

THE “SHORT-CUT” APPROACH OF K’AN-HUA MEDITATION

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TWO OF THE EARLIEST Ch’an masters to use *kung-an* in instructing their students were Yün-men Wen-yen (d. 949), the founder of the Yün-men school, and Fen-yang Shan-chao (947–1024), who revived what was at that time a moribund Lin-chi school. Fen-yang himself compiled three separate collections of *kung-an* in his *Record*: one hundred “old cases” (*ku-tse*) with explanatory verses by Fen-yang; one hundred original *kung-an* by Fen-yang himself, to which he appended his own answers; and one hundred old cases with Fen-yang’s alternate answers.

It is of course the Lin-chi school that is most closely associated with the use of *kung-an*, and the majority of *kung-an* anthologies belong to that school. The largest of these anthologies is the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Pi-yen lu*), compiled in final form by Yüan-wu K’o-ch’in (1063–1135), a tenth-generation Lin-chi successor who belonged to the collateral Yang-ch’i lineage of that school. The *Blue Cliff Record* itself is an expansion and elaboration of an earlier work by Hsüeh-tou Ch’ung-hsien (980–1052) entitled *One Hundred Cases and Verses to the Old* [*Cases*] (*Po-tse song-ku*), a collection of one hundred anecdotes concerning earlier Ch’an masters to which Hsüeh-tou appended explanatory verses and annotation. Some sixty years later, Yüan-wu added his own introductory “pointers” to each case along with further explanation of, and commentaries to, both the case and Hsüeh-tou’s verses, to form his larger anthology. A typical case in the *Blue Cliff Record* begins with a “pointer” by Yüan-wu to direct the student toward the important issue raised in the *kung-an*; this is followed by the *kung-an* itself, with Yüan-wu’s interlinear notes, and a concluding commentary to the verses, also

by Yüan-wu. A more complex genre of literature can hardly be imagined, rivaling any of the exegetical commentaries of the doctrinal schools. These collections of stories, most of which were compiled during the Song dynasty, constitute one of the largest bodies of writings of any of the Chinese schools of Buddhism. Any pretense Ch'an may have still retained about being a teaching that "did not rely on words and letters" was hardly supportable given the rapid proliferation of such anthologies within different teaching lineages.

The compilation of *kung-an* collections, with their distinctive language and style, illustrates the tendency in Song dynasty Ch'an toward refined literary activity, which was termed "lettered Ch'an" (*wentzu* Ch'an). These literary endeavors helped to bring Ch'an into the mainstream of Chinese cultural life and also led to a fertile interchange between Ch'an and secular *belles lettres*. But this tendency toward greater and greater erudition was also anathema to later teachers in the Lin-chi school; if Ch'an "did not rely on words and letters," what was the need for these massive anthologies of Ch'an works? Yüan-wu's own successor, Ta-hui Tsung-kao (1089–1163), vehemently lashed out at Song *wen-tzu* Ch'an, as epitomized in his teacher's *Blue Cliff Record*, for fostering, he claimed, the mistaken idea that Ch'an was merely clever repartee and elegant verse. In perhaps the ultimate expression of contempt for this literary type of Ch'an, Ta-hui, according to legend, tried to keep the *Blue Cliff Record* out of circulation by having the xylographs from which it was printed burned.

Unfortunately the notoriety of Ta-hui's provocative action with regard to his teacher's writings has tended to obscure the revolutionary step made by Yüan-wu in the use of *kung-an*. Yüan-wu was apparently the first to teach that *kung-an* were not simply the dead records of an exchange between ancient Ch'an masters, and thus suitably the focus of literary endeavors. Rather, they should be used as if they were directly pointing to the mind of each and every individual—that is, as a statement of immediate, contemporary relevance guiding one toward enlightenment. As Yüan-wu warns in his Hsin-yao (*Essentials of Mind*): "Do not look for the living roads in the words and phrases, bury yourself in the *kung-an* of the ancients, or make a stratagem for living in the ghost cave or beneath the dark mountain. It is important only to access awakening

and have profound realization." Despite the number of *kung-an* that had been compiled in anthologies like his own *Blue Cliff Record*, Yüan-wu insisted that any one case represented all other cases, since each was a presentation of a Ch'an master's enlightened mind. Hence, a single *kung-an* contained all the past and present teachings of Buddhism and Ch'an and was sufficient in itself to bring the student to awakening. As Yüan-wu states: "If one generates understanding and accesses awakening through a single phrase [i.e., the *hua-t'ou*], a single encounter, or a single object, then immeasurable, innumerable functions and *kung-an* are simultaneously penetrated."

