



In the Spirit of Ch'an

Entering the Gate of Ch'an

Perhaps some of you have heard the sayings “Ch’an is not established on words and language” and “Ch’an is a transmission outside conventional teachings.” But if Ch’an does not rely on words, why would anyone want to read a Ch’an book? Isn’t that a contradiction? Although Ch’an is not established on words, it has, among the many sects of Buddhism in China, left behind the most writing. The primary goal of these writings, however, is to show you or teach you that “Ch’an is not established on words and language” and that “Ch’an is a transmission outside the conventional teachings.” So there is a reason for you to read such a book.

The word “Ch’an” can mean enlightenment, and enlightenment can be understood to mean realizing “the first meaning,” or “the ultimate truth.” In Ch’an, there is also what is called “secondary meaning,” or “conventional truth.” Conventional truth can be expressed in words and concepts, but the primary, or ultimate, truth of Ch’an cannot be expressed in words. In the Ch’an tradition, sometimes the ultimate truth is compared to the moon, and the conventional truth compared to a finger pointing at the moon. No one would mistake the finger for the moon. Words, language, ideas, and concepts are like the finger and can express just the conventional truth. These words and concepts only point

to the ultimate truth. The ultimate truth can be called mind, original nature, or Buddha-nature. It is something everyone must experience for himself or herself. It can never be fully described.

What is the source of Ch'an? According to the Ch'an lore, the monk Bodhidharma brought Ch'an from India to China in about 500 C.E., more than a thousand years after Shakyamuni Buddha's death. But Indian history contains few records of the interim period, so we know relatively little about the origins of Ch'an practice.

We do know stories and legends that describe the origins of Ch'an. Most famous is the account of the transmission of the Dharma to Mahakashyapa, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, who became the First Patriarch in the Ch'an lineage. The story is this: one day during a sermon at Vulture Peak, Shakyamuni Buddha held a flower in his hand in front of the assembly and did not speak. No one seemed to know what this gesture meant, but Mahakashyapa smiled. The Buddha said, "The Treasure of the Eye of the True Dharma, the Wondrous Mind of Nirvana; only Mahakashyapa understands." This event marks the beginning of the Ch'an lineage and the master-to-disciple transmission that continues to this day. This story was unknown to Buddhist history until the tenth-century Song dynasty. But the literal truth of the story is not as important as the message it contains about the nature of Ch'an.

Shakyamuni Buddha had two other disciples, one very bright and the other quite dull. The first disciple, Ananda, had a powerful mind and a fabulous memory. However, he never attained enlightenment during Shakyamuni's lifetime. Ananda thought that Buddha

would reward his intelligence with enlightenment. It never happened. After Buddha entered nirvana, Ananda hoped Mahakashyapa would help him.

After Buddha's death, Mahakashyapa tried to gather 500 enlightened disciples together in order to collect and record the Buddha's teachings. He could find only 499. Some suggested that he invite Ananda, but Mahakashyapa said that Ananda was not enlightened and therefore was unqualified for the assembly. He said that he would rather not have the gathering at all than allow Ananda's attendance.

But Ananda persisted. Three times he was turned away by Mahakashyapa. Ananda said, "Buddha has entered nirvana. Now only you can help me reach enlightenment!"

Mahakashyapa said, "I'm very busy. I cannot be of help. Only you can help yourself."

At last, Ananda realized that he had to rely on his own efforts if he wished to attain enlightenment. He went off to a solitary and secluded place. As he was about to sit down, he attained enlightenment! Why? At that moment he relied on no one and dropped all of his attachments.

Another story describes the dim-witted disciple named Suddhipanthaka, or Small Path.

All except Small Path could remember Buddha's teachings. If he tried to remember the first word of a phrase, he forgot the second, and vice versa. Buddha gave him the job of sweeping the ground, since he didn't seem fit to do anything else.

After he had swept the ground for a very long time, Small Path asked, "The ground is clean, but is my mind-ground clean?" At that moment everything dropped from his

mind. He went to see the Buddha, who was very pleased with his accomplishment and affirmed that Small Path had become enlightened.

