

# Zhongfeng Mingben's Illusory Man

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#### Introduction

This is, as far as I know, the first translation into English of Mingben's teaching titled *Illusory Abode's Instructions*, (幻住家訓). The "Illusory Abode" is both Mingben's dwelling, the name he used for anywhere he was living, as well as Mingben's name<sup>[1]</sup> for his own person:

After ten days of being ill, there was someone who came to call on the Master. The Master said, "As for the Abode of Illusory Abiding— the roof leaks, the sides have holes, the fence is caving in, and the walls are collapsing. I cannot live here long!" He spoke and smiled as usual. (Heller, 2014, p.57)

This text is his instruction on the matter of Zen, whatever that might be. It is not the only writing of Mingben's by any stretch. Heller notes that Mingben wrote several fascicles during his lifetime and afterward his students collected various sayings as well:

- "1. Questions on Authenticating the Mind and Debating Views in the Śūraṃgamasūtra"
- 2. Explicating the Meaning of the Inscription on the Faithful Mind
  - 3. Night Talks from the Mountain Lodge
- 4. One hundred poems imitating Hanshan. Collectively these are called 'One Flower, Five Leaves'.
  - 5. The General Meaning of the Diamond Sūtra
  - 6. Alternative Transmission of the Mind of Awakening
  - 7. Conversations East and West

8. His disciples collected the writings the Master left behind, and called them "Continued Collection of Conversations East and West" in two fascicles; his Recorded Words in ten fascicles, and Alternate Record in ten fascicles." (Heller, 2014, p.65)

None of that has been translated, of course, but the generous Mr. Dufficy translated this for us, and in doing so gave us a glimpse into the Zen record extending into the 1300's.

## Why this book?

Mingben has a special place in history simply because of when he lived and how Zen is represented in the West over the last half century. This text is a rebuke of the claim that Zen "evolved" into Japanese Buddhism; the next pages will confirm this.

The Sayings Texts tradition continued to grow from the earliest Sayings of the late 500's. Built on top of these were commentaries by Masters, and built on top of those were instructional commentaries. These books of instruction written by Zen Masters, include Wansong's *Book of Serenity*, Yuanwu's *Blue Cliff Record* and *Measuring Tap*, and of course the oft mistitled *Wumen's Checkpoint*, which you may know as *Gateless Gate*.

Around this time, in Japan, Dogen invented the practice of Zazen in his book titled *FukanZazenGi*. We now know that Dogen's new religion had no connection to Rujing's teaching as proven by Rujing's *Sayings* and the excellent scholarship of Stanford's Carl Bielefeldt. But scholarship has yet to catch up with Dogen's Dogenism which still claims to be Rujing's Soto Zen.

Which brings us to Mingben's *Instructions of the Illusory Abode*. Written about a hundred years after Dogen by a Chinese Zen Master, we see the Zen tradition hasn't changed at all over previous the eight hundred years since Bodhidharma. Mingben presumably wrote commentary on Cases elsewhere, but in *Instructions of the Illusory Abode* Mingben's references to Zen history, as you will discover, are teasingly subtle, and written for an audience of serious Zen practitioners who do much more than practice sitting, as if anyone needed the practice since the invention of the chair.

Mingben's Zen students practiced looking into mind, examining themselves, their consciences, their conduct, their beliefs

and intentions.

I urge you to do the same.

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## 1. Illusory Man

An illusory man went into an illusory room one day, sat down in an illusory seat and took up an illusory fly whisk<sup>[2]</sup>, and then all his illusory disciples gathered around him in a cloud. They asked him, why are pine trees straight? And why are brambles tangled? And why are swans white? And why are crows black?

The illusory man raised up his whisk to hush the flock, and answered them:

This is my illusory whisk. When I raise it up, it isn't 'up' in and of itself, it relies on illusion to be 'up.' When I set it down, it isn't 'down' in and of itself, it relies on illusion to be 'down.' When I grasp it in my hand, it isn't 'grasped' in and of itself, it relies on illusion to be 'grasped.' And when I drop it, it isn't 'dropped' in and of itself, it relies on illusion to be 'dropped.'

Study this illusion. It's like a silk thread woven throughout all ten directions; past present and future teem with it. Held up when it's not held up. Set down when it's not set down. Grasped when it's not grasped. Dropped when it's not dropped. It's as if knowing was finished, the cave's entrance unobstructed.

Obviously, the light of illusion makes pine trees straight, makes brambles tangled, makes swans white, makes crows black. If we could extricate sight from illusion, so that pines weren't fundamentally straight, brambles weren't originally tangled, and swans weren't basically white, how could a crow be black?

幻人一日據幻室、依幻座、執幻拂時,諸幻弟子俱來雲集,有 問:"松緣何直?棘緣何曲?鵠緣何白? 烏緣何玄?"幻人竪起拂子, 召大眾曰: "我此幻拂, 竪不自竪, 依幻而竪。 橫不自橫, 依幻而拈。 放不自放, 橫。 拈不自拈, 依幻而放。 竪時非竪, 百十方, 充塞三際, 横時非横, 拈時非拈, 洞無障礙。 便見松依幻直, 棘依幻曲, 如是了知, 鵠依幻白, 烏依 幻玄。 離此幻見, 松本非直, 棘元無曲, 鵠既不白,

#### 2. This Illusion is Invisible

Know that this illusion is a blindness invisible to the eyes, it gives birth to the illusion of sight, it submerges you in your own concepts where illusory distinctions first begin. You see 'straight' as 'not crooked,' and point to 'white' as that which is 'not black.' With all your stratagems and methods, you grasp perversely at your own nature [3] and you are born: this is the order ever since the dawn of time, this is bondage in the cycle of life and death.

This is what made the old ascetics, their eyes intolerant of sight, involve themselves up on snowcapped mountains with the composition of medicines for leaving your mother's womb. They made it easy to take seven steps like [Zen Master] Buddha did when he was born; to get your eyes to see in all four directions; to point at the ground and point at the sky; to get terribly frightened over little peculiarities; to pass a hundred, or ten million, or a hundred million kalpas realizing the basis of the supreme truth; to practice purifying people that you might ascend to the ranks of the bodhisattvas.