This change in the concept of the *kung-an* was crystallized with Yüan-wu. And with Ta-hui fully elaborating the viewpoint of his teacher, *kung-an* emerged not as literary foils but as contemplative tools for realizing one's own innate enlightenment. Hence, through the influence of Yüan-wu and Ta-hui the proliferation of *kung-an* collections eventually slowed as the need to consider a multitude of ancient cases in the course of one's training was obviated in the radical reduction of Ch'an meditation to looking into (*k'an*) but a single *kung-an*.

Chung-feng Ming-pen (1263–1323), a Yüan dynasty Ch'an monk in the Mi-an branch of Yüan-wu's line, describes the use of the *kung-an* as a catalyst for enlightenment in one of the most renowned passages of Ch'an literature:

The *kung-an* is something that can be used only by men with enlightened minds who wish to prove their understanding. They are certainly not intended to be used merely to increase one's lore and provide topics for idle discussion. The so-called venerable masters of Ch'an are the chief officials of the public law courts of the monastic community, as it were, and their collections of sayings are the case records of points that have been vigorously advocated. Occasionally men of former times, in the intervals when they were not teaching, in spare moments when their doors were closed, would take up these cases and arrange them, give their judgment on them, compose verses of praise on them and write their own answers to them. Surely they did not

do this just to show off their erudition and contradict the worthy men of old. Rather . . . they stooped to using expedient means in order to open the wisdom eye of men of later generations, hoping thereby to make it possible for them to attain the understanding of the great dharma for themselves in the same way.

In *kung-an* investigation, according to Ta-hui, rather than reflect over the entire *kung-an* exchange, which could lead the mind to distraction, one should instead zero in on the principal topic, or most essential element, of that exchange, which he terms its “critical phrase” (*hua-t’ou*). Ta-hui called this new approach to meditation *k’an-hua* Ch’an—the Ch’an of observing the critical phrase—and alleged that it was a “short-cut” leading to instantaneous enlightenment.

The distinction between *kung-an* investigation as a pedagogical tool and *k’an-hua* practice as a meditative technique can be illustrated by examining the *kung-an* Ta-hui most often taught: the *wu* (J. *mu*) of Chao-chou (J. Joshu) Ts’ung-shen (778–897).

Once a monk asked Chao-chou, “Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?” Chao-chou replied “No!” (*wu*).

The entire exchange between Chao-chou and his pupil would constitute the *kung-an*, while its “critical phrase,” or “principal topic” (*hua-t’ou*), would be just the word “no.” Because Chao-chou’s answer contradicts the most fundamental tenet of sinic Buddhist doctrine, which insisted that the Buddha-nature is innate in all sentient beings, investigating the reply “no” provides a jolt to the students’ ordinary ways of thinking. Single-minded attention to that one word “no” then creates an introspective focus that eventually leads the meditator back to the minds’ enlightened source—a process that Ch’an terms “tracing back the radiance emanating from the mind.” Once the student has recovered his mind’s source by this counter-illumination, he will know the intent with which Chao-chou made his response—and, by extension, the enlightened mind that framed that intent—and will consummate in himself the very same state of enlightenment. Looking into the *hua-t’ou* thus leads to the non-dual, enlightened source of the mind from which all discriminative thought arises. The adept can then act as Chao-chou and will

understand all the *kung-an* intuitively. Hence, in this new method, *hua-t'ou* practice seeks to emulate the enlightened mind of previous masters, not to explain (by literary means) the meaning of their remarks. It is as if the student were instructed to pattern his mind after that of the enlightened master who appears in the *kung-an* until they think as one.

