, which means compassion. And, lastly, ask yourself if the teacher’s teachings resonate with you. Sometimes a person may be a very good teacher but you may not feel a connection with him or her. These are all part of the causes and conditions of finding a teacher.

Once you begin studying with a teacher and come to trust him or her, take seriously the teacher’s advice for practice. When you run into difficulties in practice, your teacher will be able to help you solve them and mature your practice. And as you actually gain experience in the dharma, your confidence will grow. Do not accept anything on blind faith. Confidence, faith, and conviction grow from experience. Experience comes from practicing the dharma, applying the teaching to your life.

A monk asked Nanquan, “Is there a teaching that has not yet been told to people?”

Nanquan said, “There is.”

The monk asked, “What is that teaching that has not yet been told to people?”

Nanquan replied, “It is not mind, not Buddha, not a single thing.”

The monk in this case surely knew the Chan axiom that “Chan is a tradition outside the doctrines: not based on words and language, it directly points to the mind, so upon seeing one’s true nature, one becomes a buddha.” What teaching could he possibly want? Thus his asking was a

challenge to his teacher. Perhaps you can understand his question rephrased in this way: Generations of teachers have taught great things. Can you put something on the table that's new? Do you have a teaching that has not yet been taught to people?

The Buddha taught for forty years; he said many things. By Nanquan's time, many generations of teachers had already been blabbering about this and that. So the monk asked, "Is there a teaching that has not yet been told to people?" He was surely expecting the answer to be no. Our tradition entails the silent or wordless teaching, beyond words and language. But at that point, Nanquan responded, "There is!" This, of course, astonished the monk. Why? Because Nanquan was a disciple of Mazu, who always taught that one's own mind is buddha.

Perhaps you think remaining silent is the best way to respond to the monk's question? Not so. The task of the teacher is to draw out the most fundamental question from students—a question that stems from the depth of one's being as it relates to one's own life. The monk in question may have started out by challenging Nanquan, knowing that Nanquan would remain silent because they both already knew that mind is buddha. But Nanquan lured him in and went for the kill. "Ah, yes, in fact, I do have a secret teaching!"

Clearly the monk still had attachments. Thus Nanquan's response was "Yes!" Had the student been free of attachments, the question would have been framed differently, and perhaps Nanquan would have said no. A good teacher is like a reflecting mirror. When there is a fixed image, when there is something there, the mirror will reflect. When there is nothing there, there's nothing for the mirror to reflect, like two mirrors reflecting each other.

In his astonishment, the monk's attachment was snatched away by Nanquan's reply, "It is not mind, not buddha, not a single thing." That's what the monk needed to hear. Chan

teaching is sometimes also called mind teaching, and mind is identical to buddha. If we realize the mind, the self-nature, we realize buddha. Nanquan responded differently to the monk: "For you it is not wordless teaching. There is no mind, no buddha, no thing." Isn't it true that in your daily life you tend to make everything into "things"? What we see, hear, touch, taste, and think, we reify and solidify into something that is graspable and attainable. Some people engage in practice intellectually, conceptually, which is the way they acquire material things. The more they acquire, the more they know and become full of themselves. This teaching, surely, is something that the monk already knew. The master pointed out to him that he needed to put down everything.

Having correct view is the critical factor. The correct view is that the self that's getting in your way is originally not there. Practice with that understanding. If you practice with the thought that this self is in your way or that there is something to attain, to realize, to get rid of so that you may *become* clear, then this is not the Chan view. The Chan view is this: In this moment, *now*, no vexations, no self. It's all good. Whatever the task at hand needs, do it.

Chan is very different from the gradual path taught by other sects of Buddhism. It provides you with the awakened view. While it gives you the target, it tells you that right from the beginning, there is no target, no arrow. Still you must shoot. The gradual school, on the other hand, teaches that before you even shoot at the target, you have to prepare yourself by first building muscles, biceps and triceps; getting the right clothes to exercise in; and learning to shoot something else first. In Chan you pick up the arrow right away and start shooting. Right from the beginning you start aiming at the target, at the goal. Finally you realize that there is no target, no arrow. Having this view is important, lest you think you're here to *get* something. Practice in this way and you will realize that the

path and the result are the same. Whether you're able to hit the target is a different matter.

It is fair to say that from the perspective of human beings, there is progress; there is process. From the perspective of enlightenment, however, there is no progress. So, objectively, when people practice they become more peaceful, less argumentative, more compassionate, more understanding, more insightful. This is progress. From the perspective of an enlightened person, there is no progress. Teachers see the buddha-nature in people; they see that everyone has this potential and one student is no different from another. The teacher does not get caught up in the student's vexations. The teacher does not think less of the students because they have vexations and somehow can't practice well.

Nanquan was asked [by this monk], and so he completely gave away all of his family treasure—he lost much!

A teacher does not hold back anything from the student. However, giving everything away is sometimes poison. Why is that? The student can easily turn a teaching into an object of attachment. Only when the time is ripe can the family treasure be revealed. This treasure doesn't take on any particular form. Sometimes a teacher needs to snatch away attachments; sometimes he or she simply needs to point out what's there.

Here's one example: Some twenty years ago I accompanied my teacher to an intense retreat in Wales. Although I was my teacher's attendant, the organizer assigned one of his students as my attendant. In the same way that I was following my teacher around to take care of him, this student followed me around to take care of me. He had been practicing for a long time; his mind was focused and receptive. I was translating from the Chinese

as my teacher gave teachings. There was one section about the nature of mind that my attendant didn't understand. He came to me after the talk for a private interview and asked, "I don't understand something . . . this nature of mind, what is the mind?" He had what Chan calls the sense of doubt or questioning that stemmed from the depth of his being. I could have ruined that moment by saying, "Let me tell you about the nature of mind: the mind is this or that; it has interconnectedness. It is also called buddha-nature; it's our potential to become a buddha," and so on and so forth. But the moment was ripe. I said, "Do you want to know what mind is?" He said, "Oh, yes!" I snapped my fingers, "Did you hear that?" "Yes." "That's mind!" At that very moment, he dropped everything. Tears came rolling down his cheeks. All he could do was bow. He had had a glimpse of awakening. I said, "Good, now go back to the Chan hall."

For the monk in the gong'an, Nanquan didn't point out what's already there. He just snatched away everything that the monk had: no mind, no buddha, not a single thing. Timing is everything. Each teaching is different; everyone is unique; context determines the teaching.

**Repeated admonitions harm one's virtue.
Wordlessness is truly efficacious.
Even if you had crossed oceans,
I would not have told you!**

Under no circumstance should a teacher ever extinguish the light of wisdom, the yearning students have within themselves to personally find the meaning of freedom. From the perspective of Chan, intellectualizing about what freedom is, what buddha-nature is, what liberation is, is like blowing out the flame. Even though Nanquan spoke of no mind, no buddha, and no thing, he kept the principle of the wordless teaching of Chan.

In your own life, please do not seek out answers from your teacher. If you are uncertain about who you are or what the mind is, ask only to find it within yourself. Question your own being. All the teachings your teacher can offer point to this. Do not take “not mind, not buddha, not a single thing” as some kind of ultimate teaching. It is not. What is it then?

CASE 28

Long Have We Heard of Longtan

Once when Deshan was getting instructions from Longtan, he stayed on into the night. Longtan said, "It's late; why don't you go?" Deshan said good-bye and lifted up the curtain to go. He saw that it was dark outside, so he turned back and said, "It is dark outside."

Longtan then lit a paper lantern [with a candle inside] and handed it to Deshan. As Deshan was about to take it, Longtan blew the candle out. At that moment, Deshan suddenly had an insight. He then bowed to Longtan, who said, "What principle have you seen?" Deshan said, "From this day forward, I will no longer doubt your words."

The next day Longtan went up to the teaching hall and said, "Among you, there's a fellow with teeth like swords and a mouth like a bowl full of blood. Strike him a blow and he shall never turn back. In the future, he will go to the summit of a solitary peak and establish our path there."

Deshan then went in front of the teaching hall with all of his commentaries and annotations [on the *Diamond Sūtra*]. Holding up a torch, he exclaimed, "Exhausting all the sublime theories is nothing more than placing a single hair in the vastness of space. Investigating the workings of the world is like throwing a single drop of water into a great

abyss." He then burned his commentaries and annotations, paid homage [to Longtan], and bid farewell.



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Before Deshan passed through the barrier, his heart had been burning with zeal and his tongue was very sharp. He traveled south, with the intent to wipe out the special transmission outside of the scriptural teachings.

When he reached Lizhou, he told an old woman selling refreshments by the road that he wanted to buy some dessert to eat. The old woman asked him, "What are those writings that you have in your cart, virtuous one?" Deshan said, "That's my commentary and annotation on the *Diamond Sūtra*." The old woman said, "Ahh . . . doesn't it say in the *Diamond Sūtra* that the past mind cannot be found, the present mind cannot be found, and the future mind cannot be found? Which mind do you wish to refresh, virtuous one?"

When Deshan heard this question, his mouth remained shut, unable to answer. Yet he was still unwilling to die under the old woman's words. He asked her, "Are there any Chan teachers around here?" The old woman said, "Yes. About five miles from here lives Chan master Longtan."

When Deshan got to Longtan, he was a defeated man. We could say that his former words did not match his later sayings. Longtan was like a mother who, out of love, does not perceive the ugliness of her child. When Longtan saw that Deshan still had a bit of live coal left in him, he doused him over the head with dirty water, putting it out completely. Examining this story impartially, it is rather funny!

It is better to see him face-to-face than to hear of his fame.

Yet seeing him face-to-face is not better than hearing of his fame.

Even though Longtan saved [Deshan's] nose,
He blinded his eyes.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Deshan Xuanjian is the main protagonist here. In case 13 I introduced him and talked about how he came to study with Chan master Longtan. In the present case, we see how he realized awakening under Longtan. When they first met, Deshan tried to show off his understanding, saying, "I've traveled from afar and recently heard great things about 'dragon's pond' (which is the meaning of the word *longtan*). Now that I'm here, I see neither dragon nor pond." Longtan, great master that he was, responded, "Don't come around here, showing off, saying there are no objects to be seen: no seer, no dragon, no pond. Here I am! And there you are!" Deshan had nothing to say. Deshan usually had lots to say. He was an intellectual. Fortunately, he met Longtan, who cut through his proclivities.

One evening Deshan thrust his questions at Longtan and continued long into the night. Longtan did not give him answers but eventually said, "It's late. You should go now." After pouring out all of his doubts, his worries, his sense of wonderment and receiving no answer, still Deshan respected Longtan's wish. He bowed and opened the bamboo door, ready to go back to his quarters. He looked out and said, "It's dark out." Longtan took this opportunity

and handed him a lit candle inside a paper lantern, but just when Deshan reached out for it, he blew it out. Deshan at this moment had a glimpse of awakening. Longtan asked for verification: "What did you see?" Deshan bowed and said that he would never doubt Longtan's words again, as he had seen the truth of Chan and his mind. Longtan's task was over; the rest was up to Deshan, to refine his practice. That is why, when Longtan praised him the next day in front of everyone, Deshan decided to leave and go on his own. He had no more doubt; he just needed to refine and nourish what he had learned. As predicted by Longtan, Deshan indeed became one of the great luminaries of the Chan tradition.

Longtan saw that Deshan's conundrum—all of his questions that poured out one after the other, late into the night—had created a ripe opportunity. Had Longtan given him the answers, which would have been from a conceptual point of view, all of Deshan's power would have been diffused and rendered useless. When a person's life questions collapse into a single, existential "Why?"—when the practitioner reaches a state of unification when the mind is engulfed in the sense of wonder-ment—that is indeed a wonderful occasion. All the master had to do was to shatter that wonderment, leaving the person completely open to what is right *here* and *now* in that state free from grasping. This strategy of inducing awakening is called taking away the object and leaving the person.

My own teacher, Master Sheng Yen's initial awakening happened in this way. In 1949, during the communist takeover of mainland China, the only way he could escape from China was to join the KMT youth army. He was eighteen years old at that time. Monks who had money would pay for a boat to escape to Taiwan or to other places such as Singapore or Malaysia. Since my teacher and his seminary friends were poor young monks, they all joined the youth army. They were promised that they could return

to mainland China and win back their nation from the Communists. Needless to say, that never happened. Thus he was stuck in the army in Taiwan. He worked as a telegrapher but wasn't allowed to resign or get out for ten long years. During the whole time, he studied and practiced like a monk but without a teacher. With the many answers that came up in his mind, he developed on his own a great sense of questioning and wonderment. He reached a point where he could no longer work, and he was relieved of his duties. A former monk, he went straight to visit monasteries. Since some of the monks knew him, he would place his bed on the platform along with theirs. At one monastery he visited, he was fortunate enough, one night, to be placed next to another visiting monk, Chan master Lingyuan (1902-88), a disciple of famed Master Xuyun. Master Lingyuan did not sleep lying down but sitting up, in meditation. My teacher thought this was a great opportunity to ask his many questions.

And that night he did. Master Lingyuan just listened and kept on saying, "Any more?" without answering any of them. Sheng Yen poured out all the questions he had accumulated for so long. The more he asked, the more he got himself into a knot. Finally he realized that Lingyuan wasn't answering any of his questions. At that moment, Lingyuan saw that my teacher was in the state of full wonderment. He slammed the wooden platform loudly and yelled, "Put it down! Who the hell is asking these questions?" Suddenly all of my teacher's questions vanished; everything, including his sense of self, flushed out of him. He was now completely clear, open, without *anything* left. Some time later, Lingyuan gave Master Sheng Yen dharma transmission—the responsibility of passing down the Chan teaching.

If something like this were to happen to you outside of that context, if you were to continually ask, "What is it? What is it?" in that unified state of wonderment and

suddenly all of your doubts were smashed away, you would probably be scared half to death. It is all about timing and causes and conditions.

What brings you to the condition of awakening is the four prerequisites to practice: great conviction; great vow; great determination; and great doubt, or questioning. *Great conviction* means that you have confidence in yourself and in the efficacy of your method as well as in your teacher and in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). How do you rise to confidence in yourself? Not through arrogance, not through knowledge, as in “Since I am originally free, I can do whatever I want.” That will not work because without real practice you will still have vexations that will affect you and everyone around you. So you have to go through practice. But practice is not about getting rid of what you have. You simply need to see through all of your vexations and deluded thinking. It’s like cleaning a room. Perhaps at the beginning you make the room cleaner so you can actually see the spaciousness of the room. But the bottom line is that it does not really matter whether the room is clean or dirty—openness is always there. It’s just that it is hard to see its nature when it is cluttered.

So Chan masters tell you to go through meditation practice, to use methods, and so on. Having a method and knowing the dharma are very important. You can have true confidence in yourself only when you actually practice the dharma, when you use a method. This brings you face-to-face with the workings of your mind. For example, just by the simple exercise of following the breath, you see the mind traveling off all over the place; you see the mind being annoyed when there is physical pain. In other words, all of your self-referential mechanisms of cherishing and protecting the self are readily available for you to see, right before you. So as you use and stay with the method in order not to be moved or pushed by any of these self-

referential occurrences, your grasping and rejecting will slow down. Without projecting, exaggerating, or minimizing them, you will know your shortcomings and you will know your strengths. You will see them for what they are. You will see how your mind actually works, how your self produces itself, moment to moment, and manifests in all of your activities. Coming face-to-face with this and still having a method to return to, you keep on going, keep on going, not swayed by those mind activities but staying with the task at hand and becoming clear. This is how you develop confidence in yourself and conviction in the dharma.

Through this training and discipline, you will naturally have confidence in your teacher, the person who has taught you meditation and guides you. However, if you had faith before the teacher taught you the practice, then it is either a kind of blind faith or some projection you have of the teacher—because that kind of faith is not grounded in your practice. If you find that the method your teacher gives to guide you actually works, then you will have faith in the teacher. Your teacher represents the Sangha, which is part of the Three Jewels. Your having confidence in your teacher will lead to conviction in the Three Jewels.

Great vow means that you are not practicing for yourself but for the benefit of others, for those around you. Why? Because everything you have, everything you are comes from others. When you let go of yourself, your mind becomes less self-referential. Recognizing the pain and needs of others will inspire you to work hard to help them. Moment to moment, offer yourself. In doing so, you learn to use your body like a rag and your mind like a mirror; everything becomes practice, and obstacles nourish your life to make you stronger. If you are selfish, self-referential, no matter what you do, everything becomes difficult. Even if you try hard to pacify your mind through repentance, rituals, meditation, or scriptural study, none of these will

pacify your heart. Dharma practice is not a selfish project. You practice not only for yourself but for the sake of all beings.

Most of the time, if not all of the time, you act out of selfishness; all the things that you say, all the actions that you do are probably harming those around you. You process things through this false sense of self, this construct. The result of whatever is based on falsehood cannot be true. Your decisions, your judgments, your opinions about your friends and everything else in the world, are based, you think, on something reliable: *your* ideas of things. When you practice this way, you hurt the people you love.

When I talk about self-referentiality, I am referring not simply to the selfish or greedy self but also to something much deeper. A humble person can have a very strong self. Even a person who thinks of him- or herself as not so good or as someone who cannot do anything well may have a very strong sense of self. Why? Because the person is attached to that self-image. So you need to practice for the sake of others. When you do, humility, gratitude, forgiveness, loving-kindness, patience, generosity, will all come to fruition. These will lessen self-grasping.

The third prerequisite is *great determination*; this means being steadfast and enduring and that, at any time, you are ready to let go of anything—even your life. In Chinese, *great determination* literally translates as “ferocious zeal.” It is great diligence in practice. People take shortcuts in life and in practice. That is not diligence. The whole world around us—mass media, technology, popular culture, social networks—builds on craving and desire. Without diligence, how will you free yourself from their influence? I do not mean you need to give up these things, but you must be diligent and careful about how you are living your life, how you are practicing. Are you perpetuating attachments? Or

are you untangling them? This takes patience and steadfast practice.

The fourth ingredient is *great doubt*, or questioning. Doubt, here, does not mean suspicion; it means a sense of wonderment. Within the Chan context, wonderment is about our existential dilemma: “Who am I?” Am I just some synapses in the brain, some wires joining one part of the brain to the other? Am I my past, my experiences, my future hopes? Am I my family, my values? In Chan, all of your life’s questions must collapse into the gong’an or huatou you are working on. All of the cases in the *Gateless Barrier* provide opportunities to free yourself. To do so, you have to take them up and investigate and relive the stories and make them your own. Of course, you must work under the guidance of a qualified teacher.

You may practice because you want to prepare for the next phase of your life, which is death. You go to great lengths to engage in practice, to find meaning, to find yourself. You know that time is limited. It is not only people with gray hair who are aware of their imminent death. Anyone can die at any time. You must make good use of your time. On intense retreats, you can let everything drop off and focus on using your method. On the method, you exist on the brink of the present moment, here and now, not in the past or future. Bringing yourself to this condition where you live in the present naturally fulfills the four prerequisites of practice. This is why retreats are so precious.

The point is, how do you live your life? In case 2, I mentioned that my teacher had a disciple who was a lay practitioner. He got terminal cancer, was in great pain, and was hospitalized. It was uncertain how long he would live. But he was not there to suffer. He was the jolliest person on that hospital floor. A great bodhisattva, he helped the nurses, visited the sick on his floor, and made everyone cheerful. He lived in the moment—not for himself but for all

of those around him. He even introduced Chan meditation to nurses and patients. He passed away very peacefully.

It is better to see him face-to-face than to hear of his fame.

Yet seeing him face-to-face is not better than hearing of his fame.

**Even though Longtan saved [Deshan's] nose,
He blinded his eyes!**

Deshan had traveled long to finally meet Longtan. Originally he set out to the south to destroy Chan, but the old lady selling desserts reminded him of the most essential meaning of practice—to know your mind—so he sought out Longtan. Deshan was, of course, awakened by the skillful means of Longtan. In this sense, it was great to meet him face-to-face. But was it? Was it worth it to seek out someone who lived so far away? Wumen says it's a mistake to see him face-to-face. Who is it you are trying to see anyway?

When Deshan asked his many questions, Longtan did not answer any of them. This pushed him into a corner, in a state of great wonderment/puzzlement. So when Deshan reached for the lantern to light his way, Longtan put it out; this caused Deshan's great awakening. His darkness was fully illuminated.

There is much to do in your life, and with so little time. I wish you the best on your journey. But in all that you do, where is your light?

CASE 29

Not the Wind, Not the Flag

Once, the Sixth Ancestor saw the temple flag fluttering in the wind and two monks arguing with each other about it. One said, "The wind is blowing." "The flag is moving," said the other. They argued back and forth without reaching the truth. The ancestor told them, "It is not the flag moving, and it is not the wind moving. It is your mind that's moving." The two monks were startled.



WUMEN'S COMMENT

It is neither the flag moving, nor the wind, nor the mind that's moving! Where will you see the ancestor? If you can perceive this truth intimately here, then you will realize that the two monks bought iron but instead got gold. The ancestor could not refrain from laughing, and so this farce.

Wind, flag, the mind moving—
All of them miss the mark.
Although they know how to open their mouths,

They do not know where the words fall.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

This case may be long-winded, but to put it plainly: Stop!

The Sixth Ancestor, or lineage master, Huineng, has already been introduced in case 23, "Not Thinking of Good or Bad," so I won't repeat his story here. But picking it up from where we left off in case 23, recall that Hongren, the fifth ancestral master, advised Huineng to go into hiding until he was ready to teach. Huineng laid low for fifteen years as a layperson. Legend has it that he hung out with some fishermen and hunters. When people cooked their game, he would eat only the vegetables around it. During these years, Huineng deepened his practice and lived among the people, getting to know their pains and attachments. This case took place after Huineng first emerged from hiding. He had heard that a master was giving a talk on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. Typically, in large monasteries when a lecture was about to begin, a flag would be hung on a pole so that everyone in the vicinity would know that they could come to the talk. When Huineng arrived at the temple and heard two monks arguing about the flag and wind, he said that neither was moving; that it was their mind that was moving. The abbot of the monastery recognized him as the legendary Huineng, who had received Hongren's entrustment. So he entreated Huineng to have his head shaven and formally take up the monastic vows.

Do you think that Huineng's reply, "It is not the flag moving, and it is not the wind moving," is a good answer? If so, then read on. Wumen said, "It is neither the flag

moving, nor the wind, nor the mind that's moving!" Is this the right answer, then? If you think so, then I ask: At this moment, what's moving?

Huineng is not really giving the highest teaching to those two arguing monks. He is merely resolving an argument. Wumen is doing the same. Right and wrong have no room here. Everything is an expedient.

**Wind, flag, the mind moving—
All of them miss the mark.**

You live your life similarly to the state of seeing that the flag is moving. When someone either praises or scorns you, you are definitively moved. And what do you perceive? You perceive that the problem belongs to the one who scorns you—that is the flag moving. You may be able to analyze the problem objectively and see that what affects you are causes and conditions. This is like "the wind is moving." For those in this group, no one is at fault; it's just that things are the way they are because of a chain of events. If your mind is unmoved by external circumstances and you don't have to or don't make problems for yourself and others, then that is like "the mind is unmoving." You might say these are three levels of being moved.

Most people's minds are moved by everything. They are captivated or propelled by everything. They could be moved by something as small as a glance or as serious as slander. This is the norm for most people because they are constantly moving, both their body and their mind.

**Although they know how to open their mouths,
They do not know where the words fall.**

These two lines refer to the arguing monks. They open their mouths and argue about the flag and the wind, and they don't see the nature of words. Practice at the

shallowest level means to recognize when you are moved, especially by words. If you criticize people and they become affected, then apologize. Some people don't even want to apologize; they insist they're not at fault and accuse the others of being wrong, or of causing their vexations. This is how normal people think. As a practitioner, if you do something wrong, you apologize. If you perceive others as problematic or annoying, that means you're already in the wrong; you've already given rise to vexations. Your mind has moved.

At the next level, practice means not to be moved by vexations. This includes all kinds of mental states, from praise to blame to jealousy, anguish, sadness, depression, up and down, coming and going. When someone criticizes you, for example, disagrees about a project you're doing at work, you are not affected by it. I was a horrible student when I was a novice attending to my teacher. When he criticized me with his sarcasm and public humiliation, I would be provoked and would fall right into his trap. He provided me with all kinds of opportunities for growth, especially psychological pain. I finally realized that they were simply words coming out of his mouth. Later, when I was no longer affected by his words, his expedient teachings on public humiliation stopped.

Let nothing move you. Whatever obstructs you, wherever you find difficulty is where your attachment is. So whatever you cannot let go of, that's where you're stuck. It can be the external environment, words, or even your own thoughts and feelings. One time I was giving a talk on emptiness to my undergrad students at the university where I teach. One student came up after class and said, "Is emptiness like writing something on the blackboard or writing nothing on it, since either way, it has nothing to do with the blackboard and the blackboard is not affected?" I said, "Yes. It's kind of like that, except that you mustn't attach to the idea that this is really a blackboard." He said,

“I think I get what you’re saying.” That student was clever. Was he moved?

Sometimes practitioners feel that an unmoving mind is something to reach for. Recently I got a letter from a student who wanted me to clarify an experience she had had some time ago in a London train during rush hour. Her mind was calm at the time. All of a sudden her stillness translated into the perception of the external world. Things were moving yet they were not moving. To her it was a pervasive sense of peace and motionlessness. She got off the train at her stop. As it was a busy subway station, hundreds of other people got off as well. Could she walk? Yes, and she could see. She went up the escalator, but all of those movements were done as if in motionlessness. To her nothing was moving, yet she was moving. The people were talking, bustling during this rush hour in London. Yet no one was moving; everything was silent. This state of mind lasted briefly, until she reached the top of the escalator. Then all of a sudden, sound and movement returned. She was wondering what had happened.

For her, neither the flag nor the wind was moving because her mind wasn’t moving. Is this awakening? No. This is a state of unification of self and others, a state of oneness in which some people can remain for a long time. Can they still function? Of course. Can they still interact with others? Yes, if their practice is very strong. But to them, everything is just pervasive peace, and they are at ease. Sometimes there is a sense of lightness and joy from this peace. Even when people are arguing and fighting and there are calamities and contradictions in the external environment, to the person all is at peace. She was glad that after all of these years someone could actually explain her experience. But I warned her not to make a “thing” out of it, which she clearly had. Why? Because, since the self is still there in that experience, it becomes an object of grasping. She thought she had attained some realization. In

reality, that experience was like a blind cat catching a dead mouse—pure luck!

As this experience came out of practice, it gave her confidence in the dharma. After all, the reason we practice buddhadharma, or practice Chan, is to get a sense of peace in our lives. Without vexations, no longer troubled by our emotional afflictions, we can feel a sense of fulfillment, at peace with the world. So when a person gets to this unified state, he or she naturally feels a sense of accomplishment. However, we should not attach to this state.

This case provides the correct view to practice. It hints at how we can turn any obstruction, any situation in our daily life, even critical words, into an opportunity to practice. Next time you're moved by circumstances, ask yourself, "What's moving?" "Is the flag moving? Or is the wind moving? Or is my mind moving?" There is great freedom within everyone, whether you're sitting, standing, or sleeping, or whether you are engaging with the world or are by yourself. If you personally realize this, then you will hold hands with Huineng. Not only with him but with Wumen and all the masters of the past, present, and future.

CASE 30

Mind Is Buddha

When Damei asked, “What is buddha?” Mazu said, “This mind is buddha.”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you can directly grasp this meaning, then you will be wearing buddha's robe, eating buddha's food, speaking buddha's words, and carrying out buddha's practices. You will be buddha. Even though this is the way it is, Damei has misled a lot of people, based on a wrong measurement of standard. One should know that just by saying the word *buddha* you should wash your mouth for three days!

If you are a genuine person, upon hearing someone say that mind is buddha, you should cover up your ears and just walk away.

Stop seeking after it
Under the clear blue sky in broad daylight.
Asking how it is [that mind is buddha]

Is like holding on to stolen goods and claiming your innocence!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

When Mazu said that this mind is buddha, he did not mean the buddha on the altar or the buddha that practitioners try to become. He also was not referring to your mind of vexations. What did he mean then? Is mind buddha? If Damei had not realized awakening upon hearing these words, these same words would be words of discrimination.

Buddha means “awake,” but there are ten epithets for any buddha; they describe different qualities of a fully awakened person: *tathāgata* (as if come), *bhagavat* (world-honored one), *arhat* (worthy of respect), *samyaksambuddha* (fully and correctly enlightened), *vidyācaraṇasaṃpanna* (perfect in knowledge and moral conduct), *sugata* (well gone), *lokavid* (one who knows the world), *anuttara* (the unsurpassed), *puruṣadamyasārathi* (the charioteer of men who need to be tamed), and *śāstādevamanuṣyānām* (the teacher of gods and men). From the Chan perspective, these are not lofty ideals that have nothing to do with you but describe your potential as human beings to wake up to all the qualities within you. These qualities are guidelines for practice.

