

TRANSCENDENCE: “going beyond” Huang Po

Master, You conduct a memorial service for the late Master Yun-yen. Are you in accordance with his teaching? Half accord, half not, replied the Master (Tung-shan). Why not complete accord? If I were entirely in accordance, I would have been ungrateful to him.

*Transmission of the Lamp*¹

True masters *go beyond* the highest standards of excellence known to their contemporaries. They extend those standards thereby establishing their own authority as master practitioners and enriching the goods that can be pursued and achieved by their successors.

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The Transmission of the Lamp tells us that when the young postulant, Huang Po, first came to see the Zen master Pai-chang, the teacher said to him: “If your ‘awakening’ is identical to that of your teacher, your power will be merely half of his. Only when you are capable of ‘going beyond’ your teacher will you have truly received the transmission.”³ If we accept this understanding of the matter, then Pai-chang’s “transmission of mind” to Huang Po will have been effective and complete only at the point that Huang Po has transcended Pai-chang’s “mind” in the act of creatively “going beyond” it. If each “enlightened mind” goes beyond its predecessor, then each would be more than the replication of a pre-given identity. Can “transcendence” or “awakening” appear in forms that transcend each other successively? Apparently. The quotes above suggest that receiving transmission from one’s teacher with due respect requires that you pass beyond and extend the highest achievements of the lineage. By the time we get to the texts transmitting the mind of Huang Po’s disciple, Lin-chi, “going beyond” is greatly accentuated. So, when

¹ Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 62. ² Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, p. 268. ³ T. 51, p. 249c.

Huang Po fully acknowledged Lin-chi's "going beyond," and therefore his own transmission of mind to his disciple, Huang Po called his attendant to bring the sacred items that he had inherited from his teacher, Pai-chang. Immediately, Lin-chi responded: "Attendant, bring me some fire!"⁴ How could the sacred texts of Zen transmit an image of "transmission" in which the successor "torches" the most prized symbols of the lineage? This is a radical image, and, even if it was once said, we can be assured that it was not an act that anyone would have considered actually performing. It does make its point in powerful terms, however. In response to receiving the transmission, Lin-chi demonstrates his realization by refusing attachment to any sign of awakening. He "empties" Huang Po's ritual gesture and his own tendencies to "clinging," to pride, and to status.

At this point in the history of Zen, the idea of "going beyond" had taken a position of considerable importance, and would inevitably redefine the consciousness of history available to practitioners. Perhaps we should understand the appearance of the "going beyond" doctrine in Zen as itself a case in point, demonstrating the truth of its own claim. Whoever first articulated this new doctrine⁵ was extending the tradition, "going beyond" its previous form by altering in some way what both "awakening" and "mind-to-mind transmission" would mean. A radical understanding of impermanence and a thoroughgoing historical consciousness stand behind this thought. Is this how we should read Zen, or not?

Answering "not" would probably place us more squarely in the mainstream of the Zen tradition. Few texts and therefore few "masters" focus on this idea and play it out to its various and unsettling conclusions. In fact, most of the Huang Po literature articulates a position which contradicts the force of the "going beyond" idea. Nevertheless, these two opposing ideas exist side by side in the texts. Our task here will be to read these two sides of Zen off against each other, and to think our way between them in the hope that some "going beyond" will occur in our minds.

"Mind transmission" (*ch'uan hsin*) or "dharma transmission" (*ch'uan fa*) is most consistently presented in the texts as the historical repetition of a timeless identity. As we have seen, the mind of the Zen master is transferred to, and imprinted upon, the mind of the disciple who then passes

⁴ T. 47, p. 505c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 56.

⁵ Yanagida claims that this idea was newly introduced into Chinese Buddhist culture in the *Transmission of the Lamp* (Iriya, *Denshin Hoyo*, p. 167).

this same mentality on to the next generation of Zen masters. The appearance of the doctrine of "mind-to-mind transmission" is no doubt historically complex – its "origination" bears numerous "dependencies." Yet one historical factor seems particularly important. This is that the Zen tradition used this doctrine to differentiate itself from other competing forms of Chinese Buddhism. Whereas other schools transmit texts, doctrines, or particular meditative/ritual practices, Zen transmits only the goal itself – enlightened mind – and not its various means.⁶ Given this difference, the realization that "means" are "empty," and thus relative to historical context, would not haunt Zen as it clearly had earlier forms of Chinese Buddhism which had come and gone through history in accordance with the relevance of their particular transmitted "means." While the texts, doctrines, and practices employed in Zen would vary, the awakened state of mind transmitted from one generation to the next would not. Instead, the exactitude and identity of transmission would be understood through the metaphor of the stamp or seal. Pressing the inked stamp upon the absorbent surface yields an exact duplication, no matter how many times it is repeated. Thus in Zen, the precise contours of the master's mind and experience of awakening would be impressed or imprinted upon the successor's mind by means of thorough, longstanding co-practice, regardless of means. When this imprinting process – this socialization into the deepest recesses of Zen mind – was complete, "transmission" required only the act of ritual announcement.

