

Chan Buddhism: The Classical Period



The Priest Dongshan Fording a Stream,
Attributed to Ma Yuan, Song Dynasty.

DONGSHAN LIANGJIE (807-869) was a disciple of Yunyan Tansheng. He is recognized to have founded the Caodong school of Zen. This school, along with the Linji school, remains today as one of the two existing Zen schools that began in China during the Tang dynasty (618-905), the "golden age" of Zen. Dongshan came from ancient Huiji (in modern Zhejiang Province). A story relates how, as a youth, he read the *Heart Sutra* and came upon the words "No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body . . ." and asked his teacher, "I have eyes, ears, a nose, and so on. So why does the sutra say there is none?" The teacher was reportedly dumbfounded at the insight revealed by Dongshan's question, and replied, "I can't be your teacher." He then sent the young prodigy to study under Zen master Limo at Mt. Wuxie.

At the age of twenty-one, Dongshan took the monk's vows on famous Mt. Song. In the tradition of the Zen school he then went traveling to visit the great adepts of his time.

Dongshan first went to see Zen master Nanquan Puyuan. At that time the congregation was working to prepare a feast for the following day in honor of Nanquan's late master, Mazu. Nanquan asked the congregation, "Tomorrow we will have Mazu's feast, but will Mazu come or not?"

The monks were unable to answer. Dongshan then stepped forward and said, "If he has a companion, he'll come."

When Nanquan heard this, he approved and said, "Though this child is young, he's a gem worthy of polishing."

Dongshan said, "Master, don't crush something good into something bad."

Next, Dongshan studied with Guishan. One day he said, "I've heard that National Teacher Huizhong taught that inanimate beings expound Dharma. I don't understand this clearly."

Guishan said, "Do you remember what he said or not?"

Dongshan said, "I remember."

Guishan said, "Please repeat it."

Dongshan said, "A monk asked the National Teacher, 'What is the mind of the ancient buddhas?'

"The National Teacher said, 'A wall tile.'

"The monk said, 'A wall tile? Isn't a wall tile inanimate?'

"The National Teacher said, 'Yes.'

"The monk asked, 'And it can expound the Dharma?'

"The National Teacher said, 'It expounds it brilliantly, without letup.'

"The monk said, 'Why can't I hear it?'

"The National Teacher said, 'You yourself may not hear it. But that doesn't mean others can't hear it.'

"The monk said, 'Who are the people who can hear it?'

"The National Teacher said, 'All the holy ones can hear it.'

"The monk said, 'Can the master hear it or not?'

"The National Teacher said, 'I cannot hear it. If I could hear it I would be the equal of the saints. Then you could not hear me expound the Dharma.'

"The monk said, 'All beings can't understand that sort of speech.'

"The National Teacher said, 'I expound Dharma for the sake of beings, not for the sake of the saints.'

"The monk said, 'After beings hear it, then what?'

"The National Teacher said, 'Then they're not sentient beings.'

"The monk asked, 'What scripture teaches about inanimate [things] expounding Dharma?'

"The National Teacher said, 'Obviously, this is not found in the scriptures, nor is it something that some noble one has said. But haven't you heard the words of the Flower Garland Sutra that say, "The chiliocosm, sentient beings, and the three realms all proclaim it?"' When Dongshan finished speaking, Guishan said, "I have this teaching. But one seldom encounters a person who understands it."

Dongshan said, "I'm not clear about it. I ask you for instruction about this."

Guishan lifted his whisk upright into the air and said, "Do you understand?"

Dongshan said, "I don't understand. Please explain it to me, Master."

Guishan said, "The mouth that my parents gave to the world is utterly unable to explain this to you."

Dongshan said, "Is there anyone else of your generation whom you respect and who can explain it?"

Guishan said, "Go to Liling in You County, where there are stone houses strung together. There, find a man of the Way named Yunyan. If you can search the grass and face the wind [bear his teaching methods], then you'll certainly hold him in esteem."

Dongshan said, "Who is this person?"

Guishan said, "He once asked me, 'When a student greatly admires and respects a teacher, what should he do?'

"I said, 'He must stop all the leaks.'

"He said, 'And he should also not go against his teacher's teaching, right?'

"I said, 'First of all you can't say that I'm at this spot!'"

So Dongshan said goodbye to Guishan and proceeded on to Yunyan. He related to Yunyan the story about the National Teacher and asked, "Who can hear inanimate things expound Dharma?"

Yunyan said, "What is inanimate can hear it."

Dongshan said, "Can the master hear it or not?"

