

*Hua-t'ou: A Method of Zen Meditation*¹

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This paper discusses a form of meditation practice known in Chinese as *hua-t'ou*. It was popularized by the Chinese Zen master Ta-Hui (1089 – 1163) a member of the Lin-Chi sect of Zen. While Ta-Hui did not invent this method of meditation, he popularized it in that he was the first to teach a theory of why *hua-t'ou* should be practiced, and also taught how to use it in Zen practice.²

In particular, this paper will discuss what a *hua-t'ou* is, why Ta-Hui placed so much importance on it, and why this practice could be of interest to people today. I will give examples of well known *hua-t'ou*, describe one way to practice this method, describe some states of mind that may arise when doing the practice, offer some personal experience from my own thirty years of practicing the *hua-t'ou*,³ and consider what it means to have a Zen awakening. I will then list Ta-Hui's "Ten Defects" of *hua-t'ou* practice, and finally offer some concluding remarks and cautions related to having an awakening experience and the importance of continuing practice thereafter.

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The paper takes a position reflecting Chinese Ch'an more than modern influenced Hakuin Rinzai or Sanbokyodan Zen.

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2 Miriam Levering, PhD. Dissertation, [Ch'an Enlightenment For Laymen: Ta-Hui And The New Religious Culture Of The Sung](#), Harvard University, 1978, p. 240. Throughout this article, I will use the better known word Zen even when referring to Chinese Ch'an or to Korean Seon.

3 Besides practicing the *hua-t'ou* method for roughly thirty years, for roughly ten years, while at the Ch'an Meditation Center of Shifu Sheng-Yen in NYC, I conducted private interviews with mostly western students during seven-day meditation retreats. A good percentage of those students were doing *hua-t'ou* practice.

What is a *Hua-t'ou*?

The Chinese term *Hua-t'ou* can be translated as “critical phrase.” Literally it means the “head of speech” or the “point beyond which speech exhausts itself.”⁴ In Korean, *hua-t'ou* are known as *hwadu* and in Japanese as *wato*. In this paper I will use the Chinese term *hua-t'ou* exclusively. A *hua-t'ou* is a short phrase (sometimes a part of a *koan*) that can be taken as a subject of meditation and introspection to focus the mind in a particular way, which is conducive to enlightenment.

While *hua-t'ou* and *koans* (Ch. *kung-an*) might seem similar because some *hua-t'ou* come from sayings and stories passed down from early Zen, as do *koans*, it is important to differentiate the two. *Koan* means a “public case.” It is an anecdote or interaction attributed to an earlier teacher in the Zen tradition. “Public case” was understood in a legal sense as being open for all to see to test or to judge one’s understanding of Zen. *Koans* mostly involve an encounter, often an encounter dialogue, between a Zen master⁵ and an interlocutor, most often a Zen student, but it may involve a lay person too. *Koans* can be complex stories with some repartee or shouts or even physical hitting or kicking between the master and the interlocutor. They are mostly known through *koan* collections such as The Gateless Gate (Mumonkan) or The Blue Cliff Record (Hekiganroku) where the *koans* are presented along with a poetic introduction and an elaborate commentary.

A *hua-t'ou* however is a stand alone, always short phrase or a part of a *koan* that can be taken as a subject of meditation and introspection. Though teachers may give talks about working on a *hua-t'ou*, there are no standardized collections of *hua-t'ou* with poetic, often complex commentary as there are with *koans* that require explication and some knowledge of ancient Chinese metaphor.

Though not widely known in western Zen circles, *hua-t'ou* meditation is popular in Korean and Chinese Zen. Since the famous Korean monk Chinul (1158-1210) discovered *hua-t'ou* meditation late in his life, it has been the favored form of practice for Korean Zen monks to the present day. In China the practice began before the 11th century. Hsu-Yun (1840-1959),

4 The Collected Works of Chinul, trans. by Robert Buswell, University of Hawaii Press, 1983, p. 67.

5 In the context of koan literature, a Zen master is someone in a Zen lineage who was given the title Zen master by his master.

the most famous Zen monk in the 19th and 20th centuries, practiced and taught *hua-t'ou* meditation as his favorite form of meditation practice.⁶

The *hua-t'ou*, though popularized a long time ago, is a good method for people today: it does not require a group or regular meetings with a teacher and besides being practiced in formal seated meditation, it can or really should be practiced throughout the day, even while at work. Hence, it allows for a full time Zen practice while living and working in the world.

The Basics of Ta-Hui's *hua-t'ou*

Here, I want to deal with three aspects of Ta-Hui's method and theory of *hua-t'ou*, which at the same time make it especially suited to contemporary Western Zen practitioners.

Firstly, Ta-Hui insisted on the necessity of an actual moment of awakening. He felt that *hua-t'ou* practice was an effective means to attaining that moment of awakening. Secondly, Ta-Hui also felt “ that *hua-t'ou* practice can be carried out by laymen in the midst of their daily activities.”⁷ It is clear that Ta-Hui wanted to make Zen enlightenment available to laymen as well as monks, and not have the laymen serve mostly as donors to collect merit for a future life, which was the more popular attitude of his time.⁸ Thirdly, *hua-t'ou* is a way of exhausting and silencing rational thinking, thereby allowing the mind to open to Zen wisdom.

(a) A Moment of Awakening is Necessary

There are two different ways of understanding and actually practicing Zen. These two different ways are termed in Chinese *pen chueh* and *shih-chueh* respectively. The term *pen chueh* refers to the belief that one's mind is from the beginning of time fully enlightened, while *shih-chueh* refers to the belief that at some point in time we pass from imprisonment in ignorance and delusion to a true vision of Zen realization: “Our enlightenment is timeless, yet our realization of it occurs in time.”⁹ According to this belief experiencing a moment of awakening in this life is of central importance. Ta-Hui believed in the *shih-chueh* view, and

6 The practice is not widely done in Japanese Zen where going through a koan curriculum is the favored form of practice for Rinzai and the modern Sanbokyodan sect practitioners. Soto Zen practitioners as a rule do not use koans or *hua-t'ou* as a meditation practice, but practice *shikantaza* (just sitting).

7 Levering, p. 246.

8 He also feared the literati would be attracted to the growing popularity of the Tsao-Tung tradition and their “still form” of meditation. See Schlutter, Morten, *How Zen Became Zen*, University of Hawaii Press, 2008, p. 180).

9 Levering, p. 273.

therefore popularized and systemized the *hua-t'ou* method so his students could experience a moment of awakening.

Ta-Hui felt “if all is adequately described as “awakening from the beginning (*pen chueh*), then from what did Sakyamuni awake to?”¹⁰ Why was it necessary for Sakyamuni to struggle as an ascetic for years before having his awakening? Ta-Hui felt the only way to preserve the paradox of these two beliefs was to consider that the “awakening for the first time” (*shih chueh*) at a given instant of time comes to accord with the Mind that is “awakened from the beginning (*pen chueh*). According to Ta-Hui, the belief in the need for a moment of awakening is essential, if one is to engage *hua-t'ou* practice.¹¹ Even though one is inherently enlightened from the beginning, most people do not really know what this means, hence the need for a moment of awakening. He also felt: “All the myriad doubts are just one doubt. If you can shatter the doubt you have on the *hua-t'ou*, then all the myriad doubts will at once be shattered [too].”¹²

Ta-Hui valued the *hua-t'ou* method because he felt a moment of awakening was fundamental to Zen practice. He believed we could experience this moment of awakening, if for an instant we could be free of thought. However, Ta-Hui felt freedom from all thought was filled with pitfalls. He believed the *hua-t'ou* would allow students to bring their minds to a condition of readiness for the moment of awakening to their true Nature, while avoiding the pitfalls of being free of thought.¹³

(b) Practicing Hua-T'ou Individually

Besides having many monks as students, Ta-Hui attracted and was interested in teaching China's educated scholar officials. These literati (*shih-tai-fu*) were the elite of the empire, the people who ran the country.¹⁴ In the earlier part of the the Sung Dynasty (960-1279), Zen had implicitly stressed koan study, which may have made it appear that only monks could fully

10 Levering, p. 274.

11 There are others who have had success with the method who did not require this as a prerequisite, though I believe this is a minority view.