That said, these qualities and guidelines are also not what Mazu meant by “This mind is buddha.” This case is simple. Damei asked Mazu “What is buddha,” and upon hearing “Mind is buddha,” he was awakened. What is interesting is that Mazu wanted to make sure Damei really came to know this and not just accept it on its superficial

meaning. So after Damei left Mazu's congregation and became a teacher in his own right, Mazu sent one of his monks to test Damei's understanding.

Upon arriving, the monk said, "So you're Mazu's student. What did you learn when you met Mazu that led you to teach here?"

Damei answered, "I asked Mazu what is buddha. Mazu replied, 'This mind is buddha.' Thereafter I left and came here."

Then the monk tested Damei with a question that Mazu had prepared. He said, "Well, nowadays Mazu has a new saying."

Damei replied, "Oh? What is that?"

"Not mind, not buddha," said the monk.

Damei said, "I don't care what that old fellow says. For me, mind is buddha." Damei did not fall into Mazu's trap. He was awakened upon hearing "mind is buddha," and he had been using this to teach others.

The monk reported this to Mazu, who said, "The plum is ripe." The word *damei* means "great plum," and it is the name of the mountain he stayed at. In this way, Mazu sanctioned Damei, affirming his realization. For this reason, Wumen commented:

Even though this is the way it is, Damei has misled a lot of people, based on a wrong measurement of standard.

In saying this, Wumen was actually praising Damei. However, it would be a mistake to take "mind is buddha" as some kind of ultimate truth, as a standard against which to validate your own original face. Awakening is neither knowledge nor an experience. Once you have tasted it, you find that it is actually the most normal, down-to-earth way that things are. It's nothing special. Actually, you bask in it all the time. It is just your deluded thinking that blocks you.

It is like tasting water that cannot be described to someone who has never drunk water. Yet this is not to say that others have not tasted it. People, in fact, drink it all the time, but most don't realize they do. How to tell them that they are actually drinking water? No words, knowledge, or esoteric teaching can express this.

Mazu sent a student to test Damei as he wanted to know how well Damei had been drinking that water. He tried to trick him by casting doubt on his understanding, but Damei would have none of Mazu's baloney.

One should know that just by saying the word *buddha* you should wash your mouth for three days!

Is it really true that mind is buddha? You will have to find out for yourself. If you just take Mazu's word for it, that's just regurgitating someone else's words, like throwing up someone else's vomit. Why would you want to do that?

Taking buddha as filth may seem irreverent, but it is a good method for one who thinks that's the answer. As a practitioner, if you hear someone say that mind is buddha, you should cover your ears and walk away. Why? Because these are not your words, they're Mazu's words. Don't swallow Mazu's vomit.

Wumen says:

**Stop seeking after it
Under the clear blue sky in broad daylight.
Asking how it is [that mind is buddha]
Is like holding on to stolen goods and claiming
your innocence!**

Who is it that is reading these words? Don't answer. Just ask.

If you say mind is buddha, or neither mind, neither buddha, and draw some kind of conclusion about it, thinking that now you *know*, then that's just copying someone else. Picasso once said that great artists steal. What he was pointing to is that, essentially, every piece of art is a remix of something else. Everything is dependent on other things. This means, according to dependent origination—the core teaching of emptiness in Buddhism—that nothing is original. Everything is just recontextualized, reconnected, remixed. That's what makes art so interesting, isn't it? The genius lies in remixing it. So it's not that copying itself is bad, it's simply poor taste if you don't have the ingenuity to remix it and make it your own.

Digesting buddhadharma to make it your own is what practice is about. You have to make it your own. Otherwise, whatever you say will be meaningless. Recently, after a retreat in San Francisco, several people came up to me, bowed, and expressed their gratitude. They said, "Thank you so much for your teaching. People in Tallahassee are so privileged to have you." I smiled and said, "You've received the benefit of buddhadharma because of your own merit. That's why you have the mind of gratitude." People listen to the dharma and get benefit—it is their fortune. The teacher is just a condition in the mix.

How can anyone claim to have buddhadharma to *give*? Buddhadharma is buddhadharma; it stems from the Three Jewels. A teacher's role is to be a clean pipe, to transport fresh water from one place to another. The water doesn't belong to anyone. Technically, neither does the pipe. If the pipe is dirty, then it needs to be cleaned. That's all that needs to be done. Water flows of its own accord. Giving teaching to students is like this. Without students, the teacher would have nothing to say. If a teacher has attachments, biases, particular things to say, then the fresh water of buddhadharma will be polluted and the pipe soiled. If you receive the benefit of buddhadharma, be

grateful to the Three Jewels, the wellspring of buddhadharma.

“Mind is buddha” is a teaching. “Neither mind nor buddha” is also a teaching. While some practitioners harbor these like eating vomit, there are others who don’t have the courage to accept them. They literally run away from this teaching. This would be like a thief who holds the gem that he has stolen in his hands and claims that he has not stolen anything.

This case is saying, “You *are* it.” So the next time you have vexations, when someone presents you with a challenge or scolds you or wrongly blames you, in that moment, how will you react? Where is your buddha mind, your buddha-nature? Look! Look! That’s practice. Practice is not limited to sitting in the Chan hall. It happens in broad daylight. Don’t be an art thief who claims innocence. Take up the responsibility and accept who you are. Don’t go around with your belongings in hand crying, “Where are my belongings? Where are my belongings?”

CASE 31

Zhaozhou Tests the Old Granny

A monk asks an old granny, "Which way is the road to Mount Tai? The old granny says, "Straight ahead." When the monk starts walking [in that direction] three or five steps, the old granny says, "Yet another fine monk goes off like that!"

Later the monk brought this up to Zhaozhou, who said, "Wait till I go and check out this old granny for you." The next day Zhaozhou went to the old granny and asked the exact same question. Her answer was the same as before.

When Zhaozhou returned, he gathered his congregation and said, "I've seen through the old granny of Mount Tai for you all."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

The old granny only knew how to sit within her headquarters tent and launch her stratagem to catch the thieves. She did not know that old man Zhaozhou was good

at creeping into her tent and menacing her fortress. Furthermore, he did not have the outward marks of a great man. Examining them, both had transgressed. But tell me, where did Zhaozhou see through this old granny?

The questions were the same,
And so were the answers.
In the cooked rice there is sand;
In the mud there are thorns.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Here we see Zhaozhou at it again, pulling tricks out of his sleeve. When will he stop? Wumen is extremely kind in creating a *huatou* out of this *gong'an*: "Where did Zhaozhou see through this old granny?" Allow me to add to Wumen's words: Not only did Zhaozhou see through this old granny, she also saw right through Zhaozhou, through and through. What is it that they saw?

The old granny who runs a tea shop is located at the base of Mount Tai—short for Mount Wutai—in northeastern China. This word *granny*, or *po*, refers to an old woman but also suggests a person of wit and resourcefulness who is usually marginal and ambivalent in social status and who crosses social boundaries. In premodern popular fictions, a granny is depicted as a witch or a sorceress. There are many of these old grannies in Chan or Zen stories.

Mount Wutai was, and still is, one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in Chinese Buddhism. And even before Chinese Buddhism, it was a great Daoist site, a sacred mountain said to be the abode of Wenshu, or Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, the embodiment of wisdom in the whole of

Buddhism. There are several hagiographical records from premodern times about Wutai Mountain and manifestations of Mañjuśrī to pilgrims to this site. So not only did Chinese pilgrims go there in premodern times but it is also presently visited by many Korean and Japanese pilgrims.

This granny had probably encountered hundreds, if not thousands, of these seekers, who always asked for directions. She always gave the same answer, “Straight ahead,” to the question “Where is Mount Wutai?” As they followed her direction and went straight ahead, she would say, “Yet another fine monk goes off like that!” This expression in Chinese has the tone of mockery and disdain. What did she mean?

Word got around to Zhaozhou, whose Guanyin Temple was fairly close to this region, although not quite as close as the old granny’s teahouse. Because of the words she spoke and her confrontational, nondeferential manner, people thought that perhaps the granny was a Chan master in disguise. When Zhaozhou heard about her, he went to check her out. So this case took place when Zhaozhou was in his eighties or even older. Although he did not have to personally go check out this old granny, he went out of compassion for his disciples. When he came back, he gathered his monks. They were quite anxious to hear what had happened between their master and the old lady. But all Zhaozhou said was, “I went and saw through her.” And then he left. Everyone was dumbfounded, wanting to hear more.

That was the genius of Zhaozhou—to stir up a fuss when there was really nothing to be stirred. Yet it was necessary that he do this in order to instill in his students the questioning mind: “What is it that Zhaozhou has seen through?”

Wumen further stirs up more fuss with his comment:

The old granny only knew how to sit within her headquarters tent and launch her stratagem to catch the thieves. She did not know that old man Zhaozhou was good at creeping into her tent and menacing her fortress. Furthermore, he did not have the outward marks of a great man. Examining them, both had transgressed. But tell me, where did Zhaozhou see through this old granny?

Before warfare, generals sit in tents and devise battle strategies. They direct the army as to what, where, when, and how they should strike. By saying this, Wumen makes an analogy to the art of war. Who is the enemy? Who are the thieves? It is Zhaozhou, who can easily sneak into her tent and wreak havoc. Why? Because Zhaozhou was a small scrawny guy. He was so unassuming looking, so unthreatening, that people would easily have allowed him to get into the tent without a second thought. Little did they know that if he came into the tent, he would see right through her. In calling Zhaozhou a person without the marks of a great man, Wumen suggests that his actions are like those of a thief, sneaking around other people's places. How could a great Chan master do that? In saying this, however, Wumen is actually praising Zhaozhou for his skill in means and kindness in setting up a trap for his disciples.

Chan masters would do anything to help students. This is very much like what happened between Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti, or Weimo Bodhisattva, in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Vimalakīrti also symbolizes wisdom in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The story goes that once Vimalakīrti pretended to be sick, and the Buddha, playing along, wanted to send his disciples to visit this great man in the hope that he would teach them. None of the Buddha's disciples wanted to go, because at one time or another Vimalakīrti had

shown his superior wisdom and had mocked their narrow views about the buddhadharma.

Vimalakīrti was particularly confrontational, like a Chan master: if he saw something wrong he would comment on it. He didn't set up any props or impose preconceived ideas on how practitioners should behave. The sūtra tells us that he practiced in brothels and had concubines and that he was a very wealthy merchant. He was the embodiment of the truth that saṃsāra is nirvāṇa. So only one disciple agreed to go visit Vimalakīrti: Mañjuśrī. When the other disciples saw that Mañjuśrī was going, they knew that it was going to be a showdown between the two, and now all wanted to go. Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti did have a showdown on the teaching of nonduality—they both saw right through each other.

That is what's happening here, except that Zhaozhou went alone, perhaps intentionally. If he had brought his students, his cover would have been blown. Zhaozhou came back and instilled in the hearts of his students this great block of unsurpassable questions: "What is it that our teacher has seen through? What does this 'straight ahead' mean?"

**The questions were the same,
And so were the answers.
In the cooked rice there is sand;
In the mud there are thorns.**

The verse expresses the impossible. How can you cook sand and expect to get rice? If you think you can, then you will be walking in mud with thorns—everywhere you go you will be poked. Wumen uses these Chan expressions to describe Chan practice. You may think, "Then what's the point of practice if it is impossible or futile?" It is precisely because people erroneously think that practice leads to awakening that Chan masters recommend practice.

From the Chan perspective, practice does not *produce* enlightenment. If it were produced, if it were gained, then it could be destroyed and lost. Don't you know that it's all good, IAG? The rice is already cooked. The mud has already been leveled. Perhaps you may know this intellectually, but you must personally realize it. How? Do something futile and continue to exhaust yourself until your sense of self, along with all of its attachments, drops away. Only then will you realize that within you there is something already indestructible, limitless, and inexhaustible. You must find out for yourself. So practice is really to get rid of that which blinds you to who you are.

From the perspective of the practitioner, yes, vexations are harmful to you and to those around you. So for the sake of helping others, you must live and be with them in harmony. You should reduce your own vexations for others, not just for yourself. You are intimately connected to one another. But from the perspective of awakening, your buddha-nature is not something that can be gained or lost or cultivated. Therefore practice is futile.

The Chan saying "cooking sand to make rice" is similar to another saying, "selling springwater next to a spring," which means, of course, that people can get the water themselves. If you misunderstand this point and think you should get rid of what's in your hand in order to get "water," then you are mistaken. If you think like this, then everywhere you go, all the mud that you dredge through will be full of thorns. There will be an obstacle everywhere you go. The mind-set of the unenlightened is to think that practice will give you something that you don't already have or that practice will help you to get rid of vexations that you have. Vexations are the normal display of the mind.

The difference between the awakened and the unawakened person is that the former displays vexations to teach sentient beings and the latter gives rise to vexations

such as diseases, harming themselves as well as infecting others in the process. No teacher is perfect, but a good teacher is careful in practice; when he or she demonstrates something that appears to be anger or craving or desire, it may be a teaching or a test for that particular student. Please don't think that if a teacher can do it, then so can you. What is important is that teachers abide by the precepts. If they fail in their own practice, then it's important to help them to resume their practice. Genuine teachers will not fall prey to breaking precepts. The last thing they want to do is hurt students. That said, you still need to have compassion for bodhisattvas who are under the influence of the three poisons of desire, anger, and ignorance.

To practice is to have a "straightforward" mind. This doesn't mean confrontational or outspoken. It means your heart is kind and your mind is free from vexations. The straightforward mind is a principle for Chan practice; it is also what Vimalakīrti advocates in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. In the story, the old granny says the way to Wutai is "straight ahead." She answers how one should go about practicing.

Many people's minds are crooked. Some practitioners engage in practice to gain external things such as fame, students, money, or Buddhist paraphernalia. The more they practice, the more they accumulate. In doing so, they perpetuate grasping. In this story, the old granny was dealing with pilgrims to Wutai. Perhaps these people are hoping to see a miracle, such as Mañjuśrī appearing to them. Chan practitioners don't ask for Mañjuśrī's appearance; they seek to find their own wisdom. Why do you have to go to Wutai and travel so far, thousands of miles, to see Mañjuśrī?

All of these cases reveal different facets of your life as a practitioner. Ask yourself, "How do I practice?" and "What is my practice?" "If I go to Wutai, will it prove that I am a practitioner? If I sit at the Tallahassee Chan Center, right in

front of the teacher so he can see how well I sit, will that demonstrate that I am practicing?” What constitutes practice and nonpractice? Between your own life and death, you should ask why you are here. Are you here to make something else better? Are you here to gain something? Are you here to get rid of something? If you have chosen to practice Chan, my message to you is: You are fine. Live your life fully, but stop chasing after things.

This does not mean that you should give up what you have or move to the mountains. No. You are an active participant in the world, in the society, yet at the same time, you are not bound or defined by the different roles that you play, the different things that you do in the society. Resolve your existential dilemma or question; that’s what this case is all about. The Chan way is to force practitioners to confront this again and again and again until they have no way out but to face and resolve it. This is no easy task. But the alternative is to live in delusion and not in a “straightforward” way.

You are conditioned to put the existential question of “Who am I” or “What is the meaning of all of this” behind the facade of makeup, better products, iPads, fancier clothes, a new car, or a bigger house. The whole world is like a mask that prevents you from confronting your life’s purpose. It’s not to say that you should deny the world and not have these things. Vimalakīrti had all of them. Amid all of this material that blinds and conceals, what is it? Where is your wisdom?

Zhaozhou is able to see through the facade of the world. Here he is teaching his own disciples to do the same. He instills this sense of wonderment in them, what is called the great doubt sensation, or questioning mind. As I said earlier, great doubt is not suspicion. It is founded on a great conviction that comes from personal experience of buddhadharma and runs through our veins like blood. It is that which makes us come alive.

This gong'an can make you come alive: Where is the Wutai Mountain in your life? How are you going about getting there? Are you cooking sand and expecting rice? Are you dredging through mud filled with thorns? What has your teacher, and all the generations of masters, seen through? Have you seen through the veil of delusion in your life?

Straight ahead!

CASE 32

An Outsider Questions the Buddha

An outer-path practitioner asked the World-Honored One: “I do not ask for [that which is expressed through] words, nor do I ask for [that which is expressed through] the wordless!” The World-Honored One sat in his seat.

The outsider exclaimed in praise, “The great merciful and compassionate World-Honored One has dispelled the clouds of delusion in me and enabled me to enter [the way].” Then he prostrated with great reverence and left.

Later, Ānanda asked the Buddha, “What did that outer-path realize for him to praise you and leave?”

The World-Honored One replied, “A good horse moves when he sees the shadow of a whip.”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

Ānanda was the Buddha’s disciple, yet his understanding was inferior to that of the outer-path. Tell me, how far apart

are the outer-path's [understanding] and that of the Buddha's disciple?

Walking on the sword's edge,
Running up an icy hill,
Without steps or stages,
Hanging from a cliff—let go!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

The “World-Honored One” was one way people addressed the Buddha. When he gave teachings, people gathered around him, asking questions using words or gestures, and the Buddha usually gave an answer in words. In this case, an outer-path practitioner—meaning a non-Buddhist—asks for a teaching that is bound by neither words nor the wordless. The Buddha just sat there. The outer-path practitioner had a realization and suddenly broke through his shell. With gratitude he paid his respects to the Buddha. Ānanda was baffled by what had just happened. Wumen drives the nail in and pushes further: How far apart are the outer-path and Ānanda in understanding? Put it down!

In the collection of *Āgama* sūtras there is one scripture entitled “The Whip’s Shadow,” where the Buddha talks about four kinds of horses, drawing an analogy to four types of practitioners. Horses in premodern time were ridden or used with carts, so people used whips to get the horse to move. The Buddha said that with some horses no whip is necessary, while with other horses a whip needs to be used repeatedly.

The first type of horse is one that is tamed: just show the whip and the horse knows what to do. In terms of the teaching, this type of student needs only a hint to get it

immediately. He or she will know what to do without being shown again. This first horse represents a student who is truly ripe for awakening. With only one hint, the student will realize his or her true nature. Moreover, the person will connect one teaching to others and will grasp various concepts in the most profound way.

With the second type of horse, the whip is used to brush against its mane and get it going. Students of this type will do only what they are told to do, step by step. If you ask them, "How come, when I asked you to do this, you didn't do that as well while you were at it?" They will answer, "You didn't tell me to!" So they're unable to make connections and need to be told what to do. When they are told to do something, they just do it wholeheartedly. In this sense, they are honest and steadfast. They are solid practitioners, but they need an extra push to be awakened. For example, during a recent retreat, I asked a student, "How is it going so far?" He said, "Very good!" I said, "How good is it? Why is it good?" He replied, "I have no obstructions; everything is very smooth." So I said, "Are you saying that it's not good when you have obstructions?" I caught him off guard; he was still dwelling in good versus bad. He realized this and replied, "Having obstructions is also good, as it helps me."

The third type is when the horse starts moving but only after being whipped directly on the flesh. This can be compared to students who say, when given a teaching, "Yes, yes, I know, I know." With a second teaching, they say, "Yes, I know how to do that." It is only with the third one that they say, "Okay, I'll do it." For example, I can give this advice: "Don't get involved in wandering thoughts" or "Pay attention to the method" or "Savor each moment with the method. Enjoy the method instead of trying to get rid of thoughts or get into blissful states. Just don't get involved; stay with the method." However, in private interviews during retreats, students will tell me, "I'm practicing very

well today. I was in a state where I sat for three periods . . . but I lost it. How can I enter that state again?" Even though they have heard me say not to get involved in different states but just to keep going with their method, as soon as they get into some pleasant state they forget what I said.

The fourth type is the student who needs a good beating—metaphorically speaking, of course. There's a Chan saying: "Students are born at the tip of a stick." These types of students must be told the same thing again and again and again, either because they just don't retain it or because they hold on to their own ideas so strongly that hardly anything gets through. So it is very difficult to guide them. The fourth type of horse is one that needs to be beaten hard on the flesh. The pain goes to the bone, and only then will the horse move.

Actually, I'd like to add another type of horse. The fifth type of horse simply stands there even if you beat it. It's called beating a dead horse. These students are so ingrained in their views and opinions about things and words and language in their own constructed views that they can't break free, nor do they really want to. Whatever you teach them, or no matter how hard you try, they just won't move. There's an expression in Chinese that says "Don't play music to a cow." This means that no matter what you play, whether a Beethoven piano sonata or a violin piece, the cow simply can't appreciate it. It just keeps chewing on the grass while you're there playing sophisticated tunes. There are students like that; the minds of the teacher and the student just don't meet.

Sometimes we are one type of horse; at other times we are another. Also, with one teacher we are one type of horse, where nothing goes in, while with another, whose teaching we really resonate with, we become a different horse. It's about timing and causes and conditions. When I began as a novice attendant monk to my teacher, I was

terribly absentminded, partly because of my young age. I'd forget all kinds of things. He would have to give me the same instruction over and over again. Later on he no longer needed to do this. Our minds became very close. Just from the way he looked at me, I knew what he wanted. Therefore, it happens that people begin as one type of horse and later end up as another. In this gong'an, the outer-path practitioner was the first type of horse—ripe for the teaching. No practice was necessary.

Wumen's comment is about you. He is asking: What kind of horse are you? When you come across a teaching, how do you respond to the teacher? Isn't it true that sometimes non-Buddhists behave in ways that are even more spiritually mature than Buddhists'? Wumen asks you to compare yourself with the best of non-Buddhists: "How far apart is your understanding from theirs?" Don't compare yourself with the worst of them but with the best. Then he gives a poetic four-line verse as a hint on how to practice genuinely. How?

**Walking on the sword's edge,
Running up an icy hill,
Without steps or stages,
Hanging from a cliff—let go!**

Wumen suggests a path to death. Not the literal kind like suicide but putting to death self-grasping. In Chan we have a saying: "Only through the great death will you come to great life." Are you willing to let go?

Practice is unlike anything the world can offer. The world offers craving and bondage—the dharma offers relinquishment and freedom. This path of relinquishment is like walking on a sword's edge and running on an icy hill. It's dangerous because it can quickly turn to self-aggrandizement or selfish fantasy. It may at times seem futile, going nowhere, but that's precisely where you are

frustrating your self-attachment—keep going! Chan master Dahui likens the process of the huatou practice of meditating on a critical phrase to a dog chewing a tasteless bone. Should the dog stop? No. When the practitioner gets to the stage where it seems like it's going nowhere, it actually is going somewhere. If your practice is such that everything is going smoothly, without obstacles, then you are probably doing exactly what your self-attachment wants you to do.

Practice is also unlike worldly, goal-oriented gains. It's the process that matters. When you try to climb a hill of ice, you will eventually slide back. The point is in putting in the effort to get to the top; it is not really about getting to the top. In the process of trying, you lose yourself and drop your attachment. Then you realize that you *are* already on top of the iceberg. When walking on a sword's edge, which can be dangerous and difficult, you will find that there's no one to kill; there's no one who dies. Go *up* a ladder by putting *down*! When you find yourself where words don't reach and concepts fall away, with no steps forward or backward, you will find yourself on top of the ladder.

Although these analogies may seem nihilistic—walking up a ladder with no steps, climbing up an icy hill, walking on a knife's edge—actually, when you let go, everything comes to life. For the first time everything is there. All things are awakened, as they are, manifesting in themselves, naturally, without any coloration. Only you are absent. Does the world disappear? Everything becomes pristinely clear as opposed to being limited and skewed by your views and ideas. Then the full potential of everything happens of its own accord; sentient beings deliver themselves in each moment. Vows are fulfilled.

Chan asks you to put down your colored lens that skews your vision. It doesn't give you another lens to wear. Awakening is not like getting another lens. It is putting down your views. This is difficult only because you love

your lens too much. You buy into your views, your fantasies, and your preferences, and your experiences that derive from them. You are too scared to let go. They're what you have ever known, all that you have, even though your pain comes from them. It is natural that you are afraid to let go of them, but the price you pay is the suffering and vexations you feel.

Most people practice so that their life is enriched. They don't want to let go, but they really want to be awakened; they want to have the best of both worlds. This is simply greed, the very culprit that has caused you pain. Your whole world is oriented to "having," and when you don't have, you feel sad, you feel you've failed. But you forget that the genesis of these feelings is marketing strategies. I'm not criticizing marketing managers in the corporate world; it goes much deeper than that. This is the nature of saṃsāra. You are like a puppet, with your emotions going up and down, tied to the strings of having and not having.

Having and not having is deeply tied to words. During an intense retreat, a practitioner told me that he's always had a "commentator" or narrator inside him. Whatever he experiences, or thinks, there is a voice inside that takes notes, summarizing what is happening, and dictating what needs to be done. So when this person sits and has wandering thoughts, his inner commentator makes a note of that. When he thinks of something, the voice inside tells him, "This is A; this is B; this is good, or bad." He can never get away from this voice that has become a disembodied being inside him, something that is not him. Even when he is doing well, with his mind concentrating on the method, the voice will say, "Good, you're on the method." By chance, he had come upon a New Age self-help book that talked about this commentator. The author called it the inner voice. It was described as some kind of primordial being that one can connect with and take as a guide for one's daily life. The author encouraged readers to cultivate

it, to latch on to this primordial voice, the “true discriminator,” or something to that effect. The student was really affected by that book, as this was exactly what he was experiencing.

He wanted to know what buddhadharma had to say about this “commentator,” which did not seem to gel with some of the teachings he had heard in this retreat—especially when I spoke about letting go of words and language that bind, define, and shape our experiences and life. He was baffled and wanted my comments about that.

I basically told him to put the voice aside and to return to the method and that eventually the commentator would go away. Only by doing so could he develop concentration. Words and language are really structured around binary poles: having/not having, good/bad, yes/no. These belong to the discriminating mind, which is characterized by vexations and self-grasping. If you want to enter the gateless barrier of Chan, you will have to let them go. You will have to let everything go.

Many people have, to one extent or another, a commentator inside them, judging them. The voice is self-consciousness. It may seem hard to be free from being self-conscious because it’s the seat of self-grasping. But it is actually not so hard. This inner voice belongs to the superficial layer of the discriminating mind, which is completely shaped by language. In order to be free, practice nonconceptual methods. If you reach a state of concentration, the mind is naturally free from scattered thoughts and, with it, the coarser states of discriminating mind. When you reach a unified state, discrimination based on words and language is transcended. This is not awakening, but already these states have gone beyond words.

Some of you may wonder what the difference is between awareness and thought. Awareness is different from your internal monologues, self-consciousness, and the inner

commentator. Awareness is a natural ability of your mind, just like your eyes have the ability to see, the ears have the ability to hear. Your mind knows. So perception or knowing can happen without words and language. While words and language are also part of your mind's function, they need not be. Foundational meditation methods such as being aware of the body or being aware of tactile sensations are nonconceptual methods. Being aware of the sensation of the breath passing through your nose actually frees you from the limitations of the words or labels, of noting this and that. The very reason you know that the breath is going through your nostrils is sensation. There's no need to verbalize about it. It is very similar to your rubbing your hand. You know that something is rushing through your hand because you *feel* it. Your knowing does not depend on words. Your experience of awareness is nonconceptual.

The mind, from one moment to the next, has the ability to be clear; one can note something conceptual while remaining nonconceptual. Let's take a light as an example. The light need not be aware in order to shine on objects in the room. The light shines on everyone present; it just shines. It does so no matter what the object is, whether the object is sensation or a concept. So this perception or awareness comes from many different systems in our brain, sending out signals, systemically working together. It is not something like a "witnesser," which is activated by the region of the brain that involves language, and language is a construct made up of symbols. This is to say, "witnesser" is made up of wandering thoughts.

Light is able to shine because there are wires connected to a switch, which, in turn, is connected to electricity, for which you have to pay. If you don't pay the bill, the light will be cut off. All of these systems and wires allow this light to emit luminosity. It is systemic. Whereas an "inner voice" is actually formulations of sentences and concepts, the function of a discriminating mind.

The discriminating mind is intrinsically limited. For example, I'm holding a printed page in my hand. If I ask what it is, you may say "paper." But as soon as you label it as paper, you miss all the other components that make up what it is—for example, the trees from which the raw material of paper comes and the sun and water that nourished them, the factory that manufactured the paper and the ink on the paper. When you reveal something about an entity that is conceptually formulated or labeled, you simultaneously conceal others aspects. When you say, "I'm *this* type of person," what prevents you from being *that* type of person? Words and ideas shape identities, self-image, and thereby limit your potential. Yet following words and concepts, you make yourself into this or that. The more you grasp them, the more you become bound by them. Words and language are not necessarily useless. They can help you, but when you are caught by them, defined by them, you suffer.

What about the wordless teaching of Chan? Chan methods of silent illumination and huatou, or critical phrase, are nonconceptual methods. The former drops all words; the latter uses simple words to put an end to words. I have written about these methods in different articles, which can be found on my center's website (www.tallahasseechan.com), so I will not elaborate on them here. Suffice it to say that the silent illumination method is based on the cultivation of awareness, and the huatou method takes the approach of using concepts to destroy concepts. You meditate on an unanswerable, ineffable question to generate a strong sense of wonderment, questioning, and not knowing, so that the mind becomes completely engulfed by this active yet nonconceptual state.

