

# Dahui's Letters

The Letters of Chan Master Dahui Pujue  
Recorded by the Master's Disciple Huiran  
Edited by Huang Wenchang (Layman Jingzhi)

TRANSLATED BY

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## Introduction

Anyone studying the Chan tradition in East Asia will soon encounter mentions of the twelfth-century text *Dahui's Letters*, a collection of sixty-two missives by the great Song-dynasty Chan master Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163). The letters in the collection consist of the master's detailed replies to inquiries from his students, almost all of them members of the Chinese scholar-official class. As one of the only classical Chinese Chan texts that offers practical, concrete advice on the actual practice of meditation and on the mental attitudes necessary for awakening, *Dahui's Letters* has since the time of its publication provided a source of inspiration and guidance for Chan monastics and laypeople alike.

The compilation of the *Letters* was aided by the fact that so many of Dahui's letters still existed at the time of his death. Among other reasons, this was no doubt due to the fact that Dahui spent many years in exile and thus had to rely on letters to communicate with his many students; to the fact that most of these students were highly literate scholar-officials, for whom letter-writing was the accepted form of contact with distant acquaintances; and to the fact that these missives must have been preserved by their recipients as precious mementos of their esteemed master. Following Dahui's death a large number of his letters were gathered and edited by his disciples Xuefeng Huiran and Lingyin Daoyin, then subjected to further editing by the scholar-official Huang Wenchang.<sup>1</sup> In 1166, just three years after Dahui died, the

1. Little is known of Xuefeng Huiran 雪峯慧然 and Lingyin Daoyin 靈隱道印 other than the fact that they were disciples of Dahui. Huang Wenchang 黃文昌 (1128–1165; layman name Jingzhi 淨智) was a scholar-official from Jiangxi.

finished compilation was published under the title *Dahui Pujue chanshi shu* 大慧普覺禪師書 (commonly abbreviated as *Dahui shu* 大慧書).

Although *Dahui's Letters* comments on a wide range of subjects, including Daoist philosophy, Neo-Confucian thought, and even sutra translation, the work is known primarily for its criticism of “silent illumination Chan” (*mozhao Chan* 默照禪: meditation as a state of non-thinking awareness) and advocacy of “koan-contemplation Chan” (*kanhua Chan* 看話禪: meditation employing koans as aids to awakening).<sup>2</sup> What distinguished Dahui from earlier koan advocates was his approach of focusing on certain critical words or phrases in a koan, known as *huatou* 話頭 (literally, “word-head”),<sup>3</sup> in order to create an intense sense of doubt that would eventually precipitate a breakthrough to awakening. This approach, most clearly presented in *Dahui's Letters*, initiated a shift in the direction of meditation practice that still characterizes all of the Linji-school traditions of East Asia. Miriam Levering, one of the foremost academic authorities on Dahui, comments:

As *huatou* (sometimes called *koan*) practice became the most important teaching method of the Linji and Japanese Rinzai schools of Chan or Zen, so did the theoretical and practical understanding of *huatou* practice which Dahui offered in his letters and sermons become the “orthodox,” traditional and central understanding of *huatou* practice. There were later additions, but the central core which Dahui contributed ... forms the central understanding of Japanese Rinzai and Chinese Chan down to the present. Dahui's *Letters* remain a text frequently used in

2. See pp. ??–??, below, for further discussion of what Dahui was criticizing.

3. A *huatou* is a word or phrase in a koan that contains the essential point that students must work with as they practice with that particular koan. Thus in the “Does a dog have Buddha-nature” koan (“A monk asked Zhaozhou, ‘Does a dog have Buddha-nature?’ Zhaozhou answered ‘No!’”), the *huatou* is Zhaozhou’s “No!” Dahui describes how to work with it: “This single word ‘no’ is your weapon to dispel all kinds of obstructive thoughts and views” (Letter 10).

China, Korea, and Japan to give students a basic understanding of how to conduct their *huaou* practice.<sup>4</sup>

In China the wide and enduring impact of *Dahui's Letters* is evident not only from the rapid spread of koan practice in Chan subsequent to the time of Dahui, but also by the frequent mentions of the work in the writings of later Chinese Chan masters. Among these masters was Yunqi Zhuhong,<sup>5</sup> who quotes several of Dahui's letters in his *Spurs to Progress through the Chan Barriers* 禪關策進, an influential text on Chan practice published in 1600 and read throughout East Asia (it was, for example, the work that inspired the great Japanese master Hakuin Ekaku<sup>6</sup> to persevere in his training). In Korea *Dahui's Letters* has held an esteemed position ever since the twelfth-century prelate Pojo Chinul<sup>7</sup> encountered the text during his study of the *Recorded Sayings of Dahui Pujue* 大慧普覺禪師語錄<sup>8</sup> and was inspired

4. LEVERING 1978, 243.

5. Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏 (1535–1615) was born in present-day Zhejiang; his family name was Shen 沈. He passed the first level of the civil-service exams, but advanced no further. Interested in Buddhism from his youth, he is primarily associated with the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism but also engaged in Chan practice under Xiaoyan Debao 笑巖德寶 (1512–1581).

6. Hakuin Ekaku 白隱慧鶴 (1686–1769), the great reviver of the Japanese Rinzai school, was a native of Hara 原 in what is presently Shizuoka Prefecture. At fifteen he became a monk at the nearby temple Shōin-ji 松蔭寺. At twenty-four he had an awakening upon hearing the sound of a temple bell, an experience he deepened through training under the master Dōkyō Etan 道鏡慧端 (1642–1721). After assuming the abbacy of Shōin-ji he had a decisive spiritual breakthrough at the age of forty-two. Hakuin was tirelessly active in teaching, laying the foundations for the Rinzai koan curriculum and attacking what he regarded as distortions of Zen training, such as “silent illumination” zazen and the Pure Land Buddhist practice of *nenbutsu* by Zen monks.