12 Schlutter, p. 109

13 Levering, p. 240.

14 Levering does not translate the Chinese characters, which are pronounced shi-tai-fu. However, in this paper I will use the common translation ‘literati’. In a private email, Levering said the term was formerly translated as ‘scholar official’.

study Zen.¹⁵ Hua-t'ou practice then allowed that lay people too could also fully study Zen and achieve enlightenment in this life time.

Interestingly, Ta-Hui instructed most of his lay students, the *literati*, through mail exchanges. The *literati* were spread across China. They therefore only rarely, if at all, had a chance to see Ta-Hui personally. These letter exchanges have been collected into book form and are an important part of monastic training for Korean monks up to the present day.¹⁶

c) Hua-T'ou as a Balance to Rational Thinking

The *literati* were in their important positions because they had passed the highly competitive civil service exams, the subjects of which were what Ta-Hui referred to as the “nine classics and the seventeen histories.” The *literati* were highly educated thinkers whose formal education started at age five or six and continued until about thirty. Their informal education continued thereafter deepening their understanding, truly a life's work.

What struck Ta-Hui most was that the education of the *literati* had fostered a rational approach to knowledge and understanding. This emphasis on the intelligent mind and the vast amount of learning required to pass the state exams deflected the *literati* from achieving self-knowledge or developing virtuous or wise conduct, leading them instead to focus on mastery of detail and rational thought.¹⁷ Knowledge for them was something gained from the outside. According to Ta-Hui, Zen wisdom can be gained in an instant if the rational mind is cut-off. Focusing on the hua-t'ou can bring the practitioner to a point where the rationalizing and conceptualizing mind is stopped, enabling a person to realize Zen awakening.

The Relevance of *Hua-T'ou* Practice Today

There are obvious parallels between the *literati* that interested Ta-Hui and western people today who are interested in Zen. For one, many if not most Zen practitioners today are lay people who hold jobs with some level of responsibility. As the *literati* had to function in their

15 Schlutter, p. 180.

16 I spent three months in Songgwangsa monastery in South Korea in the 1990's and was informed that Ta-Hui's letters were part of the curriculum studied by new monks during their first few three-month training periods. This seems to be different in Japan. In the late 1980's I spent time at Dai Shu-in, the temple of Morinaga roshi located in Kyoto. None of his monks I spoke with knew of Ta-Hui or Daie, his Japanese name. Morinaga roshi offered me a beautiful bound version of the complete works of Ta-Hui, which I refused because I do not read Japanese. He said “take it, none of the monks have any interest.”

17 See Levering, pp. 246–260 for a discussion of Ta-Hui's view of the misguided education of the *literati* and the need for Zen practice.

daily lives as laymen, so do many Zen practitioners today. In addition, most practitioners and people interested in Zen today are well educated and almost all are raised in an environment that values rational thinking, one characteristic of western traditions. People today are often afraid to give up rational thought just as Ta-Hui claimed was the case with the literati.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the existence of a growing number of people interested in spiritual practice who are not part of a sectarian practice center, specifically a Zen center. These people are spread across the country, not part of a Zen community much as the literati of the Sung Dynasty were spread across China. Whether because of personal preference or location of their home or because of their past experiences around practice centers, these people today are practicing alone or through distant communication of one sort or another, the computer and phones being the most popular means today.

My own opinion is that the *hua-t'ou* method of meditation is well suited to many Zen practitioners today. However, as mentioned above, there are two strands of Zen practice. One strand requires the belief in the need for an instant of awakening, an actual moment in time in order to fully realize what our timeless original Nature truly is. For those practitioners today who feel this way, I think the *hua-t'ou* is well suited. For those people who believe in *pen chueh*, meaning that we are perfectly enlightened from the beginning, looking for a moment of enlightenment in this life just adds trouble in the form of greed for an experience. For these people *shikantaza* (just sitting) is better suited, believing that *zazen* expresses the full endowment of realization.¹⁸ Now it is also true that people practicing *shikantaza* can and do experience a moment of awakening, it is only that it is not a point of focus from the beginning.

I also think it is suited to other people who are in mental pain or facing an existential problem and see meditation as a way to ease their suffering. When their pain starts to ease from the positive feedback of meditation, their thoughts may turn to wanting to know their true self. Though these people started from wanting to ease suffering, through the fruits of meditation their minds turn to wanting to know their true Nature through experiencing a moment of awakening.

Once familiar with the method, we do not require the many private interviews (*sanzen* or *dokusan*) with a teacher to consider the hundreds of *koans* and their accompanying

18 Leighton, Dan, "Zazen as an Enactment of Ritual," in *Zen Ritual*, ed. by Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.183. This article, based on Dogen's understanding of Zen, presents a very different understanding of Zen practice from Ta-Hui.

commentaries, at least partly in poetic form, as is the case when going through a Japanese style *koan* curriculum.

One of the important reasons for practicing the *hua-t'ou* today is that, as lay people, it allows us to practice a good part of our days, rather than just when on the cushion. Its practice really demands that we confront important issues of life, often throughout the day. The practice calls for us to work on the *hua-t'ou* throughout the day so that the doubt becomes part of our lives, a fertile doubt, at times, seemingly working below our conscious level.

Yet I want to be very clear that I do not mean to say that *hua-t'ou* practice is better than *silent illumination* favored by some Chinese affiliated Zen practitioners or *shikantaza*¹⁹ favored by the Soto sect of Zen in Japan and now in the West or going through a koan curriculum as is the case in Rinzai or Sanbokyodan Zen. It is wonderful that there are different methods of practice that are suited to individuals with different mentalities, personalities, and beliefs.

Examples of Hua-t'ou

Let us look at a few examples of well-known *hua-t'ou*:

1. "What is it?"

This *hua-t'ou* is popular with Korean teachers. It supposedly comes from an interaction between the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Hui-Neng (638–713) and a disciple.

2. "Who is repeating the Buddha's name?"

This *hua-t'ou* is popular with Chinese people who often chant Amitabha Buddha's name. Chanting Amitabha Buddha's name is a Pureland practice based on devotion and faith in the Buddha Amitabha leading to a better rebirth. The *hua-t'ou* practice of examining "Who is repeating the Buddha's name?" changes this into a Zen practice looking for awakening in this life-time.

3. "Who is dragging this corpse around?"

¹⁹ Though silent illumination and shikantaza are seemingly similar practices, I have heard Chinese affiliated people say they are different.

This *huo-t'ou* was popularized in modern times by Hsu-Yun. According to his autobiography, it was given to him by Master Yang-jing of the Tian-tai sect. Hsu-Yun gave it to many others as their first practice.²⁰

4. “Who am I?”

The famous 20th century Indian teacher Ramana Maharshi also used this phrase as a focus in meditation with his students, but he used it in a different manner.

5. “What was my original face before my father and mother were born?”

This *hua-tou* or critical phrase is taken from the words of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-Neng in the case known as “Not thinking of good or of evil.” It is also the 23rd case in the well known *koan* collection, the Mumonkan.

6. “What is Mu?”

Mu is Japanese and Wu is the Chinese for ‘no’ or ‘has not’ or ‘nothing’ or ‘empty.’ This is taken from perhaps the most famous koan case, known as Joshu’s Mu. It goes as follows, “A monk asked Joshu, ‘Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?’ Joshu replied, ‘Mu.’” Joshu is the Japanese name of Chao-Chou (778 – 897) who was a famous Chinese master. This case is often given as the first *koan* for people going through a Japanese style *koan* curriculum. This Mu or Wu is not the expected answer as according to Zen teaching all sentient beings have Buddha-nature as the monk asking the question certainly would have known. This is the first case in the Mumonkan.

In the example just given above of Joshu and “Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?” the whole story is a koan, while the *hua-t'ou* would be “no” or commonly practiced as “Mu” or “Wu.” Similarly, in example five above, the whole case of which “not thinking of good or evil, what was my original face before my father and mother were born” is only a part, the whole case is the *koan*, while when practicing with this *hua-t'ou*, “What?” is the focus. When practicing with a *hua-t'ou* one focuses all their energy on the *hua-t'ou*, which is to say, the “Who?” or “What?”, thereby bringing the discriminating tendencies of the mind to a halt.