You may think that Chan prefers silence over words. In a certain sense this is true. But the wordless teaching itself can be a source of attachment. Grasping on to silence is like grasping on to nonexistence or not having or nihilism.

It is still wrong. I once heard a talk by a Vedanta Hindu who described Buddhism as basically another form of Hinduism. But the way he depicted it basically amounted to the necessity of destroying consciousness and the world of illusions—this world—in order to realize “ultimate reality.” It sounded like some kind of abstraction that has no attributes. This is nihilism.

What is the teaching that is beyond words and wordlessness? Beyond permanence and nihilism, gain and loss, having and lack? The Buddha responded with silence, but that is his answer. What is yours? Tread your path carefully on the knife’s edge. If you can speak without using words or silence, without mimicking someone else, then you are the first type of horse, which runs freely without stomping over grown crops and fields. If you cannot, then whip yourself to get on with practice.

CASE 33

Not Mind, Not Buddha

Once when a monk asked, “What is buddha?” Mazu said, “Not mind, not buddha.”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

If you can see into the truth of this, your task of Chan investigation and training will be complete.

When you meet a swordsman on the road, show him your sword.

If you do not meet a poet, do not display your verses.

If you meet someone with potential, tell that person three-fourths of the truth.

You should not give the whole of it.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

This case is a follow-up of case 30, where Damei asked "What is buddha?" To which Mazu replied, "Mind is buddha." Damei was awakened. Later, as Mazu wanted to test Damei, he sent one of his students to tell Damei a "new teaching." This case is an extrapolation of that conversation and frames the questioner as Damei, even though it was Mazu's student who conveyed the "Not mind, not buddha" teaching to Damei. Mazu's first teaching—mind is buddha—is for the deaf. Mazu's second teaching—not mind, not buddha—is for the mute. Do you understand? If you don't, read on.

As said earlier, in case 30, "What is buddha" represents one of the most important questions for Chan practitioners. But it is also a question that stems from delusion. The scriptures tell us that buddhahood is something intrinsic in all of us. So, essentially, Damei was asking, "Having practiced all of these years, I still have vexations; I still have afflictions. What is this buddhahood that lies within me that I don't see?"

An analogy of this might be of someone seeking beauty, which is rather fitting in our modern culture, where everyone seems to be seeking that. Some people's sense of beauty is to be glamorous, with a good body shape. Others' sense of beauty may be in wearing baggy pants that drop down to their buttocks. Everyone is chasing after form, whether you are conscious of it or not, from brushing teeth early in the morning to combing hair, wearing a particular kind of shirt at night, or sleeping under a particular type of blanket. There are also those who have plastic surgery done on their face and body. The problem is, no matter how one tries, it is difficult to find beauty, until one day the seeker meets a famous person who specializes in it. The

seeker asks, "What is beauty?" The beautician replies, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; in the mind's eye." There is no such thing as beauty. And all of a sudden the seeker gets it.

What and where is buddha? You should know by now that the mind is buddha, but because of attachments, you still look outside yourself for it. In pointing out that mind is buddha, Mazu is saying something so obvious that it really need not be said, like a person holding water and asking for water who says, "I'm holding the water." Suddenly one's notion of outside vanishes; one realizes buddha is oneself.

In this present case, Mazu says, "Not mind, not Buddha." This is like someone who says, "My mind is buddha, my mind is buddha" or "I'm holding water in my hand, I'm holding water in my hand," and so Mazu says, "Not mind, not buddha."

Out of compassion, Wumen exacerbates this redundancy by luring you, "If you can see into the truth of this, your task of Chan investigation and training will be complete." The truth of what? If you think "Not mind, not Buddha"—being mute—is better than "Mind is buddha"—being deaf—then you have taken poison as medicine. Abandon the project of both and you will, for the first time, hear and see.

Isn't it true that life is a series of events that pull the rug out from under you? Each time it occurs, it takes a little bit of you with it. Yet you resist it, so your suffering magnifies. If you'd only give in and allow yourself to soak up the wisdom that is in this falling, you would come to great life. In allowing attachments and resistance to fall away, self also falls away.

Even before Mazu's time, Buddhists for several hundred years had been saying that it is your mind that realizes buddhahood; the nature of mind is not any different from the nature of emptiness. Still, for just as long, there are Buddhists who have advocated that buddhahood is something far away, in the distant future, and that only

after practicing for three innumerable eons can one become a buddha. Chan brings notions of buddhahood down from the clouds to the concrete reality of daily life. Chan masters ask, “Right here, right now, what is mind? What is buddha?”

In principle, Mazu could have said anything. The move to try to reconcile the two answers—or to think of one as higher and the other lower, that one is an expedient means and the other is a more advanced teaching—is just another form of intellectualization or objectification. The truth is this: if there is anything that you can hold on to, it is wrong.

When my teacher, Chan master Sheng Yen, first taught me how to do silent illumination, or *mozhao*, as a meditation method, he said, “Do not use your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—use the method.” There is nothing for the mind to hold on to. It is not a state of oblivion—one is wakefully practicing the method—but what is the method? It is simply wakeful letting go. There is nothing to grasp, nothing to construct, nothing to fabricate, and nothing to rely on. Although I didn’t know what he was talking about at the time, it made a very deep impression in me. I understood it as: Anything I can hold on to, attach to, cannot let go of, is bondage. Think about it: What are the things that you cannot let go of? That’s how many barriers you have to awakening. Even an attachment to awakening is an obstruction to awakening.

**When you meet a swordsman on the road, show
him your sword.**

**If you do not meet a poet, do not display your
verses.**

**If you meet someone with potential, tell that
person three-fourths of the truth.**

You should not give the whole of it.

Even though I said above that Mazu gave these teachings about mind and buddha for the deaf and mute, in practice you have to become deaf and mute. You must not take experience and intellectual knowledge about who you are as who you are—you have to shut your ears and mouth. There's no need to learn so many things and blabber so many words. You must personally awaken yourself.

Your reception to buddhadharma has to do with timing and appropriateness. If you learn too many things, you become confused. If you regurgitate to others what you have learned, your advice becomes poison, not really useful. That's the meaning of the verse above. What is most important is for you to personally realize buddhadharma. You have to be willing to do anything; if you hold back and hesitate, you will not be able to realize it.

Sometimes Chan masters put students through hell to test their resolve. That's how they discern dharma heirs from those part-time practitioners. My grandmaster, Master Dongchu, put my teacher through hell. He once told Sheng Yen to knock down a part of a wall in order to make a door in the temple. After my teacher did so and was ready to get wood frames to finish the job, Dongchu said, "That's the wrong place for a door! I told you to do it over there!"

Sheng Yen said, "You told me to make the door over here."

"Put it all back!" Dongchu answered, adding, "Every piece of broken stone, all the shattered bricks that are now on the floor came from the generosity of lay devotees. We must be frugal. Put these pieces of brick back together."

"But they're all in pieces!" Sheng Yen said.

"Use your wits. You're smart, aren't you? Put it all back together."

Sheng Yen then memorized every piece and every shape. When everything was completely clear in his mind, except for those stones that had disintegrated into dust, he was

able to reassemble all the broken pieces of brick into wholes.

Dongchu came along and said, “Now that you’ve put the broken pieces of brick together, stack them up.”

You may think, How does one stack broken bricks? My teacher, not knowing what to do, just went outside into the fields. He was ready to leave this crazy old man. Then he saw those enormous banana leaves—Taiwan is a subtropical region with many banana plants. An inspiration came: he placed a banana leaf on the ground, then set a first layer of broken bricks on top, then a leaf to cover, then a layer of bricks, and so on until all the bricks were used in that pile. When he was done, his teacher was at first utterly surprised.

Dongchu sighed, “*Hmm . . .* these bricks are useless; we should probably just throw them away. I’ll talk to the devotees tomorrow. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

Most of you would probably think that Dongchu was totally nuts. Any normal person would have told him off or walked away. What he was asking was unreasonable. Maybe you would try to find a more “compassionate” teacher, the type that always smiles and tells you to relax and breathe and appreciates you. Later Dongchu transmitted the dharma to my teacher, who then succeeded him at his monastery in Taiwan.

In times of vexations, you have to ask: What is buddha? Is mind buddha? Or is it not? Is it not mind, not buddha? Asking in this way will make this case come alive. There are many such opportunities in your life. For example, if someone accuses you of doing something you did not do, isn’t this your chance? Or if your boss, your colleague, or your friend acts mean to you, isn’t this your chance? You usually don’t see these situations as opportunities to practice because you’re captivated by our own stories about them.

If you miss these opportunities, then you are like a person swimming in a pool and complaining that you don't see water. The task of a teacher is not to come up with concepts about water; his or her job is just to push your head down in the water so you start drowning. When you do, and start to swallow water involuntarily, you will naturally know what water is, and then you'll be pulled up.

CASE 34

Wisdom Is Not the Way

Nanquan said, "The mind is not buddha. Wisdom is not the way."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

We could say that Nanquan, though an old man, had no shame. As soon as he opens his stinking mouth, he exposes the family's ugliness to the outside world. Even so, few appreciate his benevolence.

The sky clears, the sun emerges;
The rain falls, the ground is wet.
Exhausting his sentiments, he explains everything.
Yet I'm still afraid people won't believe him.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

"The mind is not buddha. Wisdom is not the way." There is no awakening, and I have nothing to give you. This case is not even a gong'an—it's just an old man complaining about his teacher for being a blabbermouth. But like father and son, he, too, disgraces the Chan tradition with his "stinking mouth" that "exposes the family's ugliness." What more can be said?

Chinese Chan masters have this peculiar way of praising others by typically saying the opposite of what they mean. I've heard it in the West, too. For example, people who love each other may say, "Come here, you big old fool, let me give you a hug." Of course they don't mean that their loved one is a fool—just the opposite. So Chan masters comment on each other's teaching in a playful way.

We have already met Nanquan in several of the earlier cases. The most radical of his strange behaviors is perhaps in case 14, where he cuts a cat in two. In this case he says something milder but nonetheless potent, contrary to common knowledge in Chan: "Wisdom is not the way."

Occasionally I teach an intermediate-level meditation class, introducing a new meditation method at each session, exposing the students to different approaches to the buddha way. Some people may find an affinity with a particular method that's introduced; others may not.

Practitioners usually begin with an effective, safe method, such as meditation on the breath. After people have built sufficient concentration with that practice, they may reach a plateau. Being exposed to a number of methods can shed new light and perspectives on their own method and breathe life into their practice. The caveat here is that those various methods can become like a new toy to some people.

Traditionally, Chan refuses to deal with stages of practice because progress is an illusion. Chan teaches from the perspective of awakening—not from the point of view of sentient beings. All of the cases in this book present that awakened view to get people to realize it personally, and for good reason: introducing various methods and stages of practice may make students feel inadequate. They may start doubting their ability to practice. They may think that all of these stages are so difficult that they could take many years to go through—and they might never get there. Moreover, learning about stages of practice gives the illusion that practice actually leads to some ideal state or goal that we lack in the present.

At the beginning of each meditation class, after a period of sitting, I ask if anyone has any questions. One woman said, “I know I shouldn’t seek after experiences, I know I shouldn’t be attached to things, but every time I meditate, all I can think about is these wonderful states that I actually don’t have and that I can’t experience. And this leads to more wandering thoughts. The more I think about it, the more frustrated I get. For the past forty minutes of sitting, I’ve been thinking about how to formulate this question to you, to tell you that I’m frustrated; I know I shouldn’t attach but I am attached to these states. Why can’t I meditate well? Why can’t I experience these things?” This duality is the caveat.

Her question applies to all practitioners, as there is tension between practice and a realization. I told her that there are many things within us and in the world for which we should be grateful, that our own very being is supported by so many people and all things around us. It is very important to recognize and feel gratitude. Realizing this, we see that we lack nothing. There is no need to seek for anything.

To see yourself in the light of all things, connected to all that surrounds you—this is buddha, this is wisdom. Is this

something to cultivate? Is this something that you lack and need to attain, to go through stages? I said to her, “Please don’t practice for yourself.” And that’s my advice to anyone who has similar questions.

It is worthwhile to reflect on whether you practice for yourself or for others when you sit and see how frustrated you are because of wandering thoughts or scatteredness, filled with desire for fantastic states of samādhi, or awakening—wishing that your past period of sitting in bliss would last. In that moment you are practicing for yourself. The truth is, whether you have wandering thoughts or not, or are scattered or have clarity, it has nothing to do with your true nature: freedom.

From the perspective of Chan, all the wonderful experiences of samādhi are altered states of consciousness that stem from the illusion of self. These delusions manifest according to your own karmic baggage. Some people feel a unified state; others feel alone, in solitude. Some experience connectedness; others feel a lack thereof. All of these states of consciousness manifest from within; they have nothing to do with who you truly are, with your true nature. I have already used many analogies to describe this.

There is not one single phenomenon that does not express this ultimate truth. The Buddha used different methods according to the different groups of people he taught. All teachings were given in a specific context to specific people who needed to hear them. Nanquan is stating it as plainly as he can here. It’s not really a Chan or Zen teaching or an esoteric truth. He is simply pouring his guts out, explaining it as it is: “The mind is not buddha. Wisdom is not the way.”

When I say, “There is nothing to seek—no enlightenment, no samādhi, no special realization that I or any master can offer,” do you believe me? Now, this may not help the meditation center pay the rent and other bills; however, it

is the truth. My words put Chan and other spiritual teachers out of business. For this reason, Women says,

Nanquan, though an old man, had no shame. As soon as he opens his stinking mouth, he exposes the family's ugliness to the outside world. Even so, few appreciate his benevolence.

I have devised some fanciful classes, such as the intermediate meditation classes for cultivating samādhi, but all of these things are like the labels printed on those over-the-counter medicines: "For temporary relief."

All of us can understand this intellectually. Why is it that there is no buddha way or no wisdom, no buddhahood to attain, to realize? Chan masters have not made this up. There are actually Mahāyāna sūtras that state this clearly. It's explicit in the *Heart Sūtra*:

There is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering and no path. There is no wisdom or any attainment. With nothing to attain . . . they reach nirvāṇa.

It is because of your sense of lack that you seek. The heart of the matter is, no matter how often the scriptures or Chan masters tell you that there's nothing to attain, nothing to get rid of, few actually take it to heart.

Chan masters state the obvious. Existing in every moment of your waking and sleeping life is your buddha-nature. It is never separate or independent; it animates every moment wonderfully, dynamically, freely. This is the very reason you're able to have wandering thoughts and not be stuck with them.

**The sky clears, the sun emerges;
The rain falls, the ground is wet.**

Exhausting his sentiments, he explains everything.

Yet I'm still afraid people won't believe him.

But you refuse to accept the truth that when the sky clears, the sun shines brilliantly, or that when it rains, the ground gets wet. Your heart is free in this very moment. Don't bind it and hold on to it.

Just take a look out the window. Even though you are free, why do you act as if you were missing something in your life? Don't you know that whatever can be gained will be lost? If you realize this and truly take this to heart, then your way of life, of relating to others, will be very different. It will not be based on greed for or aversion toward something; nor will it be based on the deluded thinking of gaining and losing, wanting and needing. It is these states that are abnormal, that conceal your natural freedom.

My daughter was only eight but she was already discovering something called cosmetics. She borrowed my wife's lipstick and put it on. I asked, "What do you have on your lips?" She said, "Lipstick." I said, "Your lips are fine; why do you need lipstick?" She said, "I don't know; it's pretty, I like the color." It was an innocent answer, and it was fine, but I went on to tell her—and please don't criticize me for saying it—"People who need makeup are trying to cover up something." Cosmetics set up boundaries. Or you can call it a facade. The function is separateness. I asked my daughter if she understood. She asked, "What are they trying to cover?" I said, "All the things they think are not pretty enough. They think with makeup they will look better." She said, "But Mommy does it!" So I said, "Mommy is trying to cover up something!"

If a person can realize that there is nothing to hide, nothing to conceal, that there is no facade to put up, then he or she will be at peace. But if you find yourself unable to realize this, then you need to engage in some kind of

practice, to train yourself to get free of that. Then you need to hear dharma talks to remind you that you shouldn't put up a facade.

All the masters, including the Buddha, have tirelessly taught until they expired. I, too, will die, maybe sooner than you think; I may not have the good fortune of living till I'm eighty years old like my master or like Zhaozhou, who lived to be 120. In case you have not heard me: It's all good; IAG! Remember this and take it to heart.

CASE 35

When a Beautiful Woman's Spirit Departs

Wuzu asked a monk [at a funeral], "This beautiful woman has died and her spirit has departed. Which is the real person?"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you can awaken to the real person here, then you realize that both leaving and entering the shell of worldly existence is like sojourning in a travelers' inn.

If you cannot awaken to the real person here, don't go running around in confusion. When the physical elements that compose your body suddenly disperse, you will be flailing around miserably like a crab dropped into boiling water. When that time comes, don't say I didn't warn you.

Clouds and moon are the same,
Streams and mountains are different.

Myriad blessings, myriad blessings!
Are we, and they, one or two?



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Before we go into this case, I will mention that some time ago I got an e-mail from a longtime practitioner who had started to practice with our group. She had made a very perplexing and troublesome discovery: she did not know who she was. Was she the person the world saw, living for other people, or was she her own person, living a life engaged in practice? Whatever she did seemed to be done for others. Was it “me” or was it “them?” If it is me, then where is this me? If it is them, then how can I live my life for other people? She eventually overcame her fear, but she did give up practicing for a certain period of time. Finally she let go of the perplexing questions of who she was and her mind began to settle down.

I replied to her that in practice it is normal to experience a roller coaster of big waves, small waves, ups and downs, but it is important not to get caught up in the scenery along the way. When we drive from A to B, we just drive; we use the momentum and energy from these experiences to return to the method. I suggested that she do prostration meditation and deeply investigate why she practiced so she could rekindle her commitment.

This gong'an derives from a famous tenth-century Tang dynasty novel, *Lihun ji*, or *Record of the Departed Soul*, a best seller of its time. The story involves two lovers, one of whom is the “beautiful woman” in this case. “Wuzu” here refers to Chan master Wuzu Fayan (1024-1104), one of the great Chan masters. He used this story to present the real

crisis of identity that one may have and the way to resolve it.

Zhang Qian, the heroine of the story, was very beautiful from an early age. She had a very handsome playmate, her cousin, whose name was Wang Zhou. Zhang Qian had an older sister who had died at a young age, so the father invested all of his love in the younger daughter. Wang Zhou and Zhang Qian lived close to each other and always played together. The father once commented, "You two are such soul mates; when you grow up and get married, that will be a real blessing." The youngsters regarded these words as a kind of engagement, as was often customary in premodern China. They developed a great love for each other and believed they would be married one day. But the father had said those words in passing, without any serious reflection. When it came time for the young girl to be wed, the father arranged for her to marry another young man, someone who had already established himself socially as a wealthy member of the literati. The young cousins were extremely sad. They had grown up with the false assumption that they would be married one day. Their dream was completely crushed.

Zhang Qian locked herself up and Wang Zhou decided to go to another city to take the civil service examination in order to establish himself. Entering officialdom and joining the literati was a way to success in premodern China. Telling no one, alone and completely heartbroken, Wang Zhou traveled by boat to another province. In the darkness of night, by the bank of the river, he suddenly heard someone calling his name. It sounded like Zhang Qian. He docked his boat. Sure enough, he saw her waving him down, running along the riverbank. She jumped into the boat. They embraced, in tears. He said, "Let's run away; I will study hard and I'll take the civil service examination. We'll start a family." So off they went. Within five years, he had established himself as a local official, and she had

given birth to two children. Although they lived happily, they began to miss their parents. In that society, it was important to have the blessing of one's parents in marriage as well as for other aspects of life, such as employment and determining where to live. They were both good and filial. Zhang Qian said, "Surely my parents will understand. You have a good job now and we have two beautiful children. It's time to go back." And so they did. As it was the custom for the man to first talk to the woman's father to receive blessings and forgiveness, Zhang Qian remained in the boat. Wang Zhou went to his uncle, Zhang Qian's father, who was delighted to see him. He exclaimed, "Wang Zhou, where have you been all these years? I've been worried sick about you, and so have your parents. Come in, come in. I'm so delighted to see you!" Wang Zhou felt guilty because the uncle did not know that his daughter had run away with him. But his uncle was very happy and kept questioning Wang Zhou. Finally, Wang Zhou couldn't contain himself: "Actually, I'm here to apologize to you in the hope of getting your permission and blessing to marry Qian. We have two children now and are living very happily. I have a very good job." Qian's father was completely dumbfounded. He said, "What are you talking about? Which Qian?" Wang Zhou said, "Qian, your daughter!" Her father replied, "My daughter! Are you kidding? Is this a joke? My daughter has been in bed in a coma for five years. . . ." Wang Zhou quickly replied, "No, no, it's impossible. I'm married to her, we have two children. She is right here at the harbor." The father became very angry, "Get out of here and don't come back; I don't find this funny at all!" The young man pleaded, "No, you have to believe me." The father said, "All right. Bring my daughter here; I want to see her." So Wang Zhou returned to the boat, fetched his wife, and brought her to the house. At that very moment, Zhang Qian got up from her bed and went to the door with her father. As soon as the two women

faced each other—Qian, the wife with the two children, and Qian, the one who'd been in a coma—they joined and became one. Then the sickly Qian awoke from her coma and asked—the same way you do when you sit in meditation—"Who am I?" The father said, "You're my daughter; I'm so happy you finally woke up!" The husband said, "I'm so happy that you're here with me as my wife!" But all Qian could remember was that Wang Zhou had gone away. She said, "Out of such sadness I locked myself in. I dreamed that I was at the riverbank, hollering at you, calling your name; and I left with you. I can't remember anything after that."

This is not a ghost story, and Chan master Fayan is really not interested in popular novels. This story actually touches something deep within us. In a way, you are living like that girl. To one person you are a son; to another you are a father or a daughter, a mother, a friend, an enemy. You may be someone entirely different to someone else. You may wish to reconcile all of these roles, but you can't do it. Even within yourself you feel conflicted; you recognize different facets of yourself. For example, you know that you shouldn't do negative, harmful things, but you keep doing them. The multiple selves you feel within you seem irreconcilable.

Who are you really? Your parents may relate to you as they did when you were young. You think: "I'm grown up; I'm no longer three years old!" But to your parents, you will always be their little daughter or son. You constantly find yourself in situations where you construct a narrative about yourself, and others seem to construct an image of you that often conflicts with who you think you are. This happens with close friends, family members, even with people you don't know.

To take up this gong'an is to take up the question: Which is your real self?

Wumen comments: “If you can awaken to the real person here, then you realize that both leaving and entering the shell of worldly existence is like sojourning in a travelers’ inn.”

He goes on to say, “If you can’t awaken to the real person, don’t go running around in confusion. When the physical elements that compose your body suddenly disperse, when your body is falling apart, you’ll flail around miserably like a crab dropped into boiling water—don’t say I didn’t warn you so.”

You may have studied buddhadharma and already concluded that there is no self, even though when you see a pretty woman or a handsome man, you look twice, or when you see something you desire, you cannot distinguish your wants from your needs. Some may even believe, in their conceit, that they are already enlightened. What I say is: Don’t be easily satisfied with any answer that you come up with or any meager realization you think you may have acquired in practice. You must continue to ask, “Which is the real self?” You must personally shed all concepts and experiences and come to know the answer. Otherwise you will only suffer when your body becomes weak, when your limbs don’t listen to you. What will happen if Alzheimer’s sets in and you can’t even remember your family, and yet you have those moments of clarity when you realize that you’re losing your memory?

Just recently I was having dinner with a ninety-year-old friend at his house. He was just sitting there in a complete stupor. He used to be a professor with a very sharp mind. Now he needs a cane, he has trouble talking, he can’t remember things. If you have not solved this existential dilemma of who you are, then what happens?

This “real person” that Wumen is talking about is something for you to discover. Yes, Buddhism does talk about no-self. Yet Wumen here is talking about a real self. No-self, real self, one or two, which one is you? Is it the one

who has continuity or is it all of the fragmented images? Talking about either is foolish, but in meditating on this gong'an, it is important to discover the answer personally. This discovery is not conceptual or intellectual or experiential. This may sound strange, as you often hear that Chan is about experience. I am telling you right now that Chan enlightenment is not an experience. It is not about feelings, it is not thinking, nor is it some kind of clarity from discovering that there's no self. Then what is it?

Fayan himself found out. He studied very hard. He left home to become a monk at age thirty-five, which was very old in the premodern age, when life expectancy was only sixty. In those days, one married at sixteen or seventeen and became an official—a local magistrate or a mayor—in one's twenties. Therefore, by the time Fayan became a monk, he already had a lot of worldly experience. What did he do? He studied the Buddhist doctrine of the Yogācāra, or Consciousness-Only, school, which is a very complex philosophical system. At one time he was reading the work of Master Xuanzang (602–64), the great Chinese pilgrim who went to India, translated numerous sūtras, and brought them back to China. He came across these words: "Awakening is something that can be known by someone only personally, like drinking water."

When you hear this, you think Xuanzang is talking about personal experience, about clarity, about personally understanding and experiencing enlightenment. Fayan didn't take it that way, which would have been a very superficial, intellectual understanding. He understood it as, "I have lived as a layperson for thirty-five years; I have studied all of these years as a monk. Who am I?" This was indeed someone with good karmic potential. He took it to heart and asked his teacher, "Why is it that I personally don't know the taste of water? Who is it that tastes this water?" His teacher replied, "You'd better go down south

and ask a Chan master." So Fayan went to his first Chan master and had some insight. When he met his second Chan master, Baiyun Shouduan (1025-72), he experienced his initial awakening and remained to study with the teacher at his monastery.

Some people were jealous of Fayan because he was put in charge of the monastery's storehouse where all the goods were kept. He managed it so well that he opened an exchange shop on the grounds and made a profit for the monastery. He was a real entrepreneur with a good business mind: people would donate rice, grains, and money, which he would then loan out with interest. All of his accounting books were clear: the monastery was in need, so he did what he had to do. At the same time, he had a great practice that other monks and laypeople envied. They went to Baiyun and said, "Fayan is always drinking alcohol in that storehouse; he feeds a host of women there, it's like a brothel in that quarter of the monastery." His master immediately called Fayan, "I've heard all of these things about you. Tell me what is going on there." Fayan did not try to explain, so his master believed that the monks were telling the truth. He slapped him across the face and said, "Get out of the storehouse. Leave this monastery!"

Now put yourself in his shoes. When someone blames you, what do you do? Maybe you defend yourself, try to clear your name, seek justice? You want to explain yourself, especially when the accusations are false. Fayan said, "Before I go, I will show you the accounting books." So he showed the books to his master. Baiyun saw how clearly every item had been entered and realized that it would be impossible for anyone who could produce such a fine ledger not only to misappropriate funds but also to do those things he was accused of doing. Baiyun personally went to the storehouse and was very pleased. He reinstated Fayan in his old job. No one maligned Fayan after that. Because of

his awakening experience, in the face of criticism, blame, and false accusations, Fayán maintained stability. However, this was not his full awakening.

Some time later, his teacher said, “Fayan, today we will have many visitors whom I’ve met before. All of them are awakened. When I asked them a question, raised a particular gong’an to them, they responded without hesitation. When I asked them about a passage from the scriptures, they explained it thoroughly, without any flaws. When I observed their behavior to see if there was congruence between what they knew and what they experienced, all of them passed the test. But none of them got *it*.”

A Chan master works in a special way. He is constantly testing his students, gauging them, helping them. At these words, Fayán gave rise to a great doubt. He thought, “All of these monks are awakened; they have passed all the gong’ans. They have the experience, they have knowledge of scripture, and they follow the precepts perfectly. So what is it that they haven’t got? Is there something more? Is there something more after awakening?” Baiyun had him. He had set up a trap, and Fayán fell right into it. For three days Fayán was in a conundrum, unable to eat, sleep, or rest. He was in what we call the great doubt sensation, or the great mass of doubt. Fayán finally went to his teacher, “What is it that they don’t have? What is it that they haven’t got?” What Master Baiyun actually answered is not so important, but as soon as he spoke, Fayán attained complete, thorough awakening. Fayán had brought the great doubt to a crescendo, where all that existed was the doubt, and when this doubt shattered, all of his attachments also shattered. For the first time he was completely free.

Wumen is just presenting us with a dilemma here—creating waves where there’s no wind. He states:

**Clouds and moon are the same,
Streams and mountains are different.
Myriad blessings, myriad blessings!
Are we, and they, one or two?**

Why is it that clouds and moon are the same and streams and mountains are not? Why is he prompting all of us to discover a self when buddhadharma says there is no self? He is not saying that there is a real self, a real person, nor is he saying that we should be satisfied with the Buddhist teaching of no-self—that is not our own wisdom. We should be satisfied neither with the self nor with no-self. We must clarify this for ourselves.

