

TRANSLATION

Wu-mên kuan, Case 11

“Chao-chou and the Hermits”

TRANSLATED, WITH A COMMENTARY

BY ROBERT AITKEN

NOTE: As Zen Buddhism moves to the West, its forms move also, and inevitably change. Perhaps the traditional path has become impoverished in some ways during this transition. It occurs to me that it might be time to stand off and evaluate. So as a Western teacher, I offer my English *teishō* on “Chao-chou and the Hermits,” for correction by my peers. It is part of a collection of commentaries on the *Wu-mên kuan* that I am preparing for publication by North Point Press, San Francisco, to be titled, *The Gateless Barrier*. It presumes a certain familiarity with Chao-chou, who appears earlier in the book in Cases 1 and 7.

—R.A.

The Case

Chao-chou went to a hermit's cottage and asked, “Anybody in? Anybody in?” The hermit lifted up his fist.

Chao-chou said, “The water is too shallow for a ship to anchor.” And he left.

Again he went to a hermit's cottage and asked, “Anybody in? Anybody in?” This hermit also lifted up his fist.

Chao-chou said, “Freely you give, freely you take away, freely you kill, freely you give life.” And he made a full bow.

Wu-mên's Comment

Both held up their fists in the same way. Why did Chao-chou approve one and not the other? Tell me, what is the core of the complication? If you can give a turning word about this, you will realize that Chao-chou's tongue has no bone in it. He is free, now to raise up, now to thrust down. Be that as it may, can you realize also that Chao-chou was seen through by the two hermits? Furthermore, if you say that one hermit was superior to the other, you do not yet have the eye of reflective study. And if you say there is no difference between them, you do not yet have the eye of reflective study.

Wu-mên's Verse

Eye like a shooting star;
activity like lightning;
the sword that kills;
the sword that gives life.

The Teishō:

Here we meet Chao-chou again, for the third time in the *Wu-mên kuan* so far. Shibayama Zenkei Rōshi suggests that the incident in today's case took place while Chao-chou was on his long pilgrimage, visiting many teachers to deepen his own realization.¹ However, we know that Chao-chou engaged in Dharma dialogues with people outside his monastery even after he settled down in Kuan-yin yüan. For example, Case 31 is the story of his visit to a tea lady whose comments to monks asking directions had intrigued him.

Thus we can't be sure when he met the hermits, and moreover we can't even be sure that two of them were involved. Some teachers, including Senzaki Nyogen Sensei, say there was only one hermit.² The Chinese is not too clear on this point. Fortunately, for kōan purposes it doesn't matter.

There are two words in Chinese that can be translated "hermit."

¹ Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 87.

² Nyogen Senzaki, *The Gateless Gate*, unpublished translation and commentary, Diamond Sangha, Honolulu; and Zen Center of San Francisco, pp. 35-37.

One is *hsien*, literally, "man of the mountains," a Taoist term that implies "saint" or "wizard," and the other is *an-chu*, as in this case, literally meaning "master of a hermitage." *An-chu* refers to a monk who has completed his training under a teacher, and is living alone in a little hut to polish his wisdom through further zazen. This was the custom in T'ang Buddhist times, though today in those Asian countries where Buddhism is still tolerated the *an-chu* usually finds himself in a village or a neighborhood, very busy with memorial services and kindergarten supervision.

To get to the point, Chao-chou goes to a hermit's cottage. It is probably tiny, a one-room hut, open to the elements. Very plainly the hermit is sitting there doing zazen. However, Chao-chou walks in, calling out, "Anybody in? Anybody in?" In classical Japanese this salutation is "*Ariya? Ariya?*". I can still hear Yasutani Haku'un Rōshi calling out in his teishō: "*Ariya! Ariya!*" and then his inimitable laugh. "Are you there? Are you there?"

The hermit lifted up his fist.³ Chao-chou, responded, "The water is too shallow for a ship to anchor." What is happening? Yamada Kōun Rōshi suggests that Chao-chou did not leave without a glance at the hermit to see his response to this abuse.⁴ It was indeed abuse, but it was abuse beyond aspersion. Chao-chou was scolding the Buddha on the monk's altar, as well as the monk himself.

So Chao-chou again went to a hermit's hut and walked in, calling out the equivalent of "*Ariya? Ariya?*" This hermit too, or again lifted up his fist. Chao-chou said, "Freely you give, freely you take away, freely you kill, freely you give life." And he made a full bow.

Yamada Rōshi says that Chao-chou must have glanced at this hermit's face as well, to see how he responded to the praise.⁵ Yes, it was praise, but it transcended commendation. The Old Master was really mumbling to himself, I think. Your task is to overhear him after all this time.

³ *His* fist. there were hermits who were female, both lay and clerical, but the Chinese compilers of Zen cases always identified them as such. Unidentified, the Chinese hermit is male.