Yunyan said, "If I could hear it, then you could not hear me expound Dharma."

Dongshan said, "Why couldn't I hear you?"

Yunyan held up his whisk and said, "Can you still hear me or not?"

Dongshan said, "I can't hear you."

Yunyan said, "When I expound Dharma you can't hear me. So how could you hear it when inanimate things proclaim it?"

Dongshan said, "What scripture teaches about inanimate things expounding Dharma?"

Yunyan said, "Haven't you seen that in the Amitabha Sutra it says, 'The lakes and rivers, the birds, the forests; they all chant Buddha; they all chant Dharma?'"

Upon hearing this Dongshan experienced a great insight. He then wrote a verse:

*How incredible! How incredible!
Inanimate things proclaiming Dharma is inconceivable.
It can't be known if the ears try to hear it,
But when the eyes hear it, then it may be known.*

Dongshan asked Yunyan, "Are there other practices I haven't completed?"

Yunyan said, "What were you doing before you came here?"

Dongshan said, "I wasn't practicing the noble truths."

Yunyan said, "Were you joyous in this nonpractice?"

Dongshan said, "It was not without joy. It's like sweeping excrement into a pile and then picking up a precious jewel from within it."

Dongshan asked Yunyan, "When I want to see *it* face to face, what should I do?"

Yunyan said, "Ask someone who's done it."

Dongshan said, "That's what I'm doing."

Yunyan said, "What can I say to you?"

As Dongshan prepared to leave Yunyan, Yunyan said, "Where are you going?"

Dongshan said, "Although I'm leaving the master, I don't know where I'll end up."

Yunyan said, "You're not going to Hunan?"

Dongshan said, "No, I'm not."

Yunyan said, "Are you returning home?"

Dongshan said, "No."

Yunyan said, "Sooner or later you'll return."

Dongshan said, "When the master has an abode, then I'll return."

Yunyan said, "If you leave, it will be difficult to see one another again."

Dongshan said, "It will be difficult to not see one another."

Just when Dongshan was about to depart, he said, "If in the future someone happens to ask whether I can describe the master's truth or not, how should I answer them?"

After a long pause, Yunyan said, "Just this is it."

Dongshan sighed.

Then Yunyan said, "Worthy Liang, now that you have taken on this great affair, you must consider it carefully."

Dongshan continued to experience doubt. Later as he crossed a stream he saw his reflection in the water and was awakened to Yunyan's meaning. He then composed this verse:

*Avoid seeking elsewhere, for that's far from the self.
Now I travel alone, everywhere I meet it.
Now it's exactly me, now I'm not it.
It must thus be understood to merge with thusness.*

Years later, Dongshan was making offerings to Yunyan's image when a monk asked, "Yunyan said, 'Just this is it,' did he not?"

Dongshan said, "Yes."

The monk asked, "What was his meaning?"

Dongshan said, "Back then I almost misunderstood my teacher's meaning."

The monk asked, "I'd like to know if Yunyan really knew this or not."

Dongshan said, "If he didn't know, how could he speak in this manner? And if he did know,

why was he willing to speak this way?" (Later Changqing said, "If he knew, why did he speak this way?" Changqing also said, "A child then knew a father's compassion.")

Dongshan hosted a feast of commemoration on the anniversary of Yunyan's death.

A monk asked, "When you were at Yunyan's place, what teaching did he give you?"

Dongshan said, "Although I was there, I didn't receive any teaching."

The monk asked, "But you are holding a commemorative feast for the late teacher. Doesn't that show you approve his teaching?"

Dongshan said, "Half approve. Half not approve."

The monk said, "Why don't you completely approve of it?"

Dongshan said, "If I completely approved, then I would be disloyal to my late teacher."

A monk asked, "When the cold season comes, where can one go to avoid it?"

Dongshan said, "Why not go where there is no cold?"

The monk said, "What is the place where there's no cold?"

Dongshan said, "When it's cold, the cold kills you. When it's hot, the heat kills you."

Zen master Dongshan entered the hall and addressed the monks saying, "Are there any among you who haven't repaid the four benefits and three existences?"

The congregation was silent.

Dongshan said, "If you don't understand this, how can you transcend the tribulations of karmic existence? The mind must not alight upon objects. The feet must walk where there is no place to do so. To finally realize this, you must expend effort and not pass your days idly."

Dongshan asked a monk, "Where have you been?"

The monk said, "Walking on the mountain."

Dongshan said, "Did you reach the peak?"

The monk said, "I reached it."

Dongshan said, "Were there people there?"

The monk said, "There weren't any people."