7. Pojo Chinul 普照知訥 (1158–1210) was born in the area of what is now Sohung in Hwanghae province. Ordained in 1165, he passed the Son clerical examination in 1182 and subsequently devoted himself to a life of practice and study. After three profound enlightenment experiences (the final one precipitated by a reading of *Dahui's Letters*), Chinul developed an ecumenical approach to Buddhism that integrated doctrinal study with meditative practice. He is honored as the founder of the Chogye Order, the representative order of Korean Buddhism today.

8. *Dahui's Letters* comprise the final six fascicles of the thirty-fascicle *Recorded Sayings*

to introduce koan contemplation to the Korean Son Buddhist tradition, where it has remained the central practice to this day. *Dahui's Letters* is also one of the basic works on Buddhist doctrine and contemplative practice that all Korean monks and nuns are expected to study at the outset of their monastic training.

In Japan, *Dahui's Letters* has attracted the attention of important Zen masters since the early years of the Japanese Zen tradition. It was one of the three texts that the fourteenth-century Zen master Musō Soseki<sup>9</sup> brought with him when he entered the mountains for extended solitary retreats; it was a book much read and lectured upon by Hakuin Ekaku; and it was the work to which the eminent Edo-period scholar-monk Mujaku Dōchū<sup>10</sup> devoted his most thoroughgoing commentary, the *Basket of Pearls for Dahui Pujiao's Letters* 大慧普覺禪師書栲栳珠.

The obvious importance of the text, plus its status as one of the very few classic Chan texts devoted to the actual practice of meditation, suggested to me from many years ago that it might be well worth

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of *Dahui Pujue*.

9. Musō Soseki 夢窓疎石 (1275–1351) was a native of Ise 伊勢, in present Mie 三重 Prefecture. Soseki first studied the esoteric teachings of the Tendai school, but, despairing of resolving the question of birth-and-death through doctrinal studies, he turned to Zen and eventually succeeded to the Dharma of Kōhō Kennichi 高峯顯日 (1241–1316). He refined his understanding for twenty more years through practice in remote mountain hermitages, until summoned to Kyoto by Emperor Go-Daigo 後醍醐 (r. 1318–1339) and appointed abbot of Rinsen-ji 臨川寺. He later founded the great monastery Tenryū-ji 天龍寺. Musō, an advisor to both the imperial court and the shogunate, was instrumental in transforming Zen from a primarily Chinese tradition to one more firmly rooted in Japanese culture.

10. Mujaku Dōchū 無著道忠 (1653–1744) was born in Tajima in present-day Hyōgo Prefecture. He ordained at the temple Nyorai-ji 如来寺 and later practiced under the priest Jikuin Somon 竺印祖門 (n.d.) of Ryūge-in in Myōshin-ji 妙心寺. After further practice under other teachers he returned to Ryūge-in at the age of twenty-five and succeeded Jikuin as priest. After serving as abbot of Myōshin-ji for several terms he retired to Ryūge-in and devoted himself to study and writing. The body of work he left, said to comprise 374 volumes, includes commentaries on sutras and Zen texts, histories of temples, dictionaries of Zen terms, and much else.

the effort of rendering into English. Another factor was the importance of Dahui himself in Japanese Rinzai Zen, the tradition I have been associated with since the 1970s: Dahui, in addition to being the most influential early proponent of koan work, was solidly in the tradition of present-day Japanese Rinzai Zen through his association with the Dharma lineage of Yuanwu Keqin,<sup>11</sup> to which all living Japanese Rinzai masters belong.

What prompted me to actually start work on the translation was a series of *teishō* (Zen lectures) on the *Letters* delivered from about 2010 by my teacher Harada Shōdō Rōshi at the monastery Sōgen-ji in Okayama, Japan. At the time the English-speaking community at Sōgen-ji had no English translation of the text to refer to, outside of Christopher Cleary's *Swampland Flowers: Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui*. This, unfortunately, is a translation not of the standard edition of the *Letters* included in the Japanese Taishō Canon (T, 1924–1934), which Harada was lecturing on, but of the significantly different collection appearing in the *Pointing at the Moon Record* 指月錄 (1602).

To translate the standard edition of *Dahui's Letters*, I relied primarily on the modern Japanese translation by Araki Kengo 荒木見悟 (1917–2017), who, in turn, had to base his rendition largely on the commentaries in Mujaku Dōchū's *Basket of Pearls for Dahui Pujiao's Letters*, since the twelfth-century Chinese of the *Letters* renders it exceedingly difficult to understand even for a specialist in Chinese like

11. Yuanwu Keqin 圓悟克勤 (1063–1135) was a native of Pengzhou 彭州, modern Sichuan 四川; his surname was Luo 駱. Feeling a strong connection with Buddhism, he became a monk while still a child. After training under a number of Chan teachers he succeeded to the Dharma of Wuzu Fayān 五祖法演 (1024?–1104). Keqin served as the priest of a succession of notable temples, including Zhaojue si, Lingquan yuan, and Daolin si, where he delivered the lectures that later formed the great Chan literary work *Blue Cliff Record*. His many students included both monks and laypeople. The name by which he is best known, Zen Master Yuanwu 圓悟禪師, was bestowed on him by Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1127–62). Keqin had sixteen Dharma heirs; of these the two most important were Dahui Zonggao and Huqiu Shaolong 虎丘紹隆 (1077–1136).

Araki. I, too, frequently needed to directly consult Mujaku, despite having Araki to refer to. Also very helpful was the *Japanese Translation of Zen Master Daie Fukaku's Letters* 國譯大慧普覺禪師書, a 1930 Japanese translation of the *Letters* in *kakikudashi* form (*kakikudashi* being a translation of Chinese into Japanese through the reordering of the Chinese characters according to Japanese syntax and adding phonetic script to indicate grammatical inflections). This text provides not only a translation but also extensive commentaries, which almost always follow Mujaku in simpler form, but occasionally offer alternative interpretations.

