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Poetry as Philosophy in Song-Dynasty Chan Buddhist Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines ways leading Song-dynasty Chan teachers, especially Cishou Huaishen 慈受懷深 (1077–1132), a prominent poet-monk (*shiseng* 詩僧) and temple abbot from the Yunmen lineage, transform the intricate rhetorical techniques of Chinese poetry in order to explicate the relationship between an experience of spiritual realization beyond language and logic and the ethical decision-making of everyday life that is inspired by transcendent principles. Huaishen's poetry expresses didactic Buddhist doctrines showing how an awareness of nonduality and the surpassing of all conceptual boundaries and categories can and must be applied to negotiating moral choices in concrete everyday situations that are either conducive or detrimental to the attainment of enlightenment. My main argument is that Song Chan discourse does not lead to antinomianism or an indifference to the conflicts of the mundane world but, instead, features an ethical approach for determining an aspirant's degree of illumination. This function is central to the school's overall teaching mission of assisting those seeking to overcome their egocentric delusions by realizing the benefits of Chan insight.

Keywords

Chan – delusions – didacticism – enlightenment – Huaishen – nonduality – Su Shi

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When what should be settled is not settled, this only leads to disorder. (當斷不斷反招其亂。)

Blue Cliff Record (*Biyanlu*《碧巖錄》)

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1 Nondual Philosophical Implications in Chan Poetry

Chan Buddhist discourse in the Song-dynasty is probably best known for evoking the qualities of an enlightened master or adept (*zuojia* 作家), who frequently engages in dialogical contests or Dharma battles with various disciples, peers, rivals, or adversaries. According to prose comments contained in the eminent collection of cases (*gongan* 公案), the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyanlu* 《碧巖錄》) published in 1128, an authentic adept prevails in these encounters by showing "how to pay attention to the realm beyond thinking and to look with urgency at what confounds speaking. Then, when thunder resounds and shooting stars soar, he drains the swamps and topples high peaks."[1] Other metaphors concerning

1 Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaigyoku ed., *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Dazang Xinxiu Dazangjing*《大正新脩大藏経》(Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932);

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the extraordinary activities that are typical of a Chan master include leaping from a somersault to reach the skies, roaring fiercely enough to frighten tigers, seizing a precious jewel from the jaws of a mighty dragon, overthrowing Mount Sumeru, or capsizing the great oceans.

Analyzing the philosophical significance of such deliberately hyperbolic rhetoric indicates that the key to attaining spiritual realization is the ability of a highly disciplined yet consistently innovative teacher to transcend the confined conceptual categories of ordinary thought or the limited capacities of conventional language by gaining command of a level of contemplation that stands beyond presupposed polarities or subtle discriminations and is able to astound and awaken his followers. However, there is another, complementary aspect of the basic Song Chan approach whereby masters use classic poetic devices in exceptionally creative ways to develop a didactic theoretical dimension that offers instructions to fellow monastics as well as lay practitioners concerning the moral principles necessary to live effectively amid the conflicts and contradictions of the mundane world. Mediators are shown how to preserve a nondual outlook yet apply this view to the constant challenges of concrete everyday situations that involve the need to negotiate difficult moral choices by promoting an adherence to appropriate Buddhist attitudes and conduct.

One accomplished poet-monk (*shiseng* 詩僧) is Cishou Huaishen 慈受懷深 (1077–1132), a temple abbot from the Yunmen 雲門 lineage who appropriated many of the intricate rhetorical techniques of Song poetry through borrowing from eloquent verse styles written by the literati culture. Huaishen and other Chan writers articulated Buddhist values reflecting how lofty nondual understanding should guide ethical decision-making in ways that are either conducive or detrimental to the attainment of enlightenment surpassing standard patterns of behavior. Song literary methods are thereby adopted and somewhat altered to reveal an emphasis on the depths of introspective perspectives cultivated in day-to-day circumstances.

Huaishen is especially appreciated for his body of poetic writings that preach the principles of the Dharma as he was considered "the great king of doctors, dispensing medicines in response to illnesses, never careless."[2] That is, he provides in his rhymed compositions useful remedies for the psychic skirmishes and ailments caused by the duplicity and deception of inner turmoil. He recommends that monastic and lay practitioners alike should "take a step back" (*tuibu shi* 退步詩), the title of one of his complicated sets of poems, which indicates the ability to withdraw from the realm of clashes and disputations and to observe clearly and contemplate calmly. This activity renews and refreshes one's meditative composure by mitigating the impact of emotional attachments, so that they are thereby enabled to leap into or take a forward step toward overcoming obstacles.

To clarify the intimate relationship between Buddhist philosophy and versification techniques evident in the writings of Huaishen and numerous comparable Song Chan monks, we find that the first poet to strongly endorse that standpoint was Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101). Su was a famous nonclerical author and painter, among other occupations, whose work was greatly influenced by his meditative training in addition to inspired interactions with monastic leaders, such as Foyin 佛印 (1032–1098). In the concluding lines of a departure verse sent to a colleague who was greatly admired for his vibrant poetry, "Seeing Off Teacher Canliao," Su writes:

rpt. ed. Chinese Buddhist Electronic Texts Association, CBETA Electronic Tripiṭaka Collection, (Taipei, 1998–2014), Vol. 48, No. 2003, 194.

2 Jason Protass, *The Poetry Demon: Song-Dynasty Monks on Verse and the Way* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), chapter 4.

