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Kōan History

Transformative Language in Chinese Buddhist Thought

DALE S. WRIGHT

Kōan Prehistory

What are kōans? Prior to its metaphorical extension into the realm of religious practice, the Chinese character combination *kung-an* referred to "public records" that document the precedent established by previous legal judgment. Just as the records of the legal tradition place into the public domain cases manifesting the criteria and principles of justice, the "public records" of the Ch'an tradition announce the criteria and principles of "awakening." As the *Extensive Record of Master Chung-feng* (discussed in depth in chapter 1 by Foulk and chapter 4 Ishii) extends the analogy, "the so-called venerable masters of Zen are the chief officials of the public law courts of the monastic community, as it were, and their words on the transmission of Zen and their collections of sayings are the case records of points that have been vigorously advocated."[1] In the same way that "public records" limit both the waywardness of the law and its arbitrariness, the "public records" of Ch'an "awakening" were thought to preserve the identity of enlightenment over time and to render refutable the assertions of impostors. Thus the *Chung-feng lu* repeatedly, as if to insist on the point, declares that "the word *kung,* or 'public,' means that the kōans put a stop to private understanding; the word *an,* or 'case records,' means that they are guaranteed to accord with the buddhas and patriarchs."[2] Parallel guarantees are offered by the text in both legal and religious domains: When "public records" are in order, both "the Kingly Way" and "the Buddha Way" "will be well ordered."[3] The Confucian rhetoric behind these assertions is certainly not accidental. Its intention is publicly to establish the kung-an as a set of standards—weights and measures—in juxtaposition to which all claims to religious attainment could be discernfully judged. Therefore the

Chung-feng lu completes this section by announcing that through the establishment of kung-an, "the intention of the patriarchs is made abundantly clear, the Buddha-mind is laid open and revealed."[4]

Which records would thus be made public as the standard of "awakened mind"? The selection process seems initially to have followed the unintentional consensus generated by Sung dynasty Ch'an abbots as favorite selections from the "discourse records," and "lamp histories" were repeatedly extracted for discussion and contemplation. The ultimately canonical choices, however, were made by compilers of explicit kōan collections like the classic *Gateless Barrier* (C. *Wu-men kuan,* J. *Mumonkan*) and *Blue Cliff Record* (C. *Pi-yen lu,* J. *Hekiganroku*). What they chose were segments of discourse from the by then exalted masters of the "golden age" of Ch'an, segments which by Sung standards seemed to encapsulate and epitomize the experience of the world around them as seen from the perspective of awakening. These sayings were typically "strange," unusual, and sometimes paradoxical from the perspective of those who had yet to achieve this state of mind. Highlighting strangeness made it abundantly clear to everyone that "awakening" was something fundamentally other than the ordinary mental state of most practitioners. Strange sayings were signs of difference, formal disclosures of a qualitative distinction separating the original speakers of kōan discourse from those who would later contemplate it.

The purpose of these disclosures of difference appears to be twofold. The first is the maintenance of criteria in terms of which subsequent awakenings could be judged for authenticity. As Wu-men (J. Mumon) says in his first commentary on Chao-chou's (J. Jōshū) "Mu," "in studying Zen, one must pass the barriers set up by ancient masters."[5] Beyond their function as standards of judgment, however, Wu-men and the other early kōan masters regard their texts as expedients or means through which the attainment of those standards might be actualized. Why were the sayings of ancient masters thought to function in this capacity? Given that these sayings epitomize the mental state from which they have come forth, if the practitioner could trace back (*hui-fan*) the saying to its source, he or she would at that moment occupy a mental space identical to that of its original utterer.[6] D. T. Suzuki gave this traditional conception beautiful expression in English. He wrote that "the idea is to reproduce in the uninitiated the state of consciousness of which these statements are the expression."[7] Kōan language expresses or "presses out" into form the "empty" experience of the great masters. Or, once again from Suzuki, "When we reproduce the same psychic conditions out of which the Zen masters have uttered these kōans, we shall know them."[8] Wu-men claims further that those who succeed in this effort will have achieved identity with buddhas and patriarchs. Practitioners would then know the meaning or "intent" (*i*) of the strange kōan sayings and begin to speak similarly. "You will see with the same eye that they see with and hear with the same ear."[9]