In the story that Fayen cites, which one was Zhang Qian? Was it the girl who was bedridden or the girl who got married and had children? And how about the woman who e-mailed me? Which self is really her: the self that she projects and that other people see or the self she has known for thirty, forty years? Which is it? Is it one or is it two? In your own life, who are you? Are you the self who is reading this book, or are you another self, the one in front of friends or the one your parents see? Maybe it is the image that you carry around with you that makes you believe that you are this or that type of person. Or are you the person that others perceive you to be? This is the fundamental question. This is something you have to know personally, like drinking water. You use this gong'an, "Which is the real person?" to face yourself, to embrace yourself, to question yourself, and finally to let go of yourself.

This is your primary task; your whole practice, up to that point, centers on this fundamental question. If you discover who you are, go and see your teacher, we'll verify what this self is. And if you haven't discovered it, go and see your teacher so he or she can examine your practice. After all,

how can you live as a human without knowing who you are? But the way to discover this is not to lock yourself in a room and meditate all day. Rather, it is through your interactions in daily life, amid all the selves that you present to others and all the selves that are projected onto you by others. The course of practice takes great courage, but it is to be hoped that you are in the good company of fellow practitioners.

CASE 36

If You Meet a Person Who Has Reached the Path

Master Wuzu said, “If on the road you meet a person who has fulfilled the way, greet this person with neither words nor silence. Tell me, how will you respond?”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Right here, if you can respond intimately, it will indeed be delightful. If you cannot, then see to it that in all situations your eyes are watching.

If on the road you meet a person who has fulfilled the way,

Don't greet this person with words or silence.

Hold his jaw and give a nice blow on the side of his face.

If you understand this directly, then you know its [meaning].



GUO GU'S COMMENT

How will you greet a person who has realized the way? In Chan or Zen, words and silence are pitched together as opposites. Some people think gestures are better. That is wrong! No words, silence, or gesture. The point is to place yourself in a situation in which you can neither advance nor retreat, speak or shut up, act or not act. How do you respond? If you can't, then read on.

Here, Wuzu Fayuan is talking about Chan master Xiangyan Zhixian. I have already introduced the former in the previous case and the latter in case 5. As soon as you see "neither words nor silence nor gestures," you may have a question such as, "Well, how do I respond then?" Or you may simply feel stuck. Both are a good place to be. Perhaps I can hold your jaw and give you a blow to the side of the face? In the immediacy of this moment, can you realize it? There's no room for pretense here. It would be wrong to punch an awakened person to demonstrate your understanding if you have none.

Why should you think an "awakened" person is any different from another? Who is discriminating between this and that? Is awakening special? Is delusion ordinary? In Chan, all beings are intrinsically awakened, free. In the midst of your daily life, how do you greet your family members, friends, colleagues, boss, and the coffee shop clerk? Are you stuck by your categories of awakened versus deluded, words versus silence, action versus inaction? Please don't be.

Living and dying go on instant by instant, such that in living there's dying and in dying there's living—they are

one. Chan practice will not bring you to a place beyond this. However, it will reveal the meaning of your life. Engaged in it, a way or path unfolds, along which you can live in peace and fulfillment. Where can you find this way or path? Not necessarily on the cushion or in meditation halls. Take your practice outside, into the world. It is there that life unfolds and is fulfilled. Be intimate with all situations of life, and there will be fulfillment. You discover that everyone is that “person who has fulfilled the way.”

People compartmentalize each other into friends, foe, or neutral. The friends and family who are good to you, you like; people who are difficult, you dislike. And you couldn't care less about the people you don't know or who have no bearing on your happiness. Haven't you experienced this: When you are doing things for or in front of a person you think is important, you often mess up or become clumsy. I was like that in front of my teacher. Now that I have my own students, I see this, too, with people who can do certain tasks well but who, for some reason, fumble all over the place when I'm around. They get uneasy either because they want to do well in front of their teacher or because they don't want to be perceived as being less than first-rate. Why? It is not because people don't know what they're doing, nor because they think the teacher is important. It's because their tension comes from discriminating between who is important, who is not, who is the teacher, who is a student. Why do people discriminate, then? It is because there is attachment to self.

Of course this is not to say you should place everyone you meet in the neutral category. No. The categories are not the issue here, nor are they the fact that you know who's important and who's not. The issue is self-attachment. Tension is always there when there is a separate *other*, which reinforces notions of *me*: How do I look in front of this person? What will he or she think of me? I should do this well so I am approved. Yet this me is really just an

imagined referent point. Sure you have a history; you have accumulated experiences and particular ways of thinking. But the reality is that these are just a continual flow of psychophysiological events. The fewer blocks you create, the more everything becomes fluid and natural.

People are so used to behaving in their own idiosyncratic ways that their brain and body have already learned this pattern. They automatically kick into certain modes when they meet one situation or another. Body-mind dynamic really is an amazing patterning of neurological, behavioral, emotional, and psychological events.

The amazing truth is that there is no need for a fixed, permanent *me* in the middle of all of that. It is fixations based on a self that block the flow of things and cause mistakes. Mistakes make people feel self-conscious, and the habitual pattern kicks in again on how to *fix* things. In doing so, they become worse. It's like doing calligraphy, where one has to moderate one's strength; in certain places, there should be more ink, such as at the angles; and in others, less. Before the bend of the angle, one has to stop and then go down, making sure one's qi, or energy, transfers from one's fingertips to the brush and onto the paper. Sometimes when one strains too much, the ink runs out and one needs to get more.

In life if you put too much emphasis on something, when you try too hard, when you become attached and captivated by how *you want it to be*, you will definitely make mistakes. That is to say, when you are distracted by various wandering thoughts—when you get caught up in your *self*—you make mistakes. When I first took up calligraphy as a child, the first thing I learned was *not* to go over a mistake, as it would make it look worse. The corrected area would become so dark that it would look awkward and unnatural next to the rest of the character.

Practice is not to be distracted by *me*—it is not about perpetuating self-cherishing notions, self-referential

thinking, nor imaginations of this or that. In engaging in practice, you discover patterns, shortcomings, habits, and also strengths. Your practice naturally unfolds amid all the games and props that the self comes up with. Seeing them, you know not to be caught up with them but to continue with what needs to be done in the present.

Being attuned to the present is important. One of my students has a tendency to feel guilty for past things. We were talking on the phone when he suddenly cut me off, interjecting to make a point and to explain certain things. A week later when we met, he apologized profusely. I just smiled and told him to put it down. Clearly, he had put too much thought into that. I have another student who likes to argue a lot. His habit is to analyze everything; he always takes the opposite perspective of the person he is talking to. So in our conversations, he often cuts me off, questioning this and that; for instance, "But what about this? What about that?" He often apologizes later on; I just smile and tell him to put it down.

We all make mistakes in life. What you do in the present not to repeat them is more important. Once in a retreat interview a student apologized to me for a mistake she made. I told her, "I don't see the past; I accept you now. A teacher will not bring the baggage of the past to the present. It's not that I have lost my memory; it's just that such baggage is usually not so helpful." Similarly, in life, you should face those around you with 100 percent of your attention. Don't get so caught up with the past or with the categories you impose on people. Don't take away the precious moment in the present with baggage from the past. You will then be free to respond and "greet the person who has fulfilled the way." Any way of greeting will do.

Can you see that the birds, the river, the people in your life—yes, even those difficult people—have "fulfilled the way"? Their way is their way; each fulfills his or her way. While their way may not agree with *your* way, know that all

people are trying their best in the best way they know how. When you see them, be with them; when you are engaged in a task, be with the task. With this, just this; with that, just that. If they need help, help. If they are doing well, rejoice. This and that is just this and that—no self needed in the mix. This is to “respond intimately.”

Chan practice is about intimacy, not about separateness of self and others. Whoever you interact with, whatever the situation calls for, be there fully. This is not intimacy in the sense that you hug everyone you see or kiss them or blur your social boundaries. It is the intimacy of not-two. Being intimate, any words or silence, gesture or no gesture, is appropriate. Once on a retreat there was a woman who practiced very diligently. She was diligent but relaxed. At the end of the retreat, she was very grateful. She said, “Toward the middle of the retreat, I realized that all I had to do was to practice my method—nothing else. If I was hungry, there were three meals per day. When tired from practice, I slept well at night. More important, if I didn’t use the method correctly, or when I needed to hear encouragement, you were always there to guide me and always said exactly what I needed to hear. All of my garbage that I brought to the retreat was left behind. I have never had that luxury. Thank you. I’m grateful.” In fact, after the retreat, even her husband came to thank me. Tell me, how did she greet me? How did she greet her husband?

If you can respond intimately, it will indeed be delightful. If you cannot, then see to it that in all situations your eyes are watching.

To be intimate means to be without self. With practice you become normal, humble, more relaxed with everything, with everyone. If you find yourself in a state of vexations, what do you do? You have to relax, relax the body and

mind. The fact is, in that moment your body has already kicked in to its habit pattern; stress hormones have already flushed out through your sympathetic nervous system. So learning to relax the body is extremely important—it will break the pattern and stop it from getting worse. You also have to relax the mind. This means relaxing your grip on *me*. If you like this gong'an, then bring up this phrase, "neither words nor silence," and relax. With more experience, you will become more relaxed and more in tune with your body and mental states. If someone insults you, you may immediately notice tension in your stomach, shoulders, or facial muscles. Your first response will be to relax. You will then be able to snap out of your negative habits.

"Then see to it that in all situations your eyes are watching" means you're practicing cautiously, with great care. "Eyes are watching" in the original Chinese means allowing your eyes to rest, to fall, to behold something. This "something" is whatever appears before you. Keep it simple: with this, just this; with that, just that. Take your self out of the mix. When you meet someone, don't greet the person with your own baggage of like and dislike. Be authentic, unpretentious. A practitioner's eyes are open; his or her actions are mindful. Don't fall prey to your own fabrications or constructs. That's the meaning of "eyes are watching."

**If on the road you meet a person who has fulfilled
the way,
Don't greet this person with words or silence.
Hold his jaw and give a nice blow on the side of
his face.
If you understand this directly, then you know its
[meaning].**

If you discover you have already erred, that you're projecting your own attachment onto the person you meet, then apologize. Leave the slapping to one who is awake. Don't intellectualize about this nice blow on the side of the face. It has nothing to do with punching or not punching, understanding or not understanding. Meeting someone who has fulfilled the way is a simple act of everyday life. If you ask me, a simple handshake would do.

CASE 37

The Cypress in the Courtyard

Once when a monk asked Zhaozhou, “What is the meaning of the Ancestor coming from the west?” Zhaozhou said, “The cypress tree in the courtyard.”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

If you can intimately perceive Zhaozhou’s answer, then there is no Śākyamuni before and no Maitreya after.

Words cannot reveal it.
Speech does not rise up to the occasion.
Those who inherit words will perish;
Those who stick to phrases are lost.



GUO GU’S COMMENT

The story takes place at Guanyin Temple in Hebei Province, where Zhaozhou taught for forty years. It was already a famous temple. The courtyard was surrounded by many beautiful tall cypress trees. So one of his students approached him and asked him, "What is the meaning of the Ancestor coming from the west?" "Ancestor" here refers to Bodhidharma, the founder of the Chan tradition. He is called "the Ancestor" because he is the progenitor of all the lineages of Chan and Zen that have come down to us today. So the meaning of this question *for you* is: What has he given you? What is this Chan that you are practicing? How does it relate to your life? These are profound, fundamental questions that cannot be answered intellectually. If you think Bodhidharma lived long ago or that he went to China from India to establish the Chan school or even that he is the ancestor of our school, then you are not a Chan practitioner.

Once, at the end of a five-day intensive retreat in Chicago, a Japanese man who had been studying Nichiren Buddhism for a long time came to pick up his friend who was on the retreat. He stopped me on my way to the restroom and said, "Venerable Teacher, I have a very important question to ask you." I said, "What is that?" He said, "What is your understanding of emptiness?" He went on to say that this particular school says this, another says that . . . on and on. After he was done, I replied, "Piss! Gotta piss." And I patted his cheek, making a *pa, pa, pa, pa* sound. He quickly said, "Oh, sorry. Please, go." He was rather shocked that I patted him on the cheek, as we did not know each other. He pounced upon me as soon as I came out of the bathroom, saying, "So, what is emptiness?" I said, "I told you already." "What? You didn't say anything." He didn't get it. Actually, he didn't really have a question—he just wanted a challenge—but he was expecting an answer. Do you understand?

If you want to know what Chan is, you have to know what it is not: Emptiness is not some abstract idea; it is not some truth outside you; it cannot be understood through words or language. You swim in it, bathe in it, yet you wonder where the water is. Those who have been studying for some time know that Chan is not some idea, state, or anything that can be grasped. It is right here, this moment. Look!

You may examine Zhaozhou's "cypress tree in the courtyard" or what I said to the man, "Piss! Gotta piss." What makes the cypress tree more or less important than some truth or scripture? What makes going to the bathroom to take a piss less important than some noble truth about emptiness? When we pee, there's emptiness.

For a person stuck on words and language, this story becomes a conundrum: "Why did Zhaozhou say that? What does the cypress tree have to do with Bodhidharma? Is that a special tree? Drive home this "Why, why, why!" You want to know yet don't know.

Words cannot reveal it.

Speech does not rise up to the occasion.

Those who inherit words will perish;

Those who stick to phrases are lost.

Nowadays practitioners *know* a lot. They read this and read that, attaching to form. They don't know the genius of not knowing. They mimic Chan masters' words and actions—yelling "*Katz!*" all the time. In 1990 I went to Korea with a Zen master for a celebration of an event. One day a number of Zen students were all asked to go onstage to say a few words to the assembly. The first guy got up and began his words with "*Katz!*" So did the next one, and the next one, and the one after that. Each person yelled louder than the previous. If they understood the shouts, then there would be no need to practice any longer. If they didn't, then they should sit in meditation until their bones break and

buttocks rot. Don't kill your wisdom life, the spark within that frees you. Attaching to words and phrases from all the things you read and learn is the way to blow out your flame of wisdom.

I often say, "It's all good! IAG!" Recently my students have started to repeat this. Not good. They must make it their own, otherwise their wisdom life will perish. Zhaozhou had a very famous attendant, Guangxiao Huijue (848?-947?), who went on to become a Chan master. After Zhaozhou's death, Chan master Fayen Wenyi, whom we met in case 26, asked Huijue: "I heard that Zhaozhou once said that the reason the Ancestor came from the west is because of the cypress tree in the courtyard. Is that true?" He was testing Huijue. Zhaozhou's answer had shaken the world of Chan. It was so popular that to some extent it became his slogan. As everyone knew this, it is obvious that he actually said it. Zhaozhou's disciple, a true upholder of his teacher, replied, "Nope!" Fayen pressed on, "But he did say that." Huijue responded, "Zhaozhou would never say that! Don't criticize him this way—now you have to go wash your mouth clean." The Chan master smiled, "It's a very good thing Zhaozhou had a disciple like you. The lion roared, but the cub also roars!" That's the meaning of "Those who inherit words will perish; / Those who stick to phrases are lost." But if you don't understand and must hold on to words, then may you perish under these words, "the cypress tree in the courtyard" and "IAG!" May you be completely lost, through and through; chew on these words without knowing why until the sky falls down and the ocean dries up.

I must say, however, that despite what you think about yourself—that you are smart or dumb; confident or lack confidence; happy or unhappy—through and through, you are free. The sky, as it is, goes on for miles and the ocean has always contained all. If you were to understand this and intellectualize about it with words, it would be a never-

ending cycle—saṃsāra. Even the existential questions of who you are, what the meaning of life is, what truth is, and so on, have no room here.

Chan practice brings the self to the point of ripeness, where the actions or words of the teacher can actually serve as a catalyst to suddenly break through your shell. What if a person's practice reaches the point where he or she has very few attachments? When the full sense of self is congealed into this single existential point of not knowing and the teacher suddenly knocks it out, then you vanish and the world comes alive. If you are not ready for such a teaching, the teacher will not snatch anything away. When you are ready for a direct teaching, then you must investigate Chan.

The fundamental way you are wired is dualistic, self-referential. You assume a permanent, separate sense of me or mine that underlies all of your experiences and determines all of your opinions and judgments. Some people assume this is the experiencer of experiences. Putting down this experiencer, what is left are just experiences. When experiences are free of the experiencer, all experiences come alive. I'm explaining it this way so that you can understand the devastation of words and language, how they actually determine shape, color, and condition.

Can you freely use and experience words and language, or are you conditioned by them? There is an easy litmus test: When someone insults you or says something deeply hurtful to you, how do you respond? When someone praises you, loves you, how do you respond? This does not mean that you should be stoic. Words are not the problem—they are just vibrations to your ears. What makes them meaningful, personal, is your attachments. When you remove your self-attachment, you fully experience the world without coloration. You are directly connected; you see things very clearly and don't feel that "I'm over here,

you're over there; you're saying these words there, and I'm hearing them over here."

Wumen says:

If you can intimately perceive Zhaozhou's answer, then there is no Śākyamuni before and no Maitreya after.

When past and future are cut off, what is left? The conceptual or rational mind works like this: As soon as I say something, perhaps your mind starts churning; it goes to the past or the future. Isn't that true? If you don't go to the past or the future, what will your response be like? You may think, "If there's no past and future, only the present is left." No.

Recently someone said to me, "We will e-mail you when you go to Taiwan, but by the time you receive the message it will be the next day, as Taiwan is twelve hours ahead." I responded, "It will be twelve hours behind!" What is past? What is future? When you adjust your clock every year, where do all those hours go? Is there past? Is there future? Is there present? Zhaozhou's cypress tree cuts through all of this. Do you understand?

Wumen so kindly provides a cue: "Words cannot reveal it / Speech does not rise up to the occasion." You must personally come to know this. So intimate, so close. Practice hard!

CASE 38

A Water Buffalo Passing Through a Window Frame

Wuzu said, "It is like a water buffalo passing through a window frame. Its horns and hooves have all passed through. Why can't the tail pass through?"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you can be turned upside down to obtain the eye [of awakening] and to provide a turning word, then you will be able to repay the four kinds of gratitude above and offer sustenance to those in the three lower realms below. If you cannot, then take care of this tail!

Passing through, it falls into a pit.
Turning back, it dies.
This tail
Is indeed very strange!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Unlike with other cases where I needed to use everyday language to explain what the case is basically saying, I don't need to do that here. It is very clear: A buffalo jumps through a window. Yet even though the large part of its body goes through, the smallest part, the tail, cannot. Why? Wumen says you should be upside down to understand "Why can't the tail pass through?" I say you need to be right side up. Why?

Why is it that you can't shake yourself free even though you are already free? Why is it that you are not at peace despite your good health, friendships, possessions, status, wealth, and even love? Some try to find peace through spiritual practices. They engage in meditation or yoga, go on pilgrimages, read scriptures, read self-help books, and pay money to receive "empowerments." All of these, from the perspective of Chan, are just props to cover up your deep sense of alienation and aloneness. Those props are transient, unreliable. Whatever you can get from outside is worthless; whatever you grasp on to on the inside is also useless. The problem lies in the "I," or self-referentiality, having, lacking, good, bad—whatever props you up will stem from upside-down thinking. To turn right side up is to be without the coloration of self. Free, everywhere. Everywhere, free.

Because of your self-referentiality, you are forever alienated from yourself and others. In separating your seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking from the objects of your seeing, hearing, smelling, and so on, you are unclear of what's outside and are forever dark

inside. As long as your self is at the center of the world, at the core of your experiences, you see everything as outside—including yourself. You make a “thing” out of everything inside and out. More than anything else, this creates a deep yearning for some ultimate something that you can hold on to. Yet you do not have the slightest clue as to what this ultimate something is.

Wumen calls this the tail:

Passing through, it falls into a pit.

Turning back, it dies.

This tail

Is indeed very strange!

This tail is the “I” that creates all the props you use in your life. Because you operate in an upside-down way, through self-referentiality, nothing goes right. You may do something, you may face challenges; you may turn your back to it, but then other issues arise. Thus you cannot pass through and you cannot turn back. Isn’t it true that you get yourself into a big knot, into conflicts with others, or even with yourself, all the time? You engage in war; you create great suffering; you identify terrorists, but they see you as the terrorist. The reason is that you are attached to your own views and opinions—the props that your discriminating mind comes up with. I’m not talking about the ordinary, conventional sense of discernment, such as knowing right and wrong; I’m talking about the kind of self-referential discrimination, bifurcation, separateness that lie at the very foundation of your being.

It is not that events, objects, words, and language themselves are upside down. It is in your engaging and experiencing that you have falsely construed a sense of “I”—the basic duality that underlines all of your experiences. If someone’s opinion does not agree with yours, you are not happy. If someone’s opinion agrees with

yours, you feel reassured. If you don't like what you see, you want to change it, even though it may be none of your business. You want things to be other than what they are; you want them to be in accordance with your way. This is upside down because things are not like that.

"A water buffalo passing through a window frame"—everything goes through except for the smallest part, the tail, which gets caught. How do you get the water buffalo to go through the frame without breaking it? If the buffalo goes forward, there's a problem. If it turns back, there's also a problem. If you remove the frame, the buffalo will fall into a pit. If you pull the buffalo back, it dies. How to proceed then? Investigate this tail and ask, over and over again, "Why can't the tail go through? Why can't the tail go through?"

How do you save the buffalo? The buffalo wants to be free. You are the buffalo; no one can help you except yourself. You get caught in situations all the time. What drove you to read this book? Just like you, all beings want to be free; they don't want to be shackled. It would not be compassionate to allow the buffalo to just stay locked up.

When my daughter Zea was four, I gave her a gong'an to meditate on:

"How do you get a duck out of a jar? The lip of the jar is very small but the container itself is large. A live duck is in it. You can't break the jar and you can't hurt the duck."

Then she asked, "Why did the duck get into the bottle in the first place?" She came up with all kinds of answers over the course of the next month.

One day, coming home from school she said, "Daddy, I got the answer to the gong'an: group effort!"

I said, "Did you learn this in school today?"

She said, "Yes, I learned that group effort makes everything possible!"

I said, "That's not it."

A couple of years later, she took it a step further. She said, “Daddy, I know the answer to ‘How do you get the duck out of the jar?’ The same way it got in!”

This was a pretty savvy answer, but I said, “Nope!”

You are that duck. You put yourself into the bottle and others in it as well. You may think this anecdote is a problem and that’s why you cannot think of a way out. The whole world is the tail—it cannot pass through. The whole world is the duck in the bottle—can’t get out. How to get the duck out? How does the buffalo’s tail pass through? Turn yourself right side up. Clear your eyes. Look!

The buffalo is already out! The duck is already free! Buffalo, duck, out, or free—these are your shackles. Please don’t make your practice like pasting gold leaf on windowsills or bottles.

Chan can be another windowsill or bottle. That was the reason for my hesitation about founding the Tallahassee Chan Center. Because of people’s requests and out of gratitude to my teacher, I started to teach. But is there anything to teach? I chose not to start by offering classes on sūtra commentaries or by providing more props. People don’t need more doctrine or theories—they just need to remove all the props in their lives and come alive to all that is. Thus, I began with comments on the *Gateless Barrier*. The cases therein reveal your own hang-ups. They unfold as you examine them in your life, in your interactions with others. In this process, a path opens up; you realize your original freedom and your connection to all beings. How can you abandon others? They are you; you are they.

To repay the four kinds of gratitude above and offer sustenance to those in the three realms below.

When you let go, you see that Buddhist teaching on so-called emptiness is just relationships. You are made up of

everyone and everything else and they are made up of you. Everything interpenetrates—just remove the unnecessary screen, the self—and you will see. Drop this “I” right away and offer a turning word, which spins the whole situation around and provides clarity and freedom. Otherwise, observe with great care this tail that gets stuck in your life.

How do you observe it? In life. You get out of your shell and offer yourself out of gratitude and to help others. Recognize that all that you are comes from others, not only those who have helped you but also those who have wronged you, harmed you. They are your benefactors. Without them, how can you tap into your resources to improve? Once self-referential attachments diminish, the four kinds of gratitude become clear: gratitude for your parents, your teachers, your nation’s leaders, and the Three Jewels. Your parents gave you life; your teachers teach you; your nation’s leaders protect you and allow you to practice buddhadharma freely; and the Three Jewels lead you to true freedom. The three realms below refers to the animals, hungry spirits, and denizens of hell. These are unfortunate beings who cannot practice buddhadharma. The four above and three below include all beings who need your gratitude and help.

If the self is in the way, you will not be able to appreciate your connections to others. How do you observe the self? You observe it in your daily life, in your interactions. There are four overlapping practices. Face the self—recognize its workings. Embrace the self—don’t deny its tricks and props. Respond to the self—learn not to fall into the props it sets up. Then slowly you will be able to let the self go.

The point of Chan practice is to let go, to put down. But most people do not know how. Even teachers talk about it like an ideal, unrelated to life, and provide no method. In daily life you need to recognize the vexations and fabrications you project onto others and yourself. The vexations are the props you create; they stem from the tail,

which is self-referentiality, the "I." When there are vexations, recognize them and put them down. Don't follow or reject them. Come back to the task at hand. This is facing, embracing, and responding to the self. Be attentive. The self is slippery. You can't see it. What you cannot see is your own eye. So you have to work with the props, the vexations. As soon as you start setting up props, making a window for the buffalo to jump through, stop! Take away the props. What are the props? Nails and hammers? No. The props are greed, anger, jealousy, arrogance, and self-doubt. Once the props are no more, then the maker can no longer build anything and will disappear. This is the way to let go.

Break free from the props and there's no need to even free the buffalo. The bottle is no more. So how do you go about it? A tail that doesn't pass through? This tail is strange indeed!

CASE 39

Yunmen's "Your Words Fail"

A monk asked Yunmen [about the poem], "The brilliant and quiescent luminosity pervades everywhere, [like sands in the] Ganges." Before his sentence was finished, Yunmen interrupted, "Are these not the words of the scholar Zhang Zhuo?" The monk replied, "Yes." Yunmen said, "Failed!"

Later, Sixin picked this case up, "How did the monk's words fail?"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If in this case you can perceive the workings of Yunmen, singling out and placing the monk in peril, and understand why the monk's words have failed, then you are fit to be a teacher of humans and gods. If you are not clear about this, then you cannot even save yourself.

Dropping a fishhook into a gushing stream;
The greedy [fish] gets caught.
As soon as it opens its mouth,

Life is lost!

//

GUO GU'S COMMENT

This case is very clear: A flashlight is useless in broad daylight; a lit candle does not need to be lit. Do you understand? If you are going to use a flashlight, use it only when it's needed. Otherwise you're just going to waste the battery. Moreover, use your own flashlight; don't borrow someone else's.

In this story, not only has the monk failed but Chan master Yunmen Wenyan also failed. The monk begins his question by citing Zhang Zhuo's (ca. ninth century) poem of awakening, but as soon as he gets done with the first line, Yunmen shines the flashlight on him—gives him a teaching. Too bad! The light shines in broad daylight, but the monk misses it and still thinks he's in the dark. Mistake! This is like humming a beautiful melody to a dead horse. The horse can't appreciate it. When the monk admits that he borrowed the flashlight from someone else, Yunmen says, "Failed!" He shines his flashlight again, hoping that the monk will open his dharma eye. Too compassionate. His second flashlight signal was also not picked up. Chan master Sixin Wuxin (1043–1116) comes along a couple of centuries later and picks up Yunmen's old flashlight. Out of kindness he asks, "How did the monk's words fail?" How will you respond? Please don't waste batteries anymore. Someone, say something!

Yunmen, whom you first met in case 15, "Dongshan's Three Rounds of Blows," was a great Chan master known for his terse teachings. He had the fortune of having more than sixty dharma successors; several of his descendants

appear in the *Gateless Barrier*. But here he is simply wasting the batteries of his flashlight. The monk, like any practitioner, cites an important cue for practice. In his case, it was a popular poem uttered by the literatus Zhang Zhuo, an educated elite, upon his awakening. We don't have Zhang's exact dates, but he lived sometime in the ninth century during the Tang dynasty. We know this through his teacher's dates: Shishuang Qinzhu (807–88).

Zhang Zhuo's life was quite interesting. He was a *xiuca*, a first-tier scholar, in medieval China. In premodern China, anyone who aspired to have an official post would have to climb up the ladder of bureaucratic success by being trained and examined in the Confucian classics. There are three levels of civil service examination: county, which gets you the *xiuca* degree, perhaps the equivalent in modern times to a bachelor's degree; provincial, which gets you a *juren* degree, which is like a master's degree; and the highest, *jinshi* degree, comparable to a PhD, the examination for which takes place in the capital. So Zhang Zhuo was at the first tier. He did not get much involved with the bureaucracy but was high enough in rank to be exempt from paying taxes. This benefit applied to his whole family as well because they had produced a literatus, a scholar, who worked for the local government.

