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The Book of Serenity

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BY HONGZHI ZHENGJUE & WANSONG XINGXIU

A TRANSLATION OF THE KOANS IN PROGRESS
BY JOAN SUTHERLAND & JOHN TARRANT

The hundred koans of the *Book of Serenity*, also translated as the *Book of Equanimity*, were among those written by twelfth-century Chan teacher Hongzhi Zhengjue. In the thirteenth century, Wansong Xingxiu compiled Hongzhi's koans and wrote commentaries for each. Although the collection is associated with the Caodong / Sōtō school, they are also taken up in koan study by Linji / Rinzai practitioners.

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Chinese : Cóngróng Lù

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The Book of Serenity

1 MANJUSHRI'S DHARMA

(Blue Cliff Record 92)

One day, the World-Honored One¹ took his teaching seat. Manjushri² 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!”³

The World-Honored One then descended from his seat.

2 BODHIDHARMA AND THE BUDDHA HEART EMPEROR

(Blue Cliff Record 1)

Emperor Wu asked the great teacher Bodhidharma,⁴ “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 Yangzi River and went to Shaolin, where he sat facing a wall for nine years.⁵

¹ When Shakyamuni Buddha is referred to as the World-Honored One, it means the story comes from the literature of classical Buddhism and has been repurposed as a koan

² Manjushri is the bodhisattva embodying prajña, profound insight

³ This is the phrase spoken at the *end* of each of the Buddha’s talks

⁴ Emperor Wu was an ordained monk who did many good deeds and was called the Buddha Heart Emperor | Bodhidharma was the Indian monk who, according to legend, brought the Dhyana (Chan/ Zen) school to China and is often referred to as the First Ancestor

⁵ Shaolin Monastery, the birthplace of Chinese martial arts, is where Bodhidharma is said to have meditated, and perhaps taught, for nine years

3 PRAJNATARA TURNS THE WHEEL

A king of Eastern India invited the Twenty-seventh Ancestor, Prajnatarā,⁶ to a vegetarian meal. “Why don’t you read from the sutras?” he asked her.

Prajnatarā said, “I’m a poor person of the Way : when I breathe in I don’t live in the world my mind makes, and when I breathe out I don’t get caught up in the world of cause and effect. I’m always turning the wheel of the sutras — a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand scrolls.”

4 INDRA FOUNDS THE MONASTERY

Once when the World-Honored One was walking with a group, he pointed to the ground and said, “This would be the right place to build a monastery.”

Indra, lord of the gods, took a stalk of grass, stuck it in the ground, and said, “The monastery is complete.” The Buddha smiled.

5 QINGYUAN’S PRICE OF RICE

A student asked Qingyuan, “What’s the deep meaning of the Buddha’s teachings?”
Qingyuan replied, “What does rice cost in Luling?”

⁶ Recent scholarship indicates that Prajnatarā, the teacher who sent Bodhidharma to China, was a woman; she was the 27th Indian ancestor in a direct line from Shakyamuni Buddha

6 ANCESTOR MA CAN'T EXPLAIN

(Blue Cliff Record 73)

A student asked Ancestor Ma, “Leaving aside the Four Propositions and letting go of the Hundred Negations,⁷ please directly point to why Bodhidharma came from the West.”⁸

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 explain it to you. Go find Elder Brother Hai⁹ 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.”

7 YAOSHAN’S SPECIALTY

Yaoshan hadn’t given a talk for a long time. The administrator of the temple said, “Everyone’s been anxious for instruction for a while. Won’t you please give a teaching?”

Yaoshan called for the bell to be rung, and everyone gathered. He mounted his seat. After some time had passed, he got down and returned to his quarters.

The administrator followed after him and asked, “You agreed to give a teaching for everyone; why didn’t you say a single word?”

⁷ 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.

⁸ Asking why Bodhidharma made the perilous journey to brought the Dhyana tradition from India to China is a common way of inquiring about the deep meaning of Chan

⁹ Elder Brother Hai would become the great teacher Baizhang

Yaoshan said, “For sutras there are sutra specialists. For commentaries there are commentary specialists.¹⁰ What do you want from me?”

8 BAIZHANG’S FOX

(Gateless Gateway 2)

When Baizhang gave a talk, an old man was always there listening to the teachings. When everyone left he followed. One day he didn’t leave. Baizhang asked him, “Who are you, standing here?”

The old man said, “Eons ago, in the time of Kashyapa Buddha, I was a monastic living on this mountain. I had a student who asked, ‘Does a person of great accomplishment fall into cause and effect or not?’ I replied, ‘A person like that does not fall into cause and effect.’ Because of this, I was born five hundred times into the body of a fox. Now I beg you to say a turning word for me.”

Baizhang said, “Such a person does not cut the chain of cause and effect.” At these words, the old man had a great awakening.

9 NANQUAN KILLS A CAT

(Gateless Gateway 14; Blue Cliff Record 63 & 64)

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.

That evening, Zhaozhou returned from a trip and Nanquan questioned him about what had happened. Zhaozhou took off his sandal, put it on top of his head,¹¹ and walked out.

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

¹⁰ Sutras are texts said to represent the Buddha’s direct teachings, though many were written long after his death; commentaries (*shastras*) are written by later Mahayana philosophers

¹¹ This is a traditional gesture of mourning

10 ZHAOZHOU AND THE OLD WOMAN INVESTIGATE EACH OTHER

(Gateless Gateway 31)

There was an old woman on the road to Mount Tai.¹² Whenever a student asked, “Which way to Mount Tai?” she would answer, “Straight ahead.”

As the student set off she’d say, “A fine student, and he leaves like this.”

When Zhaozhou heard about this, he said, “Hold on! I’ll go and thoroughly investigate that old woman for you.”

Zhaozhou asked the same question. The next day he went into the teaching hall and said, “I’ve thoroughly investigated that old woman of Mount Tai for you.”

11 YUNMEN’S TWO SICKNESSES

The great teacher Yunmen said, “When the light hasn’t gone all the way through, there are two kinds of sickness. In one sickness, wherever you are it’s dim and there are things in front of your face obscuring your vision. In another sickness, the light does go all the way through and you can see that all things are empty, but something is still hidden from you and everything seems the same as everything else because you’re not free of the light.

“There are also two kinds of sickness belonging to the dharmakaya. In the first, you’ve been able to reach the dharmakaya but because you cling to the teachings and can’t forget your own view, you get lost there. It’s also a sickness if the light passes through you in abundance, but you still can’t get completely free because you’re focused on carefully examining and comparing until you can’t breathe.”

¹² Mount Tai is one of China’s most sacred mountains and a common pilgrimage destination for Chan monastics

12 DIZANG SAVES THE WORLD

Dizang asked Xiushan, “Where do you come from?”

Xiushan replied, “I come from the South.”

“What’s Buddhism like in the South these days?”