Perhaps the first aspect to notice is that all *hua-t'ou* are questions that appear open ended. They seem more to tease or provoke our minds to look deeply into the nature of being and our

20 See *Empty Cloud: The Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master Xu Yun*, trans. by Charles Luk, revised and ed. by Richard Hunn, 1988, Element Books Limited, pp.7,8. My thanks to Chuan Zhi of the Hsu-yun Temple for this reference and for many helpful suggestions.

very own being. Another aspect to notice is that *we* are the subject of the practice, *this* body, *this* mind, not some far away being. Entering into *hua-t'ou* practice is inviting ourselves to be taunted or perhaps even tormented with a basic question of being and life. We are forcing ourselves into a situation where it is necessary to confront our very being. This is not exclusively a “feel-good” process, it can be very frustrating, frightening at times, disappointing, and boring at times. But it can also be fertile and lead to seeing our true Nature and to directly entering the world of Zen.

One Way to Practice Hua-t'ou Meditation in Zen

The short answer to how one actually does *hua-t'ou* meditation is that one concentrates on the *hua-t'ou* by silently repeating it with a questioning, unknowing, investigating, enquiring and introspecting mind, a mind of wonder. We focus at first on the whole *hua-t'ou* but once the sense of it is established, we concentrate on “Who” or “What” trying to bring the *hua-t'ou* to life, to generate doubt. That is the barest description of the method, or at least one way of doing the practice. Please keep in mind there are a number of different methods utilized for doing this practice depending on the teacher's background and personal experience.²¹ Also, we should not think that working on a *huo-t'ou* is limited to seated meditation. Just as Ta-Hui propagated the method with lay people in mind, specifically lay people holding responsible jobs, so can we consider the method applicable for any working person today. Lay people were meant to practice the method throughout their daily life while engaged in the world.

However, I think we have to back up a bit and place the practice in a larger context to actually understand how to do it in a way that can be meaningful and effective. Actually to do the practice requires us to be familiar with what is called the *Three Greats*. That is: Great Determination, Great Faith, and Great Doubt.²²

21 See “Gradual Experiences of Sudden Enlightenment: The Varieties of Ganhwa Seon Teachings in Contemporary Korea,” Ryan Bongseok Joo, paper delivered at the 2011 AAS conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. <http://international.uiowa.edu/centers/caps/documents/RyanJooAAS2011.pdf>. This is an extremely interesting and unique paper discussing the understanding and practice of ganhwa (*huo-t'ou*) practice by three leading Korean teachers. Each of the three teachers discussed has views different from the other teachers and different from the Chinese way of practicing the *hua-t'ou*.

22 Sung Bae Park, *Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment*, State University of New York Press, 1983, p. 67. The Three Greats were introduced in the 14th century by Ch'an master Kao-feng as the “three essentials of questioning practice” in his book, *Ch'an-yao* or *The Essential of Ch'an Meditation*.

Great Determination: we must be determined to see or awaken to one's true nature, who we really are. We must feel it is important and should feel a pressing and constant need to solve this problem. Much of Mahayana Buddhism, of which Zen is one branch, believes that each person has "Buddha-nature," that is, that each person is originally enlightened, albeit only a few have already realized it. That we have not awakened to this is our own doing. So this could or should make us angry or unsettled with ourselves for not realizing what our birthright is. We haven't realized this because we have been distracted by all manner of things in the world: pleasures, career, money, travel, family, sex, fame, etc. This dissatisfaction with our own state of not knowing can be a force or engine driving our determination and doubt about who we are. To heighten the desire for enlightenment, Ta-Hui and other Zen teachers over the ages have reminded their students of their approaching death.

We must be willing to spend time and energy in answering or solving this problem of who we really are, what is our true nature. It must matter to us. If we think "oh well it would be nice to awaken but if I don't, well that is OK too" then most likely with this attitude we will be lacking in motivation to make progress with the method. Or if we sit back and wait thinking, "Maybe one day I will be awakened" this too is not the best attitude for *hua-t'ou* practice. As our practice develops, we must reach a point where we must be determined to realize our true nature in a moment of awakening! Now it is also true that this determination for awakening often grows as one practices with diligence. As the practice deepens and we taste some fruit of practice, our passion for knowing- for awakening - grows. Yet it is still a step or two or three ahead of us, and we still don't know, therefore determination often becomes more intense. As determination grows and the practice deepens, at times bodily unease, irritation, frustration and disappointment with ourselves, or even anger enters the process. This is not a time to withdraw. This is just the time to forge ahead with renewed resolve.

It is important for the practitioner not to be afraid of these states or to stop or pull back. It can be helpful to know that other practitioners have also faced these problems and continued to forge ahead. In fact, the practitioner at some point must become ferocious in his determination and cut off all distracting thoughts and keep digging into the *hua-t'ou*. There is a strange sensation that can appear that makes us feel like we are in a trap; we cannot stop and back out yet going ahead seems difficult and blocked. In spite of all manner of difficulties,

one must maintain or increase one's determination to get to the bottom of the affair of who one really is, to see one's true nature.

However, as determined as we may be, once into the practice of examining the hua-t'ou in order to realize our true nature, we have to forget this idea and just wholeheartedly examine the *hua-t'ou*. If we allow thoughts about awakening to arise, or wondering how close or far we are from awakening, it can be guaranteed that awakening will never happen.

Ta-Hui placed great emphasis on what can appear as two contradictory mental attitudes in order for the practice to be successful. One was definite, absolute faith, and the other was doubt.²³ Let us look a little closer at each of these two aspects which, on the surface, may seem contradictory.

Great Faith: we must believe that the practice can be effective. That is, this is a practice that many people have done in the past and that many people do in the present; that it has worked well for them, and, importantly, that it can work well for us. We must believe this is a valid and good practice and clearly have great faith in this particular method.²⁴ In this manner, we must also believe in ourselves, have confidence that we can actually do this practice just as others have done in the past and are doing in the present. We must also have faith in ourselves and have a strong sense of being or identity. If not, we will, as Lin-Chi said, “do nothing but seek outside.”²⁵ If someone thinks that working with a *hua-t'ou* was a terrific practice for great practitioners long ago or maybe some people today but thinks “I don't know about me,” and “I am not as good a practitioner as so and so” and on like that, then this person will most likely have trouble here and not get very far with the method. We need to develop confidence in ourselves, if we want to succeed with this method.

Importantly, we should believe in our own Buddha-nature and that awakening is a birthright. We should believe that from the beginning, we are a Buddha, as is everyone else,²⁶

23 Levering , p. 283.

24 Hsu Yun, perhaps the most famous Zen master in China since the 19th century, favored *hua-t'ou* practice and also stressed the need for great faith in the method. See <http://www.hsuyun.org/chan/en/essays/bychuanzhi/759-huatoupractice.html> (date of last access: 2.6.2012). The Hsu Yun Temple website, <http://www.hsuyun.org> (date of last access: 2.6.2012) has much material from Hsu Yun and a wide assortment of articles related to practice. Of particular interest are the articles by Chuan Zhi.

25 Levering, p. 288. The full quote is, “Unwilling to have faith in the possession within your own house, you do nothing but seek outside.”

26 Park, *Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment*, p.20. Park, quoting Chinul calls this patriarchal faith, that is, believing that everyone is originally Buddha. This is opposed to doctrinal faith, which encourages people to

only we have not realized this yet. Every person essentially has Buddha-nature and has the potential to awaken to it. By applying ourselves to the practice with energy, faith in our own Buddha-mind will grow. We must develop and cultivate having confidence in our original Self-nature, having confidence in that which is not yet known with certainty. As we practice the *hua-t'ou* and get a taste for our thoughts slowing down and the *hua-t'ou* becoming alive, the belief in and determination for awakening to our Buddha-nature will become stronger. It is not blind faith! Ta-Hui wrote to one of his lay students, "Right faith and right determination are the foundations of Buddhahood."²⁷

Great Doubt: cultivating doubt is the main and key component of the practice. Lin-Chi and others placed emphasis on faith, but it was Ta-Hui's stroke of creative genius to place doubt at the core of *hua-t'ou* practice. Doubt is the beginning and end of *hua-t'ou* practice. *Hua-t'ou* meditation is entirely based on generating doubt. We need to have great faith in having Buddha-nature, that there is nothing to gain, in the sense that we are fundamentally complete from the beginning. This is necessary so that we are not looking outside for something to gain. This belief is also instrumental in generating doubt, because we do not know this with absolute certainty. Without generating doubt, we are said to be meditating on "dead words" as opposed to meditating on "live words" as when the "doubt sensation" truly arises. As the doubt rises it has the feeling of literally coming alive, it takes on an energy and life of its own, it appears spontaneously while distracting thoughts lose their power and eventually completely disappear. As the doubt sensation grows and becomes more powerful it fills our total being until there is nothing in the world but Great Doubt accompanied by great energy. It becomes like a speeding locomotive racing down the tracks. If we can stay with this state of "only doubt," in time the doubt may break open and we will realize the state of mind Zen is pointing at.