It's a strange way to establish a study, in complete disorder with practically nothing left, when regardless illusory phenomena are utterly without gain or loss. As the venerable Yunmen<sup>[4]</sup> said, "if I'd seen the Buddha then, I would have killed him with a single blow of my club in the hope of bringing great peace to all under heaven."

當知此幻,翳汝眼根而生幻見,潛汝意地起幻分別。見直非曲,指白非玄,徧計諸法,執性橫生,曠古迨令,纏縛生死。由是累及雪山大沙門,眼不耐見,方出母胎,便乃周行七步,目顧四方,指地指天,大驚小怪,將過去百千萬億劫所證底第一義諦,向諸人淨潔田地上。狼藉殆盡,審如是奇特建立,要且於幻法了無加損。老雲門謂'當時若見,一棒打殺,貴圖天下太平'。

## 3. Illusory Hand, Illusory Flower

Paint it yellow and call it gold<sup>[5]</sup>, but you're just birthing an illusion on top of another illusion.

At each of the more than three hundred assemblies where the Buddha taught, over the course of forty-nine years, he was asked only illusory questions and gave only illusory answers. And still, it set the world on fire with scriptures, set the echoes of his voice boiling and galloping all over the place. His illusion of 'sudden' and his illusion of 'gradual,' his illusion of 'partial' and his illusion of 'perfected' – set them all aside, don't talk about them.

When he used his illusory hand to twirl an illusory flower<sup>[6]</sup>, saying "I possess the true dharma eye, the exquisite heart-mind of nirvana," and tore straight through old Kasyapa's worn-out illusory face, placing that burden on his shoulders: just like that, one man passed his vanity on to ten thousand people, propagating the seed of his particular illusory illusion that it might be passed back and forth from one person to another incessantly and forever.

雖則增金以黃,其柰又添一重幻翳。當時四十九年,三百餘會,彼以幻問,此以幻答,文彩熾盛,音響沸騰。其幻頓幻漸,幻偏幻圓,且置之勿論,末上以幻手拈幻花,謂'吾有正法眼藏,涅槃妙心',直得老飲光擘破幻顏,兩肩負荷,自爾一人,傳虛萬人,傳實幻幻,相因授受不已。

# 4. Pacifying Illusory Mind

Bodhidharma going to Shaolin and staring at an illusory wall, pacifying somebody's illusory mind<sup>[7]</sup>. People repenting illusory sins, disentangling illusory bonds, asking after an illusory family name. Writing illusory poems, polishing illusory tiles<sup>[8]</sup>, dangling illusory feet over illusory wells<sup>[9]</sup>, hanging up illusory whisks. Boxing illusory ears, giving illusory slaps with their illusory hands like madmen out to fight the wind. Producing illusory shouts, as if clear blue heaven could ever thunder with anger. Even lecturing on illusory 'functions' and illusory 'guests' and illusory 'hosts,' getting all mixed up about 'killing' and 'giving life<sup>[10]</sup>,' trying on a thousand attitudes and ten thousand ways of being. Not one of them ever caught a glimpse of his own shores.

Right now, all the various directions have no special appearance. Old monks who pass through gates<sup>[11]</sup> and inherit schools: they succeed to nothing; they are heirs to an echo. They just choose some illusion out of the treasury of illusions they've gathered from the world, and they plant it at the gates of their mouths. For all their lectures on scripture, the cleverness of their contrivances, the loftiness of their demeanors, the easiness of their rhymes, the strictness of their proclamations, the greatness of their schools – not one of them can come forth out of the illusory.

至少林面幻壁,安幻心,懺幻罪,解幻縛,問幻姓,書幻偈,磨幻磚,垂幻足,掛幻拂,聾幻耳,摑幻掌,就中引出箇掣風顛漢,施一幻喝,如青天怒雷,乃至幻照、幻用、幻賔、幻主,縱橫交錯,與奪殺活,態千狀萬,莫窺其涯。迨今諸方無面目,老比丘出其門,嗣其宗,承虛接響,置一幻於口門,藏諸幻於量外,文其言、巧其機、高其風、逸其韻、峻其令、大其家,更無有一人能出其幻者。

#### 5. Ambrosia and Ghee

Illusion, in its delicious completeness, its righteous provision, its profound substance, its scrupulous operation — all the ancient Buddhas mutually befriended it forever. Not in as many kalpas as there are motes of dust on the Earth could it be exhausted. When you're in it, there is no understanding this all-pervading illusion using the words of someone trying to involve themselves in its outer garments.

Maybe a certain teacher is supposed to be able to expound Zen simply and clearly. Maybe another teacher is supposed to be able to expound Zen thoroughly and vividly. Maybe according to them Zen is about becoming lofty and venerable, or becoming perilous and steep, or becoming exquisite and intimate, or using beautiful language, or being rude and violent, or expending no effort. They esteem and emulate their betters; they despise and reject their inferiors. They pass off their artifices as the genuine article by skillfully forging positions of authority, piping their warped tunes throughout their fiefdoms.

They pore over today's rumors, they nourish today's quarrels, they rebel against today's moralities, they drown in today's breezes. Vomiting up some familiar phrase, trotting out some holy writ – scarcely do they realize the profound penetration of the past generations is just the scholars' own all-pervading illusion. 'Simply and clearly' is illusory. 'Thoroughly and vividly' is illusory. 'Lofty and venerable,' 'exquisite and intimate' – just illusions. Beautiful language, rudeness, violence, expending no effort – this is all just natural outflow from the middle of a vast, wheeling illusion.

It wheels everywhere, at every point, it's like a river bursting a dam, like wind twisting in empty space, unrelated to any conceivable through-line or design. There, picking and choosing<sup>[12]</sup> are utterly absent, devices and vessels are naturally appointed everywhere according to their capacities then destroyed again a moment later.

If the people of ancient times had harbored a single atom of themselves apart from their sentiments and circumstances, smothering something that, instead, ought to fasten their responses to the demands of a situation<sup>[13]</sup>; and then they had tried to take part in the disordered poisons of the world bereft of any way to distinguish among them – how could they have had anything to say about ambrosia and ghee? Don't you see?