“We take it seriously and talk about it a lot.”

“That’s not as good as planting this field and pounding rice to make food.”

“What does that have to do with saving the world?”¹³

Dizang asked, “What are you calling the world?”

13 LINJI’S BLIND DONKEY

When Linji was about to die, he directed Sansheng, “After my death, don’t destroy the treasury of my true dharma eye.”

Sansheng asked, “Who would dare to destroy the treasury of your true dharma eye?”

“If someone asks you about it, how will you answer?”

Sansheng shouted.

Linji said, “Who’d have thought that the treasury of my true dharma eye would be destroyed by this blind donkey?”

14 DESHAN’S SILENCE

Deshan’s attendant Shoukuo asked, “All the sages from the beginning of time — where have they gone?”

Deshan replied, “What? What?”

Shoukuo said, “I asked for a racehorse, but a lame tortoise sticks its head out instead.”

¹³ Xiushan asks literally, “What does that have to do with saving the three worlds?” The three are the worlds of desire, form, and formlessness, which together constitute the whole universe. Dizang’s reply is literally, “What are you calling the three worlds?”

Deshan was silent.

The next day, when Deshan came out of his bath, Shoukuo brought him tea.

Deshan patted him once on the back.

Shoukuo said, "This old guy has begun to get a glimpse of the territory."

Again Deshan was silent.

15 YANGSHAN PLANTS HIS HOE

Guishan asked Yangshan, "Where have you come from?"

Yangshan replied, "I've come from the fields."

"How many people are in the fields?"

Yangshan planted his hoe in the ground and stood with his hands clasped.

Guishan said, "Lots of people are cutting water mallows on South Mountain."

Yangshan picked up his hoe and left.

16 MAGU RIGHT AND WRONG ¹⁴

(Blue Cliff Record 31)

Carrying his staff,¹⁵ Magu went to Changqing and walked around his Chan seat three times.¹⁶ He shook his staff once and stood there, looking superior.

Changqing said, "Right, right!"

Then Magu went to Nanquan and walked around his Chan seat three times. He shook his staff once and stood there looking superior.¹⁷

¹⁴ Magu, Changqing, and Nanquan were all dharma heirs of Great Ancestor Ma; Magu was the most junior

¹⁵ A monk or nun's traveling staff often had 12 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.

¹⁶ Circumambulating someone's seat is a form of paying respect, the same as with a stupa

¹⁷ The accepted etiquette was to step back into a corner and wait after presenting oneself

Nanquan said, “Wrong, wrong!”

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.”¹⁸

17 FAYAN’S SMALLEST DISTINCTION

Fayan quoted, “The smallest distinction separates heaven and earth completely.”¹⁹
He asked Xiushan, “How do you understand that?”

Xiushan said, “The smallest distinction separates heaven and earth completely.”

Fayan asked, “Do you really understand that it’s like that?”

“It is like that for me. What about you?”

“The smallest distinction separates heaven and earth completely.”

Xiushan bowed.

18 ZHAOZHOU’S DOG

A student asked Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have buddha nature?”

“Yes,” replied Zhaozhou.

“Then why did it jump into that bag of fur?”

“Because it knew what it was doing and deliberately transgressed.”

Another time a student asked Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have buddha nature?”

“No.”

“All beings have buddha nature. Why wouldn’t a dog?”

¹⁸ The wind is one of the four elements—earth, water, fire and wind—in Chinese physics and is the element of movement

¹⁹ He’s quoting Sengcan’s *Xinxinming*, Trust in Mind, which begins “The greatest way isn’t difficult if you don’t pick and choose.”

“Because it’s beginning to awaken in the world of ignorance.”²⁰

19 YUNMEN’S MOUNT SUMERU

A student asked Yunmen, “When not a single thought arises, is there a problem?”

Yunmen said, “Mount Sumeru.”²¹

20 DIZANG’S MOST INTIMATE

Dizang asked Fayan, “Where are you going from here?”

Fayan said, “I’m on pilgrimage.”

“What sort of thing is pilgrimage?”

“I don’t know.”

“Not knowing is most intimate.”

Fayan suddenly had a great awakening.

21 YUNYAN AND DAOWU’S SECOND MOON

Once when Yunyan was sweeping the ground, Daowu said, “Busy, busy!”²²

Yunyan said, “You should know that there’s someone who isn’t busy.”

“If that’s the case, there’s a second moon.”²³

Yunyan held up his broom and asked, “Which moon is this?”

²⁰ Literally, “Because it has karmic consciousness (*karma vijñana*).” D.T. Suzuki speaks of karmic consciousness in the sense that through the agency of ignorance an unenlightened mind begins to be disturbed or awakened

²¹ In Indian cosmology, Mount Sumeru is the enormous mountain standing at the center of the vast geographical mandala that makes up each world-system in the universe

²² Yunyan and Daowu were fellow students under Yaoshan, and their dialogues appear in a number of koans

²³ Meaning that a duality is being set up

Daowu remained silent and left.

Later, Xuansha said, "That is exactly the second moon."

Yunmen said, "When one servant sees another, she pays close attention."

22 YANTOU'S ORDINARY AND HOLY

Yantou came to Deshan's monastery. Standing with a foot on either side of the threshold, he asked, "Is this ordinary? Is this holy?"

Deshan roared.

Yantou bowed politely.

Hearing about this, Dongshan said, "No one but clear-sighted Yantou would have understood that."

Yantou said, "That old guy Dongshan can't tell good from bad. At that moment I was raising up with one hand and pressing down with the other."²⁴

23 LUZU FACES THE WALL

Whenever Luzu saw a student coming, he immediately faced the wall. Hearing about this, Nanquan said, "I usually say to others, 'Make what was before the empty aeon²⁵ your own. Grasp the time when the Buddha had not yet come into the world.' Still, I can't get a whole or even half a person enlightened. Luzu can go on like that until the Year of the Donkey."²⁶

²⁴ This raising and lowering of hands comes from a story in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, in which one of the teachers Sudhana visits raises his hand to touch Sudhana's head, showing him infinite buddha worlds, then lowers his hand to bring Sudhana back into the everyday world

²⁵ That is, the empty time before the latest cycle of the creation and destruction of the universe

²⁶ There's no Year of the Donkey in the Chinese zodiac

24 XUEFENG'S POISONOUS SNAKE

(Blue Cliff Record 22)

Xuefeng said to his assembly, "There's a turtle-nosed snake²⁷ 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.

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.²⁸

25 YANGUAN'S RHINOCEROS

(Blue Cliff Record 91)

One day, Yanguan called to his attendant, "Bring me the rhinoceros fan."²⁹

The attendant replied, "The fan is broken."

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

The attendant couldn't respond.