These are recorded in the early texts as true stories, but their meaning goes beyond their original context. The first story illustrates that in practice, knowledge and intelligence do not necessarily guarantee enlightenment and the second story shows that even a slow person can attain enlightenment. Although Shakyamuni Buddha, Mahakashyapa, and Shariputra were people of great learning, Ch'an has less to do with great learning than with the problem of the mind that is filled with attachments. Enlightenment can be reached only when one's mind is rid of attachments.

It is said that twenty-eight generations of transmissions occurred from the time of Mahakashyapa to the time of Bodhidharma, who is considered the First Patriarch of Chinese Ch'an. His teachings were transmitted through a single line for five generations until the time of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng (638–713), whose many disciples established many branches, some of which still survive today. I am the 62nd lineage holder of Ch'an from Huineng and the 57th-generation in the Linji (810?–866) tradition. In the Caodong lineage, I am the 50th-generation descendant of the co-founder, Master Dongshan (807–869).

Ch'an is not precisely the Buddhism brought by Bodhidharma from India, but Bodhidharma brought certain insights to China, and the Ch'an tradition is related to these. He taught that everything comes from the mind, that the nature of the mind is Buddha-nature, that Buddha-nature is inherent in every sentient being, and that the essential method for realizing this original nature is beholding the mind. These ideas were

controversial when they were first presented in China, because they seemed to contradict the more complicated philosophies and practices of other Buddhist schools, but they are really just basic Buddhism, stripped to its essence.

There is a famous story about the enlightenment of Bodhidharma's disciple Huike that illustrates the bare-bones nature of Bodhidharma's Ch'an. Huike went to Bodhidharma and said, "Master, could you calm my mind for me?" Bodhidharma said, "Hand over your mind and I will calm it for you!" Huike searched within and then told Bodhidharma that he could not find his mind. Bodhidharma then said, "There, I have already calmed your mind for you." This is the account of Huike's enlightenment. Those of you who have been on retreat and suffered a lot of pain in your legs from sitting meditation apparently need not have done so. Unfortunately, you did not meet Bodhidharma.

There is an important work attributed to Bodhidharma called *The Two Entries and Four Practices*, in which he details more explicitly what sentient beings must do to realize their true nature. The "two entries" are entry through principle and entry through practice. Entry through principle means directly seeing the first principle, or original nature, without relying on words, descriptions, concepts, experience, or any thinking process. Entry through practice refers to the gradual training of the mind.

Bodhidharma describes entry through principle as follows: "Leaving behind the false, return to the true; make no discriminations between self and others. In contemplation, one's mind should be stable and unmoving, like a wall." This may sound like the direct, easy path to enlightenment, but it is in fact the most difficult. If we think of

Bodhidharma's own enlightenment as an entry through principle, then we would have to say that it only came after a lifetime of practice, culminating in his nine years of meditation facing a wall in a cave on Mount Song. Actually, the method used to accomplish entry through principle is precisely this phrase, "One's mind should be stable and unmoving, like a wall." This does not mean that the mind is blank; on the contrary, it is alert and clear, illuminating everything with awareness and responding with compassion. This is ideal, and it is the state of mind referred to in entry through principle.

The second entry to attain realization is through practice. Bodhidharma discusses four specific methods: accepting karmic retribution, adapting to conditions, no seeking, and union with the Dharma. Each practice is progressively more advanced, and therefore, they should be followed in order.

Accepting karmic retribution involves recognizing the effects of karma and cause and consequence. Karma is a Sanskrit term that translates literally as "action." When we carry out an action, a karmic force remains that leads to a consequence in the future, whether in the present existence or in a future one. The karmic effect of a particular action is not permanently fixed, because the continual performance of new actions modifies the karmic force accordingly, but in all cases, there is a cause-and-consequence relationship, and the consequence will be similar in nature to the cause. Therefore, when we face adversity, we should understand that we are receiving the karmic retribution from countless previous actions in countless previous lives. When we pay back some of our debt, we should feel happy that we have the capacity to do so. If we have this perspective, then when misfortunes arise, we will be tranquil and without resentment. We will not

suffer from disturbing emotions or be discouraged or depressed. This is an important practice.