In 2017, when, after many distractions from other projects, I had worked through most of the *Letters*, Jeffrey L. Broughton's prodigiously researched *The Letters of Chan Master Dahui Pujue* was published by the Oxford University Press. It was a welcome arrival, owing to the information it provided on difficult passages and terms. Nevertheless, my approach to translation is rather different than Broughton's and my interpretation of a number of passages is dissimilar. This is only to be expected, however—there can never be a “definitive” translation of a Chinese text, particularly one as difficult as Dahui's. One need look no further than the many *Dao De Jing* translations to see the variety of different ways a single Chinese passage can be interpreted.

As a Zen monk, my interest in the *Letters* has primarily been for its practical value as a work on meditation. Thus, in translating these letters my central concern has been on what Dahui was intending to communicate to his correspondents on the matter of Chan practice. Furthermore, the originals were letters, so I felt that, to be true to Dahui, the translations should as much as possible *read* like letters. Obscure though Dahui's original Chinese often seems, the issues the letters address are practical ones that meditators throughout the ages have faced, and I feel certain that Dahui, as a spiritual advisor, intended his comments to be as clear as possible in the language available to him nine hundred years ago.

Although I have tried in this translation to be academically

responsible, I do not regard it as a primarily academic work, but rather as one that will, hopefully, be of practical use to meditators. Dahui's advice on meditation is in many ways timeless, and can, I think, stand largely alone with little need for detailed descriptions of the historical and philosophical background of the time when the letters were written. That said, our appreciation and understanding of the letters benefits from a basic knowledge of Song-dynasty history and a description of the main events in Dahui's life, both of which I provide below. For readers interested in a more in-depth discussion of the social, political, and religious environment in China during the time of Dahui, excellent research is available in the work of scholars like Miriam Levering, Morten Schlütter, Albert Welter, and others.<sup>12</sup>

#### SONG-DYNASTY CHINA

In the early years of the tenth century, following three centuries of relative stability and unity during the Tang dynasty (618–907), China entered a time of political and military turmoil known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms era (907–979). It was only after a half-century of upheaval and warfare that this period came to end with the establishment of the Song dynasty (960–1279), which reunited the country and initiated a long era of prosperity and growth.

The dynasty had its origins when Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (927–976), a general in the army of the short-lived Later Zhao dynasty (951–960), staged a coup d'état and forced the sovereign, Emperor Gong 恭 (953–973), to abdicate. After assuming the throne, Zhao (posthumously known as Emperor Taizu 太祖) established his capital at the city of Bianjing 汴京 (present-day Kaifeng 開封) and proceeded to conquer the remaining states of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms

12. See especially Miriam Levering 1978, Morten Schlütter 2008, and Peter Gregory and Daniel Getz, 1999.

period. The strong central government he formed ruled over a nation that, in different forms, survived for over three centuries.

The Song dynasty was a time of great economic growth, technological innovation, and intellectual progress, leading to China's emergence as the wealthiest and most populous nation in the world at that time. Among the advances of the Song, the most important may have been in agriculture, as these helped make the other advances possible. Improvements in irrigation and water control, the use of early rice varieties that enabled double cropping, and the spread of regional commercial-crop specialization all increased the production of food and resulted in great population and economic growth in the rice-agriculture areas south of the Yangze. These changes, in turn, supported the development of cities and urban culture, furthering the dynasty's cultural, scientific, and philosophical advances.

Also contributing in many ways to these advances were reforms to the government initiated by the dynasty's first ruler, Emperor Taizu. Taizu sought to increase the quality of the Chinese bureaucracy by expanding the imperial examination system, through which government officials were selected on the basis of intellectual merit. Although the Chinese examination system had its origins in the Sui dynasty (581–618), for centuries its use was limited, with the majority of officials gaining their positions through association with the traditional aristocratic and military elite. Following the Song reforms, however, the imperial examinations became the main path to membership in the select group of scholar-officials who, under the emperor, formed the bureaucracy that was in large part responsible for running the Chinese local and national governments.

With the increase in population and social complexity in China, it appears that the Song imperial authorities retreated somewhat from the management of regional governmental affairs, leaving these responsibilities more to the scholar-official class.<sup>13</sup> The effects of this shift

13. See, for example, Morten SCHLÜTTER's discussion of this issue (2008, 74–5).

were not limited to the secular world. The scholar Morten Schlütter, describing the interrelationship during the Song between scholar-officials, the Chan tradition, and the Buddhist temple system, argues persuasively that Chan, despite its unworldly image, was as affected as the rest of society by the scholar-officials' growing influence.<sup>14</sup>

Schlütter shows that by the Song dynasty Chan had become the most prosperous and influential school of Buddhism, aided during the dynasty's early years by government policies designed to increase state control of Buddhist monasticism. These policies included support for a category of temples known as "public monasteries." In contrast to "hereditary" or "private" monasteries, an older category in which membership in the monastic community and appointment to the position of abbot were confined to monks in the same ordination lineage, public monasteries were open to Buddhist monastics of any lineage and their abbots were selected from among China's entire population of qualified Chan monastics.

With their government recognition and support, the public monasteries quickly attained prominence over the hereditary monasteries. In many cases, public monasteries were also famous temples with large holdings of land, eminent abbots, and (most importantly for the Chan school as a tradition) the large communities of monks from which the next generation of Chan masters emerged. Thus, Schlütter points out, these monasteries were essential for the continuity of their abbots' Dharma lineages—Chan monastics, no matter how deeply enlightened or otherwise accomplished, were only recognized as legitimate heirs to a particular Dharma lineage (and thus able to designate Dharma heirs of their own) following their appointment to the abbacy of a public monastery. In other words, the continuation of Chan itself was linked to the abbacy of public monasteries.

Since the regional or (in the case of major monasteries) national

14. See SCHLÜTTER 2008, in particular Chapter 2, "The Chan School and the Song State," and Chapter 3, "Procreation and Patronage in the Song Chan School."

governments were deeply involved in (and often directly in charge of) the appointment of public-monastery abbots, and since the government authorities had to base their decisions largely on advice from local scholar-officials and other literati, it became important for Chan masters seeking to insure the transmission of their Dharma lineages to maintain close relations with the scholar-official class.