Yet Ta-Hui was not blind to the traditional Buddhist understanding of doubt as a hindrance to enlightenment. The greatest hindrance is doubt about the Way, about the Buddhist path itself. But Ta-Hui took the idea of doubt further. He believed that all doubts are in fact one doubt, and that a *hua-t'ou* is an instrument that raises doubt in our minds. He believed that if we focus all our attention on that one doubt, the *hua-t'ou* and destroy it, then all of our doubts

have faith in the principle of cause and effect (p. 19).
 27 Levering, p. 294.

would be destroyed in that singular moment.²⁸ There is a saying about hua-t'ou meditation that condenses Ta-Hui's thoughts: "small doubt, small awakening, Great Doubt great awakening, no doubt, no awakening."²⁹

Specific Advice on Working With a *Hua-T'ou*

Please keep in mind this is only *one* method that is suited to *some* people. I in no way mean to say that this is a method for everyone or that it is the best method. There are other methods that are better suited to other people. Everyone has to find a way to practice that is suited to his or her disposition and mentality.

The *hua-t'ou* method of practice however, begins and ends with raising doubt. I would also like to underline here that there are many different ways of working on a *hua-t'ou*; I am giving only one way. When I say "the *hua-t'ou* method" I mean *one* way of working with a *hua-tou*, not the *only* way. However, common to every way on working with a *hua-to'ou* I have ever heard mentioned, as well as from my own personal experience, raising doubt and then cultivating small doubt into Great Doubt is the key to experiencing awakening. Though below, I mention a number of different mental states that can arise, each person's experience will be different. One should not compare and measure one's experience of the practice to others, but rather, focus all one's energy on the *hua-t'ou*, giving one's self over to the method completely. Do not be concerned with someone else's food. I only mention some mental states so that people should know these states may arise and that there is no reason to panic or think something especially strange or unique is happening.

To be absolutely clear, in this method we concentrate on, examine, question, and look into our *hua-t'ou* with the intention of cultivating doubt. But it is important "not to turn to externals and give rise to other doubts. Doubt can destroy doubts, but only if all of our doubting energy is totally focused on this one doubt and we can raise the doubt sensation. That is the function of the *hua-t'ou*."³⁰

An important aspect of any meditation practice is breathing. In fact, there are many forms of meditation that focus, in one way or another, primarily on the breath. With *hua-t'ou*

28 Schlutter, p. 109.

29 Levering, p. 301. One's enlightenment will be in proportion to one's doubt: "A great doubt must be followed by a great enlightenment."

30 Levering, p. 302.

practice, though breath is not the primary focus, we still need to breathe. I recommend NOT to synchronize your breath with questioning or asking the *hua-t'ou*. This can lead to breathing problems and to straining and tightening in the body and often in the face. Some people will even tighten their facial muscles and grind their teeth. This should definitely be avoided. If you become aware of tight muscles, especially facial muscles and teeth grinding, then stop examining the *hua-t'ou*. Instead, pay attention to relaxing the tight muscles. When the muscles are relaxed continue to examine the *hua-t'ou*. Keep a relaxed though unknowing and questioning attitude. Approach the *hua-t'ou* as friend or as someone we want to know, who as yet we do not understand. There is no need to look at the *hua-t'ou* as an enemy we are attacking and who we will destroy. Most likely with that attitude we will exhaust ourselves and cause all manner of problems for ourselves. There is no need to force the process, as with steady and continual uninterrupted questioning, eventually the doubt will arise and generate its own energy and power.

So, gently ask or enquire into the *hua-t'ou* constantly. Do not allow wandering thoughts to arise in the spaces between asking the *hua-t'ou*, while trying to maintain the sense of doubt or unknowing. Keep asking in a smooth and uninterrupted manner. We do not need to speed up the asking of the *hua-t'ou* in order to reduce the space between our questioning. That method too easily leads to treating the *hua-t'ou* like a mantra. The important point is not to have thoughts come into the spaces between enquiring into the *hua-t'ou*. The size of the space between asking the *hua-t'ou* is not important as long as you maintain the sense of the *hua-t'ou* and thoughts do not enter.³¹

With the *hua-t'ou* method, if we can stay focused on examining or looking into or investigating the *hua-t'ou*, thoughts will begin to subside and lose their power to drag us along into their drama, so to speak. All our thoughts have a sense of “me” as a basis – *me* thinking of the past or the future or some slight or some anticipated joy and so on. As in many forms of meditation, a focus on one point, here the *hua-t'ou*, can quiet the mind. We should focus on the “Who?” or “What?” with a questioning or unknowing mind and let the other thoughts drop away. Definitely do not follow the thoughts and get into the thought process and create a chain of thoughts and stories. If you do get caught in a chain of thoughts, when you realize this, just gently drop them and come back to the *hua-t'ou* with a gentle and questioning mind and a relaxed body.

31 Sheng Yen, *Shattering the Great Doubt*, Shambala, 2009, pp. 83-90.

States of Mind That May Arise During *Hua-T'ou* Practice

For people early on in *hua-t'ou* meditation, answers will present themselves but these should all be rejected as any kind of final result, no matter how wise or compassionate they may seem. Acknowledge them as seeds of truth that will continue to germinate as you continue the practice. This often happens in the beginning because it seems natural or is easy to focus on the meaning or to want to know the meaning, that is, our intellect is the first tool we tackle the problem with. This reaction eventually stops. This is a desired state though not always so pleasant. When the answers stop appearing, the *hua-t'ou* may appear tasteless, flat and boring yet the Doubt has still not become alive. It is called "tasteless" because there is nothing for the discriminating mind to attach to.³² The focus should then become strictly on the word: the "Who?" or the "What?" The student however, must continue on despite the *hua-t'ou* appearing tasteless. Examining the *hua-t'ou* for meaning is sometimes referred to as the "dead word," as it is composed of conceptual understanding. When the *hua-t'ou* is being examined just as a word itself, it is referred to as the live word." The "live word" is a weapon that can destroy the defects of conceptualization. Investigation of the word alone allows no intellectual understanding, so is more difficult.

This may be a good place to mention that as the mind quiets and wandering thoughts become fewer and those thoughts have less power to gain our attention, we are also losing the sense of the world and our place in that world that we create in our minds. That is, we construct the world with our thoughts and make our place in the world this way. I can think that I will meet my friend next week and run an errand later tonight and go to work in the morning and talk to my wife and so on. This is pretty normal and this is who we think we are. It is satisfying as it lets us know in a way who and what we are in the world. It is not however completely satisfying as we are still uncertain of our essential nature and often leaves us with a nagging feeling of uncertainty and doubt of who we really are. It is precisely this nagging undercurrent of doubt that is to be cultivated in the *hua-t'ou* method. Many people learn to cover over pretty well this nagging undercurrent of doubt by many means, even with meditation, but that is to be absolutely avoided. Again, it is this feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing with certainty who we really are that must be cultivated in the *hua-t'ou* method. It is

³² Buswell, 1983, p. 68.

necessary to make this “Who?” or “What?” into a living word, so that a small, often only an occasional nagging doubt becomes a living Great Doubt to destroy all our doubts.