Those who had experienced directly the intent (*i*) of the masters in their kung-an traditionally composed verses corresponding to, and thus "capping," the original kōan. These verses eventually came to be called "capping phrases" (C. *cho-yü,* J. *jakugo*). The most famous of these were appended to the kōans themselves, as alternative expressions of the same experience. Because they were regarded as expressions of the same, capping phrases were thought to possess the identical power of disclosure for those who might meditate on them. Later in the Japanese kōan tradition, Hakuin would systematically test the kōan answers of his students by their capacity to select a capping phrase to match the kōan from standard anthologies of Buddhist quotations. Essentially a multiple-choice exam rather than an act of composition, the test required the students simply to select a phrase from the source books to match the vision embodied in the kōan. The metaphorical language of "match" or "tally" that was employed in all these contexts shows further the intention of "mind-to-Mind transmission" contained in kōan study. These metaphors were drawn from numerous contexts such as commercial accounting and from the ancient Chinese practice of testing the authenticity of a messenger by seeing whether the broken piece of pottery in his possession matched that held by the receiver of the message. Since the linguistic expression of the kōan "matched" the mind from which it emerged, authentically to match that language in understanding indicated an identity of mind to some degree between kōan master and kōan meditator.

Interesting conclusions might be drawn from the universal assumption behind these conceptions that some kind of rational and predictable structure linked the language of the kōan with enlightenment. The relationships between kōan language and the mind of the master, and between kōan language and the mind of the practitioner, were thought to be far from accidental or random. Although they might be difficult to decipher from the vantage point of the unawakened, kōans were assumed to express directly and without distortion that state of mind from which they issued. Here, in the kōan, enlightenment has taken concrete form, form which, if meditatively pursued, could be traced back to the moment of its formation in emptiness.

These assumptions about the expressibility of enlightenment in linguistic form—regardless of their blatant conflict with Zen doctrine—were borrowed from earlier Chinese Buddhist traditions and their sources in India and Central Asia, where they were also widespread. Because they appear to contradict longstanding doctrine concerning the transcendence of *nirvāṇa,* these assumptions could not be articulated in theoretical form. Nevertheless, had the tradition lacked assumptions of this sort, neither kōan language nor sūtra language could have had the role that it did in Buddhism. If Buddhists could not assume that the word of the Buddha contained in the sūtras connected in some meaningful way with enlightened experience, then lacking both rationale and function, sūtras would have never been composed in the first place. Similarly, if the

language of the kōans is not considered to be linked to the enlightenment of the great masters, no grounds for their use in contemplative practice remains. A complex prehistory of presuppositions about, and use of, religious language in the earlier Chinese Buddhist tradition has established conditions for the very possibility of the idea of the kōan.

The *gātha* recited in unison in Buddhist temples and monasteries before the sūtras are opened for ritual and contemplative use reads as follows:

> The Dharma, incomparable profound and exquisite
> Is rarely encountered even in millions of years
> We now see it, hear it, accept it and hold it
> May we truly grasp the Tathāgata's meaning.

These ritual words show the profound reverence and religious awe sought for the tradition's religious language. When the *gātha* is not just said but meaningfully heard, it reminds the practitioner that he or she has in hand words that have emanated from the enlightened mind of the Buddha, words compassionately intended to transmit enlightenment to them and thus to save them from suffering. The recital of these words enables practitioners to open themselves more resolutely and authentically to the appropriation of the Buddha's intention inscribed in the text. Although kōan language differs rhetorically from sūtra language in its abandonment of instruction, doctrinal assertion, and argumentative style, nevertheless behind this difference is the more fundamental identity that both kōans and sūtras express the mind of enlightenment and, on that basis, may be taken as a means to and measure of enlightenment.