The idea of "patriarchs" standing in a historical lineage as the foundation for a "school" of Chinese Buddhism existed prior to Zen. It may be that, instead of "mind-to-mind transmission" giving rise to the recording of historical lineage, it was actually the other way around. Once the need to legitimize the new "Zen school" with a historical lineage was felt within the context of its own doctrinal and practical orientation, "mind-to-mind transmission" may have been the obvious and ingenious consequence. Or perhaps the "co-arising" of all these factors was much more complex: numerous factors thoroughly intertwined. Nevertheless, once articulated, the doctrine of

⁶ There is considerable irony, and probably historical anachronism, in P'ei-hsiu's claim in the Preface to the *Essentials of Mind Transmission* that this text is an "imprint of mind" (*hsin-yin*). The text itself says that true "mind imprint" occurs without reference to texts – "mind to mind" direct. So although we can sympathize with P'ei-hsiu's desire to claim that his text is an accurate representation of Huang Po, we can also, from the text's own point of view, see how this claim invalidates itself.

“mind-to-mind transmission,” along with an eventual consensus on how the historical lineage would be constructed, would bring to Zen substantial persuasive power. It would justify the claim that its “awakening” was an exact replica of the Buddha’s “awakening.” Lines connecting current Zen masters with Kasyapa, Shakyamuni, and the ancient Buddhas could be demonstrated with precision, thus guaranteeing the quality and authenticity of its transmission of mind in the present and future. Later “awakenings” could be considered precisely the same as the original. Taking this as one of its central points, Huang Po’s *Essentials of Mind Transmission* would say: “Since the Tathagata entrusted Kasyapa with the *Dharma* until now, Mind has been transmitted with Mind, and these Minds have been identical . . . Mind is transmitted with Mind and these Minds do not differ.”⁷ Although the idea of the “patriarchal lineage” was already present in Huang Po’s time, it would be at least another century before a method of extending this lineage into the future could be devised. This was accomplished impressively, and decisively, in the early eleventh century when the *Transmission of the Lamp* would absorb the Huang Po texts and many others into a grand vision of enlightened history.

It is against the background of this significant historical doctrine of identity that the radical call for “going beyond” is made. But how can you “go beyond” someone with whom an identity has been established? Any “going beyond” identity is a movement out of identity and into differentiation. For some, no doubt, the tension between these two incompatible doctrines was not noticed. Those who did notice, however, would have required some further adjustment in understanding to hold both of these ideas simultaneously. One strategy, because of its central place within classical Chinese thought generally, occurred to Zen Buddhists right away. The tension between the identity of transmitted mind and the call to “go beyond” the tradition by differentiating oneself could be relieved by calling upon a distinction between the “substance” (*t’i*) of mind and its “functional appearance” (*yung*). While the substance or essence of mind could be said to be identical between equally enlightened masters, the way this “awakening” functions in the world might differ significantly. Thus, while a subsequent master might behave, speak, and teach in ways quite distinct from an earlier master, having in those ways “gone beyond” him in

⁷ T. 48, p. 382a; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 50.

response to changed circumstances, nevertheless, their state of mind and experience could be held to be identical. Indeed, the character *yung* ("function") soon came to be used to refer more broadly to awakened behavior – in true Zen comportment, one sees the functional manifestation of enlightened mind, a sign of its very essence. Although these signs may change over time, it was thought that what they signify did not.

Had John Blofeld noticed the tension between these two teachings, he too would have sought some form of reconciliation. The repertoire of possibilities available in his own language and culture would have included a metaphysical structure analogous to the Chinese *t'i/yung* dichotomy. Given his background and education, Blofeld might have claimed that, whereas the (Aristotelian) substance or essence of Mind is always identical between Buddhas, its "accidental" manifestation in the realm of history would have been subject to change and differentiation. Therefore, while the essence of Mind is timeless, its temporal or historical "expressions" might be various. Hence, even though a successor's teaching may very well "go beyond" or differ from the predecessor's, this need not thereby cast doubt on the identity of its deeper essential source.

A version of this doctrine appears throughout Blofeld's writing wherever he addressed the question of the identity and difference between religions. Given Blofeld's background – a citizen of the worldwide British Empire and a romantic convert to "universal spirituality" – this question was destined to be of central concern. Rejecting what he perceived to be the excessive exclusivity of English religious traditions and its corresponding dogmatism, Blofeld joined a growing number of English speakers in embracing the Indian doctrine of the ultimate unity of all religions with respect to goals. Persuaded by the Indian model of religions as different paths to the same peak of transcendent experience, Blofeld would argue over and over that the apparent differences between religions are attributable to their employing variant historically derived means to reach the same ultimate end, whether they were able to articulate the matter this way or not.

