

Chan Buddhism: The Classical Period



LINJI YIXUAN (d. 866) was a disciple of Huangbo Xiyun. Linji is a preeminent figure in the history of Zen. He came from the city of Nanhua in ancient Caozhou (now the city of Dongming in Shandong Province). As the founder of the Linji school of Zen (in Japanese, *Rinzai*), his tradition remains, along with the Caodong school, as one of the two lineages that survive to the present day.

After taking the vows of a monk Linji studied the sutras, the Vinaya, and the various doctrines that were carried on the currents of Buddhism in his era. Although he practiced under Guishan Lingyou, his enlightenment came about under Huangbo Xiyun, with the teacher Gao'an Dayu a key player in the drama.

The lamp records provide this account of Linji's enlightenment:

From the beginning of his residence at Huangbo, Linji's performance of his duties was exemplary. At that time, Muzhou Daoming served as head monk.

Muzhou asked Linji, "How long have you been practicing here?" Linji said, "Three years."

Muzhou said, "Have you gone for an interview with the master or not?" Linji said, "I haven't done so. I don't know what to ask him."

Muzhou said, "Why not ask him, 'What is the essential meaning of Buddhism?'"

So Linji went to see Huangbo, but before he could finish his question Huangbo struck him.

Linji went out, and Muzhou asked him, "What happened when you asked him?"

Linji said, "Before I could get the words out he hit me. I don't understand." Muzhou said, "Go ask him again."

So Linji asked Huangbo again, and Huangbo once again hit him. Linji asked third time, and Huangbo hit him again.

Linji revealed this to Muzhou, saying, "Before you urged me to ask about the Dharma, but all I got was a beating. Because of evil karmic hindrances I'm not able to comprehend the essential mystery. So, today I'm going to leave here."

Muzhou said, "If you're going to leave, you must say goodbye to the master."

Linji bowed and went off.

Muzhou then went to Huangbo and said, "That monk who asked you the questions—although he's young he's very extraordinary. If he comes to say goodbye to you please give him appropriate instruction. Later he'll become a great tree under which everyone on earth will find refreshing shade."

The next day when Linji came to say goodbye to Huangbo, Huangbo said, "You don't need to go

somewhere else. Just go over to the Gao'an Monastery and practice with Dayu. He'll explain it to you."

When Linji reached Dayu, Dayu said, "Where have you come from?" Linji said, "From Huangbo."

Dayu said, "What did Huangbo say?"

Linji said, "Three times I asked him about the essential doctrine and three times I got hit. I don't know if I made some error or not."

Dayu said, "Huangbo has old grandmotherly affection and endures all this difficulty for your sake—and here you are asking whether you've made some error or not!"

Upon hearing these words Linji was awakened.

Linji then said, "Actually, Huangbo's Dharma is not so great."

Dayu grabbed him and said, "Why you little bed-wetter! You just came and said you don't understand. But now you say there's not so much to Huangbo's teaching. What do you see? Speak! Speak!"

Linji then hit Dayu on his left side three times.

Dayu let go of him, saying: "Your teacher is Huangbo. I've got nothing to do with it."

Linji then left Dayu and returned to Huangbo.

Huangbo saw him and said, "This fellow who's coming and going. How can he ever stop?"

Linji said, "Only through grandmotherly concern." Linji then bowed and stood in front of Huangbo.

Huangbo said, "Who has gone and returned?"

Linji said, "Yesterday I received the master's compassionate instruction. Today I went and practiced at Dayu's."

Huangbo said, "What did Dayu say?"

Linji then recounted his meeting with Dayu.

Huangbo said, "That old fellow Dayu talks too much! Next time I see him I'll give him a painful swat!"

Linji said, "Why wait until later, here's a swat right now!" Linji then hit Huangbo.

Huangbo yelled, "This crazy fellow has come here and grabbed the tiger's whiskers!"

Linji shouted.

Huangbo then yelled to his attendant, "Take this crazy man to the practice hall!"

One day, Linji was sleeping in the monks' hall. Huangbo came in and, seeing Linji lying there, struck the floor with his staff. Linji woke up and lifted his head. Seeing Huangbo standing there, he then put his head down and went back to sleep. Huangbo struck the floor again and walked to the upper section of the hall. Huangbo then saw the head monk, who was sitting in meditation.