The *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras,* together with the *Lotus Sūtra,* widely disseminated several forms of religious language that came to serve as the practical background for the development of the kōan. We focus here on three of them: (1) *dhāranī* or sacred formulas, including *mantra,* practiced in esoteric Buddhism; (2) devotional recitation of the thought or name of the Buddha, the *nien-fo* used in the Pure Land School (J. *nembutsu*); and (3) the visualizations and conceptual "contemplations" (*kuan*) practiced by the Chinese scholastic traditions. These three linguistic phenomena established the conditions of possibility for the conception of religious language developed in the Ch'an *kung-an* tradition.

Dhāranī are sacred formulae customarily recited in original or classical languages that are not understood by those who intone them in memorized form for ritual purposes. Why recite a verse whose words are incomprehensible and whose meaning is unknown? To any devout practitioner it would be enough to reply that these were the most mysterious and sacred words emanating from the mind of ancient buddhas. Beyond that, presumably, these mysterious words must be thought to possess a power not transferable into Chinese through translation and therefore ungraspable in concept. They must, in short,

function at a level more basic than the conceptual. They must work on the practitioner without the requirement that one think about their literal or metaphorical meaning. The parallel and precedent here should be clear: the later kōan tradition in Zen understood its language to emanate directly from the mind of enlightenment and, although still using Chinese records as sources, to surpass conventional comprehension by leaving an effect on the practitioner at a more fundamental level of mentality. The ritual aura and mystery of kung-an practices in Ch'an monasteries by the end of the Sung were clearly parallel to the dhārani and mantra practices in esoteric and tantric Buddhism.

The mystery and power of the Buddha's discourse as suggested in early Mahayana sūtras took only a slightly different form in the devotional, Pure Land tradition. Although the practice of *nien-fo,* "thinking Buddha," seems initially to have had the ethical force of edification, as Mahayana conceptions of the power and compassion of the Buddha and his teachings developed, the "other-power" implications of graceful, empowering language came to overshadow the ethics of Buddha imitation. Given the difference separating the Buddha from others, the practices of imagining the Buddha and reciting his name evolved away from imitative edification and toward the possibility that the merit and mind of the Buddha could be transferred through sacred language, or grace, without recourse to an ethics of achievement. Because the Japanese Zen that we have inherited in the West remained in sectarian competition with Pure Land Buddhism, trying to maintain its autonomy, we have also inherited the thought that the Chinese synthesis of Zen and Pure Land, kōan and *nembutsu,* constitutes a failure or fall. Although this unification was a complex historical phenomenon as, for example in the Japanese Ōbaku-shū sect, one condition of its occurrence may have been the widespread realization that whatever differences separated these two traditions in origin had either been sublated over time or simply "seen through." Just as the *nembutsu* exercise was a gift of the Buddha, kōans, as later Ch'an Buddhists would say, were transmissions to future generations by the buddhas of China's own age of enlightenment. To those who receive and cherish them through intense practice, they provide, aside from all claims to merit, a shortcut to that very same Buddha-mind. The language of intense practice of kōans and the *nembutsu* overlaps in surprising ways. The same terms that instruct kōan practitioners to "hold the words before the mind" also inform Pure Land Buddhists what to do with the name and thought of the Buddha.

Finally, the brief prehistory of the kōan sketched here includes the conceptually oriented contemplative exercises developed most fully in T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen as well as the Mi-tsung or esoteric school. These exercises in the dialectics of "emptiness and form" were clearly developed out of images in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* of the Buddha's continual shifts in framework during conversations with disciples. The Chinese scholastic sects simply systematized the various realizations that could be seen in the "Wisdom" sūtras

and extended them in directions that seemed most profound to the Chinese. These texts were commonly called *kuan,* "contemplations," and were used as guides for Chinese *vipaśyanā.* They were conceptual exercises that operated at the limits of thinking, challenging meditators to push further in their capacity to hold necessary but contradictory frameworks of thought together in the same exercise. Although they were indeed narrative and conceptual practices, often culminating in the command "think it!" (*szu-chih*), their rationale was to bring the mind thus prepared to the event of transconceptual disclosure called "sudden awakening." Like the Wisdom sūtras, Chinese *kuan* cultivated the sense of paradox, and over time paradox became a sign of depth or awakening. Some kōans, particularly those in Japanese master Hakuin's Tokugawa-era classification called *hosshin* kōans, retain the style of *kuan,* that is, they can indeed be thought even though such thinking is profoundly paradoxical because it is multidimensional. The explicit monastic exercise of *kuan* is thus a clear precursor to kōan practice. Both seek to move from intellectual perplexity to breakthrough.