It may seem curious that Lin-chi Ch'an, after developing a style of teaching that was less reliant on conceptual explanation, should ultimately embrace a contemplative technique that explicitly employs words, especially when compared with standard Indian meditative approaches that made no recourse to language, such as following the breath or visualizing the parts of the body. It is therefore worth reiterating that Ch'an considered the *hua-t'ou*, or meditative locutions, to be "live words" (*huo-chü*), because they lead to awakening, and the conceptual teaching of the doctrinal schools "dead words" (*su-chü*), because they led only to intellectual understanding. Yüan-wu warns: "Examine the live word; don't examine the dead word. One who adheres utterly to the live word will not forget for an eternity of eons. One who adheres utterly to the dead word will never be able to save himself. If you want to take the patriarchs and Buddhas as your masters, you must clearly choose the live word." Cha'n words, such as those that appear in a *hua-t'ou*, were thus conceived of as a form of spiritual homeopathy, using a minimal, but potent, dosage of the "poison of words" to cure the malady of conceptualization. Hsü-yün (1840–1949), a renowned Ch'an master of the Chinese Republican era, explains:

The message of the Ch'an sect prior to the T'ang and Song dynasties was contained in one phrase of half a line, "understand the mind, see one's nature" which brought realization of the path. The transmission from master to disciple involved nothing more than "stamping" [the master's] mind on the mind [of his disciple]. There was no other technique. Ordinarily, the disciple would ask for instruction and the master would reply. [The master] just used the appropriate technique to release [the disciple] from his bonds, as for an illness one prescribes medicine.

After the Song period, the capacity of people degenerated, and while they were taught, they wouldn't do anything. For example, if told to "renounce everything," or "do not have thoughts of good and evil," they would not renounce anything, and thought not of the good, but only of the evil. At that time, the patriarchs and teachers, from unavoidable necessity, *selected a method that used poison to counteract poison* [emphasis added]. They taught students to investigate the *kung-an* and to observe the *hua-t'ou*.

A *kung-an* or *hua-t'ou* was therefore conceived of as nothing more than an expedient; there was absolutely nothing arcane or mystical about it. Its purpose was simply "to open up the eyes of patched-robed monks of this world." Anything in fact could serve the same purpose as the *hua-t'ou* in catalyzing the experience of awakening; a story of an ancient master's enlightenment, the scriptures of Buddhism, even the ordinary activities of day-to-day life. As an expedient, the *hua-t'ou* had no ultimate meaning, and there was no specific, predetermined answer to the *kung-an* such as the Japanese Rinzai tradition is commonly portrayed as expecting.

The reader might wonder at this point whether calling the *hua-t'ou* an expedient contradicts the Lin-chi claim that *k'an-hua* Ch'an is a sudden approach to enlightenment. This is not the case. One common simile for sudden cultivation, which Ta-hui uses in his own writings, is that of an archer shooting arrows at a target: even though it may take thousands of attempts before his aim is accurate and he is able to hit the bull's-eye consistently, it is the same act of shooting that is repeated time and again. The repeated observation of the *hua-t'ou* (shooting the arrows) will catalyze awakening (hitting the target consistently) but that result does not occur after progressive development through a series of stages. It is worth noting that much of traditional Chinese apprenticeship took place in the same way, learning to do the whole job properly over a long period of time rather than mastering a series of smaller steps. Ta-hui himself is extremely careful to avoid any implication that *k'an-hua* Ch'an involves any sort of graduated progress. Ta-hui does mention different experiences that are engendered by observing the *hua-t'ou*, such as perplexity, bursting, power, and interfusion. But while such experiences may be called "constantly illuminating in silence" or "a person who experiences the

Great Death," or "an event that occurs before your parents are born," or "an event that occurs before the void-eon," Ta-hui warns that these are merely different perspectives from which *hua-t'ou* investigation may be described depending on the aspiration and talent of the individual, not stages that are invariably undergone on the way toward enlightenment.

Further, while the conceptual form of a *hua-t'ou* may involve linguistic convention, it is still a "live word" because it is designed to lead to an experience of ultimate validity. Hence it is not the expedient that renders a soteriology either sudden or gradual, but the attachment thereto. As Ta-hui says, "While one can access the path through the gate of the expedients, it is a sickness to conserve expedients and not discard them." If anything, Ta-hui views *hua-t'ou* as a "sudden" expedient, intended to catalyze an equally "sudden" awakening.

The purpose of the *hua-t'ou*, then, is to enable the student to transcend the dualistic processes of thought in a single moment of insight, without requiring that he "progress gradually through a series of steps or stages." For this reason Ta-hui refers to *k'an-hua* Ch'an as a "short-cut" approach to meditation:

If you want to understand the principle of the short-cut, you must in one fell swoop break through this one thought—then and only then will you comprehend birth and death. Then and only then will it be called accessing awakening.... You need only lay down, all at once, the mind full of deluded thoughts and inverted thinking, the mind of logical discrimination, the mind that loves life and hates death, the mind of knowledge and views, interpretation and comprehension, and the mind that rejoices in stillness and turns from disturbance.

