

CHAPTER 2

READING: the practice of insight

I am convinced that, if one were to read the Hua Yen Sutra – especially if it were by candlelight in some lonely place – and ponder its awe-inspiring imagery, a profound mystical experience might burst upon one unawares!

John Blofeld¹

You are too fond of reading all manner of books.

The Venerable Neng Hai to John Blofeld²

In the massive corpus of Zen reading material, few stories are more fervently read than the account of how Hui-neng, the renowned Sixth Patriarch of Zen, could not read. As the Zen school gradually took shape and began to formulate the point of its heritage, great pride was taken in the thought that Zen arose as a powerful critique of the prevalent scholastic tradition. Although the historical accuracy of the traditional account of the origins of Zen is now questionable in a number of ways, it is nevertheless true that, in Sung dynasty textual images of the Zen tradition in Huang Po's time, a certain kind of anti-scholasticism was indeed a rallying point for Zen monastic communities. The practices of reading and textual study, which had been central to Chinese Buddhism up through the mid-T'ang, were exposed to a forceful critique. What, after all, did reading have to do with the enlightened comportment of the Buddha and other great sages? Textual images of Huang Po, along with his most famous teachers and disciples, reveal a condescending attitude toward the practice of reading:

The fruit of the path is not attained through textual study, which was cut off by the ancient sages.³

¹ Blofeld, *Beyond the Gods*, p. 98. ² Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 151.

³ T. 48, p. 382c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 55.

The Buddhas, on manifesting themselves in the world, seized dung-shovels to rid themselves of all such rubbish as books containing metaphysics and sophistry.⁴

Following Huang Po's metaphor, his disciple, Lin-chi, calls texts "dung clods"⁵ and "worthless dust"⁶, and the genealogy of rejection goes on for generations. These anti-reading passages in Zen literature are so prominent that one might even interpret their point to be that the value of texts lies primarily in their rejection, not in their reading, and that more insight may derive from one irreverent act of anti-textuality than from years of reverent study. So much for reading and the scholastic interests of the orthodox line of Chinese Buddhism!

Yet a strange irony persists in this admonition against reading – like many generations of Zen monks, we inherit it for contemplation primarily in the act of reading. Bending these anti-reading passages back upon the texts in which they can be read lands us in reflexive paradox – self-contradiction. Yet this point never seemed to cause much perplexity in Zen. In writing their anti-reading rule, Zen authors seem to have intended at least one exception; they wanted their best anti-reading texts to be read. This should give us grounds for reflection. The critique of reading is intended to valorize its opposite – immediate experience. If we look closely, however, we will see that the very opposition between the literary world and the world of immediate experience is itself a literary construct, one which functions to bolster the reality of immediate experience by tilting the antithesis against its own textual form. In this sense, Zen texts work on their readers to make the "real world" more real than it was before the act of reading. This way of describing the matter, however, will lead us to think that the anti-reading admonitions in Zen literature may have important limits and qualifications, and that we should therefore be on guard against too literal a reading of them. Indications that reading could not have been eliminated as a primary practice in Zen are not at all difficult to find in Zen literature and in the Huang Po texts. Let us read some.

First, from P'ei-hsiu's narration, we have a story which, even in making its anti-textual point, repeatedly revives the status of reading to at least a position of inevitability. P'ei-hsiu writes: "Once I gave a poem I had written to Huang Po. He took it in his hands, and then set it aside. 'Do you understand?' he asked me. 'No,' I replied. 'Think a little. If things could

⁴ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 130. ⁵ T. 47, p. 500b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 25.

⁶ T. 47, p. 499a; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 16.

be expressed like this with ink and paper, what would be the purpose of a sect like ours?’” P’ei-hsiu’s story doesn’t go on to tell us how he responded to this criticism, or even to elaborate on Huang Po’s point – the point is apparently clear. The text does go on, however; it recites the poem for us anyway, even though its pointlessness had just been asserted. Either P’ei-hsiu didn’t get Huang Po’s message, or he didn’t believe it. Or perhaps he was so fond of this poem that he just couldn’t leave it out, irrelevant to Zen or not. Moreover, numerous Zen editors of subsequent editions of the text left it there for our reflection. Then, following P’ei-hsiu’s poem, the story takes another surprising turn, almost to the point of embarrassing the reader. Having just lashed P’ei-hsiu for writing a poem, Huang Po composes another one in response. Although his poem strives to make its anti-textual point, the master must enter into the textual world to do so, thus abandoning the position of “no dependence on texts” (*pu-li wen-tzu*) and conceding the inescapability of reading.

Second, one cannot help but notice that the recorded sayings of many of the Hung-chou masters, especially Huang Po, are strewn with quotations from other texts. Since these are “recorded sayings” texts, we are encouraged to assume that Huang Po was quoting from memory this vast repertoire of literature. Apparently, Huang Po had not just read these texts, he had read them frequently and carefully, appropriating them to memory. Huang Po is represented as citing an extensive body of literature; his own reading was obviously wide-ranging and influential. Therefore, among other attributes, Huang Po is presented to us as having been a voracious and astute reader. How could this be?

The fact of Huang Po’s reading does not go unnoticed in Blofeld’s interpretation. Nor does Blofeld lack an explanation for it. On his account, reading is a worthy practice at preliminary stages in the practice of Zen, but can be eliminated once less mediated forms of experience begin to take hold. He writes:

It is clear from his own words that he [Huang Po] realized the necessity of books and teachings of various kinds for people less advanced . . . Hence the Doctrine of Words must inevitably precede the Wordless Doctrine, except in certain rare cases.⁷

Ch’an masters do not just dispense with books from the beginning, as some people in the West seem inclined to think. They dispense with books when they have acquired sufficient preliminary knowledge to be able to transcend writings by direct experience.⁸

⁷ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 22. ⁸ Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 139.

