

# Ch'an Teachings of Yün-mên School

## 雲門宗之禪義

by *Chang Chung-yuan* (張鍾元)

*Research Associate*  
*Center of Asian Studies*  
*St. John's University*  
*New York*

Reprinted from *Chinese Culture Quarterly*,  
Vol. V, No. 4, June, 1964.



was, he said: "P'u!" P'u means originally everywhere. In *Ch'an-lin Lei-chu* (chüan x) there is a gatha concerning this answer, written by Tung-shan Hsiao-ts'ung of the Sung dynasty:

"What usually the word *p'u* is?—  
One should look at its lightning!  
If you try to understand it by reasoning out its meaning,  
Ah, you are patching a boil with a piece of flesh!"

So what we must do is to penetrate directly into the lightning of *p'u* and become part of it instead of analyzing its meaning and separating ourselves from it. For it is only then that we shall experience the *power* of the word.

Yün-mên was enlightened by Master Mu-chou (Chen Tsun-su) and was sent later to Hsüeh-fêng I-tsun, where he served as the head monk. When he first came to Mu-chou to seek the Truth, he was repeatedly refused. He went there for three consecutive days, and was put out three times. The third time he managed to sneak in, but he was caught by Mu-chou who asked him: "Speak! Speak!" While Yün-mên was going to say something, he was pushed out as a good-for-nothing. The door was hastily shut on him and one of his legs was caught and broken. Apparently this intense pain awakened him instantaneously. It would be a futile attempt to find a rational explanation for this kind of rough treatment given by Master Mu-chou to his eager learner Yün-mên.

Mu-chou was the head monk in the monastery of Huang-p'o, when he suggested to Lin-chi to ask Master Huang-p'o questions. Lin-chi went to Huang-p'o three times and was beaten three times. Here we encounter the same method that was applied by Mu-chou to enlighten Yün-mên, when he sought the truth from him. It was not until the door had been shut on him for the third time and he had suffered intense pain from a broken leg that he was awakened. Similarly, Lin-chi wasn't awakened until after he had left the monastery in despair, traveling on foot to Master Ta-yü to seek help from him. Later on, when Master Yün-mên had become the author of the forceful "Kwan" we are reminded of Lin-chi, whose exclamatory "ho" was applied with like authority. From above comparisons it becomes apparent that the better we understand one of these masters, the better we will understand the other.

The *Ch'an* Buddhist says: "I lift a finger and the whole universe comes along with it." If one understands this saying intuitively, one will be awakened to the Truth as Chü-ch'i was by Master T'ien-lung. The "finger" here is a symbol of absolute solitude. When an eager learner penetrates into it, he is instantly dispatched into his inner profundity. For the same purpose



way to freedom in talking, then, what you say, is Ch'an. It is for this reason that Master Yün-mên still gave talks on *Ch'an*, even though he knew that it depends on one's inner awareness to achieve Ch'an.

Now let us examine the teachings of Tung-shan Shou-ch'u, the greatest follower of Master Yün-mên. As mentioned above, Yün-mên was strongly against those who depended upon the master's sermons, and yet he maintained that there were words free from the attachment of words. "This," he said, "is just like eating meals without any attachment of a grain of rice." The same is true with Master Tung-shan. He defined two kinds of words: the living ones and the dead ones. He said: "If there is any rational intention manifested in the words, then they are dead words; if there is no rational intention manifested in the words, then they are living words."

When Tung-shan went to visit Master Yün-mên, his answers were disapproved of by Yün-mên, because what he said were not living words. Here we have the dialogue between Yün-mên and Tung-shan:

"Where do you come from recently?"

"From Ch'a-tu!"

"Where have you been during the summer?"

"I have been in the Pao-tzu Monastery in Hunan."

"What time did you leave there?"

"In the eighth month of the last year."

"I release you from thirty blows."

The next day Tung-shan went to question Yün-mên, saying: "Yesterday you were pleased to release me from thirty blows, but I do not know what my fault was."

"O! You rice-bag, this is the way you wonder from the west of the River to the south of the Lake!"

What Tung-shan replied to Yün-mên were the logical answers, but they were not living words. After he had been enlightened and had become the Abbot, his answers were different.

A monk asked him: "Before mind exists, where are things?"

Tung-shan answered: "Without wind lotus leaves move, so there must be fish swimming, passing by."

Another monk asked: "What is the duty required of a *Ch'an* monk?"

Tung-shan answered: "When the clouds envelop the top of Mount Chu, there must be a heavy rain storm."