Any kind of intellectualization of the *hua-t'ou*, any attempt to understand it in terms of ordinary conceptual thought, was repeatedly denied by Ta-hui. The significance of this warning becomes especially clear when Ta-hui's intimate associations with the powerful Song intelligentsia are taken into account. Ta-hui admonished these members of this elite class that the intellectual abilities they had cultivated

throughout their careers could themselves become the most implacable of obstacles to enlightenment.

Nowadays the literati (*shih-ta-fu*), despite a hundred attempts or a thousand tries, are never able to experience direct penetration of this matter. This is solely due to the fact that their natures are too clever and their opinions too multifarious. When they meet a master of our school, as soon as he opens his mouth and flaps his tongue they immediately presume that they understand. Therefore it would actually be much better for them to be stupid, without so much evil understanding and evil awareness.... The clever are actually obstructed by their cleverness, and can't gain a sudden breakthrough.

Ta-hui repeatedly cautions his learned students not even to try to resolve the *hua-t'ou*; instead they should just give up the conceit that they have the intellectual tools that would allow them to understand it. This admonition Ta-hui reiterates in his advice on how to proceed with the contemplation of several different *hua-t'ou*. With reference to Yün-men's "dry shit stick," Ta-hui warns, "When you examine this, don't use your usual intelligence and perspicacity." Discussing Chao-chou's "cypress tree in the courtyard," Ta-hui remarks, "Suddenly with regard to this cypress tree, the mind and mind-consciousness will come to an end and the breath will stop. This is where the [*hua*]-*t'ou* is penetrated." Ta-hui has even listed some eight defects in the examination of Chao-chou's "no," several of which involve the use of the rational mind to determine the meaning of the *hua-t'ou*. Thus there is nothing that the student can ultimately understand about the *hua-t'ou* as long as he employs his habitual processes of thought; in perhaps the ultimate paradox, it is only when he finally abandons all attempts to understand the *hua-t'ou* that its real significance becomes clear.

In these descriptions of the central place that nonconceptualization occupies in *k'an-hua* Ch'an, we have further intimation of the subitist character of this approach to meditation. *K'an-hua* Ch'an is termed a "short-cut" because it does not require a gradual unfolding of truth, but

can be understood in a single instant of insight. Echoing Ma-tsu's conception of a cultivation that is simultaneously perfected in one overwhelming experience of awakening, Ta-hui too says: "Understanding one is understanding all; awakening to one is awakening to all; realizing one is realizing all. It's like slicing through a spool of thread: with one stroke all its strands are simultaneously cut. Realizing limitless teachings is just the same: there is no sequence whatsoever." There is nothing that need be developed; all the student must do is simply renounce both the hope that there is something that can be achieved through the practice as well as the conceit that he will achieve that result.

This state beyond hope, where "there is no place to put one's hands and feet," Ta-hui remarks, "is really a good place." It is a "good place" because it is there that conceptualization is brought to an end: "Without debate and ratiocination they are at a loss, with no place to put their hands and feet." Only then can the student make the all-important transition from the conditioned to the unconditioned, which is likened to a death-defying "leap off a hundred-foot pole." One need only recall the role of no-thought as the access to final realization-awakening to see how thoroughly that earlier account of meditation has been subsumed by the *hua-t'ou* technique.

The leap off the hundred-foot pole from the conditioned to the unconditioned is perhaps the quintessential expression of what Ch'an means by a sudden style of cultivation and meditation. Sudden cultivation demands that there be no hint of any sequence of practices that would lead the student from one stage to another, progressively abandoning defilements and cultivating wholesome actions, until he achieves perfect purity of mind. The jump off the hundred-foot pole suggests the radical nonattachment, even to one's own body and mind, that Buddhism has always expected as a prerequisite to enlightenment. Ch'an does not deny that it might take time for one to build up the courage necessary to take that ultimate plunge. But its lack of sequence at least freed it from charges of being gradualistic.