How the highly mediated practice of reading would lead to immediate, “direct experience,” is not explained, nor is the tension between them noted. Nevertheless, one can easily find Zen texts which support this succession from reading to non-reading. Huang Po’s student, Lin-chi, gives some account of it. The *Lin-chi lu* reports how, after he had “made a wide study of the sutras and sastras,” he “threw them all away,” having “realized that they were only medicines for salvation and displays of opinion.”⁹ This account, however, would seem to be even less charitable toward reading than Blofeld’s. The text does not say that whatever state Lin-chi had attained that empowered his transcendence of texts was a consequence of the early practice of reading. Lin-chi merely comes to the realization that all study was inessential and gives it up. Yet perhaps Blofeld has a point here. Perhaps, whether Lin-chi realized it or not, his attainment was only possible on the basis of the reading practice that got him there in the first place. The implications of this line of thinking threaten to surpass what Blofeld might want to allot to reading, however. Not only would reading be essential to Zen practice in the early and formative stages, but we might further be forced to admit that if an enlightened mind “originates dependent” upon prior reading, that state of mind would continue to hold within it, and to be supplemented by, the influence and outcome of reading.

One reason Blofeld would very likely have winced at this conclusion is that his own practice of romanticism also included anti-literary images of considerable significance. In this tradition we find the image of the unschooled poetic genius who, lacking the obstructions of culture and training, penetrates to the very heart of the matter whether in music, art, or philosophy.¹⁰ Modern romantics still express considerable anxiety over the possibility that their own creativity might have been influenced and conditioned by others.¹¹ Insight that is dependent on, or conditioned by, the insight of others is considered to be unoriginal and inauthentic. Surely this element in western romanticism has had some effect on our practices of reading Zen. At the very least it established a connection through which Zen could be appreciated – here we find the truly natural genius beyond anything the romantics had imagined.¹²

⁹ T. 47, p. 502c. See Yanagida, “The Life of Lin-chi.”

¹⁰ Sources of this image in romantic writers and their precursors can be found in Bruns, *Inventions: Writing, Textuality, and Understanding in Literary History*. ¹¹ See Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*.

¹² John McRae points out an excellent example of this theme in the Zen tradition in Shen-hsiu who, although he had never read the sutras, showed complete mastery of their content nonetheless (*The Northern School*, p. 263).

In light of this coincidence of theme, we can see how both Zen and romanticism conspired to shape John Blofeld's later evaluation of his own years of reading in the English school system. In the midst of autobiographical reflections on his own religious experience, he writes:

If I had retained my powers of reflection, I might have been conscious of an almost egoless state, signifying the magnificent victory of Nature over my fine Occidental education; this had so furrowed my mind with "hard facts" and so chopped it into tiny segments with the knife-edge of dualistic reasoning, that two decades of intermittent effort under the guidance of some of Asia's most gifted sages had been powerless to overcome such an immense handicap.¹³

Reading had proved to be an "immense handicap" for Blofeld and, in contrast to his own account of how it functioned for Zen masters, it seemed to be so deeply ingrained that even if he stopped reading, it still remained there in the mind. Yet romantic (as much as Buddhist) that he was, Blofeld still hoped that "Nature" would win out over the education that had perverted it in the first place. Rather than appreciating the edification received through texts "in the preliminary stages" which led him to explorations in Asia and set the stage for his conversion to Buddhism, Blofeld considered himself saddled with the seemingly impossible task of having to eradicate the negative effect of that early practice.

Yet the "preliminary stage" theory, as convincing as it may seem at first glance, does not provide grounds for understanding how reading has figured into the history of Zen practice, not to mention romanticism. Blofeld wrote right up to the end of his life and each work displays the extent and evolution of his reading practice. He never seems to have stopped or even reduced his reading. Always humble, Blofeld might have explained that this was due to his own inability ever to penetrate beyond the preliminary stage.¹⁴ But could he have accepted this judgment about the Zen figures he so thoroughly valorized, like Huang Po and Lin-chi? Doubtful! We have textual evidence to suggest, however, that the great masters were still reading at the end of their careers, just like Blofeld was. Let us examine two such passages.

One, from *The Transmission of the Lamp*, has Lin-chi returning to Huang Po monastery and finding the aging master Huang Po reading a sutra.

¹³ Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 17.

¹⁴ A thorough study of Blofeld's writings on this topic show widespread ambivalence. He seems to have held several variant views without having reconciled them. For example, in *Beyond the Gods*, he says that "it is inherent in the nature of mystical traditions that they cannot be learnt from books" (p. 151). But earlier in the book he had worked the opposite line when he wrote that he had viewed the progress of Zen in the west with "dismay" because "too many people" have seized "blindly" upon the phrase "a doctrine without words" (p. 93).