Dongshan said, "In that case you didn't reach the peak."

The monk said, "If I haven't been to the peak, how would I know there are no people?"

Dongshan said, "Why didn't you stay there?"

The monk said, "I would stay there, but there's someone in India who would disapprove."

Dongshan said, "Formerly I doubted this fellow."

The abbot of a temple was ill. Whenever he'd see a monk he'd yell, "Save me! save me!" The monks of the temple couldn't say anything useful to deal with the situation. Dongshan went to pay him a visit.

The abbot said again, "Save me! "

Dongshan said, "What appearance should I save?"

The abbot said, "Aren't you a descendant of Yaoshan, and a Dharma heir of Yunyan?"

Dongshan said, "I dare not say so."

The abbot clapped his hands and said, "Everyone has brought you here."

He then passed away.

Dongshan and Spiritual Uncle Mi were crossing a stream.

Dongshan said, "What's it like crossing the stream?"

Uncle Mi said, "It doesn't leak to the feet."

Dongshan said, "So old and venerable, and yet you still speak in such a manner!"

Uncle Mi said, "What do you say?"

Dongshan said, "The feet aren't wet."

Dongshan became ill. He instructed a novice monk to go and speak to [Dongshan's Dharma heir] Zen master Yunju Daoying.

Dongshan told the novice, "If he asks whether I'm resting comfortably, you are to tell him that the lineage of Yunyan is ending. When you say this you must stand far away from him because I'm afraid he's going to hit you."

The novice monk did as Dongshan instructed him and went and spoke to Yunju. Before he could finish speaking Yunju hit him. The novice monk said nothing further.

A monk asked, "When the master is not well, is there still someone who is well or not?"

Dongshan said, "There is."

The monk asked, "Can the one who's not ill still see the master or not?"

Dongshan said, "I can still see him."

The monk asked, "What does the master see?"

Dongshan said, "When I observe him, I don't see any illness."

Dongshan then said to the monks, "When you leave the skin bag you inhabit, where will you go and see me again?"

The monks didn't answer. Dongshan then recited a verse:

*Students as numerous as sands in the Ganges but none are
awakened.*

They err by searching for the path in another person's mouth.

If you wish to forget form and not leave any traces,

Wholeheartedly strive to walk in emptiness.

Dongshan then had his attendants help him shave his head, bathe, and get dressed. He then had the bell rung to summon the monks so that he could bid them farewell. He appeared to have passed away and the monks began wailing piteously without letup.

Suddenly Dongshan opened his eyes and said to them, "Homeless monks aren't attached to things. That is their authentic practice. Why lament an arduous life and pitiful death?"

Dongshan then instructed the temple director to organize a "delusion banquet." The monks' adoration for Dongshan was unending.

Seven days later the food was prepared. Dongshan had a final meal with the congregation.

He then said, "Don't make a big deal about it. When I pass away, don't go carrying on about it."

Dongshan then returned to his room, and, sitting upright, passed away. It was the third month in [the year 869]. Sixty-three years of age, he'd been ordained monk for forty-two years. Dongshan received the posthumous name "Enlightened Source." His stupa was named "Wisdom Awakening."

Ferguson, Andy. *Zen's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011.

Tung-shan [Dongshan] (807-869)

Lin-chi's [Linji] life coincided almost exactly with that of Tung-shan Liang-chieh principal source of the Ch'an house known as Ts'ao-tung [Caodong] (J., Sōtō). Over the next several centuries, the Lin-chi and Ts'ao-tung houses solidified into sects clearly distinguishable by their diverging approaches to practice and, later, by their institutional structures. A rivalry developed between them, especially in Japan, but it seems to have no basis in the lives, words, or methods of their founders. Tung-shan and Lin-chi literally walked the same paths as they took part in the great Dharma free-for-all of the late Tang period. Their backgrounds, natures, and teaching styles differed, yet they shared a genius for expressing the Way in direct, impromptu exchanges, and both felt a call to synthesize from the ever-growing store of Ch'an teachings and metaphors a few succinct and subtle formulations that future generations came to revere. These include Lin-chi's "Four Procedures" and Tung-shan's "Five Degrees of Honor and Virtue," the final text of this chapter.

Having grown up in far eastern China, Tung-shan journeyed not south but west to reach the flourishing nexus of Ch'an established by Shih-t'ou and Ma-tsu. He visited both Nan-ch'uan and Kuei-shan before settling down to study in earnest with Yün-yen T'an-sheng [Yunyan Tansheng] (780?–841). A Dharma grandson of Shih-t'ou, Yün-yen (J., Ugan) lived in a stone chamber on the mountain that gave him his name. The phrase in Tung-shan's record describing the master's domicile (translated in our selection as "linked caves") indicates a series of interconnected hermit cells hewn in a cliff face; such cells remain not merely in evidence but in active use in China today. The colony of hermits dwelling there constituted Yün-yen's assembly.