This line of thinking is easily applicable to the question of apparent differences between Zen masters for whom an identity of enlightened mind had been posited. Although startling differences in language, demeanor, teaching, and practice are evident among the great masters of Zen, these differences are taken to be "accidental" rather than "essential" because they reflect variations in techniques of teaching called forth

by variant historical circumstances, but not a divergence in the state of mind from which the teaching issues.

Each of these doctrinal strategies – the Chinese essence/function dichotomy, the classical western substance/accident dichotomy – share a similar essentialist pattern. Each rests upon difficult-to-justify metaphysical grounds, and is thus vulnerable to contemporary anti-essentialist critique. In the wake of contemporary thought, none of these dichotomies now seems persuasive as a perspective from which arguments for the sameness of enlightened mind beyond historical appearances could be articulated. For this reason, the “going beyond” doctrine included in these Zen texts may have considerably more contemporary importance than traditional and modern interpreters have attributed to it. On this reading of Zen, the “mind” transmitted via “mind” would be best conceived, not as a timeless, ahistorical essence, but as a continually evolving, historical realization of successive generations’ highest aspirations.

We can begin to make this case by summarizing arguments against substance/accident or essence/function dichotomies, and then take up separately the related but somewhat different strategy of separating enlightenment as a “goal” from its various “means.” Our inclination to assume that all sorts of entities in the world – people, ideas, objects, institutions – have a deep structural essence upon which various historical causal factors operate is deep-seated. This is true of many Buddhists as well, in spite of the fact that this tradition was initiated on premises that mitigate against this view, and, moreover, in spite of the fact that forceful critiques of essentialism are found throughout the Buddhist canon. Nagarjuna and the Madhyamika lineage are the primary symbols for this general theme in Buddhist thought. We will return to this heritage shortly. But one of its arguments is still the best against an essence/attribute division. This is that whatever essence we locate can be shown to be dependent upon its various attributes; whatever we designate as central as opposed to peripheral can be dislodged or reversed by altering the angle from which it is seen. Any dependence of “substance” upon “accidents” reverses the figures, giving the posited substance a more “accidental” standing and making the “accidents” appear more substantial. If substance is dependent upon accidents, the tables have been turned, background shifts to the fore. Although in our everyday lives we do separate “essential” features from “peripheral” ones, nevertheless, we do so in finite, contextual, and contingent ways, as, for example, when we isolate what is essential to this particular issue,

within this particular time and context, and from these points of view, knowing, in principle, that changes in any of these stage-setting factors will alter the way "essence" appears. In the wake of "deconstruction," arguments like these have become common to our intellectual context – and persuasive. Although this realization in no way eliminates the necessity always placed upon us of finding what is "essential," it does fundamentally alter what we understand essence to mean.

An essence/function dichotomy, like the Chinese *t'i/ying* division, is a version of the same. It maintains that you can separate what something *is* from what it *does*. With respect to Zen, this strategy works to maintain an essence for enlightenment in the face of its changing appearances. The most serious problem that this strategy encounters is that it inevitably pushes the elusive "essence of enlightenment" out of the finite world into a transcendent realm about which nothing can be said because one encounters only its appearances in "the world," which are various and do change. We find Blofeld resorting to this move on numerous occasions. If the "ultimate transcendental experience" is the same in spite of difference in "expression", in spite of the fact that different experiencers in different traditions say and do very different things in response to "it," the only conclusion that remains is that its essence is unknowable. Unknowability, of course, makes claims about its identity and sameness tenuous. Following this track, one can still maintain, of course, as several traditions have in analogous ways, that essence is located elsewhere, in the realm of Ideas, in the mind of God, or in the sphere of nirvana. In a post-Kantian intellectual context, however, the difficulties entailed in legitimizing this metaphysical move appear to be insurmountable. Blofeld manages by ignoring the obstacles and attempting to switch intellectual contexts.

An alternative track, however, and the one being tested in this reading of Zen, is that we not make the initial metaphysical move of positing a timeless, transcendental experience, but rather, consider the possibility that all human experience is finite, historical, and open to transformation. Of all the possible candidates for which "timelessness" might be a tempting attribution, human experience is among the least likely. Just as experiencers change with alterations in context and circumstance, so does "experience." We "experience" in time, temporally, all the time. Temporality and experience are inseparable; neither can be found without the other. Even the experience of "timelessness"

occurs or fails to occur in time, its conditions “co-arising” with other factors in history.⁸

The metaphysical inclinations through which John Blofeld read Huang Po have clearly affected how Huang Po has been transmitted to us. The “footnotes” scattered throughout Blofeld’s translation of Huang Po provide interesting and excellent clues, indicating places in the text where Huang Po’s text has come into tension with Blofeld’s metaphysics. Wherever the text is “unclear,” wherever what it says must be given considerable allegorical assistance to put it into accord with Blofeld’s understanding of “the spirit of Zen,” a footnote is appended to straighten things out. Most of these footnotes are intended to keep his readers from following the text too literally down the wrong interpretive road. In the following passage, there may be good reason, given our revised “metaphysics,” to prefer a road Blofeld would not have considered:

Since the Tathagata entrusted Kasyapa with the Dharma until now, Mind has been transmitted with Mind, and these Minds have been identical . . . Thus Mind is transmitted with Mind and these Minds do not differ. Transmitting and receiving transmission are both a most difficult and mysterious understanding, so that few indeed have been able to receive it. In fact, however, Mind is not Mind and transmission is not really transmission.⁹

The final line in this passage problematizes everything said before it, so much so that it seems to reverse the very point just made. If “mind” and “transcendence” are somehow not themselves, then the status and character of “mind transmission” will not be graspable in its previous form. Blofeld responds to this interpretive dilemma with the following footnote appended to the troublesome concluding line. He writes: “This is a reminder that All terms used in Zen are mere makeshifts.”¹⁰

This footnote encourages us to read the troublesome passage as saying:

⁸ An interesting and historically important application of contemporary anti-essentialist history can be found in Foulk, “The Ch’an School.” Foulk’s thorough study of Chinese Zen institutions through the Sung concludes that, contrary to the many claims of Japanese Zen apologists, no essential, defining feature of Zen can be found. No practice, doctrine, genre, or institution remains to define the essence of Zen over time. Thus the tradition’s own radical “going beyond” has abandoned all essences. Nevertheless, Foulk allows one essence to slip away by dividing the whole into historical and “supra-historical” dimensions. According to his understanding, many dimensions of Zen can be studied historically, but enlightenment is “entirely beyond the scope of critical historiography” (p. 32). Although this division of “realms” has its advantages, such as delimiting the range of scientific research, the metaphysics required to make the division are currently untenable. Although Foulk’s historical research could hardly be more distinct from Blofeld’s romantic theology, nevertheless, both share the same modern metaphysics, on the basis of which history and the “transcendent” can be separated.

⁹ T. 48, p. 382a; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 50. ¹⁰ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 50.

"Keep in mind that real transmission and transcendent Mind – the actual referents of our language here – are not the same as, and not determinable by, whatever meaning these two terms may conjure up in your mind." This is so because, in Blofeld's words, "words belong to the realm of flux and illusion,"¹¹ which is separate from and transcended by the realm of "Mind" and "Transmission." It is not that Blofeld acknowledges no continuity between these two realms. There is an identity between them that Blofeld does see clearly. The connection is severely limited, however, and located in the priority given to the "other" side. The realm of eternity, for Blofeld, encompasses the realm of temporality – our world – but ultimately in such a way as to render it a mistake, an illusion that is subsumed into the overarching reality of timelessness. The two realms are heavily reified and, for the most part, non-dialectically related. They are not characterized by "co-arising," and "mutual penetration" is not their nature. Instead, one subsumes and cancels the other.

As the foregoing comments hint, the metaphysics behind Blofeld's interpretation of this passage are not typically "Buddhist," nor are they attractive in our current setting. In our context, "the spirit of Zen" points elsewhere, the minimal requirement "going beyond" a new set of footnotes. Our lead is supplied by Huang Po in the text's numerous claims that nirvana and samsara are not separate realms at all, and that all existants, including "mind" and the practice of "transmission," "originate dependent" upon other mutually dependent existants. Blofeld's footnote allows too easy an escape from a moment in the text where contradiction might invite our reading to focus. Can our replacement footnote invoke insight, or just further evasion of the power of Huang Po's mind?

Blofeld's gloss on this passage – a reminder that words and referents are distinct – follows his tendency to read Huang Po as a metaphysical dualist. His image of Huang Po has the master living in a transcendent world beyond the realm of time and space. As Blofeld puts it, "The state of Mind of an Illumined Man is independent of time-relationships."¹² On this view his Zen sermons are a hopeless attempt to reach back into our world, pointers which, by metaphysical location, cannot possibly do their job of pointing.

How else might we read the passage from Huang Po which so eagerly subverts the assertions leading up to it? Clues may be found in a better reading of the meaning of the Buddhist concept "emptiness." One plausible rule to consider in reading Zen is that when you find a blatant

¹¹ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 82. ¹² Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 131.