With typical wit he says: “I thought you were the perfected man, but here you are, apparently a dull old monk, swallowing black beans [words written in black ink].”¹⁵ Accepting Lin-chi’s powerful anti-reading point, and the preliminary stage theory which “could” be assumed in it, let us notice one thing – that even in his later years, Huang Po was still engaged in the practice of reading. Therefore, either Huang Po was still in a preliminary stage or Blofeld’s commonly held theory is jeopardized. A second passage from the *Lin-chi lu* reads as follows: “The one is the three, the three is the one. Gain understanding such as this and then you can read the sutras.”¹⁶ If reading is a preliminary means to a later end, or, even more critically, a practice that one later realizes was inessential to the project of enlightenment, then why would anyone suggest that one read *after* having “gained” enlightened understanding?¹⁷

Moreover, if we take a closer look at this passage, we notice that the height of realization is thought to be encapsulated in a textual passage, a passage which Lin-chi would have learned through his thorough study of Hua-yen Buddhist literature.¹⁸ No doubt Lin-chi is right that understanding this passage requires more than a simple act of reading the words – much more. The fact, however, that this passage, inadvertently perhaps, locates reading both at the beginning and at the end of practice is significant because, on this reading, that is inevitably where it will be found – everywhere in Zen. So ubiquitous, in fact, were reading practices in Zen that they constantly threatened to overwhelm other practices and, therefore, required regular critique in the form of the anti-textual text aimed at putting reading in proper perspective.

The slogan which was taken to epitomize the anti-reading sentiment in Zen – “no dependence on language and texts” – was thought to have descended directly from the founding figure of the tradition, Bodhidharma. Whatever its origins, it seems to have been entering into wide discursive circulation in Huang Po’s time as a distinguishing feature of “Zen.” Determining exactly what it meant, however, and how it was to be put into practice was not an easy task.¹⁹ Indeed, it would not be at all far-fetched to

¹⁵ T. 47, p. 505c. ¹⁶ T. 47, p. 498c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 16.

¹⁷ Similarly, in response to a question concerning the use of Zen texts, Tsung-mi says that they “serve two purposes”: they assist in awakening “those who have not fully awakened,” and they assist “those who are already awakened” but who seek even deeper appropriation of the Buddha mind (Broughton, *Kuei-feng Tsung-mi*, p. 107).

¹⁸ Yanagida shows how Hua-yen and Wei-shih influences can be seen in the *Lin-chi lu*: “The Life of Lin-chi,” p. 72.

¹⁹ Here I follow Griffith Foulk: “while most channists from the ninth century onward accepted the slogan ‘not depending on texts’ as orthodox chan doctrine, they could not agree on what it meant” (“The Ch’an School”, p. 235).

read this concern as one of the central issues of Hung-chou Zen, as a problem which Zen masters of that time provoked and passed on to later generations of practitioners. Clearly, no unanimity on the meaning of the mandate against “words and letters” existed. Did it mean literally “no reading” in Zen? Or was its meaning more subtle, like “not too much reading,” or “only certain texts,” or “only certain ways of reading certain texts,” and so on? Evidence suggests that a few did indeed take it literally – they stopped reading or used the doctrine to justify a refusal to start. A few even took “no words” to mean no spoken discourse as well; they retreated into the mountains and isolated themselves even from the monastic community, some never to be heard from again. The vast majority, however, went on reading, even though the particular shape of the practice continued to evolve.²⁰ What could the anti-textual rhetoric have meant to them?

Since the Huang Po literature presents the master Huang Po both as a voracious reader and as an outspoken critique of this same practice, these texts turn out to be a good place to begin the inquiry. In fact, dozens of passages take up reading and study as focal issues. Why? First, because reading and study were perhaps *the* central practices of the Buddhist tradition in China that Huang Po had inherited and, second, because those practices were in the process of monumental transformation. Indeed, Huang Po was one of the primary instruments of this change, although certainly not the only one. The change was not from reading to non-reading. It was rather from the particular kinds of reading practiced in earlier generations of Chinese Buddhism to fundamentally different kinds. Therefore, to understand how we should read Huang Po’s admonitions against reading, we need to consider what reading practices set the context for his views on the subject.

It is certainly clear that a variety of literary practices had been central to Chinese Buddhism throughout its history.²¹ Monasteries had become

²⁰ For an interesting description of the placement of reading practices within traditional Zen monasteries in China and Japan, see Collcutt, *Five Mountains*, pp. 215–218.

²¹ It is worth recalling here the extent to which China, by Huang Po’s time in the mid ninth century and by the subsequent Sung dynasty, was a literate culture. Reading and writing had been a part of Chinese culture already for over two millennia. To see the presence of textuality in the world of Zen, we could look past the sutras and sacred texts to see how virtually every dimension of what went on in the day-to-day business of the monastery depended on reading and writing. Records of all sorts were necessary just to conduct daily affairs – leases, rolls, agreements, government decrees, work assignment lists, plaques with Buddhist names and ranks, signs indicating what was what and where things went, and so on. Indeed, one of the very few absolutely essential possessions of every monk and nun was an ordination certificate, a text bestowing their identity as monastic citizens and permitting their practice. Texts were an inextricable part of their everyday environment, and they knew it. Not to be able to read was an enormous handicap.

the primary educational institutions of China and remained so until their partial displacement by Neo-Confucian academies following the Sung. For much of this history, it was widely expected that literacy was one requirement for the Buddhist priesthood, although it is clear that this was not always actualized in social practice. Several times, primarily for economic reasons having to do with the tax base, the Imperial government had acted to reduce the size of this ecclesiastical body by conducting a literacy exam, an examination on sutra mastery. In Huang Po's time, for example, a compulsory examination was to be administered throughout the country.²² Both monks and nuns were to be tested on their ability either to read sutra text, or to recite it from memory. Reading 500 pages of Chinese sutra text will not be regarded a simple task if we keep in mind that Chinese is not a phonetic script, and that "Buddhist" Chinese was not the language of colloquial discourse. Knowing how to pronounce a word required having memorized the appearance of the written sign to the point of being able to associate it with a sound and the sound, with a meaning beyond the parameters of everyday life.²³ The other option was to recite from memory 300 pages of text, and this was considered to be of roughly equal difficulty. Any monk or nun unable to perform in one of these capacities was to be removed from monastic life and returned to the tax rolls.²⁴

