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DOES EVEN A RAT HAVE BUDDHA-NATURE? ANALYZING KEY-PHRASE (*HUATOU*) RHETORIC FOR THE WU GONGAN

ABSTRACT

The *Wu Gongan* is primarily known for its minimalist expression based on Zhaozhou's "No" (*Wu*) response to a monk's question of whether a dog has Buddha-nature. Crucial for the key-phrase (*huatou*) method of meditation of Dahui Zonggao, the term *Wu* is not to be analyzed through logic or poetry. However, an overemphasis on the nondiscursive quality overlooks sophisticated rhetoric through metaphors used for the anxiety of doubt caused by *Wu* undermining conventional assumptions that is compared to a cornered rat; and the experience of enlightenment generated by the power of *Wu* likened to a sword cutting through all delusions.

I. THE FUNCTION OF RHETORIC IN *WU GONGAN* DISCOURSE

The *Wu Gongan* (Japanese [Jap. hereafter] *Mu Kōan*) 《無公案》, a brief dialogue in which a monk asks whether or not a dog has Buddha-nature and master Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 answers "No" (*Wu* 無), is surely the single most famous *gongan* 公案 record in the extensive Chan 禪 Buddhist textual repertoire. Included as the first case in the prominent *Gateless Gate* (*Wumenguan* 《無門關》) collection, the dialogue about the spiritual capacity of a dog has long served as the mainstay of the literature and meditative practice of nearly all schools of Chan/Zen in China and throughout East Asia. Hundreds of commentaries have been composed in prose and verse on the significance of Zhaozhou's response, in addition to manifold volumes of instructions based on oral teachings written about types of meditation practice associated with using the term *Wu*. According to most interpretations, particularly stemming from the approach of twelfth-

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century master Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163) of the Linji 臨濟 school, an emphasis on contemplating *Wu* is notable for forgoing the need for conventional discourse by directing a practitioner's single-minded focus to the meaning of nothingness and silence.¹

For Dahui, the term *Wu*, which literally means “does not have” but implies negation surpassing the dichotomy of existence and nonexistence, is not to be analyzed in a logical way in relation to doctrine, as in the teachings of traditional Chinese Mahayana Buddhist schools, or through poetic rhetoric typical of some earlier forms of Chan writings about *gongan*. Dahui understands Zhaozhou's *Wu* reply neither as the straightforward denial of “there is no Buddha-nature” in opposition to an affirmation that “there is Buddha-nature” nor as a higher sense of nonbeing. He interprets *Wu* as a key phrase (*huatou* 話頭) representing absolute negation beyond having or existence and not having or nonexistence. The key phrase is a transliteral vehicle that becomes a shortcut path to spiritual awareness when it is the basis of an intense contemplative experience through the method of *gongan*-investigation Chan (*kanhua* Chan 看話禪) conducted each and every moment of the day.

The *Wu Gongan* is also referred to as the “no-word” (*wuzi* 無字, alternatively: the “word no”) case because it defies articulation or examination. Unlike some Chan texts that feature elaborate literary embellishments based on allusions and wordplay, particularly in the seminal *gongan* collection titled the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyuanlu* 《碧巖錄》) that was composed by Yuanwu Keqin 圓悟克勤 a century before, the *Gateless Gate's Wu Gongan* is celebrated by adherents of Dahui's method of meditating with the key phrase as a succinct punch line that triggers a spontaneous experience of awakening. Based on this standpoint, the *Wu Gongan* is often known as the “heart of Oriental Nothingness” because its compact manner of expression encompassing contradictions epitomizes the essential features of minimalism, ineffability, and spontaneity underlying the fundamentally ironic style of discourse in Asian thought.²

However, I argue that an overemphasis on the single syllable *Wu* as symbolic of transcendental negation misses a larger point about the important role that rhetoric plays in *Wu Gongan* discourse. The key phrase is a complex meditative technique involving a sequence of stages in the religious quest that was developed to appeal to an audience of both monks and lay practitioners among the elite class of scholar-officials (*shidafu* 士大夫) during the Southern Song dynasty who were intrigued by its possibilities for self-examination and self-realization. Therefore, rhetorical skill has long been useful and necessary in order to explicate the dynamic, twofold pattern of the path to enlightenment attained through the *Wu Gongan*.

The first stage of the path involves realizing and overcoming profound doubt through struggling with the challenges of *Wu* that undermine existential certainty and security and lead to an excruciating and all-encompassing sense of anxiety, which often manifests through physical as well as emotional symptoms. This stage is referred to as the Chan sickness or the “illness of emptiness” (*kongbing* 空病) because it resembles some types of disease, particularly tuberculosis, and it is also depicted in terms of the legal metaphor of suffering guilt for transgressions committed. The second stage represents the experience of a sudden breakthrough to a realm of thinking beyond ordinary logic and language based on the illuminative power of *Wu* to strike like a sword cutting through all attachments and delusions. While this paradoxical outlook of affirmation-through-negation has been duly noted by traditional commentators as well as modern scholars, there is often a tendency on their part to stress the role of nothingness as an end in itself about which, to make a philosophical pun, nothing much can be said other than delineating what cannot be put into words.