> Contemplating by oneself while reposing on a cloudy peak,
> The salty and sour are mixed with many other flavors.
> From among these is found the one enduring taste [of Chan meditation] –
> Poetry and the Dharma do not obstruct or obscure one another.[3]
>
> 觀身卧雲嶺 / 鹹酸雜眾好 / 中有至味永 / 詩法不相妨。

This view of the unhindered compatibility of poetic composition that conveys the philosophical implications of a nondual vision highlights that Chan verses were often written for the purpose of communicating theoretical standpoints reflecting transcendence expressed through expansive lyrical imagery.[4] Yet the standpoint of enlightenment is not to be left as an abstraction but is consistently related to demonstrating how contemplative insight guides and enhances the functions of human comportment. This kind of instructive approach is carried out in the context of fostering the rigors of monastic practice, with its daily routines of contemplation, recitation, and corrective regulations, in addition to motivating the religious aspirations of non-clerical practitioners striving to extricate themselves from the confusions of quotidian endeavors. Literature that is at once obscure in wording and resonant with the depths of human experiences of both mystical unity and desolate delusion is thus used to trigger an experience of awakening, though without allowing excessive verbiage that might foster an underlying fixation on language and logic.

Song Chan adepts frequently sought to combine freewheeling rhetoric evoking a timeless sense of detachment, as influenced by the literary exploits of the celebrated though elusive Tang-dynasty poet Hanshan 寒山 (fl. 9th c.), with a focus on the strictures of daily demeanor that are too easily mishandled unless one is directed by persuasive reprimands and stirring exhortations regarding the merits of virtuous conduct. Hanshan commented in the following verse on his eccentric spiritual adventures that took place over the course of a lifetime of restless travels mixed with phases of quietude:

> I have lived in this world for thirty years, / And wandered tens of thousands of miles.
> I trekked by rivers where grass grows thick, / Reached areas where secular dust gathers.
> Drunk potions in a futile quest for immortality, / Learned the great classics and histories.
> Now I return to Cold Mountain, / Resting my head by a stream to wash out my ears.[5]

3 Zongqi Cai, ed., *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), part C15.3. The poem was written for Daoqian 道潛 (1043–1111?, also known as Canliao 參寥), who was considered one of the great poets although he was not exclusively part of the Chan lineage. Because of his association with the politically controversial Su Shi, Daoqian was defrocked and sent south for a period, and was pardoned only when Su was allowed to return to the mainland in 1100. See Sarah Jane Babcock, "The Aesthetics of Non – Discrimination: Chinese Poetics and Social Critique in Huihong's Night Chats from Chilly Hut (c. 1121)," (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 2020), 100.

4 In a later era it was proclaimed that "poetry and Chan are one" (*shi chan yizhi* 詩禪一致) by He Jingming 何景明 (1483–1521), an exuberant reader of *Canglang's Remarks on Poetry* (*Canglang Shihua*《滄浪詩話》), in an analysis of poetic styles by Yan Yu 嚴羽 (1191–1241?). Yan Yu compares attaining enlightenment with writing poetry based on how contemplating self and nature both "capture the true spirit" (*rushen* 入神) of things, which in turn recalls Su Shi's notion of "transforming [oneself] into bamboo." Yan Yu cites as one of myriad examples a Tang-dynasty couplet, "A winding path leads to a secluded place/My meditation cloister is replete with flowers and trees." (*Qujing tongyouchu, chanfang huamu shen*. 曲徑通幽處 / 禪房花木深。)

5 Paul Rouzer, trans., *The Poetry of Hanshan* (*Cold Mountain*), *Shide, and Fenggan* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Verlag, 2016), 322–325.

出生三十年 / 當遊千萬里 / 行江青草合 / 入塞紅塵起 / 鍊藥空求仙 / 讀書兼詠史 / 今日歸寒山 / 枕流兼洗耳。

The poet concludes his recollections by sharing a disdain for conventional sources of knowledge as well as ill-advised forms of magical pursuit that stand in contrast to the Zhuangzi-influenced, deceptively simple exercise of free and easy wandering. The final image of returning to isolation recalls Confucian legends of genuinely moral figures who would flee the city to try to eliminate the noise pollution of false speech and idle chatter by cleansing their eardrums with water from pure mountain streams.

According to a similar verse by Fenyang Shanzhao 汾陽善昭 (947–1024), an early Song Chan poet-monk from the Linji 臨濟 lineage who often emulated Hanshan's secluded lifestyle while also initiating the tradition of writing verse remarks (*songgu* 頌古) on *gongan* cases and crafting the hybrid commentarial form of succinct capping phrases (*zhuoyu* 着語):

> In this solitary, vacant place, / Where few people ever come.
> The bright moon shines softly through my window, / Sunlight streams in the open door.
> White cranes flock to trees in the courtyard, / An oriole sings on a stand behind my house.
> Who else has a mind that appreciates this scene? I must look afar to Mount Tiantai.[6]

寂寂虛閑處 / 人疏到此 / 透窗明月静 / 穿户日光开 / 鶴聚庭前树 / 莺啼宇后台 / 同心谁得意 / 举目望天台。

Fenyang's reference to the Tiantai mountain range signals his longing to recreate the stance of Hanshan, who is said to have dwelled in caves in that region of today's Zhejiang province. This passage also indicates a bit of scorn for the doctrinal focus of the Tiantai Buddhist school that was, at the beginning of the eleventh century, quickly being replaced in prestige and institutional importance by the rise of the iconoclastic views of eclectic Chan adepts who nurtured their aesthetic abilities and considered literary achievements representative of an authentic level of self-realization.