It is interesting that scriptural literacy was widely assumed to constitute the essential dimension of ordained life. Why would this have been so? We can certainly imagine other criteria: constancy of meditation practice, faithfulness to the rules of monastic life, knowledge of ritual practice, and so on. Why would sutra knowledge be the *sine qua non* of authentic Buddhist life? Cultural background provides part of the answer as we have seen. China was the world's most textually oriented culture, and the prestige of the Confucian tradition guaranteed that education and reading would continue to be vital to the overall cultural orientation in significant segments of society.

Another equally important reason for the textual orientation in Chinese Buddhism has to do with how the Chinese had come to be

²² See Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, pp. 111–112.

²³ This is not to say that the government, or the Buddhist establishment, required that monks know the meaning of the texts they recited. But as everyone knows in every language, understanding the meaning of the words you recite greatly facilitates the capacity to remember them.

²⁴ Imagine Huang Po, enormous in physical stature, overpowering in personal demeanor, and prone to scoff at "external," ritualized textual practices, reciting his personal sutra before the local magistrate in charge of conducting the government sutra exam! For the unnerved examiner, fear may have been motive enough to justify an exemption.

Buddhists in the first place. China had inherited Buddhism primarily in the form of a massive corpus of sacred texts which required enormous cultural efforts in the areas of translation, classification, interpretation, and application. Although missionary monks were essential to their conversion, the most important of these were translators, those skilled in showing the Chinese what might be done with all these texts. Buddhist texts called upon the Chinese to rework their most basic habits of thought and daily comportment, and the process of refashioning the culture in light of these texts went on for many centuries. It is therefore understandable that the practices of reading and textual contemplation dominated the early traditions of Chinese Buddhism.

For centuries the most important and best-known monks in China had been scholars. Mastering the massive canon of sutras and commentaries required total commitment, the task of an entire lifetime – and more. There were scholars specializing in philology and translation; there were others who were expert in the history and classification of texts, a major occupation when thousands of sacred texts in variant editions appeared upon the scene. Some specialized in interpreting, comparing, and relating the meaning of texts; others took the meaning of texts as the ground for further reflection and philosophy.²⁵ Many monks specialized in one particular sutra, typically committing it to memory for the purposes of public recital, ritual intonement, or private meditation. Furthermore, the textual corpus continued to grow: new translations of new texts, better translations of already-translated texts, new classification schemas, and more and more commentaries on what all of this might mean. It is certainly no accident that the technology of printing came to be discovered in the midst of this cultural envelopment in the practices of textuality. It is also not surprising that the Zen movement would eventually appear as a critique of this immersion in the book, and, at the same time, produce by far the largest and most influential canon of texts of any Buddhist movement in East Asia.²⁶

What particular textual practices would have been natural targets for the Zen critique of Huang Po and others? Ritual use of sacred texts without regard for meaning and for the purposes of merit procurement was one substantial arena of criticism. For some monks, sutra recital was

²⁵ See Lopez, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, for clarification on this dimension of Buddhist textual practice.

²⁶ Heinrich Dumoulin is insightful when he writes that “the Zen of the Sung period, despite its occasional iconoclastic tendencies, gave China its richest indigenous expression of Buddhist literature” (*Zen Buddhism: A History*, p. 245).

a vocation, a full-time career grounded in the early Buddhist understanding of the merit produced in the propagation of sutras. The sacredness of sutras meant that their ritual employment was widespread. One practice, called “turning the texts,” allowed monks to chant their way through the entire canon by intoning only the first few lines of a sutra, and then move on to the next text. This ritual guaranteed that no sacred text would be left completely out of circulation no matter how irrelevant its meaning may have become. Another pious textual practice involved dedicating a decade or more to reading rapidly through the entire Buddhist canon. Given its sheer volume, speed-reading without regard to meaning or time for reflection was a necessity for anyone committed to the successful completion of this meritorious ritual. Sutras could also be “turned” mechanically, saving the labor of the professional reader by installing a revolving bookshelf which, like prayer wheels, could be ritually activated regardless of literacy. Some of these practices were based more on ideas about the “needs” of the sutras themselves, and the demands of the theistic Buddha, than on the requirements of spiritual cultivation. Magical conceptions of the sacred texts were widespread in all Buddhist cultures as they were in non-Buddhist traditions throughout the world.²⁷

Zen critique did not focus here, however. These criticisms were already obvious to many practitioners, whether literate or not. Instead, Zen texts dwell on the shortcomings of scholarly reading, the practices of the dominant and most prestigious Buddhists of the T'ang dynasty. Their reading was not so easily susceptible to magical misunderstanding. Indeed, their weaknesses were more closely aligned to sophistication than to the lack of it. What was the character of scholarly Buddhist textual practice which drew the ridicule of Zen masters like Huang Po? This is not a simple question for two reasons: that these practices were already quite diverse themselves and that they changed over time. Nevertheless, let us characterize these practices and Huang Po's critique in terms of the ends or goals for which they were being performed. Because sutras were thought to be the words of the Buddha, and because they made available to the Chinese sophisticated but unfamiliar forms of thought, knowledge of the sutras was taken to be the most worthy

²⁷ A straightforward critique of the magical use of texts can be found in Blofeld's translation of Hui-hai, where the Zen master responds to a gullible questioner by asking whether “any marvelous efficacy” comes from the text laying there on the table. Instead, he asserts quite sensibly that “effectual answers come from proper use of the mind by the person who reads the sutras” (*The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 114).

aspiration, the goal of study as a Buddhist. To know the origins of a sutra, its setting, narrative emplotment, primary concepts, and overall position on Buddhist issues was the primary point of their study. The sutras thus became objects of knowledge in and of themselves. Zen criticisms of these practices commonly point out the limitations of “objectification,” and of knowledge as an end in itself. Knowing what the sutras say about enlightenment is not the same as awakening.