幻乎其旨圓、其義備、其體大、其用周,與諸佛祖相為始終,盡塵沙劫不可窮盡,間有未能了此大幻於言象之表者。或以某師說禪簡明,或以某師說禪圓活,或以孰為高古,或以孰為峭峻、孰為細密、孰為文彩、孰為粗暴、孰為不工,尚其優而效之,鄙其劣而棄之,亂真機於巧偽之場,屈要旨於笙簧之域。見聞日博,是非日滋,大義日乖,真風日墜。殊不知前輩深達大幻之士,凡吐一辭、出一令,其簡明也是幻,圓活也是幻,高古也是幻,細密也是幻,至若直捷、文彩、粗暴、不工等,咸自廣大幻輪中流出。此幻輪一轉,如水就決,似風行空,逈絕安排,了無揀擇,隨機任器,殺活臨時。使古人存一點分別取捨之情,潛於隨扣隨應之間,則與雜毒無以異也,豈甘露醍醐之謂哉?

# 6. No Wings

And then there's the type who thinks they need an encyclopedic knowledge of every Zen book, every sutra, hoping that somewhere in their reading they'll happen across the founder's actual purpose in coming from the West<sup>[14]</sup>, assiduously perfecting their real true Dharma until it's ready to be announced to the world. Haven't they read 'not in the written word'? Is 'the way of pointing people straight back to their own minds' just tortured pedantry<sup>[15]</sup>?

If it's important to you to enter this Great Illusory Dharma Gate, just ask your whole body to enter straight down into it. [16] You won't have a single thousandth of a trace of an obstruction left. And if somebody follows on your heels, making hypotheses and critiques, he's already wavered: chasing around words absolutely cannot produce an understanding. He'll say: 'Every single thing is illusory, everything is met in its original completeness. But I only sit there blindly swatting at it, trying to cut it off [17]. Is there some special effort that I'm able to make? Any gate or road to seek?'

And it's hard, being that way. Struggling against the passions that girdle your mind, sinking down into a nest made of weeds. Trying to act like other people from long ago only strips them of their eyes. You end up as far from those people as heaven is from earth, and you don't have wings.

更有人將箇禪冊子廣讀博記,欲契祖師西來意,却成實法流布,豈不立文字、直指人心之道果如是迂曲耶?若是真實要證此大幻法門,便請全身直入直下,更無一絲毫障礙。苟或脚跟擬議,意地躊躇,切不可隨語生解,道:'一切是幻,本來見成,我但拍盲坐斷,更別有甚麼工夫可做、門路可求?'是則固是,爭柰你依情帶識,墮在草窠,欲較他古人獨脫悟明,不翅天地懸隔。

## 7. Abiding Awareness

What it's really like is Xiangyan hearing a stone strike a hollow stalk of bamboo<sup>[18]</sup>; like Lingyun seeing peach blossoms<sup>[19]</sup>; like Taiyuan hearing a gong<sup>[20]</sup>; like Dongshan crossing over the river<sup>[21]</sup>. That's how people steal their minds away from death: cunning left out of the matter entirely, active and passive functions all used up, gain and loss completely forgotten, like empty space enfolding empty space, like water mixed with water. Not a show of strength, not an exercise in stillness, not blindly swatting at it – just a moment of unwitting unconscious abiding awareness, all the earth off the root.

Just being the way you naturally are – whether you're talking or keeping quiet, moving around or sitting still<sup>[22]</sup> – and not ornamenting it with lots of branches and leaves: this is the great gate to freedom. But to ford that river your idealist philosophies must be dead, your familiarities forgotten, your dispositions vanished, your opinions withered away. Somebody with half a speck of an idea of his own mind can't get there. You can pretend that by your thirst for comparison to the old masters, past leaks into present, the boundaries of words and images are overthrown, and in an ocean of perfect tranquility you take their hands into yours. But it's like comparing a glow-worm to the sun. You just aren't in the same category.

只如香嚴擊竹,靈雲見桃,太原聞角,洞山過水,如此輩皆是偷心 泯絕,脫落知解,能所兩盡,得失俱忘,如空合空,似水投水,既非 強勉安許拍盲,乃於不知不覺處脫落根塵。

自然語默動靜,不帶枝葉,此是大解脫門,惟心死識忘、情消見謝者乃能涉入。或半點心意識不盡,縱使透過古今、超越言象,欲與古人握手於真寂之海,何異螢光之附太陽,非其類也。

#### 8. Rely on Illusion

These days, to deal with all kinds of different people in each hour and season, you can't just talk a little about expedients and then stop for a nap.

You need to pick up a pen five times the size of Mount Sumeru and dip it in an inkwell four times deeper than the ocean. Then, turn to the eastern continent of Purvavideha and strike and fall [ $\leq$ ]; retreat to the southern continent of Jambudvipa and steal around the corner [ $\vee$ ]; calmly receive the northern continent of Uttarakuru with a single dash [ $\times$ ]; then turn your broken knife to the Western continent of Avaragodaniya [*i.e. the character for 'knife'*  $\mathcal{D}$  broken in half]. This is what is required of you to draw the single character for 'illusion'.[23]

Then you are hung exhausted from its peak before each of the ten empty directions, a sign to the great earth and to all the people there with eyes to see, with ears to hear, with bodies to feel, with thoughts to explain. Then you'll know that the Buddhas of the distant past have already realized their extinction within this illusion. The perfect enlightenment of the Buddha of the present is within this illusion. All the Buddhas of the future will unfold the eye of the true dharma within this illusion. The profusion of bodhisattvas, innumerable as atoms, arrive by means of this illusion and they are inseparable from this illusion.

It is the observation of the six perfections of character, the application of the four modes of discernment, the salvation of sentient beings, the breaking of the bonds of suffering. Even among the infinite procession of sages, there isn't a single one who doesn't rely on this illusion to perform their miracles and seize mastery of themselves.

今日既是與諸人應箇時節,不可只與麼說了便休,借五須彌筆,蘸 四大海水,向東弗于逮打箇直落,復於南贍部洲轉箇曲角,徐於北鬱 單越著一點,轉向西瞿耶尼亞箇半刀,懸向盡十方虛空之頂,使大地 人有眼者見、有耳者聞、有身者覺、有意者解,乃知過去佛久遠於此 已證涅槃,現在佛今各於斯成等正覺,未來佛將於其中開正法眼,以 至微塵數諸菩薩各各不離當處,修六度,運四心,度眾生,斷苦縛, 乃至無邊聖賢更無有一人,不依此幻具大神變而獲自在者。

#### 9. How Could You?

What can be done for people who all day long tear themselves open, whirl themselves around, looking high and low, in activity and quiescence and speech and silence, their eyes catching on everything incessantly? They just don't understand that there's no boundary between the holy sages and Buddha patriarchs and the infinite world of things. They turn the wheel in vain, their country slides willingly into the sea.

