Introduction

In 1934, under the influence of *The Light of Asia*, Sir Edwin Arnold's romantic representation of the Buddha, the young English adventurer, John Blofeld, boarded a Japanese trading ship bound for China. Having just graduated the week before from Cambridge University where he had eagerly studied the available literature on "the Orient," Blofeld was as much prepared for this adventure as he could have been. "Of course," Blofeld wrote years later, "everything in China differed enormously from what I had imagined."[1] This difference, however, would never disrupt Blofeld's lifelong commitment to the idea that present within the Buddhist tradition were insights making possible "the Ultimate Transformation" of the human mind. Blofeld had converted to Buddhism during his years at Cambridge, and would, by the end of his life, become one of the most influential twentieth-century transmitters of Buddhism to the west. His first transmission would be *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po on the Transmission of Mind* (*Huang Po Ch'uan Hsin Fa Yao*). Taking the name P'u Lotao, Blofeld immersed himself in Chinese culture in order to make himself a fit vehicle for the transmission of Huang Po to the west.

Why Huang Po? This text came highly recommended by the Buddhist monks whom Blofeld had encountered while in China. Huang Po was well known throughout East Asia as one of the most powerful figures of the "golden age of Zen." Placed at the center of the sacred genealogy of Zen Buddhism, Huang Po was the student of the great Pai-chang Huai-hai, the reputed organizer of the Zen monastic system, and the teacher of the renowned Lin-chi I-hsuan, the founder of Rinzai Zen. Stories about the powerful and unnerving Huang Po had circulated in China for over a millennium by the time Blofeld was in position to receive them. Blofeld was so impressed with the Huang Po transmission

[1] Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 33.

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that he would claim in his introduction that this text was one of "the most brilliant expositions of the highest Wisdom which have so far appeared in our language,"[2] and the one "best suited to the needs of Western readers."[3] Although these claims might later seem somewhat inflated, his choice was indeed a good one. Besides being a formative text from the "golden age of Zen," the *Huang Po Ch'uan Hsin Fa Yao* was also an innovative philosophical text, one that took provocative and insightful positions on key issues. Several years of work went into the translation, including time spent in Zen monasteries. Although he wrote humbly about the text, Blofeld's *Huang Po* was no small achievement. By 1958 the text was complete and ready for copyright; in 1959 Grove Press distributed the first of several printings. Although not a big sales item at first, its day would soon come.

In 1968, under the influence of the spirit of the age, I received Blofeld's transmission. Purchasing a paperback copy of *Huang Po* from the "Oriental Wisdom" section of my local bookstore, I too began reading Zen. The activity of reading Zen at that time placed one within a specific cultural tradition, and entailed a particular style of reading. It meant reading "romantically," and thus receiving the transmission of Huang Po through the mediation of a prominent lineage of modern romantics – Blake and Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau, all the way up through Kerouac, Watts, . . . and John Blofeld. Romantics in Blofeld's era could be characterized by their openness to cultural and historical ideals quite other than their own. They assumed that through speculative, imaginative excursions beyond the conventions of their own time and place, fundamental forms of wisdom and transformation were possible.

In this minimal sense, the *Philosophical Meditations* before you still stand within the modern tradition of romanticism. But, as we approach the turn of the century, it is easy to see that many changes have occurred since Blofeld first introduced the Zen teachings of Huang Po to the English literary world. For some intellectuals, these changes are so far-reaching and so dramatic that it has become tempting to claim that the opening of a new historical era has occurred, an era that for lack of its own name has come to be called simply "post-modern," and "post-romantic," and "post-". . . .many things. The "post" in each of these cases marks the recognition, hope, or presumption that, in some respects at least, we live in a world fundamentally different from the cultural

[2] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 8. [3] Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 8.

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world that sent the young Blofeld off to China in the thirties and that was inscribed in his Huang Po translation in the fifties. These meditations will seek to explore how these differences have recast the context for a philosophical meditation on Zen Buddhism, and how a contemporary reading of Huang Po might differ from its predecessors in both outcome and style.

