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The Blue Cliff Record

The Blue Cliff Record

by Xuedou Chongxian & Yuanwu Keqin

a translation in progress by
Joan Sutherland and John Tarrant



The hundred cases of the *Blue Cliff Record* were compiled in the eleventh century by the Chan teacher Xuedou Chongxian, who wrote his own verses and remarks for each. In the twelfth century, Yuanwu Keqin added introductions and commentaries to the cases and to Xuedou's verses. The name comes from the place in Hunan where Yuanwu gave his dharma talks on the collection.

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Chinese : Bìyán Lù

Japanese : Hekiganroku

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The Blue Cliff Record

1 BODHIDHARMA, THE BUDDHA-HEART EMPEROR, AND THE MAGICAL DUKE

Emperor Wu asked the great teacher Bodhidharma, “What is the first principle of the holy teaching?”

Bodhidharma said, “Vast emptiness, nothing holy.”

“Who are you, standing here in front of me?” asked the emperor.

“I don’t know,” said Bodhidharma.

The Emperor didn’t understand.

Bodhidharma crossed the river into the kingdom of Wei.¹

Later, the Emperor asked Duke Zhi about this. The Duke said, “Your Majesty, do you know who that was?”

“I don’t know,” said the Emperor.

“That was the great bodhisattva Guanyin,² bringing the mind seal of the Buddha.”³

The Emperor was filled with regret and wanted to send a messenger to ask Bodhidharma to come back.

The Duke said, “There’s no point, Your Majesty. Even if everyone in the country went after him, he wouldn’t return.”

2 ZHAOZHOU’S GREATEST WAY ISN’T DIFFICULT

Zhaozhou taught, “The greatest way isn’t difficult if you don’t pick and choose.⁴ As

¹ The river is the Yangzi; in the kingdom of Wei is Shaolin Monastery, the birthplace of Chinese martial arts, where Bodhidharma is said to have meditated, and perhaps taught, for nine years

² Guanyin is the embodiment of compassion known as Avalokiteshvara in India and Kannon or Kanzeon in Japan

³ The mind seal is the direct, wordless transmission of realization, which passes from one heart-mind to another, leaving an imprint like a seal

soon as I speak, you'll think, 'That's picking and choosing,' or 'That's clear.' But I don't identify with clarity. Can you live like that?"

A student asked, "If you don't identify with clarity, what do you live by?"

"I don't know."

"If you don't know, why do you say that you don't identify with clarity?"

"You're asking about a matter you already grasp. Make your bow and step back."

3 MA'S SUN FACE, MOON FACE BUDDHA

Ancestor Ma⁵ was sick. The superintendent of the monastery asked him, "How have you been feeling these days?"

The Ancestor said, "Sun Face Buddha, Moon Face Buddha."⁶

4 DESHAN CARRIES HIS BAGGAGE

Deshan⁷ came to Guishan's monastery. Still carrying his pilgrim's bundle,⁸ he went into the teaching hall.⁹ He walked from east to west and from west to east. Looking around, he said, "Nothing, nothing," and left.

(Xuedou comments: "All has been revealed.")

When he reached the monastery gate, Deshan thought, "Well, I don't want to be a barbarian." Putting on a dignified air, he went back in and looked around again. This

⁴ A quote from Third Ancestor Sengcan's Trust in Mind (6th century), a foundational Chan text: "The great way is not difficult / if you don't pick and choose. / Just don't like or dislike / and everything is clear and bright."

⁵ Ma was the only Chan teacher titled Ancestor and called by his birth surname, Ma or Horse | This conversation took place right before he died

⁶ According to the *Buddha Names Sutra*, a sun-face buddha lives for 1800 years; a moon-face buddha lives only a day and a night

⁷ For Deshan's enlightenment story, see *The Gateless Gateway* 28

⁸ A traveling pack with the essentials, like a spare set of robes, begging bowl, razor, and bowing cloth

⁹ Bringing his pilgrim's bundle into the hall was a deliberate breach of etiquette

time Guishan was in his seat.

Deshan lifted up the cloth he carried for bowing and said, “Reverend.”¹⁰

Guishan reached for his whisk.¹¹

Deshan shouted,¹² shook his sleeves,¹³ and walked out.

(Xuedou comments: “All has been revealed.”)

Deshan turned his back on the teaching hall, put on his sandals, and left the monastery. That evening, Guishan called the head of practice and asked, “Where’s the new arrival?”

The head of practice said, “After what happened, he turned his back on the teaching hall, put on his sandals, and left.”

Guishan said, “One day that boy will climb to the top of a lonely mountain and coil himself into a hermitage, where he’ll laugh at the buddhas and curse the ancestors.”¹⁴

(Xuedou comments: “That’s piling frost on snow.”)

5 XUEFENG’S GREAT EARTH IN A GRAIN OF RICE¹⁵

Xuefeng said to his assembly, “When I pick up this great earth, it’s the size of a grain of rice. I’m holding it up in front of you, but you’re as dim as tubs of black

¹⁰ Carried on formal occasions, the cloth is spread on the ground when a monastic is making prostrations

¹¹ The whisk is a stick with a long tassel of white horse or cow hair; it is a symbol of teaching authority, standing for the function of self-nature (while self-nature is represented by the staff)

¹² Such a shout expresses someone’s Chan spirit

¹³ As if shaking the dust off his clothes, a Chan gesture of dismissal

¹⁴ Guishan’s prediction came true: After these events, Deshan lived in obscurity for about thirty years. Then the emperor tried to abolish Buddhism, and Deshan escaped to a stone grotto on a mountain. Later, when the persecution was over, he became a famous and respected teacher.

¹⁵ Xuefeng is perhaps the most famous cook in Chan history. When he was making the rounds of the great teachers of his day, he’d bring along his lacquer tub and wooden spoon and serve as each monastery’s rice steward. He was a late bloomer, awakening-wise, but eventually became a great teacher with 1500 students.

lacquer!¹⁶ Beat the drum and gather everyone to look for it.”

6 YUNMEN’S GOOD DAY

Yunmen¹⁷ said, “I’m not asking you about before the full moon.¹⁸ Come and say a word or two about after the full moon.”

He responded to his own request, “Every day is a good day.”

7 FAYAN EXPLAINS ABOUT BUDDHA

A student asked Fayan, “Reverend, I am Huichao. What is Buddha?”

Fayan replied, “You are Huichao!”¹⁹

8 A DEBATE ABOUT CUIYAN’S EYEBROWS²⁰

At the end of the summer retreat, Cuiyan said to the assembly, “All summer I’ve been rambling on for your benefit, friends. How did I do? Did my eyebrows fall

¹⁶ A bucket full of black lacquer represents the state of delusion; realization is represented by the bottom falling out of the bucket

¹⁷ Yunmen, Cloud Gate (10th century), was one of the greatest of the Chinese teachers, known for a literate, witty, and often enigmatic style. He believed in the power of koans and often, as here, made sure one happened by responding to his own questions. Much of the Chan literature we have today survived because his school took pains to preserve it. (Xuedou, the compiler of the *Blue Cliff Record*, was one of Yunmen’s descendants.)

¹⁸ Literally, the fifteenth of the month, the day of the full moon in the Chinese lunar calendar, which symbolizes enlightenment

¹⁹ Later Huichao became Fayan’s dharma heir and was known as Guizong Cezhen. Once he was asked, “What is Buddha?” He replied, “When I tell you it becomes something else.”

²⁰ As the head monk under Xuefeng, Cuiyan spoke to the other monastics each day in the lecture hall; all the other characters in the koan were also Xuefeng’s students, though Yunmen was away at the time

out?”²¹

Baofu said, “This thief has a guilty heart!”²²

Changqing said, “They’re getting bushier!”²³

Later, Yunmen commented, “Barrier!”²⁴

9 ZHAOZHOU’S GATES²⁵

A student asked Zhaozhou, “What is Zhaozhou?”

Zhaozhou replied, “East Gate, West Gate, South Gate, North Gate.”

10 MUZHOU GETS SHOUTED AT

Muzhou asked a student, “Where have you come from?”

The student shouted.

“So you’ve shouted at me once,” said Muzhou.

The student shouted again.

“Three shouts, four shouts – now what?” asked Muzhou.

The student didn’t say anything.

Muzhou hit him, saying, “Thief! Fake!”

²¹ It is said that the eyebrows of someone who distorts the Dharma will fall out

²² A proverb signifying a bad conscience

²³ There’s a folk belief that talking a lot makes one’s eyebrows grow

²⁴ ‘Barrier’ refers to a large city gate that, when closed, prevents anyone from entering or leaving; these barriers were also found at frontiers and border crossings. Yunmen’s “Barrier!” was often used as a first koan, like Zhaozhou’s “No!”

²⁵ In accord with Chan custom, the teacher Zhaozhou took his name from the city called Zhaozhou where he taught

11 HUANGBO WANTS YOU TO FIND TODAY

Huangbo said, “You're all gulping down the dregs of the wine. If you keep running around like this, where will you find today? Don't you know yet that there isn't a single Chan teacher in the whole country?”