contradiction in the text, consult “emptiness” for guidance. Blofeld has done this. But for him, “emptiness,” “The Void,” has already been assimilated to his two-world metaphysics.¹³ This is accomplished in the Huang Po translation by dividing “emptiness” to fit the metaphysical dualism. “The Void” is divided into two parts, one for each metaphysical realm. Blofeld makes this explicit in a footnote: “A distinction is here made between ‘void’ in the sense of flux where all forms are seen in dissolution, and the Great Void which overspreads, penetrates and IS all.”¹⁴ Blofeld calls upon the English practice of capitalization to clarify what, to his metaphysics, is an untenable ambiguity within the one Chinese word *k’ung*, meaning “void” or “empty.” The “void” is samsara – the realm of history, culture, language, religion, philosophy, change, and finitude. The “Great Void” is nirvana – a realm lacking all of these human configurations. Given the Buddhist texts now available to us, however, this reading of Buddhist “emptiness” should no longer be persuasive, nor will it attract our interest in Zen as it did Blofeld’s. Taking another line of thought, we can read the two sides of Blofeld’s “void” as uniting on the side of the flux – the side on which impermanence and “dependent origination” necessitate a reality “empty” of static essence. As it was defined in chapter 2, the Mahayana concept of “emptiness” means the lack of own-being (*svabhava*) or self-nature (*tzu-hsing*); it calls for a perspective from which nothing – not mind, transmission, or emptiness itself – is reified, made permanent, or conceived to be independent of everything else. Emptiness, on this reading, is the Buddhist principle of finitude. It makes a claim about how things take on form and characteristics, and what this comes to mean over time.

Needless to say, this definition is “empty.” Buddhists in different contexts will have defined it differently and perhaps with more insight. Some Buddhists, like Blofeld, preferred something more substantial, with stronger “otherworldly” qualities. Chinese culture alone produced countless variant definitions. Other cultures tended to define it otherwise. From this perspective, however, many of these definitions tend heavily to reify “emptiness,” perhaps because, beyond its conceptual use, the experience of “emptiness” came to be identified with “nirvana” and the “Buddha.” When Buddhist sutras announce that nirvana is the

¹³ Naturally, since “non-dualism” was a doctrinal requirement in Buddhism, Blofeld considered himself a non-dualist. He argued, for instance, that the dichotomy between the pure and the impure (*Huang Po*, p. 117) was an illusion that must be overcome, and that the “great mystics of all ages” had done so. Nevertheless, from this perspective, Blofeld maintained other dualistic structures at the basis of his reading of Huang Po. ¹⁴ Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 75.

realization of emptiness, several interpretive possibilities are present. We can either subsume "nirvana" under the connotations of "emptiness," or "emptiness" under "nirvana," with results varying, of course, in accordance with how each has been understood. Under the latter conditions, to which Blofeld was a convert, "emptiness" – "The Great Void" – is deified and removed from the flux of this world. "Emptiness" comes to suggest another realm altogether different from this one, where temporality is unknown. We are led elsewhere, however, if we read "nirvana is emptiness" under the former conditions. In this case, "emptiness" leads to the practice of seeing "essences," including the "essence of nirvana," through the lens of their various conditions. In this light, relations, contingencies, and transformations come into view, and with them, the possibility of "going beyond."

With this second possibility in mind, let us reread Huang Po's blasphemous tribute to "mind-to-mind Transmission" along lines not open to Blofeld's view. Following a series of claims about the identity of mind through a differentiated process of transmission, the text says (still in Blofeld's words): "In fact, however, Mind is not Mind and transmission is not really transmission."¹⁵ This formula or pattern is common and central to many Mahayana Buddhist texts. It means: both "mind" and "transmission" are "empty," that is, neither are timeless, transhistorical entities. Like everything else in a contingent and finite world, "mind" and "transmission" arise and take particular shape in particular contexts and in relation to other religious, cultural, and physical factors. "Emptiness is form," as the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* have said, and form lacks both permanence and essence. Form continually reforms, "going beyond" its previous shape. If we read this Huang Po sermon as being engaged in the reflexive "deconstruction" of its own religious discourse, an effort to "break through" reification and hardened experience, we link it to the most common rhetorical theme in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*, the texts which initiated the Mahayana tradition in the first place. Such a reading seems both more suited to that particular religious context, and more attractive to our own current act of reading Zen.

One further strategy of dichotomy still exists, however, by means of which the call to "go beyond" the realization of former Zen masters can be subordinated to the theme of enlightenment as a pure, ahistorical, identity. This dichotomy separates enlightenment as an unchanging "end" from its various "means" which differ according to context. Thus

¹⁵ T. 48, p. 382a; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 50.

one might “go beyond” one’s predecessor in articulating new strategies for “inducing” or “expressing” enlightenment, while at the same time sharing the same mental state as one’s enlightened teacher. Of the various dichotomies discussed here, this one is perhaps the most plausible. It also has the added advantage of accord with the Mahayana principle of *upaya* or “skill-in-means,” one version of which stipulates that all doctrines and all practices are “empty means” (that is, contextually dependent strategies) toward the goal of enlightenment. Nevertheless, the means/ends dichotomy collapses as a foundation supporting the ahistorical essence of Mind – it too is “empty.” Even means and ends overlap, new means suggesting and making possible new ends and ends endlessly giving rise to novel means. Its “emptiness” here, the failure of each side of the means/ends dichotomy to remain fully separate from its opposite pole, can be articulated in any number of ways. The best-known Buddhist way was Nagarjuna’s, which has been restated over and over throughout the Buddhist tradition. This view maintains that if one side of the dilemma can only be defined in terms of its other, then each exists with the other at its very core. Its “essence” turns out to include non-essence, thus “emptying” the structure of polarity.¹⁶