"Public Cases" of Transformative Language

In the early Ch'an school, conceptions of religious language and corresponding practices developed in ways that, in retrospect, we can see pointing to the development of the kōan. The idea that religious language, particularly in paradoxical and strange forms, evokes enlightenment is fundamental to most early Ch'an texts. The phrase, "at these words, so and so was awakened," is perhaps the most common in late T'ang to Sung Ch'an literature. The quest to identify particular "turning words" used by the old masters became, in effect, the search for legitimate kōans. That potent phrases drawn from the discourse records of the masters might turn one's mind so thoroughly as to evoke enlightenment naturally led to the kind of intense focus on language that characterizes Sung Ch'an. When the ultimately triumphant lineage came to be identified by the name *k'an-hua* Ch'an, literally, "looking at language meditation," what we had was a Buddhist "rectification of names," because "looking at language in meditative ways" is exactly what they were doing.[10]

We might then ask: What were these ways? How was the language of the kōan, once extracted from the larger corpus of sacred literature and exalted, used in the meditative quest for the sudden breakthrough of awakening? We have already encountered the verb "to trace back" or "return" (*hui-fan*). Kōans were "traces" which monks could "track," tracing them back to their original source in enlightened mind. But *how* do you trace it back? Other verbs fill in some of this procedure: "to elevate," "to hold up," as if to bring into view; "to look at," "to inspect," that which has been held up before the mind; "to concentrate on," "to focus on," "to investigate," "to inquire," "to examine," all give the impression that the kōan was to be the sole object of contemplation

and that all energies ought to be placed in the service of both the act of "holding in a fixed manner" and "concentration on" what has thus been centered in the mind.

One effect of this intense focus in meditation upon the language of the kōan would be an intensification of its strange and paradoxical character. Although one criterion in the selection of kōans in the first place was strangeness, nothing functions to bring about estrangement more thoroughly than does unnatural or disciplined concentration. For the most part, normality and common sense are maintained precisely in the fact that the everyday draws no attention to itself. On the rare occasions when we do focus on an element of everyday life and really examine it, recontextualized out of its unnoticed setting, it quickly begins to look odd, as when we suddenly become aware of the startling strangeness of a word that we have spoken hundreds of times without ever noticing it. It seems to me that kōan study would regularly have this effect—common words and common relations to language become deeply uncommon, almost to the point of bewilderment. The longer a monk would abide with a kōan, "holding it before the mind day and night," the less it must have seemed an expression in language at all. Crossing this threshold from the commonness of language into its startling strangeness seems to be fundamental to this mode of meditation.

One form that this estrangement seems to have taken is revealed in Ch'an monks' referring to a reversal of ordinary subject/object relations that occur in advanced kōan study. In the midst of meditating on the kōan as the object of contemplation, it may occur that the kōan has so occupied the practitioner's subjectivity that the language of the kōan takes the subject position while the self of the practitioner experiences itself as the kōan's object or effect. Ruth Sasaki expresses this on behalf of Isshū Miura as follows: "The kōan is taken over by the prepared instrument, and, when a fusion of instrument and device takes place, the state of consciousness is achieved which it is the intent of the kōan to illumine."[11] The monk's subjectivity is the prepared instrument. When the fusion of subject and object occurs, the kōan's subjectivity, its "intention," as Sasaki puts it, is the controlling factor.[12]