Karma, or cause and consequence, has to be understood and applied in conjunction with the Buddhist concept of causes and conditions. Causes and conditions describes the fact that things happen because of many conditions coming together. We cannot and should not run away from our responsibilities and the retribution caused by our karma. But we should try to improve our conditions and karma. If things can be improved, we must try to make them better. If they can't be changed, then we should accept them with equanimity as karmic retribution.

It might be easy to confuse the principle of causes and conditions with that of cause and consequence. In fact, the two principles are intimately connected with each other, and it is difficult to talk about one without mentioning the other. From the standpoint of cause and consequence, we can say that the earlier event is the cause and the later event is the consequence. One event leads to the next. A cause, however, cannot lead to a consequence by itself. Something else must occur, must come together with the cause, to lead to a consequence. This coming together of events and factors is referred to as causes and conditions. A man and woman together do not automatically lead to children. Other factors must come together in order for the cause (parents) to lead to the consequence (children). Parents, children, and the other factors involved are all considered causes and conditions.

Furthermore, the condition (one dharma) that intersects with a cause (another dharma) must have itself been caused by something else, and so on and so on, infinitely in all

directions throughout space and time. All phenomena arise because of causes and conditions. Any phenomenon that arises is itself a consequence of a previous cause and arose because of the coming together of causes and conditions. This leads to the concept of conditioned arising, also known as dependent origination, which means that all phenomena, or dharmas, no matter when or where they occur, are interconnected.

Since all dharmas are the consequences of causes and conditions, their arising is conditional. This includes not only arising and appearing but also perishing and disappearing. A person being born is a phenomenon, and a person dying is a phenomenon; a bubble forming is a phenomenon, and a bubble bursting is a phenomenon; a thought appearing is a phenomenon, and a thought disappearing is a phenomenon. All dharmas arise and perish because of causes and conditions.

Let me make a distinction between dharma and Dharma. Dharma with a lowercase “d” refers to any phenomenon. Dharma with an uppercase “D” refers to Buddhadharma, or the teachings of the Buddha, the methods of practice and the principles and concepts that underlie practice. But remember, even the teachings of the Buddha and the methods of practice are themselves phenomena, or dharmas.

The second of the four practices recommended by Bodhidharma is “adapting to conditions.” It also requires an understanding of causes and conditions. Adapting to conditions means that we should do our best within the constraints of our environment. If our circumstances are fortunate or something good happens to us, we should not get overly excited. Good fortune, like bad, is the result of karmic retribution. Why should we feel excited when we are only enjoying the fruits of our own labor? It is like withdrawing

money from our own bank accounts. By the same token, we should not be overly proud, because good fortune, like bad, is the result of many causes and conditions coming together. How can we take credit for our accomplishments, when they depend so much on the good will of others, on the sacrifices of our parents, on the circumstances of history? The practice of adapting to conditions means that you accept your karma, or cause and consequence, without being overly joyful or self-satisfied or disappointed.

Accepting karmic retribution and adapting to conditions are very helpful practices in daily life. They allow us to improve our conditions and karma and maintain a positive attitude toward life. They help us enjoy equanimity in the face of changing circumstances, improve our behavior, and keep our relationships harmonious. These teachings of Bodhidharma are not hard to understand, and any ordinary person can make use of them. If we can apply them in daily circumstances, we will fulfill our responsibilities and we will make the best of our opportunities. In this way, life will be more meaningful.

The third of Bodhidharma's four practices is the practice of "no seeking." There is a Chinese saying that "people raise children to help them in old age, and people accumulate food in case of famine." Today, people in the West may not raise children just to support them in old age, but people probably still accumulate food, or wealth, in case of hardship. This attitude is not the attitude of no seeking. In the practice of no seeking, we continually, diligently engage in useful activity, yet we have no thought that this activity is for our personal gain now or in the future. We do not look for personal benefits. This is not easy, and it is a higher level of practice than the second practice. In fact, in order to completely avoid self-centered activity, we must make the difficult step of realizing that the self does not exist.