Zhang Zhuo studied with many Chan masters. One day he asked Xitang Zhizang (735–814), a great disciple of Mazu's, "Are there mountains and rivers and the great earth? Are there buddhas of the past, present, and future?" Xitang replied, "Yes!" Zhang Zhuo, a seasoned Chan practitioner, replied, "Wrong!" The Chan master asked, "And why am I wrong?" Zhang Zhuo replied, "Every time I asked my previous master this question, he would only answer 'No.'" Yes in Chinese is *yo* and *no* is *wu*. *Wu* has various shades of meaning: absent, lacking, not existent, empty. This is the same character as in Zhao Zhou's reply to whether or not dogs have buddha-nature.

So Zhang Zhuo said to Xitang, "That's why I say your answer is wrong!" Xitang smiled, "For your master the answer is 'wu,' but for you it is 'yo,'" Zhang Zhuo asked, "Why is that?" Xitang asked, "Is your master married?" "Wu." "Does he have children?" "Wu." "How about you, do you have kids?" "Yo." "Are you married?" "Yo," replied Zhang Zhuo. Xitang said, "That's why *for you* it is *yo* but for your master it is *wu*."

Because the causes and conditions were not fully ripe, Zhang Zhuo did not feel a strong connection with Xitang's teaching. So he went on his way. Xitang simply reflected the state of the student. When the student has attachment—*yo*! Yes, everything exists. If you have no attachments, then it is *wu*; there is nothing for you to learn. But Zhang Zhuo was not satisfied, so he moved on and continued his practice elsewhere.

He then met his master, Shishuang, from whom he received affirmation of his awakening. Shishuang's response was quick as lightening. Zhang's given name is Zhuo, which means "obstruction" or "obscure." Imagine naming your child that!

When they met, Shishuang asked him, "Who are you?"

"Zhang Zhuo."

"Who? Zhang Zhuo? That which you seek cannot be obtained. Where is this 'obstruction?'" Upon hearing this, Zhang realized great awakening.

Shishuang struck something very intimate in Zhang Zhuo because all of his life he had been called Zhuo. What a wonderful, immediate, spontaneous response! As it was quite rare for a lay practitioner at that time to reach such an understanding, he became well known in Chan circles. People began to memorize and recite his poem, just like the monk in this case. Here is his poem in its entirety:

**The brilliant and quiescent luminosity pervades
everywhere [like sands in the] Ganges.**

**Both the ordinary and the holy are endowed with
the essence in my abode.
When a single thought is not born, the essence is
completely revealed.
But with the slightest stirring of the six senses,
this essence is blocked by clouds.
To cut off vexations is to increase your illness.
To aspire toward true suchness itself is in error.
[Simply] adapt to worldly conditions without
obstructions.
Nirvāṇa, birth and death—flowers in the sky!**

Such a nice poem. Truly eloquent. This is what happens when scholars become awakened—they describe things so beautifully. A plain piece of paper can be described as a golden leaf. The first two lines depict the truth that all is awakened. Buddhist scriptures often make reference to the Ganges River. Here it is used to describe the innumerable, countless teachings that adapt to uncountable living beings—as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges, as radiant and luminous. All the grains of sand represent you and the many sentient beings of different shapes, sizes, and karmic dispositions. Each and every grain of sand, each and every sentient being shines brilliantly, radiating its intrinsic luminosity. The next four lines describe the process of degeneration: our awakened nature is covered by deluded thought; deluded thought arises from attachment to our senses; when it arises, there is grasping and rejecting. The last two lines show how one should practice: be normal, down-to-earth—come to an accord with conditions without injecting something that’s not there (for example, the self), like flowers in the sky.

To put this in perspective: we all borrow from the scriptures and the words of great Chan masters of the past. Buddhists are encouraged to read and study them—that’s how we develop correct views on how to practice. This

would be like someone asking me, “Teacher, form is emptiness, emptiness is . . .” “Stop! Aren’t these the words from the *Heart Sūtra*?” “Yes.” “Fail!” That’s what is happening in this case. The words of the lay practitioner Zhang Zhuo were as well known as those of the *Heart Sūtra* are in Chan circles.

Yunmen is not saying that you should not read or recite scriptures or the words of the enlightened; he himself often quoted other Chan masters. Nor is he saying that Zhang Zhuo’s answer “Yes” was somehow wrong. Had he said “No, these are not his words,” that would have been wrong too. What does this mean? After all, Chan master Sixin recited Yunmen’s words and asked you what they mean. Is he wrong too?

Sixin’s name is great: *sixin* means “bring to death the mind”; *wuxin* means to “awake to the new.” Putting the characters together, the name Sixin Wuxin means, “bringing the mind to death so you can awaken to the new.” In Chan there is a saying: Only by dying the great death will you live the great life. Yunmen’s “Fail!” was very famous. So Wumen’s drawing a connection to Sixin Wuxin is itself a hint for practitioners.

Wumen’s comment:

If in this case you can perceive the workings of Yunmen, singling out and placing the monk in peril, and understand why the monk’s words have failed, then you are fit to be a teacher of humans and gods. If you are not clear about this, then you cannot even save yourself.

If you’re able to intimate Yunmen’s mind, then you can be the “teacher of gods and men,” which is one of the epithets of a buddha discussed in case 30. The key is “placing the monk in peril.” How? Bring the mind to death so you can awaken to the new. What is this mind? It is the mind of

vexations, the mind that fabricates, constructs, labels, and discriminates based on your ideas of gain and loss, good and bad, benefit and disadvantage, yes and no, *yo* and *wu*, having and not having. If you can bring the mind to death, you will come alive and be a buddha. No longer pegged down to one of the realms in the cyclical existence of *samsāra*, not even gods will have anything on you. However, if you cannot die the great death but perpetuate your mind of vexations, then save yourself from the real peril of *samsāra*.

**Dropping a fishhook into a gushing stream;
The greedy [fish] gets caught.
As soon as it opens its mouth,
Life is lost!**

These lines are something that cannot be fathomed by concepts and ideas. Anything you come up with is like the greedy fish that goes for the hook. As soon as you open your mouth, you're gone! Even if you remain silent, you will have failed because keeping your mouth shut is still a response from the thinking or reasoning mind.

How often do you depend on your mind of vexations to deal with life's problems? Aren't you living in this gushing stream of rising and falling, having and not having, succeeding and failing? Everything that you do, whether you stay silent or say some words, is conditioned by birth and death. Before you can realize that which is without rising and falling, that which cannot be characterized by having and not having, gaining and losing, you must practice very, very hard.

Why is practice hard? Because it takes away what you depend on the most, what you take for granted every moment. Everything that you have ever known about yourself—all of your tricks and treats for survival—must be let go. This is worse than a person with broken legs

learning how to walk again through physical therapy. Most people just give up, frustrated with being bound to a wheelchair. You must make the great sacrifice of offering yourself, disciplining your will, being patient with disappointments, being diligent in never giving up, focusing your mind/heart on each task, and most important, you must have the wisdom in knowing that from the beginning you are able to walk. You just need to relearn how to do it. These six prerequisites are called the “six perfections” or *pāramitās*. The last is important. It is the correct view that you are originally from the beginning able to walk just fine. All the temporary therapies are like crutches. You are not born with them. You use them as something to be relinquished eventually, once you regain your walking abilities.

Chan teaches that you are born perfect, even with your defects. Originally nothing binds you. It is only when you shelter yourself in self-grasping that you find yourself in a cave. Only then do you need a flashlight. If you discover that you’re in the dark cave, then you need the brilliant and quiescent luminous flashlight of buddhadharma to shine on your life. The cave is all that you’ve ever known; you think that you’ve never been outside. So you refuse to let others convince you otherwise. Your resistance, indeed, runs deep. This is why practice is difficult. Yet all the masters have said: In the openness of a vast, spacious sky, why do you give rise to vexations? The Buddha, upon enlightenment, said, “All beings are fully endowed with all the virtue and wisdom of the Buddha.” He did not say, “All beings except this person and that person. . . .” Please don’t add your name to that list of exceptions.

You live in broad daylight. There’s no need for a flashlight to perceive the intimate workings of Yunmen. If you don’t understand, then let the crutches and flashlights—or someone else’s poem of awakening—help you walk the path. If you discover that you can stand up and walk

suddenly, then wonderful! If not, then do it step by step—take the gradual way, which involves strenuous training and practicing the six perfections. It involves success and failure, gaining and losing, having and not having. Masters of the past have exhausted their wits to come up with different kinds of crutches to help you walk. They try to sell springwater next to the spring because you think you're thirsty; they throw hooks in the stream because you think you're drowning. Please don't fall for the fishhooks in your life. Take up this expedient means and ask: "This fish has no mouth; who's taking the bait?"

CASE 40

Kicking Over the Water Jar

When Venerable Weishan was still in Baizhang's congregation, he served as a cook. Baizhang wanted to choose a successor for Mount Dawei. He invited the head monk to announce to the assembly that anyone who could go beyond the patterns [of the world] could go to be the Chan master at Mount Dawei.

Baizhang, in front of everyone, took out a water jar, set it on the ground, and asked, "If you don't call it a water jar, what would you call it?"

The head monk was the first to stand up and said, "You cannot call it a tree stump."

Baizhang turned to Weishan. Weishan just kicked over the water jar and left.

Baizhang laughed and said, "The head monk just lost the mountain." Then he dispatched Weishan to open a monastery at Dawei.



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Weishan was brave on this occasion, but even he could not jump out of Baizhang's trap. Just examine the outcome: he picks up a difficult task and gives up the easy. Why? He managed to take off his cloth headband to put an iron cangue on his own shoulders.

[A great gust of wind] scatters the water scoops and
ladles;
A sudden thrust severs complications and circularities.
Even Baizhang's multibarrier gate cannot hold him
back;
The tip of his foot creates countless buddhas.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

What is genuine? What is false? Will the real practitioner please stand up?

I have already introduced Baizhang Huaihai in case 2. He was one of the greatest Chan masters in history. Naturally he had many patrons, including one who donated a large piece of land on a mountain site called Dawei. Baizhang was probably already in his eighties when this story occurred and was too old to relocate. He decided to pick one of his disciples to go to Mount Dawei to open a new monastery. Because of his ability to cut to the chase, Weishan won. But in doing so, he traded his kitchen tools, including his own cloth headband—kitchen monks wear cloth around the head to absorb sweat—for an iron cangue. This means he took up the burden of saving sentient beings, which is a much more difficult task than the relatively easy job of being a cook. That's why Women says he still fell into Baizhang's trap.

A cangue in premodern China is like today's handcuffs that the police use to arrest people, but much worse. It's usually made of two pieces of wood with three holes: one for the head and two for the hands. So, basically, a person in a cangue carried around an unwieldy two-inch board. Weishan's cangue was made of iron. There's basically no escaping if you're locked up in one of those. This means that he gave up his duty as a cook only to put himself in a much more difficult situation. A real bodhisattva. Because of what he did, we now have the benefit of his teachings. We are grateful to him.

When Weishan arrived at Dawei, there was nothing there, just a forest. The patron donated only the land—no monastery. So Weishan set up a hut and started practicing. No longer in a monastery but in a wild forest, with no water scoops, ladles, and other cooking utensils, he ate only wild berries and some vegetables he grew. He was now in a worse situation than ever before. After he spent many years of asceticism at Dawei, people found out about him. As his reputation grew, practitioners flocked to him, and he was able to train them. He had nine chief disciples, one of whom was Yangshan Huiji, the subject of case 25. Together, they were known as the Weiyang house of Chan.

Like other gong'an in the *Gateless Barrier*, this case highlights the extent to which we are entrenched in words and language, labels and judgments. However, it also distinguishes the actions of a genuine practitioner from those of a charlatan. Words and labels are not the problem in our life. Some practitioners read this case and think that labels are useless. You ask them a question and they demonstrate a "Zen answer" by doing something strange—perhaps copying Weishan's behavior by knocking something over. I once held up a cup and asked my students what it was. I asked them not to call it a cup, not to stay silent, and not to touch it. The first student said, "A vessel." The second one said, "A noncup." The third person,

“Don’t call it anything because it will change and become something else.” The fourth one said, “Atoms!” There were many answers—all of them wrong. Actually, the whole premise of my question was foolish. The same is true with Baizhang’s question. It would be like asking, “Why are Martians green?” Who says Martians are green in the first place? First of all, it is assuming that there are Martians. Second, why should they be green? The premise of the question is problematic even though most of us understand it intellectually, through words and labels. When Weishan sees Baizhang doing his thing, he just kicks the water jar and leaves.

It is pointless to use words to label the things you experience in life. It is even worse to copy the actions of past Chan masters. The point is to take up the practice and concretely engage in practice. Are you ready to shoulder great responsibilities? Interestingly, when most people are asked to take up a great responsibility, they think only of themselves or how much of a pain in the butt the task will be, in which case they just bow out. This is self-attachment. Practitioners should emulate not Weishan’s actions but his bodhisattva heart, his willingness to endure hardship to help others.

This case does not deny the usefulness of the term *water jar*. Don’t get the impression that there is no need for labels; the world would be chaotic without them. For example, if I took your wallet, you can’t say, “It doesn’t matter; it’s not *my* wallet; it’s the universe’s wallet!” Labels are useful. They are useless only if you generate vexations around them. Most people discriminate with labels; practitioners use buddhadharma to measure others’ practice against their own. This is just foolish. No matter what label there is, when vexations are present, all situations become problematic. So you have to know when vexations are present or not.

Labels are not intrinsically good or bad. If you are a CEO, be a good CEO; if you are a janitor, be a good janitor. If a janitor wants to be a CEO, that's fine, too. Have peace of mind in all of your actions in life and fulfill your vow to help others. Your vow of benefiting all beings should not change, but your goals or positions can. You may aspire to be a CEO or be happy with being a janitor. Both are fine. These are just different roles you assume to fulfill your vow. There are always sentient beings who can teach you and whom you can help. If, however, you feel miserable being a CEO or a janitor, then you need to examine this "water jar."

Weishan was a great bodhisattva. He took up the kind of work that no one else wanted to do. Kitchen work is typically very difficult. It requires long hours of labor. As soon as one meal is prepared, the cook has to prepare for the next one. Between preparations, he has to tend to other tasks to ensure that the kitchen runs smoothly. Because of his compassion, he endures hardship and peril, putting himself in a cangue for sentient beings. Nothing can now hold him back or discourage him. This is why Wumen says Weishan was brave.

In the verse, Wumen tells us what Chan practice is about:

**[A great gust of wind] scatters the water scoops
and ladles;
A sudden thrust severs complications and
circularities.
Even Baizhang's multibarrier gate cannot hold
him back;
The tip of his foot creates countless buddhas.**

Weishan exemplifies the courage of a great Chan practitioner who, for the sake of all beings, is able to endure suffering. The first line of this verse refers to Baizhang's teaching as a great gust of wind that blew away Weishan's kitchen. Weishan threw away his liking for

cooking for the sake of sentient beings. How many are willing to take the road less traveled over an easy way out? When a situation calls for you to take up your responsibility for a particular task, are you able to do so? If self-attachment is present, you will surely think of your own benefit first and hesitate. Weishan puts you to shame.

The second line refers to Weishan's swift and direct response to Baizhang's challenge. While the head monk's reply to Baizhang was still involved in words and language—he merely skirted around the term *water jar* and substituted another, "tree stump"—Weishan just kicked over the water jar without hesitation.

In the third line, Wumen uses a technical Chan term: *multibarrier gate*. This refers to Baizhang's famous three barriers: The first barrier is called initial barrier, or *chuguan*, which is the initial breakthrough awakening. In Chan this is the experience of *jianxing* (Jp., *kenshō*), perceiving self-nature. The second barrier is called multilayered barrier, or *chongguan*. This is the stage in which one deepens one's insight by becoming awakened again and again and again, until the practitioner is able to break free of saṃsāra, the cycle of birth and death. Saṃsāra is the third barrier, the prison barrier called *laoguan*. Once a person breaks free from saṃsāra, he or she becomes a great bodhisattva of the highest caliber. The person is free not only from saṃsāra but also from the *notion* of nirvāṇa. Nothing binds the person in his or her ability to save sentient beings. When the verse says, "Even Baizhang's multibarrier gate cannot hold him back," it means that Weishan has passed through the second barrier and is now at the third gate.

The last line is "The tip of his foot creates countless buddhas." Wumen draws an analogy between Weishan's kicking over the jar with his foot and his ability to help others realize buddhahood or awakening. Isn't it true that

you are still benefiting from his teaching today? Who are the buddhas? Who is reading this book?

It is not enough to understand this case only intellectually. You have to bring yourself to a point where you are free, especially in situations when someone gives you problems or causes vexations, when things don't go the way you like, when someone falsely accuses you. If you wish to use this case in daily life, you can ask the question, "Water jar: if I don't call it a water jar, what do I call it?" The water jar symbolizes *you*. Who are you? Why should you be bound by this label of "water jar"? You must not think, "Ah, then I'm not a water jar." That would just be another concept. You must break through all concepts and come to know who you are. How? When someone labels you as this or that, making you feel bad, then bring up, "Water jar: if I don't call it a water jar, what do I call it?"

CASE 41

Bodhidharma Pacifies the Mind

Bodhidharma sat facing a wall. The second ancestral master stood in the snow and cut off his arm, saying, “Your disciple’s mind is not at peace. Please, Teacher, pacify my mind!”

Bodhidharma said, “Bring out your mind and I’ll pacify it for you.”

The second ancestor replied, “When I search for my mind, it cannot be found.”

At that point Bodhidharma said, “I’ve already pacified it!”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

This gap-toothed old barbarian sailed thousands of miles especially to come to China. This can be considered stirring waves when there is no wind. At last he accepted a single disciple, but even he was one whose six faculties are incomplete.

Alas, Xie Sanlang was illiterate!

Coming from the west [he] directly points to this;
An affair initiated by an entrustment.
Disturbing and stirring up the Chan forest
Is, after all, you!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

The quintessential teaching of Chan is anxin, peace of mind. Few could appreciate this teaching. Even though everyone wants peace of mind, and indeed it is something that each and every one already has, people's actions stir up more vexations. I have already written about the life and teaching of Bodhidharma in *The Essence of Chan*, so I will not repeat it here. Suffice it to say that all lineages of Chan trace back to this culprit as the first ancestral master of the Chan lineage. He was the one who stirred up waves when there was no wind. Already more than one hundred years old when he arrived in China, Bodhidharma met many Chinese Buddhists who wouldn't give up their props. So this Indian monk sat facing a wall in meditation inside a cave behind Shaolin Monastery. The present story presumably happened some nine years after Bodhidharma entered the cave. It took place when Shenguang Huike (487-593), the second ancestral master to be, drew him out of his meditation. Even now, this story circulates among the deaf and the mute.

Legend has it that Huike was once a ruthless general. He had won many battles, but the more he killed, the more remorseful he became. One day he happened upon some Buddhist teachings and felt great contrition. As a result, he left his military life to become a monk and repent for all the

lives he took. Troubled by his past and trying to relieve his guilt, he engaged in sūtra chanting and repentance rituals, visiting teacher after teacher, but nothing worked. When he heard that a great master from India had come to China and was residing at the Shaolin Monastery, Huike set out to meet him.

Arriving outside the cave, Huike patiently waited, begging Bodhidharma for the teachings, but to no avail. As it was wintertime in northern China, Huike stood there covered in snow, half frozen. Bodhidharma did not stop his meditation. Huike was willing to die at this point, and he remained there in the snow with great determination.

Bodhidharma finally turned from the wall and got up. He went outside and asked Huike, "What do you want?"

Huike replied, "I came here to seek your teaching."

Bodhidharma repeated, "I have nothing to give you. Go back to where you came from!"

Huike went on, "I came a long way; please, my mind is not at peace. I have tried everything to pacify it."

Testing him, Bodhidharma repeated, "I have nothing to give you."

Huike took out a sword and cut off his own arm and placed it in front of Bodhidharma.

Seeing Huike's resolve, Bodhidharma said, "Bring me your mind and I will pacify it."

By this point, Huike's mind was completely focused. Nothing else mattered but his earnest need to relieve his mind, which was not at peace. He took to heart the one teaching that Bodhidharma was offering him: "Give me your mind and I'll pacify it." With utmost sincerity, he searched for his mind but could not find it. When he expressed that and Bodhidharma said, "Already pacified then!" upon hearing those words, in his astonishment, Huike completely shattered the burden of guilt and turmoil that he had been carrying for years, and he was liberated.

What is this peace of mind? Did Bodhidharma give Huike anything? He merely pointed out the treasure within Huike with which to help himself. The treasure that has been passed on from Śākyamuni down to the present is nothing but this peace of mind. There's no gain, no loss, no waves, no wind. All the vexations you experience—whether they are guilt or anguish, resentment or craving—are without substance. They free themselves instant by instant. Far from being static, this peace of mind is, on the contrary, quite dynamic. It is the function of the wisdom mind responding to situations without any need to fabricate a self or other. If you put down your vexations, you, too, will be able to respond to the environment and others freely.

Presumably you are an adult. You have perhaps already lived decades; it is time to personally realize this peace of mind. It is your birthright, your task as a human being. Chan practice requires the four prerequisites of great confidence, vow, resolve, and the ability to let go of everything. Only if you are willing to give up your life will you be able to die the great death and live the great life. Even though you are already free, awakening does not come easily because you are deeply entrenched in your vexations. All the great practitioners of the past gave everything they had. If you have the least bit of reservation, not giving 100 percent, this is called *touxin*—the looting mind.

Touxin is the dishonest mind-set that always takes shortcuts out of laziness and greed—it is the opposite of the straightforward mind. It is this mind of deception that robs you of your wisdom and compassion. All of your props and attachments are basically forms of deception. You deceive yourself and others. For example, you go through life putting up a facade when you face certain people. When you face others, you put on another facade. This applies to Buddhist practitioners as well. Some, the more they practice, the more strangely they act. Reading all the

discourse records of past masters, they confuse genuine practice with mere rhetoric. The more they read, the more they think and act as if they were enlightened. The longer they do that, the more convinced they are of it. It's like a liar who forgets her lies and after a while takes them as truth. So it's important for practitioners to watch out for this mind of deception. Being honest and earnest will carry you a long way.

While I'm not advocating self-mutilation, like Huike, who cut off his arm to demonstrate his resolve, it is important to be dead honest with oneself. The four prerequisites of Chan practice that I'm encouraging you all to develop are mind-sets that stem from honesty and earnestness. Deeply see the extent to which you are deluded by your vexations. Essentially, you have to take off your facade and find out what's wrong with your life. Examine it within—don't rely on scriptures or words from others. Find out what's wrong and these prerequisites will naturally develop. Having developed them, you will eventually put your mind at peace.

This gap-toothed old barbarian sailed thousands of miles especially to come to China. This can be considered stirring waves when there is no wind. At last he accepted a single disciple, but even he was one whose six faculties were incomplete.

Bodhidharma as the “gap-toothed old barbarian” and Huike as “one whose six faculties are incomplete” are not derogatory statements; Wumen is actually praising them. Bodhidharma endured dangerous travels to China to teach; Huike relinquished his life for the teaching. They are exemplars for Chan practitioners.

Actually, Bodhidharma endured more than just a dangerous journey to China. When he arrived there, people tried to poison him five times, which is why he had gaps in

his front teeth. Finally, the last time he was poisoned, he died. His legacy, however, continues. That legacy is this peace of mind; in fact, this Bodhidharma is none other than this peace of mind. Yet isn't it true that you sabotage yourself by poisoning your own mind with delusion and deception? Out of which manifest greed, aversion, ignorance, arrogance, and suspicion. You even spread these poisons to other people. You have to stop doing that. All sentient beings are the sentient beings of your own mind and heart. Stop poisoning them.

Wumen likens Bodhidharma's teaching to stirring waves when there is no wind because he pointed out the most precious treasure you have within you. All of his descendants also pointed out that whatever you find outside yourself is not the treasure of your own home. Most people do not believe this. Some are even afraid to own up to this responsibility of being who you truly are. How about you?

Alas, Xie Sanlang was illiterate!

Xie Sanlang refers to the famous Chan master Xuansha Shibe (835–908). Xie was his lay surname; Sanlang was his nickname. *San* means the "third," as he was the third son in his lay family. *Lang* just means "boy." His father was a fisherman, and all of his brothers, including Sanlang, made their livelihood by fishing. Having received no formal education, that's all he did. One night Sanlang went fishing with his father, and in the silence of the sea, he looked up at the moon, then saw its reflection in the water. Suddenly he realized the transiency of all things. He left his home the following day, entrusting the care of his family to his older brothers, and traveled to a local monastery to become a monk. Fortunately, he became a disciple of Furong Lingxun (d. 851), a third-generation disciple of the great Chan master Mazu, whom we've met in several cases. However,

after a year Lingxun passed away. Sanlang then went on to Lingxun's dharma heir, Xuefeng Yicun, featured in cases 13 and 21.

Although Sanlang was basically illiterate, he had great resolve and karmic disposition, which means affinity with buddhadharma. He couldn't read scriptures and was a man of few words, but he engaged in hard "painful practices," which in Chinese is *toutuo*, a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhutaṅga*. Usually people translate *toutuo* or *dhutaṅga* as "asceticism," but this word has too much Western Christian baggage and doesn't really carry the same connotations as the original Chinese or Sanskrit. For one thing, Buddhists engage in *toutuo* not to deny the body or negate it out of the Cartesian body-mind duality. They engage in *toutuo* to be free from self-grasping—and the most potent kind of grasping is an identity of the body with the self. Sanlang never lay down when he sat and would often forgo eating. Sanlang later became a Chan master with the dharma name Shibei. However, prior to his awakening, due to his practice and discipline, other monks in the monastery called him Toutuo Bei.

After many years of practicing with Xuefeng to no avail, he left and visited other teachers. However, soon after he left, when walking on the mountain trail, he accidentally smashed his toe and was bleeding profusely. If you have ever hurt your toe, you know how much this hurts. He was in pain but thought, "The body is an illusion, but where the hell does this pain come from?" Suddenly, as this thought vanished, he was greatly awakened.

Shibei turned around and went back to Xuefeng's monastery.

Xuefeng said, "I thought you left. What are you doing here?"

Shibei replied, "I know not to ever deceive people again." This means he had discarded his facade and had finally relinquished the mind of deception, or the "looting mind."

Xuefeng pressed further, testing him, “Why don’t you continue your journey to other places then?”

Shibei replied, “Bodhidharma never came to China! Huike never went to India!”

Xuefeng was delighted and affirmed his experience. Years later, after helping Xuefeng develop his monastery, Shibei became a teacher in his own right. He had received some notoriety and already had many disciples. Practitioners gathered around him on Mount Xuansha, which became his toponym. However, in order to formally teach, Shibei needed transmission. He asked a monk to submit three sheets of paper to Xuefeng. Many things could have been written on them, but they were all blank. Xuefeng asked the messenger, “What have you learned from Shibei?” “Nothing, really. I have no idea what he is talking about most of the time. He [Shibei] just put the papers into my hands and asked that I deliver them to you.” Xuefeng retorted, “You idiot! You missed the chance to study with a great master!” Xuefeng gave Shibei his seal of approval.

In Wumen’s comment, Shibei represents the spirit of Chan: Don’t depend on words, language, deception, and delusion. Engage in genuine practice. No matter how much knowledge you may have, if you cannot put down your facade, it will be impossible for you to realize awakening.

In practice, the key is to be one whose six faculties are incomplete. Isn’t it true that despite the fact that all day long you see, hear, taste, touch, and think, you are really enslaved by what you experience? In genuine practice, you must be deaf and mute to all the distractions and temptations from what you see and hear. We must become Xie Sanlang or Xuansha Shibei, whose actions spoke louder than his words.

**Coming from the west [he] directly points to this;
An affair initiated by an entrustment.
Disturbing and stirring up the Chan forest**

Is, after all, you!

Bodhidharma, unlike other missionaries who brought all kinds of scriptures, came to China empty-handed. Why? Buddhaharma was already there! He went to China only to take away everything that people relied on. That was always the true intention of Śākyamuni Buddha: to remove attachments. When he entrusted to Mahākāśyapa the responsibility of this wordless teaching, the Buddha caused a great fuss over nothing—yet in doing so, countless people have realized that they are already free. A whole tradition based on nothing—the Chan tradition—was established. Chan has nothing to give to people: no toys, no props, no fancy paraphernalia.

In the West, as in Asia, people long for that *something* missing in their lives. So they pay lots of money for empowerments, for dharma paraphernalia; they seek after spiritual experiences to fill the void. I recently heard that a Zen practitioner asked for dharma transmission as part of her divorce alimony. What use are all of these things? Is a certificate going to make you happy? Will it truly put you at peace? Nothing out there can do that. You need only to stop poisoning your mind.

Chan is already in the West. Is there a need for transmitting it here? Why did my teacher come to the United States then? Why am I exhausting my energy teaching Chan? If you can become intimate with these words, you will know that it is because of *you, after all!*

CASE 42

The Girl Comes Out of Samādhi

Once the World-Honored One [told the story of Devarāja Buddha] and Mañjuśrī, who wanted to go to his buddha land where all the buddhas were gathering to collect the essential sūtras [but Mañjuśrī was forbidden]. When Mañjuśrī arrived, all the buddhas had already returned to their own abodes, except a girl [named Depart from Consciousness], who remained sitting in samādhi near [Devarāja] Buddha.