A student stepped forward and asked, “But what about all those places where people are guiding students and leading communities?”

Huangbo said, “I didn't say no Chan, only no Chan teachers.”

12 DONGSHAN'S THREE POUNDS OF HEMP

A student asked Dongshan, “What is Buddha?”

Dongshan said, “Three pounds of hemp.”²⁶

13 BALING'S SNOW IN A SILVER BOWL²⁷

A student asked Baling, “What is Chan?”²⁸

“A silver bowl filled with snow.”²⁹

²⁶ Hemp was grown at many monasteries and was the fiber from which monastic robes, rakusus, etc. were made, but is that important?

²⁷ The full text of Baling Haojian's Three Turning Words

What is Chan? A silver bowl filled with snow.

What is the Way? The clear-sighted person falls into a well.

What is the sword so sharp it cuts a hair blown against it? Each branch of coral holds up the moon.

²⁸ Literally, “What is Kanadeva's school?” Kanadeva (‘One-eyed Deva’) was an Indian teacher considered the founder of the Dhyana (Chan/Zen) school, which Bodhidharma brought to China; he was the dharma heir of Nagarjuna, one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers, and was himself a renowned philosopher, writing a major work of the Madhyamaka School on emptiness. The Japanese teacher Tenkei comments, “The Kanadeva school means the buddha-mind school, the school of the enlightened mind ... Ultimately the whole universe should be seen as the school of the enlightened mind.”

²⁹ Dongshan's “Jewel Mirror Samadhi” begins:

14 YUNMEN SAYS SOMETHING IN RESPONSE

A student asked Yunmen, ““What is the teaching that lasts a lifetime?”³⁰

Yunmen said, “Say something in response.”³¹

15 YUNMEN SAYS IT BACKWARDS

Then the student asked Yunmen, “But when it’s not the things I can see, and it’s not what they’re doing, what is it?”³²

“Say something backwards.”

16 JINGQING’S PECKING OUT OF THE SHELL

A student asked Jingqing, “I am breaking out of my shell. Will you peck?”

Jingqing asked, “But will you survive if I do?”

“If I didn’t survive, people would laugh at me.”

“You really are in the weeds.”³³

The teaching of suchness, intimately given by the buddhas and ancestors—
now that it’s yours, keep it well.

A silver bowl filled with snow; a white heron hidden in the moonlight—
Apart, they seem similar; together, they’re different.

³⁰ This has three layers of meaning: what the Buddha taught over his lifetime; the teaching for a particular era; and the teaching that will last each of us our whole lives

³¹ This dialogue continues in the next koan

³² This seems to refer to the Chan idea of two aspects of things: their materiality and their functioning, roughly corresponding to form and emptiness

³³ Common images in the *Blue Cliff Record* include being in the weeds, which refers to being deep in the world of form, and being on the mountaintop, standing in the world of emptiness

17 XIANGLIN'S WHY BODHIDHARMA CAME FROM THE WEST³⁴

A student asked Xianglin, "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?"³⁵

Xianglin said, "Sitting for a long time makes you tired."³⁶

18 HUIZHONG'S SEAMLESS MONUMENT

Emperor Suzong asked National Teacher Huizhong, "What should I do after you die?"³⁷

"Build a seamless monument for me," replied the National Teacher.

"What should the monument's design be?"

There was a long silence, and then the National Teacher asked, "Do you understand?"

"No, I don't," said the Emperor.

The National Teacher said, "I've handed on my teachings to a student named Danyuan. He knows all about this sort of thing. Why don't you ask him about it when the time comes?"

After the National Teacher's death, the Emperor summoned Danyuan and asked him what the teacher meant. Danyuan said (and Xuedou comments):

³⁴ Xianglin served as Yunmen's attendant for eighteen years. Yunmen had forbidden his students to record his teachings, but Xianglin famously wore a paper robe under his cloth one and wrote down whatever Yunmen said.

³⁵ A stereotypical way of asking, What is Chan? What is the meaning of life?

³⁶ Another time, a student asked Xianglin the same question about Bodhidharma's coming from the West. He replied, "Who's walking?"

³⁷ National Teachers were appointed by emperors and served as their personal teachers; Nanyang Huizhong (d. 775) was the first and most famous one, appearing in several koans. He received transmission from Sixth Ancestor Huineng and resisted two emperors, the father Suzong and his son Daizong, for forty years before agreeing to come down from his mountain and teach at court. The emperor in this koan should probably be Daizong, and this conversation takes place right before the National Teacher's death.

In the center of the country³⁸

(A single hand doesn't call out in vain)³⁹

There's enough gold to fill the whole land.

(That's a staff straight from the mountains)⁴⁰

Beneath a tree with no shadow,
there's a ferryboat where people gather.

(The sea is calm, the river clear)

In the emerald temple,⁴¹
there's no knowledge and no one who knows.

(He's really held it up for us)

19 JUDI'S ONE FINGER⁴²

Whatever he was asked, Juzhi just held up one finger.

20 LONGYA'S WHY BODHIDHARMA CAME FROM THE WEST

Longya asked Cuiwei, "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?"

Cuiwei said, "Pass me that meditation brace."⁴³

³⁸ Literally, "North of Xiang, south of Tan." Two possible references: 1) The Xiang and Tan Rivers marked the boundaries of the area where Chan was flourishing, and 2) Xiangtan is a district in Hunan, near the center of ancient China

³⁹ This is the original appearance of what became Hakuin's famous koan, What is the sound of one hand?, which we continue to use as a first koan today

⁴⁰ Chan teachers would find an unworked piece of wood in the mountains to use as their teaching staff

⁴¹ An image of the vastness, sometimes called the crystal temple

⁴² The longer version of this koan: One day a visitor asked Juzhi's attendant what Juzhi taught, and the boy held up one finger. Hearing of this, Juzhi cut off the boy's finger with a knife. As the boy ran from the room, screaming with pain, Juzhi called to him. When the boy turned his head, Juzhi held up one finger and the boy immediately had an opening. Just before his death, Juzhi said to his students, "I received this one-finger Chan from Tianlong. I used it all my life but never used it up. Do you understand?" He held up his finger and died.

Longya passed him the brace. Cuiwei took it and hit him with it.

“I accept that you can hit me, but that doesn’t show me Bodhidharma’s intention,” said Longya.

Then Longya went and asked Linji, “Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?”

“Pass me that cushion,” said Linji.

Longya passed it to him. Linji took it and hit him with it.

“I accept that you can hit me, but that doesn’t show me Bodhidharma’s intention,” said Longya.

21 ZHIMEN’S LOTUS

A student asked Zhimen, “When the lotus hasn’t emerged from the water, what’s that?”

Zhimen replied, “Lotus flower.”

“After it’s emerged from the water, what’s that?”

Zhimen replied, “Lotus petals.”

22 XUEFENG’S POISONOUS SNAKE

Xuefeng said to the assembly, “There’s a turtle-nosed snake⁴⁴ on South Mountain. All of you should have a good look.”

Changqing said, “There definitely are people in this hall today who could lose their lives.”

Yunmen threw his staff down in front of Xuefeng and made a show of being afraid.⁴⁵

⁴³ When people meditated for long stretches, including all night, they used a brace stretching from chin to mat to keep themselves upright (and allow for napping)

⁴⁴ Possibly a cobra, the turtle-nosed snake is ancient, gnarled, and venomous; it swallows up buddhas and ancestors, who emerge from the ordeal as poisonous snakes themselves

⁴⁵ See BCR 60 for a fuller exploration of Yunmen’s connection between staffs, snakes, and dragons

When a student told Xuansha about this, Xuansha said, “Well, it makes sense that Brother Changqing was the first to understand this. Even though what he says is true, that’s not what I would have said.”

The student asked, “What point would you make?”

“Why bring South Mountain into it?” responded Xuansha.⁴⁶

23 BAOFU AND CHANGQING ON WONDER PEAK⁴⁷

Once when Baofu and Changqing were wandering in the mountains, Baofu pointed and said, “The summit of Wonder Peak is right here and nowhere else.”

Changqing said, “That’s true, but what a pity!”

Later this was relayed to Jingqing, who said, “If it weren’t for Changqing, we’d see skulls in every field.”

(Xuedou comments: Why should we wander in the mountains with these guys now? Well, I’m not saying there won’t be anyone like them after a hundred, or even a thousand years, but there won’t be many.)

24 IRON GRINDER LIU VISITS GUISHAN⁴⁸

The nun Iron Grinder Liu came to visit Guishan.

Guishan said, “Hello, you old cow, you’ve come!”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Xuefeng was said to be so fiery that those who approached him got their faces burned; Changqing, Yunmen, and Xuansha all spent time studying with him before becoming esteemed teachers themselves

⁴⁷ The Peak of Wonder is the center of Paradise, according to the *Huayan (Avatamsaka) Sutra*; the word translated as ‘wonder’ also means ‘sublime, mystic, profound, spiritual, incomparable’

⁴⁸ Liu Tiemo (ninth century) was a nun whom Yuanwu described as “like a spark struck from a stone or a lightning flash; her active edge was sharp and dangerous.” After long years of study, she built a hermitage a few miles from Gui Mountain, where Guishan taught, and she became one of his dharma heirs.