This is one of logic’s ways beyond the means/ends dichotomy. History provides others, vantage points from which interdependence defines ends and means. From this perspective we see that not just the means but the end – enlightenment – has a history. The goals toward which Buddhists in the history of numerous cultures have striven are various and differentiated. Although Buddhist mythology tells us that there have been an “infinite” number of enlightened Buddhas, it is hard for us to think so. Historically conceived, enlightenment has a story of origins, no matter how complex and no matter how little of it we currently understand. The metaphors of “light” and the language of “waking up,” when brought together with sufficient cultural conditions, social practices, and proper timing, came to suggest the possibility that the human mind may be capable of more penetrating light, of a greater wakefulness and awareness, and more. As new practices were devised to actualize these possibilities, new conceptions of the goal and new experiences of it evolved. Our “use” of singular nouns like “enlightenment” and “awakening” disguise the cultural complexity of these processes, as does the brief narrative I have just told about “origins.” They entice us into reifying the concepts and separating them from the language, prac-

¹⁶ See *Mula Madhyamaka Karikas*, section XV.

tices, and histories that surround them. If this reading of Huang Po is helpful, then it is not just, with Blofeld's account, that words are historical and contingent, and therefore do not match reality which is not. It is rather that both are historical and contingent, the gap and boundary between them being structurally illusive. Not only does "reality" "go beyond" words, but also words "go beyond" reality. Of course, neither goes very far beyond the other, however, since "interpenetration" is their "nature."

The point I want to highlight here is that there is a crucial link between goals and means, especially when the goals are the highest aspirations of an entire culture. The link is such that any change in one will bring with it irresistible impetus for change in the other. Neither side can win the argument about which came first. "Enlightenment" came to be the goal of those who were already engaged in certain practices toward some prior goal. Once the goal was "enlightenment," however, certain old practices receded as being less appropriate while others emerged as the ones most capable of enabling its attainment. Changes in practice can in turn provide the context necessary for further articulations of the goal. The point here is that the "skillful means" and "expedient devices" employed by Buddhists to disseminate "enlightenment" into contexts of diversity had the additional effect of forcing "enlightenment" to "go beyond" itself in an accelerated historical development. As is true in every sphere of human culture, what we do in our quest for the ideal will inevitably have some effect on the very process of idealization.¹⁷

Our initial question was how to reconcile the call to "go beyond" the tradition with the concept of "identical enlightenment." Our conclusion thus far comes to this: this reconciliation cannot easily be made, and, more importantly, it need not and should not be made. The concept of the "sameness" of enlightenment within differentiated history contradicts many of the central concepts of the Buddhist tradition: impermanence, dependent origination, no-self, emptiness. Moreover, this contradiction is unnecessary since enlightenment or "transcendence"

¹⁷ "The very process of trying to obtain what one values may change what it is that one values" (MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, p. 41). MacIntyre helps us see why the issue before us cannot be handled by a "means-ends distinction according to which all human activities are either conducted as means to already given or decided ends or are simply worthwhile in themselves or perhaps both. What this framework omits from view are those ongoing modes of human activity within which ends have to be discovered and rediscovered, and means devised to pursue them; and it thereby obscures the importance of the ways in which those modes of activity generate new ends and new conceptions of ends" (*After Virtue*, p. 273).

can, and has, been conceived through the figures of “impermanence” and “emptiness” without obstructing its transcendent character. Instead, “transcendence” can be redefined in historical, and therefore, finite terms. For Blofeld, transcendence could not be finite, by definition in fact, because what it transcends is finitude itself. Having constructed an absolute transcendence, beyond space, time, causality, language, and history, how could this state possibly be transcended by future practitioners? Blofeld’s only option then was to link up with the text’s claim about the identity of mind within transmission and to ignore any claims about “going beyond.” As an alternative to this, we have explored the “going beyond” theme in Zen in an effort to conceive, in our terms, what a “historical” transcendence could mean, a “going beyond” that nevertheless remains in the world.

If transcendence is a historical phenomenon, found in historically constituted cultures among historical human beings, it would be subject to change and transformation under the influence of alterations in other factors and circumstances. Transmitted from one generation to the next through historical traditions, texts, and teachings, this experience, like any other, would lack an immutable, eternal essence. Taking its point of departure from past experience, any new experience of transcendence might go beyond its predecessor insofar as circumstances, thinking, practices, and human selves have changed. Understood along these lines, tradition is a living medium, every dimension of which grows, changes, and recedes in relation to other dimensions and surrounding historical circumstances. It is the tradition’s “nature” always to be “different,” to “go beyond” itself by considering each new realization – each “going beyond” – as one historical potentiality contained within tradition itself.¹⁸