⁴ Kōun Yamada, *Gateless Gate* (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1979), pp. 64-65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Wu-mên gives rather an extended comment to this case, and when we examine it closely we find several themes. First, he says, "Both held up their fists in the same way. Why did Chao-chou approve one and not the other? Tell me, what is the core of the complication?" The core of the complication, if any, is that Chao-chou really didn't approve one and not the other. Both held up their fists in the same way, and Chao-chou's *teishō* came out one way the first time, and another way the second. "Comparisons are odious," says the old proverb. It is important to clean up the source of that bad smell. Then the treasure house of precious things will open of itself for your enjoyment.

If you are clear about the fists, then you will also see Chao-chou clearly. Each fist is like Yün-mên's staff:

Yün-mên held up his staff before his assembly and said, "This staff has become a dragon. It has swallowed up the whole universe. Mountains, rivers, and the great earth, where can they be found?"⁶

Yün-mên inadvertently casts a lot of light on the interaction of the monks with Chao-chou.

Wu-mên then goes on to say, "If you can give a turning word about this, you will realize that Chao-chou's tongue has no bone in it. He is free, now to raise up, now to thrust down." Wu-mên is playing along with Chao-chou's little game. The fact is that Chao-chou is free to expound point *A* in his put-down, and point *B* in his praise. He is like an image of Shākyamuni Buddha, ticking off the categories of the Four Noble Truths. He is like a bamboo grove that clatters when the wind comes up and is silent when the wind dies down.

Then Wu-mên takes another approach, and says, "Be that as it may, can you realize also that Chao-chou was seen through by the two hermits?" What did the first one see in Chao-chou's response to his up-raised fist? What did the second one see? Suppose you were the first hermit, how would you respond to Chao-chou? And if you were the second hermit? These two old fellows surely knew what Chao-chou was up to. Otherwise, they might better have returned to their home monasteries and taken up Mu again as beginning students.

⁶ Thomas and J.C. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, 3 vols. (Boulder: Shambhala, 1977), II, 389.

There are important overtones to this case that relate to everyday life. When you make a presentation and it is put down, what is your response? When you make a presentation and it is praised, how do you react? How do you view the critic in each instance? We are not doing intellectual tricks with these kōans. If they had no connection to daily affairs, we would be simply an esoteric cult, reinforcing each other in ego trips to show our superiority to the world.

Without a certain measure of emotional maturity it is difficult even to begin Zen practice. You tend to take the Rōshi's suggestions as personal criticism, and end up on your cushions with paranoid thoughts revolving in your head. Or you take his approval as personal praise, and make yourself unbearable to your friends. But as you become emotionally mature you can handle praise or blame with equanimity.

Such moral overtones can be abstracted and played separately as Buddhist ethics, but in this process please don't neglect the primordial themes of the Tathāgata. In this case they are Chao-chou and avatars of the Buddha seeing through one another. To see through others is to breathe in their own inspiration. To allow others to see through you is to inspire them in turn.

You meet avatars of the Buddha at every turn. In one of our sutra dedications, the leader recites the words, "Our friends and family members guide us on the ancient path." Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom, and out of spouses' mouths too, and from people at the car wash.

The other day at the McKinley Car Wash I switched off my car radio as one of the Samoan workers was preparing to vacuum the seats. We were anticipating a typhoon, and he asked if I had heard news about it. I said, "It seems to be just sitting there south of us." He said, "Well, maybe it's waiting for us to make our move." There you have the Buddha's doctrine of interdependence from the least doctrinaire corner of our society.

Back to Wu-mēn, we find him taking still another tack. "Furthermore, if you say that one hermit was superior to the other, you do not yet have the eye of reflective study."

In other words, don't jump to conclusions about Chao-chou's blame and praise. Compare Fa-yen:

The great Fa-yen of Ch'ing-liang ascended to the high seat before the noon meal. Raising his hand, he pointed to the bamboo blinds. Two monks went and rolled them up in the same way.

Fa-yen said, "One gains; one loses."

Fa-yen clarifies Chao-chou's points, just as Yün-mên clarifies the intention of the hermits with his staff dragon.

"If you say there is no difference between them, then you do not yet have the eye of reflective study." Yes, that would be like saying there is no difference between old and young, or between Chao-chou and yourself. Yamada Rōshi calls this pernicious equality. Female and male are the same, parent and child are the same, student and teacher are the same. "It's all God." That's the worst smell of all.

Wu-mên's verse begins: "Eye like a shooting star;/activity like lightning." One of the qualities of a realized person is briskness, and no one is quicker than Chao-chou. I am sure that his students never saw him piously mooning down the hall looking ever so holy. No, his eye truly shoots forward, and his action is altogether appropriate to the circumstances—now setting up, now pushing down, forthrightly expounding the Dharma.

The verse continues: the sword that kills; /the sword that gives life." This is an echo of Chao-chou's words to the second hermit, "Freely you give, freely you take away; freely you kill, freely you give life," but really it is a comment on Chao-chou's teaching to both of them. What is the implication of "killing"—and how does it relate to Chao-chou's words? What is the implication of "giving life"—and how does that metaphor relate to his words?

In the Chinese, Wu-mên uses a synonym for "sword" in the fourth line, but the sword that kills and the blade that gives life are both wielded by Chao-chou, and in the hands of this greatest teacher the blade and the sword are one. Is their function the same as well?