⁴⁹ Guishan often referred to himself as an old buffalo, and here he calls Liu an old buffalo cow

Iron Grinder said, “Tomorrow there will be a huge community feast on Mount Tai.⁵⁰ Will you be going?”⁵¹

Guishan flopped down and lay on the floor.

Iron Grinder went away.

25 THE HERMIT OF LOTUS PEAK⁵²

The hermit of Lotus Peak held up their staff, saying to the group gathered around, “When the ancestors reached here, why didn’t they decide to stay here?”

Everyone was silent, so the hermit answered herself, “Because it has no power for the Path.”

Then he asked, “What does it come to in the end?”

He answered his own question again, “I put my staff across my shoulders and set off without a backward glance, going straight into the endless mountains.”⁵³

26 BAIZHANG’S MOST WONDERFUL THING

A student asked Baizhang, “What’s the most wonderful thing in the world?”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Mount Tai is one of the most sacred mountains in China, home to Manjushri and a place of pilgrimage where many mystical occurrences are reported; Southern School teachers like Guishan had an ambivalent attitude toward its reputation for magic and wonders

⁵¹ Mount Tai was many hundreds of miles away, much too far to travel in a day

⁵² Little is known about the hermit except that s/he came two dharma generations after Yunmen and lived on this peak, one of China’s five holy mountains. The hermit’s title is ambiguous, applying to both abbots and abbesses, so there’s a slim possibility she was a woman. Hermits would live simply, in lively hermit neighborhoods, and small groups of students would gather around them. This story took place right before the hermit died.

⁵³ The hermit is quoting an ancestor named Yanyang, who said the same thing in reply to a monastic he met on the road who didn’t understand his questions

⁵⁴ The phrase ‘the most wonderful thing in the world’ is a term of art in two traditions: In Chinese folklore, it refers to the mysterious realm of spirits and supernatural events; in Chan, it refers to the incomparable powers of the Way, including the power to attract, persuade, and save all beings, and the wisdom of awakening.

Baizhang answered, "Sitting alone on Great Courage Peak."⁵⁵

The student bowed, and Baizhang immediately hit him.

27 YUNMEN REVEALS THE GOLDEN WIND

A student asked Yunmen, "When the tree withers and the leaves fall, what's that?"⁵⁶

Yunmen said, "The Golden Wind reveals itself."⁵⁷

28 MASTER NIRVANA'S SECRET TEACHING

Nanquan visited Master Nirvana of Baizhang,⁵⁸ who asked, "Is there a teaching that the wise throughout the ages haven't ever told anyone?"

Nanquan replied, "There is."

"How would you express it?"

"It is not mind, not buddha, not things," said Nanquan.⁵⁹

"You said it!"

Nanquan said, "That's just what I would say. What would you say?"

Master Nirvana responded, "Like you, I don't have any great knowledge or expertise. How would I know whether it's been expressed or not?"

⁵⁵ Great Courage Peak (Daxiong) is another name for Mt. Baizhang, where Baizhang's monastery was located. It was known for the magical tigers that lurked near its summit. Yuanwu calls Baizhang 'a tiger with wings.'

⁵⁶ This can be an old Chan metaphor for the absolute, or for enlightenment. For example, one of Han Shan's poems describes a tree older than the forest it stands in; its bark is dried up and its leaves have fallen, so that only naked reality is left.

⁵⁷ Golden Wind is the name of the deity of autumn

⁵⁸ Master Nirvana of Baizhang was a successor of the great teacher Baizhang Huaihai; the two Baizhangs and Nanquan were all students of Ancestor Ma. Master Nirvana was older than Nanquan and considered to have deeper realization at the time of this story, though Nanquan went on to become a more eminent teacher.

⁵⁹ This was a famous saying of Ancestor Ma's

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve already said way too much.”

29 DASUI’S FIRE AT THE END OF THE KALPA

A student asked Dasui, “It’s clear that the fire at the end of this kalpa will completely destroy the universe.⁶⁰ I’m still not clear whether there’s something that won’t be destroyed.”

Dasui said, “It will be destroyed.”

“It’ll leave along with everything else?”

“It will leave along with everything else,” said Dasui.⁶¹

30 ZHAOZHOU’S GIANT RADISHES

A student said to Zhaozhou, “I’ve heard that you saw Nanquan with your own eyes.⁶² Is that true?”

Zhaozhou replied, “In Zhenzhou they grow giant radishes.”⁶³

31 MAGU RIGHT AND WRONG⁶⁴

Carrying his staff,⁶⁵ Magu went to Changqing and walked around his Chan seat

⁶⁰ A kalpa is an inconceivably long age. In Chan cosmology, the universe undergoes endless cycles of emptiness, formation, existence, and destruction, called great kalpas, each of which ends in an all-consuming fire.

⁶¹ In a curious rhyme, Dasui was once the fire keeper at Guishan’s monastery

⁶² Zhaozhou spent forty years with Nanquan and became his dharma heir | The student’s question is the opposite of what Emperor Wu said of Bodhidharma, “I met him without meeting him.”

⁶³ Zhenzhou is the name of a place famous for its large radishes, near where Zhaozhou lived

⁶⁴ Magu, Changqing, and Nanquan were all dharma heirs of Ancestor Ma; Magu was the most junior

three times.⁶⁶ He shook his staff once and stood there, looking superior.⁶⁷

Changqing said, “Right, right!”

(Xuedou comments: A mistake!)

Then Magu went to Nanquan and walked around his Chan seat three times. He shook his staff once and stood there looking superior.

Nanquan said, “Wrong, wrong!”

(Xuedou: A mistake!)

And so Magu asked, “Changqing said ‘Right.’ Why do you say ‘Wrong?’”

Nanquan replied, “Changqing is right, but you’re not. What you’re doing is just spinning in the wind. It will come to nothing in the end.”⁶⁸

32 WHAT HAPPENED WHEN ELDER DING BOWED

Elder Ding⁶⁹ asked Linji, “What is the key idea in Buddhist teaching?”

Linji came down from his seat and grabbed him. Then he pushed him away with one hand.

Ding stood rooted to the spot.

A student nearby asked, “Elder Ding, why don’t you bow?”

Ding bowed.

Suddenly, great awakening.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ A monk’s or nun’s traveling staff often had twelve rings at the top, symbolizing the chain of cause and effect (ignorance—volition—consciousness—name and form—the six senses—contact—sensation—desire—grasping—existence—birth—old age and death). The constant jingling of the rings reminded the pilgrim of her existential condition. Monastics shook the rings to announce their presence and to dispel demons, two important things on a pilgrimage.

⁶⁶ Circumambulating someone’s seat is a form of paying respect, the same as with a stupa

⁶⁷ The accepted etiquette was to step back into a corner and wait after presenting oneself

⁶⁸ The wind is one of the four elements — earth, water, fire and wind — in Chinese physics and is the element of movement

⁶⁹ The title ‘Elder’ was given to people who’d been in the monastery for decades; there’s some poignancy in this

⁷⁰ After this, Ding largely disappeared from the world, though an occasional sighting is recorded. In one, he was resting on a bridge when he met three lecturing monks. One asked

33 ZIFU CLOSES THE DOOR ON THE BUREAUCRAT

The high-ranking bureaucrat Chencao paid Zifu a visit. When Zifu saw him coming, he drew a circle in the air.⁷¹

Chencao said,⁷² “Just by coming here, little brother, I’ve already left the realm of true meaning. Why would you add to that by drawing a circle?”

Zifu closed the door of his abbot’s quarters.

(Xuedou comments: “Chencao has only one eye.”)

34 YANGSHAN WANDERS IN THE MOUNTAINS

Yangshan asked a student, “Where have you come from?”

“Mount Lu,” replied the student.

“Did you go wandering on Five Elders Peak?” asked Yangshan.⁷³

“I wasn’t able to get there,” answered the student.

“Then you didn’t really go wandering in the mountains,” said Yangshan.

Yunmen comments, “These words were spoken out of compassion, but they ended up in the weeds.”

him, “What is the meaning of ‘Where the river of Chan is deep, you must plumb the very bottom’?” Ding grabbed him and was about to throw him off the bridge when the other lecturers frantically intervened, saying, “Stop! Stop! He has offended you but we hope you will be merciful.” Ding replied, “If not for you two, I’d have let him plumb the bottom all right.”

⁷¹ Zifu belonged to the Guiyang lineage, whose members drew circular figures as imaginary places for people’s different perspectives to meet; they might also have been used as objects of meditation. So Zifu was greeting Chencao cordially and making an offer to him.

⁷² In his commentary, Yuanwu is scathing in his description of Chencao, who seemed to take pleasure in showing up Chan people by laying traps for them. Chencao probably means something like, “Just coming to visit is already a move away from emptiness.”