What we commonly think of as the self is an illusion. It is nothing in itself at all but a name we give to our continuous interaction with the environment. We constantly see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think, and it is this cascade of sensations, perceptions, and judgments, thought after thought, that we identify as the self.

To say that the self is an illusion, however, is not to say that the self is a hallucination. The self is not a mirage. We say that the self is illusory because it is not a stable entity but, rather, a series of events that are forever changing in response to a constantly changing environment. The self is not a thing that stays the same, and as such, we say that the self is an illusion. For the same reason, all phenomena are considered illusions; that is, all phenomena are selfless. All things change from moment to moment, evolving and transforming into something else. The self, therefore, is a false existence ceaselessly interacting with a false environment.

The practice of no seeking is an advanced practice because it is the practice of no-self. While it is normal for people to begin to learn and practice Buddhism for their own benefit, eventually, through practice, their self-centeredness falls away. They find themselves busy because others need their help, and they provide what is needed. Such a person no longer even thinks about attaining enlightenment.

When you have ceased to be concerned about your own attainment, then you are enlightened. Otherwise there will always be subtle, wandering thoughts and attachment to the desire to do something for yourself. If you want to free yourself from all worldly vexations and suffering and if you desire liberation, you are still attached to your self. It

is only when you have no concern about your own enlightenment that you can truly be enlightened. The practice of no seeking is the practice of this enlightened state.

The fourth of Bodhidharma's practices, "union with the Dharma," is a basic tenet of Buddhism that all phenomena are impermanent and do not have an intrinsic self. In the practice of union with the Dharma, we try to personally experience this impermanence and selflessness through direct contemplation of emptiness. This is the highest practice of Ch'an, and it leads to the highest attainment. It is the practice that allows us to reach the point of "entry through principle" that we talked about earlier.

But where does a practitioner begin? Different Buddhist sects employ many methods of practice that can be used by beginners, such as reading the scriptures, making vows, doing prostrations, mindfulness of the Buddha, and counting the breath. These methods all help us to go from scattered mind, which is confused, emotional, and unstable, to a mental state that is tranquil and in harmony with our environment. The very first thing we should do is relax the body and mind. If we can relax, we will be healthier and more stable and will relate to others more harmoniously.

There is a Buddhist householder who comes to the Ch'an Center who is very nervous. His nervousness makes other people feel nervous. When he talks to you, his body is tense, as if he is about to attack you or defend himself. People react to this kind of behavior; it disturbs them. When I told him to relax his body, he responded in a tense, forced voice, "I am already relaxed!" He is constantly fearful and insecure, and because of the problems these feelings cause, he came to the Ch'an Center seeking help. He wanted to learn meditation, so I taught him to gradually relax his body and then his mind. If we cannot

relax, there is no way we can meditate; and if we cannot meditate, the practice of no seeking is completely impossible. This man was impatient and thought that if he got enlightened all his problems would disappear. He said to me, “Master, I do not want anything; I just want the method to get enlightened quickly. Give me the method as soon as possible.” I answered, “Such a method has not been invented. If I could invent a guaranteed, speedy method of enlightenment, I could probably sell it for quite a lot of money.”

Now I have invented the following method, and I offer it free of charge to whomever wishes to learn. The method is to relax your body and mind. It is easy and simple. Do not ask whether it can lead you to enlightenment. First you should be able to relax, and later we can talk about enlightenment. Close your eyes, lean back in your chair, and relax your muscles. Completely relax your eyes. It is very important that your eyelids be relaxed and do not move. There should not be any tension around your eyeballs. Do not apply any force or tension anywhere. Relax your facial muscles, shoulders, and arms. Relax your abdomen and put your hands in your lap. If you feel the weight of your body, it should be at your seat. Do not think of anything. If thoughts come, recognize them and pay attention to the inhaling and exhaling of your breath through your nostrils. Ignore what other people are doing. Concentrate on your practice, forget about your body, and relax. Do not entertain doubts about whether what you are doing is useful.