As the mind quiets and wandering thoughts cease or lose their power to attract, this can be scary as one feels lost, even losing a sense of being a person. Depending on how strong a sense of self we have and how much and how quickly the *hua-t'ou* has become alive and thoughts have dropped away will determine how we react to this state. This happens at different places in the process with different people. With some people it happens very quickly, before the doubt has any real power. It seems these people become too rattled or unsettled, becoming psychologically troubled. The *hua-tou* may not be the best practice for these people. With others, it happens only well along in the process, but it is something that most, if not all, people will have to encounter. We enter a situation where the wandering thoughts have lost their power or have slowed almost completely, or have ceased. The *hua-t'ou* becomes alive and is going by itself, while the Doubt is rising quite spontaneously and quickly, but now we no longer have the mental markers mentioned above telling us of our place in the world. All the planning for tomorrow or thoughts about what we did last week, that is, our ordinary thinking processes that also gives us our mentally constructed sense of who we are, are gone. Our ordinary ideas of who and what we are no longer clearly present or they are there only in a very faint form. The mind of rational thought and of distinctions is no longer functioning. At the same time, the Doubt is alive and going by itself, often with much force. This can be very frightening indeed - the feeling being that we will just go ZAPP!, drop into a black hole and be no more, never to return. A great fear of falling into emptiness can arise with the feeling that we will just disappear. It is common I think for most people to stop the process at this point because they are scared. There are many ways to do this: just raising a thought of any kind or entertaining the idea that we are going to take a short break and will continue shortly, or laughing, or thinking some very compassionate or other elevated thought, or some thought of gratefulness towards someone or situation, or crying for whatever reason and so on. Often these thoughts will be or sound elevated or spiritual, but in the end their purpose is to stop the fear. Unfortunately it always works! That is, it brings back a sense of the self. However, it is rare that we will immediately be able to return to the concentrated state we were in when the fear got the best of us. The power and energy gained through continual and lively practice will be lost at this time.

However, going through this process a number of times, maybe many times, can make us more determined not to stop next time, more determined to get past the fright when it arises again, more frustrated or angry with ourselves for stopping short of realizing who we really are. We mustn't give up or stop because of fear getting the best of us. To maintain the practice and to actually increase our determination in spite of stopping because of fear, I think is one of the reasons why it is so important to cultivate great faith. Great faith being belief in our original Buddha-nature, belief in the efficacy of the *hua-t'ou* method and belief in and confidence that we too can awaken to our nature.

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that we can be satisfied too easily. After gaining some power and sense of well being, we can become satisfied with ourself. We lose the drive, the vigor or need to really see who we are. Perhaps we lose the determination necessary to confront and once again go through the fear of falling into emptiness. It is similar to being satisfied with a car running on three cylinders when it really has six cylinders.

Another possibility is as the mind quiets and thoughts lose their power to attract and pretty much stop, then one can enter very pleasurable states, states of calm and a sense of purity, or slip into a state of stillness, peace with an accompanying sense of control. Though often we hear that in Buddhist meditation peaceful, still, and pleasurable states are desired, in the context of *hua-t'ou* practice we should not let ourselves be side-tracked by these satisfying states where the *hua-t'ou* is lost; be aware that these pleasures can be extremely enchanting and enjoyable. These pleasurable states and silent and peaceful states can be very captivating and in fact, be very difficult to leave once entered. Though these states show that the mind has settled and is stable, we must not forget that the *hua-t'ou* method is based on raising doubt. Resting in inviting or pure feeling states are not a condition of doubt, or useful for raising doubt. These states should be recognized as they arise, but not lingered in, because they are very seductive, but they do not allow for raising the doubt. Hence, it is best for these states to be avoided for one using the *hua-t'ou* method. However pleasurable and stable these conditions are, from the point of view of *hua-t'ou* practice, they are a waste of time.

In addition, since many practitioners are laypeople living active lives, there may be a desire to escape the daily pressures of worldly life and retreat into silence and stillness, really withdrawal from the world. But stillness that is the opposite of motion, quietness understood as the opposite of disturbance, is merely an illusion of quietness, it is not a truly peaceful mind. A practice seeking quietness is actually a form of attachment to the present moment and

state of mind. This is sometimes referred to as *entering the ghost cave*. Ta-Hui, in a letter to a student, mentions that the problem with quiet sitting is not the practice itself, but that the stillness of mind may be taken for the ultimate Principle itself.³³ Ta-Hui saw a retreat into silence and stillness as a particular problem for people busy and under pressure in the world. He feared that when they “obtain a state of having no trouble in their breasts, they grasp onto this state and think it is the highest final peace and joy...”³⁴ In fact, I knew a man who had a demanding technical job in the computer field. He also had the ability to go into silent and still states for hours at a time. In a way that is similar to the situation that Ta-Hui warned about, this fellow wrongly insisted this was Zen enlightenment.

Another point worth mentioning here is that when doing *hua-t'ou* practice from moment to moment we do not know what will be next. I think it is important to be comfortable with that thought. When meditating, if things are not going well, or if we feel tired or agitated or whatever, we should not think this is a waste of time, maybe I'll stop now and try again later or tomorrow. Just come back to the method, whatever the method. In a flash, that state can change. It is impossible to know what the next moment will be! We can begin being tired or foggy or agitated or feeling sick or ordinary and a moment later the mind we will be focused and clear and vice versa. In accepting that we do not know what the next moment will bring, we will feel less pressure to judge our meditation, we will get used to uncertainty which is an aspect of life, we will continue to stay with the *hua-t'ou* though there is no clear roadmap, and will to a degree short-circuit the logical problem solving mind.

Though we look at the “Who?” or “What?” with a questioning mind, we should also want to know - be determined to resolve the doubt raised by the *hua-t'ou*. Ta-Hui in fact reminded his students of their impending death and their not knowing who they are in order to make them feel the need to break through their *hua-t'ou*. It can, however, not be figured out by the rational mind – unlike knowing what X is in the equation $XY + Y = 124$ if $Y = 6$. As mentioned above, early in the process, seemingly rational answers will often appear, however, they must be rejected. Nevertheless, we must have faith that the *hua-t'ou* is a question that can be resolved and that it is important to solve it. We should think that it is the *hua-t'ou* that will answer us, not us answering it.³⁵ There is really no secret trick to the practice. We just keep probing deeper and deeper, giving up “discussion and thought,” asking and asking and we

33 Levering, p. 270.

34 Levering, p. 264.

35 Shifu Sheng Yen in oral instructions.

will reach a place that Ta-Hui describes as a place “with no place to put one’s foot or hand.” He says, people “won’t believe that where there is no place to put one’s hands and feet is really a good situation.”³⁶ We must keep probing, and should not be satisfied until the doubt grows into Great Doubt and that doubt consumes all of us, until there is nothing but Doubt. The faintest or subtlest clinging to a self must be dropped. Everything aside from Doubt must be dropped completely, totally abandoned. Ta-Hui says, “all at once, annihilate every splendid thing.”³⁷ If one can stay with this great Doubt, this all-consuming Doubt, in time, in an instant it may finally break apart and collapse and open to the world of Zen.

Most importantly, we must put away any thought which waits for or anticipates awakening or a breakthrough to occur. All we need to do is keep coming back to the *hua-t'ou*. After all, any such thought that anticipates awakening is based on a thought of the self. If we hold onto a thought that waits for an awakening, that awakening will never come! We need to put down all thoughts, all logical discriminations, all thoughts of good and evil, love and hate, liking life and fearing death, all thoughts of “I” no matter how subtle that thought may be, of understanding, of views, and of knowledge, all pleasure in stillness or clinging to purity or turning away from disturbance. Absolutely everything must be put away until only doubt remains.

As was stated earlier, *hua-t'ou* practice is not only about seated meditation. We should keep or examine the doubt as much as is possible. But I would like to add a strong caveat, that is, as most people live in cities with cars and traffic and other elements that call for alertness, we also have to be sensible and responsible when practicing. This caveat cannot be stated too strongly. We should NOT investigate our *hua-t'ou* when driving a car or any vehicle, when walking in a busy traffic situation or when riding a bicycle or using a dangerous machine or anything similar to that. I know someone who did not take this caveat seriously and rode her bicycle into the side of a car while looking into her *hua-t'ou*. Luckily she did not get hurt too badly, but badly enough. In fact, this woman was lucky she did not get killed. Please, if we decide to do this practice, do it wisely.

Yes, as our environment allows it, we should keep investigating the *hua-t'ou* as constantly as our situation permits. I have found there is a certain power to the investigation when done during eating or going to the bathroom. I have also found it particularly fruitful is to keep

36 Cleary, Christopher, Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui, Grove Press, 1977, p. 57.

37 Buswell, 1983, p. 249.

investigating the *hua-t'ou* while lying in bed going to sleep - when having done this, it is not uncommon to wake in the morning with the *hua-t'ou* running in my mind. At times this has made me feel uneasy, to wake from sleep in a state of doubt with the *hua-t'ou* running on its own.

