CHAPTER 3

UNDERSTANDING: the context of enlightenment

> The sense [of my Huang Po translation] is strictly that of the original, unless errors have occurred in my understanding of it.
>
> John Blofeld[1]

> If one does not actually realize the truth of Zen in one's own experience, but simply learns it verbally and collects words, and claims to understand Zen, how can one solve the riddle of life and death?
>
> Huang Po[2]

If Huang Po is right that learning Zen "verbally and collecting words" does not constitute an understanding of Zen, then what does? To answer this, and to read Zen with the aim of true understanding, we will need to consider what understanding is, and develop our understanding of it. What is understanding, if not the kind of knowledge criticized above by Huang Po? For the purposes of this chapter, let us take "understanding" to be different than knowing, something more basic to human life. In contrast to "knowing," let us consider understanding to be something that we are always doing in and among all our other activities. No matter what we are doing – eating, working, or thinking – we are always understanding. Understanding what? All of the components and dimensions presupposed by that particular activity. Understanding, in this sense, is our most practical attunement to the world, the way we are embedded in the world, oriented to it, and engaged with it. Although the particular shape of understanding differs from person to person and from culture to culture, it is always there as the essential background out of which we live and work.

A simple example may help to show the universality and character of understanding so conceived. In order to perform his duties, the cook in Huang Po monastery would have understood many things, without

[1] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 25. [2] Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 105.

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perhaps ever having thought much about them. He understands clearly enough what it means to be a cook, what he must do, how he must do it, and why. Writing manuals on each of these dimensions of the task could take years and thousands of pages if they were adequately detailed. Nevertheless, the cook holds all of this in his mind, and in his eyes, hands, and bodily movement. Standing in the kitchen, without a moment's abstraction from his task to think, he cooks, understanding everything: where the knives are, how sharp each one currently is, and which are best in which role. He will no doubt have explicit knowledge about some matters, those especially which are amenable to formulae or which require calculation – the ratio of water to rice for each kind of rice or the ratio of uncooked rice to the number of monks served. That knowledge, however, rests upon and is made possible by immense stores of unconscious understanding. What he knows is merely the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface is a much broader and more complex understanding – of the physics of hot and cold, of hard and soft, the sensibilities of tasteful or not, "on time" or not, the psychology of interaction with kitchen helpers, the rationale of the monastery as a whole, and so on in immeasurable complexity. If the cook had to "know" all this to the point of being able to articulate it, and if he had to think about each dimension of the task as he performed it, Huang Po and the other monks would have starved. From this example, we can see how understanding is the crucial background to all dimensions of human life; it pervades and makes possible all activity. This is no less true of reading Zen than it is of cooking. In each case the particular contours of understanding shape our relationship to things and contextualize them for us in a more or less meaningful way.

How is the world presented to us in understanding? For one thing, the various elements of the world in which we live are not experienced in isolation from each other. Instead, we understand each thing through its various relations to others, through countless interconnections and juxtapositions. We understand the knife in relationship to carrots and cabbage, not to mention our fingers, the cutting board, the basin, the drawer, and other knives. Numerous expanding contexts encircle the act of cutting with the knife. We use the knife in order to cut vegetables; we cut vegetables in order to prepare the soup; we prepare the soup in order to present a meal; we present a meal in order to nourish the monks; we nourish the monks in order that they may seek enlightenment; they seek enlightenment in order that wisdom and compassion may be disseminated throughout the land. We understand our fingers, not in and of

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themselves, but through their relations to carrots, knives, books, duties, injuries, and the act of pointing. All these things and thousands more point our fingers out to us, and our fingers point to them. Understanding is the activity of synthesizing all these elements together into an organic and functional whole. Every time we perceive something new, as we do every moment of our lives, understanding locates the new perception in relation to the world as already understood.

It would be best, however, to resist our modern inclination to understand this entire process as subjective activity, what the individual mind does on its own. Although it is indeed performed by our individual minds, there are larger, more complex and more fundamental processes at work in understanding. Consider initially the extent to which understanding is less an individual matter than it is a social practice. Much of what we understand is understood similarly by those around us, the closer they are to us the more we hold in common. We share an understanding of many things: what knives are and how to use them, what books are and how to read them, what elders are and how to relate to them, what injuries are and how to avoid them. Some of this is taught. We are socialized into a vast store of understanding that is culturally established. As children and as adults, we observe the practices of those around us and we imitate them. Very little needs to be, or ever is, discovered, invented, and determined on our own. Far more than we produce understanding, we are immersed in it. We participate in a world already structured and established in particular shapes of understanding. Therefore, this background of intelligibility is "intersubjective," it forms and connects individual subjectivities through common language, customs, institutions, and practices.

Participation in a particular community, like the monastery on Mount Huang Po, requires initiation into the particular forms of understanding and practice which constitute that community. Shared understanding functions as sensibilities held in common, that is, the "common sense" in terms of which everyone in the community can proceed with their various activities. Although we occasionally have reason to question or to reflect upon this background of understanding, for the most part it is too close to us to notice. Instead, we work out of it, taking it for granted and using it to question and to reflect on one issue at a time.

Precisely because understanding stands so much in the background of our daily activities, we can never see it comprehensively or formalize it in a theory. Every effort to do so presupposes the very understanding that it seeks to objectify. Understanding shapes us far more than we shape it.

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It is in this sense, then, that we belong to traditions of understanding and engage in them socially, no matter how isolated we are from others.