English-language books on Buddhism have increased in number almost exponentially since they began to appear in the nineteenth century. Until very recently, virtually all of them have taken one of two distinct modern forms: either they position themselves within the modern scientific tradition in order to analyze the history and sociology of Buddhism, or, romantically, they attempt to transmit the truth and transformative power of this tradition to the west. Representatives of each of these forms have tended to criticize each other severely. From a scientific point of view, romantic transmissions of Buddhism are simply inaccurate. They project forms of Buddhism more in line with contemporary ideals than with anything that has ever existed in Asia. And from a romantic point of view, scientific studies miss the point of Buddhism altogether. They inadvertently transmit the mentality of modern science, and do nothing to enlighten or alleviate suffering. This duel is well known to us. It constitutes one of the most basic oppositions of the modern era. Scientific rationalism and romantic spiritualism are the twin siblings of modern culture, and the two poles within which the modern personality has been constructed. The bond between them is so close that it was inevitable that both would be implicated in the transmission of Buddhism to the west. The scientific motive for the study of Buddhism was accurate knowledge – enlightenment defined as a thorough understanding of world culture and history. The romantic motive for the study of Buddhism was a breakthrough to a new kind of understanding – enlightenment defined as a fundamental transformation of the human mind. Until recently, these two formative motives have seemed to be irreconcilable.

One factor that lends credence to contemporary claims that we are now moving beyond the modern era is the realization that this conflict may be illusory, and that, in many ways, the opposition between these two essential forms of modernity has hidden their more fundamental similarity. It is now possible to see that both share a set of presuppositions that have made the debate between them possible. If scientific rationalism and modern romanticism can now be seen to share a worldview, the perspective from which this can be seen is no longer completely

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within either one of them and therefore in some sense "post" both of them. This historical development sets the stage for the claim that reading Zen today is a significantly different matter than it was in Blofeld's time: it will follow different methods and styles, and arrive at quite different conclusions. Many of these methods, styles, and conclusions will show the various marks of contemporary culture and thought. Our Huang Po will not look like Blofeld's. Why not? Isn't this fluctuation with "the times" a symptom of our being somewhat too impressionable? Blofeld reads Huang Po through the lens of romanticism and we read Huang Po through "post-romantic" specters – why not just read Huang Po on his own and set aside the influences of the current intellectual context?

The persuasive force of these questions shows the hold that romantic and scientific doctrine still have on our minds, as well as the need to press beyond them. The romantic quest to behold "spirit" directly without mediation through any particular culture is analogous to the scientific demand to set aside all prejudices and just examine the data, or read the text, in and of itself. In both cases, the mind of the one who understands is thought to exist independent of its own context which leaves no traces on the understanding developed within it. When, however, from our contemporary point of view, we reflect on the assumptions hidden in these questions, we discover that the questions presuppose an understanding of the human mind that is no longer tenable. Just like the objects of our experiments and the texts we read, our minds are context-dependent; they come to the particular form of understanding that they do within particular cultural, historical settings. Once this is seen, the questions above begin to dissolve, and lose their point. We cannot "just read" anything, without demonstrating the shaping power that tradition in its current form has upon us. These powers may take scientific form, or romantic form, or some form beyond those two, but one possibility that we can no longer maintain is that the imprint of tradition will take no form at all, thus allowing us to see Huang Po's Zen on its own. Contemporary Zen readers will thus be able to see what Blofeld could not have seen: that every understanding of Zen will be mediated through some particular development of historical culture. Moreover, this realization is not simply an unfortunate concession that must now be made. It is instead an insight providing the best point of departure for contemporary reflection on Zen because, like Zen, this insight demands an examination of the background factors currently shaping our experience. In the language of Zen, it calls forth "the one who is

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right now reading," and refuses to allow the reader to cling to his or her own invisibility. Because of its centrality to both contemporary reflection and Zen, this point of departure will be a recurring theme throughout these meditations.

Taking this point of departure in these meditations on Zen will direct us to the possible significance of one of Huang Po's themes: transmission. Transmission is the process through which all forms of culture, including Zen "enlightenment," make their way from one generation to the next, one form leading to a transformed other and to another, without end. How should we understand this process? What is the process through which the minds and experiences of a generation are shaped by the past to become what they are? How should we understand the process through which we, turn-of-the-century English-language readers, have received a transmission from Huang Po, a ninth-century Chinese Buddhist monk? What is revealed, about the principles of transmission, and about us, in our own activity of reading Zen? And what will the effect be, over time, of the fact that, given Blofeld's transmission and thousands of others like it, our education in reading and understanding now includes the great texts of many cultures and historical eras quite other than our own?