An interesting question comes up repeatedly in modern kōan interpretation. Were kōans, and the language of kōans, strange and paradoxical to the Zen masters who originally spoke them? Or is this language paradoxical only from our unenlightened point of view? Does kōan language express in a simple and straightforward way the new "common sense" attained in awakened vision? Is this the language that ultimately corresponds to the way things are in their "suchness"? It seems to me that traditional Ch'an texts will authorize both yes and no answers to these questions, depending upon which set of background ideas are being highlighted. When, for example, the complex interpenetration and interdependency of reality is being stressed as it was in Hua-yen Ch'an, then it makes sense that this language really does correspond to the way things are. When, however, the accent is placed upon the negative function of empti-

ness and upon the provisional and expedient nature of the bodhisattva's teaching methods, then no correspondence would be thought possible no matter how convoluted and paradoxical. Many elements in early Ch'an up through the writing of the initial kōan texts in the Sung seem to show a preference for the first of these: paradox is worth meditative exertion precisely because this language shows, from an enlightened point of view, something about how things really are. Later, critical developments seem to have made the second alternative more attractive. Noncorrespondence between kōan language and its goal is certainly a safer assertion, since it eludes the necessity of articulating the nature of the correspondence. The weakness of this view, however, is that, in the absence of an understandable relation, kōans take on the appearance of arbitrariness. Why should this language be thought to evoke that goal? In any case, the tendency in subsequent kōan exercises is to repudiate any role for thought and reflection in authentic kōan practice, thus implying that, in enlightenment, the Ch'an master does not necessarily think a deeper correspondence than that which is available to ordinary mind.

Two interesting controversies in the Sung dynasty have come to structure the way we think about these issues today. One of these, between masters Ta-hui and Hung-chih, establishes a dichotomy between the *k'an-hua* or kōan Zen of the Lin-chi (J. Rinzai) tradition and the "silent illumination" or zazen-only Zen of the Ts'ao-tung (J. Sōtō) tradition. The other controversy, also involving Ta-hui, was a disagreement over how kōans were to be handled. In opposition to the contemplative literary tradition that was developing around kōan study—what Ta-hui called "literary or cultured Zen," *wen-tzu Ch'an* (J. *monji Zen*)—Ta-hui proposed an essentially nonreflective kōan practice in which total concentration would be placed upon one word or element in the kōan, its *hua-t'ou* or "main phrase" or "punch line," the place where kōan language literally comes to a head in nonconceptual awareness. From my point of view, the marvelous irony of these divisions is that they would seem to be much more accurately described in reverse. That is, if we look closely at the kind of kōan practice advocated by Ta-hui, which repudiates any narrative, conceptual, or linguistic access to the meaning of the kōan, what we really have remaining is silent illumination. We will return to this point. If, on the other hand, we look at what develops in the Ts'ao-tung or Sōtō tradition, we find exceptional achievements in *k'an-hua Ch'an,* that is, a Zen of "looking at language," and of achievements in "literary Zen," or *wen-tzu Ch'an.*

This twofold divergence in orientation is evident in the two most famous kōan collections themselves. *The Gateless Barrier* foregoes literary and poetic development. Its language is stark and its rationale is the sublation of the conceptual order, breaking through the temptation to encounter the kōan intellectually. *The Blue Cliff Record* is itself a literary masterpiece of both refinement and complexity. The former collection, by its very character, encourages silent concentration on the intellectual barrier to awakening. The latter, by its very character, encourages contemplative and imaginative explorations

into the unknown and as yet unexperienced. In *Dōgen and the Kōan Tradition,* Steven Heine rethinks this dichotomy. One thesis of the book is that Dōgen's *Kana Shōbōgenzō* is "thematically and stylistically remarkably similar to the *Blue Cliff Record*"[13] and that, if we stand back from the Rinzai claim that Ta-hui's "shortcut" method is the culmination of the kōan tradition, then we would recognize that Dōgen was himself a kōan master who has taken this genre of Zen literature off onto an entirely different line of development with fundamentally different consequences. Like the *Blue Cliff Record,* Dōgen reverses the direction of abbreviation and opens up the genre of commentary, erasing the distinction between primary source literature and secondary, interpretive commentary, or between text and self. In this genre, the "turning word" may show up anywhere, in Dōgen's criticism of the original kōans, or in the practitioner's own moment of reflection.