Personal Experience Practicing the *Hua-T'ou*

Another state of mind that may arise is anger. In my own case I can think of times of anger arising. One example was on a group retreat - probably the fifth night of a seven day retreat. At this place the teacher, Shifu Sheng Yen gave a talk each night for about 45 minutes. On this particular night, he mentioned the word "ego" and then he kept on talking. About fifteen or so minutes later he ended his talk and we began to meditate for the night period. As soon as I started to sit, the word "ego" popped into my mind and I thought something like, "What a crock of shit that word is. It doesn't mean anything!" I was literally furious at the word or idea and kept repeating it and silently screaming, "it is bullshit, it is bullshit." Somehow, I then switched to the *hua-t'ou* and all the energy and anger moved over to the *hua-t'ou*. I was totally concentrated and energized then on the *hua-t'ou*, the anger and energy focused in the doubt. Immediately there was nothing but doubt, everything else fell away but this driving, forceful Doubt. At some point it just broke open. I don't know how long I stayed in that state. At some point the thought appeared, "I have to leave this now." Just then the bell rang to end the last meditation period of the night.

This state continued after the bell rang although I recognized people and the meditation hall itself. It was just that everything felt easy and appeared clear and also a bit funny or amusing. We then had a short closing service which was done at the end of each night. I went to Shifu and told him I wanted to see him in private. We went into a separate room and he asked me what happened, I told him, upon which he asked me a few questions which I don't remember now except that they were easy to answer. They were easy to answer because it was clear, there was no figuring, just answering.³⁸ He confirmed my experience. This is called "seeing the nature" in Shifu Sheng Yen's tradition.

38 See "Gradual Experiences of Sudden Enlightenment: The Varieties of Ganhwa Seon Teachings in Contemporary Korea," by Ryan Bongseok Joo, paper delivered at the 2011, AAS conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. The three modern Korean Zen teachers discussed in this paper seem concerned with the state of the student before the awakening moment rather than after, as is common with Japanese and Chinese Zen

On another occasion, I was doing a seven day retreat alone in my apartment. During the afternoon sitting of the fifth or sixth day things seemed to be quite stable. About an hour into the afternoon somewhat quickly a driving anger arose into the *hua-t'ou*. I was angry, really furious at not knowing, at the doubt about the *hua-t'ou*. It got progressively stronger and energetic and driving. Everything but doubt was completely gone – there was only raging doubt. I don't know how long that lasted but sometime late in the day it just exploded open.

What was this experience of the *hua-t'ou* breaking open? The experience was of emptiness, emptiness of what or who I considered myself to be and emptiness of others and things. At some point it seemed very funny to have taken myself as all that I thought I was. The same view applied for others. It seemed completely ridiculous or comically foolish that I had done so. It was exactly as the Heart Sutra states, “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” It was a stark realization that the Heart Sutra was really describing things just as they are. It was also clear that there was nothing to attain, so what had been the big struggle? This also seemed amusing. It seemed like an ever abiding present - there was no time.

The first state of anger I described above happened many years ago so I would not like to go into too much detail. In the Zen tradition these states are not described in detail and definitely not clung to. I've had experiences before this that are essentially completely forgotten. Clinging to the experience and remembering it is a form of living in the past instead of moving with life. We can also fall into trying to repeat the experience again, recreate it, but that also is trying to relive the past. Some of the experience remains though in most cases, in time it is not what it originally was. What seemed to remain the most in this case was a connection to the world - a sense of intimacy or being in the world. However, in some sense it became a memory. This was a minor experience on the Zen path, though it is important to have direct experiences. Besides having a direct experience of what Zen is about, these experiences are important because they strengthen our faith in the teaching (the Dharma) and faith in the practice. After having direct experiences, Zen is no longer blind faith or based on something that seems correct or reasonable. Nor is it the philosophy or the teachings and catchy stories. Rather, Zen is now digested. It is in our bones and Zen has taken root. We know that what the Zen tradition is talking about and pointing at is real. This is faith itself as the Dharma manifests in us, the awareness of Mind itself.

traditions, where the student is given “checking questions” to determine the depth of their experience.

After a Zen awakening, the *hua-t'ou* seems to lose all its power, at least for a time. That is a common experience. It was impossible to raise any sense of doubt, so when I sat I did *shikantaza* (just sitting). I would try the *hua-t'ou* periodically but I think it was a week or two before any sense of the doubt sensation arose. I am pretty sure that after two weeks I was working on the same *hua-t'ou* again. I believe this is common in Chinese and Korean Zen, that is, to stay with the same *hua-t'ou* after having a Zen experience.³⁹ The hope is that one will have a deeper experience at a later date. From this perspective one *hua-t'ou* is as good as another. This is different from Japanese Rinzai Zen and the new Sanbokyodan Zen sect popular in the West where students go through a koan course or curriculum composed of maybe 200 or 300 or more koans as well as other material. However, going through a koan course does not mean someone actually has an awakening while working on each koan. There is a certain being moved along in the curriculum, learning to talk in a Zen way, gaining an intellectual view of the koans, and keeping a written notebook about the koans containing material mostly coming from the private interviews (Jp., *sanzen* or *dokusan*) with the teacher, no doubt for future reference.

Hakuin, the famous 18th century reviver of Japanese Rinzai Zen is said to have had fifteen major experiences and something like seventy minor experience before he “put the rhinoceros to rest.” The Chinese master Ta-Hui also had many experiences and was asked to take over a large monastery but refused because he still had some questions about his practice. We should not make too much of small openings or even many openings. The important point is how well the practice and awakening becomes integrated into our life and becomes living Zen. All too often we have seen how that has not been the case with Zen in the West over the last forty-five years, instead it is often seen mostly as an activity while “sitting on a cushion” with little attention paid to integrating it into daily life or what that means.

Meaning of Zen Awakening

As for “seeing the nature” Zen writings refer to having a “no-self” experience, which is the experience that I talked about above. Previously, I described it in terms of seeing clearly that “form is emptiness” and so on. Those ideas came to me quickly after the bell. They seemed

³⁹ Levering, p.310. Though Ta-Hui never recommends changing your *hua-t'ou* after an awakening to deepen an insight, he in fact changed his *hua-t'ou* under direction from his teacher Yuan-Wu and had a more profound experience.

funny and amusing because it seemed so simple and so very obvious. It was a joy of recognizing something that had always been there but not seen so clearly. From one point of view, this is considered the beginning of practice. It should definitely not be considered the culmination of practice!

The second example given above of the energy from rising anger during meditation leading to the *hua t'ou* breaking open was not so much a “no-self” experience, though that was there, but rather, as seeing the world as a totally interconnected dynamic web of all phenomena. It was seeing the world of people and objects and emptiness as interconnected and interpenetrating each other. I also remember with this experience that physically much heat and sweat was generated leading up to the breaking open the *hua-t'ou*. I also feel this experience was a deeper realization than just realizing the emptiness of self and others and things.

Interestingly, some people mistake a “oneness” experience for “seeing the nature.” This is a very big mistake though not uncommon, and it is also not uncommon for people perceiving “oneness” to then cling to this experience. “Oneness” is actually a step away from “no-self,” though it is a big step to take. In “oneness” there is a sense that we are one with the universe. There is usually a wonderful feeling accompanying this experience and it is easy to get very taken with it. However, no matter how subtle the self or sense of “I” may be at this time, and that can be quite subtle, there is still a self, and a universe to be one with. The next and important step of letting go of a subtle self can be very difficult. In Zen parlance this is sometimes referred to as taking a step off the top of a hundred foot pole.

Ta-Hui's Ten Defects of Hua-t'ou Practice

Above I mentioned a number of states that arise and instructions on how to examine a *hua-t'ou*. Ta-Hui at one point condensed his instructions for working on the *hua-t'ou* by giving what we call the Ten Defects in working on the “Mu” *hua-t'ou*:⁴⁰

“As long as the affective consciousnesses have not been destroyed, the fire in the heart will continue to rage. Keep your attention of the *hua-t'ou* at all times and deepen the doubt toward it. You should always be concerned with keeping this question [the *hua-*

40 The “Mu” *hua-t'ou* is: “Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not? Joshu (Chao-chou, Ch.) replied: Mu! (not!).”

t'ou] before you and your attention always focused. From the left you cannot get to it; from the right you cannot get to it.”