Considering understanding a fundamentally social practice goes against the grain of our modern habits of thought, and, coincidentally, against the ways in which we have interpreted Zen. To our modern and romantic dispositions, Zen has stood for radical individualism, and for the depths of personal inner subjectivity. It is now becoming possible to see, however, that this reading of Zen tells us as much about ourselves as modern Westerners as it does about Zen. Various critiques of individualism and subjectivism now make possible post-romantic views of Zen, and of human understanding generally. Following these suggestions, we may open the possibility that in studying a deeply communal tradition of understanding like Huang Po's Zen, we might be shown the character of our own modern individualism and subjectivism.

Realizing that a shared domain of understanding supported and made possible the practices which took place on Mount Huang Po, we can begin to appreciate the communal dimension of its Zen practice. "Awakening" was the collective matter to which all activity would ultimately be directed. The very architectural layout of the monastery (as we receive it through Sung dynasty plans of similar institutions), as well as the schedules of practice and duty, all would have embodied an overall sense of "Zen" purposes. We can picture the coherence of communication and silent action in the "monk's hall," where monks slept, kept their few belongings, and sat in meditation. We can imagine the quarters of the Zen master Huang Po himself (*fang-chang*) where he both lived and examined his students in personal interview. We can picture the "lecture hall" (*fa-t'ang*) where Huang Po would have spoken, responded to questions, and engaged in dialogue over issues of thought and practice.[3] We can imagine monks in their daily practice of communal labor, either in the vegetable garden or in some task of maintenance or construction. We can see the monks chanting sutras before dawn and engaging in afternoon textual study. We can imagine their conversations and relations with the local communities of farmers, townspeople, landowners, and government officials, as well as with visiting monks from other monasteries. In all of these activities and relations, a shared understanding or "common sense" would have invisibly structured their world of Zen.

Although all communal activity presupposed understanding, the one activity that would consciously feature it would have been staged in the

[3] For more comprehensive background on this, see Foulk, "The Ch'an School", p. 278.

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"lecture hall." The earliest extant code of rules for a Zen monastery prescribes the "*dharma* hall" as follows:

> The community of the whole monastery should gather in the *dharma* hall for the morning and evening discussions. On these occasions the Elder "enters the hall and ascends his seat." The monastery officers as well as the ordinary monks stand in files and listen attentively to the discussion. For some of them to raise questions and for the master to answer, which invigorates and clarifies the essence of Ch'an teachings, is "to show how to live in accord with the *dharma*."[4]

Talk makes manifest and "shows" "how to live in accord with the *dharma*." Even where understanding is not shown, however, as in all other activities from meditation to eating and labor, its presence is presupposed.

Both the institutional patterns of Zen practice on Mount Huang Po, and the articulated "dharma" understanding that they internalized, have larger cultural and historical underpinnings. Understanding was shared, not just by monks in Huang Po monastery or even by all Zen monastic communities, but in broader, and, therefore, less precise ways, by everyone who at a given time participated in Chinese culture. Although it is true that Zen monastic communities like Huang Po cultivated a certain isolation from, and critique of, society at large, they were still in constant and active dialogue with this "outer world." Even criticism is a form of dialogue, and dialogue witnesses to the shared understanding that makes it possible. The monks on Mount Huang Po participated, whether explicitly or not, in the broader culturally established understanding that unified China enough to make it distinguishable from other cultures.

If Huang Po's understanding was continuous in fundamental ways with the larger world of medieval China, what dimensions of culture are ingredients of this shared background? Language is no doubt a critical element, perhaps primary. To share a language is to share ways of experiencing and responding to the world. We consider this in the next chapter. Within language, understanding is collectively cultivated at the most basic level by fundamental stories like mythic narratives and the symbols that are active within them. Myth and symbol help set the broad context of intelligibility within which communities of more specific understanding like Huang Po can take shape. Preconditions for the intelligibility of Huang Po's Zen practice are clearly the stories of the Buddha's enlightenment, of his meditative practice, of his community

[4] See Collcutt, *Five Mountains*, pp. 138–145, and Foulk, "The Ch'an School", pp. 347–353.

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of discourse and reflection, as well as all the symbols and paradigms that emerge from these stories. When the monks on Mount Huang Po sat in meditation, they reenacted ritually what the Buddha had done over a millennium earlier in his quest for enlightenment. Even the very idea of the quest for enlightenment comes to Huang Po and his community as an inheritance without which Zen practice would have been unthinkable. Reenacting the practice of "Buddhas and patriarchs," internalizing sacred narratives, the monks of Huang Po formed their lives out of an extended but finite set of traditional patterns. These patterns form the very structure of understanding for participants.

This is true of us as well. Like them, we know who we are and what we are doing through reference, both compliant and critical, to a store of symbols, narratives, and precedents that give shape and context to our lives. One of the great difficulties entailed in "our" understanding Huang Po is that, while the truth of contextuality applies as much to us as it did to medieval Chinese, the fact that our contexts differ so radically complicates the matter. Consider Alasdair MacIntyre's description of the cross-cultural predicament of understanding:

> when two . . . distinct linguistic communities confront one another, each with its own body of canonical texts, its own exemplary images, and its own tradition of elaborating concepts in terms of these, but each also lacking a knowledge of, let alone linguistic capacities informed by, the tradition of the other community, each will represent the beliefs of the other within its own discourse in abstraction from the relevant tradition and so in a way that ensures *misunderstanding*. From each point of view certain of the key concepts and beliefs of the other, just because they are presented apart from that context of inherited texts from which they draw their conceptual life, will necessarily appear contextless and lacking in justification. [My emphasis][5]

Although it is a lesson that takes considerable experience to learn, at some point we all realize that to some extent conclusions about what something means will differ to the extent that points of departure differ. Lacking sufficient background understanding, we may easily misunderstand or fail to understand the texts of Huang Po.