⁷³ Five Elders Peak, shaped like five old people greeting each other, is one of the most famous parts of Mount Lu in northern Jiangxi province; with numerous temples, Mount Lu was once a major seat of Buddhist learning.

35 MANJUSHRI'S ORDINARY PEOPLE AND SAINTS TOGETHER

Manjushri asked Wuzho, "Where have you come from?"⁷⁴

"From the South," replied Wuzho.

"How are the Buddhist teachings being maintained in the South?"

"In this Last Age of the Dharma, monastics barely keep the precepts."⁷⁵

"How big are the assemblies?"

"Some have three hundred and some five hundred. How are the Buddhist teachings being maintained here?"

"Ordinary people and saints live together. Dragons and snakes mix."

"How big are the assemblies?"

Manjushri said, "In front three three, in back three three."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ The long version of this koan: When he was young, Wuzho, which means No Attachment, made a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai, where Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, is said to live. Wuzho came to a wild and dangerous area, and Manjushri imagined a temple into existence to take Wuzho in for the night. Manjushri took the form of the head of the temple, welcomed Wuzho, and they had the conversation recorded in this shorter koan.

Later, as they were drinking tea, Manjushri held up a perfect crystal bowl and asked, "Do you have this in the South?"

Wuzho replied, "No."

"Then how do you drink tea?"

Wuzho didn't have an answer, and he decided to leave. A young attendant accompanied him to the gate, and Wuzho asked him, "What temple is this?" The boy pointed to the mountain behind Wuzho, who turned to look. The mountain was a beautiful, deep indigo in the twilight. When Wuzho turned back, the temple and the boy had vanished, and he was standing alone in an empty valley.

Wuzho stayed on Mount Wutai, working as a cook in one of the monasteries. Manjushri would appear over the rice pot, and Wuzho would hit him with his spoon. All in all, this was drawing his bow after the thief was gone.

⁷⁵ There are said to be three ages after the life of Shakyamuni: the first 500 years is called The Age of the True Dharma, the next is called The Age of the Imitation Dharma, and the last is called The Age of the Corrupt Dharma.

⁷⁶ This is a mysterious statement; it could refer to a phrase in the *Xuansha Guanglu* meaning "six in front, six behind," possibly the six sense realms. Hakuin says, "Three times three is nine, two times nine is eighteen; is that what it means? If you want to know this, refer to the number of last night's stars, and the number of this morning's raindrops." Front is associated with south, fire, and yang; back with north, water, and yin.

36 CHANGSHA WANDERING IN THE MOUNTAINS

One day Changsha went wandering in the mountains. When he returned, the head of practice met him at the gate and asked, “Where have you been?”

“Wandering in the mountains.”

“Where did you go?”

“I went out following scented grasses and returned chasing falling blossoms.”

“That’s so much the feeling of spring,” said the head of practice.

“Still, it’s better than autumn dew dripping on lotus flowers,” said Changsha.

(Xuedou comments: “Thanks for your reply.”)

37 PANSHAN’S NOTHING IN THE UNIVERSE

Panshan taught, “In the universe⁷⁷ there is nothing. Where will you search for your heart-mind?”⁷⁸

38 FENGXUE’S IRON OX

Fengxue taught in the hall at the government offices in Yingzhou, saying, “When the ancestors’ mind seal makes an impression on you, it’s like the working of the Iron Ox.⁷⁹ When the mind seal is lifted, it continues working, but if the seal remains, its working is ruined. With the mind seal and without the mind seal can both be right only

⁷⁷ Literally, in the three worlds: the worlds of desire, form, and formlessness, which encompass the whole universe, material and spiritual

⁷⁸ The complete Panshan quote: You have to look into it for yourselves; no one can do it for you. In the universe there is nothing. Where will you search for your heart-mind? The elements are fundamentally empty; how can they appear as a buddha? The pole star doesn’t move or speak, yet it reveals itself immediately. And there is nothing else.

⁷⁹ The Iron Ox was built by the legendary ancestor Yu to stem the flooding of the Yellow River; it was a vast structure lying at the bottom of the river, with its head in the province of Hunan and its tail in the province of Hubei. Iron oxen were said to subdue sea-dragons, who stir up the waters and break dams; they are afraid of iron and the ox’s steady strength.

if the seal neither goes away nor remains.”

Just then, Elder Lupi⁸⁰ stepped forward and said, “I have the workings of the iron ox. But please don’t impress your seal on me.”

Fengxue said, “I’m used to catching big fish and calming the seas. So I’m sorry to see just a frog hopping in the mud.” Lupi stood there, thinking.

Fengxue roared, “Why don’t you say something?”

Lupi thought about it again.

Fengxue hit him with his whisk and said, “If you come back to the point of the koan, I’ll look at it with you.”⁸¹

Lupi had decided to open his mouth when Fengxue hit him again with his whisk.

The Chief Magistrate said, “The Buddha’s law and the king’s law are the same.”

“What have you seen that makes you say that?” asked Fengxue.

The Chief Magistrate said, “When it’s time to decide you have to decide; otherwise you invite chaos.”⁸²

Fengxue got down from his seat.

39 YUNMEN’S LION WITH GOLDEN HAIR

A student asked Yunmen, “What is the pure and everlasting body of reality?”⁸³

Yunmen said, “A fence of flowers and healing herbs.”⁸⁴

The student asked, “What’s it like when I reach there?”

Yunmen said, “Golden-haired lion!”⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Like Fengxue, he was a long-time practitioner in the Linji school

⁸¹ It seems likely that there was a koan about the iron ox circulating at that time which has since been lost

⁸² This was not just an intellectual point; at that time the Five Dynasties were at war with each other, and the chief magistrate of Yingzhou had invited Fengxue to take refuge there for the summer.

⁸³ Literally, Dharmakaya, the Body of the Vastness

⁸⁴ This fence surrounded the temple latrine

⁸⁵ The golden lion is a Huayan image of the inseparability of the vastness and all phenomena, which are like gold and the lion made from it; Manjushri is said to ride on a golden-haired lion.

40 NANQUAN'S DREAM FLOWER

Governor Luxuan⁸⁶ was having a conversation with Nanquan and quoted Sengzhao:⁸⁷ “‘The universe and I have the same root. The ten thousand things and I have one body.’ How very strange and wonderful!”

Nanquan pointed to a flower in the courtyard; he called to the governor and said, “These days people see this flower as though it’s a dream.”

41 TOUZI PLUNGES INTO DAYLIGHT

Zhaozhou asked Touzi, “What’s it like when you’ve gone through the Great Death and then come back to life?”⁸⁸

Touzi said, “I don’t accept walking about in the night. You have to get there by plunging into daylight.”

42 LAYMAN PANG’S BEAUTIFUL SNOW, FLAKE BY FLAKE

Layman Pang was taking leave of Yaoshan, who ordered ten Chan guests⁸⁹ to see him to the gate.

The Layman pointed to the snow in the air and said, “Beautiful snowflakes! They don’t fall in the other place.”⁹⁰

A Chan guest named Chuan asked, “Where do they fall?”

⁸⁶ An important official in the Tang government and a longtime student of Nanquan’s who immersed himself in Sengzhao’s writing

⁸⁷ Sengzhao was one of Kumarajiva’s disciples in the fifth century. When he was thirty, he refused the emperor’s request to leave the monastery and become his secretary. This was a capital crime and he was sentenced to beheading, but first he was allowed seven days to finish his writing, which is considered one of the foundations of Chan.

⁸⁸ The Great Death refers to enlightenment

⁸⁹ Pilgrims taking up residence in one monastery after another to study with various teachers

⁹⁰ Variant: ‘any other place’

The Layman slapped him.

Chuan said, "Layman, you shouldn't be so crude."

The Layman said, "If you're a Chan guest and act like this, in the end the King of Death will never let you go."⁹¹

Chuan said, "What would you say?"

The Layman slapped him again and said, "You have eyes but you don't see, you have a mouth but you don't speak."

(Xuedou comments, "When he first asked about where the snow falls, I'd have grabbed a snowball and hit him.")

43 DONGSHAN'S COLD KILLS YOU, HEAT KILLS YOU

A student asked Dongshan, "When cold and heat come, how can we avoid them?"

Dongshan said, "Why don't you go to the place where there is no cold or heat?"

The student asked, "What's the place with neither cold or heat?"

Dongshan said, "When it's cold, the cold kills you. When it's hot, the heat kills you."

44 HOSHAN BEATS THE DRUM

Hoshan taught, "Studying—we call that 'hearing'; completing study is called 'getting nearer'. Going beyond both of these is what we mean by 'truly going beyond'.

A student stepped out of the assembly and asked, "What's truly going beyond?"

Hoshan replied, "Knowing how to beat the drum."

The student asked again, "What's true inquiry?"

Hoshan said, "Knowing how to beat the drum."

The student then said, "I'm not asking about 'just mind, just buddha'. What is 'not mind, not buddha'?"

⁹¹ Yama, the god of the underworld and judge of the dead

Hoshan said, “Knowing how to beat the drum.”

