



Dale S. Wright. *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, ISBN: 0-521-59010-8, US \$53.95.

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One of the first great books on Zen Buddhism in the twentieth century was John Blofeld's translation, *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po on the Transmission of Mind* (New York: Grove Press, 1959). This highly influential rendering of the *Ch'uan-hsin fa yao* (J. Denshin hōyō), a crucial text attributed to the T'ang era master Huang Po, reflected Blofeld's personal interest and life-long commitment to East Asian mystical thought. One of the last great books of the century is Dale Wright's critical philosophical meditations on Huang Po's texts and on Blofeld's inspiring yet problematic translation/interpretation. Wright finds Blofeld's still frequently-consulted rendering inconsistent and to some extent inauthentic, due to its inability to extricate itself from underlying romanticist presuppositions which impede an appropriate access to the source materials. Wright's book represents a culmination of the kind of twentieth-century approach to philosophy exemplified by Blofeld. It also marks a transition to a next-century philosophical methodology that is sensitive both to the nuances of textual history and to the significance of grounding a critical discussion of metaphysical issues in an insightful understanding of the historicity of Huang Po's life and times.

Huang Po was a leading figure in Ma-tsu's Hung-chou school lineage, which was known for initiating the irreverent, iconoclastic style of

encounter dialogues that eventually became the dominant fashion in Zen pedagogy and the staple of the *kōan* collections of the Sung dynasty. Huang Po was the third member of the “four houses” (*ssu-chia*). His role is somewhat overshadowed by the other three masters. Ma-tsu, the founder of the lineage, was known for dramatic gestures: shouting, tweaking noses, and dealing out blows. Pai-chang, the second in line, created the first monastic rules text and was slapped by his student Huang Po in several incidents (including the epilogue to the “fox *kōan*,” in which Huang Po admonishes the mentor who approvingly calls him a “red-bearded barbarian”). Lin-chi, founder of the Lin-chi school/Rinzai sect and a Huang Po disciple, was known for his tough-mindedness (beginning with the striking of his teacher) and for creating the most famous Zen recorded sayings (*yu-lu*) text.

Yet, as Wright carefully explains, Huang Po played just as important a role in transmitting the concrete, this-worldly, spontaneous teaching style of the Hung-chou school “four houses” lineage. According to the *Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu*, Huang Po stood seven foot tall with a round spot symbolizing a pearl of wisdom on his forehead, and once criticized a Buddhist practitioner who walked on water. Huang Po’s distinctive emphasis was on the doctrine of “One Mind.” He referred to the doctrine of “One Mind” as the “great matter of Zen” because it encompasses the fundamental issues of language, thought, reality, and activity. The text attributed to Huang Po articulates in a relatively systematic, rational fashion Ma-tsu’s radically nondualistic view that “everyday mind is the Way” or “this very mind is buddha” (*chi hsin chi fo*). Huang Po writes, “If you would only rid yourselves of the concepts of ordinary and enlightened, you would find that there is no other Buddha than the Buddha in your mind” (p. 192). The message of both Zen thinkers is paradoxical, but Huang Po explains the meaning of the paradox. Part of the reason for the more straightforward style of Huang Po’s comments is the editing of P’ei-hsiu, an important government official and lay disciple who apparently collected the *Ch’uan-hsin fa yao* based on some discourses he heard Huang Po deliver.

However, Blofeld is unable to convey appropriately Huang Po’s standpoint because of the way he is trapped in a particular worldview shaped by the twin tendencies of the modern western intellectual era: scientific progressivism and romantic naturalism. Bound by a romanticist view that stands in polarity with and thus does not take benefit from the objectivity of positivist historiography, Blofeld fails to grasp the way Huang Po’s textuality is conditioned by a variety of mediating factors in the “manuscript culture” of medieval China. According to Wright, “Fully ensconced within the romantic tradition of textuality, John Blofeld would insist that neither P’ei-hsiu’s mediation nor his own have obstructed the pure expres-

sion of the Zen master himself. What we get is still the real Huang Po behind the text. . . P'ei-hsiu claims to be a neutral medium through which the enlightened mind of Huang Po has been transmitted. Only romantic piety will encourage our efforts to believe this, however. . . . [P'ei-hsiu] was writing what Huang Po never wrote and, if the stories are true, never wanted written" (p. 17). For Wright, philosophy is alive and well, but only when grounded in textual history, historiography, and cultural history. He is particularly effective in discussing the issues of how Zen records developed during a time of "indigestion" with the study of the overwhelming number of sutras being translated. The flourishing Zen school took advantage of the newly invented printing press for dissemination of its colloquial, irreverent, and highly digestible style of textuality.

Another problem with Blofeld's approach is its idealization of oriental wisdom (again, one side of a polarity that otherwise stereotypes and belittles the Orient). This approach tends to exaggerate, if not altogether fabricate, a sense that Zen enlightenment represents an ahistorical transcendence shorn of the need for language, reliance on relationships, and other aspects of mediation. Blofeld sees enlightenment from a romantic — that is, supremely individual — perspective. But Wright maintains convincingly that "'Acting freely' can only take place against a background of constraints: alternative choices, the possibility of unfree acts, and all the stage-setting features of any context of understanding" (p. 123). Similarly, Wright argues compellingly against Blofeld's view that awakening is a prereflective, prelinguistic experience, showing that Zen rhetoric and consciousness are fully bound by a network of associations. Wright's approach is strengthened by his familiarity with western phenomenology and hermeneutics. Yet in Wright's numerous journal articles we see that he also disagrees with Thomas Kasulis in *Zen Action/Zen Person* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979), who, like Blofeld, tends to favor ahistoricism rather than conditionality, silence over speech, and a state beyond thought rather than a continuing discursive reflection.

A limitation of *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* is that Wright frequently cites, but does not engage fully, the writing of Bernard Faure, whose work *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) was perhaps the first twenty-first century study of Zen. It would be fascinating for us to see how Wright envisions his methodology, which is still primarily hermeneutic, contrasting with Faure's approach, which has a post-structural and cultural critical orientation that tends to refute hermeneutics. Both scholars overcome the uncritical romanticist/Orientalist attitudes of many previous attempts to reconstruct the intellectual history of Zen, but we would greatly benefit from a dialogue pairing

Wright's attempt to revive a philosophical understanding in light of cultural history with Faure's suggestion that an analysis of the Zen tradition that is derived primarily from philosophy remains untenable, because the Zen tradition assimilates so many aspects of popular religiosity. In addition, readers will likely hope for a new translation of Huang Po's text that reflects Wright's critique of Blofeld's romanticism.

It is clear that *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, written in a lucid and evocative, yet jargon-free, no-nonsense style, will quickly become a standard work for scholars and students interested in an intensive, detailed study of a leading exponent of the classical age of Zen thought.