Ta-Hui then went on to list the Ten Defects related to working with the “Mu” *hua-t'ou*, which apply to practicing with all *hua-t'ou*.

1. You should not understand it to mean yes or no.
2. You should not take it to be the no of true nonexistence.
3. You should not consider it in relation to doctrine.
4. You should not ponder over it logically at the mind consciousness base.
5. You should not think the master is explaining the *hua-t'ou* when he raises his eyebrows or twinkles his eyes.
6. You should not devise stratagems for resolving the *hua-t'ou* through the use of speech.
7. You should not busy yourself inside the tent of unconcern.
8. You should not consider the *hua-t'ou* at the place where you raise it to your attention.
9. You should not look for evidence in the wording.
10. You should not grasp at a deluded state, simply waiting for enlightenment.

”Once the mind is without any abiding place, do not fear falling into emptiness. It is certain to be a good place there” says Ta-Hui.⁴¹

Chinul, the 12th century revitalizer of Korean Zen and Korea’s first great proponent of *hua-t'ou* practice comments on the above adding that “once a student has been given this sort of explanation and has been given his *hua-t'ou*, he should then merely raise it to his attention and investigate it during the twelve periods of the day and in all four postures ... If there is even one thought left of knowledge or conceptual understanding regarding the Buddha-dharma, he is enmeshed in the ten defects of understanding.”⁴² Chinul refers to defect # 3 as creating “the obstacle of understanding.”⁴³ This is exactly what I have been saying earlier in the paper, that any kind of rational thought or conceptual understanding has to be put aside and one should only be concerned with examining the *hua-t'ou*, examining the word and raising the doubt.

41 Buswell, 1983, p. 246.

42 Buswell, 1983, pp. 245, 246. Chinul being Korean used the word *hwadu* as did Robert Buswell, the translator, but to keep the discussion consistent, I have replaced the Korean *hwadu* with the Chinese *hua-t'ou*.

43 Buswell, 1983, p. 240.

Chinul later adds advice for Zen practitioners of *hua-t'ou*, "Straight off, they take up a tasteless *hua-t'ou* and be concerned only with raising it to their attention and focusing on it. He importantly notes that they should "stay clear of any idea of a time sequence in which views, learning, understanding or conduct are to be developed."⁴⁴ *Hua-t'ou* is a sudden practice meaning one does not understand or awake to it half or three quarters. Awakening to the *hua-t'ou* happens in an instant. However, there are depths to the awakening and certainly levels of integration into our life.

Ta-Hui, Chinul and more recently, the famous modern Chinese master, Hsu-Yun⁴⁵ instructed their students in very much the same way, which is the way I have practiced and described it in this paper. Take up the *hua-t'ou* and raise it to your attention as much as is possible throughout the day, while dropping all ideas we have about knowledge and truth and conceptual understanding. In a sense, we must give up our intelligence and embrace not knowing, ignorance. We must forget or lay aside all our ideas of truth, all our external knowledge and search inside for our own minds. It is also mandatory to "stay clear" of any ideas of development of understanding in time, as stated above. There is nothing left to do but focus on the *hua-t'ou*, to investigate the word. This is the way to the "truthless ultimate truth."⁴⁶

Some Concluding Remarks and Cautions

Early in this paper I discussed Ta-Hui, the leading exponent of *hua-t'ou* practice in Sung dynasty China and his lay students, referred to as literati. I also mentioned that the literati did not have much contact with Ta-Hui and the contact they did have was through mail, probably fairly slow in China at that time. I also mentioned that I thought *hua-t'ou* practice was very well suited today to certain western lay practitioners of Zen. In particular, though not limited to, it is well suited to certain experienced meditators who for whatever reason are not part of a Zen center. This is a growing but largely unknown group of people. I think it is a practice well

44 Buswell, 1983, p. 250.

45 Luk, Charles, *Chan and Zen Teachings, First Series*, Rider and Co., 1960. See pp. 19 - 109 for Hsu-yun's teaching on *hua-t'ou* practice and talks given at two- one week retreats in Shanghai in 1953.

46 Buswell, 1983, p. 251, Chinul quotes the Korean monk Wonhyo, a famous contemporary of Chinul. Wonhyo was the most prolific Zen writer in history. Wonhyo traveled back and forth to China and was an influential force in Chinese Buddhism. A project is underway to translate all of his extant works into English. Prof. Buswell is in charge of the project.

suiting to people who are part of a Zen group as well, but that must be worked out in the context of the center and its teacher.

For those working on their own it would be good to have some contact with someone familiar with the practice to discuss whatever aspect that comes up that is perplexing for you or which you would like to discuss with someone. Finding a good spiritual friend, a *kalyanamitra* can be very helpful. *Hua-t'ou* practice for the most part doesn't really take much discussion, once one understands the basics. Nevertheless, I think it is good to have another person to speak with. However, for people new or newer to meditation having someone to talk with is more important. In either case, books are also a good place to look, again especially so for beginners. Below, I list a few books I recommend specifically in relation to *hua-t'ou* practice.

Again, this practice is suited for people who believe strongly in their innate true-nature or Buddha-nature, are determined to realize this innate nature at a given time in this very life, believe in their ability to do so, that the *hua-t'ou* is a good method for doing so, and finally, are determined to actually work towards this goal. To this end, a few words are needed to place actual awakening in a bigger context. For instance, is awakening to one's innate nature the end of practice? How does one judge the maturity or immaturity of one's insight? These are just two of many questions that arise in Zen practice.

Many of us in the West have been attracted to Zen first, because we desired an end to suffering, and secondly, as our suffering lessened, because of a wish or desire for freedom and independence that practice and awakening promises. And indeed, Zen practice and awakening can alleviate our suffering and deliver this freedom and independence, to one degree or another. However, it is not as simple as many of us originally may have thought or wished. Zen stories are filled with an encounter between a master and a disciple which in an instant the disciple is enlightened or awakened. That is often presented as the end of the story. We also know and hear of Dharma transmission and people being given the title roshi or Zen master, empowering these sanctioned people by their participation in a Zen lineage and the mythology accompanying it. This leads others to think that institutional sanctioning implies a complete or near complete enlightenment. This virtually is never the case, but rather to a large extent, Zen sanctioning is an institutional necessity to keep the lineage alive, to spread a lineage, to fulfill the need for a teacher and so on. These teachers may be able to help people

with their *hua-t'ou* practice, but maybe not. But certainly they have not finished the path.⁴⁷ This is to say, for all practitioners, there needs to be vigilance with our practice, almost more so after an awakening, when inflated thoughts of self and our attainment have a way of creeping in. Fortunately, many teachers from the past were well aware of this need.

Ta-Hui in China and Chinul in Korea were also concerned with these post-awakening problems and questions, as were other well-known teachers of the time. Without going into a long discussion of different ideas of practice, Zen mostly follows a scheme known as “sudden awakening/gradual cultivation.”⁴⁸ That is, though awakening happens suddenly, there still remain strong habit energies or selfish tendencies or karma or however one chooses to label tendencies that do not disappear because of one awakening or even many awakenings. Chinul names these initial awakenings as “understanding-awakening” where there is a clear comprehension of nature and characteristics in which one has clearly comprehended the mind-nature. So while the student may have the correct understanding, his practice would be too immature to act consistently enlightened. He would need gradual cultivation to counter his defiled tendencies and to cultivate wholesome qualities.⁴⁹ This calls for focusing on integrating the awakening insight into each aspect of one’s daily life.

But some people think otherwise, become infatuated with the level of their awakening or think they are above everyone else because of their awakening experience or with the power imputed to them by Zen institutional titles and authority, and they let the power and authority go to their heads. Some think because they have seen their nature they are free to act as they please. However, this can cause suffering for oneself and for others. It has led to many

47 I have a number of papers on the internet that discuss problems related to Zen’s institutional sanctioning and to a large measure, misleading people as to the meaning of Dharma transmission and of the titles Zen master and roshi. <Lachs.inter-link.com> . For an important paper discussing Dharma transmission, especially so as related to Soto Zen, see, Bodiford, William M., “Dharma Transmission in Theory and Practice,” in Zen Rituals, ed. by Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 261-279.