Finally the student asked, “When it comes from the ancient sages, how do we welcome it?”

Hoshan said, “Knowing how to beat the drum.”

45 ZHAOZHOU’S ALL THINGS RETURN TO THE ONE

A student asked Zhaozhou, “All things return to the one. Where does the one return to?”⁹²

Zhaozhou said, “When I was in Qingzhou, I made a cloth robe. It weighed nine pounds.”

46 JINGQING’S SOUND OF RAIN

Jingqing asked a student, “What’s that sound outside the door?”

“Rain,” replied the student.

Jingqing said, “People are upside down. They delude themselves and chase after things.”

“What about you?”

“I’m reaching not to lose myself.”

“What do you mean by reaching not to lose yourself?”

Jingqing said, “Being born is easy; the way of freedom is hard.”

⁹² The question refers to a passage in the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, which says, “All things of the three realms are reduced to one mind.”

47 YUNMEN'S WHAT THE SENSES DON'T TAKE IN

A monastic asked Yunmen, "What is the pure, everlasting body of reality?"⁹³

Yunmen replied, "The six senses⁹⁴ don't take it in."

48 LANG SPILLS THE TEA

Governor Wang arrived at Zhaoqing Temple while they were making tea.⁹⁵ As Elder Lang held the kettle for the teacher Mingzhao,⁹⁶ it turned over. The governor saw this and asked the elder, "What's under the little tea stove?"

"The spirits that hold up the stove," replied Lang.⁹⁷

"If the spirits are holding up the stove," asked the governor, "why did the kettle turn over?"

Lang said, "You can serve as a high official for a thousand days, and then lose it in a morning."

The governor shook out his sleeves and left.

Mingzhao said, "Elder Lang, you've been eating our food here at Zhaoqing Temple, but you've just strayed across the river, collecting trash."

Lang asked, "What would you say?"

"The humans lost to the hearth spirits."

(Xuedou comments: If I'd been there, I'd have kicked over the tea stove myself.)

⁹³ The Dharmakaya

⁹⁴ The six sense faculties—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind—and the sensations (including thoughts for mind) associated with them

⁹⁵ Governor Wang was the patron of the temple and often visited, having studied there for a long time

⁹⁶ Mingzhao was known as the One-eyed Dragon and later became abbot of another temple

⁹⁷ The tea stove is a brazier with three legs shaped like demigods, called hearth-holding deities

49 XUEFENG HAS A LOT ON HIS MIND

Sansheng asked Xuefeng, “I’m the golden carp who has passed through the net, but I wonder what to eat now.”

Xuefeng said, “I’ll wait for you to come out of the net, and then I’ll tell you.”

“A spiritual friend⁹⁸ to fifteen hundred people and you’re still not intimate with the koans!”

“Well, I’m old, and as head of the temple I have a lot on my mind.”

50 YUNMEN’S PARTICLE-BY-PARTICLE SAMADHI

A student asked Yunmen, “What’s the particle-by-particle samadhi?”⁹⁹

Yunmen said, “Food in the bowl, water in the bucket.”

51 XUEFENG’S WHAT’S THIS?

Once when Xuefeng was living in a hermitage, two students came to pay their respects. When Xuefeng saw them coming, he slumped against the hermitage door and then came out. He asked, “What’s this?”

One of the students said “What’s this?” back to him.

Xuefeng hung his head and returned to the hermitage.

Afterwards, the students went on to Yantou. Yantou asked, “Where have you come from?”

“From Lingnan,” one student replied.

“Did you get to see Xuefeng?”

“I did.”

“What did he have to say?”

⁹⁸ *Kalyanamitra*

⁹⁹ With the sense of William Blake’s seeing the whole world in a grain of sand; through this samadhi you can enter all other samadhi states

The student told the story.

Yantou asked, “Then what did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything; he hung his head and went back inside.”

Yantou said, “Too bad! I’m sorry that years ago I didn’t tell him the last word. If I’d told him, no one in the world would be able to touch old Xuefeng.”¹⁰⁰

This student stayed through the end of the summer retreat, and for the second time recounted the story and asked for help with it.

Yantou asked, “Why didn’t you ask me earlier?”

“It’s not as easy as that.”

Yantou said, “Although Xuefeng and I were born on the same branch, he won’t die on the same branch as me. If you want to know what it’s all about: ‘It’s just this.’”

52 THE STONE BRIDGE OF ZHAOZHOU

A student asked Zhaozhou, “For a long time I’ve heard about the stone bridge of Zhaozhou.¹⁰¹ But now that I’ve come, I see only a log across the river.”

Zhaozhou said, “You only see the log, you just don’t see the stone bridge.”

“What is the stone bridge like?”

“It brings donkeys across, it brings horses across.”

53 ANCESTOR MA’S DUCK FLIES AWAY

Once Ancestor Ma and Baizhang were taking a walk when a wild duck flew by.

“What’s that?” asked the Ancestor.

“A wild duck,” said Baizhang.

¹⁰⁰ Yantou is referring to the incident recorded in *Gateless Gateway* 13, when he and Xuefeng were studying with Deshan; Yantou played with Xuefeng the same way he’s playing with the student here.

¹⁰¹ The city of Zhaozhou, where the teacher Zhaozhou lived, is famous for its Safe Crossing Bridge, the world’s oldest stone segmental arch bridge

“Where did it go?”

“It flew away.”

The Ancestor twisted Baizhang’s nose, and Baizhang cried out in pain.

“When did it fly away?” asked the Ancestor.¹⁰²

54 YUNMEN SPREADS OUT HIS HANDS

Yunmen asked a student, “Where have you come from?”

“Xichan,” answered the student.¹⁰³

“What’s being said at Xichan these days?”

The student spread out his hands.

Yunmen slapped him.

“But I’m in the middle of saying something,” said the student.

Yunmen spread out his hands.

The student couldn’t say anything.

Yunmen hit him.

55 DAOWU AND JIANYUAN OFFER CONDOLENCES

Daowu and Jianyuan visited a house in mourning to offer their condolences.

Jianyuan struck the coffin with his hand and asked, “Alive or dead?”

Daowu said, “I’m not saying alive, I’m not saying dead.”

Jianyuan asked, “Why won’t you say?”

Daowu said, “I’m not saying! I’m not saying!”

On the way home, Jianyuan stopped in the middle of the road and demanded,

¹⁰² The next day, Baizhang opened completely and began weeping. Someone asked him why, and Baizhang told him to ask Ma. Ma sent him back to Baizhang, who was now laughing uproariously. “You were just crying; why are you laughing now?” Baizhang replied, “I was crying before; now I’m laughing.”

¹⁰³ The temple called Xichan was west of Fuzhou, on the mountain where Daoist immortals were said to live

“Tell me right now, Teacher. If you don’t say, I’m going to hit you and leave.”

Daowu said, “You can hit me, but even if you do, I still won’t say.”

Jianyuan hit him.

After Daowu died,¹⁰⁴ Jianyuan went to Shishuang and told him this story.

Shishuang said, “I’m not saying alive, I’m not saying dead.”

Jianyuan asked, “Why won’t you say?”

Shishuang said, “I’m not saying! I’m not saying!”

At these words, Jianyuan had an opening.

One day Jianyuan took a spade and went into the teaching hall. From the east he crossed to the west, and from the west he crossed to the east.

“What are you doing?” asked Shishuang.

Jianyuan said, “I’m searching for our old teacher’s sacred bones.”

Shishuang said, “Floods reach the horizon, whitecaps drown the sky. What sort of sacred bones are you looking for?”

(Xuedou comments: “Blue heavens! Blue heavens!”)

Jianyuan said, “This is truly good; it makes me strong.”

Later, Fu of Taiyuan said, “Our teacher’s sacred bones are still here.”

56 QINSHAN’S MASTER INSIDE THE BARRIERS

A pilgrim named Liang asked, “What’s it like when one arrow shatters three barriers?”¹⁰⁵

Qinshan said, “There’s a master inside those barriers; let him loose so I can see him.”

¹⁰⁴ The word used for ‘died’ here is a Daoist term meaning ‘transformed himself into the universe’

¹⁰⁵ The three barriers aren’t specified but are probably understanding how the heart-mind works, directly perceiving the emptiness of reality, and realizing complete enlightenment. In the Linji School of the Southern Song, there were three phases of understanding a koan: seeing its intent, practical application, and transcendence.

“When you put it like that, I can see my mistake and I can correct it.”

“What are you waiting for?”

Liang said, “If I broke through all the barriers, there’d be no traces for you to see,” and he left.

Qinshan said, “Come back!”

Liang turned his head.

Qinshan grabbed him and said, “Drop this about breaking through all the barriers at once. Show me where you are now and I’ll see it.”

Liang was stopped in his tracks.