But now, just for you, I've broken my image from its mold and calmly placed it on the platter of my palm; I've held myself up like a word already spoken. Just invite your whole body to enter straight into this lesson, so that everywhere is as distinct as a brushstroke, everywhere is easily and utterly visible. Befriend the Buddhas of past, present, and future. All the successive generations of patriarchs have been in tacit agreement on this matter, coming out the same way, sinking in the same way – and was there anything that hindered or obstructed them? As long as you can still see and hear, how could you get hung up on merit?

奈何諸人終日折旋俯仰,動靜語默,觸目無間,剛不自悟,將謂與他聖賢佛祖有無邊法界之所間隔,自甘陸沉,徒受輪轉。今日特為你起模畫樣,和盤托出,如前所云,便請全身直入直教,一切處點畫分明,一切處受用成現,與三世佛、歷代祖契理契事,同出同沒,更有何物為障為礙,而尚存觀聽、猶滯功勛者哉?

#### 10. Great Illusory Dharma Gate

Underlying past and present is illusion, this single Buddha, this single Patriarch. If you don't pass through this Great Illusory Dharma Gate to capture wisdom and liberation, you won't find another place.

I will tell you everything there is to know about the phenomenal world: there is no past, there is no present, and among all things that feel and all things that don't, if there were a single one not involved with the Great Illusory Dharma Gate, and yet which could be born and live and change and die, there wouldn't be any place for it to exist.

Know that illusion is neither holy nor ordinary; illusion is not one thing or another. Within this terrible illusion there is no meeting with wisdom and liberation, no meeting with birth and life and change and death.

Everything is illusion and is fulfilled by illusion. It isn't something you can replicate or dissect or part from or starve to death. It is not a strength, it is not a discussion. It is only the suchness<sup>[24]</sup> of things. The pure autumn dew is above all your machinations, you cannot shake it off.

古今之下,如有一佛一祖,不由此大幻法門而獲菩提解脫者,無有是處。更教你知盡法界內,無古無今,但有情無情等,如有一物不依此大幻法門而具生住異滅者,亦無有是處。當知幻無聖凡,幻無彼此,了得此幻,在彼不見有菩提涅槃,在此不見有生住異滅。一切幻幻圓滿,無二無分,無別無斷故。非是強言,法如爾也,苟或於此,未能脫白露淨,全機超入。

#### 11. Keep Going

Don't get distracted, and don't be careless. Just make your body into a hunk of iron and make your mind into a stone, break one life into two lives, get to a place where all the meaningless remnants are heaped together at the bottom, and the matter at hand rises to the top. Stop swatting at it blindly: square your feet on the ground, fill your mind with furious intent, and confront it, pushing until it feels like you're just about to die. Precisely when that moment arrives, you absolutely must not turn away to meditation or doctrine: don't try to get away from it or account for it.

It's like banging your head against a silver mountain, it's like running up against an iron wall, you're left with nothing to chew on but that flavorless meaningless indestructible matter, there is no other thought upon which to crouch.

The mind hangs in suspension. It's like leaning out over a tenthousand-foot cliff, like standing on top of a hundred-foot pole there's nothing in front to catch hold of and nobody behind you to help. But take hold of the teachings, use them to steady yourself, and just keep going with diligence and determination.

且不要忽忽草草,但辦取一片鐵石身心,拌取一生兩生,向所条底 無義味話頭上,拍盲立定丁字脚頭,心憤憤地,與之抵捱將去。正當 抵捱時,都不要你向禪道佛法上,別求解會。只如撞著銀山鐵壁相 似,除却箇齩嚼不破底無義味話頭之外,更無第二念蹲坐。其懸懸之 心,如措足於百尺竿上,著脚於萬仞崖巔,前無可攀,後無可援,但 與麼把教定、靠教穩,孜孜兀兀,只如是去。

#### 12. Enter The Gate Abruptly

Understand that the Great Illusory Dharma Gate is right at the soles of your feet and has never moved a single hair. You just need for your delusions to be snuffed out, for your point of view to end. When you take a false step and trample on your attachments, then you'll know that Taiyuan heard a gong at the same moment Dongshan crossed his river, and there will be no separation between us.

When you get here to the place where the Great Illusory Dharma Gate is entered, kick it over with a single kick. Don't preserve your footprints: only then can you be ten feet tall. An emancipated person must be able to enter the gate abruptly. If you drift through life frivolously with your mind always in a single revery of delight, then obviously you're still taking part in yesterday's bewilderments.

This matter is not explained thoroughly, and then you rest easy. Nor is it something you finish seeing, and then you can take a break. It is done incessantly and without deviation, from beginning to end.

When you're ten feet tall, you don't cling to a single truth like it's a fish basket. Being adequate only to the burden of the Buddha's teachings is just sowing weeds. Even at this very moment the truth of the Way is not an antique; people's minds are just lazy and idle. They may behave like teachers and behave like disciples but really, they just seek to balance one another's accounts. Day and night they entice each other with appearances, when they ought to be building a single belly for Zen, the Way, the Buddhadharma. There, life and death are the family treasure. It hasn't ever yielded its dwelling high up on the cliff, and if it's cut off behind, it just comes around again rejuvenated.

當知大幻法門在你脚底,不曾移易一絲毫。只待你情消見盡,蹉步踏著,則知太原聞角、洞山過水之時節,不我隔也。到此,更須和箇所入底大幻法門,一踢踢翻,不留联迹,始是丈夫。脫或乍得入門,

苟存一念歡喜之心,依舊與昨日之迷無間然也。此事不是說了便休,亦不是見了便休,直須始終。丈夫不受一法籠罩,方堪為荷負大法之真實種草。邇來法道不古,人心懈怠,為師為徒,彼此只求解會,日夕相誘,築得一肚禪道佛法。其如生死命根,不曾於懸崖撒手處,絕後再穌一回。

## 13. Apprehend Your Own Soul

Falling into the middle of an ocean of wickedness, not knowing anything: that is sincere compassion<sup>[26]</sup>. Is there a map for studying the Way and taking part in Zen? The root of the throne's strength is not gotten from someone else. It's in your refusal to be ignorant of yourself – that is the first cause in Zen. Then you'll have the good fortune not to fall in with all those diseased deceivers. Those who refuse to drag people down into the bottom of a rut – each and every one is a bodhisattva.