Huangbo said, "There's someone down below who is sitting in meditation. What do you imagine you're doing?"

The head monk said, "What's going on with this old fellow?" (Guishan recounted this story to Yangshan, saying, "Just like old Huangbo! What was his meaning?" Yangshan said, "Two bettors, one race.")

Huangbo entered the kitchen and asked the cook, "What are you doing?"

The cook said, "Selecting rice for the monks' meal."

Huangbo said, "How much do they eat in one meal?"

The cook said, "Two and a half stone [one hundred fifty kilos]."

Huangbo said, "Isn't that too much?"

The cook said, "I'm afraid it's not enough!"

Huangbo hit him.

The cook related this event to Linji. Linji said, "I'll check out the old fellow for you."

Linji then went and stood in attendance for Huangbo.

Huangbo brought up his conversation with the cook. Linji said, "The cook doesn't understand. Please, Master, say a turning phrase on his behalf."

Huangbo said, "You ask it."

Linji said, "Isn't that too much?"

Huangbo said, "Tomorrow, have another meal."

Linji said, "Why say 'tomorrow'? Have a meal right now!" And so saying he hit Huangbo.

Huangbo yelled, "This crazy man has come in here and grabbed the tiger's whiskers again!"

Linji shouted and went out.

(Guishan brought up this case to Yangshan, asking, "What was the idea behind these two worthies?" Yangshan said, "What do you think, Master?" Guishan said, "When raising a child you learn a father's compassion." Yangshan said "No, it's not like that." Guishan said, "What do you say?" Yangshan said, "It's like enticing a thief to destroy the house.")

Linji went to visit Bodhidharma's stupa. The caretaker there said, "Will you first bow to the Buddha, or will you first bow to the First Ancestor?"

Linji said, "I don't bow to either one."

The caretaker said, "How did the Buddha and First Ancestor offend you?" Linji shook his sleeves and left.

Linji said, "There's a type of student who goes to Mt. Wutai to seek out Manjushri. That student has already made a mistake! There's no Manjushri at Mt. Wutai. Do you want to know Manjushri? It's just what is in front of your eyes! From first to last it's not anything else. Don't doubt it anywhere you go! It's the living Manjushri!"

When Linji was about to die he sat upright and said, "After I'm gone, my *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* cannot be destroyed."

Linji's disciple, Sansheng, said, "How can we dare destroy the master's *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*?"

Linji said, "In the future if someone asks about my teaching, what will you say to them?"

Sansheng shouted.

Linji said, "Who would have thought that my *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* would be destroyed by this blind ass!

Upon saying these words Linji passed away, sitting upright.

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

Lin-chi [Linji] (D. 867?)

Just as Te-shan is known for his blows and Chao-chou for his simple eloquence, Lin-chi I-hsüan is known for his shout—a roar sounding something like KHAT! that he issued as a presentation of Buddha-nature. While each of these reputations is deserved to a degree, they are grossly reductionistic. Lin-chi's bellow was no more than a small part of his rich, inventive, and highly effective teaching. His lively and extensive discourse record undercuts the popular image of him as a sort of Dharma thug, displaying his mastery of Mahāyāna sutras and his creativity in utilizing and interpreting them. He did shout at, beat, and berate his students, but he also originated some of the most sophisticated, even lovely, expressions of the fundamental matter ever to appear in Ch'an. And it was all to the same end: to introduce us to, as he put it, "the true person of no rank who is constantly going in and out the gateways of your face."

Born and raised in the north, Lin-chi [Linji] (J., Rinzai) traveled far south to study with Huang-po and eventually received transmission from him. According to Lin-chi's record, three years passed before he even dared to approach Huang-po with a question, and when he did, he got no more than a taste of the old master's stick. Frustrated, supposing his way was blocked by bad karma, he decided to leave. Huang-po referred him to another teacher, Kao-an Ta-yü, who is reported to have brought him to awakening with a few well-chosen phrases. Lin-chi continued his training with Huang-po for an unspecified period thereafter, making at least one excursion to Mt. Kuei, where he had exchanges with both Kuei-shan and Yang-shan. He also studied with Te-shan at least for a while:

The Master [Lin-chi] was standing in attendance at Te-shan's side. Te-shan said, "I'm tired today!"

The Master said, "What's this old fellow doing talking in his sleep?"