Tsung-mi’s evaluation of scholarly practice works in this direction, but still falls short of the full force of the Zen critique. He has his interlocutor comment that “the important thing is to get the idea and not to value specialization in the texts.”²⁸ Huang Po’s orientation to reading would reposition priorities so that the important thing is neither to “value specialization” nor to “get the idea,” but rather to look through the sutra and its “ideas” to the realities presented in their light. The point of studying the sutras, therefore, was not to “know” them, or even to “understand” them, but rather to embody their wisdom in such a way as to experience their referent, that to which they point. The texts themselves were to be regarded as “empty” of “own-being,” and, therefore, not something worthy of knowledge in and of themselves. This was true of everything, however. Texts were no more (or less) to be derided than anything else in the world. Yet texts had a way, it seemed, of closing one off from precisely what they were meant to disclose. This closure only occurred, however, if one took them as an end in themselves, as something that one masters for the sake of mastery, rather than something through which some other “end” was to be achieved. What seems to be emerging in the texts of Huang Po and other Hung-chou Zen masters was a new way of practicing textuality, and of relating to their texts. This new practice was clearly experientially oriented, and directed toward evoking moments of “awakening.”

Anti-textuality was, therefore, not a theory of Huang Po’s, nor of other Zen masters, and it was certainly not their practice. Instead, we will be better off reading it as a powerful way of addressing a situation in which what they took to be the “great matter” of Buddhism – awakening – was being obstructed by a certain style of reading practice. Huang Po’s instincts seem to have been iconoclastic in this regard. Sutas were being objectified, externalized, in the same way that statues of Buddhist deities had. Reifying the words of the Buddha had the same detrimental effect as reifying the Buddha. Both prevented the possibility

²⁸ Broughton, *Kuei-feng Tsung-mi*, p. 107.

of seeing the Buddha already present and at hand. Iconoclastic acts and seemingly irreverent behavior had the effect of showing the “emptiness” of the Buddha and the sutras in practice, and of reorienting practitioners to these sacred entities in some more helpful way.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the transformation in reading practice suggested by the Huang Po texts is to say that they question the practice of studying the sutras for knowledge, of looking at them and thinking about them, with a strong preference for a practice of reading in which one would look through the text to the reality presented there. The authentic Zen practitioner would not study texts so much as he or she would study reality, in part by means of the texts that purport to present it in its fullness. Let us read carefully one passage in Huang Po where this position on reading is articulated:

In these days people only seek to stuff themselves with knowledge and deductions, seeking everywhere for book-knowledge and calling this “Dharma-practice.” They do not know that so much knowledge and deduction have just the contrary effect of piling up obstacles. Merely acquiring a lot of knowledge makes you like a child who gives himself indigestion by gobbling too much curds . . . When so-called knowledge and deductions are not digested, they become poisons.²⁹

In this passage what has been called “book-knowledge” – clearly the practice of sutra study – is related to human desire and read metaphorically through the processes of eating and digestion. Those who pride themselves on knowledge of the sutras are simply following the paths of craving and gluttony. They do not recognize how this practice has the effect of obstructing the point of the text they study – the overcoming of desires and ego. Their insatiable desire to consume the texts leads to “indigestion.” This is the crucial metaphor: sutras are susceptible to being “consumed” in inappropriate ways, with devastating consequences. “Undigested” sutras are those from which all we gain and retain is knowledge “about” them. They accumulate in our bodies and minds without being digested or taken into our system. They don’t become part of the reader, except as excess weight, an obstruction to actual life functions. They function to restrict one’s vision rather than to open it.

The text’s rejection of the accumulation of “knowledge about” the sutras is so forceful that it may seem to reject reading altogether. But clearly it doesn’t. It backs its arguments with quotes from the sutras – the

²⁹ T. 48, p. 382c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 56.

Buddha opposed textual memorization and “mastery”; he taught deep appropriation of their meaning. And, as we have seen, in the midst of his teaching practice, Huang Po does not stop reading. Instead, what he teaches is how to read.

One of the greatest who learned from Huang Po was Mu-chou Tao-tsung who was head monk under the master Huang Po. Two passages from the Mu-chou fascicle of *The Transmission of the Lamp* can instruct us here:

When the Master (Mu-chou) was reading the sutras, the Minister Chen Tsao asked him, “Master, what sutra are you reading?” The Master said, “The *Diamond sutra*!” The Minister said, “The *Diamond sutra* was translated in the Sixth Dynasty; which edition are you using?” The Master lifted up the book and said, “All things produced by causation are simply an illusive dream and the shadow of a bubble.”³⁰

When the Master was reading the *Nirvana sutra*, a monk asked him what sutra he was reading. The Master picked up the book and said, “This is the last one for cremation.”³¹

Before we jump to anti-textual conclusions about these passages, notice who is reading on each occasion. Notice also that the story, which is meant to valorize Mu-chou, does not have Mu-chou going up to some other monk who happens to be reading. If the point is simply that one ought not to read, then Mu-chou himself would have been the target of the narrative. Clearly he isn’t. Mu-chou is reading in both stories; nevertheless, it is he who comes down upon the other with respect to reading. What is the point? In the first story, the Minister’s question sets the stage for a critique of a certain kind of reading. “Which edition of the text are you using?” Response: “All editions and all things ‘originate dependently,’ they are empty of inherent ‘self-nature’ and relative to other things. To grasp for the thing in itself – sixth-dynasty text? – rather than peering through the text as though through a ‘dream, a bubble’” or shadow, is to terminate one’s reading at precisely the point where it ought to begin.