Nevertheless, in China, in spite of a historical milieu of enormous literary, philosophical, and cultural achievement in the Sung dynasty, Ta-hui's understanding of the kōan and of Ch'an won the day. Whereas conceptual sophistication would be the hallmark of the Sung in other dimensions of Chinese culture, Ch'an would resist this seduction and establish itself firmly in the nonconceptual. This development occurred primarily through the *hua-t'ou* (J. *watō*) or "critical phrase" style of kōan meditation. Ta-hui insisted that, although kōans may appear to promise advanced insight and understanding, this is not what they in fact offer. As an alternative to meditation on the full narrative of the kōan, therefore, Ta-hui advocated intense focus on one critical phrase, generally one word or element at the climax of the kōan. Furthermore, he maintained that the *hua-t'ou* had no meaning and that any intellectualization, any conceptual thinking at all, would obstruct the possibility of breakthrough. As a corollary to this, Ta-hui warned that the intellectuals who in his day were the ones most interested in kōan meditation would be the least likely to succeed at it, given their tendency to think.[14] His advice to them, therefore, was to cease completely any effort to resolve the kōan and "to give up the conceit that they have the intellectual tools that would allow them to understand it."[15] The primary effort required in this enterprise was a negative one, "nonconceptualization," which, as Robert Buswell explains, came to occupy "the central place . . . in *k'an-hua Ch'an.*"[16] Otherwise, in Buswell's words, "there is nothing that need be developed; all the student must do is simply renounce both the hope that there is something that can be achieved through the practice as well as the conceit that he will achieve that result."[17]

Conclusions: On the Decline of the Tradition

The following four points are what I take to be the most important consequences of this development in Chinese Ch'an.

1. The tradition of *k'an-hua Ch'an,* which was generated by a fascination with the masters' linguistic expressions, became in effect silent illumination

Ch'an; the kōan was reabsorbed into zazen. This, of course, was never stated and, in fact, the opposite was what was generally assumed. My reasons derive from a simple comparison of descriptions of practice. After Ta-hui, kōan meditation drew as close to the nonconceptual as it could. No thinking was to be admitted into the exercise. The narrative structure of the kōan was eliminated in the focus on a single point, the *hua-t'ou* or "critical phrase." The critical phrase itself was declared to have no "meaning" (*i*). What remains is an intense, prolonged focus on a single point, whether one is sitting in the lotus posture or not. This description differs in no substantial way from zazen in its non-*vipaśyanā*—that is, in its *śamatha*—forms. Both "looking" (*k'an*) and "language" (*hua*) have been reabsorbed into the "silence" of meditation (*ch'an*).

2. With the ethics of achievement dismissed as a form of conceit, and also the functions of the intellect set aside in religious practice, the role of faith in Ch'an would come to be accentuated, thus bringing Ch'an closer to, and ultimately uniting it with, Pure Land Buddhism. Faith was an essential theme for Ta-hui, as it had been for several other Ch'an Buddhists, including Lin-chi. For Ta-hui, faith was required to make the leap into the nonconceptual. Pride, on the other hand, prevented the practitioner from realizing the futility of gradual awakening, a much maligned doctrine associated with the by then defunct Northern school that assumed substantial benefit from human effort and the quest for achievement. Although it is not clear to me how important a role was played in this doctrinal development by the influential idea of the declining dharma, or the "age of *mo-fa*" (J. *mappō*), the emphasis on faith and the rejection of pride in Ch'an and in Pure Land are strikingly similar. Both scorned intellectual practices and put their entire emphasis on overcoming the latent Confucian "ethics of achievement."

In retrospect, we can note an interesting doctrinal "intersection" that was encountered and determined in the Sung. During this period the notion of the prior "golden age" when many capable Ch'an Buddhists had been awakened was widespread. When they asked themselves what the great masters of the earlier era had in common, however, the universal answer was that they had all rejected their own earlier practice of sūtra study. That is, intellectual achievement was renounced in the end so that sudden breakthrough might occur. What this tended to mean for Sung practitioners was that they could obtain the benefit of the masters' realization by foregoing intellectual study in the first place. Why take it up if all the masters had come to reject it? Yet, another, apparently unnoticed, route that could have been taken from this intersection was the opposite one: they might have realized that what the great masters had in common was prolonged and serious study of the sūtras. Intellectual endeavor had, in fact, been common to all of them even if, at some point in their training, critique and negation of this learning were required. Although they did hold the act of critical rejection in common, they also held in common that which could be rejected but never lost.[18] Some extent of Bud-