My aim, instead, is to piece together and highlight diverse rhetorical elements expressing the two main stages of the key-phrase method that reveal the depth and complexity, rather than simplicity, of *Wu Gong'an* discourse using the key-phrase technique. The crucial component of this rhetoric captures the role of personal spirituality that is willing and motivated to take great psychological risks in order to gain the heights of religious truth. Many dozens of monastic in addition to non-monastic practitioners have given ample testimony for nearly a thousand years as to the devastating capacity of *Wu* to make one feel like a cornered rat or a man hanging from the edge of a cliff before revealing the tremendously productive qualities of liberation embedded in the key phrase once the veil has been lifted.

II. DAHUI'S APPROACH BASED ON ABBREVIATION

According to the main rendition of the case record, which is extant in numerous variations, “When a monk asked master Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?,” he replied, “No.””³ To clarify the function of negation in the key-phrase method, it is important to consider how *Wu* represents a deliberately puzzling and contradictory reply to an anonymous unenlightened monk's question that evokes a seemingly sardonic view of one of the most basic and far-reaching theoretical issues in Mahayana Buddhism. Based on a famous passage from the *Nirvana Sutra*, which was introduced into China in the early part of the fifth century, the doctrine of an all-pervasive Buddha-nature encompassing sentient and, for some interpretations, insentient

beings as well became the central tenet supported by the major scholastic schools of the Tang dynasty. These included the Dilun 地論, Huayan 華嚴, Sanlun 三論, and Tiantai 天台 schools, in addition to the then fledgling and more practice-oriented Chan and Pure Land movements.⁴

In basic Chinese Buddhist teachings derived from the sutras, *everything* has Buddha-nature or the potential to attain awakening. The aim of the *Wu Gongan*, however, is to disregard and dispense altogether with the results of longwinded doctrinal debate. The case is studied not for exploring the ramifications of abstract theory, but because it captures in a single word the heart of Zen/Chan as an ineffable transmission that eliminates cogitation and rhetoric at the root by not relying on any particular manner of deliberation or phrasing.

Among the variety of Tang-dynasty Chan dialogues that were adapted into *gongan* by Fenyang 汾陽 in the early eleventh century, questioning the teaching of sutras is listed as one of eighteen kinds of cases. However, Fenyang does not cite the *Wu Gongan* as an example of this category but rather an exchange in which Shoushan 首山 is asked, “All beings have the Buddha-nature, so why do they not know of it?,” and the master replies, “They know.”⁵ As an intriguing variation on that theme, there is a subdialogue of one of the many versions of the *Wu Gongan* in which Zhaozhou indicates incongruously that the reason dogs do not have Buddha-nature is that they possess an awareness of karmic causality. These examples suggest that knowledge of true reality is not sufficient for spiritual attainment because this capacity implies an affliction or defilement. The irony is that cognizance of karma is precisely what defines a human’s distinctive feature in comparison with all other beings and, thus, represents the key to his ability to realize enlightenment.

Does a dog, which at that time in Chan discourse was primarily known as a scavenger or guard animal but not necessarily a domesticated pet or man’s best friend (even though there may have been some affection for the creature based on its loyalty), know that it is a dog? To what extent does the reference to a lowly canine seek to divulge indirectly the inquirer’s personal sense of insufficiency and reveal his unconscious acknowledgment of a lack of self-worth? In other words, does the image of a dog, which is known to chase mindlessly after a clod of earth or a rock that is tossed while failing to go after the real prey, function as a metaphor for deficient understanding?⁶

Dahui advises followers not to dispute but to blissfully ignore such concerns in following the course of action that must be taken to identify and escape from typical conceptual snares and pitfalls by avoiding

misunderstandings of *Wu*. In an example of key-phrase injunctions he writes:

This one character is the rod by which many false images and ideas are destroyed in their very foundations. To it you should add no judgments about being or nonbeing, no arguments, no bodily gestures like raising your eyebrows or blinking your eyes. Words have no place here. Neither should you throw this character away into the nothingness of emptiness, or seek it in the comings and goings of the mind, or try to trace its origins in the scriptures.⁷

In this passage, the disciple is taught how not to misrepresent the meaning of *Wu*. Dahui also urges the trainee to avoid the extremes of becoming either dull (*hunchen* 昏沉) or agitated (*diaoju* 掉舉), which are considered “two kinds of diseases” that disturb body and mind.⁸ These instructions were later formalized by Korean Zen followers into a list of ten defects to be eliminated through meditation.⁹ A verse commentary by a monk named Jingshan Gao 疏山如 further warns against making any effort to try to interpret the significance of Mu from a rational perspective: “The dog has no Buddha-nature./[Zhaozhou’s] compassion is like a deep ocean./Those who try to dissect the saying line by line/Destroy their ability to understand it.”¹⁰

The approach of Dahui, who spent prolonged periods of his career in exile in the malarial south as a punishment for insubordination by imperial authorities, was formulated in an era during the Southern Song of intense competition among rival schools, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, while strict government supervision of all religious movements was undertaken. Dahui’s lineage was critical of other forms of Chan, including the supposedly passive meditative style of the Caodong 曹洞 school. A disciple of Dahui adamantly points out that the threat of dullness disrupts all those who attempt to gain awakening through the school’s path of silent-illumination (*mozhao* 默照禪): “Practice in the Caodong school was very dense and obscure,” he reports, “and therefore after meditating this way for ten or twenty years people still did not succeed. Thus, it was difficult for them to find heirs [to their tradition].”¹¹