This was the right place for Tung-shan to pose the burning question that motivated his search: how can inanimate things teach the Dharma? In one form or another, such questions were in the air. "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" one of his contemporaries asked Chao-chou, drawing the famous "No" (Ch., *wu*; J., *mu*) that would, within a couple of centuries, come into play as a koan. Tung-shan's record quotes both Kuei-shan and Yün-yen answering his question in the affirmative and citing Mahāyāna sutras in support of their position. But the idea that inanimate things teach the Dharma was a new one, and both masters bent the letter, and probably even the spirit, of the texts they quoted. Later Ch'an firmly resolved this matter in favor of inanimate things both having and expressing Buddha-nature, a position that remains controversial even today.

Its doctrinal weaknesses notwithstanding, Yün-yen's teaching on this question evidently sufficed to open young Tung-shan's eyes, for his record continues with a poem expressing what he realized. The word used here is the Chinese for *gāthā*, but Tung-shan's verse scarcely resembles the *gāthās* of old. Rather, it belongs to a new genre of enlightenment poems that arose about this time and soon became a fixture in Ch'an and Zen literature. Such poems were later termed *tou-chi-chieh* (J., *tokinoge*), which translates as "*gāthās* of mutual understanding"—poems that reflect a true meeting of minds. The minds involved are those of the student and the teacher but also, implicitly, of the student and all enlightened Dharma ancestors, of mind and Mind.

Tung-shan was just thirty-four when Yün-yen died, and he had already taken leave to continue on pilgrimage. He is said to have practiced after Yün-yen's death with Tao-wu Yüan-chih (J., Dōgō Enchi), who was Yün-yen's brother through ties of both blood and

Dharma lineage. Tao-wu's biography puts his demise six years before Yün-yen's, however, so one chronicler or another has obviously erred. In any case, Tung-shan did study further, testing and sharpening his insight through many encounters on the road. A great second awakening occurred one day when he glimpsed his own reflection as he crossed a river, and again he marked the experience with a *gāthā*, this one manifesting his delight at seeing Yün-yen truly eye to eye, everywhere he looked.

Tung-shan's record contains a number of other poems as well, both long and short, doctrinal and occasional. His doctrinal poems hark back to those of his Dharma ancestor Shih-t'ou, while the occasional verses anticipate the flowering of Ch'an poetry yet to come. His legacy also included twenty-six successors, of whom Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi (Chapter 20) came to be considered co-founder of the Ts'ao-tung house. The only enduring Ts'ao-tung lineage, however, flowed from Yün-chü Tao-ying (J., Ungo Dōyō), who figures more conspicuously in Tung-shan's record than any other successor and developed the widest reputation as a teacher. Tung-shan himself, again like Lin-chi, seems to have risen in prominence after his death, but he was known well enough in his own day to attract correspondence from Po Chü-i and receive the usual imperial honors marking his career.

FROM THE RECORD OF TUNG-SHAN

When the Master first set out on a pilgrimage, he met an old woman carrying water. The Master asked for some water to drink.

The old woman said, "I will not stop you from drinking, but I have a question I must ask first. Tell me, how dirty is the water?"

"The water is not dirty at all," said the Master .

"Go away and don't contaminate my water buckets," replied the old woman.

Once, while the Master was on pilgrimage with Shen-shan, they saw a white rabbit suddenly cross in front of them. Sheri-shan remarked, "How elegant! "

"In what way?" asked the Master.

"It is just like a white-robed commoner paying respects to a high minister."

"At your venerable age, how can you say such a thing!" said the Master.

"What about you?" asked Sheri-shan.

"After generations of serving as a high official, to temporarily fall into reduced circumstances," replied the Master.

When Shen-shan had picked up a needle to mend clothes, the Master asked, "What are you doing?"

"Mending," answered Shen-shan.

"In what way do you mend?" asked the Master.

"One stitch is like the next," said Sheri-shan.

"We've been traveling together for twenty years, and you can still say such a thing! How can there be such craftiness?" said the Master.

"How then does the venerable monk mend?" asked Shen-shan.

"Just as though the entire earth were spewing flame," replied the Master.

The Master asked Yün-chü, "Where have you been?"

"I've been walking the mountains." replied Yün-chü.