When, for example, the texts describe the following dialogue between Huang Po and one of his disciples, we may read it incredulously: "When a monk asked the master 'What is the meaning of coming from the West?' the master hit him with his staff."[6] For those of us not familiar with a Zen context of understanding, these exchanges make no sense. Not

[5] MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy," p. 392.
[6] T. 51, p. 266; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 105.

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only does the response call for rigorous interpretation and explanation, but so also does the question. Even if one knows that the question literally asks why Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of Chinese Zen, came from the West (i.e. India) to China, one still lacks the background of assumptions and discursive practices that fit the question into the "common sense" of monastic practice in medieval China. Why would anyone ask that question? What do they really want to know? What kind of question-and-answer ritual is this anyway? We need to understand this context along with them to share in their question. Moreover, why was the questioner hit with Huang Po's staff? If this was a meaningful response, and indeed it was, then what must be understood to interpret it?[7]

The same passage goes on to say of Huang Po that "those of medium and low spirituality were unable to understand his Dharma."[8] In addition to "those of medium and low spirituality," we would need to add another group: those, like us, who stand outside the community of understanding within which this exchange made sense. When this background is absent, the necessary framework for understanding is missing. Those of "medium and low spirituality" could at least assume the fundamental intelligibility of the practice as a whole (along with Huang Po). What they lacked was subtlety of interpretation, or depth of realization. Our problem is more substantial. We need to work our way into the language and customs of local practice before we can share in the subtleties of understanding. This is hard work, and typically not even attempted unless it appears that something important is to be gained from it. In our time, romanticism has supplied this justification, and the tradition of historicism has initiated the quest for a background of understanding sufficient for reading Zen.

It is clear, however, that if a Zen text can only be understood against the background of its Zen "context," the same would be true of its context as well. As an object of study, "context" also has a context which requires complex interpretation. Neither text nor context is easy to contextualize, and regression beyond the most immediate context is infinite. This became clear in interesting ways in Derrida's famous exchange with J. L. Austin.[9] One thesis of Austin's immensely influential *How to Do*

[7] Bernard Faure describes the most famous Zen example of the importance of context to understanding in Bodhidharma's legendary effort to play Zen language games with the Emperor of China. The Emperor "did not understand the rules" of the Zen game and concluded that Bodhidharma had simply failed at the game of Imperial propriety (*The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, p. 64). [8] Lu K'uan Yu, *Ch'an and Zen Teachings*, p. 138.

[9] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*. In this explication, I follow the lead of Stanley Fish in "With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida," in *Doing What Comes Naturally*.

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Things With Words was that utterances can only be understood within actual speech situations where shared assumptions enable interlocutors to make sense of each other. What Derrida's essay pointed out was that the move from utterance to context doesn't alter the difficulty of interpretation. Contexts are no more self-identifying than are sentences. Moreover, a significant difference exists between how context affects understanding when it is an object of analysis and when context constitutes the very structure of subjectivity in the form of the presuppositions that ground and shape experience.[10] This is simply to say that we will be just as much inclined to understand Huang Po's context in ways that he never could have understood it as we are of misunderstanding the intentions of his discourse. Nevertheless, both object-text and context will come to be understood only in relation to each other, and both of these will be understood from the perspective of the context of the one who understands. Understanding this, we will nod approvingly when John Blofeld writes in the introduction to his translation of Huang Po that wherever there were "obscure passages," passages with a "wide variety of different explanations," he sought to interpret them in the "spirit" of the Zen tradition in general.[11] Unlike Blofeld, however, we will more likely see this as a circular process. While particular teachings are best understood in relation to overall "spirit," this spirit is only accessible through particular teachings. Neither is clearer or more obvious than the other.

No matter how we imagine the context of understanding, however, interpretation will be essential to it. How is interpretation related to understanding? A useful distinction can be made here between understanding, which is always operant in our experience, and interpretation, an explicit elaboration of the understanding in which we already stand. In making this distinction, we follow the tradition of "hermeneutics" initiated by Martin Heidegger in section 32 of *Being and Time* where it is said that "interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former. Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding."[12]

The idea that interpretation is based on understanding gives startling reversal to our modern custom of thinking that interpretation is what produces understanding. Heidegger's insight, now basic to all forms of "post-modern" thinking, is that unless the object of interpretation is

[10] Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, pp. 52–53. [11] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 26.
[12] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 188.

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understood in some sense already (pre-understanding), there neither would, nor could, be any interpretation of it. Some understanding of the phenomenon must already be in place motivating and guiding our desire for an interpretive elaboration – we would not want to know "more" about the phenomenon unless we already understood something of it. Understanding, in this sense, is more inclusive and more fundamental than interpretation.[13] A particular background of understanding – a pre-understanding – is already there prior to acts of interpretation, guiding and shaping subsequent interpretive acts.