Since I've arrived here within the veil right along with you, it would be a mistake for me to be perpetually droning on at you like a preacher. I just founded a family gate. Interdependent upon one another under half a thatched roof, intent only on what's true: by these means we carry out our whole lives.

But even if you can name the Great Illusory Dharma Gate, if you won't apprehend your own soul, you'll never find a second way to enter.

墮在惡毒海中,不自知非,此誠可愍。条禪學道,何所圖哉?然本上座固非其人,惟是不肯自昧条禪正因,而况諸人幸不遭此,各各是不肯墮人窠臼底端人正士。既來遮裏相從,我此間又非唱導之師,建立門戶。彼此相依於半間茅屋之下,只圖真實,以辦平生。然此雖曰大幻法門,苟非神悟,决不可造次而入。

#### 14. Clear Perception Is Illusion

It's just like uttering the word 'illusion,' the common and intimate friend of present and past. If you want to find the person who's there alone in its midst, then stand and enter right into the middle of illusion: rouse your body and sit up: unbind your legs and walk: trust your intentions and function. The free can let everything go, or gather it all up and press it together. But this is calamitously difficult for people – why?

They hide from their hearts what they already know, and never see the release in which all things abide. It's by illusion that they're bound, and yet, conversely, clear perception is illusion itself – and it doesn't wait for them to turn themselves around.

They find some means by which to know, but how are they any different than those who don't know? As the scripturalists teach in their schools, "if one thing is provisionally true, then everything is provisionally true. There is no 'middle,' no 'emptiness,' no 'provisional." Which is just to say that in the end, there is no 'Way.'

And precisely because people don't know that, they turn every word of the writings inside-out, language unspooling from their mouths like bolts of cloth. But how could the Buddhadharma come from knowledge of the teachings? Isn't Zen a second thing entirely? By means of your own awareness, the teachings approach Zen. By means of your accumulated experience, Zen approaches the teachings.

That is why the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment says, "Among people living in the final era, few have any hope of attaining the Way. They won't demand awareness, but only think of learning, increasing their estimation of themselves."

At this point, words have been practically exhausted. You have to be like the monk Huitong, who immediately threw off his strictures upon seeing Niaoge blow a feather from his nest<sup>[27]</sup>. You have to be like Deshan, who in a single moment surpassed the whole of the sect when Longtan blew out his lantern<sup>[28]</sup>.

只如說箇'幻'字,今古共知,於中欲覔一人,於此幻中 掉臂而入、横身而坐、肆足而行、任意而用,放開捏聚一切自由者,極難乎人。其故何哉蓋由心存所知而未嘗悟脫於一切處,明知是幻,不待旋踵,而反為幻所縛。以若所知,則與不知者何以異也? 只如教家道: '一假一切假,無中無空而不假'。此說之下,了無剩法。惟其不悟,翻成文字,語言流布,豈佛法果有教、禪之二哉? 以其神悟,教即是禪。以存所知,禪即是教。故《圓覺》謂: '末世眾生,希望成道,無令求悟,惟益多聞,增長我見',斯言殆盡之矣。只如會通和尚見鳥窠吹起布毛,應時脫略。德山見龍潭吹滅紙燭,當下超宗。

#### 15. Ancients' Incomprehension

People today just look to the older generation for comprehension, as if it were that easy. People don't understand the disaster of their own season of incomprehension. If they would just attend to their own difficulties, then the effortlessness of the ancients would be the effortlessness of today.

If they don't attend to their own difficulties because they'd rather imitate the ancients' easy manner, they unavoidably act on the forgeries of their own delusions — which seem to them the very source of wisdom — and they keep on dying and being born in the dust, the abstruse revolutions of the Wheel hemming them in on every side.

For the time being, let's not discuss the ease of the ancients' comprehension. What was their incomprehension like? It was like this: the second patriarch<sup>[29]</sup>, overthrown by incomprehension, standing waist deep in the snow and not even knowing it was cold, cutting off the arm<sup>[30]</sup> his mother grew for him and not even aware of the pain.

The second patriarch's good fortune has never been tasted without difficulty. His difficulties and those of people today: they are all one single obstruction. His were forgotten by means of his entreaty for the truth of the Way. For the second patriarch and his descendants, the Way is both parent and teacher; and suffering is birth, death, and impermanence. Those who have a contract and an official certification when they haven't yet understood this – there's no one whose difficulties are worse than theirs.

今人但見前輩領悟如是之易,而不知其未領悟時之難。苟知其難, 則古人之易亦今人之易也。苟不知其難,欲效古人如此之易,未免為 情識虛妄引入相似般若中,重生死之根塵,深輪回之陷穽耳。且古人 領悟之易置之勿論,如何是未領悟時之難?只如二祖未悟之頃,立齊 腰之雪不知為寒,斷娘生之臂莫知為痛。只遮一箇樣子,不惟今人之難,在二祖分上亦未嘗不難。以其求法之真,所以忘其難也。自二祖而降,其親師為道,痛為生死無常,而有契有證之士,於未領悟時,未有一人不如是之難。當知古人之生死,即今人之生死也。

#### 16. Foul Language

Know that the lives and deaths of the ancients are the lives and deaths of people today. Modern people's study of the Way is also the ancients' study of the Way. When we conceal the ancients' genuine burdens, when we forget their hardships, we make it seem like everything was effortless for them. And now people today chase absurd fabrications and discard their own difficulties because they think they're supposed to imitate that effortlessness.

Here amidst the phenomenal world, although awareness is the same as illusion – and benefit is the same as harm, and good is the same as bad – they are also different. Buddha is that way, and that is the irrefutable truth of the ancestors who were here for a little while acting as your venerable grandmothers, drawing you along and helping you to reach this place.

Any suggestion that the Way has some essential quality – I call that 'foul language.' I call it 'suturing the dharma in place.' I call it 'the teaching of scoundrels.' I call it 'the true eye of the blind scholars.' So long as people teach that way, they and I have nothing to gain from one another.