The Caodong school was not the only target of criticism. Although it is not clear whether reports that Dahui burned the xylographs of the *Blue Cliff Record* composed by his own mentor are accurate, proponents of the key-phrase method presume that the collection deserved to be eliminated and argue that some supporters of the text (possibly including its creator) would in the final analysis have agreed with this assessment.¹² A passage in the *Precious Lessons from the Zen Forests* (Ch. *Chanlin Baoxun* 《禪林寶訓》) from around 1180 contains a Linji-Huanglong stream monk’s (*Xinwen Tanben* 《心聞曇贲》) reflections on the regrettable condition of the Chan school because of

an overreliance on literary studies of *gongan* cases. For Xinwen, this approach created a desperate situation in which monks were consistently misled by false expectations. During his travels to Fujian province in the 1130s, Dahui saw firsthand the way students were being pulled in the wrong direction:

Day and night, he pondered the fate of these students until finally he felt sure about the correct course of action to be taken. Dahui smashed the woodblocks and tore up the words [of the *Blue Cliff Record*] so as to sweep away delusion, rescue those who were floundering, get rid of excessive rhetoric and exaggeration, and destroy the false teachings and reveal the truth.¹³

Another passage refuting rival viewpoints from *Precious Lessons from the Zen Forests* shows that Dahui's successor Wanan 萬安 criticizes *gongan* practices involving dialogues held in the Dharma Hall (*shangtang* 上堂), the rite of "entering into the room" (*rushi* 入室) of the abbot for special instruction, and the testing of levels of understanding through other kinds of *gongan* inquiry and commentary held on the monastery grounds. All of these are legitimate and useful techniques, if authentically followed. The main problem is that they generally lead away from, rather than toward, an experience of awakening by fostering either an obsession with negativity through sitting quietly for too long a time without reaching Samadhi or a mechanical clinging to words lacking insight. Dahui refers to the drawback underlying deficient practices as a matter of failing to bridge the gap between an actually limited yet ideally limitless mind, which he says "is like trying to scoop up the entire ocean with a small calabash."¹⁴

One might expect that supporters of the Ur Version would use as little rhetoric as possible, and indeed that seems to be the entire point of the key-phrase method's manner of isolating concise yet pungent critical terms from a case record. Perhaps the most prominent example of a deliberately extreme form of abbreviation based on single-minded focus on one word is by the author of the *Gateless Gate*, who reports that he spent six long years contemplating the *Wu Gongan* before gaining enlightenment. In a brief poem contained in the final fascicle of his recorded sayings that is often referred to as the "twenty Wus" (*ershi Wu* 二十無), *Wumen Huikai* 《無門慧開》 evokes the technique of concentrating one's whole body and entire spirit on the key phrase. The word is repeated for emphasis in four lines with five characters each, thus more or less following a traditional Chinese poetic form that is used in much Buddhist poetry, including sometimes elaborate *gongan* collection commentaries:¹⁵ "No, No, No, No, No/No, No, No, No, No./No, No, No, No, No/No, No, No, No, No."¹⁶

Ideally, *Wumen's* verse speaks for itself, without a need for further remarks or any additional elaboration. However, in order to stay free from nihilistic implications and also to acknowledge the workings of the unenlightened human mind which cannot help but seek an articulation of ideation, it must be acknowledged that *Wu* as a discursive unit is allusive and referential just as much as it is elusive and reverential. Seeing or hearing this thought-provoking word, which evokes precursor notions of emptiness and nothingness in Mahayana Buddhist and Daoist philosophies, is bound to stimulate cogitation. Therefore, some form of expression can and must be used to clarify the meaning of the key phrase, even if this is understood as a skillful means to be discarded once its utility is exhausted.

III. THE POWER OF PERSONALIZATION

In that vein, Dahui and followers articulate the basic ingredients of key-phrase practice through a series of metaphors capturing two main levels of transformative personal experience. These include the anguishing experience of doubt and the psychophysical suffering it causes as well as the limitless capacity of *Mu Wu?* to conquer illusion and break open once and for all the gateless barrier to awakening. In key-phrase discourse, the determination to overcome anxiety is likened to hanging on the brink of life and death while summoning all 360 bones of one's skeleton and 84,000 pores of the skin in order to wrestle with the red-hot iron ball symbolizing the sensation of doubt.¹⁷

The *Gateless Gate* also compares the explosive conversion of sudden enlightenment to a candle lit with a single spark, as well as the intimacy and silence of a mute person awakening to reality but unable to put it into words. This leads to full freedom marked by commingling one's own eyebrows with those of Chan ancestors, including Zhaozhou in a state of joyous nirvana, while also being willing, in an allusion to art of war stories, to snatch away a general's famous weapon in order to slay the Buddha symbolically when needed.

Discourse based on personal experience was initiated in the context of Song-dynasty intellectual life that fostered a new focus on individualism as well as the need to wrestle with internal demons in order to achieve a radical spiritual breakthrough. Dahui and many monks as well as literati and other lay practitioners found it necessary to overcome existential disturbance caused by diverse social and emotional factors. This experience often took place amid such examples of turmoil as banishment, exile, imprisonment, or defrocking, as well as being the object of severe criticism and humiliation by a mentor for

merely parroting words without demonstrating a genuine internal understanding of their meaning or awareness of mystical certitude.