Immersed in the world, we function out of an understanding that is largely unconscious. In interpretation, we make thematic and explicate some aspect of our understanding. Although interpretation does not produce understanding from out of nothing or "from scratch," it does refine, criticize, correct, and cultivate understanding. In interpretation we come to "know" what we have understood, and sometimes to see how it may have been inadequately understood or misunderstood. If interpretation has been fruitful, our understanding of the phenomenon will have changed. The principle that "interpretation always proceeds from its basis in pre-understanding," will be useful to us in at least two ways: on the object side, for reflection on how the articulation of Zen thought in the Huang Po texts stands upon a deeper basis of understanding, and, on the subject side, for reflection on how our interpretation of Huang Po, our reading Zen, is the cultivation of our own prior understanding, both of "Zen" and of the issues it addresses.

Given these two uses, let us develop the idea one step further. Again, following Heidegger, we notice how "that which has been explicitly understood has the structure of something *as* something."[14] The highlighted *as* is the key word. When we interpret something, we interpret it *as* something in particular. The *as* guides our interpretation; it connects the phenomenon under interpretation – the perception – with some concrete image in our already-understood world in terms that make it understandable. Although, to take a simple example, we perceive only rectangular lines on a wall, we understand the phenomenon before us *as* a door, a passage through which we may move to another room. In the absence of prior experience with doors, we would no doubt interpret these lines *as* something else – cracks in the wall, the design of an artist,

[13] It is helpful, following David Klemm in *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, to consider understanding as a first-order activity, interpretation as a second-order elaboration on understanding, and hermeneutics as a third-order reflection on the interplay between the first two.

[14] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 189.

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who knows? We interpret this *as* a book and its subject matter *as* Zen. Everything present to us at all is present *as* something. For Blofeld, the images in terms of which Huang Po was interpreted derived from his prior understanding of analogous images in romantic literature and thought. Ours may be romantic and "post-romantic," but we too will find local images or figures to give form and shape to our reading of Zen.

When we understand something, we understand it "in terms of" something else already familiar and available within our world. When we first go to the bookstore in search of a book on "Zen," we do so, first, already having an understanding of Zen that makes it of sufficient interest to want further elaboration, and second, already understanding Zen *as* something – *as* "oriental mysticism," *as* a "non-religious way to cultivate centering," *as* the "key to business success in Japan," *as* something. We may later think that we had misunderstood Zen, that it isn't mysticism, focuses on "decentering," and makes for lousy business. Regardless, however, we can see that some form of "pre-understanding" was already there as the basis from which our subsequent understanding emerged.

If interpretation is always based on prior understanding and always articulated "in terms of" some already available image, then it is never a presuppositionless process. Interpretations are exercises in connecting one thing to another, a phenomenon to an image in our minds, and that connection to the totality of our understanding. We cannot heed, therefore, Blofeld's instruction to us as readers "not to read into the text any preconceived notions as to the nature of the Absolute."[15] For it was precisely *because* we would have such preconceptions that Blofeld has considered placing this word into Huang Po's text. His job as translator was to find images in the cultural world of the English language suited to the understanding of Huang Po's world of Chinese Zen. As readers, we understand one in terms of the other; *i-hsin* in Chinese is understood "in terms of" or "as" "the Absolute" in English. If it is found that "the Absolute" is an inadequate image of *i-hsin*, it is because some other image or set of images has emerged in light of which the inadequacy of "the Absolute" can be seen.

To understand something new or foreign, like a Buddhist concept for us or, say, an unanticipated situation for Huang Po, is not to set one's own background of understanding aside in order to grasp the concept or situation on its own terms. On the contrary, it is to draw upon this background "contextually" as a way to make sense of the new concept or

[15] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 19.

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situation. We do this quite naturally. Conceiving of the process of understanding in this way, however, is not natural for us. When called upon to discuss the matter theoretically, we turn to the already articulated theory most readily at hand – theories of knowledge characteristic of modernity in the west. These theories focus on the necessity of "objectivity" and the elimination of "preconceptions," and this is clearly the source of Blofeld's instructions to us. On this view, "preconceptions" or "pre-understanding" must be eliminated in order to understand truthfully. Post-modern critiques of these theories show us why, without preconceptions, we cannot understand at all, truthfully or otherwise. As we have seen, this background to understanding serves as the positive condition for the occurrence of any understanding at all.

Although so far we have used sources in contemporary western thought to interpret "understanding," it may be that nowhere is the relational, contextual, and impermanent character of the human mind given more thorough and sustained reflection than in the Buddhist tradition. Let us consider here, therefore, how these same issues emerge in Buddhist thought by taking up the central Mahayana concept, "emptiness." The concept "emptiness" derives from, and eventually encompasses, the key elements in Buddhist contemplative practice: impermanence, dependent origination, and no self. The earliest layers of the Huang Po literature, the *Ch'uan-hsin fa-yao* and sections of the *Wan-ling lu*, make considerable explicit use of the concept "emptiness." But even in later additions to these texts, where its use is not explicit, "emptiness" permeates the meaning of the texts.

What does "emptiness" mean there? Although the original Sanskrit term, *sunyata*, evolves from the mathematical cipher, "zero," the Chinese term that translates it and that is found so frequently in the Huang Po texts, is *k'ung*, "sky" or "space." The sky metaphorically comes to suggest the vacuum, "empty" space, where no-thing can be found. Over time, this symbolic image of "emptiness" gave rise to elaborate conceptual determination. "Emptiness" became the central philosophical concept in the Mahayana tradition. What does it mean? "Emptiness" is a universal predicate; it applies to everything. All things are "empty," everything is "emptiness." For something to be "empty" means that, because the entity "originates dependent" upon other entities, and is transformed in accordance with changes in these "external" conditions, the entity therefore lacks "own-being" (Sanskrit: *svabhava*) or "self-nature" (Chinese: *tzu-hsing*). The thing is not self-determining; on its own it would have never come to be what it is. Its existence and its character are attributable to the

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multiple factors that condition its origin and subsequent transformations. Coming into existence, changing over time, and passing out of existence, empowered by conditions beyond itself, the "empty" thing lacks any trace of "aseity" or permanence.