2 Huaishen's Didacticism

Cishou Huaishen, who wrote several series of poetic compositions for the purpose of elucidating ethical principles, was one of the last great leaders of the Yunmen lineage that was dying out at the end of the Northern Song and the ascendance of the Linji and Caodong 曹洞 schools. He was leader of a prestigious monastery in Kaifeng before being forced, in the aftermath of the Jin invasions in 1126, to escape to a safer yet still unstable environment in areas to the south where Chan remained prevalent.[7] Along with Fenyang and several other Chan authors, he is known as an important imitator of Hanshan's poetic sensibility as well as a strict teacher who frequently assumes the perspective of an aloof "fool on the hill," or one who appears ignorant yet is pure at heart so cannot be deceived but, rather, exposes all manner of insincerity evident in those he encounters.[8]

This detached perspective serves as a productive vantage point by which to comment critically on all-too-human foibles that plague members of ordinary society while admonishing particular people, including both monastics and laypersons, for their ingrained misconceptions and misdeeds. Huaishen's edifying yet artless attitude is

6 *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* Vol. 47, No.1992, 625a.

7 Jason Protass, "A Geographic History of Song – Dynasty Chan Bud dhism: The Decline of the Yunmen Lineage," *Asia Major* 3d Series 32, no. 1 (2019): 122.

8 Huang Jingjia, "A Study on Imitating Activities of Hanshan Poems by Chan Buddhist Monks in Song Dynasty," *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 3, no. 4 (2013): 204–212.

reinforced by a prose remark on case 34 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, which claims that only "a blockhead can perceive the meaning of a *gongan* case."[9] Although ignorant people are stubborn and sanctimonious, a genuine Chan teacher who may appear oblivious knows at the core to continue to administer spiritual medicine, even when there is no disease to cure, and to cleanse himself regularly, even if he seems unsoiled. According to a saying that emphasizes the significance of commonplace practicality as key to realizing the heights of spiritual renewal, "Meditation begins with clean feet."

Huaishen's approach consistently confronts and seeks to overcome false assumptions and craven pretentions by dealing constructively with entangled situations fomented by hypocrisy and deceit while embracing enduring Buddhist moral principles. Some of the themes are illustrated by a verse that is the last of a small group Huaishen wrote on the three defilements (*du* 毒) of greed, anger, and ignorance, with the first line of each poem proffering the same basic injunction as part of an often-used literary technique:

> To learn the Way, from the beginning you must not be ignorant,
> An unknowing mind cannot disentangle itself from foxlike doubts.
> Clouds drifting above seem as black as ink –
> How long until one perceives the clear and boundless sun?[10]
>
> 學道先須不要癡 / 癡心未了轉狐疑 / 迷雲頭上黑如墨 / 白日茫茫幾箇知。

Huaishen draws on the Chan symbol, inspired by Chinese folklore, of the seductive shape-shifting wild fox that perpetually causes discord and delusion. That outlook resembles dark mists blocking any chance to achieve a transformation of the mind, so that it can begin to view the brightness of day no longer obscured by ingrained misconceptions.

In another example that is one of a group of twenty "Instructional Verses for the Practice of Novices at Zifu Temple," where he served as abbot beginning in 1113, Huaishen warns novices about mishandling connections between their speech and actions so that, whether or not they have taken the tonsure, they will act like a genuine Buddhist practitioner:

> The words and deeds of a home – leaver must be mutually conducive,
> Be ever diligent and attentive, as if always treading on thin ice.
> Even if your hair and beard have not been shaven,
> You can realize forthright teachings, just like those of a monk.[11]
>
> 出家言行要相應 / 戰戰長如履薄氷 / 雖是未除鬚與髮 / 直教去就便如僧。

Here Huaishen derides the inauthentic rationalizations of the kind of casuistry typical of many Buddhist thinkers that tends to place blame for moral deficiencies outside of oneself, such as on the mechanical forces of karmic rewards and punishments that supposedly defy human intervention. He also rejects antinomian tendencies linked to some examples of Chan unorthodoxy, like Huineng 惠能 ripping the scriptures and Linji killing Buddhas on the road. Instead, Huaishen provides straightforward, albeit cryptic, advice about ways that wily deceitfulness reinforces intrinsic deceptions that haunt an individual's conduct and must be overcome through dedicated moral effort. Once deficiencies are effectively reversed, an authentic teacher embodies dignity regardless of whether clerical robes are donned.

Beginning in the twelfth century Chan verses were usually, but not exclusively, written in the

9 *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* Vol. 48, No.2003, 173b.

10 *Xinbian Wanzi Xu Zangjing*《新編卍字續藏經》(Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1968–1978); rpt. ed. Chinese Buddhist Electronic Texts Association, CBETA Electronic Tripiṭaka Collection, Taipei (1998–2016), Vol. 73, No. 1451, 109.

11 *Xinbian Wanzi Xu Zangjing*, Vol. 73, No. 1451, 115.

truncated style (*jueju* 絕句) of quatrains, often as an ode (*zan* 贊) to a patriarch or for a ceremony. This style of poetry features complex rhyme schemes, tonal patterns, and thematic progressions mixed with vernacular locutions in addition to traditional metaphors and references.[12] The key to the efficacy of Chan poetics is not the creation of eloquent literature for its own sake, but the production of verses that reflect the innate joyfulness of supreme concentration or samādhi and its moral implications. These expressions usually contain the following discursive elements designed to activate awakening:[13] obscure yet appropriate allusions to Chan or basic Buddhist and classic sources; clarifications of the roots of delusion and attachment that need to be overcome; creative turns of phrasing through punning or wordplay that help alter one's perception; glimpses of the moment of illumination conveyed through expressive natural imagery; and a lingering sense of equivocality regarding the applications of authentic awareness.