Zifu drew a circle and in the middle wrote the character 'rhino'.³⁰

²⁷ 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

²⁸ 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

²⁹ A fan made of rhinoceros horn, which was also used to make a tool that loosened knots and cups for drinking alcohol

³⁰ Zifu was the dharma grandson of Yangshan, so this is an example of the magical symbolism of Yangshan's line

26 YANGSHAN'S SNOW LION

Yangshan pointed to the statue of a snow lion and asked, "Is there anyone who can pass through this whiteness?"³¹

Yunmen said, "I'd have immediately knocked it over for him."

Xuedou said, "He only explains knocking it over, he doesn't explain helping it up."

27 FAYAN'S STUDENTS ROLL UP THE BLINDS

(Gateless Gateway 26)

Fayan pointed to the bamboo blinds, and two students went and rolled them up in the same way. Fayan said, "One wins, one loses."

28 HUGUO'S THREE SHAMES

A student asked Huguo, "What's it like when a crane perches on a withered pine?"

Huguo said, "From the ground underneath, a single field of shame."

"What's it like when every drop of water freezes?"

"After the sun comes out, a single field of shame."

"During the great persecution of Buddhism, where did the temple guardians go?"³²

"The two of them at the temple gate, a single field of shame."

29 FENGXUE'S IRON OX

(Blue Cliff Record 38)

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

³¹ Snow lions are pure white, sometimes with turquoise mane and tail

³² In the Huishang Persecution of 845, Buddhism was suppressed by order of the emperor. The temple guardians are the two deva kings who stand guard on either side of the main gate of a Buddhist temple

Ox.³³ 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 if the seal neither goes away nor remains.”

Just then, Elder Lupi³⁴ 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.”³⁵

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.”³⁶

Fengxue got down from his seat.

³³ 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.

³⁴ Like Fengxue, he was a long-time practitioner in the Linji school

³⁵ It seems likely that there was a koan about the iron ox circulating at that time which has since been lost

³⁶ 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

30 DASUI'S FIRE AT THE END OF THE KALPA

(Blue Cliff Record 29)

A student asked Dasui, "It's clear that the fire at the end of this kalpa will completely destroy the universe.³⁷ 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.³⁸

Then the student asked Longji, "It's clear that the fire at the end of this kalpa will completely destroy the universe. I'm still not clear whether there's something that won't be destroyed."

Longji, replied, "It won't be destroyed."

"Why won't it be destroyed?"

"Because it's the same as the universe."

31 YUNMEN EMBRACES A PILLAR

(Blue Cliff Record 83)

Yunmen taught, "An old buddha and a pillar embrace. What level is that?"

No one spoke, so he answered for them, "It rises as clouds on South Mountain, it falls as rain on North Mountain."³⁹

³⁷ 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

³⁸ In a curious rhyme, Dahui was once the fire keeper at Guishan's monastery

³⁹ '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)

32 YANGSHAN'S MIND AND ENVIRONMENT

Yangshan asked a student, "Where were you born?"

The student said, "I'm from You province."

"Do you think about that place?"

"I'm always thinking about it."

"That which is able to think is the mind. What is thought about is the environment. Within the environment are mountains, rivers and the great earth, towers, terraces, pavilions, people, animals, and all kinds of other things. But turn your thought inward to the mind that thinks. Are there lots of things there?"

"When I reach that place inside, I don't see anything there."

"That's right when you're at the stage of faith, but it's not yet enough for the stage of being human."

"Do you have anything else to point out?"

"Whether I have something else or not isn't the issue. When you look inside now, you see only an undifferentiated darkness. But move around and throw on some clothes, and then notice yourself doing that."

33 XUEFENG HAS A LOT ON HIS MIND

(Blue Cliff Record 49)

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 friend⁴⁰ 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."

⁴⁰ *Kalyanamitra*

34 FENGXUE'S SPECK OF DUST

(Blue Cliff Record 61)

Fengxue observed, "If you bring a single speck of dust into existence, the country prospers. If you don't, the country dies."⁴¹

Xuedou held up his staff and asked: "Can you live and die with Fengxue?"

35 LUOPU BOWS

Luopu paid a formal visit to Jiashan; he didn't bow but stood right in front of him. Jiashan said, "A chicken roosting in a phoenix nest — not the same species. Go away."

Luopu said, "I've come from far away because of your reputation. Please indulge me this once."

Jiashan said, "There's no you in front of me, and there's no me here."

Luopu roared.

Jiashan said, "Stop, stop! Don't be so reckless. Clouds and the moon are the same; valleys and mountains are different. You might be able to cut out the tongues of everyone on earth, but how can you teach a tongueless person to speak?"

Luopu couldn't speak.

Jiashan hit him, and Luopu bowed deeply.

36 MA'S SUN FACE, MOON FACE BUDDHA

(Blue Cliff Record 3)

Ancestor Ma⁴² was sick. The superintendent of the monastery asked him, "How have you been feeling these days?"

⁴¹ 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 dies and the wind blows chill. Why do the old peasants come out and sing hallelujah?"

⁴² This conversation took place right before Ancestor Ma died

The Ancestor said, “Sun Face Buddha, Moon Face Buddha.”⁴³

37 YANGSHAN’S KARMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Guishan asked Yangshan, “Suppose someone asks you out of the blue, ‘Sentient beings only have endless karmic consciousness, with no foundation to rely on.’ How would you work with this?”

If a student like that came, I’d call, ‘Hey, so-and-so!’ When the student turns his head, I’d say, ‘What is it?’ Then I’d wait while she thinks about it. Then I’d say, ‘Not only is karmic consciousness endless, but there’s no foundation to rely on.’”

Guishan said, “Good!”

38 LINJI’S TRUE PERSON

Linji taught his assembly, “There is a true person of no fixed position⁴⁴ who’s always going and coming through the gates of your face.⁴⁵ Those of you who still haven’t seen this for yourselves, look, look!”

A student asked, “What is the true person of no fixed position like?”

Linji came down from the teacher’s seat and grabbed him.

The student hesitated.

Linji released him and said, “What a dried up piece of shit the true person with no fixed position is.”

⁴³ 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

⁴⁴ Often translated as ‘rank’ but the Chinese word has a sense of where you stand and what the view is like from there

⁴⁵ Eyes, ears, nose, mouth

39 ZHAOZHOU'S WASH YOUR BOWL

(Gateless Gateway 7)

A student said to Zhaozhou, "I've just entered your monastery. Please give me some guidance."

Zhaozhou asked, "Have you had your breakfast?"

The student said, "Yes, I have."

Zhaozhou said, "Wash your bowl."

40 YUNMEN'S CLEVER THIEF

Yunmen asked Jianfeng, "May I have your answer?"⁴⁶

Jianfeng responded, "Have you even arrived here yet?"

Yunmen said, "In that case I'm late."

"Is that so? Is that so?" asked Jianfeng.