Schlütter also notes, however, that this interaction with the literati class would have been quite natural for important Chan masters, as they themselves were part of the educated elite. Many were born into the literati class and educated as members of such, and even those who were not of this class would have had to have been the intellectual equals of the literati in order to merit consideration for the position of a public monastery abbot.

The relationship between the Chan clergy and the literati was generally one of mutual respect. During the Song there was on the literati side an upsurge in interest in Chan meditation, and thus an increase in interactions with Chan practitioners. Often this interest in Chan was combined with an interest in the thought and practice of Neo-Confucianism, which was regarded by many literati as sharing fundamental similarities with the Chan tradition, such as the notion that sagehood—the realization and embodiment of the true Dao—could be realized through self-cultivation and passed from generation to generation of sages.

The Song dynasty experienced a major rupture in its history when in 1125 Jurchen people invaded China from the north. By 1127 they had not only taken the capital Bianjing but also captured the retired Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1082–1135), the serving Emperor Qinzong 欽宗 (1100–1161), and most of the imperial court. However, Emperor Huizong's ninth son, Zhao Gou 趙構 (1107–1187), escaped the invaders and made his way first to Yangzhou on the northern bank of the Yangtze and then to Lin'an 臨安 (present-day Hangzhou 杭州) south of the Yangtze. There in 1127 he reestablished the Song imperial court and assumed the throne as Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1127–62). This

marked the beginning of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), the second half of the overall Song dynasty.

Although it had lost control of the Song dynasty's northern territories, the new Southern Song government still ruled most of the majority of the Chinese population and controlled its most productive agricultural lands. In addition, many among the educated elite had managed to relocate to the area south of the new border. Among the Southern Song's human assets were a number of accomplished military leaders, who, after the Southern Song government had reorganized itself, initiated counterattacks against the Jin 金 (Jurchen) dynasty. In particular, the great general Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103–1142) won a series of victories over the Jurchen forces and, in 1140, penetrated far north of the Yangtze River, positioning his army to retake Bianjing.

However, political developments prevented the Southern Song forces from further advances. With Emperor Huizong and Emperor Qinzong still captives of the Jurchen, Emperor Gaozong feared that the defeat of the Jin dynasty might allow Qinzong to reassume the throne and thus deprive Gaozong of power. Convinced by his chief minister Qin Hui<sup>15</sup> that suing for peace was the better option, Gaozong ordered Yue to cease hostilities and return to Lin'an. In 1141 Yue was imprisoned and in 1142 executed, a fate that Chinese popular history ascribes to the treachery of Qin Hui. The Song and Jin dynasties signed the Treaty of Shaoxing in 1141, returning the territory taken by General Yue, fixing the border between the two countries, and requiring the Song to pay tribute to the Jin.

15. Qin Hui 秦檜 (1091–1155) is remembered as one of Chinese history's greatest villains. Born in Jiangsu, in what is the present-day city of Nanjing, Qin passed the imperial examinations in 1115 at the age of twenty-four. When the Jurchen invaded China from the north he was captured along with the Northern Song imperial court and held captive, but in 1130 he made his way to the Southern Song court. He quickly won favor with Emperor Gaozong and in 1131 was designated chancellor. When the military victories of Yue Fei and other Southern Song generals threatened the Jin, Qin recalled the military forces to Lin'an and in the subsequent negotiations advocated peace. Qin's position won favor with the emperor, leading to the Treaty of Shaoxing.

Nevertheless, many important officials in the Southern Song government remained adamantly opposed to what they saw as the appeasement of an enemy that the country had every chance of defeating. In order to suppress this resistance and maintain the conditions of the Treaty of Shaoxing, Qin Hui embarked on a series of purges that left virtually all of his opponents exiled to distant regions of the empire.

Qin Hui continued unopposed for the rest of his life, but with his death in 1155 most of those he had sent into exile were pardoned and allowed to resume their official duties. Emperor Gaozong, who maintained his policy of coexistence with the Jin for the rest of his reign, abdicated in favor of Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (1127–1194) in 1162.

Following this the Southern Song dynasty survived for more than a century. Its powerful navy, established in 1132 and employing swift and maneuverable paddle wheel war vessels, decisively defeated Jin naval efforts to invade the country, and its armies were able to hold back the Jin forces until well into the thirteenth century. The Jin dynasty finally collapsed in 1233 following its defeat by the allied armies of the Southern Song and the Mongols, but this unfortunately opened the way for the Mongols to invade the Southern Song, which, after several decades of resistance, finally fell to the invaders in 1276.

#### A BIOGRAPHY OF DAHUI ZONGGAO

Our knowledge of Dahui's life is considerably more detailed than that of almost any other Chan master, thanks largely to Dahui's willingness in his writings to describe the events and experiences of his life. Indeed, Miriam Levering credits Dahui with being perhaps the first autobiographical writer in Chan history.<sup>16</sup> As the principal sources for this biographical information, Levering cites the works *Records of Chan Master Dahui Pujue* 大慧普覺禪師語錄 (1172),

16. LEVERING 2002.

*Chronological Biography of Chan Master Dahui Pujue* 大慧普覺禪師年譜 (1183), *Dahui's Chan Arsenal* 大慧宗門武庫 (1186), and *Discourses of Chan Master Dahui Pujue* 大慧普覺禪師普說 (1190). The reliability of these materials is greatly enhanced by the fact that they were compiled by Dahui's direct disciples and published relatively soon after the master's death. The most comprehensive biographical information on Dahui in English, to the best of my knowledge, is still that provided in Levering's *Chan Enlightenment for Laymen* (1978).<sup>17</sup>

The *Chronological Biography* reports that Dahui was born in 1089 in Xuanzhou 宣州 in the province of Anhui 安徽, to a family named Xi 奚. He started school in 1100 at the age of eleven, but was fined and had to leave after a mere thirteen days when, the *Biography* reports, he threw an inkstone that struck his teacher's hat. When scolded by his father, Dahui replied that secular learning couldn't compare with Buddhism. His parents supported this view, and allowed Dahui, then fourteen, to receive ordination under a priest named Huiqi 慧齊 (n.d.) at the temple Huiyun si 慧雲寺. At this time he received his monk's name, Zonggao 宗杲. The following year he took the full precepts at the temple Jingde si 景德寺.