## Ch'an Teachings of Yün-mên School

The swimming of fish and the motion of lotus leaves have nothing to do with the question concerning the existence of things, and the rain storm and Mount Chu have nothing to do with the question concerning the monk's duty; yet these are the best answers recorded from Master Tung-shan. They are answers with living words. In Yün-mên's dialogue we also find answers of this kind:

Monk: "What is the fundamental idea of Buddhism?"

Yün-mên: "When spring comes, the grass turns green by itself."

Monk: "What was Niu-t'ou Fa-yung before he saw the Fourth Patriarch?"

Yün-mên: "The Goddess of Mercy is worshipped in every family."

Monk: "What was he after Niu-t'ou saw the Fourth Patriarch?"

Yün-mên: "The moth in the flame swallows the tiger."

These answers from Yün-mên are not logically related to the questions that were put up to him. In Tung-shan's expression they were words which do not manifest rational intention—so they are living words.

In Tung-shan's teachings there was a very famous kung-an which was commented on by many later masters. A monk asked him: "What is the Buddha?" Tung-shan answered: "Three chin (Chinese pound) of flax." This answer brings to mind Yün-mên's answer when he was asked: "What was the teaching beyond the Buddhas and Patriarchs?" He said: "Pancake!" Apparently they walked on the same road. This type of answer had been frequently employed by previous *Ch'an* masters. Long before Yün-mên, Chao-chou Tsung-shen was asked: "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?" And he replied: "Cypress tree in the courtyard." Some time after Tung-shan had given his famous kung-an of the three chin of flax, a monk went to Chih-men Kuang-tsu and asked: "What does it mean." His answer was: "Flowers are shining bright, brocade is shining bright." Because the monk did not understand, he added: "Bamboos in the South and trees in the North." This answer became famous and was recorded in the *Blue-cliff Records*. All these answers from Tung-shan, Chih-men, Yün-mên and Chao-chou implied nothing metaphysical; they were plain matter of fact utterances, which emerged from the inmost consciousness, as water flows out of a spring, or a bud bursts forth in the sun. Yet every one of them contains unmeasurable power of irrationality, which cuts off all passages of intellection. Thus they destroy the roots of speculation and free one from all entanglements and limitations.

In the *Blue-cliff Records* we have Yuan-wu K'e-ch'in's comments on Tung-



native of Chia-hsing in Su-chou.<sup>5</sup> His family name was Chang. He first studied under Chen Tsun-su of Mu-chou.<sup>6</sup> After he had understood the general idea of *Ch'an*, he went to Master Hsüeh-fêng,<sup>7</sup> penetrating further into its depth and grasping its essence. Trying to conceal his capacity he made no distinction between himself and others. However, soon he took the first seat among the monks in the monastery of Ling-shu of Shao-chou where *Ch'an* Master Jü-min<sup>8</sup> preached, and when this Master was about to pass away, Wen-yen was recommended to the Prince of Kwang-chou to succeed as the abbot of the monastery. Wên-yên did not forget his previous teacher, Hsüeh-fêng, and still esteemed him as his master.

When he preached for the first time to the assembly, the Prince of Kwang-chou was present and asked him for advice. Master Wên-yên replied: "In front of you lies no divergent way."<sup>9</sup> He said to the assembly:

"Please do not think that I am trying to deceive you today by words. I can hardly help talking and making a mess of it. If a clear-sighted man saw me doing this, I would be a laughing stock. How can I avoid his laughter now? Let me ask you all, 'what do you lack from the very beginning?' Even though I tell you that there is nothing lacking within you, this, too, is a deceit. Unless your understanding has reached this stage, you are not right yet. Do not ask questions carelessly and hurriedly when your mind is completely dark. Tomorrow and the days thereafter you will have the most important work to do to achieve enlightenment. Those whose talents are low and fumbling, should go to the well-established schools of the great ancients and search on every side for truth. Should you gain some inner awareness, all this is due to what is within yourself. When you are drifting in the endless kalpa, your mind is full of illusions. The moment you hear others talk about *Ch'an*, you will immediately want to know and start questioning what the Buddha is and what the Patriarchs are. Thus you seek high and low for understanding, but in doing so, you get even further away from *Ch'an*, because the searching mind is a deviation, and to talk about it is even worse. Then is it true that not to search for it is the correct way? Well, what else is there besides these two ways? Be careful!"