This "lack," furthermore, this negative dimension at the very heart of the thing which the concept "emptiness" highlights, is the "nature" or "essence" of all things without exception. When Buddhists contemplate anything – an entity, a situation, or an idea – this "dependence," "instability," or "void" within it directs the meditator beyond the thing itself to its determining conditions, other things, situations, and ideas which similarly point beyond themselves to others, *ad infinitum*. Empty things are what they are contextually; their being is relational. Understanding anything, therefore, requires explication of context, as we know very well. This insight, however, goes beyond our common sense on the matter: contexts are contextualized by other contexts, and those by others, and more. Meditations on the interdependent and interpenetrating character of reality had become fundamental to the Chinese Buddhist tradition prior to Huang Po's time. Their imprint on the Zen literature of his era and thereafter is unmistakable. These were the conceptual and symbolic resources most readily available for understanding anything, including understanding itself.

The implications of "emptiness" as a point of departure for our reflections on this matter are immense. One of them is the realization that there is always more to something than initially meets the eye; thorough understanding requires seeing the thing outside itself in the other things and contexts which make it what it is. Another implication draws the subject who understands into the circle of understanding. It requires "reflexive" meditation on our part and it is perhaps here that we can learn the most from Huang Po.

Not only are entities, situations, and ideas "empty" – that is, relative to conditioning factors and processes – so am "I," the one who encounters these entities, situations, and ideas in understanding. "No self," the assertion that the "self" is "empty," is perhaps the most widely remembered "doctrine" of Buddhism. But what does it mean? "No self" means no permanent self; no separable, enduring entity, essence, or soul grounds human existence. It also means, following the description of emptiness above, that, like everything else, human beings are not self-determining. The self does not possess its "own-being"; there is no "self-nature." The self "co-arises" with the world, and, on its own, *is* nothing. Like everything else, we are embedded in the world; we are immersed in

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an infinitely interconnected context in such a way that "self" and "other than self" interpenetrate. Huang Po takes these meditations through traditional channels: one by one each of the six senses is shown to imply its own respective sense object, and vice versa.[16] Therefore, he concludes, "mind and context are one."[17] If so, it follows that as one correlate in the relation changes so would the other. As the world changes so does the self; as the self changes so does the world. Understanding one necessitates understanding the other.

Given the long tradition of reflection on this issue before his time, the unity of these two – self and world – can be spoken and reflected in Huang Po's Buddhist Chinese without the awkwardness and self-contradiction implied in our language. On this theme in particular, the vocabulary available to Huang Po facilitates realization. Huang Po's discussions of "emptiness" commonly focus on the status of "dharmas," *fa* in his Chinese version. Although this term carries with it a long history and wide range of meaning, in this context the applicable sense derives from Buddhist meditation practice. Here, *dharmas* are locatable on neither side of the subject/object dichotomy. They are objects as encountered by the mind, things as experienced, or "moments of experience" where self and world reflect each other. Meditation practice and its corresponding "*dharma* language" fosters such "non-dual" experience, experience in which the world can be seen to penetrate the self and vice versa. The "emptiness" of each is the inclusion of the other within it.

Neglecting one dimension of the imagery of "emptiness," Herbert Guenther has translated the term into English as "openness."[18] This alternative image in our language corresponds more adequately to the conceptual and experiential dimensions of "interdependence" so emphasized in Chinese and Tibetan interpretations. Things are "open" insofar as other things enter into them, insofar as their boundaries are not fixed or static but permeable and changing. "Openness" also indicates the stance most applicable to understanding. When we open ourselves, or are opened by unexpected factors in our lives, deeper and more wide-ranging understanding may become possible.

Understanding, as we have developed it here, is, like "emptiness," the particular way in which we are contextualized in the world. Through understanding we correspond to situations and to things by making or

[16] T. 48, p. 380b. [17] "hsin ching yi ju," (T. 48, p. 381c).
[18] Herbert V. Guenther, *Kindly Bent to Ease Us* (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publications, 1975).

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recognizing the connections all around us. The principle component of understanding – application – is seeing how things are related, how they fit together into meaningful and applicable patterns within the here-and-now world of the one who understands. Practical wisdom, so prominent in Zen, is understanding how to work and to function effectively in an "empty" world, a world in which relation and movement are the key elements.

The foregoing paragraphs apply "emptiness" to the issue before us. In this situation, "emptiness" is lifted out of its familiar Buddhist context and brought into the service of a concern for which it may not originally have been intended. Prior to this occasion, others have done the same, thousands of times. It is only in the "application" of the concept to new and significant issues that "emptiness" continues to be a functioning concept. It is not necessary for us to have decided whether or not we "believe" in the truth of "emptiness" before we apply it in this way. On the contrary, application is a prior condition of belief. Before we could ever be in a position to decide whether to "believe" a Buddhist idea or not, we would have had to "apply" it in order to understand what it might mean. In the process of application, two closely related critical activities occur simultaneously.