Many of these points are evident in a couple of passages of Huaishen's "Taking a Step Back," which is the title of his most famous, twelve-stanza poem. This composition indicates that exploring fully the meaning of human interactions, which usually cause distress, can be transformed and lead to spiritual advancement by consistently enacting dignified behavior.[14] In the first example, the poet-monk invokes the memory of the Tang-dynasty master Zhaozhou (趙州, 778–897), who is known from numerous *gongan* cases for his calm, indirect responses capturing the world of incessant change and uncertainty, rather than the use of dramatic shouts or sticks associated with the methods of several of his illustrious peers:

> Nothing is better than taking a step back to rest,
> From a lifetime of illusion bobbing along like bubbles on water.
> Zhaozhou never bickered over obtaining a snack,
> Whatever was needed, he didn't beg or borrow it from others.[15]
>
> 萬事無如退步休 / 百年浮幻水中漚 / 趙州不為爭糊餅 / 要得時人劣處求。

The concluding couplet implicitly contrasts Zhaozhou's teaching style with that of Deshan 德山 (780–465), who in a famous narrative is outsmarted by an intriguing pun that an old woman makes while selling rice-cakes (*dianxin* 點心) on the side of the road. The woman shows the monk that the term for refreshments literally means "pointing" (*dian* 點) to the "mind" (*xin* 心) in a way that perplexes and frustrates him.[16]

12 Charles Egan, *Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen Monks of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), some sections; Zhou Yukai 周裕锴, *Wenzi Chanyu Songdai Shixue*《文字禪與宋代詩學》(Wenzi Chan and Song Dynasty Poetry) (Beijing: Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe 高等教育出版社, 1998, rpt. 2001); and Zhou Yukai, *Zhongguo Chanzong Yushige*《中國禪宗與詩歌》(Chinese Chan Buddhism and Poetry) (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe 上海人民出版社, 1992).

13 Iriya Yoshitaka and N. A. Waddell, "Chinese Poetry and Zen," *The Eastern Buddhist* 6, no. 1 (1973): 54–67; a Hanshan verse cited reads, "My mind is like an autumn moon, / An emerald pool, clear and pure. / Nothing will afford comparison … / Tell me, how should I explain?", 57.

14 Some of Huaishen's poetry is included in volume eight of the ten-volume collection, *Admonitions for Monks* (*Zimen Jingxun*《緇門警訓》, *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 48.2023), featuring a group of twenty verses that overlaps but is somewhat different than what is included in his recorded sayings (X.73.1451). That section appears just before passages by his eminent contemporary Chan teacher, Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163), who is probably best known for an emphasis on *gongan*-investigation (*kanhua Chan* 看話禪) or contemplating the main-phrase (*huatou* Chan 話頭禪) of a case. Also, the saying "taking a step back" as a deliberate, productive path must be distinguished from the typical Chan putdown of deficient behavior used in many *gongan* commentaries, "He falls back three thousand times" (*daotui sanqian* 倒退三千).

15 *Xinbian Wanzi Xu Zangjing*, Vol.73, No. 1451, 108.

16 The Deshan dialogue is discussed in the prose comments on case 4 in the *Blue Cliff Record*.

In the next example, Huaishen uses a verbal sleight of hand to indicate the unity of enlightenment and training which, although it seems to occur naturally, must be continually cultivated, just as windows are placed prudently to allow natural light to shine through and flowers are cut regularly at an early stage of growth so they eventually will reach full capacity.

> Nothing is better than taking a step back to rest,
> Originally there is neither realization nor practice.
> A clear window set high above catches moonlight,
> Golden chrysanthemums, if well-tended, flourish in autumn.[17]
>
> 萬事無如退步休 / 本來無證亦無修 / 明窗高掛多留月 / 黃菊深栽盛得秋。

Moreover, in various prose sermons Huaishen argues that the main point of Chan realization is a matter of reconciling discrepancies so that coarse words and fine language are not seen as two distinct kinds of speaking. Using only one method is not sufficiently productive, but summoning its opposite side is also generally ineffective; however, a creative mixture of the two styles of communication succeeds in edifying followers. Therefore, Huaishen suggests, "Whenever thoughts appear, they quickly scatter, and if you try to be mindful, you'll lose the meaning. But as soon as you take a step back true reality responds, even if it does not seem to enable you to step back, and as soon as you let things go you are at peace, even if the situation does not seem to allow you to let things go. Therefore it is said, 'Truth cannot be grasped and it cannot be released, but in not being able to do this, it is manifest!'." (動念卽乖，擬心卽失．才退步便相應，只是不肯退步．才放下便安樂，只是不肯放下．所以道，取不得，捨不得．不可得中，只麼得。).[18] At the end of the sermon Huaishen puts down his staff and says, "Please accept this humble offering," thereby using a phrase that recalls the politeness of typical social greetings with salutations in order to appeal to disciples by illustrating that authentic meaning lies beyond the dichotomy of rituality and arbitrariness.