The Master came to the assembly and said:

5. Now Wu-hsien, town in the south of Kiangsu Province, on the Grand Canal and west of Shanghai.

6. Now Chien-te, town in the west of the Chekiang Province and south of Hangchow.

7. Hsüeh-fêng I-ts'un, see the *Lamp* (chüan 16)

8. The fascicle of Ling-su Jü-min is in the *Lamp* (chuan 11).

9. According to the *Lamp*, at that moment the Prince of Kwangchou tried to start a war against the central government. So the Master's answer was simply an advice to give up his intention.



"My work here is what I cannot help. But when I am telling you to penetrate directly into all things, and to be non-attached to them, I have already concealed what is within you. Yet you all proceed further looking for *Ch'an* among my words in order to achieve enlightenment. Through thousands of deviations and a myriad of artificialities, you raise endless questions and dispute them. This means that you merely gain temporary satisfaction from verbal contest, repeatedly quarrel with words, which makes you deviate even further from *Ch'an*. When will you obtain it and rest?"

"If the Truth could be expressed in words, the traditional teachings of the Three Vehicles and the Twelve Divisions of the Canon would not be found lacking. Why should we seek the secret transmission handed down outside of the traditional teachings? To pursue Truth through explanations and wisdom, such as the doctrines given by the saints of Da'sabhūmi,<sup>10</sup> forceful as the falling rain and thunder clouds, is not approved by Buddha, because there is a barrier, as a gauze-like ethereal garment, which prevents one's true nature from being revealed. Hence we know that all the intentional minds are a separation from *Ch'an* as great as between heaven and earth. However, when a man who has obtained *Ch'an* speaks, it is as if he stood unharmed in the midst of flames. He speaks all day, but carries not a word in his mouth. He eats meals and wears his clothes, as if he neither tasted a grain of rice nor covered himself with even a thread of silk. Nevertheless these wordy expressions are still slogans of *Ch'an* schools. What we really should have, is the actual experience of *Ch'an*. For instance, in the presence of *Ch'an* monks we try to show mind-awakening through playing with words, which is simply useless intellectual reasoning. In fact, even though one obtains something through a word, one is still slumbering.

The Master continued: "The teachings of the Three Vehicles and the Twelve Divisions of the Canon expound Buddhism in this way and that way. The old masters of the world today give their talks on *Ch'an* from all directions at once. Comparing these approaches to mine, which concentrates on the needle-point, their methods are like the medicine given by clumsy animal doctors, which often kills the horses. However, there are few who can attain to such a state. How can you expect there to be roaring thunders in speech and the sharpness of swords in words? In the twinkling of an eye, a thousand changes can take place. When the wind ceases, the waves become calm. May I beg you to accept this offer? Be careful!"

Another time the Master came to the assembly, saying: "Brothers! you

---

10. Da'sabhūmi is the tenth stage in the fifty-two sections of the development of a Bodhisattva into Buddha.



## Ch'an Teachings of Yün-mên School

have visited many masters in all places trying to solve the problem of life and death. Everywhere you go you find the sayings of famous old masters, which may lead you to enlightenment. Do you have any difficulty to understand them? If so, please let me know. Let me discuss them with you! At that moment a monk came out of the crowd and made a bow. When he was going to say something, the Master remarked: "The road that leads to the Western Heaven is ten thousand miles, far away, far away."

A question is asked: "What do these devotee gatherings here discuss?" The Master answered: "All of you stand here too long."

The Master said: "If I should give you a statement and teach you how to achieve *Ch'an* immediately, dirt would already be spread on the top of your head. Even plucking out a single hair would make you understand everything in the world in a second, but it would still be like 'cutting one's flesh to patch up a boil.' To really grasp *Ch'an*, you have to actually experience it. If you do not experience it, do not pretend to know. You should withdraw inwardly to search for the ground upon which you stand; thereby you will find out what Truth is. Outwardly not even the slightest explanation can be used for your inner awareness, or for your deliberation. Everyone of you should devote himself to the task of self-realization. When the 'great function' takes place, no efforts will be required from you. And spontaneously you will be no different from the Patriarchs and the Buddha.

"Because the root of your faith is so shallow, and your evil karma<sup>11</sup> is so heavy, there suddenly emerges in your head a strong will, which makes you carry your 'bowl bag', to suffer from wanderings to a thousand distant places. Let me ask you all: 'What are you lacking? All men have their share of Buddha nature. Yet, even if it comes close to your eyes, you still miss it.'