The first is that we expose our understanding of "emptiness" to critical scrutiny. It may be that the interpretation of the concept that we have initially projected is demonstrated to be insufficient. The projected meaning – what we think Huang Po may have meant – turns out to be our own possibility, not Huang Po's; it originates in our mind and in relation to our understanding even though the meaning we seek is that of the "other." No other source for "meaning" is available. But the meaning thus projected is projected as the text's meaning, and if it cannot be reconciled with what is said in the text, then we have not yet understood it. In that case, a revised projection of meaning will be necessary.

Sound interpretations are not to be produced in an abstinence from projection of meaning by the interpreter. That would result in no understanding at all. Truthful interpretation consists not in the avoidance of projection and preconception, but rather in their critical appraisal and confirmation. Inappropriate projections of meaning for the text are not characterized simply by their being projections, but rather by their inability to fit with the text. The crucial question is thus: how is it possible to locate our inappropriate projections so that they can be revised or replaced by better ones?

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The second critical activity that occurs simultaneous to our attempt to understand "emptiness" through application is the use of "emptiness" as a means of critique and evaluation of our own understanding. We apply "emptiness" to the question of understanding in order both to see what "emptiness" means, and to see what it may teach us about understanding. This second dimension of the process amounts to self criticism through the use of the Buddhist concept, "emptiness." Thus we open ourselves to having our own minds supplemented, reworked, revised, or reformed by the concept. In this process, our prior understanding of the matter is not set aside or eliminated in order to see what "emptiness" might be able to contribute. Instead, the two are set into relation with one another so that critical questions can be posed and connections can be seen. Application, always ingredient to understanding, is the process of finding relations.

Although application is always going on whether we are aware of it or not, it can be cultivated explicitly as a practice, in which case it occurs more thoroughly and with greater rigor. This point, and one other, can be made by considering the example of foreign travel. When we travel in a foreign land, we notice and understand how things are, not in and of themselves, but in reference to how they are (or aren't) in our own culture. Application, as the practice of seeing relationship, is constantly at work. Aside from its relation to what we already understand, nothing will be noticed, nothing will evoke interest. Only by means of comparison and contrast, by seeing identity and difference, and thus by relation to our own culture's customs and practices, will we be able to see what this foreign culture is. Put this way, application may seem obvious. It is. But it also runs head-on into, and contradicts, our modern ideology on the matter.

If we were asked about the matter, our instincts, shaped by the understanding of modernity into which we have been socialized, would lead us to say that traveling well requires an open mind, that expectations and presuppositions about what we will see and how things ought to be will prevent our seeing things as they are. We might say that we should be "objective" and "nonjudgmental" about what we see. To do this, we might go on, we must temporarily forget about our own culture and just immerse ourselves in this new and foreign one so that we can really see it as it is in itself, without reference (i.e. application) to our own culture. These thoughts are elements of the common sense of modernity. We can now see their limits, however. Not only is it not possible to set aside one's own background of culturally shaped understanding, even if one

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could, that would render everything one saw in this foreign land uninteresting and not particularly noteworthy. Without this inescapable but constantly revised background of understanding, we could learn nothing, at home or abroad.

Is it possible to discriminate between people more able to learn from "travel" and those less able? Surely, and from this point of view, the basis upon which that distinction should be made is twofold: the extent to which one is grounded in one's own culture and the way in which one relates to that ground. The person who understands most about his or her own culture and is, at the same time, open to its critical assessment and possible transformation, is in a better position to learn from travel. This person is sensitive to issues, customs, and forms of thought in his or her own culture, and, from this basis, will notice analogous dimensions in the foreign culture. He or she will be able to ask good questions, to see what is worthy of reflection or further inquiry. He or she will notice what is lacking, in that culture and in his or her own culture, and will be interested in asking why and to what effect. Difference and otherness come into view only in their relation to identity and the self, and the reverse holds true as well. Aside from such relational application, travel may be "fun," but neither meaningful nor transformative. The same goes for reading Zen.

The first criteria above is not enough on its own; that is, understanding may be impeded if solid grounding in one's own culture is not accompanied by a critical edge and a sensitivity to the "otherness" of the other. In the effort to understand, we project what we take the other to mean and eagerly open ourselves to its possible value and truth. If this eagerness, however, allows us to be complacent in the thought that our original projection is in fact the other's meaning, then we may very well miss its greatest possibility for us. "Otherness" is not easy to discern; it takes time and patience. From our vantage point, some decades later, it is easy for us to catch John Blofeld in the act of projecting issues upon Huang Po in which Huang Po could not have been interested. Although, given our own envelopment in a world of understanding, we can rarely see this in ourselves, it is easily detectable in others. Studying examples of it, and realizing its inevitability, will help us to catch ourselves in the act on occasion, and to locate a posture from which more sensitive means of understanding can be developed.

Before he even decided to travel to China, both Blofeld and his culture were undergoing significant changes as a result of their cultural encounter with the otherness of the larger British Empire. Blofeld had

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systematically immersed himself in the rapidly growing literature on the "Orient" and, like a few others around him, he was feeling its effects. One issue that had been a topic of considerable discourse and writing in the western world was "tolerance." From Hobbes and Locke to J. S. Mill and the Huxleys, the issue of the character of liberal society was hotly debated. Many of these thinkers either criticized "religion" for its failure to tolerate difference, or divided it evenly between the truly religious who were tolerant and those who were not. "Oriental religions," for some justifiable reasons, were taken stereotypically to represent the possibility of tolerance within religion. This issue was of critical importance in Blofeld's own life, and it was partly on this basis that he would convert to Buddhism. He understood Buddhism to be the epitome of true religion which, although present in all religions, was hidden under a cloak of intolerance and small-mindedness. Intolerance was one trait for which Blofeld had little tolerance.