People try to conceal enormous expenditures of time and energy, but just look at the undersides of their tapestries. If there is naturally, step by step, sincere effort being put into the Way – could painting a pretty picture to be used as a model really be the best way to demonstrate the heart of the fundamental principle? If people believe that the mind of the Way is apart from sincerity, apart from honesty, apart from that which is bitter or urgent – though they may have a hundred thousand devices and stratagems, they are just corpses in shackles. They are trying to fill up a net by blowing into it. Isn't that absurd?

Remember that Guishan worked as Baizhang's chef; Xuefeng was Dongshan's head rice cook; Boushou ran errands in town for Linchi; Wuzu supervised the monastery's mill. Is humble, tiresome work like that really the concern of dragons and elephants? But the truth of the Way is its attire; forget about whether your position is

'superficial.' People today make their quick wit into a burden. Maybe they aren't suited to the work of a monastic community, they'd rather storm out of the hall and ridicule their abbots' mistakes. Seeing that kind of thing, the difference between the ancients and people today is made quite obvious. Illusory people amid illusory phenomena have never really awakened to anything. Nevertheless, today I see injustice on the road, and so I gossip about it like this.<sup>[31]</sup>

今人之道業,即古人之道業也。蓋古人負真誠而忘其難, 所以致其 易。今人逐虚妄而棄其難,必欲效其易。故於此一法中, 雖同知是 幻,而其利害優劣,所以異也。此是從上佛、祖不易之論, 一時老婆 引援及此。在本色道流分上, 唤作惡口,亦名實法綴人, 人,又喚作瞎學人正眼,今日彼此不獲已也。然而遮許多做工夫底露 布,在當人為法之誠,自然步步踏著,豈是起模畫樣教得人底道理? 其或為法之心不真不誠、不苦不切,縱使百千方便,束縛得他, 如箇死人,何異吹網欲滿?又如溈山充典座、雪峯做飯頭、寶壽作街 坊、演祖為磨主,此猥屑之務,豈真龍象所當為哉?蓋亦為道之真, 有如此者。今人稍負聰敏,或叢林補職不稱,則掉臂譏主 法者之誤。於此觀之,則古今之真妄判然矣。幻人於幻法,實未曾 悟。今日但路見不平,竊論如此

#### 17. Give Us Your News

But I arrive here within the veil simply to convey to you the ancient basis of the Great Illusory Dharma Gate, and that teaching is of the utmost importance. That the past is 'gone' is an illusion. That the present is 'here' is an illusion. That the future is 'about to arrive' is an illusion. The whole of the canon is propped up by illusion, and nevertheless it expounds. That festering tangle of vines, the seventeen-hundred public cases, proceeds from illusion, and nevertheless it proliferates. Enlightenment and nirvana are the offspring of illusion, and nevertheless they are accomplished. Suchness and wisdom rest on illusion, and nevertheless they are manifest. Compassion and charity are the products of illusion, and nevertheless they are expressed. The six perfections and the ten thousand practices are founded on illusion, and nevertheless they have been established. The three vehicles and the ten stages of practice are the campaigns of illusion, and nevertheless they are arrayed before us. Discipline, stability, insight, greed, malice, delusion, affliction, defilement, impermanence, life and death are all identical to illusion. Nevertheless, they appear in the world.

Even light and dark, color and empty space, that which is seen and heard, that which is felt and known – there can be nothing at all but that which professes my illusion. The straightness of pines, the tangledness of brambles, the whiteness of swans and the blackness of crows are all illusory. The sky is our illusory canopy, the ground props us up with illusion, illusion is what contains the oceans and gives birth to the seasons. Illusion makes peach blossoms pink and plum blossoms white. Illusion makes confusion hard and comprehension easy. I speak in illusion, and you hear in illusion. Illusion is the imprint of everything, and there is no dharma beyond it.

And I myself am like the whisk in the hand of the illusory man, now that I have tangled my eyebrows with the King of Mount Sumeru. But tell me, is the Way illusory? Or is it not illusory?

If you say it's illusory, you are an illusory person fallen into an illusory net, and you won't escape it for another ten thousand kalpas.

If you say it's not illusory, please go to the place before speech and silence, before movement and stillness, then come back and give us your news.

到遮裹索性將乎昔所解底大幻法門,重為發露去也。過去是已去之幻,見在是目前之幻,未來是將至之幻。一大藏教依幻而說,千七百則陳爛葛藤由幻而生,菩提涅槃根幻而成,真如般若倚幻而現,慈悲喜捨即幻而興,六度萬行憑幻而立,三乘十地仗幻而等差,戒定慧、貪瞋癡、煩惱塵勞、無常生死等從幻而出。以至明暗色空、見聞覺知,未有不稟吾幻而有者。豈但松直、棘曲、鵠白、烏玄是幻,乃至天以幻蓋、地以幻擎、海以幻涵、春以幻育、桃以幻紅、李以幻白、迷以幻難、悟以幻易、我以幻說、爾以幻聞,森羅萬象一幻所印。此大幻印中,固是不留剩法。只如幻人手中拂子,即今與須彌山王眉毛廝結,且道是幻耶?非幻耶?若謂是幻,帶累幻人墮在幻網中,若謂非幻,請去却語默動靜,出來露箇消息。

## Mingben's Autobiography

Selections from the Autobiography of Zhongfeng Mingben, written when he was 60 years old, translated by Uta Lauer [32].

My, (Huanren's) [person of illusory existence] family has lived for generations in the new part of Hangzhou.

When I had grown out of my swaddling- clothes, I enjoyed to recite Buddhist songs and perform Buddhist rituals as child's game. The neighbors found this strange. At the age of seven, I attended the city school and read «Lunyu» and «Mengzi».

I had not yet finished school, that, when I was nine years old, my mother died and I [therefore] stopped attending school. From early on, I harbored the wish to become a monk. The worldly conditions daily became more restrictive, so I made a hundred plans how to abandon these conditions.

Until I was 24, although I made no special effort to liberate myself from these conditions, it just resolved by itself...

In the fifth month of this year, I climbed the mountain alone and paid the late master my respect. And then, I recited the «Diamond Sutra». When I came to the part about the Hedan Buddha, I suddenly understood its meaning.

From then on, I was inclined towards the words of the Sutras and filled with their flavor.