Notice how Mu-chou’s metaphors, drawn from the *Diamond sutra*, the very text he was reading, show his own “digestion” of its meaning. Mu-chou learns from the text that all things, even the text itself, are like “bubbles and shadows.” In what sense? Bubbles and shadows are not unreal – they are really there. Mu-chou’s interest in them is directed, not to their unreality, but rather to the particular character of their reality.

³⁰ T. 51, p. 291; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 111.

³¹ T. 51, p. 291; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 111.

Like texts, bubbles and shadows are tentative, fleeting, and brought about in the first place by factors beyond themselves. Their reality is provisional, dependent, and thus, in Buddhist terms, “empty” of an independent and permanent “self-nature.” How should we read them therefore? Just like we read bubbles and shadows, by seeing what they can show us about the character of the world right before our eyes, and by refusing to attach ourselves to the signs which perform this showing. When Mu-chou reads the *Diamond sutra*, his concern is not with the text itself (which edition?), but rather with the realities to which it can point when properly read and, through them, to the transformation in his own experience that it may make available. Enlightened reading, not just of texts but of things as well, is unattached; it does not objectify or reify whatever is being read.

The second passage from Mu-chou is even more radical in its qualifications on textuality. When reading is practiced in such a way as to obstruct the meaning of the text, when one focuses on the text itself rather than through it to its referent, then the point of the sutra – emptiness – can only be made by calling to mind its own destruction. Since the monk failed to get the point of the sutra by reading it, Mu-chou wonders out loud whether the act of cremating the text would manage to communicate the point. Will burning the text break the grasping for the text that characterizes the monk before him? Only if that act can be properly read as the “shadow” of emptiness, a sign of something not so much in the text as in the world. Occasionally in Zen, such literal acts of destruction or “emptying” were performed, and, when they were, these radical acts served as symbolic, paradigmatic expressions of the very wisdom meant in the Buddhist sutras. The most famous of these is perhaps the monk-scholar Te-shan, who could only come to the true meaning of the *Diamond sutra* and his vast collection of commentaries on it by ripping them to shreds, a ritual sacrifice that still reverberates in Zen today.³² When the meaning of the text you read is Buddhist “emptiness,” the full force of that meaning can only appear in reflexive application, when the text finally shows its own emptiness, and when the reader sees the emptiness of his or her own act of reading.

³² Bernard Faure is right that, although following Kagamishima Genryu, we should understand the origins of the “no dependence” doctrine as a rejection not of texts but of particular textual practices, nevertheless, continued emphasis on this critique inevitably veered off into an unabashed anti-intellectualism (*Chan Insights and Oversights*, p. 218). This tendency is no doubt at least partially responsible for the eventual marginalization of Zen in China and elsewhere. Inability or unwillingness to reflect on what you do eventually leads to naive and narrow practices.

Several challenges, therefore, are placed upon our acts of reading Zen by the texts themselves. Is Huang Po's critique of reading practice applicable to our reading too, and, if it is, how should we judge its validity? One question raised by Huang Po's critique of reading has to do with motivation, and seems well worth asking ourselves: in the final analysis, why are we reading? What is the character of the end toward which our practice is aimed? Goals, like anything else, can vary significantly in character, and are also susceptible to change over time. One point in the Zen critique of reading is that the ends we seek through it are commonly shallow, that they are insufficiently motivated by something that truly matters. They can be transformed, however. We may read a Zen text to discover which edition it is, to learn about reading practice in medieval China, to gain knowledge about Zen, or to entertain ourselves, but unless these "ends" are clearly subsumed under some larger end, they will be vulnerable to Huang Po's criticism. Why be concerned about "editions"; why care about reading in medieval China? Why do you want to know about Zen?

In the Huang Po literature, this central issue or "end" is called the "Great Matter" (*ta-shih*). To read for any reason other than penetration into this matter is to have mistaken the point of the practice, and, therefore, to diminish its benefit. But what is the "great matter," the one matter among the many others? For Huang Po, "mind" is the great matter, and to "awaken" to it is all that really matters. No doubt other things matter as well, but only to the extent that they can in some way serve an authentic pursuit of the "great matter." How we should understand "mind" and "awakening" are matters to be explored in chapters to follow. Nevertheless, let us postulate for now that, however we understand our own enlightenment, this is the only end or motivation that will ultimately justify our practice of reading Zen. Is Huang Po right in that assertion? So it seems, but following Huang Po's stipulations for authentic reading practice, each reader would need to make that judgment honestly on his or her own terms. If we agree with this initial principle, then the further question mediated from Huang Po to us is: when we examine our reading practice, the activity in motion right now, in what way and to what extent is it motivated by whatever we take to be the "great matter?" What is the character and quality of our aim in reading? Can this practice be deepened and improved so that it may truly matter whether we have done it or not?