3 Levels of Huaishen's Chan Moral Philosophy

Much of the poetic writing of Cishou Huaishen, who like so many Chan teachers of the era was skilled at calligraphy and painting as well as music, is reflective of the ups and downs of his leadership roles in the Buddhist monastic institution. Huaishen began his career as a Dharma heir of the Yunmen lineage leader, Changlu Songxin 長蘆嵩信 (d. u.), and he first became the abbot of Zifu Monastery 資福寺 in Jiangsu province. In 1122, he was invited by the emperor to serve as the leader of the Huilin Cloister 慧林禪院, one of two major Chan temples within the impressive compound at Xiangguo Monastery 相國寺 that was located near the imperial palace in Kaifeng.[19] Huaishen enjoyed patronage of the ruling family until his temple lay all but abandoned after the Jin attacks of 1126 so, just days after giving his final sermon there, he experienced for the first time a deep sense of personal loss that gave him a chance to retire from the bustling capital for a few final years of rustic life. He stayed for a while at a war-torn temple in Suzhou and then wandered to monasteries in Zhejiang and Jiangxi provinces. Even before his decline in social status Huaishen wrote didactic poetry. Although, like many Chan leaders, he prohibited followers from collecting and publishing

17 *Xinbian Wanzi Xu Zangjing*, Vol.73, No. 1451, 108.

18 *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, Vol. 48, No. 2023, 1076.

19 It is said that at its peak during the Northern Song Dynasty, Xiangguo was revered by the royal family and enlarged several times, occupying a huge estate with dozens of meditation halls and sixty-four cloisters under its administration serving more than a thousand monks as the center of national Buddhist activities.

his sayings, this instruction was disobeyed out of respect for his literary accomplishments.

Throughout his monastic career Huaishen composed a group of 148 verses that were "Imitations of Hanshan's Poetry," as part of his intention to admonish disciples in ways that could be understood or memorized. His writings envisioned Hanshan, whose poetry had by the Song dynasty found a sympathetic audience among the literati, as an avatar of Mañjuśrī. Along with his eccentric companion Shide, Hanshan pretended to be an impoverished scholar singing and laughing, but as a bodhisattva he understood how to transform seemingly vulgar thoughts and deeds into superior perspectives by making a retreat from worldly concerns yet giving clear instructions that were relatively easy to follow.

Huaishen also wrote verses for children and to endorse devotional Pure Land beliefs. He admitted that, even if his own words were sometimes rather clumsy and without the discursive brilliance of Hanshan, his primary goal was to embody and express the compassionate stance of the Tang sage. Yet, while embracing elements of this carefree and non-conformist approach, Huaishen also spoke directly against killing, violence, and warfare, and he advocated a vegetarian diet for lay followers both to save money and accrue better karma. Compared to numerous examples of Song Chan poetry that were very clever but perhaps overly enigmatic and thus difficult to decipher, his verses enjoyed a greater sense of being appreciated and gained a distribution to a broad group of supporters.[20]

Huaishen's moralistic poetry shows how to achieve a quiet mind, perceptual clarity, and true contentment whatever one's station in life. Taking a step back shifts a person's orientation from self-centered thinking, which tries to move ahead blindly, toward the path of selfless awareness based on retreating from conventional views and attitudes. My analysis suggests that, by adhering to the Chan notion of adjusting teaching styles to the needs of particular audiences, Huaishen addresses in his poetry several categories of followers by showing each group that there are two ways to live. One way is based on trying to make progress through forward movement alone, but the preferable way is turning backwards to comprehend infinitely subtle underlying principles based on nonduality. Thus, stepping back provides the real path ahead, although most people would at first glance find this view nearly impossible to grasp. By actualizing the value of advancing and retreating at the same time, especially since the latter approach serves as the nondual foundation of the former, one is led to practice virtuous behavior worthy of actualizing genuine Chan realization.

The groups of followers addressed by Huaishen, sometimes in the same poem or collection of stanzas, include: (1) advanced practitioners determined to pursue post-realization cultivation, (2) purposeful wayfarers hoping to solidify their holy status through carrying out austerities, (3) novices who are eager yet uncertain about how to make strides on the Buddhist path, (4) aspiring worldly people learning to accommodate the casting off of ego-based mindsets to the functions in family life, and (5) those who are unaware and aimless, or too unclear about their delusions to inquire about the need to follow suitable behavioral guidelines.

The first level of understanding Huaishen addresses involves superior meditators who continue to conduct a thoroughgoing introspection in every possible way so that they will not deceive themselves with a false sense of purity. Rather, they fully accept and affirm the travails of current circumstances without constantly yearning for something more privileged. According to the opening stanza of "Taking a Step Back":

20 On the other hand, it seems unlikely that typical literati would have been interested in the singsong quality of some of Huaishen's verse that was designed in part for mnemonics by rhyming seven-character lines so that the meter would aid memorization and inspire appropriate deportment reflecting Chan values; see Jason Protass, *The Poetry Demon: Song-Dynasty Monks on Verse and the Way* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021).

Nothing is better than taking a step back to become a person,
Investigating oneself thoroughly from head to toe.
Because when you blow out a fire burning in your heart,
You may no longer see the resentment that still lurks in your belly.[21]

萬事無如退步人 / 摩頭至踵自觀身 / 只因吹滅心頭火 / 不見從前肚裡嗔。

In the final section of the opus Huaishen emphasizes that the peace of mind a Chan adept possesses is eminently active day and night yet remains tranquil and harmonious while engaged with ordinary affairs. The true teacher does not feel compelled to make bold claims regarding his elevated status, but instead communicates a profound sense of humility and self-doubt:

Nothing is better than taking a step back to sleep,
In a bed made of pines with a net of paper as warm as a [wool] blanket.
Explicating truths during the night without using flowery expressions,
I am just a rustic monk who does not know much about the Chan path.[22]