When, after having become a Buddhist and after years of immersion in Chinese culture and language, Blofeld decided to try his hand at translation, he sought out just the right text. His Buddhist friends and teachers recommended Huang Po, the great Zen master. Reading the text, he agreed – this was the one to transmit back home. Beginning the project with detailed study, as any translator should, he encountered an interpretive problem. Sometimes Huang Po seemed intolerant of other kinds of Buddhism. How could this be? Huang Po was a Buddhist and Buddhists, as Blofeld knew, were famous for their attitude of tolerance. Furthermore, Huang Po was "enlightened," and, as Blofeld understood the matter, tolerance was an inevitable outcome of enlightenment. Given these premises, Blofeld assumed that he had misunderstood the text. Huang Po could not have meant these criticisms of other forms of Buddhism "literally." In several instances, therefore, Blofeld sought allegorical interpretations. Although Huang Po might be indicted on "casual glance," Blofeld wrote, deep study would surely vindicate him: "A casual glance at our text or at some other Zen works might well give the impression that non-Zen Buddhism is treated too lightly." However, "a careful study of this work has persuaded me that Huang Po felt no desire to belittle the virtue of those Buddhists who disagreed with his methods"[19]; "I am convinced that Huang Po had no intention of belittling the 'Three Vehicles.'"[20]

When, in the final analysis, his allegorical readings did not prove to be convincing, Blofeld wrote a prominent section in his introduction

[19] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 21. [20] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 22.

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explaining why Huang Po had criticized others. He had, it turned out, good reasons. "Huang Po's seemingly discourteous references to other sects are justified by the urgency and sincerity of his single-minded desire to emphasize the necessity for mind-control."[21] As Blofeld put it, the "Hinayanists" and Buddhist scholars whom Huang Po seemed to be ridiculing had made some grievous mistakes in doctrinal matters, and the propagation of these errors would lead to widespread spiritual decay among those naive enough to have listened. In spiritual matters at least, being wrong is dangerous. Erroneous views might prevent one's own enlightenment, not to mention the enlightenment of others. Huang Po's "discourtesy," Blofeld finally concluded, could be excused by the "urgency" of the situation, and by the fact that his interpretive position in the dispute was the correct one.

Because of the importance of this issue in Blofeld's own culture and mind, and the vehemence of his stand on it, this was the matter that most troubled his work on Huang Po. In the end, his own background of understanding could find ways to pronounce Huang Po innocent of what, in Blofeld's mind, would have been an inexcusable offence, one that simply could not be reconciled with his understanding of "Buddhism" or of "enlightenment." From that location in understanding, Blofeld could not see that Huang Po had absolutely no interest in the issue of tolerance. It simply was not an issue for him, although, clearly enough, it had been an issue in other eras in the history of Buddhism and in Chinese culture. Moreover, in order to extricate Huang Po, Blofeld attributed to him the very same position that Blofeld's own criticisms of "sectarian" Christianity had denounced: they had taken an immovable stand on doctrinal matters and assumed, presumptuously, that they were correct and the others wrong. This had been problematic for Blofeld because he held firmly to the doctrine of the ultimate unity of all religions "beyond doctrinal difference." Huang Po's sectarian vehemence could be excused, however, because the doctrines that he was defending were the ones upon which all religions were united, whether particular "adherents" of those religions knew it or not.

Clearly, pressing issues in his own mind prevented Blofeld from being able to see the importance and vitality of sectarian and doctrinal issues in Huang Po's historical context. Huang Po was not just defending the faith, he was on the offence, and through his efforts and those of others, his Zen sect won. Although, by the twentieth century, the hollowness of

[21] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 24.

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its victory was more than clear, Blofeld was nevertheless reading Zen from the perspective of its longstanding East Asian triumph. And, although he wouldn't have put it this way, Blofeld was himself entering Zen as a new combatant in the doctrinal battles that were being staged in his own culture. Huang Po was indeed being put to good use.

Blofeld's "application" of these texts to current issues, and mine, are only the most recent of countless such manifestations. Each of them is an instance or example of the impermanence and "emptiness" of meaning that is made available to understanding. Unless we contemplate this "emptiness" of understanding, we will be unable to consider the history of interpretations of Huang Po as anything but the history of error. As we will see when we contemplate "history" and "freedom," the masters of Hung-chou Zen realized that the tradition could maintain itself authentically only by undergoing change. Aside from transformation and recontextualization, no ongoing life is possible. Like all Mahayana Buddhists before him, Huang Po would call upon the Buddhist concept of *upaya*, or "skill-in-means," to help legitimize these transformations.[22] All "means" of understanding must be "skillfully" molded to the situation at hand, and will thus vary from one time and place (or mind) to another. This application of the concepts of "emptiness" and "impermanence" was difficult to conceive, but nevertheless widespread in the tradition.

Our romantic and historicist inclination to privilege an "original meaning" as the one to which correct interpretation must correspond would have to be seen, from this Buddhist point of view, as an act of clinging to illusory permanence and substantiality – a denial of interdependence and change. Our desire to have the text be intelligible in and of itself, and separate from current understanding, however, can never be fulfilled. We too stand in a long history of interpretation and, like our predecessors, we can only understand in the terms available to us. The fact that for us those "terms" include scientific and romantic ideologies does not alter the fact that we apply what we understand to our own world. Indeed, our practices and customs of interpretation, like everyone else's, exemplify the truths of application, contextuality, and contingency.