To consider these questions as we read is to enter into a relationship with the text that draws the reader fully into the activity. If the motive

and aim in reading is the first concern of the Huang Po texts, the implication of the reader's "self" is the second. We can easily read in order to discern which edition of the text this is, or even "what Huang Po believed," without getting involved ourselves. In fact we commonly do so when we read to gather information or to describe objectively what the text says. "Objectivity" is by definition and historical practice the sustained effort to hold the text or object at a distance from the self so that no intermingling of one's own beliefs or feelings with those represented in the text occurs. Much has been learned about Huang Po and about Zen through objective methods of analysis that could not have been known otherwise. In fact, historians will tell us quite rightly that we may completely miss the true "matter of the text" if we have not rigorously separated the Huang Po of contemporary romantic projection (our own subjectivity as readers) from the Huang Po of rigorous historical analysis (the exercise of objectivity). Nevertheless, the Huang Po texts insist that authentic reading demands the full presence of the reader's own self in the activity of reading, not its dismissal. And so should we. Objective historical analysis is not an end in itself. It is rather a means of getting to something that may matter. If it doesn't matter, if it has no bearing on our own lives, then what reason would we have to suppose that it might matter to someone else? The truth is that it may not matter whether we know anything about Huang Po or not. It will matter, however, if, in reading the Huang Po texts, we deepen our own sense of the matters about which the texts speak since these matters may be manifest in our lives as well.

Here we can see that Huang Po's first concern about the aim or motive of reading, and the second concerning the implication of the reader in the reading process, are two sides of a single coin. If the aim of reading is directly on what matters, the one to whom it may matter is drawn fully into the activity. Reading the texts objectively as sources of information holds them at such a distance that their point and power are diminished, or canceled; they are not allowed to matter to the only one for whom they could matter – the reader. When what you're reading is Zen, however, be prepared! The self of the reader is the "great matter" of the text.

When we read objectively we understand ourselves as outside observers rather than participants. Thus we can watch the action taking place between others – the characters in the story. When Huang Po ridicules a scholar-monk for an inauthentic reading practice, we can, at a comfortable distance, share in the joke. Having set ourselves and our

own reading practice aside for the time being, we don't feel threatened by the force of the story. If we consider the point of the text to be directed at others, we have carefully eluded its power and, at the same time, the primary benefit to be gained from having read it. If, on the other hand, we read Zen in the spirit of Huang Po, the true target of the text's criticism is no one but the reader here and now.

But isn't it important, we might ask, to clear away our own preconceptions, set aside our own ideas, in order to be able to understand those of the Zen text we read? No, although the fact that it so clearly seems so reveals to us what it means to be a modern western reader. This idea, so carefully considered in early modernity, is by now a very natural preconception.³³ Thinking this thought, we misunderstand who we are as readers. More than an appendage to the reader, ideas and assumptions are constitutive of the reader's own mind. Setting them aside, we eliminate ourselves as readers. If we attempt to clear our minds in this way, we take ourselves out of play before the game of reading even begins. Rather than being set aside, conceptions and preconceptions are more fruitfully brought out in the open, made conscious, and thus susceptible to transformation through reconception *in the very process of reading*. This has not been our modern custom in reading, however. Following the lead of modern historical science, we assume that reading the Huang Po texts requires that we suspend our own beliefs, and, through objective method, reconstruct a picture of the thought, practices, and institutions reflected in the texts. We place the text in its own context and assume that, in doing so, we have kept our own context at a critical distance. The mind of the reader is thus pictured as a mirror which reflects Zen as it really was, without itself being implicated or transformed in the process.

Reading Zen, however, will require greater understanding of subjectivity than this, more reflexivity, and thus more thorough "digestion" of the text into the mind of the reader. How so? To appropriate or "digest" the meaning of the text implies that one has taken it, along with whatever can be known of its context, into one's own context so that it can be considered in relation to life as it is inevitably lived here and now. To read otherwise is to read in abstraction from any issue that might really matter, and thus to leave the text there in the mind undigested, as

³³ "If it seems that no prejudice can be appropriate precisely insofar as it is a prejudice, if it seems in other words that the whole task of understanding is the elimination of prejudices and not at all their projection, that is because we ourselves still share the prejudices of the Enlightenment" (Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, p. 167).

a memory or a fact that has yet to have any bearing. What Huang Po calls “wise eating”³⁴ focuses only on what seems eminently usable by body and mind; it shuns mere accumulation in preference for careful appropriation. The text is useful only when taken into the system as food for thought and experience.

“Taking” the text in this way, however, requires some degree of “letting go” as well. The mental agency entailed in Huang Po’s practice of reading includes an element of exposure and relinquishment of will. When we think, as we commonly do, that reading is encompassed by a description of the reader’s activity and effort in penetrating the text as object, we overlook all of the ways in which the text can influence, persuade, dislodge, and transform the reader. This realization is especially clear in Zen which stands within a tradition of Buddhist critiques of the substantiality of the self and its agency. To say that subjectivity is “empty,” or that there is “no self,” is to say, among many other things, that the reader “originates” as the one he or she is “dependent” upon whatever texts have been consumed, and is never the sole agent of that change. No clearer example of how this was realized in Zen reading can be found than in *koan* texts. *Koans* were the focal point of Zen meditative practice when they were read, first from the book, and then over and over in the mind, in such a way that their words did indeed penetrate the reader. To read a *koan* authentically one had to share the role of agency or actor, with the *koan* as textual agent possessing the capacity to open up its reader. A standing joke in Zen was based on the reversal that took place when what the practicing subject took to be its object and goal was realized to be a domain to which the subject in fact already belonged.