Mañjuśrī asked [Devarāja] Buddha, “How is it that a girl is here and even sitting next to you but I may not?”

Devarāja Buddha told Mañjuśrī, “Bring that girl out of samādhi and ask her yourself.”

Mañjuśrī circumambulated her three times and snapped his fingers [which didn’t wake her up]; then he took her up to the brahma heaven, exhausting all of his spiritual powers without being able to bring her out [of samādhi].

The World-Honored One said, “Even hundreds of thousands of Mañjuśrīs would not be able to bring this girl out of her samādhi. Below, past one billion two hundred million Ganges Rivers of buddha lands, there is a bodhisattva called Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin who can bring this girl out of samādhi.”

In that instant, Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin Bodhisattva emerged from the ground and made obeisance to the World-Honored One. The World-Honored One directed Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin to snap his fingers. The girl came out of her samādhi.



WUMEN'S COMMENT

Old man Śākyamuni staged this comedy; the inferior would not be able to appreciate it. What is more, Mañjuśrī is the teacher of seven buddhas, so why couldn't he bring the girl out of samādhi? Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin was only a bodhisattva of the first *bhūmi*. Why then could he bring her out? If you can perceive this intimately, then this frantic consciousness of karma is precisely the great samādhi of the dragon kings.

Whether able or unable to bring [her] out,
You and I are already free.
A facade of a god or a mask of a demon—
Defeat is indeed outstanding!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Was Mañjuśrī defeated? Did Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin win? Are you able to see how both played their part so wonderfully? In your life, are you able to appreciate both win and loss, superior and inferior? What about the girl, Liyi Nuren, or Depart from Consciousness? How is she able

to one-up Mañjuśrī? In this comedy drama, everyone is a splendid performer. Śākyamuni has really outdone himself here. If you don't understand my questions, then you had better cultivate yourself for three innumerable eons before you see the light of day.

According to the Chinese Buddhist doctrine, bodhisattvas progress through fifty-two stages of practice. The last ten stages are called the ten bhūmis, or "grounds." The fifty-third stage is buddhahood. This process entails three innumerable eons of practice. Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva is supposed to be a bodhisattva of the highest caliber, at the fiftysecond stage of Universal Awakening Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, just shy of full buddhahood. As the embodiment of *prajñā*, or wisdom, he is also known to have postponed his own buddhahood and served as the teacher of seven buddhas. Surely Mañjuśrī has mastered all the meditative absorptions or samādhis. Why can't he wake up a mere girl who is in samādhi? Why is it that Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin—an inferior bodhisattva who has attained only the forty-first stage of bodhisattvahood, or first bhūmi (nothing compared with Mañjuśrī)—is able to wake the girl out of her absorption?

This delightful case is meant for bookworm Buddhists who are doctrinally informed and well read in Buddhist canonical literature. Intellectual knowledge is not harmful in itself. But when you attach to it, you get yourself entangled in knots and can't get out. Overanalyzing is a common problem in modern life. The more you analyze things, the more entangled you become—sometimes becoming so stifled that you can't move forward or retreat. For these bookworms, Wumen offers a gong'an from a Mahāyāna sūtra entitled *The Scripture Where All the Buddhas Collect Essential Teachings*, or *Zhufo yaoji jing*. He shows that even Śākyamuni had a sense of humor—that he, too, knows the gong'an game.

For those whose mind is entangled by rational thinking, this case will totally not make any sense. Yet, *this* is precisely the wonderful place to be. Allow this nonsensical mind to drive you to the abyss. May you wallow in the sea of right and wrong, success and defeat, superior and inferior. Perhaps when you exhaust your discursive thinking, you will see that the whole Buddhist project of escaping saṃsāra is just a farce. In this very moment you are buddha. Past is present, future is now. No need to wait for three innumerable eons.

There is yet another type of practitioner who is captivated by samādhi, the experience of meditative trance or calm abiding. I often hear of Buddhist yogis boasting about reaching certain states of *jhāna*: “Oh, I was in the first jhāna at the last retreat” or “Hey, I was in the third jhāna last week for about an hour.” Jhāna, or dhyāna, refers to specific levels of meditative trance. There are traditionally eight levels. The ninth one is the state of liberation in the gradual Buddhist scheme of the meditative path. In Buddhist doctrine, there are those who reach liberation through meditation and those who realize liberation through wisdom. A third type is those who reach liberation through the dual realization of meditation and wisdom. Of course, experiences of meditative trance are quite pleasant, blissful. They are also useful in stabilizing one’s insight. These experiences arise as a natural outcome of meditation practice. In fact, the first teacher who taught me meditation when I was a boy was an expert in samādhi. His name was Guangqin (1892–1986). One time he entered deep samādhi and remained in it for several weeks. However, one should not seek after these states lest they become objects of attachment.

Chan is the path of liberation through wisdom. It basically sees these states as toys and props that perpetuate saṃsāra. It is fine to cultivate them *after* one is awakened to nourish one’s practice, because one would not

attach to them. Also, it would be useful to know them to help others. However, one should not cultivate them—at least not deeply—before awakening because it would be very difficult to let go of them. The pleasure from these states supersedes any worldly sensual pleasure. They can potentially lead us away from the purpose of practice; we might reify them as yet another “object” to be acquired, attained, thereby reinforcing attachment and duality.

Both intellectualizing Buddhism and attaching to blissful states can be problematic. They belong to the world of appearances, where there is attaining and losing, having and not having. Inevitably, they alienate you from yourself and others. The more you acquire them, the more you may think there’s something outside you that you have to seek after.

Chan practitioners see the world of toys and props as a show. For this reason, Wumen says in his verse:

**Whether able or unable to bring [her] out,
You and I are already free.
A facade of a god or a mask of a demon—
Defeat is indeed outstanding!**

Isn’t it foolish to attach to the characters in a comedy drama? Sometimes people get so engrossed with watching a movie that they forget that it’s just a movie. Yet in your life, are you not caught up with the comedy of all the appearances and roles that you play? It’s not the roles that are the problem—it’s that you mistake them as your true identity, as your true original face.

In this drama of life you put on a facade of a god or a mask of a demon. Naturally, your roles change and responsibilities vary. Adapting to circumstances, there is no need to fixate on any specific form or standard. The fact is, you may not be putting on a facade, but others project on you all the time. They think you are a god or a demon. One

time a woman came to me complaining that her coworker was really horrible. She was manipulative and deceptive. In addition, her coworker was accusing her of doing things that she didn't do. She asked how to deal with that person. I asked her, "Why are you playing a role in her drama?" She didn't quite get it at first. I explained, "When others have an image of you and you get affected, it's like accepting their projections and getting all worked up by them. Meanwhile, understand that it's just *their* projection of you. How is that you?" She felt better. Then I scolded her for projecting her own image on her coworker. People project their ideas on you, and you do the same to them. You live in each other's dream and don't even realize it.

Some people can play only one role and not another. But in playing such a role, they become miserable. For example, I've met practitioners whose sole agenda is to undermine authority. There are all kinds of things going on inside them that need to be worked out; all they see is the outside world. When they see a teacher, they think of the teacher as an authority and find all kinds of faults. This makes them feel better about themselves, but in doing so, they are really miserable, constantly undermining themselves and disclosing their own stupidity to everyone. Interestingly, everyone around them sees their authority problem except themselves.

There are also teachers who can't get off the pedestal, who can't take criticism. They act like saints or gods all the time and put on airs. They are miserable because they live two lives: one public, the other private. Their lives are contradictions. In front of students they act a certain way, but behind the scene, they are just typical people with vexations. In time, because of this incongruence, they become more removed from their students and more depressed. Eventually they just collapse, revealing all of their faults and often doing something horrendous, like

sleeping with students or stealing money or doing drugs or alcohol. In other words, sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

Chan practitioners should be grounded, solid, and unpretentious. Everyone has shortcomings. We all face failures and defeats. There's no need to either hide them or flaunt them. You face them, embrace them, respond to them, and let them go. Not being moved by them—this is practice. In the midst of facing them, you have the correct view: Don't be someone you're not. This means don't be an actor or an actress. Of course, for some this is their job, but what I mean here is that you should not attach to the role and games that you play. Know that originally it's all good. IAG. No labels define you. Whoever you *think* you are, you're not it. What you are is free.

In your drama of life, you are Devarāja Buddha, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, the girl named Depart from Consciousness, as well as Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin Bodhisattva. You create your own buddha lands and all the actors in it. In your creation, you get caught up with the roles that you play and all kinds of experiences you encounter. You create your own pleasure and pain. If you hold on to notions of superiority and inferiority, you will not be able to pull the girl out of samādhi—like Mañjuśrī. But in moments when you are free from preconceived ideas about yourself and others, you are actually doing just fine. Aren't you beginning bodhisattvas like Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin?

Defeat is indeed outstanding!

Fixed notions of yourself are never helpful. They ruin everything. In Japan there is a dish called *donburi*, which is a common rice dish topped with various kinds of meat that the Japanese love to eat. Pork, for example, is a common topping. They call it *katsu donburi* or just *katsudon* for short. Japanese students often eat this dish the night before an exam because *katsu* is a homophone for winning, or victorious—hoping to come out victorious in the exam. This is understandable. Who would want to eat defeat or failure?

But in life, you often create your own defeat. If you have a fixed image of yourself, you ruin everything; you defeat yourself. It would be like putting rat turds on top of your donburi, making rat-turd donburi. It would simply ruin the whole dish.

Inevitably, you insert self-referentiality into the panoply of life—ruining everything. There is no need to be bogged down by it. The point is to catch yourself doing this and putting the dish down. Never give it to someone else to eat. This rat-turd analogy is equivalent to thoughts such as “I don’t have this or that”; “I’m not good at this”; “Wow, I’m very good at that!”; “I am depressed”; or “I’ve lost everything—my life is meaningless.” These notions truly ruin your original freedom.

When you discover that you are bound by this and that, see through, put down, and observe this drama. Just enjoy the drama. Go with the flow. You will discover something new. Do you know what that is?

CASE 43

Shoushan's Bamboo Stick

Master Shoushan held up a bamboo stick and showed it to the assembly, saying, "If you call it a stick, you oppose it. If you don't call it a stick, you deny it. Tell me, all of you, how would you call it?"



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you call it a stick, you oppose it. If you do not call it a stick, you deny it. You cannot say anything, and you cannot say nothing. Speak! Speak!

Holding up a bamboo stick
To mandate the killing or the giving of life.
[If you are] entangled in opposing and denying,
The buddhas and ancestral masters will beg for their
lives.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Chan masters are up to their old tricks again. Yet desperate times call for desperate measures. I invite you to look inside yourself and find out what it is that binds you. If you don't call it a stick, "how would you call it?" Are you not scrambling inside for words and language at this very moment, trying to label and define what is troubling you? In naming it, you are already bound in duality. You have the unique ability to look inside yourself and be both subject and object of yourself. In objectifying yourself, you may see you're this or that kind of person; you formulate all kinds of stories about yourself, even though deep inside, you know that such narratives may not define you. Is there an ever-present observer inside that simply escapes your understanding?

No matter how hard you try to find it, to find out who you are, this observer is inaccessible, unreachable. The more you look, the more you become alienated from yourself. The dualism you feel makes you ill at ease, gives you angst. It's like a light tower that shines outwardly but can never shine within, so it's always dark in the center. This fundamental existential alienation runs through all of your experiences. Everything you experience *outside* reminds you of the fact that you don't know who you are *inside*. This is what is meant by "if you call it a stick, you oppose it."

What's worse is that since there's no way to know who you are, you seek outside affirmation. You ignore the existential dilemma inside by turning your back on it. Instead, you focus on acquiring things outside. This is the meaning of "If you do not call it a stick, you deny it." Praise

and success, fame and fortune, peace and prosperity—these are sufficient to conceal your fundamental existential question for most of the time, but there are moments when even these fall apart. When they do, the void or emptiness you feel surfaces. These moments are potent—not so infrequent, after all. Perhaps someone you love dies; perhaps living in a time of sociopolitical instability will do it.

Chan master Shoushan Shengnian (926–93) lived in such a time, the sociopolitical instability of dynastic succession. The Northern Song dynasty had just begun, the fate of Chan and Buddhism at large was uncertain. The focus of the empire was on defending the threats of the Western Xia kingdom of the Tanguts in northwestern China. Buddhism lost its former patronage of the elite ruling class. Later, as Buddhism regained the patronage of the Northern Song elite, they either used it as a way to legitimize their own self-interest of political rule or saw it as a literary game that broadened their own knowledge as dilettantes. They understood Chan as *wenzi chan*, or “literary Chan.”

They fancied their own literary outpour of “Chan” poems and “Chan” art. Chan’s axiom of not depending on words and language became a slogan among the literati to support more poetry with sparing words and art that resembled minimalism. In response to the need to gain security and patronage, even Chan clerics themselves produced and compiled numerous Chan literature: discourse records, gong’an collections, and genealogical histories about itself. Chan became thoroughly entrenched in *wenzi*, or words and language.

It was in this spirit that Shoushan had to use poison to fight poison. He challenged the very foundation on which the tradition was rebuilding itself through words in this new dynasty. In raising a stick, he tells you not to rely on words and language but also not to reject them. Yet you are asked to respond.

In our own time, we also face sociopolitical instability. Modern technology has brought us closer, but at the same time, it has also widened the gap between people and distanced us from ourselves. You may have a broader social network, yet you feel deeply isolated. The more you know, you realize how much you don't know, especially about who you are. You ally with those who agree with your view and demonize those who disagree with your own interests. You label yourself as a hero and others as villains, terrorists. Meanwhile the distance between you and your brothers and sisters in other nations widens.

Even Buddhism in our modern age, just like in the Northern Song dynasty, is used to advance people's own self-interests: Buddhism as a form of self-help, Buddhism as a "scientific and rational" religion, Buddhism as psychotherapy, Buddhism as a form of social justice. Aren't all of these things what modern people are interested in anyway? What role do they have in Buddhism? None. Buddhadharma is a way to free yourself from bondage. To clearly discern what is at stake: What are all these labels for?

At the core of all of this is your attachment to words and language. Of course, Buddhism greatly values your intelligence, so in itself, intelligence is not a problem. Nor are knowledge and words. The problem is your attachment. You turn everything you encounter into an object of your craving, grasping. For what? You deeply hope that your investment in the outside world will lead you to happiness and peace—away from the void and emptiness you feel inside from not knowing who you are.

Over the years, I've observed that people's problems and difficulties come down to two main issues. The first group of people tend to overanalyze everything, creating problems where there are none. This tendency to overanalyze manifests in many different ways. Many practitioners are like this: when they practice very hard,

they naturally find themselves in a state of peace, joy, and clarity. However, they generate conflicting thoughts or feelings of doubt or guilt for even practicing well. Or when they are concentrated, all of a sudden some kind of fear arises—perhaps a fear of not knowing what will happen if they continue. This fear of the unknown, of uncertainty, spins off all kinds of thinking: What might happen if I continue to practice? What will happen if I get enlightened? Will my intimate partner—girlfriend or boyfriend, wife or husband—still recognize me? How should I act in my daily life? Should I quit my job, sell my stuff, give away all of my money?

The scenarios or narratives you come up with carry within them a lot of conflicting views and vexations. The more you think about a problem or issue, the more you are bound. Because of your ability to analyze, or to view an object or a task from different angles, your detailed-minded and meticulous ways make you worry a lot. This is the overanalyzing type of people. When there really is no problem, they think of one all by themselves.

The second group of people essentially choose oblivion. They may follow a certain ideology, so they fixate on a particular view of things. Or they have had some powerful experiences of calm, so every time they sit in meditation, they create a kind of void, a blank-minded stagnant state that they hold on to. The more they excel in doing this, the more they believe that their practice is getting better. This is not to say that they actually don't have wandering thoughts; they do, but they create this blank not-knowing state and zone out. Of course, this has nothing to do with Chan or Zen. These states open up neither wisdom nor compassion. Those persons have simply learned a particular skill of blank-mindedness. They call that just sitting or bare awareness or witnessing or whatever. These are, of course, not genuine forms of shikantaza or clear awareness.

These practitioners are often under the influence of certain ideologies, some Zen ideals or rhetoric learned from scriptures. They say that vexations themselves are the wisdom, that delusion is itself enlightenment, that saṃsāra is nirvāṇa. They have vexations, but they just don't recognize them. Their ignorance is their bliss. They have attachments, but they simply deny them. They justify this by saying that attachments are wisdom and that it is natural to have them.

Holding up a bamboo stick

To mandate the killing or the giving of life.

[If you are] entangled in opposing and denying,

The buddhas and ancestral masters will beg for their lives.

This verse highlights both of these flaws—overanalyzing and voluntary blindness: opposing is overanalyzing; denying is blank-mindedness. Both have in common attachment in words and language. Both miss what is most important: our intrinsic freedom.

In the first instance, your ideas continue to flow and you get caught up in a web. In the second, under the influence of certain views, you voluntarily choose not to see any problems. Caught in the web, you kill all possibilities, all of your potential of ever being free. Being oblivious, your problems worsen. As long as your attachments are present, even the buddhas and the ancestral masters will beg for their lives. This means your wisdom life is completely killed.

The good news is that none of these fabrications and props you create—while fun to play with—have any real substance. Just don't give in to either of these tendencies of overanalyzing things or running away from them. That's the practice. Your life, then, will come to life. Those who just focus on the task at hand often have fewer vexations

and simply dispense with worrying over this or that. That is why you engage with a method of practice—to see through the veil of your constructs or fabrications of the mind and not be influenced by them. Practitioners who can do this begin to slowly free themselves from their own attachments.

One time as a young novice, I remember getting myself into a conundrum thinking about my vexations. My teacher laughed at me: “You’re creating a wall again,” he said. “How do I go through this impenetrable wall?” I said. He replied, “Don’t go through the wall! Just turn around and see the open space.” That opened up new possibilities: There is no wall. You’re free. Just keep walking. If you stop opposing or denying, what will bind you?

CASE 44

Bajiao's Staff

Venerable Bajiao taught the assembly, "If you have a staff, I will give you a staff. If you have no staff, I will take your staff away."



WUMEN'S COMMENT

It helps you cross the river over a collapsed bridge and helps you return to your own village on a moonless night. If you call it a staff, you shoot straight to hell like an arrow.

Everyone, everywhere, deep and shallow—
All within your palm.
Propping up heaven and supporting the earth—
The winds of truth flow everywhere!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

What a wonderful analogy of the Buddhist truth. Is there truth or not? Wumen is so kind—he tells you explicitly: if you say there is staff, then you go straight to hell. What about if you say there isn't any staff? Well, you go straight to hell as well. This staff is the truth of buddhadharma. Bajiao's staff has helped numerous practitioners. You should know that lambasting buddhadharma is a grave transgression. So tell me, is there truth or not?

Not much is known about the Korean-born Chan master Bajiao Huiqing (880–950) except that his teacher was Nanta Guangyong (850–938) and that he had some twelve dharma heirs listed in one Chan genealogical record. His grandmaster in dharma was one of the cofounders of the Weiyang lineage of Chan. Thus he comes from an exceptional line of great masters. This is the only case of the various gong'an collections in which Bajiao appears, but if you understand this one case, you understand the heart of the Chan teaching.

Before launching into the case, I should say that usually when someone has attachments and props, including “realizations” and “attainments,” the Chan master takes them away. When someone doesn't know how to practice, the Chan master points out a way. In the language of this case, the realizations and attainments are like the staff. They must be taken away lest you think you've got something. However, Bajiao is saying just the opposite. Why would you need a staff if you already have one? Why take it away if you have none?

Just examine the way you can't distinguish between needs and wants. Aren't your wants insatiable, unending? In those moments when you feel like you have nothing, don't you want to fill this deep void inside? Yet precisely

when there is this void, you need to let it go. Imagine a Chan master who keeps giving you stuff to fill this void. That would be like sending you straight to hell—the place where there's never-ending anguish. Do you understand?

Likewise, when you think you already have everything, you stop trying. Many practitioners are like this. After only some initial glimpse of insight, they become self-satisfied. This is the beginning of their downfall. Sooner or later they transgress and break people's hearts and disappoint them. Therefore, it is necessary for you to continue practicing even when you feel you've attained something. How? Know that this is not "it." You still need a staff to continue walking.

Isn't it true that you, like anyone else, want a happy life? But if you want to have happiness for yourself and others, you need to first remove suffering. This entails removing the causes of suffering. If you go through life with misconceptions of who you are, then you will inevitably hurt yourself and others. Examine the causes of suffering; examine what is need and what is want. Be reflective about how the culture has molded your needs and wants. If you watch enough commercials or if you read enough shopping center magazines, you may start to believe them and think, "Yes, I need more of this or that."

Suffering comes from the sense of having and not having, gaining and losing. The Buddha talked about suffering, the cause of suffering, the ending of suffering, and the path. There are eight sufferings, two of which are meeting those you don't like and losing those you love. Isn't it true that while you have something, you fear losing it? And that what you want to get rid of constantly bombards you? Isn't it true that there are things you don't have and are happy that you don't have? Isn't it also true that there are things you don't want but have and you're glad to get rid of them? For some, buddhadharma is also something that people have or don't have—something that can be gained and lost.

It helps you cross the river over a collapsed bridge and helps you return to your own village on a moonless night. If you call it a staff, you shoot straight to hell like an arrow.

Buddhadharma helps you distinguish between needs and wants; it helps you cross the river of suffering and walk through the dark forest in the middle of the night. For most people, their bridge of life is dilapidated and their path in life is pitch dark—no moonlight to guide them. This buddhadharma is like a staff that helps them walk, and it's like the moonlight that shines on the path. However, if you get too attached to buddhadharma, that there is really something outside you called buddhadharma, then you're mistaken.

Buddhadharma is nothing but what you need in the moment. It is up to you to turn situations in life into buddhadharma. Vimalakīrti has said that “for those with the conceit of superiority, falsely claiming attainment, the Buddha just says that detachment from craving, aversion, and ignorance is nirvāṇa. For those with no conceit of superiority, the Buddha says that the true nature of craving, aversion, and ignorance is identical to nirvāṇa.” There is no fixed teaching anywhere. How can you cross a collapsed bridge? There's no such thing. How can you walk when there's absolutely no light? A moonless night sounds poetic, but basically, in premodern times, this meant pitch dark. How in hell are you going to return to the village? Chan practitioners used to sojourn in the mountains from one monastery to another. They relied on the moon to see what was out there. Imagine hiking in the wild on a moonless night. Yet the text says, “Yes, it is there, it accompanies you as you get home in a moonless night.” This is like saying, going home in pitch darkness, without a moon, without stars, without a flashlight, yet you get home

safely. In modern language, this is like driving your car home without an engine, or riding your bike to school without wheels. These are examples of the impossible. Buddhist scriptures use comparable similes, like “flower in the sky” or “a rabbit’s horn.” There is no such thing as buddhadharma, but that is not to deny its usefulness. Yet if you hold on to buddhadharma and reify it as a “thing,” then there naturally will be consequences to your delusion and grasping. You create your own hells.

The cause of suffering is grasping, but along with craving, simultaneously there’s always rejecting. Love and hate, craving and aversion, grasping and rejecting—they are inseparable and all stem from the fundamental ignorance of not knowing who you are. If you know who you are, you will be able to wield the staff of life, freely demonstrating the truth. This is the meaning of Women’s verse.

**Everyone, everywhere, deep and shallow—
All within your palm.
Propping up heaven and supporting the earth—
The winds of truth flow everywhere!**

This verse means that you are free in your connections with all of those around you. How can you not be? Everyone and everywhere is life. Life sustains life, heaven sustains heaven, earth supports earth. You contain everyone and everyone contains you—there is no self to be found anywhere. Yet as soon as attachment is there, there’s grief and sorrow, gaining and losing, living and dying.

Do you take the time to appreciate the people you are close to, those you love? Do you wait until they’re gone and then miss them? Do you know when you’re going to lose someone you love? Many people don’t die of old age or sickness. For many, death comes suddenly. The extent of the sorrow you may feel inside when losing someone

reveals the extent of your self-attachment. Those without self-grasping truly love. This reality is subtle, deep.

Appreciate life as life, mountains and rivers as mountains and rivers, and people as people. Just don't inject a self where there is none. Your life, with its vicissitudes, is buddhadharma. You need only to accord with situations and adapt to the needs of others appropriately. Don't project your own ideals onto them. Otherwise there will be more pain. I knew a boy who was very much loved by his parents. Then he grew up. There are many causes and conditions that lead a teenager to turn out a certain way and one brother to turn out to be just the opposite of the other. The boy's older brother was a straight-A student, which put some pressure on the younger boy. The parents are Asian, which in itself meant extra pressure on their children. The boy's parents would often say, "Friends? Why do you need them? You can make friends when you're successful in life." Later, in high school, the boy not only took drugs but became a drug dealer. I met him when he attended the youth camp we ran when I was in the monastery. He is now seventeen or eighteen. His father has been completely devastated and still doesn't know what to do. All he knew was to scold him, "Stop doing that! You should do this, you shouldn't do that! Look at your brother!" In fact, that's partly what drove the younger boy to be the way he is.

You avoid difficult family relationships by learning to put down your own ideals and expectations; these are the props of self-attachment. I often say, "It's all good," but it's all good only if there's no self. If you are enslaved by concepts, ideals, expectations—the self—then nothing for you will be good. You need to see their causes and conditions, their formation and also their freedom. Otherwise not only will you suffer but you will also cause even those you love dearly to suffer.

So, "If you have a staff, I will give you a staff." If you think you have gained something, you need to be taught.

Don't think there's no need to practice. Keep going! "If you have no staff," no realization, "I will take your staff away." This is like a person who has self-disparaging thoughts and says, "I have no this, I have no that." Take it away! Thinking you have or don't have is precisely what obstructs you.

Please know that the winds of truth flow everywhere. When you are already holding an ice-cream cone in your hand, please don't say, "Where is my ice cream?" Should I take it out of your hand and squish it in your mouth? Will that do? Do you understand? Will you enjoy your ice cream?

CASE 45

Who Is He?

Ancestor Yan of East Mountain said, “Even Śākyamuni and Maitreya are his slaves. Tell me, who is he?”



WUMEN’S COMMENT

If you can see him clearly, it is like meeting your own father at a crossroads; you don’t have to ask anyone whether it is him or not.

Don’t shoot someone else’s bow;
Don’t ride someone else’s horse;
Don’t judge someone else’s mistakes;
Don’t inquire into somebody else’s business.



GUO GU’S COMMENT

So blunt! Yet so intimate. Are you brave enough to take up the responsibility of being you? Tell me: Whose face do you wash in the morning? Whose teeth do you brush every day? More intimately, when you urinate, whose pee is it? There is buddhadharma. Can you smell it? Surely you know that discrimination and conceit cloud your perception. If you can cut off this and that, before and after, then right there you will suddenly know this pee is yours—this pee of the Buddha's. Śākyamuni said that "the Tathāgata uses all kinds of similes to explain all kinds of things, but there is no simile that can explain this. Why? Because the path of intellectual knowledge is cut off—the dharma is inconceivable." As soon as you rely on the slightest knowledge, you miss the scene right where you are standing.

This case is very short and succinct and goes right to the point. Case 35, "When a Beautiful Woman's Spirit Departs" also involves Chan master Wuzu Fayán. In this present case Wumen calls him Dongshan Yan. This is because *Dongshan* means East Mountain, which is where Fayán lived. Sometimes masters are referred to by their toponym.

Fayan produced several great Chan masters, most notably Yuanwu Keqin, the author of the *Blue Cliff Record*. Yuanwu, in turn, was the teacher of Dahui Zong'gao, who introduced the practice of concentration on the huatou, or critical phrase. Fayán is also the progenitor of the lineage to which Wumen belongs—Wumen is the fifth-generation descendent of Fayán. For this reason Wumen called Fayán Ancestor Yan.

In this case, Fayán points to the most crucial question of life: There is someone in this room right now to whom Śākyamuni Buddha and Maitreya bow down. Śākyamuni is the historical buddha; Maitreya is the future buddha. What do they have to do with right now? To put it in modern slang: "Śākyamuni and Maitreya ain't got nothin' on me!"

Who is this *me*? You can, of course, give up on finding out who you are and invest all of your energy on things outside yourself: fame, power, prestige, influence, and so on. But you will never succeed. You can also, of course, give up on *this* and then place all of your hopes in *that*. But in giving up, you will be forever enslaved by the fundamental duality of having and not having, this and that, and still not know who you are.

Fayan's own awakening experience, which led him to pursue Chan practice, had something to do with this struggle. He came to the dharma, became a monk, and began practicing quite late in life, perhaps at age thirty-five. This was past middle age in those days, as people on average lived only to about sixty years. He studied very hard; he knew the Buddhist monastic codes, the vinaya, well. He studied Buddhist doctrines but focused on one particular school: the Consciousness-Only school.