Because of the all-pervasive and all-consuming nature of doubt, not all of the strivings for awakening were successful at the time. In some cases this makes the account even more captivating when the practitioner, however accomplished, is forced to consider giving up on the *Wu Gongan* in order to press on with other cases. Many of the most distinguished masters in the history of the Chan/Zen school confessed proudly that they had struggled mightily with solving the case for prolonged periods before achieving a resolution. The sense of pride that their explanations convey is based on the idea that anxiety is a necessary and invaluable stage on the religious path in that the higher the degree of feeling of anxiety, the more profound the realization of truth.

For example, Yuan-dynasty monk Gaofeng Yuanmiao 高峰原妙 abandoned the *Wu Gongan* after three years of agony. Although this disappointing experience was ironically productive in that it heightened his sense of *Angst*, he had to shift to another case before gaining enlightenment. On the other hand, as a novice the eminent Korean master Taego 太古 visited several masters and throughout his twenties worked on another *gongan* attributed to Zhaozhou, “The ten thousand dharmas return to the one; where does the one return?” At age thirty-three, Taego attained a resolution and then moved on to work with the *Wu Gongan*. At first he felt greatly challenged until eventually he succeeded after four years of practice in attaining a great awakening. This was expressed in the following poem: “The solid doors shatter./Clear wind blows/From beginningless time.”¹⁸

An example of struggling with the *Wu Gongan* in modern Japan is found in the biography of Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎, the founder of the Kyoto School of philosophy who developed the nondual metaphysical view of absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無). To a large extent, Nishida’s thought is rooted in Zen meditation and represents a watershed in combining elements of subjectivity and objectivity in appropriating *Wu/Mu*. Nishida spent several years dealing with this case that had been assigned to him during the first intensive meditation session (*sesshin* 攝心) while he was studying at Myōshinji 妙心寺 temple in Kyoto in 1897. During a summer retreat a few years later, Nishida would sometimes skip his private audience (*sanzen* 参禪) altogether. Despite the relaxed atmosphere of the countryside setting, he recorded in a journal that this was “because he was having a hard time with his *kōan* ‘Mu’ and had nothing to say to the master. His analytical and conceptual mind stood in the way of his *kōan* practice.”¹⁹

Apparently, Nishida, who was trained in Western philosophy, could not help but think logically about the implications of the question of

whether or not the dog has a Buddha-nature. This level of thought presupposes a dichotomy between the subject and the object, and thus does not touch the vitally living reality, whether it is a dog's or a person's, since this realm in an ontological rather than chronological sense stands before the duality of "it has" and "it has not." "What deludes me is the temptation to think," Nishida wrote in his diary.²⁰ Seeing that he was stuck and could not at that stage resolve his studies, the mentor switched the disciple's meditative focus to the "sound of one hand," a case that was devised by Hakuin 白隠 as an alternative focus for introductory study. On the same day this occurred, in learning that his good friend "Mitake passed his *kōan*, which annoyed him in no small degree, Nishida's diary reads: "Mitake, saying something like he passed his *kōan*, proudly went home."²¹

In recent times, Sheng Yen 聖嚴, a Taiwanese master whose teachings spread to the West, reports that he once meditated on the *Wu Gong'an* in twenty-seven degrees below zero weather while practicing in the remote mountains of Japan before he eventually succeeded in "shattering the great doubt" by solving the case.²² Another contemporary account is provided by scholar-practitioner Victor Hori, who was born and raised in Canada. After earning a doctorate from Stanford University in Western philosophy, he went to Japan and practiced as a Zen monk in a Kyoto temple for several decades before returning to the West to become a university professor and author of academic writings. Hori notes his personal struggles and remarkable sudden realization with its universal implications:

When I received the *jakugo* [Ch. *zhuoyu* 著語] assignment [composing a capping phrase] for "Mu," try as I might, I could not find a capping phrase that summed up "Mu." Weeks went by. I lost track of the number of times I went through the *Zen Phrase Book* from cover to cover without success. I was beginning to think there was no such verse. Finally, in disgust, the *rōshi* gave me a hint. All at once an avalanche of suitable pages tumbled off the pages, all of which I had read many times before without making the association. It was as if *every* verse expressed "Mu."²³

IV. NOTIONS OF MALADY AND GUILT RELATED TO DOUBT

A number of intriguing metaphors are used by Dahui and his followers to characterize the central role played by doubt as a dramatic double-bind experience that is essential for attaining a transformative breakthrough. Total dedication to the challenge of engaging with *Wu* is by no means an easy task. Commentaries compare struggling with this

syllable and the uncertainty and instability it provokes to the condition of having a prickly chestnut burr forced down one's throat. The predicament is also likened to someone trapped who can neither stay put nor escape, or who hangs from a hundred-foot pole by the fingernails while being prodded with an unanswerable question from below, has their hair set on fire without the possibility of quick remediation, gets attacked by a fierce dog that never lets go, or is confronted by thousands of enemies all at once without holding a weapon or forming any strategy. In these metaphors, the immediacy and palpability of feelings of desperation are deftly evoked.