It is possible that the “going beyond” doctrine in Zen is a product of the realization that the tradition had in fact changed in spite of its occasional claims to immutability. It is true that the expectation in the tradition was that “transmission” would occur only at those points where each new Zen master had attained an “original” experience – his or her own – rather than a replication of someone else’s. The “transcendence” that is “transmitted” would not be a “repetition” in the sense of a reduplication of historical precedence. It would instead repeat prior transcendence in that an “original” experience is undergone. If the teacher’s experience was his own, an original, so must the student’s be

¹⁸ “It is the tradition’s essence always to be different” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 110).

in order to equal it. It is perhaps in this sense that Pai-chang tells Huang Po that transmission will occur only in the act of "going beyond" precedent and tradition. Similarly, the *Transmission of the Lamp* has Huang Po say: "[I]f one does not actually realize the truth of Zen from 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?"¹⁹

Attempting to clarify this matter generations later, the text lets Zen master Kuei-shan ask: "'Tell me, how did Huang Po get it (this marvelous awakened character)? Naturally, or did he get it from someone?'" Yang-shan said: 'It is both the inheritance of his teacher's bequest and his own communion with the source.' Kuei-shan said: 'So it is!'"²⁰ Is Huang Po's power an inheritance, or is it an original discovery? Both, since in principle these two sources amount to the same: what the teacher teaches is how to commune with the source on one's own. Since it is "on one's own," however, and since new historical circumstances surround each individual's encounter with the tradition, each new "transcendence" must in certain respects "go beyond" its predecessors. The "tradition," therefore, is not best conceived as an inert deposit, a sealed package passed on from one generation to the next. Such a unilateral conception of history fails to recognize its reciprocal character. The tradition does provide the "pretext," the point of departure from which the text of the tradition of "transcendence" is to be rewritten, but the operation only makes sense "dialectically" as an exchange between the interpreted past and the interpreting present, the old and the new.²¹ Perhaps this is how we should understand the explanation given for Ma-tsu's reception of his teacher's "transmission of mind": Nan-yueh says, "Ma-tsu, among all my disciples, deserves my mind, for he excels in the old and the new."²² To excel in the old, without managing to "go beyond" it, is to fail in the new – the present – where, in fact, we live. The obverse implication is clear as well: you cannot excel in the new aside from deep appropriation of what has been. As earlier Chinese Buddhist thought (T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen) had made clear, there is no

¹⁹ T. 51, p. 266; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 105. ²⁰ T. 51, p. 266.

²¹ For this same reason, Yanagida is overzealous in his claims about the "originality" of Zen. He writes that the "Zen school" was "a new creation, based on its own original experience which negates all preexistent organization and values. The formation of the *zenshu* as a 'separate transmission outside the teachings' means that the Chinese cast away the borrowed clothing they had been given by the Indians, and created a wardrobe that fit their own constitution" (*Zen no goroku* vol. II, *Shoki no zenshu*, trans. Foulk, "The Ch'an School," p. 25). The metaphor of "tradition" as "clothing" had led Blofeld to similar conclusions in which tradition, language, and history are removable at will rather than constitutive of the self.

²² T. 51, p. 241a; Pas, *The Recorded Sayings of Ma-tsu*, p. 49.

dwelling in the present without the full presence there of the past and future.

This reciprocal relationship between past and present is the source of much paradox in the Zen tradition. Paradoxically, Huang Po can be faithful to his teacher and to the tradition only by freely revising their legacies. Only by redescribing what “Zen” means in such a way as to accommodate issues raised by the present can he truly “pass on” the Zen tradition. Given ongoing temporality, only by re-imagining, re-describing, and re-experiencing Zen “enlightenment,” will it continue to be considered “enlightening.”²³

Some degree of transcendence, or “going beyond,” will occur to us whether we want it or not. History, in effect, hurls us beyond, not so much against our will as by shaping our wills.²⁴ We can see that John Blofeld was himself one instrument of the relentless “going beyond” of English culture. He and a few others in his generation went beyond the forms of religion previously available in their culture. Why was this; how did it occur? Blofeld’s own explanation (like ours) is a symptom of history’s effects on him. As a modernist, he understands the matter individually, not collectively or historically. As a romantic, he makes every effort to understand the matter through the categories of the “other,”

²³ In an odd form of historical awareness, Zen interpreter Thomas Hoover has written that “in effect, Huang Po laid it all out, cleared the way, and defined Zen once and for all . . . With his death at the midpoint of the ninth century, there was little more to be invented” (*The Zen Experience*, p. 131). In the most important sense, this is clearly false. Zen was just getting going when Huang Po arrived on the scene. Massive development occurred within the tradition beyond this point. There is, however, an interesting truth to Hoover’s remarks. There is a sense in which Chinese Zen did become conservative several centuries later, making itself less relevant to current developments in Chinese culture. The tradition seemed to have lost its vibrant capacity to change, to adapt, and to “go beyond” itself. The cultural avant-garde in China moved elsewhere to a resurgent Neo-Confucian tradition and beyond, and Zen ceased to be a major player in Chinese history. This was the situation to which Blofeld was responding when he wrote that we must “hasten . . . to preserve the essence of Buddhism for the West before most of the traditional links are broken or weakened beyond repair” (*The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 14). Unless this “essence” includes the capacity to go beyond prior essences, however, it would not be worth preserving.