For the reader or practitioner to be the “object” of this reversal amounted to a kind of “awakening” from the illusory assumption that we are fully in control of the enlightening process. Henceforth, reading ceases to be an “act” of grasping or taking possession of the text – the textual analogue of Huang Po’s “sensual eating.”³⁵ Instead it becomes a meditative opening beyond our “desires” to that which the text may disclose to us, and to whatever transformation in the reader this disclosure may enact. Nothing magical need be intended here, Blofeld’s statement at the very beginning of this chapter notwithstanding. The truth is that, when we read a text, analyze and work on it, the text may in fact do its work on us. That depends, however. It depends on the posture and practice of the reader, whether he or she is willing to be

³⁴ T. 48, p. 380b; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 39. ³⁵ T. 48, p. 380b; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 39.

exposed to its challenges and provocations, willing to take a position from which an alteration of mind may very well be the best way through the text.

One crucial question is: does this “willingness” to be exposed to the text and influenced by it require a posture of “belief” in the reader? Is openness to the text the same as the desire to believe that what it says is true? This is an important question, one about which much can be thought. But let us begin with this distinction. Openness to the possibility that truth may be disclosed in one’s encounter with the text is quite different from an a priori commitment to its doctrinal position. “Commitment” is a form of closure and stands in sharp contrast to the “openness” of Zen awakening. Many passages in Zen texts ridicule naive belief, and insist that one’s encounter with the “dharma” be fully critical. This tradition of critical appropriation goes all the way back to the early sutras where the Buddha encourages personal experimentation to test the truth of Buddhist doctrine.

It is equally naive to suppose that “belief” has no role to play in Zen, or in Buddhism generally. Minimally, one must believe that Buddhist texts are worth reading on some issue that matters before picking them up to read becomes possible. If Zen monks did not believe at the outset that there was something to which they might awaken, no grounds for entering the practice would exist. We always believe something, even though what we believe is subject to denial and transformation over time. Nevertheless, the reader need not, in fact cannot, simply replace prior beliefs by accepting whatever is said in the text. Appropriation of any kind, especially critical appropriation, takes time. At the outset, and even after an initial reading, we typically don’t know exactly what the text is asserting, nor what we think about these issues. Coming to this realization and entering into the awakening process of working back and forth between the “mind of the text” and one’s own mind in dialogical exchange is a lengthy and difficult process. Realizations may arrive in a flash of insight, but the complexity of their “origination” is so multi-layered as to be unrecoverable.

It is now possible for us to see that one weakness of Blofeld’s romantic reading of Zen is his willingness at the outset to believe. Blofeld begins his reading of the text on the assumption that what it says is true, that the ultimate mode of enlightenment is represented there. Reading is therefore simply a matter of recognizing the truth that one knows already to be there. For example, in the introduction to his translation of Hui-hai, Blofeld writes that Hui-hai is “offering us precious Truth, . . .

the gift beyond all gifts – that of immortal wisdom and the peace which blossoms from it.”³⁶ Clearly, Blofeld fulfills Huang Po’s criterion of reading by being open to the truth of the text, and is not concerned with anything other than the “great matter.” The danger with this posture, however, is that, in one’s eagerness to believe, the “otherness” of the text, its radical challenge, may be passed right over. It is all too likely that in one’s readiness to believe, what one believes is more closely tied to one’s former views than to those presented in the text. The danger is that, on occasion, Blofeld may have been overly prepared to project a meaning for the text that was simply too believable, that is, simply too much a projection of the beliefs that he held beforehand. When this occurs, piety prevents a radical overturning of the mind; no risk or challenge is encountered. By contrast, the value of the text consists primarily in the disruption to the self and its prior beliefs that may occur in the process of reading it. Romantic readings of Zen texts, therefore, differ tremendously from modern, historiographic analyses, but the outcome bears an important similarity. Both manage to find ways to avoid being targeted and challenged by the text: one, the romantic, by projecting one’s own relatively safe meaning onto it, and the other, the historiographer, by considering the text to be about someone else in another time and place. How can we avoid these weaknesses in our own reading? Perhaps, initially, by adopting the strengths of both: by critically appropriating the otherness of the text into the context of our own concerns and issues.

The practice of reading, however, can be extended beyond the domain of written texts. Zen reading required much more in fact. The world itself seemed to require reading: facial expressions can be read, gestures can be read; so can movements, signals, sounds, behaviors, minds, contexts, and situations. Indeed, potentially, anything can become a sign, and thus open itself to the insightful reader. This is the reading ability for which Zen masters like Huang Po were best known. In his long career, Huang Po had thousands of disciples, each a complex text to be interpreted, each a set of actions and words whose deeper implications might be deciphered. A Zen master must also read the “times,” a set of historical developments and circumstances – political, economic, and cultural – within which the transmission of mind and *dharma* must be performed. Failure to read this text well would eventuate in a failure of transmission. Reading, both in and out of written texts, was and is a continuous activity for any serious practitioner of Zen. Zen

³⁶ Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, pp. 17–18.

masters were so conscious of the ubiquity of reading that they began to call the world a text: the reality before them was “The Great Sutra,”³⁷ not an easy text to decipher, but the only one that truly mattered. When “reading” becomes a metaphor in this sense, it is synonymous with “interpretation,” and beyond that, with “understanding” itself. Therefore, we extend our reading and ask: what would it mean not just to read the texts of Huang Po but to understand them, and what role did understanding play in Huang Po’s Zen?

³⁷ Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 126.