Chan masters have often talked about the need to recognize the symptoms and overcome the effects of the illness of emptiness. As Juhn Young Ahn suggests, "Not only did practitioners of Chan and Zen ... literally succumb to the malady of meditation while mulling over this kōan but they also seem to have become ill precisely because there was, as the title [of Ahn's dissertation chapter] states, nothing to get sick over."²⁴ In Dahui's words, the Chan illness is like having a mixed poison (*zadu* 雜毒) enter into the mind that, like oil spoiling flour, could not be removed once the intrusion took place.²⁵ "The illness," he hastens to add, "applies not only to wise literati but also to experienced meditators."²⁶ Dahui then lays the blame for the tendency to intellectualize on "a brand of bald heretics who, without having even cleared their own eyes, just teach people to rest and relax, like a dead snubnose-dogwolf."²⁷

Suffering the malady of meditation often refers to the state of dullness or torpor that can result from silent-illumination, causing physical symptoms that include cold feet, difficulty in catching one's breath, a ringing in the ears, stomach cramps, or intense perspiration. Some of these conditions have often been associated either with the diagnosis of tuberculosis or with an underlying sense of panic that may be accompanied by hallucinations, indicating the onset of what would likely be called today a nervous breakdown.

Indeed, nearly all of the stories that pertain to gaining enlightenment through contemplation of the *Wu* key phrase involve psycho-physical struggles lasting until a resolution is found. According to an account of Yuan-dynasty master Hengchuan 橫川, "In the old days when I was traveling on foot, I too believed there was such a thing as Chan. For three days and nights, I kept my attention on the word *No*, observing it horizontally and vertically, but I could not see through it. My chest felt like a lump of hot iron, but there was no understanding."²⁸ Then Hengchuan entered the private quarters of his teacher, who brought up a different case, "On South Mountain, bamboo shoots; on the Eastern Sea, black marauders," and Hengchuan reports, "As soon as I tried to open my mouth, he hit me: at that

moment I emptied through, and the word *No* was smashed to pieces. How could there be any buddhas? How could there be a self? How could the myriad things exist? This is the fundamental realm, the stage of peace and happiness without concerns.”²⁹

Another fascinating example of a monk suffering from the Chan malady is Mengshan 蒙山, an eighth-generation disciple of Yuanwu’s mentor Wuzu Fayan 五祖法演 who was assigned Zhaozhou’s *Wu* by his teacher. After dedicating himself for eighteen days like a cat chasing a mouse, a hen sitting on eggs, or a rat gnawing at coffin wood, he quickly had a major breakthrough while drinking tea. But his request for confirmation was repeatedly turned down by his mentor and he was advised to investigate further. Two years passed without any significant development and then Mengshan became ill with dysentery and felt as if he were on the verge of death. After taking a confessional vow, he resumed his investigation of the case and before long he felt his intestines churning. He simply ignored this physical discomfort and went on with his practice.

Mengshan noticed that “After a while, my eyelids did not move and later I did not even notice that I had a body. Only the key phrase [continued] uninterrupted. When evening arrived I arose [from meditation] and my illness was half gone. I sat again until quarter past the third watch [of the night] and all the illnesses had completely disappeared.”³⁰ However, Mengshan needed to persist and bear with sores appearing all over his body before transforming “meditative-work in the midst of illness” (*bingzhong gongfu* 病中工夫) into “meditative-work in the midst of [enlightened] activity” (*dongzhong gongfu* 動中工夫).³¹ After gaining full enlightenment while hearing the sound of an incense bowl being struck by the head monk while he was in a trance state contemplating *Wu*, Mengshan was told by his teacher that he had captured the essence of Zhaozhou’s key phrase. He extemporaneously created a verse about his sudden awakening that included the following lines: “Master Zhaozhou stands above the crowd,/But his features are just like ours.”³²

In addition to evoking the symptoms of illness, key-phrase discourse also draws on the Chinese court system and its distinctive approach to dealing with crime and punishment. Key-phrase advocates give the legal context a special interpretation by emphasizing the role of the master as an arbiter who unequivocally determines right from wrong after sifting through all of the available evidence. In addition the trainee needs to be aware of his transgressions by admitting culpability and adopting a remorseful and repentant outlook. According to Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 in *Evening Talks in a Mountain Hut* (*Shanfang Yehua* 《山房夜話》), a text from the early Yuan dynasty, Chan masters “are the senior administrators of the monastic

‘court,’” who commented on cases, “not just to show off their own erudition or to contradict the ancient worthies,”³³ but to make a clear and decisive judgment in order to avoid misapprehension and enable their followers to realize the truth for themselves.

Zhongfeng’s assessment is supported by Sanjiao Laoren 三教老人, who in a preface to a restored copy of the *Blue Cliff Record* dated 1304, uses a series of metaphors to reconstruct the legal element related to overcoming doubt that results in “complete transcendence, final emancipation, total penetration, and identical attainment [with the ancestors]”:

Now, the public case (*gongan*) is the torch of wisdom that illuminates the darkness of the passions, the golden scraper that cuts away the film clouding the eye, the sharp ax that severs the life-root of birth and death, the divine mirror that reflects the original face of both the sage and the commoner.... Just as the compass needle always points south, out of compassion one is shown the way. Each blow of the staff, leaving a welt, is to bring about understanding.... For this reason the great teachers handed [down?] instructions that the mind is to die on the [meditation] cushion. Each inquiry is like an official promulgating an order, directing people to read regulations and know the law, or extinguishing bad thoughts as soon as they arise.³⁴

Taking responsibility for being accountable in the spiritual journey parallels admitting a sense of legal guilt through appearances or correspondences with the court system and accepting the punishment that is meted out for one’s case. It represents a crucial turning point in the quest to attain realization.