Yunmen said, "You're a cleverer thief than I thought."⁴⁷

41 LUOPU NEAR THE END

When Luopu was about to die he said to his assembly, "I have one thing to ask you. If you say, 'Yes, that's right,' you're putting another head on top of your own.⁴⁸ If you say, 'No, that's not right,' you're looking for life by cutting off your own head."

The head monk said, "The green mountain is always lifting its feet; you don't need a lantern in the daylight."⁴⁹

Luopu asked, "Is this the time to be making speeches?"

⁴⁶ Yunmen is the pilgrim student here, striking up a conversation with a teacher he's visiting

⁴⁷ Literally, "I thought White Head, but Black Head." White Head and Black Head are pickpockets in Chinese folklore. Black Head was the cleverer of the two.

⁴⁸ This second head refers to our preconceptions, opinions, judgments, reactions, etc. — the head made of our ideas about our experiences rather than the experiences themselves

⁴⁹ The head monk was quoting something Luopu had once said

A senior student named Yancong stepped forward and said to Luopu, “We need to leave these two paths that you’re talking about; please don’t ask about them.”

Luopu said, “You’re not there yet. Try again.”

Yancong said, “I can’t say it completely.”

Luopu said, “I don’t care whether what you say is complete or not.”

Yancong said, “I’m not a student who can answer you.”

When evening came, Luopu called for Yancong and said, “The reply you gave today was actually rooted in something. Try to embody what our late teacher said :

In front of your eyes, there are no things,
your thoughts are in front of your eyes,
there’s *another* that’s not the things in front of your eyes,
it’s not something you can reach with ears or eyes.

Which phrase is the guest? Which phrase is the host? If you can sort that out, I’ll pass on the bowl and robe to you.”

Yancong said, “I can’t.”

Luopu said, “You can.”

Yancong said, “Honestly, I can’t.”

Luopu roared, “Bitter! Bitter!”

A student asked, “What do you mean?”

Luopu said, “You don’t row the boat of compassion over smooth waters, but there’s no point in releasing the wooden goose down these rapids.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The commentary says that a boat running rapids would release a piece of wood, which warned any boat planning to come up the rapids and prevent collisions. The commentary also says that this explanation might not be reliable, and that the full meaning of the saying is contained in a line of Wansong’s verse : “Old in years, alone at heart, he hasn’t got a fish yet” – which doesn’t mean that Luopu didn’t have successors but refers to his freedom. In fact, Luopu had eleven successors, Yancong among them.

42 HUIZHONG'S WATER JUG

A student asked National Teacher Huizhong of Nanyang, "What is the original body of Vairochana Buddha like?"⁵¹

The National Teacher said, "Pass me that water jug." The student picked up the jug and brought it to him.

The National Teacher said, "Put it back where it was."

The student asked again, "What is the original body of Vairochana Buddha like?"

"That old buddha is long gone," said the National Teacher.

43 YANTOU'S APPEARING AND DISAPPEARING

Luoshan asked Yantou, "What if thoughts appear and disappear without end?"

Yantou scolded him, "Who appears and disappears?"

44 XINGYANG'S GARUDA

A student asked Xingyang Qingpou, "The *sagara* dragon emerges from the sea, and heaven and earth are at peace. If you were suddenly face to face with it, what would that be like?"

Xingyang said, "The garuda is the king of birds; it fills the universe. Who's going to stick their head up?"⁵²

The student asked, "But what if the dragon did suddenly stick its head up?"

⁵¹ Vairochana, The One Like the Sun, is one of the five transcendent buddhas, who are considered the personifications of the dharmakaya | The original body : the fundamental or essential body of a buddha as distinct from his or her temporal manifestation

⁵² The *sagara* dragon lives in the sea and protects the bodhisattva Guanyin | The garuda is a giant bird that eats most dragons but can't eat the *sagara*

Xingyang said, “It would be like a falcon catching a pigeon. If you don’t understand, you can’t pretend to. You won’t be happy until you check for yourself and know what’s real.”⁵³

The student said, “Well, if that’s the case, I’ll fold my hands over my chest and take three steps back.”

Xingyang said, “You’re just the carved turtle that holds up my chair.⁵⁴ Don’t wait for the weight of my teaching to scar your forehead.”⁵⁵

45 THE SUTRA OF COMPLETE ENLIGHTENMENT’S FOUR PHRASES

The *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*⁵⁶ says :

Don’t give rise to delusive thoughts.

Don’t suppress delusive states of mind.

When you find yourself in a realm of delusive thought, don’t add knowing.

When you don’t know, don’t jump to the conclusion that that’s the truth.

⁵³ Xingyang literally says, “If you don’t understand, check in front of the tower and you’ll know what’s real.” He’s referring to a horrible story in the *Book of History* : Zhaosheng, who lived around 250 CE, built a high tower that overlooked the city. One day a hunchback passed by and one of Zhaosheng’s concubines laughed at him. The hunchback was furious and demanded her execution. Zhaosheng promised to behead her but substituted the head of a convict. When the deception was discovered his retainers lost trust in him and drifted away. Finally he executed the concubine and hung her head in front of the tower. The hunchback was satisfied and the retainers returned.

⁵⁴ Literally, “black turtle under the Mount Sumeru seat”, the carving that supports the chair from which the teacher gives lectures, and here a metaphor for not being enlightened

⁵⁵ There’s something slightly pitiful about this story full of posturing when you realize that Xingyang didn’t outlive his own teacher Dayang and died without dharma heirs

⁵⁶ *Yuanjue jing*, an eighth century Chan and Huayan text on enlightenment and the practicalities of meditation, influential in China and Korea

46 DESHAN'S LAUGHTER AT THE END OF STUDY

The great teacher Yuanming of Deshan said to his assembly, "Extinguish every conceptual thought, and all the buddhas in the universe won't be able to open their mouths.⁵⁷ But there's someone who can't stop laughing. If you recognize that person, you've completed your study."

47 ZHAOZHOU'S JUNIPER TREE

(Gateless Gateway 37)

A student asked Zhaozhou, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?"

Zhaozhou said, "The juniper tree in the front garden."⁵⁸

48 VIMALAKIRTI AT THE GATE

(Blue Cliff Record 84)

Vimalakirti asked Manjushri, "What is the dharma gate of nonduality that the bodhisattvas enter?"⁵⁹

Manjushri said, "My idea is this: in all the teachings there are no words, no speech, no explanations, no understanding. Leaving 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 tell us what the bodhisattva's dharma gate of nonduality is."

Vimalakirti was silent.

⁵⁷ Literally, "their mouths will be stuck to the wall"

⁵⁸ This is often translated as 'oak tree' but that's a Japanese reading, and the Chinese juniper's uselessness for lumber (in contrast to the majesty of the oak) is part of Zhaozhou's response

⁵⁹ Vimalakirti was a lay disciple of the Buddha and considered a living bodhisattva; Manjushri is the bodhisattva of wisdom. The story is that Vimalakirti was sick and Shakyamuni sent Manjushri with tens of thousands of bodhisattvas to visit him. Vimalakirti accommodated them all in his 10x10-foot room, and he and Manjushri had a long dialogue. At one point Manjushri asked, "Why are you sick?" Vimalakirti replied, "Because the whole world is sick."