48 I think in part the problem of post awakening practice in Zen comes from the Lin-Chi (Rinzai, Jp.) sect’s ideological stance of sudden awakening/sudden cultivation which holds that in the sudden awakening experience, the path is fully completed, hence the term sudden cultivation. I think this is mostly an ideological stance maintaining the superiority of Zen’s sudden approach over the gradual approach of other sects of Buddhism. Hence we see little or no talk of ethics or in developing wholesome qualities. However, Hakuin, Ta-Hui, Chinul, and Hsu-Yun all cultivated after their initial experiences and had other awakening experiences after an initial awakening, as have almost every other famous Zen person. Songchol, a recently deceased leading Korean Zen teacher was rare in that he maintained the sudden enlightenment/sudden cultivation view, but he was very demanding in what he considered sudden enlightenment.

49 Buswell, Jr., Robert E., “Pojo Chinul and Kanhwa Son: Reconciling the Language of Moderate and Radical Subitism,” in Zen Buddhist Rhetoric in China, Korea, and Japan, ed. by Christoph Anderl, p. 347, Leiden: Brill, 2012.

unfortunate problems for individuals and for Zen centers in western Zen over a period of forty-five years. I think more emphasis on embodying and integrating the insight is called for.

Perhaps the most direct clear warning discussing the level of one's maturity in the practice is seen in Chinul quoting the famous Zen and Hua-Yen teacher Tsung-Mi (780-841):

“If the manifesting formations are not yet severed and the defilements and habit-energies persist, or whatever you see leads to passion and whatever you encounter produces impediments, then although you have understood the meaning of the nonarising state, your power is still insufficient. You should not grasp at that understanding and say, “I have already awakened to the fact that the nature of the defilements is void,” for later when you decide to cultivate, your practice will, on the contrary, become inverted. Of course, the nature of defilements is void, but they can still cause you to feel the results of karma. That karmic result might have no nature, but still it acts as the cause of suffering. Although the pain of suffering is empty, how difficult it is to bear! Hence it should be clear that *if words and actions are contradictory, the correctness or incorrectness of one's practice can be verified* [emphasis mine]. Measure the strength of your faculties; you cannot afford to deceive yourself. Examine your thoughts and guard against error; you must be absolutely thorough in this!”⁵⁰

This warning not to cling to some awakening experience as the end of practice is very clear and straightforward. We must measure our actions, be aware of our habit-energies, and be clear with ourselves as to how we act and think as we encounter the world. This is our practice so of course we must examine our thoughts and actions and must be “absolutely thorough in this!” In simple terms, to repeat Tsung-Mi's words “if words and actions are contradictory, the correctness or incorrectness of one's practice can be verified.” With this simple line, we can clearly tell the maturity of our practice.⁵¹

50 Buswell, 1983, p. 305.

51 At times what appears to many as self-serving behavior by teachers has been explained away as “crazy wisdom,” the actions of supposed highly enlightened beings that only seem self-serving because ordinary folk cannot understand so highly evolved people. I hazard to say that people this highly enlightened are extremely rare, the proverbial needle in the haystack at best. I find it interesting that virtually all of this supposed behavior labeled “crazy wisdom” seems to bring pleasure to and to serve the needs of the wise one acting so, often to the detriment of others and themselves. Similar behavior displayed by other people would be called self-serving, a weakness or an addiction of some sort.

Chinul goes on to add the need for a vow of compassion. “After the understanding gained through awakening is achieved, one should contemplate the sufferings of sentient beings through discriminative wisdom and make the vow of compassion.”⁵² In Mahayana, for wisdom to be liberating it must also be compassionate. In a sense then, our practice becomes a practice not for ourselves, but for others.

Chinul chides those who after having an awakening declare the nature of the defilements are void and then fall into a carefree attitude. He talks of these people not having “shame” when they make karma producing acts. He calls this the “contamination of conceit” and that their “vigor and willpower are entirely lacking.”⁵³ Later he adds, “although the approaches to cultivation are incalculable, loving-kindness and forbearance are their origin.” Chinul mentions cultivating compassion, loving-kindness and forbearance as wholesome qualities. We can add generosity, morality and diligence to the list.⁵⁴

I think by taking seriously the words of these teachers from earlier times quoted above and applying them thoroughly, we can tell the maturity or immaturity of our practice, whether it is *hua-t'ou* or any other practice. By taking the words of these long dead Zen teachers to heart, we can avoid the “contamination of conceit.”

Recommended Reading

Buswell, Robert, The Collected Works of Chinul, University of Hawaii Press, 1983.

Especially relevant are pages 238 – 261, “Resolving Doubts About Observing the Hwadu” and pages 262- 374, “Excerpts From the Dharma Collection and Special Practice Record with Personal Notes.” The book is a treasure for Zen practitioners.

Buswell’s “Introduction” and extensive notes to each chapter are especially rewarding. Sadly, the book is out of print but available from libraries.

52 Buswell, 1983, p. 308.

53 Buswell, 1983, p. 310.

54 The Six *Paramitas*, the perfections to reach the other shore (Buddhahood): giving (*dana*), morality (*shila*), patience (*kshanti*), diligence (*virya*), meditation (*dhyana*), and wisdom (*prajna*) are basic to all of Mahayana Buddhism. Zen however places most importance on wisdom with its emphasis on formal meditating together as a group, seven day or longer meditation retreats, and daily meditation. In addition, the emphasis on wisdom can be seen in the daily morning and evening chanting of the Heart Sutra, a condensation of the vast body of wisdom (*Prajna*) literature. In fact, there is little institutional concern with regards to activities not related to meditation and wisdom. The *koan* collections along with the Collected Sayings (*yulu*) literature, which so define Zen, are overwhelmingly concerned with wisdom. I think there may be an institutional weakness in Zen, at least as it has come to the west, by and large from Japan, in that developing wholesome qualities are not given enough attention or even valued. The rhetoric that idealizes the actions of Zen Masters also clouds the issue.

- Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta-Hui, tran. by J.C. Cleary, Shambhala, 2006. This is a collection mostly of Ta-Hui's letters to his literati students. Unfortunately, the book only contains Ta-Hui's replies without the letters he is replying to. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained by reading his replies. The letter exchanges of Ta-Hui and his students are studied to this day in Korean monasteries.
- Luk, Charles, Chan and Zen Teaching, First Series, Rider and Company, 1969, see pp. 19 – 48 for a discussion of hua-t'ou practice. See pp. 49 – 109 for Hsu-yun's daily lecture given at two one week retreats in Shanghai, in 1953.
- Batchelor, Stephen, The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty, Parallax Press, 1990. I recommend the whole book but especially see pp.19 – 36 for a discussion of the hua-t'ou, "What is it" and pp. 37- 58, "Questioning."
- Kusan Sunim, The Way of Korean Zen, translated by Martine Fages, Weatherhill, 1985. Especially relevant are pp. 59 – 72, "Instructions for meditation." This section includes Kusan's short commentary on the Ten Diseases (Defects) of Ta-Hui.
- Sung Bae Park, Buddhist Faith and Sudden Enlightenment, Suny University of New York Press, 1983.
- Sheng Yen, Shattering the Great Doubt: The Chan Practice of Huatou, Shambhala. 2009. There is some good advice here, but there is also much repeating of Chan sectarian mythology as fact. He also presents stages in the practice which for analytic type people can cause problems as they try to figure where they are in his stage scheme.
- Levering, Miriam, Ch'an Enlightenment for Laymen: Ta-Hui And The New Religious Culture Of The Sung, Phd. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1978, available from UMI Dissertation Publishing. For those with a scholarly bent, this dissertation gives a background of Ta-Hui's thought in the context of Chinese religious, social, and political ideas and environment of his times. See pp. 207 – 239 "Hua-yen Thought and Lay Practice." There is also much material about the hua-t'ou and why and how to practice it, see pp. 240 – 282, "Hua-tou Practice: The Need For The Hua-t'ou, and pp. 283 – 311, "Faith, Doubt, and the Hua-tou."