"Which mountain was suitable for residing on?" asked the Master.

"None was suitable for residing on," said Yün-chü.

"In that case, have you been on all the country's mountains?" said the Master.

"No, that isn't so," said Yün-chü.

"Then you must have found an entry-path," said the Master.

"No, there is no path," replied Yün-chü.

"If there is no path, I wonder how you have come to lay eyes on this old monk," said the Master.

"If there were a path, then a mountain would stand between us, Ho-shang," said Yün-chü.

The Master said, "Henceforth, not by a thousand, not even by ten thousand people will Yün-chü be held fast."

A monk said, "The Master normally tells us to follow the bird path. I wonder what the bird path is?"¹

"One does not encounter a single person," replied the Master.

"How does one follow such a path?" asked the monk.

"One should go without hemp sandals on one's feet," replied the Master.

"If one follows the bird path, isn't that seeing one's original face?"² said the monk.

"Why do you turn things upside down so?" asked the Master.

"But where have I turned things upside down?" asked the monk.

"If you haven't turned things upside down, then why do you regard the slave as master?" said the Master.

"What is one's original face?" asked the monk.

"Not to follow the bird path," responded the Master.

One time when the Master was washing his bowls, he saw two birds contending over a frog. A monk who also saw this asked, "Why does it come to that?"

The Master replied, "It's only for your benefit, Acharya."

The Master asked a monk, "What is the most tormenting thing in this world?"

"Hell is the most tormenting thing," answered the monk.

"Not so. When that which is draped in these robe threads is unaware of the Great Matter, that I call the most tormenting thing," said the Master.

The Master went up to the hall and said, "When looking upon, what is it? When serving, what is it? When accomplishing, what is it? When accomplishing mutually, what is it? When there is the accomplishment of accomplishment, what is it?"

A monk asked, "What is 'looking upon'?"

"When eating, what is it?" replied the Master.

¹ "The bird path," an image encountered throughout Buddhist literature, is used to describe the path of an enlightened being.

² The image of one's original face appears in the *Hsing-yu* section of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Ancestor*.

"What is 'serving'?" asked the monk.
 "When ignoring, what is it?" replied the Master.
 "What is 'accomplishing'?" asked the monk.
 "When throwing down a mattock, what is it?" replied the Master.
 "What is 'accomplishing mutually'?" asked the monk.
 "Not attaining things," replied the Master.
 "What is the 'accomplishment of accomplishment'?" asked the monk.
 "Nothing shared," replied the Master.
 The Master offered the following *gāthā*:³

The sage kings from the beginning made Yao the norm;
 He governed the people by means of rites and kept his dragon-waist bent.
 When once he passed from one end of the market to the other,
 He found that everywhere culture flourished and the august dynasty was celebrated.

For whom do you wash your face and apply makeup?
 The sound of the cuckoo's call urges one home;
 Countless multitudes of flowers have fallen, yet the cuckoo's call is not stilled;
 Going farther into the jumbled peaks, in deep places its call continues.

The blooming of a flower on a sear old tree, a spring outside of kalpas;
 Riding backwards on a jade elephant, chasing the *ch'i lin*.⁴
 Now hidden far beyond the innumerable peaks,
 The moon is white, the breeze cool at the approach of sunrise.

Ordinary beings and Buddha have no truck with each other;
 Mountains are naturally high, waters naturally deep.
 What the myriad distinctions and numerous differences show is that
 Where the chukar cries, many flowers are blooming.

Can't stand head sprouting horns anymore;⁵
 When the mind rouses to seek the Buddha, it's time for compunction.
 In the unimpeded vista of the *Kalpa* of Emptiness, when no one is perceived,
 Why go south in search of the fifty-three?⁶

This selection is adapted from:

Foster, Nelson and Jack Shoemaker, eds. *The Roaring Stream: A New Zen Reader*.
 Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1996.

³ [This passage has come to be known as Tung-shari's "Five Degrees of Honor and Virtue."—Eds.]

⁴ The *ch'i lin* is a mythological beast, with the characteristics of a dragon, a deer, and the Greek Pegasus. It is traditionally regarded as the mount of slyphs.

⁵ Nan-ch'üan asks Tao-wu, "What can you say about that place that knowledge does not reach?" Tao-wu replied, "One should absolutely avoid talking about that." Nan-ch'üan said, "Truly, as soon as one explains, horns sprout on one's head, and one becomes a beast."

⁶ The "fifty-three" is a reference to Sudhana's fifty-three teachers in the *Gandanyuha* section of the Avatamsaka Sutra.