The philosophical meditations that follow work in and around these questions by entering into a sustained dialogue with themes that appear to be crucial to a contemporary effort to understand Huang Po's Zen. Blofeld's essential role in this process is to provide an initial understanding in relation to which our own thoughts can be developed and honed. The meditations will, accordingly, move back and forth in dialogue between Blofeld's understanding of a theme and another understanding that will have become possible since Blofeld's time.

In what sense are these meditations philosophical? In the same sense, perhaps, that Descartes' classic "meditations" are – that they pose a series of questions intended to yield something important about the very bases of human experience. One difference is crucial, however, and shows an interesting distinction between contemporary thought and the modern mentality shown in the Cartesian meditations. Descartes' philosophical meditations strive to set aside all previous thinking on these matters in order to delve directly into the mind itself. By contrast, our meditations are first and foremost "readings." They regard mediation through language, culture, and prior texts to be as direct as philosophical meditations can be. Therefore, instead of taking the autonomy of "critical doubt" as their first principle, these meditations

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feature a prior interest in the underlying activities of reading and interpretation. Although critical reflection is crucial to any mature practice of reading, it is neither sufficient nor comprehensive. From a contemporary point of view, larger processes and influences render Descartes' efforts at self-purification unattainable. This becomes clear when we realize that hidden beneath our activity and intentions in reading, numerous processes are in effect. What we intend to do in reading is but one element in determining what in fact happens. Beyond our work on the text in reading it is the work that the text performs upon us. And beyond both of these is the work performed upon both thinker and object of thought by larger cultural and historical forces which set the stage for the interaction between them. Neither these meditations nor Descartes' can step out of their own genealogy of transmission to see how things are on their own. In fact, the universal fate of immersion in a lineage of understanding is anything but regrettable.

As points of departure, however, intentions are crucial. By calling the practices of reading demonstrated here "meditations," I intend three basic points.

First, a meditative reading practice will be thoughtful. Although receptivity is essential, reading is not primarily a mode of passivity; it is active and engaged. In order to receive transmission, the reader must do what the author has done – think. For this reason, at the end of a "*dharma* talk," the great meditation master, Dogen, would beseech his readers to "ponder this day and night." Meditative reading is a philosophical, reflective activity. It is never content with the obvious; it will refuse to hold onto customary forms of understanding in order to push beyond what is already within grasp. The initial act of reading serves to lure the mind out of complacency and inertia by challenging it to consider something new, or to experience more deeply what has already been thought. A critical reader seeks freedom through the practice of reading, freedom from immature forms of grasping, self-deception and confinement. Because these goals are primary, this book is not just about Huang Po; it is about issues that emerge in the process of engaging Huang Po's Zen in philosophical meditation. Huang Po is therefore not so much its object of knowledge as he is its medium, the figure of Zen through which both writer and readers will seek cultivation of mind.

Second, meditative reading will be reflexive, that is, it will use the text as a mirror upon which the reader's own mind can be reflected and observed. Self-awareness is essential to a meditative practice of reading. In this sense, reading is a form of dialogue, a back-and-forth movement

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between the reader and the text. Reading critically, we question what is said in the text; reading reflexively, we allow what is said in the text to question us. For every statement made in the text, an implicit question probes the reflexive reader: what do you think? A unilateral reading, which seeks only to absorb what the author has said, casts no light back upon the reader. It fails to bring the reader's own mind to awareness. Meditative reading is a practice requiring the full presence of the practitioner; it is a practice taking that very presence as one of its goals. Be aware that this book – and every other – displays before the reader a specific practice of reading. When you are reading critically and thoughtfully, you will see the reading practice of the author. You will see not just what the author has read, but how, why, and to what effect. Even this first step is not enough, however. The value of the exercise is to develop awareness of your own reading practice, and, beyond that, to change it. Reading at its best is an engagement of the mind that alters the mind.