Qinshan hit him seven times with his stick and said, “You’ll just have to doubt for another thirty years.”¹⁰⁶

57 ZHAOZHOU ALONE AND HONORED

A student asked Zhaozhou, “‘The greatest way is not difficult if you don’t pick and choose.’ What is not picking and choosing?”¹⁰⁷

Zhaozhou said, “Above the heavens, below the heavens, I am alone and honored.”¹⁰⁸

“But that’s still picking and choosing.”

“Peasant! Where’s the picking and choosing?”

The student was speechless.

58 ZHAOZHOU CAN ONLY SAY IT THAT WAY

A student asked Zhaozhou, “You always say, ‘The greatest way is not difficult if you don’t pick and choose.’ Hasn’t this become a cliché?”

Zhaozhou said, “You’re not the first person to ask me that. The truth is that I haven’t been able to avoid saying it that way.”

¹⁰⁶ Thirty years was the time it was thought to take to complete one’s training and become fully enlightened

¹⁰⁷ Refer back to the second koan, “Zhaozhou’s Greatest Way Isn’t Difficult”

¹⁰⁸ These were the words spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha when he was born

59 ZHAOZHOU FINISHES THE QUOTATION

A student asked Zhaozhou, “‘The greatest way is not difficult if you don’t pick and choose. As soon as someone speaks, we think that’s picking and choosing.’ So how can you help people?”

Zhaozhou said, “Why don’t you finish the quotation?”

“I only remember up to here.”

“It’s only this: ‘The greatest way is not difficult if you don’t pick and choose.’”

60 YUNMEN’S STAFF TURNS INTO A DRAGON

Yunmen held up his staff and said to the assembly, “This staff becomes a dragon. It has swallowed the whole universe. The mountains, rivers, and great earth — where do they come from?”

61 FENGXUE’S SPECK OF DUST

Fengxue observed, “If you bring a single speck of dust into existence, the country prospers. If you don’t, the country dies.”¹⁰⁹

(Xuedou held up his staff and asked: “Can you live and die with Fengxue?”)

62 YUNMEN’S TREASURE HIDDEN IN THE BODY

Yunmen said, “In the center of the cosmos, inside heaven and earth, there is one treasure, hidden in the body. It picks up a lantern and walks into the meditation hall. It

¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere Fengxue says: “If you bring a single speck of dust into existence, the country prospers and the old peasants frown. If you don’t, the nation perishes and the wind blows chill. Why do the old peasants come out and sing hallelujah?”

brings the entrance gate¹¹⁰ and puts it on top of the lantern.”¹¹¹

63 NANQUAN KILLS A CAT

One day at Nanquan’s monastery, students of the eastern and western halls were arguing over a cat. When he saw this, Nanquan held up the cat and said, “If you can say a turning word, I won’t kill it. No one could respond, so Nanquan cut the cat in two.”¹¹²

64 ZHAOZHOU’S SANDAL ON HIS HEAD

That evening, Zhaozhou returned from a trip and Nanquan questioned him about what had happened. Zhaozhou took off a sandal, put it on top of his head, and walked out.¹¹³

Nanquan said, “If you’d been here, you’d have saved the cat.”

65 THE BUDDHA AND THE RACEHORSE

A practitioner from another tradition asked the Buddha, “I’m not asking about what you can say in words; I’m not asking about what you can’t say in words.” The Buddha sat for a good while.

The practitioner sighed and praised him, saying, “World-Honored One, with your great compassion you’ve parted the clouds of my delusion, and now I can enter the Way.”

¹¹⁰ The triple gate is the main entrance to the monastery, with three arches and a room at the top with all the bodhisattvas and arhats ranged along each side—and sometimes the mummified remains of previous abbots, if they weren’t stolen during the Cultural Revolution

¹¹¹ In the first sentence, Yunmen is paraphrasing Sengzhao (See 40), and then he adds his own comment in the second and third sentences

¹¹² The story continues in the next koan

¹¹³ This is a traditional gesture of mourning

After the pilgrim left, Ananda asked the Buddha, “What did you prove to that practitioner so they said they could enter the Way?”

The Buddha said, “She’s like a racehorse who runs at the mere shadow of a whip.”¹¹⁴

66 YANTOU STICKS OUT HIS NECK

Yantou asked a student, “Where have you come from?”

The student said, “From the Western Capital.”¹¹⁵

“After the rebel general Huangchao was driven out, did you get his sword?”¹¹⁶

“I did.”

Yantou stretched out his neck, approached the student, and shouted.

The student said, “I just cut off your head.”

Yantou broke into laughter.

Afterwards the student went to Xuefeng, who also asked, “Where have you come from?”

The student said, “I’ve come from Yantou.”

“What does he have to say?”

The student told him what had happened.

Xuefeng hit him thirty times with his staff and drove him out.

¹¹⁴ When Shakyamuni Buddha is referred to as the World-Honored One, it means the story comes from the literature of classical Indian Buddhism and has been repurposed as a koan

¹¹⁵ Changan, now Xian

¹¹⁶ Yantou is referring to something that had just happened: As the Tang dynasty was ending, there were riots over heavy taxation. One day a sword fell from the skies with “Heaven gives this to Huangchao” inscribed on it. Huangchao, who had been an ordinary merchant, raised a rebel army, captured Changan, and named himself emperor. He was killed and his rebellion suppressed a few years later. In an eerie coincidence, Yantou himself was murdered by rioters three years after Huangchao’s execution. As Yantou was stabbed to death, he let out a great shout that became famous.

67 MAHASATTVA FU EXPLAINS THINGS TO EMPEROR WU

Emperor Wu of Liang asked Mahasattva Fu to explain the *Diamond Sutra*. Fu went up to the teaching seat. He shook the lectern and immediately came down. The Emperor was startled.

Duke Zhi asked, “Your Majesty, do you understand?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Mahasattva Fu has finished explaining the sutra.”¹¹⁷

68 YANGSHAN AND SANSHENG SHARE A NAME¹¹⁸

Yangshan Huiji asked Sansheng Huiran, “What’s your name?”¹¹⁹

Sansheng said, “Huiji.”

“Huiji? That’s my name.”

“My name is Huiran.”

Yangshan roared with laughter.

69 NANQUAN AND HIS FRIENDS PAY THEIR RESPECTS TO THE NATIONAL TEACHER

Nanquan, Guizong, and Magu went together to pay their respects to National Teacher Huizhong.¹²⁰ When they were halfway there, Nanquan drew a circle on the ground and said, “If you can say something, we’ll go on.”¹²¹

Guizong sat in the middle of the circle, and Magu curtsayed the way women do.

¹¹⁷ This is the same Emperor Wu and Duke Zhi as in the first koan. Mahasattva (Great Being) Fu was a revered lay practitioner of Chinese Buddhism; he was selling fish in the marketplace when he received Wu’s invitation | The *Diamond Sutra* is part of the Prajnaparamita literature; one of the most popular Chan texts, it was said to cut through delusions like a diamond.

¹¹⁸ Sansheng is continuing the pilgrimage he began in 49, when he encountered Xuefeng’s net

¹¹⁹ Huiji was Yangshan’s personal name, as Huiran was Sansheng’s

¹²⁰ No Chan practitioner considered training to be complete without a visit to National Teacher Huizhong; these three were Ancestor Ma’s students

¹²¹ Huizhong is said to have originated the use of the circle as a Chan symbol

Nanquan said, “Okay, in that case we won’t go.”

Guizong asked, “What’s the thinking behind that?”

70 BAIZHANG SPEAKS TO GUISHAN WITHOUT OPENING HIS MOUTH

Guishan, Wufeng, and Yunyan were Baizhang’s attendants.¹²²

Baizhang asked Guishan, “How would you speak if your mouth were closed?”

Guishan said, “Please, Your Reverence, will you show me how?”

“I could speak for you, but I’m afraid that then I’d lose you as an heir.”

71 BAIZHANG SPEAKS TO WUFENG

Baizhang next asked Wufeng, “How would you speak if your mouth were closed?”

“You should close your own mouth, Your Reverence.”

Baizhang said, “I lift up my eyes and look for you where no one else has reached.”

72 BAIZHANG SPEAKS WITH YUNYAN

Baizhang then asked Yunyan, “How would you speak if your mouth were closed?”

Yunyan said, “Can you do that, Your Reverence?”

Baizhang said, “I’ve lost my heirs.”

¹²² The next three koans involve a group of Baizhang’s students who went on to become great teachers themselves; the differences in their temperaments and styles are already clear.

73 ANCESTOR MA CAN'T EXPLAIN

A student asked Ancestor Ma, “Leaving aside the Four Propositions and letting go of the Hundred Negations,¹²³ please directly point to why Bodhidharma came from the West.”

Ma said, “Today I’m worn out and can’t explain it to you. Go find Zhizang and ask him.”

The student asked Zhizang, who said, “Why didn’t you ask His Reverence?”

“He told me to ask you.”

“Today I have a headache and can’t to explain it to you. Go find Elder Brother Hai¹²⁴ and ask him.”

The student asked Hai, who said, “After all my time here I still can’t explain that.”

The student told Ancestor Ma about this.

Ma said, “Zhizang’s hair is white, Brother Hai’s hair is black.”