Becoming interested in the records of such Chan masters as Yunmen Wenyan<sup>18</sup> and Muzhou Daoming,<sup>19</sup> Dahui embarked in 1107 on

17. LEVERING 1978, 18–57. LEVERING 2002 also contains much biographical material.

18. Yunmen Wenyan 雲門文偃 (864–949), the founder of the Yunmen school of Chan, was a native of Suzhou 蘇州, in modern Jiangsu. His family name was Zhang 張. He first studied under the Chan master Muzhou Daoming. Later, on Daoming's advice, Yunmen went to Xuefeng Yicun 雪峰義存 (822–908) and eventually became his Dharma heir. He then joined the assembly of Lingshu Rumin 靈樹如敏 (d. 920) at Lingshu yuan 靈樹院, where he was immediately appointed head monk, and later named Lingshu's successor as abbot. Subsequently Yunmen went to the region of present-day Guangdong and founded Guangtai Chanyuan 光泰禪院 on Mount Yunmen 雲門. Yunmen is known for his terse statements, many of which were of one word only and came to be known as “Yunmen's one-word barriers.”

19. Muzhou Daoming 睦州道明 (780–877), also known as Daozong 道蹤, was a native of Jiangnan 江南; his family name was Chen 陳. After studying the vinaya he entered the

a pilgrimage that took him to various teachers in both the Linji-school and the Caodong school.<sup>20</sup> However, he remained dissatisfied with his attainments, feeling that he still lacked a decisive awakening.

In 1112 Dahui encountered the master Zhantang Wenzhun<sup>21</sup> and practiced under him at the temple Baofeng si. Dahui obviously respected him as a teacher, mentioning him often in his writings and remaining with him until the master's death in 1115. Zhantang recognized Dahui's exceptional abilities, but saw, as did Dahui, that more needed to be done. According to *Dahui's Chan Arsenal*, one day Zhantang commented to Dahui:

“Head monk, you immediately comprehend my Chan teaching. When I ask you to explain it, you do so skillfully. When I ask you to investigate stories of the ancient masters, to create poems in their praise, to instruct the monks, or to give sermons, you are skillful at all of these things as well. Just one thing is not as it should be. Do you know what it is?” I replied, “What is it?” Zhantang answered, “You lack that single realization. Without this realization, when I speak with you in my quarters you have Chan, but when you leave you do not. When you're fully awake and aware, you have Chan, but when you sleep you do not.

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assembly under Huangbo Xiyun 黄檗希運 (d. 850?), whose Dharma heir he became. He then lived at Longxing si 龍興寺 in Muzhou 睦州, in present-day Zhejiang 浙江, teaching an assembly of a hundred monks. He later left the monastery and lived in a house with his mother, supporting himself by weaving sandals and thus acquiring the nickname Chen Puxie 陳蒲鞋, “Rush-sandal Chen.” He became an eccentric recluse, treating the few disciples he accepted with great severity.

20. The Linji 臨濟 school and the Caodong 曹洞 school are two of the so-called Five Houses (five main teaching lineages) of Chinese Chan. The remaining three Houses are: the Yunmen 雲門 school, the Guiyang 滄仰 school, and the Fayan 法眼 school. In China the Linji school eventually absorbed all four of the other schools, and continues in Japan as the Rinzai school. The Caodong school survives in Japan as the Sōtō school.

21. Zhantang Wenzhun 湛堂文準 (1061–1115) was a native of Xingyuan fu 興元府 in present-day Shanxi 陝西. His family name was Liang 梁. He entered the temple Jinxian si 金仙寺 at the age of eight and studied the *Lotus Sutra*; later he received the precepts under the precept master Tang'an 唐安. Still dissatisfied after study under the Chan master Dagui Mujie 大滄慕詰 (n.d.), he trained with Zhenjing Kewen 真淨克文 (1025–1102) and eventually succeeded to his Dharma. He later assumed the abbacy of Baofeng si 宝峰寺.

Being like this, how can you ever overcome samsara?" I replied, "This is precisely what concerns me as well."<sup>22</sup>

As he faced death during his final illness, Zhantang recommended that Dahui continue his training under the Chan master Yuanwu Keqin. Dahui, however, was unable to follow this advice for some time, since, as Zhantang's senior disciple, he was responsible for compiling his teacher's recorded sayings and commissioning an inscription for Zhantang's memorial stupa. For this latter task Dahui turned to the eminent scholar-official Zhang Shangying,<sup>23</sup> a former chancellor, a Dharma successor of the Chan master Doushuai Congyue<sup>24</sup> and an eloquent and erudite defender of Buddhism against the attacks of Daoist and Neo-Confucian critics. Zhang not only agreed to write the inscription but also became a mentor to Dahui. It was under Zhang that Dahui began his study of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a text that greatly influenced his thought and that is often quoted in the *Letters*. Furthermore, Zhang was acquainted with Yuanwu Keqin, and seconded Zhantang Wenzhun's recommendation that Dahui continue his training under this master.

In 1120 Dahui set out for the capital Bianjing, finally arriving in 1122. Finding that Yuanwu was not in the city at the time, he prac-

22. T47:953b.

23. Zhang Shangying 張商英 (1043–1121) was a native of Xinjin 新津 in Shu 蜀, in present-day Sichuan 四川. He passed the imperial examination at the exceptionally young age of nineteen, and was later appointed magistrate of Nanchuanxian 南川縣. After rising to the position of chancellor he was demoted for a time to governor of Hengzhou 衡州, but was subsequently reinstated. He practiced meditation under Doushuai Congyue and succeeded to his Dharma; he also had a close relationship with Yuanwu Keqin. He compiled several texts, among them the *Supplementary Biographies of [Mount] Qingliang* 續清涼傳 (T2100), describing Mount Wutai 五臺 and the cult of Mañjuśrī there. His Buddhist name was Layman Wujin 無盡居士.