Therefore, third, the goal of meditative reading is self-transformation. Through the practice of reading, some change of mind and character is sought. Change, however, requires openness to change, which is never easy. This transformation can only be accomplished in an open process of questioning. Whether questioning Huang Po's Zen, or using that Zen to question ourselves, we open our mind to something that is other than its current identity. In reading, the open mind is attentive to real possibility. Its meditations are explorations, experiments with forms of experience that are taken to be its own possibilities or potential. In this sense, John Blofeld provides an excellent model for us in our reading. Blofeld made of his own life an experiment in Buddhist ideas. His writings show clearly that he sought always to experience the meaning of the Buddhist ideas that he encountered in his own life. The extent of his sincerity in this enterprise, and the openness of his mind in experimenting with alien ideas, made him both an excellent disciple and a ground-breaking navigator across cultural lines. Experiments of this kind require that our own ideas and states of mind be placed at risk, open to transformation by being tested against those of the other. When these practices are operative, philosophical meditation becomes a practical, ethical activity, one through which our own forms of enlightenment will be shaped.

These meditations will follow a series of topics that adhere to their own logical sequence. No doubt, both Huang Po and Blofeld would have chosen a different set of topics and arranged them in an alternative order that made better sense in their intellectual contexts. Nevertheless,

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the logical progression of these meditations is as follows. Because our access to Huang Po's Zen Buddhism is through texts, we take up a variety of questions about what that means. They ask what a "text" was in Huang Po's time and how reading in that context would have differed from Blofeld's account and ours. The first two chapters encourage us to ask ourselves: what is a Buddhist text and how should we read it? Because we read in language with the goal of understanding, the next few chapters address these philosophical topics. What would it mean to understand Huang Po's Zen and how does the medium of language through which we understand it affect the kind of understanding that emerges? Raising the issue of language takes us deeply into the philosophical domain of Buddhism where sophisticated reflections on language as such, and upon the specifics of Zen rhetoric, were widely discussed. What is the role of language in the enlightened mind of the Zen master? Questions about the immersion of our minds in language lead to other basic questions about human history and the extent to which Zen Buddhism encourages some form of historical awareness. While acknowledging that cultural forces like language and history determine the shape of life, Zen Buddhists nevertheless strive for forms of freedom that transcend a whole range of constraints. Chapters 7 and 8 probe the character of freedom attained in Huang Po's Zen and ask what forms of transcendence are humanly possible. The final two topics are suggested by Huang Po and guide us toward addressing the fundamental point of his Zen. They are "mind," which Huang Po's texts project as the "great matter" of Zen, and enlightenment, the ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism. Our goal in meditating on these topics is to ask ourselves as clearly as possible – how can we, in our time and place, best understand the enlightened mind of Huang Po? In this context, our task is not so much to describe Huang Po's ancient thought as it is to develop our own contemporary thought. Based upon the question, "how did they think?" – ours is "how should we?"

Because these meditations take up ideas that reflect on our own lives, East Asian words are given, when appropriate, in their most common English form. Hence this book engages in meditation on "Zen" even though the proper Chinese transliteration in the case of Huang Po would have been "Ch'an" or "Chan." The word "Zen," in other words, is now our own, for various historical reasons. The traditional Wade-Giles system of "romanizing" Chinese characters has been used in order to retain connections to John Blofeld's use of that system.

Making something one's own is never simply an individual matter. As

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Huang Po knew, transmission always entails the convergence of innumerable forces. Among those responsible for making up my mind on these matters are my teachers, especially Alan Anderson, Wang Pachow, and Robert Scharlemann. Close friends, through their conversation and critical reading of these ideas, have helped hone the specific character of these meditations: Elmer Griffin, Steven Heine, David James, Karen King, David Klemm, Donna Maeda, Keith Naylor, Martha Ronk, and Diana Wright. And all of these influences converge upon the basic quest for understanding instilled in me by my parents. Therefore, it is to the precious memory of my father – Harold D. Wright – and in ongoing love of my mother – Marion M. Wright – that this book is gratefully dedicated.[4]

I would like to express my gratitude to Glenda Epps, Mary Pullen, Linda Whitney and the editors and staff at Cambridge University Press for their invaluable assistance in the preparation of this volume.

[4] Segments of chapters 5, 6, and 7 have appeared in earlier publications and are reprinted here with the generous permission of publishers: "The Discourse of Awakening: Rhetorical Practice in Classical Ch'an Buddhism" (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61/1, 1993); "Historical Understanding: The Ch'an Buddhist Transmission Narratives and Modern Historiography" (*History and Theory* 31/1, 1992); "Emancipation from What? The Concept of Freedom in Classical Ch'an Buddhism" (*Asian Philosophy* 3/3, 1993).

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