74 JINNIU DANCES BEFORE THE MEAL

Every day at mealtime, Jinniu himself would take the buckets of rice to the front of the monastery hall, where he’d dance and laugh heartily, saying, “Bodhisattvas, come and eat your food!”

(Xuedou comments: Jinniu wasn’t being kindhearted.)

Later, a student asked Changqing, “In the old days someone said, ‘Bodhisattvas, come and eat your food!’ What did he mean?”

Changqing said, “That’s a blessing for the meal.”¹²⁵

¹²³ The Four Phrases are the assertions that things exist, don’t exist, both exist and don’t exist, and neither exist nor don’t exist. The Hundred Negations are the negations of 100 propositions derived from these four phrases.

¹²⁴ Brother Hai would become the great teacher Baizhang

¹²⁵ This isn’t exactly a grace, but more like a blessing said at the dedication of a statue or temple

75 WUJIU ASKS ABOUT THE WAY OF TEACHING

A student came to Wujiu from Dingzhou's community. Wujiu asked him, "How does Dingzhou's way of teaching compare to here?"

The student said, "There's no difference."

Wujiu said, "Then go back there if it's not different," and he hit him.

The student said, "There's an eye on the tip of your staff. You shouldn't hit people carelessly."

Wujiu said, "I've hit one of them today," and he hit him three more times.

The student immediately left.

Wujiu said, "Everyone submits to the staff; from the beginning of time people have been suffering here."

The student turned around and said, "That's true, but the handle is in your hand, Your Reverence."

Wujiu said, "I'm just a country monk; if you want, I'll turn it over to you."

The student came up, snatched the staff right out of Wujiu's hand, and hit him three times.

Wujiu said, "Submitting to the staff, submitting to the staff."

The student said, "Someone is suffering right here."

Wujiu said, "I did hit this guy carelessly."

The student bowed.

Wujiu said, "So you want to leave it like this?"

The student gave a great laugh and left.

Wujiu said, "It comes to this, it comes to this!"

76 DANXIA ASKS WHERE YOU'VE COME FROM

Danxia asked a student, "Where have you come from?"

The student said, "I've come from the foot of the mountain."

"Have you eaten yet?"

"Yes, I have."

“Did the person who brought the food for you have an open eye?”¹²⁶

The student was speechless.

Later, Changqing asked Baofu, “If you feed someone, it repays the generosity you’ve been shown. Why wouldn’t you have an open eye?”

Baofu said, “The giver and the receiver are both blind.”¹²⁷

Changqing said, “If you give it everything you’ve got, could you still be blind?”

Baofu said, “Would you call me blind?”¹²⁸

77 YUNMEN HAS A CONVERSATION ABOUT CAKE

A student asked Yunmen, “What is the conversation that leaps over the buddhas and goes beyond the ancestors?”

Yunmen said, “Cake.”

78 SIXTEEN BODHISATTVAS TAKE A BATH

In the old days there were sixteen bodhisattvas. When it was time to bathe they got into the bath together. Suddenly they realized the cause of water¹²⁹ and said, “This subtle touch releases the brightness. We have become the sons and daughters of the Buddha.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Having an eye means having prajña insight

¹²⁷ Yamada Koun identified five kinds of blindness: 1. Mediocre blindness: scholars of all kinds and those who follow them. 2. Pernicious blindness: Priests who teach heaven and hell. 3. Hitherto blindness: People who recognize true Dharma but have not yet experienced deep realization. 4. Actual blindness: The eye of deep realization. 5. Genuine blindness: One who has forgotten realization and wiped away the light of enlightenment itself.

¹²⁸ In this exchange we can see the beginnings of the koan tradition, as two students discuss an old story together in late ninth-early tenth century China

¹²⁹ Xuedou comments: “How do you understand this, you virtuous Chan people?”

¹³⁰ Xuedou comments: “You have to put seven threads through eight holes to realize this.” We moved these comments to the notes because they distract from a luminous story.

79 TOUZI'S RUDE AND POLITE

A student asked Touzi, "All sounds are buddha sounds — right or wrong?"

"Right," said Touzi.

The student said, "Teacher, doesn't your asshole make farting sounds?"

Touzi hit him.

Then the student said, "Rude words and polite words all lead to the fundamental truth — right or wrong?"

"Right," said Touzi.

"Teacher, can I call you a jackass?"

Touzi hit him.

80 ZHAOZHOU'S MIND OF A NEWBORN BABY

A student asked Zhaozhou, "Does a newborn baby have consciousness?"¹⁵¹

Zhaozhou said, "Tossing a ball on rushing waters."

The student went on to ask Touzi, "What does 'tossing a ball on rushing waters' mean?"

Touzi said, "Moment after moment, it never stops flowing."

81 YAOSHAN'S STAG

A student asked Yaoshan, "In the pale grass on the plains, a stag gathers a herd of deer. How do I shoot the lead stag among all the lead stags?"

Yaoshan said, "Look at the arrow!" and the student fell to the ground.

Yaoshan said, "Attendants! Drag this dead guy out."

¹⁵¹ Literally, the sixth sense, which is consciousness (the first five are sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch). Yuanwu quotes Master Shandao: "Among the sixteen contemplation practices, the baby's practice is the best. When she's babbling she symbolizes the person studying the Way, with her detachment from the discriminating mind that grasps and rejects."

The student walked out.

Yaoshan said, “This guy is playing with a ball of mud. Where will it all end?”

(Xuedou comments: He was alive for three steps, but after five steps he had to die.)

82 DALONG’S FLOWERS LIKE BROCADE

A student asked Dalong, “The physical body¹³² decays. What is the pure everlasting body?”

Dalong said:

Flowers cover the mountains like brocade,
mountain torrents so deep they’re indigo.

83 YUNMEN EMBRACES A PILLAR

Yunmen said, “An old buddha and a pillar embrace. What level is that?”

He himself answered, “It rises as clouds on South Mountain, it falls as rain on North Mountain.”¹³³

84 VIMALAKIRTI AT THE GATE

Vimalakirti asked Manjushri, “What is the Dharma gate of nonduality that the bodhisattvas enter?”

Manjushri said, “My idea is this: In all the teachings there are no words, no speech, no explanations, no understanding. If you leave behind all questions and answers is entering the Dharma gate of nonduality. It’s like that.”

Manjushri then asked Vimalakirti, “Each of us has spoken; now, kind sir, you must

¹³² Rupakaya

¹³³ ‘Clouds and rain’ is an old Chinese euphemism for lovemaking; this kind of pairing also points to the unity of all things (You eat; I get full).

tell us what the bodhisattva's Dharma gate of nonduality is."

(Xuedou comments: What will Vimalakirti say? All has been revealed.)

85 DONGFENG'S TIGER

A student went to the hermit Dongfeng and asked, "If you suddenly ran into a great tiger here, what would you do?"

The hermit growled like a tiger. The student acted frightened, and the hermit burst out laughing.

The student said, "You old thief!"

The hermit asked, "Nevertheless, what?" The student gave up and left.

(Xuedou comments: Well and good, but these two wicked thieves think that if they cover their ears, they'll get away with the bell.)

86 YUNMEN'S LIGHT

Yunmen taught, "Everybody has a light inside. When you're looking for it, you can't see; it's obscured in the dimness. What is this light that everybody has?"¹³⁴

He himself answered, "The kitchen pantry, the entrance gate."

Then he said, "It's better to have nothing than to have something good."

¹³⁴ Elsewhere Yunmen said: "Each and every one of you, right where you stand, has a beam of light that shines continuously, now as in the past, having nothing to do with seeing or knowing. Though it's a light, when you're asked about it you don't understand; isn't it dark and dim?"

87 YUNMEN'S MEDICINE AND SICKNESS CURE EACH OTHER

Yunmen said to the assembly, "Medicine and sickness cure each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is the self?"¹³⁵

88 XUANSHA HELPS ALL BEINGS

Xuansha taught, "All the ancestors everywhere said, 'Help others, help others.' If you suddenly ran into someone with three disabilities, how would you help that person? They're blind, so you could lift up a gavel or raise a whisk, but they wouldn't see it. They're deaf, so you could speak about life in the monastery, reading scriptures, and meditation,¹³⁶ but they couldn't hear your words. They're mute, so you could give them instruction about speech, but they wouldn't be able to talk. What could you do to help? The Buddha's teachings are useless if you can't help such people."

A student asked Yunmen to say something more about this. Yunmen said, "You, bow!" The student bowed and straightened back up.

Yunmen poked his staff at him, and the student retreated. Yunmen said, "Well, you're not blind," and he called the student to come closer. The student came up to him. Yunmen said, "Oh, you're not deaf." Yunmen then asked, "Do you understand yet?"

The student said, "I don't."

Yunmen said, "Well, you're not mute."

At this the student had an understanding.

¹³⁵ One day Manjushri asked Sudhana to pick medicinal herbs, telling him to bring back anything that wasn't medicine. Sudhana searched all over but couldn't find anything, so he came back and said, "There is nothing that isn't medicine." Manjushri said, "Then bring me something that is medicine." Sudhana picked a blade of grass and handed it to Manjushri, who held it up and said, "This medicine can kill people and it can also bring people to life."