24. Doushuai Congyue 兜率從悅 (1044–1091) was born in Qianzhou 虔州 in present Jiangxi 江西. His family name was Xiong 熊. At the age of fifteen he received ordination under the priest Dechong 德崇 at the temple Puyuan yuan 普圓院, and at age sixteen received the precepts. He trained under Zhenjing Kewen and succeeded to his Dharma. He then served as abbot of Luyuan si 鹿苑寺 and, later, Doushuai si 兜率寺.

ticed with the Chan master Purong Daoping 普融道平 (d. 1127) until Yuanwu returned following his appointment as abbot of the great temple Tianning si 天寧寺. Dahui joined the assembly there, and was in the audience when, about a month later, Yuanwu ascended the high seat and said:

A monk asked Yunmen, “What is the place from which all buddhas come?” Yunmen replied, “East Mountain walks on the water.” But I wouldn’t have said that. If someone asked me, “What is the place from which all buddhas come?” I would simply say, “A fragrant breeze blows from the south, giving rise in the palace to a refreshing coolness.”<sup>25</sup>

At these words Dahui experienced a deep awakening. After reporting his experience to Yuanwu he was given the position of attendant-without-duties, a position that allowed him to devote himself entirely to his practice and meet daily with Yuanwu for instruction. Yuanwu had him work with the following koan: “‘Being’ and ‘non-being’ are like vines clinging to a tree. If suddenly the tree falls and the vines wither, where do ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’ go?” Every day he went to Yuanwu’s room for instruction, but all Yuanwu would say was, “‘Being’ and ‘nonbeing’ are like vines clinging to a tree.” Whenever Dahui opened his mouth to respond, Yuanwu would cut him off, saying, “That’s no good.”

Nearly half a year went by in this way. One day while Yuanwu was dining with an official, Dahui, chopsticks in hand, forgot to eat his rice. Yuanwu glanced at Dahui, then turned to the official and said, “This fellow is practicing boxwood Zen.”<sup>26</sup> Dahui explained to Yuanwu that he felt like a dog eyeing a frypan of hot food.<sup>27</sup> Yuanwu

25. Yuanwu quotes from a famous poem by Liu Gongquan 柳公權 (778–865), a Tang-dynasty poet and calligrapher. The verses were Liu’s response to two lines presented by Emperor Wenzong 文宗 (809–840) in a linked-verse contest: “People suffer from the burning heat, but I always love the summer days.”

26. The boxwood tree is said to be extremely slow-growing, and even to shrink during leap years. “Boxwood Zen” often refers to the Zen of students who, though slow to awaken, are earnest and unswerving in their practice.

27. The image is one of being unable either to partake of something or to let it go, just

replied, “This is [hard to penetrate and hard to grasp, ] like a vajra or a chestnut burr.”<sup>28</sup>

Later Dahui went to the master and said, “I heard that you once asked your teacher Wuzu Fayan<sup>29</sup> about ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’. Do you remember the master’s reply?” In answer Yuanwu only laughed. Dahui said, “Since you asked in front of the assembly, surely there is no reason now not to tell me Wuzu’s reply.”<sup>30</sup> Yuanwu then said, “When I asked about the statement, ‘Being and nonbeing are like vines clinging to a tree,’ Wuzu responded, ‘Try to describe it, and it cannot be described; try to portray it, and it cannot be portrayed.’ When I asked, ‘What if the tree suddenly falls and the vines wither?’ Wuzu said, ‘They come down together.’”<sup>31</sup>

When Dahui heard this he cried, “I’ve got it!” When Yuanwu asked whether Dahui had truly understood, Dahui said, “Please, Master, question me in any way you wish.” Yuanwu proceeded to question him, and Dahui replied without hesitation. Recognizing Dahui’s awakening, Yuanwu said, “Today you see that I haven’t deceived you,” and had Dahui lecture to the other monks.

It was not long thereafter, in 1125, that the Jurchen began their

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as a dog is unable to eat food that is too hot yet unwilling to leave it behind.

28. A vajra is a legendary Indian weapon used by the deities; circular in shape, it is said to be capable of destroying anything. A chestnut burr cannot be grasped because of its spines.

29. Wuzu Fayan 五祖法演 (1024?–1104) was a native of Mianzhou 綿州 in Sichuan 四川; his family name was Deng 鄧. After becoming a monk at the age of thirty-five he first studied the Yogācāra teachings, then sought a master of the Chan school. He studied under Fakong Zongben 法空宗本 (1020–1099) and Yuanjian Fayuan 圓鑑法遠 (991–1067) before joining the assembly under Baiyun Shouduan 白雲守端 (1025–1072, whose heir he eventually became. He later settled on Mount Huangmei 黃梅, also known as Mount Wuzu 五祖 (Fifth Patriarch Mountain) because the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren 弘忍 (601–674), had lived there. His most important heir was Yuanwu Keqin, from whom all modern Japanese Rinzai masters descend.

30. That is, “Since you asked in public, there is no reason to refrain from telling me Wuzu’s answer.”

31. The original Chinese, 相隨來也, is open to various interpretations depending on the context. ZGTT has “to imitate someone or follow their lead.”

invasion of Song-dynasty China from the north. In 1126 Yuanwu and Dahui joined the exodus of Chinese to the regions south of the Yangtze River, first staying at the monastery on Mount Jin 金山 in Runzhou 潤州, on the southern bank of the Yangtze. Yuanwu remained there, while Dahui continued on to Huqiu 虎丘, in present-day Suzhou 蘇州. During the year he spent at Huqiu he studied the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, leading to a deepening of the understanding he had attained at Tianning si. In 1128 he rejoined Yuanwu, who was then residing at the temple Zhenru yuan 真如院 on Mount Yunju 雲居 in present-day Jiangxi. When Yuanwu moved to Sichuan the following year Dahui decided to remain in the area, staying at Yunmen an 雲門菴 in Haihun 海昏 and also residing elsewhere in the provinces of Jiangxi and Hunan. The *Chronological Biography* reports that twenty disciples studied under him at Yunmen an.