Ta-hui's interpretation of "sudden cultivation" is perhaps even more radical than was Ma-tsu's earlier description based on spontaneity. Both claim that total relinquishment, which is final enlightenment, cannot be achieved by undertaking any kind of practice. But whereas

Ma-tsu stresses the need “to be free of defilement” and “spontaneous,” Ta-hui refuses even to posit the necessity of maintaining an undefiled state, which the ordinary person might find daunting. For Ta-hui, nothing at all need be perfected to achieve enlightenment: not purity, not samadhi or prajna, not even the bare faith of Lin-chi. Ta-hui insists instead that the practice must begin and end amid the typical afflictions of ordinary life—especially ignorance, delusion, insecurity and stress. *K’an-hua* Ch’an in fact encourages the student to foster all the confusion and perplexity he can muster, for it was expected that the ordinary person, when first faced with the *hua-t’ou*, would indeed be puzzled as to its significance. This puzzlement is what Lin-chi Ch’an terms the “sensation of doubt” (*i-ch’ing*), and building that sensation is the main purpose of investigating the *hua-t’ou*. This peculiar Ch’an emphasis on doubt had a rather long history by Ta-hui’s time. One of the earliest usages of the term appears in the enlightenment poem of Lo-han Kuei-ch’en (867–928), the teacher of Fa-yen Wen-i (885–958), who refers to enlightenment as shattering the “ball of doubt” (*i-t’uan*). Ta-hui’s grandteacher, Wu-tsu Fa-yen (1024?–1104), also taught his students to keep the great ball of doubt. But it was Ta-hui who drew out the full implications of this idea, making it the core of his approach to formal meditation practice.

Doubt is the perplexity the student feels from his inability to resolve the riddle of the *kung-an*. Doubt acts as the force that pressures the mind to break out of the complacency engendered by its habitual ways of thinking. Doubt places the person at a disconcerting loss, for he soon finds that his ordinary ratiocinative processes are inadequate to the task of penetrating the *hua-t’ou*. Because the person ordinarily assumes that he is “in control” (a notion attacked in Buddhism’s virulent critiques of theologies positing an eternal self, or *atman*), the insecurity created by the *hua-t’ou* becomes frustrating and unnerving, a feeling likened to “a mosquito atop an iron ox.” But it is precisely this sensation of doubt that *hua-t’ou* are intended to produce, and after it is present, their purpose is fulfilled.

When doubt becomes unqualified, it and the *hua t’ou* become indistinguishable; as the Korean Son monk T’aego Pou (1301–1382) says, “The doubt and the *hwadu* (*hua-t’ou*) fuse into one.” From this point

continued investigation of the doubt-cum-*hua-t'ou* will eventually trap the mind in an unmoving state of perfect concentration. That is to say, when the sense of frustration over one's inability to resolve the *hua-t'ou* through ordinary logic has brought an end to random thought, intense one-pointedness of mind is engendered, which eventually produces the experience of no-thought. Ta-hui compared this state of being existentially, implacably "stuck" to a rat stuck in the narrowing taper of a cow's-horn trap, burrowing ever deeper to get at some oil placed inside its tip, until finally the rat is caught.

The power of doubt in cutting off conceptualization is stressed repeatedly by Ta-hui: doubt is that state of perplexity "where intellect cannot operate and thought cannot reach; it is the road through which discrimination is eradicated and theorizing ended. [Doubt makes the mind] puzzled, frustrated, and tasteless [i.e., lacking in any intellectual interest]—just as if you were gnawing on an iron bar." Kao-feng Yuan-miao (1238–1295), a Yüan dynasty master in the Mi-an branch of the Lin-chi school, and teacher of Chung-feng Ming-pen, clarifies how doubt leads to a state of no-thought:

As the sensation of doubt is perfected little by little, there then is no mind that initiates actions. And once there is no mind that initiates actions, the objects of thought are then forgotten. This ensures that the myriads of conditions naturally expire, but without bringing them to an end. The six windows [of the senses] are naturally calmed, but without calming them. Without countering the dust [of sensory objects] one suddenly accesses the no-mind Samadhi.

Ta-hui interprets the story of Bodhidharma's instruction to his disciple Hui-k'o (487–593) as a paradigm of the way Ch'an statements are intended to frustrate the mundane mind of the student so thoroughly that they serve as a catalyst for supramundane awakening. Bodhidharma first instructed Hui-k'o, "Bring all conditioning to rest outside, and keep the mind without panting inside." "But," Ta-hui explains, "Hui-k'o quoted texts and thereby sought certification. For this reason, Bodhidharma rejected each and every one of his statements; finally, when there

was no place left [for Hui-k'o] to use his mind, he was able to step back and consider [those words].... Suddenly, all conditioning was ended, and he then saw the moon and forgot the finger."