49 DONGSHAN'S PORTRAIT STORY

Dongshan held a memorial service for his teacher Yunyan in front of Yunyan's portrait. He told the story about the portrait again, and a student asked, "What did Yunyan mean by 'Just this is it'?"⁶⁰

Dongshan said, "At the time I almost misunderstood what my teacher really meant."

The student said, "I wonder if Yunyan really knew what he was talking about."

Dongshan said, "If he didn't know, how could he express it like that? If he did know, why was he willing to express it like that?"

50 XUEFENG'S WHAT'S THIS?

(Blue Cliff Record 51)

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?"

⁶⁰ When Dongshan was still a young monk he decided to leave his teacher Yunyan, who said, "If you leave, it will be difficult for us to see each other again."

Dongshan replied, "It will be difficult for us not to see each other." He continued, "After your death, if I'm asked whether or not I have your portrait (meaning the essence of your dharma), what should I answer?"

After a long pause, Yunyan said, "Just this is it!" Then he said, "Now that you've taken on this great matter, consider it carefully."

But Dongshan continued to have doubts. Later as he crossed a stream he saw his reflection in the water and awakened to Yunyan's meaning. He wrote this verse :

Don't look elsewhere, far from yourself.

Now I'm walking alone, but I meet him everywhere.

Now he's exactly me, now I'm not him.

You have to understand this way to join with what is.

“From Lingnan,” one student replied.

“Did you get to see Xuefeng?”

“I did.”

“What did he have to say?”

The student told the story.

What did he have to 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.”⁶¹

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.’”

51 FAYAN’S BOAT OR LAND

Fayan asked a senior student named Jiao, “Did you come by boat or land?”

Jiao said, “I came by boat.”

“Where’s the boat?”

“It’s on the river.”

After Jiao left, Fayan asked a student who was standing nearby, “Tell me, that student who was just here — could he see into reality or not?”

⁶¹ Yantou is referring to the incident recorded in 55 when he and Xuefeng were studying with Deshan; Yantou played with Xuefeng the same way he’s playing with the student here

52 CAOSHAN'S DHARMA BODY

Caoshan asked elder monk De, "The Buddha's true essential body is like space. It responds to things, manifesting its forms the way the moon appears in the water. How do you explain this responsiveness?"

De said, "It's like a donkey looking into a well."

"That's most of it, but not the whole thing."

"What's it like for you?"

"It's like a well looking into a donkey."

53 HUANGBO WANTS YOU TO FIND TODAY

(Blue Cliff Record 11)

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."

54 GUANYIN'S HANDS AND EYES

(Blue Cliff Record 89)

Yunyan asked Daowu, "How does Guanyin use all those hands and eyes?"⁶²

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 doesn't say it all."

⁶² Guanyin is the bodhisattva of great compassion, who is sometimes depicted with up to 84,000 hands and eyes

“What would you say, older brother?”

“All through the body are hands and eyes.”

55 DESHAN, CARRYING HIS BOWLS

(Gateless Gateway 13)

One day Deshan came down to the dining hall, carrying his bowls. Xuefeng asked him, “Where are you going with your bowls, Old Teacher? The bell hasn’t rung and the drum hasn’t been struck.” Deshan turned and went back to his room.

Xuefeng brought this up with Yantou, who said, “Deshan, great as he is, doesn’t yet know the last word.”

Hearing about this, Deshan sent for Yantou and asked, “Don’t you approve of this old monk?” Yantou whispered what he meant, and Deshan said nothing further.

The next day, when Deshan took his teaching seat in front of the assembly, his talk was different from usual. Yantou came to the front of the hall, rubbing his hands and laughing loudly, saying, “How delightful! Our Old Boss has got hold of the last word. From now on, no one in the world can outdo him!”

56 UNCLE MI’S WHITE RABBIT

When Uncle Mi and Dongshan were on a walk together,⁶³ a white rabbit dashed in front of them. Mi exclaimed, “How quick!”

Dongshan asked, “What’s that like?”

“Just as if a commoner were appointed prime minister.”

“Though you’re old and great, you still say things like that!”

“What would you say?”

“Generations of nobility, temporarily fallen into poverty.”

⁶³ Sengmi of Shenshan, Uncle Mi, was Dongshan’s uncle in the dharma

57 ZHAOZHOU'S THROW IT AWAY

Yanyang asked Zhaozhou, "What if I come with nothing?"⁶⁴

Zhaozhou said, "Throw it away."

"If I come with nothing, what can I throw away?"

"In that case, keep holding it."

58 THE DIAMOND SUTRA'S SCORN

(Blue Cliff Record 97)

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."

59 QINGLIN'S POISONOUS SNAKE

A student asked Qinglin, "What about when a student is going along the path?"

Qinglin said, "There's a poisonous snake on that path. I'd advise the student not to run into it."

"What about when you do run into it?"

"You'll mourn the loss of your life."

"What about if you don't run into it?"

"But there's no way to avoid it."

"Then how about the moment you run into it?"

"It completely disappears."

"I wonder where it goes."

"The grass is so deep that we can't find it anywhere."

"You too should protect yourself against it."

Qinglin rubbed his palms together and said, "We're both poisonous snakes."

⁶⁴ This was their first meeting, and Yanyang went on to become Zhaozhou's dharma heir

60 IRON GRINDER LIU VISITS GUISHAN

(Blue Cliff Record 24)

The nun Iron Grinder Liu⁶⁵ came to visit Guishan.

Guishan said, “Hello, you old cow, you’ve come!”⁶⁶

Iron Grinder said, “Tomorrow there will be a huge community feast on Mount Tai. Will you be going?”⁶⁷

Guishan flopped down and lay on the floor.

Iron Grinder went away.

61 JIANFENG’S ONE LINE

(Gateless Gateway 48)

A student said to Jianfeng, “‘Bhagavats⁶⁸ in every direction, one path to nirvana.’ I wonder where that path is.”

Jianfeng picked up his stick, drew a line in the air, and said, “Here it is.”

Later a student asked Yunmen about this. Yunmen held up his fan and said, “This fan jumps up to the Heaven of the Thirty-three and strikes the nose of Shakra devendra.⁶⁹ Strike a carp of the Eastern Sea with a single blow, and the rain comes down in torrents.”

⁶⁵ Liu Tiemo (ninth century) was a nun known as a fearsome debater. 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.