V. ILLUMINATIVE POWER OF *WU*

The word *Wu* can drive the unenlightened to distraction and cause a fit of frustration that often leads to physical illness, which represents an important stage of the bottoming out of despair before initiating a turnaround in the process of spiritual growth. It also has a very positive meaning. *Wu* is said to encompass the entire universe, function like a sword that slices its way through all barriers, a ladle of cold water that cools off a huge boiling cauldron, an iron broom that sweeps away all residue, or a sun that has the power to melt rocks. Therefore, another type of discourse developed by Dahui expresses an affirmation of the negation represented by *Wu*.

This rhetoric uses metaphors to proclaim in triumphal fashion how the key phrase functions in overcoming doubt and inducing an experience of awakening that is attained by the seasoned and dedicated trainee. The following passage may seem to be a repetitive and

redundant citing of Dahui's negative injunctions, but the use of metaphor to explicate the positive function of *Wu* is added:

Just at all times, whether walking or standing, sitting or lying down, hold on to this No steadfastly. "Does even a dog have Buddha-nature or not?" Hold on to this No earnestly to the point where it becomes ripe so that no discussion or consideration can reach it and you are as if caught in a place that is just one square inch. When it has no flavor whatsoever as if you were chewing on a raw iron cudgel but you get so close to it that you cannot pull back, then that really is auspicious!³⁵

The main affirmative recommendation Dahui makes is that practitioners should give unending attention and commitment to solving the case, 24/7 so to speak, by engaging the key phrase at any and every moment amid the four daily activities of standing, walking, sitting, and lying down.

Elsewhere, Dahui suggests that once doubt is centered on the key-phrase, it will become like a huge growing ball and, eventually, this ball of doubt will shatter and all other sources of anxiety and uncertainty will disappear with it in at? the moment of enlightenment. Therefore, "Great doubt will necessarily be followed by great enlightenment."³⁶ He also remarks that if one begins to feel dull and muddled during meditation, they must muster all of their energies by holding up the word *Wu*: "Then suddenly you will be like the old blind woman who blows [so diligently] at the fire that her eye brows and lashes are burned right off."³⁷

Furthermore, sixteenth-century Korean master So Sahn 西山 in *The Mirror of Chan* provides a series of metaphors reflecting the staunch commitment and keen skills that are needed to be able to surpass *Angst*:

A hen nests on her brood, always keeping them warm. When a cat chases a mouse, its mind and eyes never wander from the object of its hunt, no matter what. A starving man has but one object: food; a man with throat parched from thirst conceives of but one goal: get water. A child who has been left alone for a long time by its mother only longs to see her again. All of these focused efforts come only from the deepest mind, and are not artificial. It is a kind of intense sincerity. Without such a deeply straightforward striving mind, it is impossible to attain enlightenment.³⁸

Hakuin frequently cites Dahui's emphasis on integrating Chan practice with secular concerns, such as when he addresses the lay community in his *Letter to Lord Nabeshima* (*Orategama* 《遠羅天釜》) I,

The Zen Master Dahui has said that meditation in the midst of activity is immeasurably superior to the quietistic approach ... [which is] like trying to cross a mountain ridge as narrow as a sheep's skull with

a hundred-and-twenty pound load on one's back.... What is most worthy of respect is a pure kōan meditation that neither knows nor is conscious of the two aspects, the quiet and the active. This is why it has been said that the true practicing monk walks but does not know he is walking, sits but does not know he is sitting.³⁹

Key-phrase discourse offers many examples of metaphors used to describe the power that the syllable *Wu* can exert to remove ignorance and attain enlightenment. A motif in the *Gateless Gate* evokes the imagery of weaponry and death in regard to battling ignorance and attachment. In another example, Yuanwu's teacher Wuzu once brought up the *Wu Gong'an* while giving instruction in the abbot's quarters. When asked by a disciple for a verse comment, he offered the following, "Zhaozhou shows his sword,/Reflecting frost in a blaze of light./If you persist in looking for answers,/It will cut you in shreds."⁴⁰

Several other classical verses evoke the power of *Wu* in images of a warrior killing off barbarians, an avalanche of falling rocks, a grindstone rolling rapidly down a hill, or a mirror that is smashed. According to a poem by Gushan Gui 徑山杲, "Somebody asked, 'Does the dog have Buddha-nature?'/And Zhaozhou replied, 'No.'/With that saying he annihilated the barbarians,/Who still have no clue."⁴¹ The next example by Shaoshi Mu 少室睦 also uses dramatic imagery of destruction, "When Zhaozhou uttered 'No,'/Mountains collapsed and stones were split asunder./If you haven't fully comprehended this yet,/You've gained only a small splinter."⁴²

Although these metaphors all emphasize destruction, there are also constructive images comparing *Wu* to the purity and clarity of a huge solid substance, like a silver mountain or iron wall that signifies equanimity, which is also indicated in the last verse in the series cited above. For Taego, "The word Mu is like a pellet of alchemical cinnabar: touch iron with it and the iron turns to gold. As soon as [Zhaozhou's] Mu is mentioned, the face of all the buddhas of past, present, and future is revealed."⁴³ A verse comment by Nantang Xing 南堂興 similarly reflects this triumphal standpoint: "Zhaozhou said the dog has no Buddha-nature –/The seventh primordial buddha, Tathagata, puts his hands together and listens,/Dancing on three platforms on the peak of Mt. Sumeru/While ocean waters form a wave that leaps sky high."⁴⁴