This certainly was not enlightenment.

In the year yiwei of the era yuanzhen [1295], the late master lay down with an illness and (never) got up (again) [died].

After he was buried, I immediately left the mountain in order to realize my long cherished intention [to travel].

In the year bingshen [1296], I roamed the Wumen area. In the spring of the year dingyou of the era dade [1297], I took my bundle under the arm and unrolled it at Mount Tianzhu. In autumn, I went to Mount Lu.

In winter, I returned to Nanjing. Hidden in the shady grass of the hut, I spent ten months there. In the winter of the year wiwu [1298], I built the Huanzhu [Illusory Abode] retreat on Mount Bian.

In the winter of the year jihai [1299], I built the Huanzhu retreat in Wumen I stayed there the whole time from the year gengi [1300] to the year xinchou [1301].

In the year jiyou [1309], I bought a boat in Yizhen. In summer, I anchored in Xiacheng.

In the year jiayin of the era yanyou [1314], I was again in charge of the affairs of the Shiziyuan temple. In the year yimao [1315], I built a hut at Dawo. In the year bingchen [1316], my diabetes became serious.

The years jiwei [1319], gengshen [1320] (have passed), the years xinyou [1321], renxu [1322] of the era zhizhi, and now I have already completed my sixtieth year.

This summer, I built a hut at Mount Zhongzhui.

From the year bingxu [1286] to the year renxu [1322], altogether 37 years have gone by in vain.

My illusory traces will fade away and yield to karma.

Originally, it has been my heart's desire to become a monk, in straw clothes with a dirty face to practice the way of a Buddhist recluse, - but I was only disguised in monk's robes [only superficially, on the surface a monk, a false pretense], I was ashamed of this all my life.

Furthermore, my writing lacked in erudition and my inquisitiveness was insufficient in insight and clarity. Well-meaning people praised me, (but) all this is only an unfounded coincidence

Really I only long for withdrawal, not to pretend to the world and to be different from the ordinary, but I deceitfully sat down and people had faith in me.

Therefore I am agitated and have no (inner) peace.

When the ancients turned 50, [they] understood that 49 [years] had been all wrong. Today, in my 60th year, I turn back my thoughts to the past. A big part (of those years) was obscured by a feeling of ignorance.

Where is there still objective truth to be found?
Floating lights, illusory shadows,
that change at an instant, Therefore, I wrote this down as words of admonition to myself.

# Mingben's Death Poem

Trans. by N. Heller (Heller, 2014, p.58)

我有一句, I have one sentence,

分付大眾: To give all of you:

更問如何, I again ask how is it,

無本可據? There is no root to rely on?

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#### Further Reading:

www.reddit.com/r/zen/wiki/getstarted

www.reddit.com/r/zen/wiki/lineagetexts

www.reddit.com/r/zen/wiki/famous cases

www.reddit.com/r/zen/wiki/buddhism

- [1] "These cloisters were known as 'Cloister of illusory Abiding'. Zhu means to 'dwell' or 'settle in,' as well as 'to rely on.' Mingben seems to have occasionally added huan to his name in other positions: Uta Lauer, in her study of his calligraphy [A Master of His Own], notes that Mingben signed a letter 'Illusory Mingben' (Huan Mingben)" (Heller, 2009, p.272)
- [2] The whisk was used to keep flies away without killing them, which would have been a violation of the lay precept against murder. Over time the whisk came to represent Mastery.
  - [3] This is a reference to the third of the Four Statements of Zen:
  - 1. A special transmission outside the teachings,
  - 2. The sole transmission of the mind seal,
  - 3. Directly pointing at mind, seeing the nature
  - 4. Realization of Buddhahood (Yuanwu, 2006)
- [4] From the record of Yunmen: "Master Yunmen related [the legend according to which] the Buddha, immediately after his birth, pointed with one hand to heaven and with the other to earth, walked a circle with seven steps, looked at the four quarters, and said, "Above heaven and under heaven, I alone am the Honored One." The Master said, 'Had I witnessed this at the time, I would have knocked him dead with one stroke and fed him to the dogs in order to bring about peace on earth!" (Yunmen, 1994, p.226)
- [5]Cf Huangbo's description of Buddha's teachings: "... 'studying dhyana' and 'studying the Way,' what has all that got to do with Buddhism? So it is said that all the Tathagata taught was just to convert people; it was like pretending yellow leaves are real gold just to stop the flow of a child's tears." (Huangbo's, 1958, p.63)
- [6] This is a reference to Zen Master Buddha transmitting the Dharma by holding up a flower and seeing his disciple Kashyapa smile:

"The World Honored One said, 'I possess the storehouse of the correct Dharma eye, the wonderful heart-mind of Nirvana, the formless true form, the subtle Dharma gate, not established by written words, transmitted separately outside the teaching. I hand it over and entrust these encouraging words to Kashyapa." (Wumen, 2007, Case 6)

- [7] Huangbo: "Thus Bodhidharma sat rapt in meditation before a wall; he did not seek to lead people into having opinions." (Huangbo, 1958, p. 93)
- [8] "[Mazu's teacher, Huai Jang] went to question him; 'great worthy, what are you aiming at by sitting meditation?' Ma replied, 'I aim to become a Buddha.' Jang then took a tile and began to rub it on a rock in front of the hermitage; Ma asked him what he was doing... Jang said 'I am polishing it to make a mirror.'" (Yuanwu, 2005) See also: Mazu, 2001.
- [9] "Joshu was standing on the ladder above the well at Nansen's monastery, drawing water, when he saw Nansen passing below. He held on to a rung, dangling his feet in midair, and cried, 'Help! Help!' Nansen climbed the ladder, saying 'One, two, three, four, five.' After a moment Joshu turned to Nansen to offer his thanks. He said, 'Master, I am grateful for your saving me a little while ago." (Zhaozhou, 1998)
- [10]Zen has been called "the death-dealing, life-giving sword" in reference to its manner of Enlightenment.
- [11] "Passing through the gate" is a reference to Enlightenment from a specific teacher; See also *Wumenguan*, which can be translated as "Wumen's Gate".
- [12] This is a reference to *Trust in Mind*, a text popular with Zen Masters, sometimes attributed to the Third Patriarch of Zen:

(1)
The best way is not difficult
it only excludes picking and choosing.
Once you stop loving and hating
it will enlighten itself.