萬事無如退步眠 / 松床紙帳暖如氈 / 夢中說話無花草 / 況是山僧不會禪。

In another aspect of his advice for a sage suggested in a verse, "Written at the Ke Pavilion at West Lake in Hangzhou," which probably from the period after his exile from Kaifeng, Huaishen uses the opportunity of dwelling near the picturesque waterway to comment to a fellow practitioner on how a frequently cited *gongan* case should guide his perceptions. That case is based on a story in which the Tang-dynasty master Xiangyan 香嚴 (?–898) achieves the genuine eye of Dharmic insight after three decades of futile practice when he hears the simple sound of a pebble swept by his broom striking a bamboo tree. According to Huaishen, only by appropriating and becoming one with Xiangyan's state of mind can the meaning of the case be understood:

I am glad to see you are determined,
Shutting the door and reflecting all day on a jade stone.
But if you lack Xiangyan's eye while encountering this object,
You'll take it as just something carried along by wind and rain.[23]

喜見君心有歲寒 / 閉門終日對琅玕 / 相逢不具香嚴眼 / 祇作敲風帶雨看。

Many of the recommendations Huaishen gives to adepts also apply to the other four levels of understanding, but each of those groups needs an increasingly modified form of expression to make the message more direct and less difficult to comprehend, and thus easier to apply to their situations. Wayfarers on the second level thwarted on the path to enlightenment by underlying delusions are instructed to cast aside all pretenses through facing tribulations and settling accounts while contemplating the inevitability of death:

Nothing is better than taking a step back to move ahead,
Because worldly fame and fortune are both an ensnarement.
Since the days lying before you are surely numbered,
Don't bother trying to spar with that grim reaper![24]

萬事無如退步行 / 世間名利兩重坑 / 前頭光景無多子 / 莫與扶屍鬼子爭。

21 *Xinbian Wanzi Xu Zangjing*, Vol. 73, No. 1451, 108.
22 Ibid., Vol. 73, No. 1451, 109.
23 Ibid., Vol. 73, No. 1451, 110.
24 Ibid., Vol. 73, No. 1451, 110.

Furthermore, such obstructed practitioners need to resist any temptation to write poetry for the sake of gaining notoriety or profit, or to use it as a subversive tool if their motives are misguided:

> Nothing is better than taking a step back to rest,
> Flowery words and clever sayings can be deceptive.
> Since all worldly circumstances are mere child's play,
> Why would anyone want to toy around with a writing brush?[25]
>
> 萬事無如退步休 / 華言巧語誑時流 / 世間種種皆兒戲 / 何必區區弄筆頭。

To encourage potential seekers occupying the third level of understanding, or those deciding whether to break from ordinary society and become home-leavers, Huaishen offers moral instructions in "On Negotiating Human Affairs," a poem with six stanzas, each of which begins with the same line. Here he maintains that disentangling karmic complications, which invariably lead to disagreements and discord, is essential for attaining liberation. This is accomplished through embracing the utter simplicity of the renunciant's lifestyle:

> To learn the Way, you must first understand human affairs.
> Don't let yourself be drawn into worldly attachments.
> Just fill your eating bowl two times a day,
> There is no need to carry any coins in your purse.[26]
>
> 學道先須要省緣 / 莫教到被世情牽 / 二時但得鉢盂濕 / 囊底何妨無一錢。

Huaishen supplements this admonition with a dire warning of the fate that befalls those who persist in fostering cunning schemes:

> To learn the Way, you must first understand human affairs.
> In this floating world, you are a puppet pulled blindly on a string.
> No matter how much you try to calculate or manipulate to achieve a goal,
> You will end up being punished on your way to the inferno.[27]
>
> 學道先須要省緣 / 浮生傀儡暗抽牽 / 機關用盡成何事 / 贏得三塗鬼火煎。

People at the third stage, Huaishen further suggests, can be inspired by recalling the model of Vimalakīrti, who while living in a modest hut was able to best Buddhas and bodhisattvas in dialogues based on his supremely reticent outlook:

> To learn the Way, you must first understand human affairs.
> Do not gossipmonger about other people,
> Or the gates of misfortune will remain wide open,
> So, just practice Vimalakīrti's path of pure silence.[28]
>
> 學道先須要省緣 / 他人長短莫喧傳 / 禍門不閉終無益 / 參取維摩老子禪。

For the fourth level of understanding, Huaishen addresses the religious aspirations of householders by assuring them that the "Four Deportments of Daily Life Achieved at Home" (*jiazhong siweiyi* 家中四威儀) is key to well-being. The forms of Buddhist meditative behavior covering all activities during the course of twenty-four hours are traditionally referred to as (1) walking swiftly like the wind, (2) standing upright like a pine, (3) sitting still like a bell, and (4) reclining taut as

25 Ibid., Vol. 73, No. 1451, 108.
26 Ibid., Vol. 73, No. 1451, 109.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.

a bow. According to Huaishen, all these states can be realized just as effectively within the structure of family life:

> Walking at home:
> Daily differences of opinion should not become a matter of dispute.
> If you understand that every step taken is of equal value,
> There won't be any need to look for lotus flowers beneath your feet.
>
> 家中行. 尋常違順不須爭. 若知步步無階人. 方知佛是凡夫做。
>
> Standing at home:
> Wake up early and open the gate and at night close the doors.
> When you carry water and chop firewood without relying on anyone else,
> You realize that Buddha is no different from an ordinary person.
>
> 家中住. 早起開門夜閉戶. 運水般柴莫倩人. 方知佛是凡夫做.
>
> Sitting at home:
> What about sitting by yourself in an isolated room?
> If just a spark of insight suddenly grows bright,
> There is no longer any need to seek Bodhidharma in remote mountains.
>
> 家中坐. 一室寥寥是什麼. 靈光一點甚分明. 何必青山尋達磨。
>
> Reclining at home:
> It's up to you whether to stretch out or cross your legs.
> Should you sleep undisturbed until daybreak comes,
> You'll begin to feel that practicing meditation is not as good as loafing.[29]
>
> 家中臥. 展脚縮脚皆由我. 若能一覺到天明. 始信參禪輸懶墮。