VI. WITHER *WU*?

As has often been noted in studies of comparative religious thought, few people speak at greater length or with more eloquence about any

topic than mystics in regard to the virtues of negation and silence. H. D. Thoreau has said that “Silence is the universal refuge.” But Nobel laureate Harold Pinter speaks of transcending language in the introduction to the first volume of his *Complete Plays*, “There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed.”⁴⁵

Dahui’s followers were no exception, creating dozens of volumes concerning the merits of undertaking practice based on the key-phrase *Wu*. This standpoint, rooted in the notions of nihility nihilism? and reticence that epitomize the Zen motto of “a special transmission outside the sutras” (*Jiaowai biechuan buli wenzi* 教外別傳, 不立文字), stresses the role of minimalist expression through the use of abbreviation and parsimonious language. A single word or phrase cut off from the fuller narrative context of the *gongan* record is considered sufficient to evoke pure silence, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of quiescence associated with meditation based on silent-illumination.

Nevertheless, the religious quest based on the key-phrase method is conveyed persuasively in a powerful and personal way through metaphor and other kinds of verbal images. Numerous accounts in prose and verse commentaries feature a variety of symbols conjuring the excruciating experience of doubt and the physical as well as mental symptoms it causes, in addition to the extraordinary power of *Wu* to cut through ignorance and realize awakening. These tropes were expressed in voluminous texts ranging from *gongan* commentaries to collections of formal and informal sermons, poetry, and epistles to followers. Dahui was particularly keen on the use of letters to communicate ideas about *Wu* with literati. Of the forty references to the *Wu Gongan* in his collected writings, about a third of these occur in his communications with lay practitioners.⁴⁶

The aim of rhetoric for Dahui and his followers is constructively to utilize yet also to deny emphatically the role of language in the religious quest for enlightenment. While delivering a sermon, Dahui was queried by a monk who referred to a predecessor’s poem on the *Wu Gongan*, “Wuzu said, when asked about Zhaozhou’s ‘a dog has no Buddha-nature,’ ‘Still it has a hundred thousand times more than a cat,’ so what of this?” The monk said, “The wind is blowing and the grass is growing.” Then Dahui remarked, “Let us not talk falsely. Now what are you going to do?” The monk was speechless, and the master said, “Learning through words will invariably knock you off course.”⁴⁷

ENDNOTES

Acknowledgment of Copyrights and Credentials: Some sections of this article are part of the second chapter of Steven Heine, *Like Cats and Dogs: Contesting the Mu Kōan in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

1. See, for example, Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983); Miriam Levering, “Ch’an Enlightenment for Laymen: Ta-hui and the New Religious Culture of the Sung,” PhD diss., Harvard University (1978); and John Daido Looi, ed., *Sitting with Koans: Essential Writings on Zen Koan Introspection* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006).
2. Akizuki Ryūmin, *Kōan: Jissenteiki nyūmon* (Tokyo: Chikuma bunko, 1987), 201.
3. *Taishō* 48:293a.
4. See Sharf, “How to Think with Chan *Gong’an*,” in *Thinking with Cases: Specialist Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Charlotte Furth et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 205–43; and William Henry Grosnick, “The Zen Master Dōgen’s Understanding of the Buddha-Nature in Light of the Historical Development of the Buddha-Nature Concept in India, China, and Japan,” PhD diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison (1979).
5. *Xu Zangjing* 83:647a (all *Xu Zangjing* citations are based on numbering from CBETA.org).
6. T. H. Barrett, “The Monastery Cat in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Cat Poems of the Zen Masters,” in *Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia: Places of Practice*, ed. James Robson, James A. Benn, and Lori Meeks (London: Routledge, 2009), 107–24; see also Aaron Herald Skabelund, *Empire of Dogs: Canines, Japan, and the Making of the Modern Imperial World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). There are positive images of dogs in modern Asia, including the famous statue of Hachiko located outside Tokyo’s Shibuya Station, commemorated for his remarkable loyalty, which has become a renowned landmark where people meet. Also I recently saw a picture of a studious-looking dog wearing a suit and glasses in a Berlitz ad saying, “Teaching English carefully. That’s my job.”
7. Heinrich Dumoulin, “The Song Period: A Time of Maturation,” in *Sitting with Koans*, 34 (with minor revisions).
8. *Taishō* 47:922a–b.
9. See Buswell, *The Korean Approach to Zen*, 337–38 and 373–74.
10. *Xu Zangjing* 65:593a.
11. *Taishō* 47:828b. It is important to note that Dahui endorses somewhat varied approaches for different training situations. Even though he refutes the Caodong school for being decadent and complacent, he also says, “Although we do not approve of silent illumination it is necessary that each of you face the wall [to meditate in a Caodong-like seated posture].”
12. See Christoph Anderl, “Chan Rhetoric: An Introduction,” in *Zen Buddhist Rhetoric in China, Korea, and Japan*, ed. Christoph Anderl (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1–94. It is important to determine whether Yuanwu is a supporter of literary Chan far removed and antithetical to and, thus, an opponent of Dahui, or instead is a precursor consistent with and even subsumed by the outlook of Dahui, such that the latter’s burning of the *Blue Cliff Record* could be seen as a natural outcome of ongoing abbreviation in Chan textuality, to which Yuanwu himself partly contributed.
13. *Taishō* 48:1036b–c.
14. Juhn Young Ahn, “Malady of Meditation: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Illness and Zen” (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2007), 174.
15. Verse commentaries on *kōans* seem to combine some of the style of traditional Buddhist *gatha*, a type of metered and often rhythmic poetic verse in the ancient Indian languages of Pali and Sanskrit, with traditional Chinese odes (*song* 頌), often sung or chanted during ritual ceremonies. This contributes to the regulated and rhyming qualities of Chan verse commentaries.