Naturally, in his study of this particular school, Master Fayan came across the story of the founder of the school in China, Master Xuanzang. In Xuanzang's time, there were still many scriptural texts not yet translated into Chinese, so in his drive to learn more, Xuanzang traveled to India and to Central and South Asia and spent twenty years mastering Sanskrit. Upon his return to China, he developed the Consciousness-Only school.

There is an interesting story about Xuanzang that demonstrates his exceptional capacity. In premodern times, there was a tradition in India of engaging in debate, which is one of the reasons that, to win debates, Buddhist traditions developed various philosophies. The entire community of the party losing the debate would convert to the opponent's side. In the tale, Xuanzang was visiting a Buddhist temple in India when a great teacher of a non-Buddhist sect was challenging a text promoted by the temple. It articulated nonduality, a fundamental stance in Consciousness-Only philosophy: wisdom arises when

subject and object cease to be in opposition. The contending teacher was questioning this view, asking, "If there is wisdom of nonduality, this nonopposition where subject and object are absent, then *who* is having the wisdom? And what is the wisdom for?" No one could answer. Then visiting-monk Xuanzang answered on behalf of the monastery: "It is like drinking water; whether it is cold or hot, only the person who drinks it will know."

Supposedly the opponent, who had spoken on a very abstract level of philosophy, found nothing to criticize in Xuanzang's answer, who had responded in a very direct, experiential way. *Who* is it that experiences the wisdom of nonduality? Do you ever drink water? Is the water cold or hot? You know this, right? So who is it who knows?

Fayan had been studying Consciousness-Only school very hard when he read this tale, and he puzzled over this knowing; he naturally generated the sense of great doubt, or wonderment, wanting to know who this *who* is. He pondered, "When drinking water, only the drinker will know whether it is hot or cold. How does a drinker know? What does it mean 'to know'? Who is the one that knows?" This questioning was so profound it drove him on to pursue Chan, especially since he had become a monk rather late in life and was now trying to make up for those lost early years.

Perhaps his was not so different from the reason you're reading this book. Because of the routine of life, you experience vexations, anxiety, and pain. Have you seen a corpse, maybe someone you once knew? The body lying there in the coffin used to be so animated; now it is just a shell, not the person you knew. Who or what was animating it? Have you ever thought that this corpse could be you? "Who is it that animates me?" That is the most basic question. Of course, you can invest in things outside yourself, denying (along with the whole world) your deep, fundamental wish to know who you truly are. So when

Fayan came upon the story of Xuanzang, it profoundly touched something deep within.

Who is it that knows? How do *I* know? When you drink water, who is it that knows? Who is it that feels that sense of self, that sense of subjectivity, that sense of who you are? How do you know it is reality? You may have different roles in life, according to different circumstances. Isn't it true that what you want to do and what you can do often don't match either, or that what you know and what you do are incongruent? For instance, if I asked you, when you sit, to remain on the method of practice for five or ten minutes, could you do it? If you are really the master of yourself, you could. But doesn't it often seem that your mind has a life of its own? Can you tell yourself not to have scattered thoughts, not to think of negative things? Aren't you the master? Who the hell is the master then? Who is it? That's the case.

Ancestor Yan of East Mountain said, "Even Śākyamuni and Maitreya are his slaves. Tell me, who is he?"

Fayan is speaking to monks who know who Śākyamuni Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva are. Their names appear in the daily liturgy. Monastics chant their names and bow down to them every day. Śākyamuni and Maitreya are both outside *you*. No matter how saintly or holy they are, who is the one who knows them? Who is the one who sanctified them? Who is that? *That* is the most important thing. Otherwise you give up on yourself and put your trust in something "out there." This is not to say that you should not chant their names or learn from their teachings. These days there are some Zen fools who read too much and think that nonattachment means not to learn from teachers, not to read scriptures, not even to practice meditation. They're so clever, yet they don't know themselves. Like a parrot,

they just copy the actions of past masters. The important point is to take up the imperative and see for yourself who you are.

If you can see him clearly, it is like meeting your own father at a crossroads; you don't have to ask anyone else whether it is him or not.

If you see into your true nature, if you awaken your own mind, you will realize that the master, right here, right now, in this moment, is you. Then you are free. And when you are free, you will realize that buddhadharma is not something foreign, distant. Wumen likens this to seeing your father on the street—someone you see day in and day out. Some of you may think, “Well, I don’t know my father.” To this I say, it’s like seeing your teacher standing in front of you. This is not an ordinary teacher but one who taught you, helped you, offered his life to you, and most important, helped light your own light of wisdom. How can you not know him or her? A teacher is both a father and a mother; students are like children. The meeting of minds is something that is undeniable.

Someone who has seen his or her self-nature realizes that there is nothing more intimate than this meeting. After awakening, the foundation of Chan and buddhadharma is clear—there is no need for outside confirmation, but a sharing of this with a teacher is something natural. When a girl grows up to be a mother herself, she will naturally know the experiences of her own mother who raised her. There is an intimacy based on gratitude, love, shared responsibility that goes beyond words. Mother’s and daughter’s hearts meet. This meeting needs no verification; it’s just a meeting. Certainly you don’t need any paper like a Certificate of Dharma Transmission to justify that meeting. If you went around saying, “Hey look, I have seen my father,” you would sound like an idiot.

When my teacher, Chan master Sheng Yen, asked me to pass down the teaching of Chan, he gave me several things: two incense sticks and a calligraphy couplet. There was no need to give me anything. How could I not share what he taught me? Not for *myself* but out of gratitude to him and to all the lineage masters who have offered their own lives. Incense sticks are long wooden boards used during meditation to whack practitioners on the shoulder when they are drowsy. These boards symbolize Chan training. On one stick he wrote, "Take a step off the hundred-foot pole." On the other, "An autumn pool reflects the moon." The calligraphy couplet he gave me consists of a poem he wrote using the characters Guo Gu—*guo* means result, effect; *gu* means valley. The poem basically says: The effect is already in the cause—there's *no effect*! Humble as a valley—there is *no valley*! What need is there for Guo Gu? There is no Guo Gu. He wanted me to teach the Linji method by continuing to take a step off the hundred-foot pole, and the Caodong method of silent illumination by stilling the mind like an autumn pool that reflects the moon. These two methods are the principles of the Dharma Drum lineage of Chan he established. They are principles in my own practice and in teaching others.

In practice and teaching, the principle is no-self. Master Sheng Yen's instruction on the couplet is: Get yourself out of the way. Can people who are truly free from self-grasping still function in life? Sure. They will have no problem operating in a conventional way, but they will be more compassionate than most people who act out of self-interest. If we were to describe it using words and language, we could say that a person free from self-grasping operates in an other-centered way. Everything is there except for the self. "No-self" does not mean that there is nothing there; on the contrary, it means that everything is there. All is connected, but there is no center. It's like a mirror that has no fixed image; it just reflects and

helps others. Buddhism has many words for this no-self: for instance, “mirror wisdom” or “pervasive mirror wisdom.” These are other ways to express “Who is he?” which is what this case is all about.

**Don't shoot someone else's bow;
Don't ride someone else's horse;
Don't judge someone else's mistakes;
Don't inquire into somebody else's business.**

Although you may understand this on some level, you may not *really* understand it, as you have no personal experience of it. You can study a lot, you can read about it and attend dharma talks, but what is most important is to personally *know* “Who is *he*?” Otherwise, basically, all of this studying amounts only to shooting an arrow using someone else's bow, riding someone else's horse, judging others' mistakes, or meddling in other people's business.

This verse is quite clear. The lines point to all possible ways self-attachment manifests. Please take this to heart. If you don't resolve the fundamental question of “Who am I?” then you are probably inserting the me, me, me in the midst of all of your activities: doing things for others when others should be doing them themselves, using other people's things as if they're yours, using your dharma ruler to see how others measure up to your ideal of practice, and minding someone else's business.

Please don't take someone else's knowledge as your own. Have humility. If you mistake others as yourself, then you are enslaved by them. You have to personally experience. Knowing how to practice is the most important matter in life. When everything in the world veils this reality, you have to see through it. Although it is difficult because you're going against the stream of the world, it is worth it. When you see through the veil, you will have done the

single most important task of what being a human being is all about: to be a human being, to live like a human being.

You have the precious gifts of intelligence and many resources. But if you don't know how to *use* these gifts by asking the most fundamental question, "Who is aware?" then you are forever blinded by the veils of the world. For example, even though all of your life you have used your hands to grab things, no one has ever told you what a hand is. What is a hand? If you know that, then you can pick up something and put down something else. Putting down and picking up are a natural functions of the hand. How could you mistake your hand for what you pick up? You are not defined by whatever is in your hand. Must you first discern directly what the hand is?

The fact is, if you grab a cheap cup, you cry poverty. If you grab expensive things, you brag about being wealthy. These constructs and narratives are not you. They're not the hand, are they? With your mind, you have the gift of knowing. You must know *who* is aware. Don't give up. This doesn't mean that to find out who you are you should lock yourself up in a room. You must discover and realize who you are in the midst of interaction. The mirror can only know its true function by reflecting. The eye can only see when an object is there. How do you discover who you are? It is by interacting in daily life, by not escaping or running away from life, yet not being bound by the multitude of things in life. In that process, everything that comes up—emotional reactions, thoughts, views, values—is the wonderful opportunity that you work with. You discover who you are in the midst of interaction. Trying to discover it through analyzing or intellectualizing it will lead you further and further astray.

Here's some advice in the last words of a letter Fayuan wrote to his student who was leaving to visit other teachers and sojourn on other mountains, which I have translated:

Stick the two words living and dying on your forehead. Resolve yourself to fully understand them at all times. If you just follow the crowd moving around every day, at the end of your life the King of Death, Yama, will come to collect karmic debts. At that time, don't say I didn't warn you so! Genuinely engage in practice and introspect carefully at all times, asking, "Where is the place where I can gain or conserve power? What kind of practice do I do that drains away power? In which areas have I failed? In which areas am I successful?" Practice involves critical examination. It is not to blindly plunge forward. You have to be wise and skillful in your practice. If you had a good sitting, examine that: what were the causes and conditions? If you hear good dharma teachings and are able to use them, ask yourself in what way you were able to use them. If you came across something that prevented you from doing well, what was it? . . . There is one type of person who, every time he or she gets on the cushion, becomes drowsy and falls asleep; soon after the person wakes up, he or she engages in scattered, wandering thoughts. The person alternates between drowsiness and scatteredness. When the person gets off the cushion, he or she talks a lot of garbage. If you practice like this, even when Maitreya comes you will still be unable to enter the way.

Please take this advice into your daily life. If you have never practiced the huatou method, then find a teacher to undergo training. Don't just read these words and start using this method. What you may take from this is this: Life offers you an opportunity to see who you are. This is the most important task. Carefully and earnestly find the place

where words and concepts do not reach, then ask, “Who is this who is blinking the eyes and reading these words?”

CASE 46

A Step beyond the Hundred-Foot Pole

Venerable Shishuang said, “How to take a step beyond the hundred-foot pole? Another ancient worthy said, ‘Although the person sitting on top of the hundred-foot pole has found an entry [into the practice], it is still not real. At the top of the hundred-foot pole, you must step forward and expose the full body of reality throughout the worlds in the ten directions.’”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you are able to take a step forward, then you will be able to flip your body around and see that there is no place that is unholy! Even though it is like this, still, how to take a step beyond the hundred-foot pole? Eh?

Blinding the eyes on your forehead,
Mistaking the markers on the scale,

Throwing away your body and relinquishing this life—
Such is the blind man blinding a crowd!



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Chan practice is for fools! Yes, fools who are willing to give up everything just to realize that they're human beings. Ordinary people are way too smart to practice—so smart that they give rise to vexations to afflict themselves and others. They're constantly trying to be everything else except humans. Some live as animals, others live like demons, still others live like gods. All of these life forms have something in common: insatiable desire. When people are born with black eyes, they want to make them blue; when they are born to have small breasts, they want to make them bigger; when they have thoughts, they want to stop thinking; when they're full, they want to eat more; when they already have a spouse, they want to cheat and have a fling on the side. It is for these reasons that people should engage in Chan practice—to stop this nonsense and realize just who they are: humans.

The habit of the mind is insatiable desires. I'm not talking about everyday needs but desires that stem from self-referentiality. These vexations must stop in order to realize the most important task of being a human: to live fully as a human. Isn't your deepest wish to live life fully, wakefully, at peace? It is just that most go about getting this the wrong way. The point is not to chase after it but to stop chasing and just see. Unfortunately, this takes practice. Reading books won't help. Listening to dharma talks may help to inspire you. It all depends on you. You have to take a step forward and forward and forward. The analogy in

this case is to climb, to climb the hundred-foot pole. When you get to the top, take another step forward. Will you die then? No. You will truly come to life.

When delusions arise, when there are emotional afflictions, ups and downs, when everything seems to go wrong, it is very important to bring yourself back on track—continue to take a step forward; continue to climb. Keep your practice going. Don't give up or get entangled by anything. Even though all of your life you've been taught to grasp after this and chase after that, no one has pointed out just "Who is grasping? Who is chasing?" The one who gets entangled is the very source of the problem. Keep your practice despite everything, and you will reach a point where there are no more problems. Is that the end of the path? No.

In the process of practice, meeting the vicissitudes of life, you learn to face them, embrace them, respond to them, and then let go of them. Chan practice is a fourfold process. You cannot let go of anything if you don't face it, if you don't know what it is. All of your habit tendencies, all of your emotional ups and downs, all the narratives or limitations that you tell yourself: "I'm this, I'm that; I want this, I want that; I should have this, I should have that; I need this and I really don't need that"—do not conceal the fact that from moment to moment you are free.

The limits that you cast on yourself are like the walls in a room. You create the divisions of separateness—compartmentalizing space into this room and that room. You have drawn boundaries to distinguish friend from foe, good from bad, and so on. These are useful for managing and organizing life, but they are *your* views—they are not real things *out there*. Everything in life is carved out, reified, and separated by walls. In case you forget, society will tell you where the walls are: what is good, what is bad, who's a hero, who's a terrorist, and so on. Creating boundaries is a form of control—controlling what really

cannot be controlled. All kinds of problems arise from this. Haven't you observed this? Haven't you seen nations go to war vying for boundaries?

That is not to say that good and bad are unnecessary, that civil law is not needed. There would be chaos without it, so that is not my point. The point is: What was there before that, within your own being? And I do not mean going back to being a baby, an infant. Many people when they first read Zen are told that babies have the purest mind, that infants have the Zen mind naturally. No. Babies are pretty dumb; their attention span is pretty short. Is that what you are striving for in practice? Is Chan or Zen supposed to revert to an infantile mind? No! Practitioners should not search for a true self somewhere in time *before* all the clutter, separation, compartmentalization, discrimination, took place. I'm not talking about a regression.

Nor am I talking about an *imagined future* if only the clutter, separation, compartmentalization, discrimination, were left behind. There are people who engage in practice so they can be free from the troubles of life. A student recently e-mailed me and said that the red dust of the world was turbulent and vexing and that he hoped to get away from it for an extended period of time so practice would allow him to make some headway. Noble aspiration—many feel that way. However, it is also the wrong way to go about it. The stories about what practice will do for you in the future actually solidify two things: a sense of lack in the present and alienation from an impossible future.

Life has no fixed narratives; life is free. All the opportunities it presents you *are* your path. Practice is about realizing that in this very moment there is freedom. You can't will yourself to be free. It has nothing to do with willpower. You can't intellectualize yourself into it; freedom is not what you know. Although practice is necessary, it doesn't *produce* enlightenment, which is not a matter of cause and effect. Practice doesn't produce or lead to

awakening. If it were something like that, then whatever was gained could be lost. Whatever is realized is dependently conditioned. When before and after suddenly vanish, and the present is also gone—this is awakening.

The present case is simple. Engage in practice—climb the pole—and continue until you reach the top. Once there, take a step forward—and continue further. The case involves Shishuang Chuyuan (986–1039), the sixth lineage master from Linji Yixuan. He is the disciple of Fenyang Shanzhao (946–1023). There is much to learn from his life and practice.

Shishuang became a monk in his early twenties in order to seek the dharma. Although he practiced very hard, his teacher, Fenyang, always scolded him, yelling at him every time they met. Most people would feel totally humiliated and would leave if they had to study with someone like that. Imagine your coming to the Tallahassee Chan Center and from day one, every time I saw you I scolded you, “Why the hell are you here? You are an embarrassment to Chan!” Know that Fenyang was actually giving something very precious to Shishuang—instilling in him the great sense of questioning, the great sense of not knowing. He ignited in him the great doubt, which is the great sense of wonderment and not knowing, the answer to the core question, “Who am I?” In his case, this question took the form of right and wrong: “Who is it that is right and wrong? Why is he scolding me? Who is *me*?”

Shishuang stuck around and practiced with Fenyang, but he remained in great internal turmoil for two years; eventually he broke down and cried. Shishuang couldn’t understand, “Why am I being scolded every day? What did I do wrong? Did I show disrespect? What is wrong? What is right?” Right, wrong; right, wrong; right, wrong: he questioned himself until he simply went to his teacher, Fenyang, and said, in tears, “I left the household life to practice with you, and it seems that I’ve gotten nowhere.

All you do is scold me. What is my mistake? Am I worthy?" Fenyang gave him one more push and said, "All of this time I've been training you; how could you betray me?" This means: All of this time, I've been giving you the sustenance of dharma—the best there is. As Shishuang was about to reply, Fenyang placed his palm over Shishuang's mouth. At this, Shishuang's doubt shattered. He realized great awakening.

"How to take a step beyond the hundred-foot pole? Another ancient worthy said, 'Although the person sitting on top of the hundred-foot pole has found an entry [into the practice], it is still not real. At the top of the hundred-foot pole you must step forward and expose the full body of reality throughout the worlds in the ten directions!'"

How to take a step beyond the hundred-foot pole? Shishuang had been climbing the pole for two years, eating up his teacher's sustenance, bearing the struggle over right and wrong, asking "What is my mistake?" He has reached the limits of duality and gotten himself to the threshold of a unified not knowing—all of his attachments to dualities collapsed into this single question. Even in such oneness, he still tried to push forward the conundrum of words and language, so his teacher just shut his mouth—a nice push off the hundred-foot pole.

Out of respect for his teacher, and also to mature his awakening, Shishuang remained in the monastery for twelve more years, until Fenyang died. Then he started to travel around visiting various Chan masters. He reluctantly accepted the abbotship of a monastery, but after only three years he relinquished his position and went on the road again. He visited other Chan masters to sharpen his ability to help and save people. At one point he went to see his

uncle in dharma, Chan master Shending Hongyin (d. 1043?), a highly regarded Chan master at that time.

Shishuang appeared at Shending's monastery all scruffy and dusty, bearded and hairy, dressed in a raggedy robe. Shending's acolyte took a look at Shishuang and asked, "What do you want?" "I came to see Master Shending." The acolyte cast a disdainful eye and said, "You? What's your name?" "Chuyuan" (this was his name before he became known as Shishuang). Although Master Shending was a great Chan master, few people visited him because his monastery was known to be very strict and in such poor condition. Most Chan practitioners never considered setting foot in that place. The acolyte reported this to Shending and then returned to ask Shishuang, "My master wants to know who your teacher is." When the acolyte told Master Shending that the monk's teacher was Fenyang Shanzhao, Shending immediately got up, took his cane, and went out to meet Shishuang. Shending's disciples all went with their master. After all, no one visited this monastery. This person must be a somebody.

Shending saw Shishuang, unkempt and practically in rags, and said, somewhat sarcastically, "I didn't know Fenyang had someone like you around." Shishuang did not reply. Shending continued, "What did you learn from Fenyang?" Suddenly Shishuang looked back and shouted, "The building is collapsing; the building is collapsing!" That got everyone up in a frenzy. They all knew that the monastery was in bad shape, so they all ran out of the hall to check out the building. All went except Shending, but even he began to look around and asked, "Which building?" Everyone had fallen for Shishuang's trick—he had stirred up waves where there were none. He put up a pole where there was no need for one.

As soon as he triggered that false alarm, all the monks fled in panic. Shishuang just sat down and looked up at the abbot. He nonchalantly removed one shoe and placed it to

the side. The abbot, this famous Shending, having forgotten the question he had previously asked, was now wondering which building was collapsing. Shishuang stood up, dusted off his raggedy shirt, replaced his shoe, turned around, and started to walk out, muttering to himself, "Seeing him is definitely not better than simply hearing of his fame!" What he meant was, "Shending, you are famous from a distance, but when it comes to meeting you face-to-face, you're no big deal!" And he walked away.

Shending heard his words and, perhaps still scratching his head, wondered what had just happened. When his acolyte came back to the hall, Shending sent him to find Shishuang, but he could not be found. Shending was renowned. Later he proclaimed publicly, "I met my dharma brother's student. I did not know he had such a great student! An undefeated fellow!" Because of this comment, Shishuang became so famous that many flocked to his monastery later to study with him. He settled on Shishuang Mountain, which became his toponym, and became the progenitor of the two main lines of the Northern Song dynasty Linji school: the line of Yangqi Fanghui (992-1049) and the line of Huanglong Huinan (1002-69).

In this case the "ancient worthy" refers to Changsha Jingcen (788-868), the dharma brother of Zhaozhou. Changsha adds that "at the top of the hundred-foot pole, you must step forward and expose the full body of reality throughout the worlds in the ten directions." This means that one must fully let go, die the great death in order to live the great life. Shishuang fully lived this life. He actualized what Changsha meant by dying the great death. In his life, we see that he was unwilling to stop practice; he continued his training after awakening. Even when he was already an abbot of a monastery, he was willing to abdicate that position to get back on the road to visit other teachers. Nowadays people are in a hurry to become Zen teachers.

“Climbing up a hundred-foot pole” is a Chan expression that dates back to Changsha. It was an answer to a monk who inquired about genuine practice and realization. As the monk didn’t understand this reply, he asked for clarification, and Changsha said, “Lang Mountain, Li River.” The questioning monk knew both places well, since they are located in Hunan Province. Changsha is the name of a mountain. An analogy would be someone living in New York City asking what New York City is like. The best reply would be: Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty.

Practice is necessary and must be genuine. In this process, delusion must be relinquished. This means that when you get to the top of the pole, you have to jump off. When this is done, you become perfectly normal and ordinary. You realize that all along you’ve been a human. To be fully human is to be a buddha—someone who is selfless. Is this the end? No. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of wisdom and of compassion.

Chan or Zen teachers are not advocating that people commit suicide by jumping off the top of the pole. It is only a metaphor, but it points to the mind-set of one who is able to do this. Without this mind-set, this commitment to the path, you will just be a pole dancer. You may be able to do all kinds of fancy moves on the pole, going up and down, down and up, but none of that is awakening. That is essentially what some practitioners are doing. You must have the courage to relinquish what you cherish the most: the “I.”

Here are some examples of pole dancers: One time, during an intense meditation retreat, a man requested an interview and said, “I can’t go on anymore.” “Why?” I asked. He answered, “I’ve been practicing very well, but I’m afraid if I get enlightened, my girlfriend won’t recognize me anymore.” Many people resist letting go; they love practice, but practice for them is a kind of part-time hobby to adorn themselves with the idea that they’re

spiritual. Some practice very hard for a little while and then want to save some energy for later; they practice with a mind-set for the future. They make great effort in the morning but then think, “Maybe I should eat a little more at lunchtime and reserve my energy for the afternoon.” After these people have climbed up the hundred-foot pole a little and allowed themselves to slide back down—up and down, up and down—they have gotten nowhere.

Another kind of practitioner attaches to samādhī experiences. Every time the person sits, he or she becomes like a rock, sitting through several periods without getting up. I recently saw a documentary about a yogi in India who was able to sit for ten days straight without eating or defecating. He claimed that his samādhī power allowed him to transcend all desires. People flock to him because of his extraordinary powers, and he bestows blessings on them (for a fee). Some people cannot meditate this long, but on retreats they want to sit as long as they can. They force themselves to sit through several periods in the full lotus posture, until they start to shake back and forth, eventually screaming out in excruciating pain.

Most Chan and Zen practitioners just seek awakening experiences. To let others know they’re already awakened, they put on airs and walk around behaving in a strange way. These are all the silly things that people do to perpetuate their self-attachment.

“At the top of the hundred-foot pole you must step forward” means putting down all the games and tricks you can do on the pole. In terms of meditation practice, it means reaching a point where there is no longer past or future, only the present, only concentrating on the method, becoming one with the method. At this stage you have forgotten about yourself. Duality is transcended. Is that enough? No. Many practitioners, teachers included, make a big deal about nonduality. People in sports have this experience where, say, they are one with the basketball or

one with the act of running. Accomplishing that is not so hard. Don't stop there. You have to take one more step forward. Put down the oneness.

Don't be a pole dancer! Get up that pole and take one more step. Whatever you cannot let go of is your obstruction. Whenever you cannot let go of something, it means a self-attachment is there. Even if you let go of everything—let go of that, too! If you do this, you will be able to “expose the full body of reality throughout the worlds in the ten directions,” which means that just as you are—as a human, through and through—is *reality*! Selfless, free: this is to manifest wisdom and compassion fully. You've come full circle. You discover that you didn't die after taking that forward step. On the contrary, the whole world has come alive, and you have truly come alive, for the first time, as a human.

You will be able to flip your body around and see that there is no place that is unholy!

Coming and going, turning and being still—there's not a single thing that binds you. Everywhere you go, you are free; every place is a place for practice; and everyone is a buddha. A buddha sees everyone as a buddha; an awakened person doesn't feel like he or she is special. There is no holy or unholy. It's just that some buddhas don't feel they're buddhas, so an awakened person will help them. In helping, the awakened person doesn't feel like he or she is really helping or doing something extraordinary. Judgments and notions about what awakening is, what delusion is; what is good, what is bad; what is profane, what is holy; what is bondage, what is freedom—all are just products of the “I.”

The pole is your path. In the beginning you can't have one foot wrapped around one pole and the other foot on another. You've got to choose one pole to climb—don't

change your mind halfway or change poles. In the beginning you should shop around for a suitable pole. Your teacher may guide you to find it. Once you find the pole, start climbing until you exhaust it fully. All of your endeavors and effort in practice will become unified, including all aspects of your daily life—the difficulties, the challenging situations that you find yourself in, the annoying people in your life—until you reach a point when you see your true nature.

The pole exists because there is a self. You may have gained some insights along your climb, but please put them down and keep climbing. These insights will make you feel you've gotten somewhere or attained awakening. Self-attachment is still there.

Even though it is like this, still, how to take a step beyond the hundred-foot pole? Eh?

Don't think that there is a definite pole or that you haven't found that "right pole" for yourself yet. That's just another delusion. Only by climbing it will you know if the pole is right for you. Just practice! The word *eh* is important here. In Chinese it is *sha*, and it has the connotation of negation, as in "Whaaaaat?" or "What in the world?" Wumen here is negating the step beyond the hundred-foot pole. Why? Because you are originally free. You are originally a human. Just be one. Be free without deluded thinking and attachments of this and that. Originally there are no vexations, so stop creating them. Since people cannot realize this, there's a need to get on the pole and let go of everything.

**Blinding the eyes on your forehead,
Mistaking the markers on the scale,
Throwing away your body and relinquishing this
life—**

Such is the blind man blinding a crowd!

In stepping off the pole, you will fully realize the silliness of this pole. You will realize your humanness and that the wondrous compassion of all the buddhas and all the lineage masters is to blind people. Practice is for fools. What does that mean? It means it's useless. Why is it useless? The pole, or path, is just an expedient for your relinquishing delusion. It's *yours*. The way you climb actually creates the next section of that pole. In other words, you create that pole by the way you climb it. All the vexations and challenges you face are yours. Is there really a path left on the lake when ducks swim across it? They leave no trace behind, it's just water. Is there a trace in the sky when birds fly across it? Buddhadharma is only like a crutch to help you.

Unless you climb the pole, you will not truly appreciate your freedom. Freedom, original awakening, buddhahood, will just be concepts. Not too useful in your life. Climbing the pole is helpful. But don't get stuck on the pole or keep going up and down on it. Don't be a pole dancer—be a climber. Climb to the top and jump off!

CASE 47

Tuṣita's Three Barriers

Master Congyue of Tuṣita Monastery established three barriers to question students:

Pushing aside the weeds to investigate the mysterious is only for the purpose of seeing the nature. Right now, where is this nature?

If you see your self-nature, you are liberated from birth and death. Yet when the light of your eyes goes out, how will you be liberated?

If you are liberated from birth and death, you will know where you will go [after you die]. When the four elements disperse, where will you go?



WUMEN'S COMMENT

If you can respond to these three turning words, then you can be your own master wherever you go and engage with the conditions without losing sight of the principle. If you cannot, then you will be like a person who gobbles down

food—even though it is easy to be satiated this way, only by chewing food finely will it keep hunger away.