In each stanza Huaishen indicates that the trappings of Buddhist lore and ritual are unnecessary so long as one's behavior is fully honorable and attitude eminently reliable. In the opening section flowers at the feet as a symbol of the blossoms that appeared for Gautama when he was born, or that accompany the activities a bodhisattva or the beauty of a dancer's steps, are no longer needed. The second stanza supports the view of Layman Pang or Pangyun 龐蘊 (740–808) that everyday chores supporting the household are in their own way miraculous, while in the third stanza it is not necessary go off in pursuit of the first patriarch, whose real significance lies within one's own undertakings. The final section dispenses with meditation for the sake of adapting a Whitmanesque stance of idle but contemplative openness to observing that ironically becomes as virtuous as the sitting of a typical monk.

Huaishen's positive approach in regard to lay followers is at once undermined and reinforced by a similarly titled composition on "Four Deportments at Tiantong Monastery" (*Tiantong siweiyi* 天童四威儀) that was addressed exclusively to monks at the prestigious temple near Ningbo by a teacher named Yuejian Wenming 月澗文明 (1231–?):

> Walking: If for no reason you lose your footing and fall down a deep hole, change your path immediately or everyone in the temple will start laughing.
>
> 行: 無端失腳墮深坑. 轉得步. 笑倒更幽亭。
>
> Standing: If someone is desolate and has no place to turn, will they know how to tell a preying hawk from a perching heron?
>
> 住: 一身貧到無貧處. 有誰知. 狎鷗并宿鷺。
>
> Sitting: Stick to the meditation cushion until you become fully aware that the sound of

29 Ibid.

pines is stirred by the gentle breezes passing through.

坐: 卻被蒲團先識破. 松作聲. 元是微風過。

Reclining: Taibai Peak [on Mount Tiantong] is as big as a huge pillow, so I stretch out both legs and trample through toward the empty sky.[30]

臥: 太白一峰枕頭大. 伸雙腳. 虛空俱踏破。

In Yuejian's opus, the first two sections emphasizing how to overcome petty jealousies and personal conflict could also be applied to householders, whereas the third stanza highlights the role of meditation in appreciating natural conditions that are perceptible only to practitioners who have stilled their minds but elude those with ordinary attitudes. However, the fourth section on stretching one's legs as part of the bravado of a Chan adept who can stir and dazzle his followers seems to dovetail with the message of Huaishen's last stanza on the lofty functions of the reclining position, whether or not performed by a meditator.

Finally, Huaishen offers verses that are addressed to the fifth level of (mis)understanding, or those who are not sufficiently informed to see how important it is to ignite the aspiration for awakening. This audience requires the most direct forms of admonition. In many ways, however, the basic moral message delivered remains consistent and uniform; that is, there is no underlying implication that adepts are allowed do as they please in antinomian fashion, whereas people with lesser levels of insight are the only ones who must rouse themselves above the fray. Huaishen writes:

Don't judge others for being weak or strong,
That idle chatter directed outward only brings troubles to oneself.
If you can just shut your mouth and hold your tongue,
That itself is the highest path of self – cultivation.[31]

莫說他人短與長 / 說來說去自招殃 / 若能閉口深藏舌 / 便是修身第一方。

In another poem, the poet-monk points out that, ultimately, both the renunciant and the householder should step headlong into the realm of everyday relationships to catch a glimpse of Tang-dynasty master Guishan 溈山 (771–853), who is said to have told the assembly before his death that he would eventually be reborn as a beast of burden roving the fields:

Sometimes conditions will lead you into a village,
To take care of Guishan as a water buffalo.
Outside the temple gates, where grass grows tall, always keep him on a short leash,
Otherwise, if he roams away, it will be too difficult to ever find him again.[32]

有時緣幹到街頭 / 照顧溈山水牯牛 / 門外草深常管帶 / 等閑失却便難收。

Once Guishan is seen near the marketplace as an auspicious symbol of the complicated process of self-discovery and self-discipline, he must be held onto firmly, without ever letting go, or else the opportunity for awakening slips away all too quickly regardless of the prior status of one's spiritual attainment.

4 Concluding Remarks

Huaishan exemplified the way that nearly all prominent Chan teachers of the Song dynasty, whose works are recorded and available today in the main modern edition of the Buddhist canon or *Taishō Daizōkyō* (*Dazangjing* 《大藏經》) and its supplement or *Zoku Zōkyō* (*Xuzangjing*

30 Ibid., Vol. 70, No. 1392, 529.

31 Ibid., Vol. 73, No. 1451, 115.

32 Ibid., Vol. 73, No. 1451s.

《續藏經》), functioned not only as abbots appointed by government officials to administrate the ritual and practical concerns of running a temple filled with many long-term clerics as well as transient practitioners. The institutional leaders were required to abide by Chan rules yet were also expected by embedding in poetry the significance of nondual philosophy to gain support from literati plus other non-clerical followers interested in attaining a spiritual realization. In Song-dynasty Chan monastic practice, the leading adepts needed to be capable of demonstrating a creative flair through using literary devices to craft moral teachings that would arouse the theoretical aspirations of intellectuals and arouse the religious longings of people in the outreach community.[33]

Although the term poet-monk was not an official title and did not belong to a particular Buddhist school, by the time of the Southern Song transmitters of this dual function were increasingly associated with the diverse Chan lineages often influenced by Hanshan's poetry that was relatively free in form and flexible with rules.[34] Huaishen's approach to composition develops a wide range of discursive possibilities, although his primary emphasis is on giving direct instructions and moral guidance, themes evident but to a lesser extent in Hanshan's work.