16. Ishii Shūdō, “The *Wu-men Kuan* (*Mumonkan*),” in *The Zen Canon*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 230; he cites this with an exclamation point after each word. See also *Xu Zangjing* 69:364c as part of the *Record of Wumen* (*Wumen Heshang Yulu* 《無門和尚語錄》) Vol. 2. Wumen also wrote a poem about his experience with the *Wu Gongan*, “A thunderclap under the clear blue sky/All beings on earth open their eyes;/Everything under heaven bows together;/Mount Sumeru leaps up and dances”; in Aitken, trans., *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-Men-Kuan* (*Mumonkan*) (New York: North Point Press, 1991), 4.
17. *Taishō* 48:293a.
18. J. C. Cleary, *A Buddha from Korea: The Zen Teachings of Taego* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 65 and 188–89.
19. Michiko Yusa, *Zen & Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nichida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 69. The term “nothing” seems to be an unintentional pun.
20. Michiko Yusa, *Zen & Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 69.
21. *Ibid.* In a conversation in November 2012, Yusa explained that the term for “passing” a kōan is literally means “penetration” 透過 (Ch. *touguo*, Jp. *tōka*).
22. Sheng Yen, *Shattering the Great Doubt: The Chan Practice of Huatou* (Boston: Shambhala, 2009).
23. Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 32.
24. Ahn, “Malady of Meditation:” 14–15, in Chapter One on “Getting Sick over Nothing (*wu*).”
25. Ahn, “Malady of Meditation,” 161.
26. Ahn, “Malady of Meditation,” 165; *Taishō* 47:918a.
27. *Ibid.*
28. J. C. Cleary, *Zen under the Gun* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), 59.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Taishō* 48:1099a-c; in Yunqi Zhuhong’s 雲棲祿宏 *Advancing through the Chan Gate* (*Changuan Cejin* 禪關策進), a late Ming work that highlights many examples of training with the *Wu Gongan* but also, unfortunately, perpetuates the fallacy that it was originally cited by Tang master Huangbo 雲棲祿宏; see also Ahn, “Malady of Meditation,” 235.
31. George A. Keyworth, “Transmitting the Lamp of Learning in Classical Chan Buddhism,” PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles (2001), 233–36 (with some minor revisions).
32. *Taishō* 48:1099c; see Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 115, a work that also discusses several other trainees with similar experiences, including two successive disciples in the Wuzu-Mengshan lineage.
33. Sharf, “How to Think with Chan *Gong’an*,” 209; he points out, “There is, to my knowledge, no conclusive evidence of the pre-Song use, if any, of the term *gong’an* in a Buddhist context,” 207. However, in the ninth century, Muzhou Daoming (aka Chen Zunsu), a disciple of Huangbo who became the teacher of Yunmen, used such sayings as, “It is an obvious case, but I spare you thirty blows” or “Guilt is written all over your face,” sometimes evoking the term *xiancheng gongan* 現成公案 (Jap. *gen-jōkōan*) as well as epithets like “clever thief” or “pickpocket” used in a double-edged sense to refer to those who could rob the foolish through their way with words or who had such little understanding that they tried to cover up the fact that, in the end, they were no better than petty crooks.
34. *Taishō* 48:139b–c; see also Sharf, “How to Think with Chan *Gong’an*,” 328 n.19.
35. *Taishō* 47:901c–902a.
36. *Ibid.* 47:886a.
37. As translated in Ishii Shūdō, “Yakuchū *Daie Fukaku Zenji Hōgo* (Zoku) (Jō),” *Komazawa Daigaku Zen Kenkyūsho Nenpō* 4 (1993): 20–62 (48)—these are taken from the general sermons included in *Dahui Pushuo*; *Taishō* 47:481c.

38. Stephen Addiss, Stanley Lombardo, and Judith Roitman, eds., *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China and Korea, and Japan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), 214–15.
39. Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 33. Note that this statement by Hakuin paraphrases a statement in a letter in *Dahui shu*, *Taishō* 47:918c; see Miriam Levering, “Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163): The Image Created by His Stories about Himself and His Teaching Style,” in *Zen Masters*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91–116.
40. *Taishō* 47:666bc.
41. *Xu Zangjing* 65:592c.
42. *Xu Zangjing* 65:593b.
43. J. C. Cleary, *A Buddha from Korea*, 99 (with minor revisions).
44. *Xu Zangjing* 65:593a.
45. Harold Pinter, “The Echoing Silence,” *The Guardian* (31 Dec, 2008).
46. Victor Sōgen Hori discusses the legacy of literary Chinese Chan on contemporary Rinzai Zen practice in Japan in “Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” in *The Kōan*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 295–96.
47. *Taishō* 47:850b; see also *Taishō* 47:660a for the original Wuzu verse.