A single moment thoroughly reveals countless kalpas.
All the countless kalpas are just this moment.
If right now you see through this single moment,
This seeing through is [to see though] the one who
sees.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

Life is transient. Death is uncertain. What happens after death is even more bewildering. This fundamental uncertainty is the root of all fears. It is also a wonderful device to get people motivated to practice. In Chan, “birth and death” represents this uncertainty. The good news is that this uncertainty comes from illusory thinking based on the “I”—which is just a construct, a fabrication of the thinking mind. Buddhism has a lot of metaphors for this: a flower in the sky, a rabbit’s horn, a cataract, a reflection of the moon. Once this illusion disappears, the problem of birth and death also disappears. It’s all good! Originally there is not even a single barrier. Why in the world would there be three?

People since time immemorial have theorized about death and afterlife. Thousands of years ago in India, the idea of liberation was framed in terms of transcending or going beyond the shackle of the wheel, or cycle, of saṃsāra: continuous rebirths. Furthermore, there was no guarantee in which of the six realms of existence a person might end up, whether in an unfortunate birth as a hell being, a hungry ghost, or an animal, or in better rebirths as a human, a jealous demigod, or a god. People viewed life as

filled with sorrow and suffering. No one wanted to return to saṃsāra lifetime after lifetime to face the same frustration and misery they were in. This general understanding of rebirth in India preceded the emergence of Buddhism. Such ideas are not completely absent in Western religions either. Some Greek philosophers advanced notions of rebirth. Even some offshoots within Judeo-Christian traditions hold some forms of rebirth ideology.

In our contemporary culture people also have many perspectives about rebirth, reincarnation, or life after death. One perspective is that “after I die, there is nothing; I should make the best out of life now.” Another view is that “there *may* be something after death, something not necessarily called heaven or hell. I’m not sure, but I might as well do as much good as I can just in case I will face judgment after death.” A third view ascribes to the importance of doing good deeds because its beliefs about the existence of heaven, hell, and judgment day are strong.

This case features Chan master Zhenji Congyue, the abbot of Doushuai, or Tuṣita Monastery. Later, he became known simply as Doushuai Congyue (1044–91). Congyue was a descendant of the Huanglong Linji line of the Northern Song dynasty. One of his dharma heirs was a lay practitioner named Zhang Shangying (1042–1122), or Layman Wujin, who was not only a Chan practitioner but also a very important defender of Buddhism and a chief minister. Zhang played a seminal role in the flourishing of Chan during the Northern Song dynasty and helped prominent Chan masters of the Southern Song dynasty to flourish.

In this case, basically, Congyue sets up three barriers to test and teach his students. “Barrier” refers to the self. Because people attach to an illusory self, they are always blocked and obstructed. From the perspective of Chan, there is no self to be obstructed. Thus barrier is no barrier—hence, the *Gateless Barrier*. Yet Congyue sets up three

barriers. One could say these are really three angles to consider at the same thing. What is this one thing? It's nothing at all!

But since Congyue wants to talk about three, let's go along with him.

Pushing aside the weeds to investigate the mysterious is only for the purpose of seeing the nature. Right now, where is this nature?

In the first barrier, "weeds" refers to what *you* create. You must not get stuck if you are to investigate the mysterious, which is Chan. Why is it mysterious? Because the "I" blocks your vision. Everything you see is mysterious, and everything becomes an obstacle. If you don't know who you are, how do you know others or the world? Chan practitioners engage in practice to see the true nature of things—to see themselves. But what is this nature? That's the first barrier. Do you know your true nature? Or do you just see weeds?

The weeds in reality are not the obstacles or the problem. They are so only if you have attachments. Although there is the potential of weeds to cause problems, you should not dislike weeds while liking beautiful flowers. Flowers can be weeds, too. Haven't you seen weeds that sprout beautiful flowers? Weeds can be placed in a compost and become nutrition. Equally, you cannot say that because the true nature of weeds is the same as the true nature of flowers, you shouldn't have to deal with them and should let them grow wild. You still need to pull them out and put them into the compost even if their true nature is the same as the flowers'. In the same way, you cannot say that since the true nature of your suffering, anguish, difficulties, and challenges in life is empty, you need not engage in practice. No, you must not stop practicing. You have to go through

the process of putting the weeds into the compost that they may transform into nutrition. That's practice.

If you see your self-nature, you are liberated from birth and death. Yet when the light of your eyes goes out, how will you be liberated?

In the second barrier, if you personally come to experience your self-nature, then you should be free from birth and death—the uncertainty of living and dying. “When the light of your eyes goes out” refers to your death. If you are free from birth and death, how is it that you die? How will you liberate yourself? That's the question.

If you are liberated from birth and death, you will know where you will go [after you die]. When the four elements disperse, where will you go?

The third barrier Congyue sets up is that if you're truly liberated, you should be able to know where you will go after you die. So when the four elements of water, fire, earth, and wind—the constituents of your physical body—disperse, where will you be reborn?

These last two barriers deal with an imagined future. Recently a woman who has been practicing for some time asked me for advice, “Guo Gu, I would like to prepare for my death by engaging in some specific Chan practice.” I replied, “There's no need to prepare. When you are about to die, just die. What do you need to prepare for?” You may think that there needs to be some kind of preparation, such as warning your family, writing a will, or taking care of your house and finances. If you can do these, then fine. But if not, then don't worry about it. The truth is, even if these things are not in order, someone else will do it for you. Just

practice now; don't practice for the future; don't practice to get away from the past. Think about this.

Do you practice for the future? Do you practice to get away from the past? If you think about it, aren't all of the things you do conditioned by the future and the past? I told the woman, "Unless you drop the future and the past—they belong to the realm of thoughts anyway—you will not be able to see your self-nature." "How do I drop the future and the past?" she asked. I replied, "You have to drop sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought. Drop away body; drop away mind." Whenever you find yourself practicing for the future or the past, let it go. Practicing without using the senses means not to get caught up with them.

These three barriers are nonexistent. There is only one, which is to see your self-nature, and it is not a barrier. There is a great soft drink in Taiwan called Three in One. It's like a meal, although not really. There are various things in it, but because they're mixed, there is only one taste. The drink is like astronauts' food; you have to add water to it. In the Buddhist monastery, monastics are not allowed to eat anything after noon, but they have found ways to get around that, such as drinking the Three in One. This case is like three in one. Any one of the three will satiate your hunger, but you have to take the whole thing in. If you're able to penetrate or drink up any one of these barriers, then to you there are no three—there is but one: the taste of liberation.

**If you can respond to these three turning words,
then you can be your own master wherever you
go and engage with the conditions without
losing sight of the principle.**

To see one's self-nature personally means to drop self-attachment. Actually, there is no nature to speak of. It's not like there's a true self within you that can be known. If

there were, then it would not be buddhadharma—not what the Buddha taught but some kind of thing. To be free from self is to be free from all the props and toys and things that create vexations. This is liberation.

“Seeing the self-nature,” in Chinese, is *jianxing*, *kenshō*. *Jian* means “to perceive or see”; *xing* means “nature.” What nature is this? Self-nature. There are many terms for it in the scriptures: Buddha-nature or the nature of awakening or the nature of emptiness. This emptiness is not the opposite of existence; it doesn’t mean nothingness or blankness. Nor is it a *thing* to be had. Some people say that seeing your self-nature or Buddha-nature is the beginning and also the end of Chan practice, that it’s the whole project of Buddhist practice. There’s some truth to that, but in reality, seeing your self-nature is not what it is cracked up to be.

Sometimes people who present Chan or Zen in this way do harm because they are promoting an *experience*, touted as some kind of ultimate goal to be achieved, so people chase after *it*. This is just dangling a toy in front of practitioners, making people practice very hard to seek a reified, independent, isolated moment of experience. So when people experience something in practice, they think, “Ah, this must be it! This must be awakening. I’ve got it!” If you’re looking for something, then of course you’ll end up with something. Know that whatever you end up with, whatever you think you got, it’s just another delusion. Seeing self-nature is not actually seeing some thing. One doesn’t attain *anything*. It’s just that deluded thinking has dropped away. Chan master Nanyang Huizhong once said, “In expounding the dharma, if you have realized something, then you’re like a wild jackal yelping; if you have no attainment, then this is like the lion’s roar.”

Like a person who gobbles down food—even though it is easy to be satiated this way, only by

chewing food finely will it keep hunger away.

Some people who have had a shallow awakening experience relate to it as if they really got something, but only because the insight was so shallow. They may even have received sanction prematurely by some mediocre or charlatan Zen masters who themselves have not clarified the truth. Having been sanctioned, they stop practicing, and that experience remains like a distant memory, which they reify into a *thing* of the past. Because they've stopped practicing, they regress and end up harming others. If they become teachers, they abuse their authority and others. This is not completely their fault, because when the self-nature is presented this way, those people who "don't have it" start projecting all kinds of romantic ideas onto those people who supposedly "have it." It is the students who give teachers unquestioned authority. This is not to say that the person's initial experience is not real; it's just that it is too shallow. Hence the text says not to be so easily satiated. When practice is coarse, haphazard, like gulping down food, you may feel you're full, but it doesn't last.

If a person feels that he or she has gained something, such as a realization or insight, that "thing" has already become an attachment—even if it was a genuine experience. Your self-grasping has already worked its way back. Self can turn anything into an object of grasping. For a seasoned practitioner, it is crucial to have the humility to let go of whatever experiences he or she has had and continue to practice. How should the person engage in practice? By chewing food finely. If you just practice for the sake of practice, and continue, continue, continue with caution and care, being ever aware of attachment and self-referentiality, then such practice will keep hunger away. Hunger means insatiable desire. This is the cause of endless suffering.

Sometimes Chan masters use the analogy of dream. Liberation would be like waking up from a dream. In dream there are six realms of existence; upon waking up, one realizes it's only a dream. Sometimes the power of the dream is so strong that even after waking up, the person is still enticed by the dream. Some people even go back to sleep so they can continue the same dream—like a person who experiences a small awakening and quickly returns to sleep again. Is that possible? Yes. Is that person the same as any other dreamer then? Not quite. At least this person has woken up once; even in a dream the person may actually realize he or she is dreaming. A thorough awakening would be like waking up and staying awake. Looking around, the person sees others sleeping. Even though others are still dreaming, the person who has awakened knows that their dreams are not real. Some people have pleasant dreams; others have nightmares. Irrespective, it's all dreams. It's important to practice and to wake up from the dream, again and again, until one simply has no more dreams—meaning, the person stops creating the fiction of self.

A single moment thoroughly reveals countless kalpas.

All the countless kalpas are just this moment.

**If right now you see through this single moment,
This seeing through is [to see though] the one
who sees.**

Kalpa means an eon. It is a Buddhist way of expressing an incalculable period of time. So the first two lines mean the infinite is just this moment and this very moment is the infinite. Experientially, if there's no before and after, then this state is *samādhi*, a unified state of oneness. Some teachers claim that all is one and one is all, or the world is just oneself. Is this awakening? No! This is why there are

two more lines. You can't even attach to the present moment of oneness. You have to thoroughly let it go. When the past, future, and even the present are let go of, self also vanishes.

These lines collapse your sense of time and space, which are the constructs of the deluded mind. They are not real, fixed, or permanent. You all know this. When you concentrate on your work or on watching TV or on anything that focuses your attention, time goes by very quickly. There is no definite, fixed notion of time. When you are bored, time stretches for so long it feels as if it were forever. "Moment" here is *nian*, which is also the same character for "thought." That's because time essentially *is* thought. When there are a lot of scattered thoughts, time goes by slowly; when there are few thoughts, time goes by quickly. Time is like a chain of thought links: thought after thought after thought. To stay with one thought is to experience samādhi.

In terms of space, when you are young you may feel that all the adults around you, especially your parents, are huge. But when you grow up they seem smaller. Everything hinges on your state of mind. When you feel free from the mind's constructs and illusions, you are free from the shackle of time and space. You perceive countless buddhas in the ten directions expounding the dharma on the tip of a single hair. And each tip of each single hair itself contains countless universes, and each universe has its own buddha, expounding at this time, in this moment.

When past, future, and present vanish—when the deluded mind ceases—the seer also vanishes. The words "see through" are a loose translation. The literal translation is actually "to see and to break up." In this seeing there is no seer. The wonderful thing about you is that it's not necessary to have a subject in order to have subjectivity. You can see, hear, taste, touch, and think without processing everything through a sense of a permanent "I."

Dropping this self-referentiality is to see through the one who sees.

CASE 48

Qianfeng's One Path

A monk asked Venerable Qianfeng: “The Bhagavāns of the ten directions have but one path to nirvāṇa. Where does this one path begin?”

Qianfeng picked up his staff and drew a line and said, “Right here!”

Later a monk asked Yunmen for instructions about this. Yunmen picked up his fan and said, “This fan leaps up to the thirty-third heaven and taps Indra on the nose. When it falls in the Eastern Sea, it strikes a carp and great rain pours down.”



WUMEN'S COMMENT

One of them walks on the bottom of the deepest sea, winnowing dust and stirring up dirt. The other stands on the peak of the highest mountain, raising foaming waves to the sky. Holding fast, letting go—each extends a hand to support and to defend the principle vehicle. But they are

like two children charging at each other and colliding. Surely no one in the world can stand up to them. But observing them with the correct eye [of wisdom], neither of the two great elders knows where the path begins.

Before even taking a step, you've already arrived.
Before even moving your tongue, you've already spoken.
Even if you are able to grasp every opportunity [and respond] before it occurs,
You should know that there is still an abyss that lies beyond.



GUO GU'S COMMENT

How does one "begin" the path of becoming a buddha? A fitting question for the end of this collection of cases. But what kind of question is it? This is like asking where the beginning of a circle is. If you're born a human being, you'll die a human being. Please don't ask how to become a human being when you already are one.

Chan master Yuezhou Qianfeng (n.d.) was a disciple of Dongshan Liangjie, one of the founders of the Caodong lineage or school. Not much is known about this ninth-century master. The case starts with a monk citing a line from the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* referring to the Bhagavāns, which means the World-Honored Ones. The line states that all the buddhas in the ten directions have but one single path to nirvāṇa. The monk then asked, "Where does this one path begin?" Qianfeng responded with a stupid gesture, drawing something in the air.

What an enticing statement though. When you hear this, you must be wondering, "What's that one road? I need to

know! I want to become a buddha—I want enlightenment!” Ever since this question was raised, subsequent Chan fools have been asking the same question. So another monk raised the question to Chan master Yunmen, who just blabbered some nonsense. You’ve already met Yunmen several times in a number of cases. You already know he is skilled in setting up traps for students. Unfortunately, both Qianfeng and Yunmen have failed. That’s why Wumen says, “Neither of the two great elders knows where the path begins.”

One of them walks on the bottom of the deepest sea, winnowing dust and stirring up dirt. The other stands on the peak of the highest mountain, raising foaming waves to the sky.

Qianfeng is the one walking on the bottom of the sea. How can the sea have dust and dirt? It can’t! It’s all water. Yunmen is the one standing on the peak of the mountain. Does the mountain have waves? No! Waves belong to ocean. These two are talking about things that don’t exist. It’s as if I were to say, “The rain is pouring in New York City, but Tallahassee gets wet.”

Wumen calls them “children charging at each other and colliding.” Why are they colliding? Because they don’t make sense, which is the point. You have to drop all common sense established on words and language, on having and lack, exist and nonexist, clearing away all attachments. You will see that from the beginning you’ve been a human being—your eyes are horizontal and your nose is straight.

As for the details of Yunmen’s nonsense, like Indra’s thirty-third heaven, a fan flying up in the sky, and so on, there’s no real need to discuss it in detail. In short, Indra, in Buddhism, is the king of the thirty-third heaven located at the top of the mythic Mount Sumeru, the *axis mundi* of Buddhist cosmology. Yunmen says that his fan shoots up to

Mount Sumeru, taps Indra on the nose, comes down, and dives to the sea to strike a carp, which brings rain. What a fan! Surely it can do more than that, no? If you ask me, it can also create all kinds of music and cause all world wars to stop.

This reminds me of a story. There was once a retired Chan master who had a disciple. The young disciple had been studying with the retired Chan master on a mountain, in a hut behind a main monastery, for a long time. He first had the thought, “Ah, I’m the personal attendant of this great Chan master and have the greatest opportunity to get some secret out of him on how to really practice.” But years went by and the disciple’s wish to receive buddhadharma remained unfulfilled. All the Chan master ever did was to ask him to do this or do that: wash laundry, clean the hut, cook the rice, chop the wood, and so on. One day the monk asked the master, “I came here to serve you, thinking you would teach me dharma, yet after all of these years, I haven’t received any instructions.” Taken aback, the master replied, “Dharma? I didn’t give you dharma all of these years?” The monk retorted, “What dharma? I’ve been washing dishes, doing laundry, chopping wood, carrying water . . . you never gave me any dharma!” The master answered, “But that *is* the dharma.” The young monk was puzzled. In fact, it compounded the wonderment he had built up for years. So the master seized the opportunity and said, “Oh, you want *that* buddhadharma!” The monk quickly replied, “Yes, yes please! I want *that* dharma!” So the master immediately complied. He picked a piece of lint from his patched robe and blew it on the young monk. “There you go, there’s your *dharma*!” At that moment, the young monk awakened.

After reading the present case, are you awakened? Have you found where the path to nirvāṇa begins? Maybe the entrance to the path? Need I say more? This is just like a person asking “Who am I?” If someone asked me that, I

would just squeeze his nose. There it is—that's you! At the same time, if you just mouth off that saṃsāra is nirvāṇa, or desire is precisely awakening—without having personally realized awakening—then you are even more deluded.

The problem is you do not feel free or liberated, do you? In your life, why is it that you give rise to vexations? Why is it that you practice? If you practice to get rid of delusion, then you really don't have the correct view of Chan. If you practice to attain buddhahood, then you also do not understand Chan. So should you practice or not? Yes!

I recently received a text message from a student. The gist of it was that he had been trying to practice in a very subtle way, influencing his mind with positive thinking. Although in some situations he was still vexed, he tried to tell himself that all is empty—saṃsāra is nirvāṇa. However, since he still felt vexed, he did not know what he should do. I said, "Remove the poop in your food." He completely misunderstood what I was saying and began to lecture me on the nature of bodhisattva practice, adding that wisdom did not really work for him but compassion supersedes everything, and so on. This would be an example of "mouthing off saṃsāra is nirvāṇa without personally realizing it."

**Before even taking a step, you've already arrived.
Before even moving your tongue, you've already
spoken.
Even if you are able to grasp every opportunity
[and respond] before it occurs,
You should know that there is still an abyss that
lies beyond.**

Yes, it is true that you are already awakened. This is what is referred to in the verse above. For most, this is a correct view that guides practice. But just knowing this is not enough. You have to realize it personally.

First you have to stop putting poop in your food and eating it. Second, you have to stop giving others your poop to eat. Third, see no poop. At this point it is important not to stop there but to continue to practice until even the word *poop* is unnecessary. This stage refers to practitioners who have had some Chan experiences. It is very important to have the humility to “know that there is still an abyss that lies beyond.” Practice must continue.

I’ve met many practitioners who think they are beyond practice. They are just fooling themselves—they only talk because they can’t walk the walk. You may think that you don’t need to practice, but do you give rise to vexations? If you do, then you’re eating your own poop and forcing it on others. You cannot confuse correct view with where you are. This case is for those who no longer see poop. Wumen is saying that “even if you are able to grasp every opportunity [and respond] before it occurs”—meaning have no vexations—even if you can do that, you should still know that there is more to practice and realization.

All the genuine masters of the past were perfect in their conduct. They didn’t eat poop and they didn’t give their poop to others. Linji was a perfect monk in upholding precepts; Deshan was extremely knowledgeable in Buddhist doctrine; Yunmen was an exemplar to other monks and eloquent in buddhadharma; Zhaozhou was so cautious in his practice, not taking anything for granted, that after decades of practicing under his teacher, who passed away when Zhaozhou was close to sixty, he continued to practice for another twenty more years, refining his understanding by studying with other teachers.

Practice continues on and on, irrespective of whether there’s awakening or not. Even if you have experienced some insight, it’s best to get rid of the stench of awakening.

Women's Postscript

The buddhas and ancestral masters have provided the opportunities, according to different situations, and settled them without excess of words. They have lifted off the lids of their skulls and revealed their eyes to you. They want you to take up practice directly and not to seek elsewhere. If you are a person of superior caliber, as soon as you hear any one of these words, you will understand.

Ultimately, there is no gate to pass through nor any steps to be climbed. You must freely swing your arms and pass through the gate without asking the border guard. Haven't you heard Xuansha's words, "Gateless is the gate of liberation. Intentionlessness is the intent of the person of the way"? Moreover, Baiyun [that is, Baiyun Shouduan] has said, "Although you clearly realize it, why can't you pass through *just this*? This kind of talk is actually rubbing red clay on cow's milk. If you can pass through a gateless barrier, you will make a fool out of me. If you cannot pass through the gateless barrier, you will let yourself down. The so-called mind of nirvāṇa is easy to know, but the wisdom of discernment is hard to understand. If you can clearly

understand the wisdom of discernment, families and nations will naturally be at peace.

Completed on the first year of the Shaoding era [1228 of the Western calendar], five days before the end of the summer retreat, by the monk Huikai Wumen bhikṣu, eighth-generation descendant of Yangqi Fanghui.

GUO GU'S COMMENT

I have already said way too much. I have actually covered many facets of practice and life. One of the things I tried to convey is that these gong'an are not so obscure or removed. These cases actually relate to your life, addressing issues such as the challenges you face, what is life, what is the source of isolation and alienation, what is the self and how it relates to practice, and how practice relates to others. Most important, "Who am I?"

Basically, Wumen's postscript says that everything is already free. It's all good—IAG! He encourages you to practice and realize that you have already passed through the gateless barrier because there is no gate. If you think you are still stuck in life—that somehow you cannot shake off your vexations and hang-ups—then take up these cases and chew on them until you disappear.

The buddhas and patriarchs have opened their hearts and shown you everything. It is up to you to open your own heart and discover what lies within. Instead of seeking from outside, you must see that you, as you are, are replete with all the wisdom and compassion of all the buddhas, right here, right now. Buddhadharma is for hang-ups—if you give them up, what need is there for buddhadharma?

Yet all of your hang-ups, obstructions, vexations in your life, are precisely buddhadharma—they are *your* path. Be careful in your practice. Where is liberation? Where is

freedom? Where is peace and joy in your life? If you think that peace and joy are something outside you, you have settled upon poop because outside you, everything is in flux. This is true indeed, but still, practice is necessary. Look at the ancient masters in their perfect conduct: they uphold the precepts, study the scriptures, learn from teachers. Humble yourself to receive the teachings and put them to use in your life. The teachings are simple. Stop pooping on your food and eating it. Stop giving others your poop to eat. See that there is no poop anywhere. Then drop even this idea of poop.

You must begin at the foundation. Be humble enough to receive teachings from your teacher. If you have no teacher, find one. No book can substitute for a person who is practicing and actualizing the path. That's just how things work. If you want to receive the freshness of water, you have to hold the cup lower than the water jar. When the cup is lower, the water from the jar will pour into it. It won't work if the cup is already full or turned upside down or has holes at the bottom; or if it's full of poop, anything that goes in will be horrible. Being humble, you will be able to retain the teaching and be a vessel for Chan.

Awakening is referred to in Wumen's postscript as "the mind of nirvāṇa." This is called fundamental wisdom in Buddhism, which is relatively easy to realize. What about wisdom of discernment? Why is that hard? The wisdom of discernment refers to teaching others. Even though you may be free, others are still suffering. You must know their suffering and be among them, relate to how they feel, and come up with expedient means to help them. True teachers are personable. They do not put on airs and distance themselves from anyone. With children, they offer candy dharma; with the lonely, they offer loving dharma; with the arrogant, they offer humble dharma; with covetous people, they dazzle them with nirvāṇic dharma. Chan masters are great bodhisattvas. They continue their practice to

accumulate what is called “acquired wisdom” to help others. In perfecting the acquired wisdom of expedient means, Chan masters continue to repay their gratitude to the Three Jewels. They have already quenched their thirst from the springwater of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. To express gratitude, they ensure that the Three Jewels continue to benefit others.

May this book continue to quench the thirst of all practitioners. May the merit of this book dispel the darkness of ignorance and the obscurations to wisdom so you may realize your own luminosity. Whatever wisdom you get from this book naturally comes from you; the flaws of this book naturally reveal my ignorance. Whose wisdom? Whose ignorance? Be free!

GLOSSARY OF NAMES, FOREIGN TERMS, AND TEXTS

Names

The numbers next to the names refer to the cases in which the people in question appear. The first number without square brackets is the case wherein a main character in the case is fully introduced. The numbers in brackets refer to people mentioned in my commentary who are not main characters in the cases. They have, however, some relation to the main characters or to the case. Some people do not have Japanese names.

<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Japanese</i>	<i>Introduced in Cases</i>
A'nan 阿難	Anan	22
Ānanda (see A'nan)		
Baiyin Huihe 白隱慧鶴 (1686-1768)	Hakuin Ekaku	[Introduction]
Baiyun Shouduan 白雲守端 (1025-	Hakuun	[35]

72)	Shutan	
Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 (720–814)	Hyakujō Ekai	2, [5], 40
Bajiao Huiqing 芭蕉慧清 (880–950)	Bashō Esei	44
Bodhidharma (see Putidamo)		
Caoshan Benji 曹山本寂 (840–901)	Sōzan Honjaku	10, [14]
Changsha Jingcen 長沙景岑 (788–868)	Chōsha Keishin	46
Dahui Zong'gao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163)	Daie Sōkō	[8, 20, 32, 45]
Daman Hongren 大滿弘忍 (602–75)	Daiman Konin	[23, 29]
Damei Fachang 大梅法常 (752–839)	Daibai Hōjō	[3], 30, [33]
Danyuan Yingzhen 耽源應真 (ca. 765–864)	Tangen Ōshin	17
Deshan Xuanjian 德山宣鑑 (782–865)	Tokusan Senkan	13, 28
Devarāja (see Tianwang Rulai)		
Dongchu 東初 (1907–77)		[33]
Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良价 (807–69)	Tōzan Ryōkai	[4, 13]
Dongshan Shouchu 洞山守初 (910–90)	Tōzan Shusho	15, 18
Doushuai Congyue 兜率從悅 (1044–91)	Tosotsu Jūetsu	47
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Foreign Terms

<i>anxin</i>	安心	
Baoci si (Baoci Monastery)	報慈寺	
<i>can</i>	參	
Caodon	曹洞	
Chadu	查渡	
Chan	禪	
<i>chongguan</i>	重関	
<i>chuguan</i>	出関	
<i>datong</i>	大通	
Dayu	大庾	
<i>dhyāna</i>	(see <i>jhāna</i>)	
<i>dianxin</i>	點心	
<i>ducan</i>	獨參	
<i>duxuan</i>	杜撰	
<i>gong'an</i>	公案	<i>kōan</i>
Guizhou Province	貴州	
Hebei Province	河北	
<i>huatou</i>	話頭	
Huangmei	黃梅	
<i>huren</i>	胡人	
Jambudvīpa	(see <i>Yanfuti</i>)	
<i>jhāna</i> or <i>channa</i>	禪那	
<i>ji</i>	機	
Jiangxi Province	江西	

jianxin 見性
jinshi 進士
juren 舉人
laoguan 牢關
laoshi xiuxing 老實修行
Linji (Rinzai) 臨濟
Lingnan 嶺南
mi 密
mozhao 默照
Mumonkan (see *Wumenguan*)
nian 念
niepan 涅槃
nirvāṇa (see *niepan*)
po 婆
qi 氣
ruixiang si 瑞像寺
samādhi (see *sanmei*)
saṃsāra (see *shengsi*)
sanmei 三昧
sha 嗟
Shaolin Monastery 少林寺
shi 實
shikantaza (see *zhiguan dazuo*)
shengsi 生死
songgu 頌古
Sōtō (see *Caodong*)
Sumeru, Mount (see *Xumi shan*)
touxin 偷心
toutuo 頭陀
Tuṣita Heaven 兜率天
wenzi chan 文字禪
wu (mu) 無
xiucai 秀才
Xumi shan 須彌山
Yanfut 閻浮提
yiqing 疑情

Zen (see Chan)

zhiguan dazuo 只管打坐

Glossary of Texts: English and Chinese

Avatamsaka Sūtra 華嚴經

Blue Cliff Record (Biyan lu) 碧巖錄

Book of Serenity 從容錄

Diamond Sūtra; Jinggan jing 金剛經

Gateless Barrier (Wumenguan) 無門關

Heart Sūtra (Xin jing) 心經

Lihun ji 離魂記

Nirvāṇa Sūtra (Niepan jing) 涅槃經

Scripture Where All the Buddhas Collect Essential

Teachings (Zhufo yaoji jing) 諸佛要集經

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*Transmission of the Lamp in the Jingde Era (Jingde
chuandeng lu)* 景德傳燈錄

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