⁶⁶ Guishan often referred to himself as an old buffalo, and here he calls Liu an old buffalo cow

⁶⁷ Mount Tai was many hundreds of miles away, too far to travel in a day

⁶⁸ Bhagavat, World-Honored One, is one of a buddha’s titles

⁶⁹ Shakra devendra is the ruler of Trayastriṃśha, the Heaven of the Thirty-three, located on the summit of Mount Sumeru

62 YANGSHAN'S ENLIGHTENMENT

Mi the Foreigner⁷⁰ had a student go to Yangshan and ask, “Do Chan students today need enlightenment?”

Yangshan said, “It’s not that there’s no enlightenment, but we’re almost always in the second level of experience.”⁷¹

The student returned to Mi and told him about this. Mi heartily agreed.

63 TOUZI PLUNGES INTO DAYLIGHT

(Blue Cliff Record 41)

Zhaozhou asked Touzi, “What’s it like when you’ve gone through the Great Death⁷² and then come back to life?”

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

64 FAYAN'S ONE BODY IN ALL THINGS

The head monk Zizhao asked Fayan, “You’re the founder of this monastery. When you opened this hall, whose successor were you?”⁷³

Fayan said, “Dizang’s.”

“You’ve really turned your back on our late teacher Changqing.”

“I still don’t understand a single one of Changqing’s sayings.”

“Why not ask me?”

⁷⁰ Jingzhao Mihu; like Yangshan, he was one of Guishan’s dharma heirs

⁷¹ The second level is the realm of duality—of our assumptions, opinions, judgments, etc. about the first, nondual level of reality

⁷² The Great Death refers to enlightenment

⁷³ Fayan and Zizhao had both been Changqing’s students, and then Fayan went on to study with Dizang. When Changqing died, Zizhao inherited his temple. Still angry with Fayan, Zizhao went to Fayan’s temple to confront him, where this conversation took place.

“‘One body revealed in all things.’ What does that mean?”⁷⁴

Zizhao raised his whisk.

Fayan said, “That’s what you learned at Changqing’s. What do *you* think?”

Zizhao had nothing to say.

Fayan asked, “When one body is revealed in all things, do all things disappear?”

“They don’t disappear.”

“Now you’ve got two.”

Everyone in the room said, “They disappear.”

Fayan cried out, “One body revealed in all things!”

65 SHOUSHAN’S NEW WIFE

A student asked Shoushan, “What is Buddha?”

Shoushan said, “The new wife rides a donkey. Her mother-in-law leads it by the
bridle.”

66 JIUFENG’S HEAD AND TAIL

A student asked Jiufeng, “What is the head?”

Jiufeng said, “Opening your eyes and not seeing the dawn.”

“What is the tail?”

“Not sitting on a ten-thousand-year-old seat.”

“When there’s a head but no tail, what’s that?”

“After all, that’s not sublime.”

“When there’s a tail but no head, what’s that?”

“Trying your utmost, yet having no power.”

“When the head harmonizes with the tail, what’s that?”

“The descendants will prosper, but the one in the room won’t know it.”

⁷⁴ This is a Huayan saying; Fayan was deeply influenced by Huayan philosophy

67 THE HUAYAN SUTRA'S WISDOM

The *Huayan Sutra*⁷⁵ says, “When I look at all beings everywhere, I see that each of them possesses the wisdom and virtue of the Tathagata, but because of their attachments and delusions, they cannot bear witness to it.”

68 JIASHAN WIELDS SOME GARDENING TOOLS

A student asked Jiashan, “What if you sweep away the dust and see the Buddha?”

Jiashan said, “You have to wield your sword. If you don't, you'll be like a fisherman roosting in the reeds.”

The student spoke about this to Shishuang, asking him, “What if you sweep away the dust and see the Buddha?”

Shishuang said, “The Buddha has no country. Where will you meet her?”

The student reported this to Jiashan. Jiashan stepped up to the rostrum and said, “As far as gardening tools go, Shishuang is inferior to me, but for discourse on the deepest reality, he's a hundred steps ahead.”

69 NANQUAN'S BADGER AND FOX

Nanquan said to his assembly, “All the buddhas of past, present, and future don't know it, but the badger and fox know it.”

70 JINSHAN'S BAMBOO

Jinshan asked Xiushan, “You know clearly that life is by nature unborn.⁷⁶ Why are you still attached to life?”

⁷⁵ The Huayan (Flower Garland) School is one of the principle philosophical schools of Chinese Buddhism and shares many ideas and images with Chan

⁷⁶ In Chinese the same word means both 'life' and 'birth' so there's a repetition that doesn't come across in English : life by nature not-life, born by nature not-born

Xiushan said, “By its nature, a bamboo shoot will become a bamboo tree, but I’m still a shoot. You can’t make a bamboo rope out of me yet.”

“Later you’ll realize this for yourself.”

“That’s just how I see it. How do you see it?”

“This is the temple superintendent’s domain; that is the temple caretaker’s domain.”

Xiushan bowed.

71 A DEBATE ABOUT CUIYAN’S EYEBROWS

(Blue Cliff Record 8)

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 out?”⁷⁷

Baofu said, “This thief has a guilty heart!”⁷⁸

Changqing said, “Those eyebrows are getting bushier!”⁷⁹

Later, Yunmen commented, “Barrier!”⁸⁰

72 ZHONGYI’S MONKEY

Yangshan asked Zhongyi, “What does ‘buddha nature’ mean?”⁸¹

Zhongyi said, “I’ll give you an analogy. Suppose a monkey is inside a room with six windows.⁸² From outside someone shouts, ‘Monkey! Monkey!’ and the monkey

⁷⁷ It is said that the eyebrows of someone who distorts the dharma will fall out

⁷⁸ A proverb signifying a bad conscience

⁷⁹ There’s a folk belief that talking a lot makes one’s eyebrows grow

⁸⁰ ‘Barrier’ refers to a 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!”

⁸¹ Yangshan was still a boy at this time

⁸² The windows represent the six senses

immediately responds. So it's just as if someone calls 'Monkey!' through one of the windows."

Yangshan asked, "What about when the monkey is asleep?"

Zhongyi came down from his teacher's seat, grasped Yangshan, and said, "Monkey, monkey, I greet you."

73 CAOSHAN FULFILLS HIS DUTY

A student asked Caoshan, "What's it like when you put aside your mourning clothes?"

Caoshan said, "Today I've fulfilled my duty to my parents."

The student said, "What about after you've fulfilled your duty?"

Caoshan said, "I love to get drunk."

74 FAYAN STANDS NOWHERE

A student asked Fayan, "I hear that a sutra says, 'Each thing stands up out of a source that stands nowhere.' What is this source that stands nowhere?"

Fayan replied, "Forms appear before matter. Names arise before naming."

75 YANTOU'S UNCHANGING PRINCIPLE

Ruiyan asked Yantou, "What is the principle that never changes?"

Yantou said, "It just moved."

"What about when it moves?"

"Then you're not looking at the unchanging principle."