dhist learning could easily have been recognized as a precondition for sudden awakening in Ch'an. Sung masters, however, tended to take the rejection literally and nondialectically. In effect, what they instituted was a form of Zen fundamentalism: the tradition came to be increasingly anti-intellectual in orientation and, in the process, reduced its complex heritage to simple formulae for which literal interpretations were thought adequate. The increasing institutional unification of Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism in the Yuan, Ming, and Ch'ing dynasties, although brought about by numerous factors, is less mysterious intellectually when seen in light of these doctrinal and practical conjunctions.

3. Even during the height of Ch'an in the Sung, but more so later, these developments would send the educated classes in China elsewhere, leading, in the final analysis, to the construction of a new tradition that would overwhelm Ch'an Buddhism by drawing several of its elements up into a more encompassing cultural framework. Already in the Sung an innovative *tao-hsüeh* tradition was gaining the upper hand in this stilted debate. Although this tradition benefited greatly from what Ch'an had to offer—meditative practices, sudden awakening, monastic retreat, and so on—it made more than ample room for intellectual practices as fundamental to the Way. Some of these intellectual practices were drawn from and modeled after earlier developments in Chinese Buddhism, doctrinal advances made in T'ien-t'ai, Hua-yen, and early Ch'an. Although it is now clear that the relationship of influence between Ch'an and Neo-Confucianism was multidirectional, with both traditions benefiting from the exchange, it is also clear that Ch'an drew the least benefit from this opposition because of its entrenchment in doctrines that condemned intellectual practice. Instead of regrouping to face the challenge of *tao-hsüeh* by probing ever more deeply into its own Buddhist and Chinese heritage, Ch'an opted for the silence of sudden illumination. This choice, however, had the effect of condemning Ch'an to its future marginal status in China; as the dynasties rolled by, the Ch'an contribution to Chinese culture would become increasingly insignificant.

4. Although Ch'an, for most practical purposes now merged with Pure Land Buddhism, would maintain itself in Chinese society through overwhelmingly conservative policies and practices, what creativity there has been in the tradition can be found precisely where, according to Ch'an theory, it should not be found: in the domain of Ch'an theory. What we find in some Yüan and Ming dynasty Ch'an texts is a reemergence of rational, metaphysical construction—the effort to "explain" how it is that Ch'an practices link up with reality.[19] No doubt this necessity was foisted upon Ch'an monks by historical circumstances that, for whatever reason, were allowing Neo-Confucianism to bypass Ch'an. Neo-Confucian critiques of Ch'an were widely successful, even when unsophisticated, because, for one thing, Ch'an Buddhists were by then so ill equipped to reason and argue in opposition to them. Eventually, however,

cultural decline did evoke a response; Ch'an Buddhists began to give reasons to justify their practice. These reasons naturally took metaphysical form: how is reality constructed such that it makes sense to focus all of your energies into meditation on a single "meaningless" phrase from the ancient masters? Psychological explanations were required too: how is the mind constructed such that is makes sense to drive yourself into a mental impasse? Neo-Confucian intellectuals, of course, argued that it made no sense, a conclusion applauded by mainstream advocates of common sense. Ch'an apologists thus had their work cut out for them, and their response was in fact a new wave of creative Ch'an literature. The creativity of this work is limited, however, because its authors could not see that their own writings in meta-kōan language went directly against the conclusions that they had set out to justify. They were unable—because of the power of doctrinal predilections to the contrary—to recognize that "the one who was right then doing the explaining," to borrow Lin-chi's phrase, was not the nonconceptual, nonnarrative self that their doctrine valorized. Although these doctrines concerning what a kōan is and what a human mind is were innovative, they could not encompass their own status as doctrinal assertions. They lacked the reflexive sophistication that had made many of the great Ch'an masters famous in the first place.