Huaishen understood the conundrum evident in discussing issues exclusively in terms of the Buddhist Dharma, which may create an impression of being overly secluded or erudite, or using rhetoric reflecting the mundane realm, which suggests a practitioner appears unappreciative of the rich legacy of ancestral teachers. Therefore, it is appropriate to join these disparate styles of expression and embody the quietude of liberation amid the bustle and clamor of the everyday world. This leads ultimately to the full awareness within the proverbial marketplace of a level of experience that sixth patriarch Huineng called the "original face," Shitou 石頭 named the "undying person in the hermitage," Linji referred to as the "true person without rank," and Dongshan 洞山 said was the "non-aging one in the home."[35] All these designations are merely different names for a single basic realization, which if sought from a selfish outlook will never be obtained because it is reached only when the ego is released through taking a step back so that one's behavior becomes identical with that of a genuine adept.

According to a two-stanza verse titled "Imitating Hanshan's Self-Depictions" by the monk Xiyu 戲魚 (fl. 12th c.), the first poem ironically evokes a self-deprecating question about the author's role as one of numerous admirers of the renowned Tang eccentric poet and his companion:

> We find many imitations of Hanshan,
> As well as those of Shide.
> If everyone has ambitions as high as the sky,
> What is the use of trying to copy their approach?
>
> 多見擬寒山 / 不然擬拾得 / 沖天各有志 / 擬比復何益。

Xiyu's solution to the dilemma, offered in the next stanza, is to turn from a preoccupation with the words of poetry to fully embrace through

33 The number of verses authored by each teacher varies but, in many cases, adds up to hundreds or even over a thousand entries when the myriad examples of poetry included in various volumes of their recorded sayings and other relevant sources are taken into account. The Caodong school monk Hongzhi 宏智正覺 (1091–1157) probably composed the largest number, with over 1300 poems in his collection. See Christopher Byrne and Jason Protass, "Poetry: China (Song and After)," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Volume One: Literatures and Languages*, ed. Jonathan Silk (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 547–553.

34 Huang, "A Study on Imitating Activities of Hanshan Poems."

35 Sources for these notions are: Huineng, *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* Vol. 48, No. 2008, 349; Shitou, *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* Vol. 51, No. 2076, 461c; Linji, *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* Vol. 47, No. 1985, 496; and Dongshan, *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* Vol. 47, No. 1986, 510.

versification the natural setting as sensed by human perceptions:

> Live in the mountains and see the shades of green,
> Live by the water and listen to its endless sounds.
> Watch flowers blowing in the breeze and the moon shining on the snow,
> All the time reciting poetry to yourself.[36]
>
> 居山山色翠 / 臨水水聲長 / 風華與雪月 / 時處自歌揚。

Yet, Ying'an Tanhua 應菴曇華 (1103~1163), another leader of Song-dynasty discourse concerning the double-edged role of language and poetics in relation to Chan's "special transmission outside the teachings" (*jiaowai biezhuan* 教外別傳), cautions, "Every movement and every whisper, each step back and each step forward, is based on wrong intentions." "Why is this?" he asks. "Once one word draws you into the courtroom, nine bulls pulling carts cannot drag you out."[37] This image suggests that even a single false expression can cause a bad impression that gets you in dire straits, both psychologically and legally. On the other hand, sometimes the meaning of this saying is reversed by Chan adepts to indicate that just one transformative Chan utterance is sufficient when it functions a turning word leading to liberation.

To give Huaishen the final word in this discussion, his verse comment proclaims the productive, albeit makeshift and tentative, qualities of Chan discourse that must be suited to the level of understanding of the audience yet maintains an enduring capacity to convey truth:

> The Chan school seeks to put an end to discernment and discrimination,
> Thereby eliminating extraneous thoughts.
> [Teachers'] replies are elusive in using perplexing words,
> With details counter to reason and speech seeming contradictory ...
> Yet such provisional responses help surpass ordinary entanglements,
> So that words succumb, deliberations are given up, and fixations are relinquished.[38]
>
> 禪宗了卻心意識 / 分別思量泯多知 / 答非所問言顛倒 / 事與理乖語參差 ... ...
> 支吾以對超造化 / 詞喪慮亡念亦失。

Therefore, Huaishen's moral reprimands, like Chan discourse more generally, should be seen in terms of their pertinence to upholding nondual truth by evoking a Mādhyamika-based process of endlessly correcting misunderstandings to awaken followers in both monastic and non-monastic settings from subtle biases and unedifying preoccupations.

36 *Xinbian Wanzi Xu Zangjing* Vol. 79, No. 1559, 476.

37 Ibid., Vol. 70, No. 1379, 118.

38 Cited in "Lives of the Patriarchs of the Forty–Seventh Generation: Dhyana Master Huai Shen of Cishou Monastery," published online by Vajra Bodhi Sea (*jinggang pusa hai* 金剛菩提海), Venerable Master Hsuan Hua, http://www.drbachinese.org/vbs/publish/442/vbs442p012.pdf (accessed 9/22/2021).