Long before Blofeld understood Huang Po "differently," Huang Po had himself understood the Buddhist tradition in ways that had never before existed. No one needed allegory more than Huang Po. When the

[22] "The canonical teachings of the three vehicles are just remedies for temporary needs. They were taught to meet such needs and so are of temporary value and differ one from another" (T. 48, p. 382c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 57).

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sutras said irrelevant or naive things, he deepened them: "This is a fable in which the 'five hundred Bodhisattvas' *really refers* to your five senses."[23] When a questioner faced existential crisis because of an inability to interpret broadly, Huang Po would allegorize him into more authentic practices: "Question: But what if in previous lives I have behaved like Kaliraja, slicing the limbs from living men? Answer: The holy sages tortured by him *represent* your own Mind, while Kaliraja *symbolizes* that part of you which goes out seeking."[24]

Only modernists and historicists, who assume that texts from distant contexts will be irrelevant to current needs, don't need allegory. Indeed, no premodern textual practice has received more scorn in modernity than this one. Any tradition that includes sacred texts, however, will at some point in history find that allegory is essential. In a culture where texts aren't sacred, old writings that have become irrelevant are just set aside. The canon shifts and the old texts are simply not read. Where their sanctity is maintained, however, reading practices will be motivated to attain whatever sophistication is required to find ways in which they are, in fact, still relevant.

Due to the self-conscious and critical elements in the Zen tradition, reading practices like allegory would occasionally come under scrutiny. On one occasion, Huang Po's allegory was challenged by the great Nan-ch'uan, a Zen master of equal status.

Another day, our Master, Huang Po, was seated in the tea-room when Nan Ch'uan came down and asked him: "What is meant by 'A clear insight into the Buddha-Nature results from the study of dhyana (mind control) and prajna (wisdom)'?" Our Master replied: "It means that, from morning till night, we should never rely on a single thing." "But isn't that just Your Reverence's own concept of its meaning?" "How could I be so presumptuous?" "Well, Your Reverence, some people might pay out cash for rice-water, but whom could you ask to give anything for a pair of home-made straw sandals like that?" At this our Master remained silent.[25]

Huang Po asks, rhetorically and jokingly, "How could I be so presumptuous as to teach my own concept of the text's meaning, rather than the text's meaning?" Whoever's meaning it is, Nan-ch'uan's retort is that its "cash value" isn't much. At this, Huang Po is left silent. Had the story ended there, it would have never made its way into Huang Po's "discourse record"; after all, "Our Master" didn't emerge looking all that enlightened. So the story proceeds as follows, allegorizing Huang Po

[23] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 115. [24] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 123. [25] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 98.

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out of the predicament: "Later, Wei Shan mentioned the incident to Yang Shan, enquiring if our Master's silence betokened defeat. 'Oh no!' answered Yang. 'Surely you know that Huang Po has a tiger's cunning?' 'Indeed there is no limit to your profundity,' exclaimed the other."[26]

Wei Shan struggles to interpret the text, but a contradiction looms. It appears on the surface that Nan ch'uan had gotten the better of Huang Po. For Wei Shan in this account, however, Huang Po is, by definition, the one whose vision is so penetrating that he cannot be upstaged. Yang Shan steps in to dissolve the apparent contradiction. Huang Po's silence must be interpreted more carefully, allegory providing the means by which silence can be seen *as* something quite the opposite of discursive "defeat." Given Huang Po's profundity, the task before Yang Shan was simply to locate it, to interpret it and to allegorize it out of obscurity and into the open space of understanding. In this case, Yang's task was relatively easy because there was ample precedent in the tradition to underwrite his reversal of Huang Po's demise. Silence can, on some occasions, be understood as defeat while in other contexts it means victory in the forms of profundity and freedom. Since the protagonist is the great Huang Po, this is clearly a case of profundity. Just in case his readers might miss the text's depth here, Blofeld jumps into a footnote to do his own allegorizing: "1 . . . His silence was deeply significant; it implied that the Master NEVER indulged in concepts; . . . But it took a man of Yang Shan's caliber to penetrate through to his meaning."

Allegory displays quite prominently the reader's involvement in the process of interpretation. As we have seen, however, there is no understanding without projective involvement by the one who understands, and there is no understanding that merely duplicates an original. Therefore, we can interpret "allegory" *as* a metaphor for all understanding. We always understand "this" *as* something else, *as* whatever it is when new light is shed on it. Understanding transforms the object of interpretation by bringing it into a new context of meaning, that of the interpreter him or herself.

There is an important sense, therefore, in which the self who understands is not just the subject of this activity, but its object as well. What the Huang Po texts are finally about – their "Great Matter" – is the self, not just any self but rather "the one right now who seeks to understand."[27] Thus, the primary "intention" of the text is that readers

[26] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 98.

[27] I borrow this rhetorical "means" from the Zen texts of Ma-tsu and Lin-chi which continually strive to expose "the one right now who reads this" to the light of critical reflexivity.

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understand themselves in and through what is said in it. All texts "intend" this in some sense since understanding and self-understanding are inextricably joined. If we have truly encountered the ideas presented in the text, we have encountered our own ideas on these matters and others at the same time. If we have truly understood the Huang Po texts, we have understood ourselves in light of them. And, going further, if we understand what understanding entails, we will sense our immersion in the open space of language.

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