This split between kōans and the meta-discourse about kōans is heightened even further and modeled for us in English in the work of D. T. Suzuki. It is interesting to note that in his own writings about the kōan, Suzuki draws heavily upon this Yüan/Ming explanatory literature. This was naturally the literature most applicable to Suzuki's task, that of explaining to us in an entirely different cultural context why the great Zen masters said and did such "strange" things. Suzuki's own writings don't fit the definition of Zen that they propose. Transmitting Zen in the presence of Americans and Europeans in the mid-twentieth century called for some heavy-duty metaphysics and a lot of explaining. Too much "Zen Mind" would undermine the task. Instead of just giving us unadulterated "unreason" when he wrote about kōans, Suzuki was forced to step back and articulate "The Reason of Unreason," which is what he entitled his best essay on the kōan tradition. He knew in advance that he would have to give some very good "reasons" and that, unless Zen appeared to be the most reasonable alternative under the circumstances, it would simply be rejected. As it turns out, his reasoning was excellent and many of us were persuaded or at least influenced. Even now, when scholars regularly criticize the writings of Suzuki for their misrepresentation of the Ch'an/Zen tradition, we can see that Suzuki's task has been impressively accomplished. "Zen," whatever it is, still symbolizes for many some dimension at least of "the great matter." The reasons Suzuki provided for us may now be inadequate, but their one-time persuasiveness abides in the fact that we do not just drop the subject. Even if it takes a radically new form of metaphysics to pull it off, we would still like to learn how to hear "the sound of one hand clapping."

Notes

1. *Chung-feng ho-shang kuang-lu,* trans. Isshū Miura and Ruther Fuller Sasaki, in *The Zen Kōan* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), pp. 4–6.

2. Ibid., p. 6.

3. Ibid., pp. 5, 6.

4. Ibid., p. 7.

5. Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 19.

6. I borrow this expression from Robert E. Buswell, "The 'Shortcut' Approach of *K'an-hua* Meditation: The Evolution of a Practical Subitism in Chinese Ch'an Buddhism" in Peter Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1987), p. 347.

7. D. T. Suzuki, "The Kōan Exercise," in *Essays in Zen Buddhism,* Second Series (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1953), p. 94.

8. D. T. Suzuki, "The Reason of Unreason: The Kōan Exercise" in *Zen Buddhism,* ed. William Barrett (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1956), p. 151.

9. Shibayama, *Zen Comments,* p. 19.

10. Ironically, however, at precisely the time this name was coined, Ch'an Buddhists began to move in the opposite direction, toward a focus on the *hua-t'ou,* which, while still linguistic, was intended to sidestep language altogether.

11. Miura and Sasaki, *The Zen Kōan,* p. xi.

12. If this is what is meant, then Sasaki would be better off in English reversing the structure of the sentence before this one: "To say that the kōan is used as a subject of meditation is to state the fact incorrectly" (p. xi). Instead this would be "correct," if by "subject" Sasaki means "object," as we commonly and mistakenly do in English, then this statement makes sense of what follows. When we say "subject matter," we mean the "object" that will be taken up by the subject, the objective matter of concern to the subject.

13. Steven Heine, *Dōgen and the Kōan Tradition: A Tale of Two Shōbōgenzō Texts* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 218.

14. "Training on this path is not bothered by a lack of intelligence; it is bothered by excessive intelligence. It is not bothered by a lack of understanding; it is instead bothered by excessive understanding" (*Ta-hui yü-lu* 29, T.47:935a23–24, cited from Buswell, "The 'Short-cut' Approach," p. 371).

15. Buswell, "The 'Shortcut' Approach," p. 350.

16. Ibid, p. 350.

17. Ibid, p. 351.

18. A similar point is made by Bernard Faure: "The point of these spiritual exercises is to go through all mental artifacts, through the conventional truths of *upāya,* before eventually discarding them upon reaching ultimate truth. But the process or itinerary is not irrelevant, for it is somehow inscribed in the arrival point," *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 53.

19. For example, from the Yuan dynasty, *The Extensive Record of Master Chung-feng,* and from the Ming dynasty, *The Mirror for Ch'an Studies* complied by T'ui-yin.