If it were not for Chao-chou, we would none of us be practicing zazen, I am sure. It behooves us to study his words and his manner with minute closeness, beginning with his most dexterous sword of all, the one that has killed many and brought many to life: "Has the dog Buddha-nature or not?" "Muuu."

¹ Yamada, *Gateless Gate*, p. 137.

Lineage

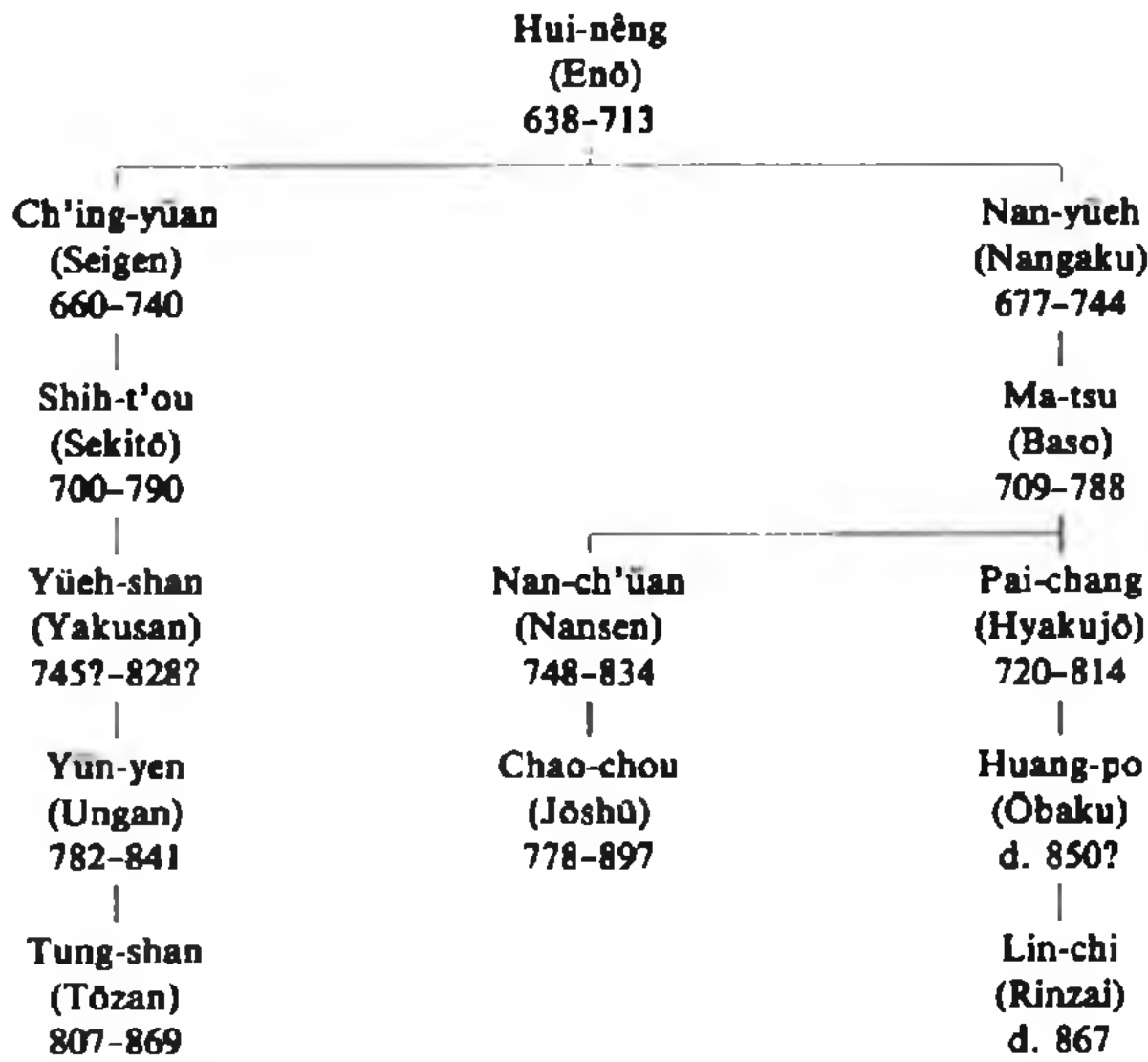


Table of Chinese-Japanese Equivalents

	Chinese	Japanese
(Wade-Giles)	(Pinyin)	
an-chu	anju	anju
Chao-chou Ts'ung-shên	Zhaozhou Congshen	Jōshu Jūshin
Fa-yen Wên-i	Fayan Wenyi	Hōgen Bun'eki
hsien	xian	sen
<i>Kuan-yin yüan</i>	Guanyinyuan	Kannon-in
Ch'ing-liang	Qingliang	Seiryō
Wu-mên Hui-k'ai	Wumen Huikai	Mumon Ekai
<i>Wu-mên kuan</i>	<i>Wumenguan</i>	<i>Mumonkan</i>
Yün-mên Wên-yen	Yunmen Wenyan	Unmon Bun'en