(Sengcan, 2022)

- [13] This is a reference to the Zen teaching that wisdom is only ever "appropriate to the situation", rather than doctrinal as with Buddhism and Christianity.
- [14]One of the traditional testing questions in Zen is "Why did the founder (Bodhidharma) cross over from India into China?"
- [15] "Not in the written word" and "pointing straight to their own Minds" are references to the Four Statements of Zen.
- [16] For Wumen's classic description of 'entering the gate,' which certainly influences Mingben here as well as in section 11 of this text, cf Case 1 of *Wumen's Checkpoint*: "Wouldn't you like to pass this barrier? Then concentrate your whole body, with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints, and eighty-four thousand hair-holes, into this Question; day and night, without ceasing, hold it before you." (Wumen, 1966, p.32)
  - [17] This is a reference to practices Zen Masters reject:

"To unify and pacify the mind is quietism and false Zen; Subjectivity and forgetting the objective world is falling into a deep hole; Sitting blankly in Zen practice is the condition of a devil." (Wumen, 1966, p.314-315)

[18] Here Mingben references a few well-known accounts of sudden enlightenment – one of Zen's defining doctrines.

As related in Case 305 of Dahui's 'Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching,' as a monk Xiangyan's "natural intelligence was brilliant and swift, but he couldn't attain Chan. After [his teacher] Baizhang passed away he went to Guishan. Guishan questioned him, 'when you were at our late teacher Baizhang's place, you had ten answers for every question... try to tell me something about before your parents gave birth to you.' At this one question, he was simply at a loss... he begged Guishan to explain for him. Guishan said, 'If I explained it to you, later on you'd revile me. What I say is mine, and has nothing to do with you.'" Frustrated to the point of tears, Xiangyan abandoned his studies and left the monastery to live as a hermit. "One day as he was clearing away weeds and brush, when rubble hit some bamboo and made a sound, he was suddenly awakened... He said [of Guishan] in praise, 'The master's great kindness surpasses that of parents; if you had explained for me back then, how could this have happened today?'" (Dahui, 2017)

- [19] Again from Dahui, Case 160: "Lingyun awakened to the Way on seeing peach blossoms. He composed a verse on the occasion: For thirty years I sought a swordsman; / How many times have the leaves fallen and shoots sprouted! / But ever since seeing peach the blossoms once, / I have never doubted any more." (Dahui, 2017)
- [20] Taiyuan was a sutra lecturer. After being laughed at by a group of monks during one of his talks, he sat awake all night, and was enlightened upon hearing the sound of a gong. (Ferguson, 2011)
- [21] From Dahui, Case 314: "[Dongshan asked his teacher Yunyan] 'After you die, if somebody asks whether I can describe your likeness, how shall I reply?" Yunyan was silent for a long while, then said, 'Simply say, 'Just this is it." Dongshan sank into thought. Yunyan said, 'Having gotten this matter, you really have to be thorough.' Dongshan left without saying anything. Later, as he was crossing water, he saw his reflection and only then was he suddenly enlightened." (Dahui, 2017)
- [22] Cf verse 20 of Yongjia's 'Song of Enlightenment': "Whether talking or remaining silent, whether moving or standing quiet, the Essence itself is ever at ease." (Suzuki, 1950, p.94)
  - [23]Mingben is describing the brushstrokes used to make the character 幻.
- [24] "This" means "suchness," (Sanskrit tathata), also referred to as "thusness," (bhutatathata) or "being-as-is" (yathab buta). (Foyan, 1994, p. 122)
- [25] A reference to Changsha Jingcen's 'hundred-foot pole,' a classic Zen case. See, for example, *Book of Serenity* Case 79: "Changsha had a monk ask Master Hui, 'How was it before you saw Nanquan?' Hui remained silent. The monk said, 'How about after seeing him?' Hui said, 'There couldn't be anything else.' The monk returned and related this to Changsha. Changsha said, 'The man sitting atop the hundred-foot pole: though he's gained entry, this is not yet the real. Atop the hundred-foot pole, he should step forward.' (Wansong, 2005)
- [26] Cf Huangbo's definition of compassion: "By mercy is really meant not conceiving of a Buddha to be enlightened, while compassion really means not conceiving of sentient beings to be delivered." (Huangbo, 1958)

- [27] Huitong was attendant to a Zen Master named Niaoge Daolin, whose name means "Bird's Nest" because he lived in a tree. Huitong informed Niaoge one day that he was leaving to study under someone else, because Niaoge refused to teach him anything. Niaoge said, 'If you are searching for Ch'an, I have a little here,' and blew a feather off his robe. Huitong was immediately enlightened.
- [28] Deshan's enlightenment is related in Case 4 of the *Blue Cliff Record*. A wandering lecturer on the Diamond Cutter Scripture, which preaches the cultivation of "diamond-like concentration," Deshan went to see Longtan to refute the Southern School teaching of 'Mind itself is Buddha.' "During the night Deshan entered Longtan's room and stood in attendance till late at night. Longtan said, 'Why don't you go?' Deshan bid farewell, lifted up the curtain and went out; he saw that it was dark outside... Longtan lit a paper lantern and handed it to Deshan; as soon as Deshan took it, Longtan blew it out. Deshan was vastly and greatly enlightened." (Yuanwu, 2005)
- [29] Case 41, *Wumen's Checkpoint*: [Bodhidharma] faced toward the wall. The Second Ancestor stood in the snow, cut off his arm, and said, "This disciple's heart-mind has not yet been pacified. I beg teacher to pacify my heart-mind." [Bodhidharma] said, "[Bring me] your heart-mind, and I will pacify it for you." Ancestor said, "My searching for heart-mind is completed, and I'm not able to obtain it!" [Bodhidharma] said, "I have finished pacifying your heart-mind for you." (Wumen, 2007)
- [30] There is a portrait of Mingben in the Tokyo National Museum missing a finger, the smallest finger of the left hand. Cutting off joints of a finger (or burning a finger) is traditionally done to demonstrate the strongest intent to keep a vow or precept. This is likely the origin of the "arm" in Case 41.
- [31] "I see injustice on the road" is the first half of an idiom, which ends "I draw my sword to help" (路見不平,拔刀相助). Mingben just gossips.

[32](Lauer, 2002, p.389-141)