²⁴ The “going beyond” of history sometimes takes on radical proportions. Just prior to its famous “Long March,” Mao Tze-tung and the “Red Army” occupied the Buddhist monastery on Mount Huang Po which it held as a base of operations for many years, making it, in a sense, a sacred place in an entirely different lineage. This history, however, did not prevent Huang Po monastery from being destroyed decades later in the Cultural Revolution. With its bricks and stones, a new building was erected on the same site to house the newly formed “Huang Po Production Brigade.” Red banners now displayed a new lineage of ancestors: Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao. With appropriate symbolism, only the well-spring of the original monastery remains. Locals, however, now dream of rebuilding the monastery, seeking Huang Po’s help in “going beyond” the deficiencies of the communist present. The story of transformation on Mount Huang Po is far from over.

such as karma, rebirth, and other mysteries of "Oriental wisdom." Therefore he asks: "How could my chosen mode of life or even my presence there in Sikkim, under such circumstances, be explained in the light of my upbringing and family background, except as the logical result of trends stretching back past my birth?" Having included the answer in the question, he goes on to explicate: "During my earliest years there had been outwardly nothing, however tenuous, to connect me with the Path, nothing to link me even remotely with any aspect of Asia."²⁵

The explanation that he is experimenting with here is karma and reincarnation. He has found himself in Asia, a converted Buddhist, not for any reasons having to do with family background and other "external" affairs, but rather due to his individual past – previous lives. The experiment is just the one he should have been performing, probing and testing the "other's" cultural proclivities with an openness of mind, a desire to learn. Nevertheless, what it blocks from his view is an important realization, one that might also be attainable and understandable through less individualistic readings of karma and rebirth. What he does not see, given his experiment, is the historical inevitability that when the British Empire expanded to include "Asia," the results would be reciprocal, each converting the other. When Blofeld says that his conversion was "the logical result of trends stretching back past my birth," his meaning – individualized karma – is encompassed by larger historical developments, "trends" which would make "Buddhism" irresistible and persuasive to certain "individuals" in England. Blofeld was not just a convert, he was an instrument of conversion, his writings helping to turn the tide of history just as he had been turned by it. Precisely *in* the writings of Blofeld, English culture "went beyond" itself. No matter how we understand his "past lives," larger developments set the stage for Blofeld's journey to Asia and his conversion to Buddhism, making possible his place in history. This is the "mystery of transmission" that now summons our reflection.

The Zen doctrine of "historical transcendence," or "going beyond" the tradition as received, is based upon radical insight into other Buddhist principles: impermanence, dependent origination, no-self, and emptiness. Although the tradition did not always affirm this doctrine, and often contradicted it, nonetheless, the fact that it is there at all is intriguing, and impressive. Overcoming the tradition, "going beyond" it, differing from it – these are the tradition's own demands, not something

²⁵ Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 18.

counter to it or outside its parameters.²⁶ Simply to agree with the tradition, to obey its current form, is to fail to receive the “transmission.” It is to be “ungrateful,” as the *Transmission of the Lamp* put it.²⁷ This form of reflection can only derive from a deep sense of historicity; it implies the radically temporal thesis that who we are as human beings is historical through and through. History is conceived here not so much as a force that acts upon our human essence from outside but rather as something closer at hand, something beyond which we will not go. It is true that only a few exceptional Buddhists were ever willing to face this realization in a thorough-going way. Most preferred that it apply to things of “this world” but not of the transcendent realm of Buddhas, nirvana, and mind-to-mind transmission. Nevertheless, whoever the Master of Mount Huang Po was, he may have been one of these few. “Mind is not Mind and transmission is not really transmission.” Reading Zen in this context, therefore, requires that we too raise the question of what it means to live historically. And when we do, we must also ask: how does the call to “go beyond” also apply to us in the context of reading Zen?

²⁶ The difference, it seems to me, between the Zen doctrine of “going beyond” and the romantic “anxiety of influence” as articulated by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* is that the romantic “horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica” leads to a sense that the most significant achievement is to distance yourself from the tradition, that what you overcome in yourself is the tradition. In Zen, precisely because self-overcoming was the tradition’s own demand, such overcoming was considered an act of piety, an act of paying off a debt to the tradition which has made transcendence possible. Transcendence derives from the tradition and is posited in history as a reciprocal gift back to the tradition. Transcendence does not require distance if you *are* the tradition and if, through you, the tradition moves ahead with every excursion you make. ²⁷ T. 51, p. 291.