The principle of this method is to relax—to be natural and clear. Keep each session short, but practice frequently; each session should be no longer than three to ten minutes. If you do it longer, you will probably feel restless or fall asleep. You can use this method a few

times a day; it will refresh your body and mind and eliminate some of the confusion in your daily life. Gradually you will gain the stability of body and mind that makes it possible to, eventually, enter the gate of Ch'an.

Ch'an is often referred to as the "gateless gate." The "gate" is both a method of practice and a path to liberation; this gate is "gateless," however, in that Ch'an does not rely on any specific method to help a practitioner achieve liberation. The methodless method is the highest method. So long as the practitioner can drop the self-centered mind, the gateway into Ch'an will open naturally.

The primary obstacle to attaining wisdom is attachment to the self. When you face people, things, and situations, the notion of "I" arises immediately within you. When you attach to this "I," you categorize and judge everything else accordingly: "This is mine; that is not. This is good for me; that is not. I like this; I hate that." Attachment to the idea of self makes true clarity impossible.

But how might we define non-attachment? According to Ch'an, non-attachment means that when you face circumstances and deal with other people, there is no "I" in relation to whatever may appear in front of you. Things are as they are, vivid and clear. You can respond appropriately and give whatever is needed. Clear awareness of things as they are, in this state of selflessness, is what Ch'an calls wisdom. Giving whatever others may need with no thought of the self is what Ch'an calls compassion. Wisdom and compassion describe the awareness and function of the enlightened mind. In Ch'an, these two cannot be separated, and both depend on putting down the attachment to self.

As the Ch'an school evolved, two forms of practice developed, which correspond roughly to Bodhidharma's two entries, the one through principle and the other through practice. The method of silent illumination is the specialty of the Caodong tradition, while the Linji tradition advocates the method of gong an and huatou. Both approaches can lead to enlightenment, the realization of no-self.

The term Silent Illumination, or *Mozhao*, is associated with the Song dynasty master Hongzhi Zhenjue (1091–1157), although the practice itself can be traced back at least as far as Bodhidharma and his concept of entry through principle. Five generations later, the great master Yongjia (665-713) wrote about “clarity and quiescence” in his *Song of Enlightenment*. Quiescence refers to the practice of silencing the mind, and clarity refers to contemplation, illuminating the mind with the light of awareness.

Hongzhi himself described the “silent sitting” as thus: “your body sits silently; your mind is quiescent, unmoving. This is genuine effort in practice. Body and mind are at complete rest. The mouth is so still that moss grows around it. Grass sprouts from the tongue. Do this without ceasing, cleansing the mind until it gains the clarity of an autumn pool, bright as the moon illuminating the evening sky.”

In another place, Hongzhi said, “In the silent sitting, whatever realm may appear, the mind is very clear to all the details, yet everything is where it originally is, in its own place. The mind stays on one thought for ten thousand years, yet does not dwell on any form, inside or outside.”

To understand Silent Illumination Ch'an, it is important to understand that while there are no thoughts, the mind is still very clear, very aware. Both the silence and the illumination must be there. According to Hongzhi, when there is nothing going on in one's mind, one is aware that nothing is happening. If one is not aware, this is just Ch'an sickness, not the state of Ch'an. So in this state, the mind is transparent. In a sense, it is not completely accurate to say that there is nothing present, because the transparent mind is there. But it is accurate in the sense that nothing can become an attachment or obstruction. In this state, the mind is without form or feature. Power is present, but its function is to fill the mind with illumination, like the sun shining everywhere. Hence, silent illumination is the practice in which there is nothing moving, but the mind is bright and illuminating.