This period of relative retirement continued until 1134, when Dahui moved to Yangyu an 洋嶼菴 in Fujian and first delivered talks attacking the “silent illumination” movement that he regarded as distorting Chan’s true teachings. Dahui’s criticism of silent illumination is, of course, one of the best-known features of *Dahui’s Letters*; in addition to the criticisms found in the letters themselves, Letter 5 mentions a treatise on the subject he wrote in 1134 entitled *Bian xie-zheng shuo* 辯邪正說 (Distinguishing the True from the False). Of particular concern to Dahui was the silent-illumination teachers’ rejection of the necessity for a decisive moment of awakening.

In 1135 Dahui was invited to live in the Fujian city of Quanzhou 泉州, one the world’s largest and most cosmopolitan seaports, where he resided through 1136 in a residence provided by a scholar-official benefactor. In 1137 the master received his first imperial appointment to the abbacy of an important public temple, Nengren Chanyuan 能仁禪院 on Mount Jing 徑 in the capital city of Lin’an. The appointment was made upon the recommendation of the chancellor Zhang Jun,<sup>32</sup> a

32. For Zhang Jun, see note 1, Letter 23.

former student of Dahui's teacher Yuanwu. Nengren Chanyuan was the preeminent monastery of the Southern Song's Chan temple system, and thus of enormous importance and influence. Dahui proved to be a popular and effective abbot, attracting within a year over a thousand students both ordained and lay. Over the course of the following few years Dahui's teachings flourished and the number of his students steadily increased.

Unfortunately, among Dahui's many lay followers were a number of influential scholar-officials associated with the anti-peace faction that opposed the policies of the imperial chancellor Qin Hui, and were thus marked by Qin as enemies to be purged. A particularly outspoken opponent of Qin's policies was the brilliant scholar and official Zhang Jiucheng,<sup>33</sup> who Dahui considered to be his most accomplished lay disciple (Zhang was the recipient of Letter 48 in the *Letters*). As a result of this connection, Dahui was accused in 1141 of complicity in Zhang's opposition to Qin's policies, leading to the master's defrocking and exile in Hengzhou 衡州, in present-day Hunan 湖南. Despite these circumstances Dahui continued his work as a Chan master, instructing a few disciples, writing letters to his literati students, and compiling between 1147 and 1150 the koan collection *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* 正法眼藏.

In 1150 Dahui was ordered further south to Meizhou 梅州, an undeveloped region in the China's southernmost province of Guangdong, characterized in Dahui's *Chronological Biography* as "a malaria-ridden area where even medicines were not readily available and from which few exiles returned."<sup>34</sup> Even there he continued teaching, sixty-two disciples having followed him to his new place of exile. In addition, he maintained his correspondence with his now-distant lay students; a number of his surviving letters date from this period of exile.

33. For Zhang Jiucheng, see note 1, Letter 48.

34. LEVERING 1978, 34

Following Qin Hui's death in 1155 Dahui was no longer required to stay in Meizhou, so in 1156 he made his way north toward the area of the capital. Later that year he was appointed to the abbacy of Ayuwang si 阿育王寺 (Temple of King Ashoka), a top-ranking temple in the Southern Song Chan temple system. The appointment was made on the recommendation of Hongzhi Zhenjue,<sup>35</sup> an eminent priest of the Caodong school who, by all indications, seems to have thought highly of Dahui.<sup>36</sup> Under Dahui's direction Ayuwang si prospered, with its community growing to well over a thousand monks.

Two years after assuming the abbacy of Ayuwang si, Dahui was invited by the imperial court to return to Lin'an and reassume the abbacy of Nengren Chanyuan on Mount Jing. He served there until his retirement in 1161, combining his duties as abbot with extensive travel. In 1162 Emperor Gaozong abdicated and the throne was assumed by Emperor Xiaozong, who held Dahui in high esteem and invited him to lecture at the imperial court. It was at this time that Dahui received from the emperor the title "Dahui" (Great Wisdom). In the eighth month of 1163 the master announced his coming death, and passed away several days later.

35. Hongzhi Zhenjue 宏智正覺 (1091–1157) was a native of Xizhou 隰州, in modern Shanxi 山西; his family name was Li 李. He is said to have been extraordinarily intelligent as a child, memorizing several thousand characters by the age of seven. He became a novice monk at eleven and received the full precepts at fourteen. At eighteen he left on pilgrimage, studying first under Kumu Facheng 枯木法成 (n.d.), a Caodong master in Ruzhou 汝州, modern Henan 河南. After several years Kumu sent Hongzhi to the Caodong master Danxia Zichun 丹霞子淳 (d. 1119), also in Henan. After Hongzhi succeeded to Danxia's Dharma he served as abbot of several temples, finally settling down at Jingde si 景德寺 on Mount Tiantong 天童山, in present Zhejiang 浙江. There he taught for nearly thirty years, building what had been a small temple into a great monastic complex with twelve hundred monks. Hongzhi was also a skilled writer who authored several influential works on Zen, including the one-hundred-case koan collection *Record of Equanimity* 從容錄. He became well-known in China, and was referred to as one of the two great Ambrosia Gates of the Zen school, along with Dahui Zonggao.

36. For example, Hongzhi sent supplies from his monastery, Jingde si, to Ayuwang si when Dahui assumed the abbacy there. Also, prior to his death in 1157, he asked Dahui to handle his posthumous affairs (SCHLÜTTER 2008, 134–5).