As the story illustrates, the sensation of doubt must become all-consuming. In such a state, all the perplexities of everyday life are rolled into one existential "great doubt" (*ta-i*), produced through examining the *hua-t'ou*. As Ta-hui says, "Whether a thousand doubts or a myriad doubts, they are all just one doubt. If you break through your doubt concerning the *hua-t'ou*, then a thousand or myriad doubts are all abruptly destroyed."

Ta-hui viewed the unique rhetoric of Ch'an in the same way. In the only *kung-an* ascribed to him personally, he illustrates the distinctive use of Ch'an language.

If you call this a bamboo comb, you are stuck to it. If you don't call this a bamboo comb, you have turned your back to it. Don't speak, but don't stay silent. Do not cogitate and do not guess. Do not shake your sleeves [in disapproval] and walk out. Anything you do is wrong.... Once I was likened to an official who confiscated all of someone's wealth and property and then demanded still more. I find this analogy particularly sublime. Truly, I demand that you hand over everything. When you have nowhere to escape, you will have to beg to take the road of death. Throwing yourself into the river or jumping into fire, you will die when your time comes. Only after you are dead will you gradually come back to life.

Because mental stress and existential quandary were exactly the states that Ta-hui sought to foster through *k'an-hua* Ch'an, it is no surprise that he embraced ordinary life as the ideal venue for Buddhist meditation practice. Alluding to the simile drawn by Vimalakirti, the quintessential Mahayana lay adept, he says, "The high plains do not produce lotus flowers: it is the mud of the lowlying marshlands that produces these flowers." But Ta-hui's vision of the ordinary, afflicted condition of humankind as the way to enlightenment is a radical departure even for Mahayana Buddhism. Ta-hui saw the world as the ideal training ground for religious

practice because it provided a plethora of situations in which frustration, doubting, and insecurity would appear—all weapons in the arsenal of *hua-t'ou* meditation. Moreover, the obstacles facing the householder were so ubiquitous and seductive (sex, wealth, fame, and so on, ad infinitum) that a person who was able to withstand them developed a tremendous "dynamism" or "power" that was far superior to that of a sequestered monk, who faced few obstacles in his daily practice and so needed to expend only a modicum of effort to overcome them.

For Ta-hui, dynamism plays a pivotal role in consummating the process of *hua-t'ou* investigation because it is the energy that shakes the student loose from everything he had identified with previously. And again, it is by living in the world, yet remaining detached, that one develops dynamism: "As soon as you become aware of gradually conserving power in the midst of the dusty afflictions of daily life, this then will be where you gain power. This is how you achieve Buddhahood and become a patriarch." If, on the other hand, the student permits himself to become entangled in worldly affairs, he loses his dynamism by allowing his energy to become dissipated in mundane distractions and wandering thoughts.

Given the prominent place of faith in earlier Ch'an thought, as exemplified by Lin-chi, it is rather striking the extent to which Ta-hui has deemphasized faith in favor of doubt. While there are passages in Ta-hui's writings where he does acknowledge the role of faith as a support of practice, he seems on the whole to have had a rather poor opinion of the prospects of the ordinary person attempting to rely on faith. More typically, Ta-hui maintains that practice has its inception in doubt, is enhanced through dynamism and the application of effort, and develops into faith only as those preceding factors mature. In his "directive" to the nun Miao-yüan, for example, Ta-hui says: "If you want to transcend birth and death and cross the sea of suffering, you must raise straight the banner of effort. Directly beneath it, faith will become sufficient. Only where this faith has become sufficient will the event take place of transcending birth and death and crossing the sea of suffering."

To succeed in *hua-t'ou* practice, a strong sense of urgency about one's practice, rather than faith, is what is first required. In a refrain found frequently in his writings, Ta-hui says: "You should constantly

paste the two words 'birth' and 'death' on your forehead. Whether drinking tea or eating rice, when sitting or lying down, when directing the servants, when coordinating your household affairs, when happy and when angry, when walking and when standing, when entertaining guests—[throughout all these events those two words] must not be removed." Ta-hui even goes so far as to dismiss the need for faith, since diligent practice will corroborate the teachings of Buddhism whether one begins by believing them or not. Ta-hui's emphasis on the place of effort eventually became the "great zeal" discussed by Kao-feng Yüan-miao in his *Essentials of Ch'an* (*Ch'an-yao*), a synopsis of Ch'an practice that enjoyed a wide currency in the post-classical Ch'an schools of the Yüan and Ming dynasties. In that text great faith, great zeal, and great doubt are treated together as the "three essentials" of *k'an-hua* Ch'an.