A *gong an* is a story of an incident between a master and one or more disciples that involves an understanding or experience of the enlightened mind. The incident usually, but not always, involves dialogue. When the incident is remembered and recorded, it becomes a "public case," which is the literal meaning of the term. Often what makes the incident worth recording is that, as the result of the interchange, a disciple had an awakening, an experience of enlightenment.

Master Zhaozhou was asked by a monk, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" The master replied, "Wu," meaning nothing. This is a basic *gong an*, possibly the most famous on record. Here is another *gong an*, also involving Zhaozhou. Zhaozhou had a disciple who met an old woman and asked her, "How do I get to Mt. Tai?" She said, "Just keep going!" As the monk started off, he heard the old woman remark, "He really went!" Afterward, the disciple mentioned this to Zhaozhou, who said, "I think I will go over

there and see for myself.” When he met the old woman, Zhaozhou asked the same question and she gave the same response: “Just keep going!” As Zhaozhou started off, he heard the old lady said as she had last time, “He really went!” When Zhaozhou returned, he said to the assembly, “I have seen through that old lady!” What did Zhaozhou find out about that old lady? What is the meaning of this lengthy and obscure gong an?

Around the time of the Song dynasty (960-1276), Ch’an masters began using recorded gong ans as a subject of meditation for their disciples. The practitioner was required to investigate the meaning of the historical gong an. To penetrate the meaning of the gong an, the student has to abandon knowledge, experience, and reasoning, since the answer is not accessible by these methods. The student must find the answer by can (pronounced: *tsan*) gong an, or “investigating the gong an.” This requires sweeping from consciousness everything but the gong an, eventually generating the “doubt sensation,” which is a strong sensation of wonder and an intense desire to know the meaning of the gong an.

Closely related, but not identical to, the gong an is the huatou. A huatou—literally, “head of a spoken word”—is a question that a practitioner asks himself or herself. “What is Wu?” and “Who am I?” are commonly used huatous. In the huatou practice, one devotes one’s full attention to repeating the question incessantly. The gong an and the huatou methods are similar in that the practitioner tries to arouse the great doubt sensation in order to eventually shatter it and awaken to enlightenment.

Ch’an master Dahui Zong gao (1089-1163), one of the greatest advocates of huatou practice, maintained that sitting meditation is necessary to settle the wandering mind before a student can effectively use a gong an or huatou. A scattered mind lacks the focus

or energy necessary to generate the great doubt, so in training my students, I first give them a method to unify the scattered mind. Once the student's mind is stable and concentrated, the application of *gong an* or *huatou* may cause the great doubt to rise. This doubt is not the ordinary doubt of questioning the truth of an assertion. It is the fundamental uncertainty, the existential dilemma, that underlies all of our experiences—the question of who we are and the meaning of life and death. Because the question inherent in the *gong an* or *huatou* cannot be resolved by logic, the practitioner must continually return to the question, nurturing the “doubt mass” until it is like a “hot ball of iron stuck in his throat.” If the practitioner can persist and keep the energy from dissipating, the doubt mass will eventually disappear in an explosion that can wipe away all doubt from the mind, leaving nothing but the mind's original nature, or enlightenment.

It is also possible, and perhaps more likely, that the explosion will lack sufficient energy to completely cleanse the mind of attachment. Even as great a master as Dahui did not penetrate sufficiently in his first explosive experience. His teacher Yuanwu (1063-1135) told him, “You have died, but you have come back to life.” His enlightenment was confirmed on his second experience.

Therefore, it is very important to have a reliable Shifu, or teacher, guiding one through all stages of practice. At the outset, attempting to generate the great doubt before the mind is sufficiently stable would, at best, be useless and, at worst, give rise to a lot of anxiety. And finally, any experience one has as a result of the practice must be confirmed by an adept master. Only a genuine master will know the difference between a true and a false enlightenment.

The practice of *gong an* and *huatou* is an aggressive, explosive approach toward enlightenment; the practice of silent illumination is a more peaceful way. Both, however, require the same foundation: a stable and unified mind. And both have the same purpose: the realization of the nature of mind, which is the nature of emptiness, Buddha-nature, wisdom and enlightenment.