Ruiyan considered this.

Yantou said, "If you agree, you're imprisoned by what you perceive. If you disagree, you're sunk in endless birth and death."

76 SHOUSHAN WALKS ALONE

Shoushan said to his assembly, “If you get it the first time you hear it, you’ll teach buddhas and ancestors. If you get it the second time you hear it, you’ll teach gods and humans. If you don’t get it until the third time, you won’t even be able to save yourself.”

A student asked, “When did you get it?”

Shoushan said, “The moon sets at midnight, I walk alone through the town.”

77 YANGSHAN’S AS NEEDED

A student asked Yangshan, “Can you read and write?”

Yangshan said, “As needed.”

The student immediately turned around once to the right and asked, “What word is this?” Yangshan drew the character for “10” in the air.⁸³

The student turned around once to the left and asked, “What character is that?”

Yangshan modified the cross into a swastika.⁸⁴

The student drew a circle and held it in his hands like an ashura⁸⁵ holding the sun and moon. He shouted, “What character is that?”

Yangshan drew a circle enclosing the swastika.

The student immediately displayed the vigor of a temple guardian.⁸⁶ Yangshan said, “That’s it, that’s it. You’re keeping it well.”⁸⁷

⁸³ The character for 10 looks like a cross 十

⁸⁴ The swastika is an ancient symbol of Buddhism

⁸⁵ The ashuras are angry titans who wage constant war; they are one of the six paths of existence, along with gods, humans, animals, greedy ghosts, and hell-dwellers

⁸⁶ This refers to a guardian of the dharma whose image is often found in temples; he’s destined to become Rucika, the last buddha of our kalpa

⁸⁷ In another version of this story, the monk then bowed and flew up into the sky

78 YUNMEN TALKS ABOUT CAKE

(Blue Cliff Record 77)

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

Yunmen said, "Cake."

79 CHANGSHA TAKES A STEP

(Gateless Gateway 46)

Changsha had a student ask Master Hui, "What about before you saw Nanquan?"⁸⁸

Hui sat still for a little while.

"What about after seeing him?"

"Nothing special."

The student returned and told Changsha this. Changsha said :

The person perched on a hundred-foot pole
has entered the Way but it's not yet real.

Take a step from the top of the pole
and the universe in every direction is your body.

The student asked, "How do I step from the top of a hundred-foot pole?"

"Mountains of Lang, waters of Li."

"I don't understand."

"The whole world belongs to the monarch."

80 LONGYA'S WHY BODHIDHARMA CAME FROM THE WEST

(Blue Cliff Record 20)

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

⁸⁸ Changsha and Hui had both been students of Nanquan; nothing else is known about Hui

Cuiwei said, "Pass me that meditation brace."⁸⁹

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.

81 **XUANSHA'S FAR DISTANT**

Xuansha came to Pudian district and was welcomed with a party. The next day he asked the head priest, Xiaotang, "Where has yesterday's revelry gone?"

Xiaotang held out the corner of his robe.

Xuansha said, "Far distant, no connection at all."

82 **YUNMEN'S CAKE AND DUMPLING**

Yunmen asked his assembly, "What is it to realize the Way through hearing sounds, to enlighten the mind through seeing forms? He raised his hand⁹⁰ and said, "It's as if Guanyin bought a cake with her penny." Then he lowered his hand and said, "It was only ever a dumpling."⁹¹

⁸⁹ 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)

⁹⁰ See note to 22 on the raising and lowering of hands

⁹¹ Yunmen apparently had a fondness for sesame rice cakes, which appear frequently in stories about him (see 78), while dumplings were simple, ordinary food

83 DAOWU NURSES THE SICK

Guishan asked Daowu, "Where have you been?"

Daowu said, "I've been nursing the sick."

"How many people are sick?"

"Some are sick, and some are not sick."

Guishan asked, "Aren't you the not-sick one?"

"Sick and not sick don't have anything to do with it. Say quickly! Say quickly!"

"Even if I could answer, it would have nothing to do with it."

84 JUDI'S FINGERTIP CHAN

(Gateless Gateway 3; Blue Cliff Record 19)

Whatever he was asked, Judi just held up one finger. One day a visitor asked Judi's attendant what his master preached. The boy raised a finger. Hearing of this, Judi cut off the boy's finger with a knife. As the boy ran from the room, screaming with pain, Judi called to him. When the boy turned his head, Judi raised a finger, and he was suddenly enlightened.

When Judi was about to die he said to his assembled students, "I received this one-finger Chan from Tianlong. I used it all my life but never used it up." With this he entered his eternal rest.

85 HUIZHONG'S SEAMLESS MONUMENT

(Blue Cliff Record 18)

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

"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 died, the Emperor summoned Danyuan and asked him what the teacher meant. Danyuan said (and Xuedou comments):

In the center of the country⁹²

(A single hand doesn’t call out in vain)⁹³

There’s enough gold to fill the whole land.

(That’s a staff straight from the mountains)⁹⁴

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

(The sea is calm, the river clear)

In the emerald temple,⁹⁵ there’s no knowledge and no one who knows.

(He’s really held it up for us)

86 LINJI’S GREAT ENLIGHTENMENT

Linji asked Huangbo, “What is the clearly manifested essence of the Buddha’s teachings?” Huangbo hit him. This happened three times.

Linji then took his leave and went to see Dayu, who asked, “Where have you come from?”

Linji said, “From Huangbo.”

“What did Huangbo have to say?”

⁹² 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, or 2) Xiangtan is a district in Hunan, near the center of ancient China

⁹³ 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

⁹⁴ Chan teachers would find an unworked piece of wood in the mountains to use as their teaching staff

⁹⁵ An image of emptiness

“I asked him three times, ‘What is the clearly manifested essence of the Buddha’s teachings?’ and I got his stick three times. I don’t understand if I made an error.”

Dayu said, “Huangbo was such an old grandmother; he completely exhausted himself for your sake. Then you come here and ask whether you made an error!” With these words, Linji had great enlightenment.

87 LAN’AN’S BEING AND NONBEING

Sushan called on Lan’an⁹⁶ and asked, “I’ve heard that you say, ‘Being and non-being are just like a vine and the tree it twines around.’ If the tree suddenly falls down and the vine withers, where do being and nonbeing return to?” Lan’an roared with laughter.

Sushan said, “I sold my possessions and made a long and arduous journey to come here. Why won’t you take me seriously?”

Lan’an called for his attendant and said, “Give this reverend monk some money for his travel expenses.” Then he said, “Someday a one-eyed dragon will help you open your eyes.”

Later Sushan went to Mingzhao⁹⁷ and told him about this. Mingzhao said, “Here’s what I can say: Lan’an was right from head to tail, but in you he didn’t meet someone who could appreciate him.”

Sushan asked again, “If the tree suddenly falls down and the vine withers, where do being and nonbeing return to?”