Through the application of effort, then, the doubt engendered by the *hua-t'ou* becomes so intense that all distracting thoughts come to an end. When this condition is reached a final "burst" is all that is needed to catalyze the experience of enlightenment. In other words, when the "one great doubt" produced with reference to a single *hua-t'ou* becomes the locus around which all other doubts accumulate, intense pressure is generated on the meditator's intellectual processes and on his own sense of self-identity and self-worth. The coalescence of all the meditator's thoughts and actions into that doubt—which resonates with the connotation of "absorption" (*samadhi*) in Sino-Indian Buddhism—produces the power (here, almost the courage) necessary to abandon himself seemingly to ultimate disaster: his own personal destruction. When the student's consummate dynamism carries him beyond the point where he can cope with the pressure created by the doubt, the doubt explodes, annihilating the student's identification with body and mind. While ordinary language may be unable to describe this achievement, it is an experience that is readily available to all; Ta-hui compares it to "a man drinking water: he himself knows whether it is cold or warm."

The explosion of the doubt destroys the bifurcating tendencies of thought as well. Whereas previously all of one's experiences were seen to revolve around one's self, and interpreted as either self or other, through *k'an-hua* practice the mind opens into a new, all-inclusive perspective from which the limiting "point of view" that is the ego is eliminated. Awareness now has no fixed locus. The distinctions ordinarily perceived between self and other disappear, and consciousness expands infinitely, encompassing the entire universe both spatially and temporally: "Throughout boundless world systems, oneself and others are not separated by as much as the tip of a hair; the ten time periods of past and present, from beginning to end, are not separate from the present thought-moment."

This expansive vision restores the perfect clarity of mind, and all actions become expressions of the enlightened mind:

A patriarch [Bodhidharma] said, "If mind and consciousness are quiescent and extinct, without a single thought stirring, this is called right enlightenment." Once enlightenment is right, then throughout the twenty-four hours of your daily activities, when seeing forms, hearing sounds, smelling scents, tasting flavors, feeling sensations, or knowing mental objects, whether walking or standing, sitting or lying down, where speaking or silent, active or still, there's nothing that is not clear.... Once you've attained purity, when active you manifest the function of clarity, and when inactive you return to the essence of clarity.

In seeing the macrocosm of the universe reflected in the microcosm of the individual, the Ch'an conception of enlightenment is framed in terms evocative of the *summum bonum* of Hua-yen philosophy, the "multivalent interfusion of all phenomena." Moreover, as the consummation of a practical subitism, the *k'an-hua* technique epitomizes the Chinese conception of the immanence of enlightenment within the mundane world.

K'an-hua Ch'an may thus be viewed as one of several products of the sinification of Buddhism, whereby the highest reaches of Buddhist

spirituality were made accessible to Chinese adherents of both lay and monastic persuasions. Its evolution was prompted by critiques of Sino-Indian meditative concepts and hastened by the rhetorical and pedagogical experimentation that occurred during the middle Ch'an period. The *k'an-hua* technique, as standardized during the classical Ch'an period, exemplifies the Hung-chou conception of a "spontaneous" practice which is perfected not through a graduated regimen of cultivation but through instantaneous insight; and Song accounts of *hua-t'ou* investigation purport to be a definitive enunciation of the soteriology of sudden awakening—sudden cultivation, in which all traces of "gradualism" have been rigorously excised. *Hua-t'ou* meditation thus emerges as a practical application of the subitist teachings that had been the hallmark of the Ch'an school since early in its history.

K'an-hua Ch'an became virtually synonymous with Lin-chi practice from Ta-hui's time onward, and the approach was transmitted to Korea within a generation and, some decades later, to Japan. Understanding the theoretical foundations of this technique is therefore vital not only for drawing out the wider implications of the meaning of sudden enlightenment in Chinese Ch'an, but also for comprehending the subsequent evolution of Ch'an throughout East Asia. In the final analysis, *k'an-hua* Ch'an did not evolve because of the degeneration of the pristine message of some elusive Ch'an "golden age," but instead was the consummation of forces set in motion centuries before, propelled by the sudden-gradual debate.