"Do not let others deceive you and manage you. As soon as the old master begins to talk, you will immediately swallow what he says—just like a group of flies on top of manure struggling to gobble up the dirt. You will gather together in threes and fives and engage in endless discussions. What a pity, brothers! Now and then our ancient masters could not help leaving a word for you to gain insight into *Ch'an*. Such words should be put aside. You should be independent from them and get support from your own backbone. Is this not close to the Truth? Hurry! hurry! Time does not wait for you. When you have exhaled, there is no guarantee that you will inhale again. How can you waste your self with useless things. You must beware,

---

<sup>11</sup> Evil karma means thoughts, words and deeds, all of which lead to evil, and their recompenses are heavy.



you may understand it, but is what you understand the correct insight?<sup>16</sup> Even though you do reach this stage, you have not yet dreamed of what a *Ch'an* monk really is. To find a real *Ch'an* monk is just like going to a deserted village with few houses, and you will meet no one there. Thereupon the Master suddenly got up and, taking his staff, he made a line on the ground, saying: "All is here." And again he repeated the gesture and said: "All is gone out of here. Take good care of yourself."

The Master came to the assembly and said: "My fellow monks! To be a *Ch'an* Buddhist one must immediately obtain a *Ch'an* Buddhist nose. Let me ask you, 'What is a *Ch'an* Buddhist nose?' No monks answered. The Master said: "Mahaprajnaparamita."<sup>17</sup> Today we all work together; the meeting is adjourned."

The Master came to the assembly and said: "All of you, no matter what you say or what you have obtained, it is just like adding another head on top of the head, or mixing frost with snow. Or, as if you made a dead man's eyes stare at you, or, as if you cauterize a boil with moxa. This mess is not a trifling thing. What really should you do? Every one of you should find a firm ground to stand on. Do not just travel all over the place for nothing, just catching idle words. Oftentimes, as soon as *Ch'an* masters open their mouths, they immediately ask about *Ch'an* and Tao, upward and downward. They may copy the remarks of the master, memorize them and deliberate upon them. Whenever they arrive at a place, three or five gather around the fireside to discuss these remarks as to which is the best and unbiassed, which is expressed through reasoning, which describes only the event, and which reveals reality through reality. This is just like your old folks chatting in the house after dinner, and you claim that you understand Buddhism! Do you know that how many years you may search for *Ch'an* by foot traveling, you will never reach it and rest. Furthermore there are some Buddhists who, as soon as they hear others talk about enlightenment, search through Hades. It seems that such men are seeking a way of living in the rat hole, or they are resting under a black mountain, or they are enjoying the place where ghosts are, and yet they claim that they have found the entrance. What were they dreaming of? Even though we punish ten thousand people of such kind, we would not have committed a crime. Since those we punish are not Buddhists, but liars.

"When you really have achieved something, please show me. I will

16. This sentence is found in another Chinese script, the *Amalgamation of the Five Lamps*. The sentence as recorded in this text, differs from that in *the Lamp*. The unknown monk who edited *the Five Lamps* missed the point when changing this sentence.

17. The acme of wisdom enables one to reach the other shore.



discuss it with you. Do not ignore good advice and gather with others who are vainly engaged in endless discussions. Be careful, all of you! Do not let me catch you and break your leg. You all have the sensation under your skin, why should you suffer like this? What kind of wild foxes are you? What are you here for in a pack of foxes? When the master had finished his talk, he threw away his staff. There was a question: "What is the fundamental idea of Buddhism?" The Master's answer was: "When spring comes, the grass turns green by itself." The Master asked the monk from Korea: "What do you use to cross the sea?" The monk answered: "The bandit is indeed defeated." Then the Master grabbed him and said: "Why should you be in my hands?" The answer was: "It is exactly what it is." The Master remarked: "That was another jump."

A question was raised: "What was Niu-t'ou Pa-yung before he saw the Fourth Patriarch?"

"The Goddess of Mercy is worshipped in every family." was the answer.

"What was he after Niu-t'ou saw the Fourth Patriarch?"

"The moths in the flame swallow the tiger."

There was a question: "What is the song of Yün-mên?" The Master answered: "December 25."

The question: "What is the roar of the muddy ox on top of the snow hill?"

The Master: "Heaven and earth are black."

The question: "What is the neighing of the wooden horse from Mount Yün-mên?"

The Master: "Mountains and rivers are running."

The question: "Please give us the basic principle for pursuing the ultimate?"

The Master: "Look to the southeast in the morning, and to northwest in the evening."

The question: "What would it be like if one understood according to your remarks?"

The Master: "Light the lamp in the eastern house, and sit in the dark of the western house."

The question: "How can one pass the twelve periods of the day without wasting time?"

The Master: "Where do you put this question?"