A FEW THOUGHTS ON DAHUI'S CRITICISM  
OF "SILENT ILLUMINATION"

In reading Dahui's criticisms of silent illumination it is important to keep in mind that, as many scholars have pointed out, silent illumination—the practice of alert awareness free of thought—is basically the way that Chan meditation was always practiced prior to the use of koans. Morten Schlütter, for example, calls silent illumination “simply a continuation of the standard form of meditation in the Northern Song” (2008, p. 174). Even Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866), founder of the Linji school (the lineage to which Dahui belonged) advised his monks to practice in a way that sounds very similar to that of the silent illumination teachers: “Don't continue [thoughts] that have already arisen and don't let those that haven't yet arisen be aroused. Just this will be worth far more to you than a ten years' pilgrimage,” and, “If you will just bring to rest the thoughts of the ceaselessly seeking mind, you will not differ from the patriarch-buddha. Turn your own light inward upon yourselves!” Dahui was certainly aware of this; in Letter 10 Dahui even gives what might be regarded as a succinct definition of what true silent illumination involves:

This very moment just cease to entertain thought, putting an end to the confused mind. Then you will know that there is no delusion to be destroyed, no awakening to be aspired to, and no discriminatory thought to be cut off. With time erroneous views will disappear of themselves, and you will be like a person drinking water and knowing for himself whether it is hot or cold. The mind that is clearly aware of discriminatory thought taking place—how can this mind possibly be obstructed? How can there possibly be any other kind of mind than this one?”

But silent illumination is a quite difficult practice—attempting to go directly, without any intermediate practices, from a mind that basically identifies completely with thought to one that “just brings to rest the thoughts of the ceaselessly seeking mind” easily leads to var-

ious contemplative cul-de-sacs, such as attempts to suppress thought through forced concentration or to achieve tranquility by numbing the mind. It was such dangers that Dahui had in mind when warning against “arousing the mind to control consciousness and deadening the mind to stop thought” (Letter 19), and criticizing false teachers who, “not believing in the gate of awakening, regard awakening as a deception, as something secondary, as an expedient term, as a word to entice practitioners” (Letter 35). Koan use, too, has its dangers of course, and Dahui was equally clear in warning against these (see, for example, Letter 10).

It is generally thought that Dahui’s criticisms of silent illumination were directed toward members of the Caodong school. However, Dahui never specifically mentions the Caodong school or any of its teachers, nor were any Caodong masters moved to respond to his critiques. For an interesting and well-researched discussion of whether the Caodong school was the target of Dahui’s attacks, see Yu 2023. Yu cites passages from the representative Song-dynasty Caodong teachers demonstrating that the importance of awakening was emphasized by all of them, and points out that phrases suggestive of passivity, such as “dry tree stump” and “one thought for ten thousand years,” were commonly used by masters in every Chan school. This includes Dahui’s teacher Yuanwu, who used such expressions far more frequently than his eminent Caodong contemporaries Hongzhi Zhenjue and Zhenxie Qingliao.<sup>37</sup> Yu concludes that whoever the “false teachers” mentioned in the Letters may have been, there is no evidence to suggest that Dahui had important Caodong teachers in mind.

37. Zhenxie Qingliao 真歇清了 (1088–1151) was a native of the city of Anchang, in present-day Sichuan Province. He became a monk at the age of eleven and trained in Chan under the Caodong master Danxia Zichun, as did Hongzhi Zhenjue. He and Hongzhi are considered the most eminent Caodong masters of the Song dynasty.

## CONCLUSION

When Dahui was taking his leave of Yuanwu, he requested some words of advice from his teacher. Yuanwu, in a later letter to a follower, related what he had said to the departing monk:

When [Dahui] came to announce his departure, he asked for some words of teaching, which I accordingly gave him. This what I told him:

“Those who wear the patched robe of a Zen wayfarer should be completely serious about taking death and birth as their business. You should work to melt away the obstructions caused by conditioned knowledge and views and interpretive understanding, and penetrate through to a realization of the great causal condition communicated and bequeathed by the buddhas and ancestral teachers. Don’t covet name and fame. Step back and turn to reality, until your practical understanding and virtue are fully actualized.

“When there is real attainment, the more you try to hide it, the more it cannot be concealed. All the sages and the *devas* and *nagas* will try to push a person of real attainment forward, especially after years of cultivation and refinement. Wait until you are like a bell sounding when struck or a valley returning an echo. Wait until you are like pure gold coming forth from a forge where it has been smelted and refined ten thousand times, so that it will not change in ten thousand generations, so that it is *ten thousand years in a single moment*.

“When the grip of transcendence is in your hand, when the grasses bend down as the wind blows, then won’t you be expansive and generous with resources to spare?”<sup>38</sup>

It is clear that Dahui fully fulfilled Yuanwu’s hopes for him. Becoming the most influential Chan master of his era, Dahui is described by Schlütter as “easily the most famous Chan master of the Song dynasty, and indeed one of the most famous Chan masters of all time.”<sup>39</sup> Prior to and following his years in exile he served as abbot of several of the most important temples in the Chan world, and even

38. CLEARY 2001, 182–3.

39. SCHLÜTTER 2008, 105

during the exile years his guidance continued to be sought by some of China's most capable officials. Through his teaching on koans and *huatou* he permanently changed the way that meditation was approached in the Linji traditions of China, Korea, and Japan, contributing significantly to the vigor and continuity of these lineages.

Among all of Dahui's writings, it has been *Dahui's Letters* that has most clearly and widely espoused his teachings on koan use and other topics relating to Chan. However, the value of the *Letters* is not limited to its influence on the practice of Chan meditation—it reveals much about Dahui the man. Dahui's deep experiential understanding of the psychological attitudes and outlooks necessary for true practice, his skill in expressing his ideas and views, and his extensive knowledge of the teachings not only of Buddhism but also of Neo-Confucianism and Daoism—all are evident in this collection. Also evident is the range of Dahui's human qualities: his compassion in comforting a father who has lost a son (Letter 27); his integrity in correcting those who he felt had erred, whether a favorite disciple (Letter 48) or a well-intentioned stranger (Letter 57), his passion in presenting his convictions on the nature of Chan practice (numerous letters), and much more.

It is my hope that the present translation, joining the other recent translations of the *Letters* into English, will further contribute to our understanding of this important work.<sup>40</sup>

40. In addition to Jeffrey Broughton's *The Letters of Chan Master Dahui Pujue*, there has recently appeared *The Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Dahui Pujue: The Letters*, by Randolph S Whitfield.