Mingzhao said, “That would make Lan’an laugh all the more.”

As soon as he heard this, Sushan had realization and said, “From the start there was a knife in Lan’an’s words.”

⁹⁶ Changqing Lan’an was sometimes known as Guishan Lan’an, and so this koan has mistakenly been attributed to Guishan Lingyou, co-founder of the Guiyang School, or to Changqing Huileng, both of whom appear often in the koans; to avoid confusion Changqing Lan’an will be referred to as Lan’an.

⁹⁷ Mingzhao was blind in one eye

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

(Blue Cliff Record 94)

The *Shurangama Sutra*⁹⁸ 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?”⁹⁹

89 DONGSHAN'S GRASS

Dongshan said to his assembly, “As the summer training period ends and autumn begins, all of you will be heading off to the east and west,¹⁰⁰ but you should go directly to the place where there’s no grass for ten thousand miles.” Then he asked, “How do you go there?”

Shishuang said, “As soon as you go through the gate, there’s the grass!”

Dayang said, “Even if you don’t go through the gate, the grass is everywhere.”

90 YANGSHAN SPEAKS FROM THE THIRD SEAT

(Gateless Gateway 25)

Yangshan dreamed he went to Maitreya’s realm and was given the third seat. A senior monastic struck the stand with a gavel and announced, “Today the talk will be given by the one in the third seat.”

⁹⁸ 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

⁹⁹ This is a question that Ananda asked the Buddha

¹⁰⁰ It was customary for monastics to go off on pilgrimage in the times between the two three-month training periods every year

Yangshan stood up, struck the stand with the gavel, and said, “The truth of the Mahayana is beyond the Four Propositions and transcends the Hundred Negations.¹⁰¹ Listen, listen.”

91 NANQUAN’S DREAM FLOWER

(Blue Cliff Record 40)

Governor Luxuan¹⁰² was having a conversation with Nanquan and quoted Sengzhao¹⁰³: “The universe and I have the same root. The ten thousand things and I have one body.” Luxuan exclaimed, “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.”

92 YUNMEN’S TREASURE HIDDEN IN THE BODY

(Blue Cliff Record 62)

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 brings the entrance gate¹⁰⁴ and puts it on top of the lantern.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ 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. They stand for the whole of Mahayana philosophy.

¹⁰² An important official in the Tang government and a longtime student of Nanquan’s; he immersed himself in Sengzhao’s writing

¹⁰³ 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.

¹⁰⁴ The main entrance gate to the monastery has 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

¹⁰⁵ In the first sentence, Yunmen is paraphrasing Sengzhao (See note to 91), and then he adds his own comment in the second and third sentences

93 NANQUAN OFFERS LUZU A JEWEL

Luzu asked Nanquan, “People don’t recognize the wish-fulfilling gem.¹⁰⁶ I picked it up myself in the Tathagata treasury. What is this treasury?”

Nanquan said, “It’s me engaged in conversation with you like this.”

“How about when there’s no conversation?”

“That’s it, too.”

“What is the jewel?”

“Reverend Luzu!”

“Yes?”

“Go on, you don’t understand my words.”

94 DONGSHAN IS WELL

Dongshan was ill. A student asked, “You’re unwell. Is there someone, after all, who isn’t sick?”

Dongshan said, “There is.”

“Does the one who isn’t sick take care of you?”

“I’m actually taking care of that one.”

“What’s it like when you take care of that one?”

“Then I don’t see that there is any illness.”

95 LINJI SELLS ‘ONE’

Linji asked the manager of the monastery, “Where have you come from?”

The manager said, “I’m coming back from selling rice in the market.”

“Did you sell all the rice?”

“Yes, I did.”

¹⁰⁶ The wish-fulfilling gem is the *mani* jewel, often a pearl or crystal and a symbol of purity. It’s the *mani* in *Om mani padme hum*, Hail to the jewel in the lotus.

Linji raised his staff, drew the character for “one,” and asked, “Have you sold this, too?”¹⁰⁷

The manager shouted, and Linji hit him.

When the student in charge of meals arrived, Linji told him about the incident. The monastic said, “The manager didn’t understand what you meant.”

Linji asked, “How about you?”

The student bowed.

Linji hit him, too.

96 **JIUFENG DOESN’T ACKNOWLEDGE THE HEAD MONK**

Jiufeng lived at Shishuang’s monastery as his attendant. After Shishuang’s death, the community wanted the head monk to succeed Shishuang as abbot, but Jiufeng couldn’t acknowledge him. He said, “Wait, let me examine him. If he understands what our late teacher meant, I’ll attend him as I did our late teacher.”

So he said to the head monk, “Our late teacher used to say, ‘You should extinguish all delusive thoughts. You should let consciousness expire. You should let your one awareness continue ten thousand years. You should let your awareness become like winter ashes and a withered tree. You should let your consciousness become like one strip of white silk.’ Tell me, what was he trying to make clear by this?”

The head monk said, “He intended to clarify absolute emptiness.”

Jiufeng said, “Then you don’t yet understand our late teacher’s meaning.”

“You don’t acknowledge me? Pass me the incense.” The head monk lit the incense and said, “If I don’t understand our late teacher’s meaning, I won’t be able to die while this incense is still burning.” No sooner had he said this than he sat down in meditation and died.

Jiufeng caressed his shoulder and said, “You might be able to die sitting or standing, but you still haven’t dreamed of our late teacher’s meaning.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ The character for ‘one’ is a single horizontal line —

¹⁰⁸ Pause to light a stick of incense for this nameless head monk

97 XINHUA APPRECIATES THE EMPEROR'S TREASURE

Emperor Tongguang said to Xinghua, "I've obtained the treasure of the central capital, but no one can appreciate it."

Xinghua said, "Your Majesty, please lend it to me; I'd like to see it."

The Emperor pulled the strap of his hat.

Xinghua asked, "Who *could* appreciate the Emperor's treasure?"

98 DONGSHAN IS INTIMATE

A student asked Dongshan, "Among the Three Bodies of the Buddha,¹⁰⁹ what body doesn't degenerate into levels?"

Dongshan said, "I am always intimate with it."

99 : YUNMEN'S PARTICLE-BY-PARTICLE SAMADHI

(Blue Cliff Record 50)

A student asked Yunmen, "What's the particle-by-particle samadhi?"¹¹⁰

Yunmen said, "Food in the bowl, water in the bucket."

100 : LANGYE'S ESSENTIAL WORLD

A student asked Langye Huijue, "The essential world is intrinsically pure. How does it instantaneously produce mountains, rivers and the great earth?"

Langye said, "The essential world is intrinsically pure. How does it instantaneously produce mountains, rivers and the great earth?"

¹⁰⁹ Trikaya : dharmakaya (vastness), sambhogakaya (dream body), and nirmanakaya (material body)

¹¹⁰ 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