¹³⁶ Known as 'the three flavors'

89 GUANYIN'S HANDS AND EYES

Yunyan asked Daowu, "How does Guanyin use all those hands and eyes?"¹³⁷

Daowu answered, "It's like feeling behind you for a pillow in the middle of the night."

"I understand."

"What do you understand?"

"The whole body is hands and eyes."

"That's very well expressed, but it doesn't say it all."

"What would you say, older brother?"

"All through the body are hands and eyes."

90 ZHIMEN'S PRAJÑA

A student asked Zhimen, "What is the substance of insight?"¹³⁸

Zhimen said, "The oyster swallows the bright moon."¹³⁹

The student continued, "What is the function of insight?"

"The rabbit is pregnant."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Yunyan and Daowu were fellow students under Yaoshan, and their dialogues appear in a number of koans | Guanyin is the bodhisattva of great compassion, who is sometimes depicted with up to 84,000 hands and eyes

¹³⁸ Prajña is a particular kind of clear insight that comes with meditation and opening experiences

¹³⁹ According to Chinese folklore, the oyster rises to the surface of the water at the full moon of mid-autumn, opens its shell, and envelops the light of the moon, forming a pearl; if the moonlight is strong there are many pearls, but if not there are few.

¹⁴⁰ Again according to folklore, all rabbits are female and conceive by opening their mouths and swallowing the moon's light at mid-autumn; the number of offspring depends on the moon's brightness.

91 YANGUAN'S RHINOCEROS

One day, Yanguan called to his attendant, "Bring me the rhinoceros fan."¹⁴¹

The attendant replied, "The fan is broken."

Yanguan said, "If the fan is broken, bring back the rhinoceros."

The attendant didn't respond.

Later, Touzi said, "I wouldn't mind if it were brought back, but I suspect that the horn wouldn't be intact."

(Xuedou comments: I want the not-intact horn.)

Shishuang said, "If it were brought back to you, it would no longer exist."

(Xuedou: That rhinoceros is still here.)

Zifu drew a circle and in the middle wrote the character 'rhino'.¹⁴²

(Xuedou: Why didn't you bring it out before?)

Baofu said "Master, you've reached a venerable age. It would be good if we asked someone else."

(Xuedou: A shame to work so hard and not succeed!)

92 MANJUSHRI'S DHARMA

One day, the World-Honored One took his teaching seat. Manjushri struck a white gavel and said, "Look into the Dharma of the King of the Dharma. The Dharma of the King of the Dharma is thus!"¹⁴³

The World-Honored One then descended from his seat.

¹⁴¹ A fan made of rhinoceros horn, which was also used to make a tool that loosened knots and cups for drinking alcohol

¹⁴² Zifu was the dharma grandson of Yangshan, so this is an example of the magical symbolism of the Guiyang school (See 33 and *Book of Serenity* 77)

¹⁴³ This is the phrase spoken at the *end* of each of the Buddha's talks; the Buddha obviously agreed with Manjushri

93 DAGUANG'S DANCE

A student asked Daguang, "Changqing said, 'That's a blessing for the meal.'¹⁴⁴ What did he mean?"

Daguang did a dance, and the student bowed.

Daguang asked, "What did you see that made you bow?"

The student did a dance.

Daguang said, "Here's a wild fox spirit."¹⁴⁵

94 THE SHURANGAMA SUTRA'S WHEN YOU DON'T SEE

The *Shurangama Sutra*¹⁴⁶ says, "When I don't see, why don't I see my not-seeing? If I see my not-seeing, then obviously that's not not-seeing. If I don't see my not-seeing, then obviously it isn't something that can be seen. Why isn't it you?"¹⁴⁷

95 CHANGQING AND BAOFU HAVE TEA

Changqing once said, "It's better to say that the enlightened saints¹⁴⁸ live in greed, hatred, and ignorance than to say that the Tathagata has two kinds of speech.¹⁴⁹ I'm not saying that the Tathagata doesn't speak, I'm just saying that the Tathagata doesn't have two kinds of speech."

¹⁴⁴ See 74

¹⁴⁵ Fox spirits are trickster figures, like coyotes in the Americas or selkies in Celtic culture

¹⁴⁶ The *Shurangama Sutra* is a kind of manual of the psychology and the challenges of meditation that uses the nature of seeing to explore the nature of mind; it was a favorite of Chan practitioners

¹⁴⁷ This is a question that Ananda asked the Buddha

¹⁴⁸ Literally Arhats, who were the highest ideal in early Buddhism; they were guaranteed entry into nirvana upon their death

¹⁴⁹ The Tathagata, meaning 'thus come' or 'thus gone', is one of the titles of the Buddha and refers to his attainment of perfect enlightenment | The two kinds of speech are the level of expedient means and provisional truth, and the level of ultimate truth.

Baofu asked, “What is Tathagata speech?”
“Are you deaf?”
“It sounds like you’re speaking from a second head.”
“Well, what is Tathagata speech?”
“Let’s go have tea,” said Baofu.

96 ZHAOZHOU’S THREE TURNING WORDS

Zhaozhou used to teach three turning words:

A clay buddha can’t cross through water.
A gold buddha can’t cross through a furnace.
A wooden buddha can’t cross through fire.
(The true buddha is sitting in the house.)¹⁵⁰

97 THE DIAMOND SUTRA’S SCORN

The *Diamond Sutra* says, “If people despise you, it’s because of sinful karma from previous lives that has inexorably led you into evil paths in this life. Then, being despised by people in this life extinguishes the sinful karma of previous lives.”

98 TIANPING MAKES MISTAKES

Tianping often said, “Don’t say you understand the Buddha’s teachings. I’ve looked for a person who grasps a single saying of the Buddha’s teachings and haven’t

¹⁵⁰ Yuanwu begins his commentary: “After Zhaozhou spoke these turning words, he said at the end, ‘The true buddha is sitting in the house.’” Although this last phrase was part of Zhaozhou’s original formulation, Xuedou omitted it because he thought it was over-indulgent. We’re putting it back.

found one.”

Once when he was making the rounds on pilgrimage, Tianping encountered Xiyuan. Xiyuan saw him in the distance and called out his name. Tianping raised his head.

Xiyuan said, “A mistake!”

Tianping took two or three steps.

Xiyuan again said, “A mistake!”

Tianping came up to him.

Xiyuan said, “These two mistakes just now, are they are mine or yours?”

“They are my mistakes.”

“A mistake.”

Tianping gave up and started to leave.

Xiyuan said, “Spend the summer retreat here, and we’ll explore these two mistakes together.”

Tianping immediately walked away.

Years later, when Tianping was living in his own temple, he said to the community, “When I was first making the rounds, I was blown by the winds of karma to Xiyuan, who introduced me to two mistakes. He tried to make me stay for the summer retreat to explore them. I don’t say that the mistake happened then; when I first left for the South on pilgrimage, I already knew it was a mistake.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Little is known of Tianping beyond this case, and Yuanwu says some harsh things about him: He had attained ‘turnip Chan’ and put it in his belly, which made his breath stink; he indulged in scorn and contempt. Wuzi used to say that there was a kind of person who studied Chan like stuffing cakes in a crystal pitcher: It can’t be turned over anymore, it can’t be cleaned out, and if you bump it, it immediately breaks. If you want to be lively and active, said Wuzi, study ‘leather bag’ Chan instead; even if you toss it off the highest mountain, it won’t break.

99 HUIZHONG STANDS ON THE BUDDHA'S HEAD

Emperor Suzong asked National Teacher Huizhong, “Who tames the ten aspects of the buddha body?”¹⁵²

The National Teacher said, “Patron, you’re standing on the head of the Infinite Buddha Body.”¹⁵³

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t recognize your own pure, everlasting body.”¹⁵⁴

100 BALING'S CORAL MOON

A student asked Baling, “What is the blown-hair sword?”¹⁵⁵

Baling said, “Each branch of coral holds up the light of the moon.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² *Buddhakaya* | A buddha has two kinds of *dharmakaya*: the self-experienced one (the buddha’s own enlightenment) and the one experienced by others (the buddha’s qualities and teachings). According to Huayan doctrine, this second dharmakaya is itself made up of ten buddhas: a buddha of non-attachment, of vows, of results of action, of abiding maintenance, of extinction (nirvana), of the cosmos, of mind, of concentration, of nature, and of magic. Different texts contain different lists of the ten aspects of the buddha body, but the basic idea is that a buddha is the ‘controller’ or ‘herder’ of their own attributes.

¹⁵³ Vairochana, the true *Buddhakaya*

¹⁵⁴ *Dharmakaya*

¹⁵⁵ A sword so sharp it would cut a hair blown against it

¹⁵⁶ According to Chinese legend, coral branches grow under the influence of moonlight, and their tips have haloes around them | Baling quoted the line from a Chinese poem by Chan Yue