Te-shan struck the Master a blow.

The Master grabbed the chair Te-shan was sitting on and turned it over.

Te-shan let the matter end there.

Later, Lin-chi sent one of his best students to check on Te-shan, and Ch'an annals link the two masters closely for reasons of style and disposition as well as for their record of contact.

Lin-chi returned north to teach at a small temple called Lin-chi-yüan, the Monastery Overlooking the Ford, which was not far from the city of Chao-chou and likewise on the route to Mt. Wu-t'ai. Though older than Lin-chi, Chao-chou had not yet hung up his traveling staff at Kuan-yin Temple and paid a call before he did. Lin-chi's record says he was washing his feet when his visitor arrived, but Chao-chou put his question anyway, inquiring, "What's the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from India?"

"I happen to be washing my feet just now," Lin-chi replied. Chao-chou came closer and made as if listening intently. "In that case, I'll ladle out another dipper of dirty water!" exclaimed Lin-chi. Chao-chou promptly took leave.

Scholars cannot pin down dates for Lin-chi, but he probably moved to the temple by the ford in about 850, at the age of about forty. By that time, political changes had created new circumstances in the north, helping open the way there for southern Ch'an. Northern

Buddhist institutions had been hurt by the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763), and they suffered outright repression in the early 840s, climaxing with the all-out Hui-ch'ang persecution of 845. During this latter period, monks and nuns were defrocked en masse, some even executed, and thousands of monasteries and temples were destroyed. Southern Ch'an was largely protected from these developments by its distance from the capital, its relatively high degree of economic independence, its good standing with local officials, and a weakening of imperial authority that had occurred after 755. This last factor gave provincial rulers increased latitude to exercise their own prerogative, and the officials who welcomed both Lin-chi and Chao-chou to their new positions undoubtedly were doing exactly that.

Lin-chi's teaching was cut short by his death in 866 or early 867, when he was in his middle fifties. Despite his relatively brief tenure and isolated location, he had twenty-one successors and received the posthumous imperial honors that were becoming customary for noted Ch'an masters. Among his heirs, Hsing-hua Ts'ung-chiang established the lasting line that came to be thought of as the house of Lin-chi and that remains alive today, best known in the Rinzai Zen of Japan. Another successor, San-sheng Hui-jan, compiled the master's lectures and dialogue into a sparkling record that spread Lin-chi's influence far and wide.

FROM THE RECORD OF LIN-CHI

The Master instructed the group, saying: "Followers of the Way, the Dharma of the buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down. Fools may laugh at me, but wise men will know what I mean.

"A man of old said, 'People who try to do something about what is outside themselves are nothing but blockheads.'¹ If, wherever you are, you take the role of host, then whatever spot you stand in will be a true one. Then whatever circumstances surround you, they can never pull you awry. Even if you're faced with bad karma left over from the past, or the five crimes that bring on the hell of incessant suffering, these will of themselves become the great sea of emancipation.²

"Students these days haven't the slightest comprehension of the Dharma. They're like sheep poking with their noses—whatever they happen on they immediately put in their mouths. They can't tell a gentleman from a lackey, can't tell a host from a guest. People like that come to the Way with twisted minds, rushing in wherever they see a crowd. They don't deserve to be called true men who have left the household.³ All they are in fact is true householders, men of secular life.

"Someone who has left household life must know how to act ordinary and have a true and proper understanding, must know how to tell buddhas from devils, to tell true from sham, to tell common mortals from sages. If they can tell these apart, you can call them true men who have left the household. But if they can't tell a buddha from a devil, then all they've done is leave one household to enter another. You might describe them as living beings who are creating karma. But you could

¹ From a poem attributed to the eighth-century Ch'an master Ming-tsan, or Lan-tsan, of Mt. Nan-yüeh.

² The five crimes are usually given as (1) killing one's father, (2.) killing one's mother, (3) killing an *arhat*, (4) doing injury to a buddha, and (5) causing dissension in the Monastic Order. Anyone of these condemns the doer to suffer in the *Avichi* hell, the hell of incessant suffering.

³ *Ch'u-chia*, to leave the family or the household life, is the common term in Chinese for becoming a monk or nun.

never call them true men who have left the household."

Someone asked, "What do you mean by the true Buddha, the true Dharma, and the true Way? Would you be good enough to explain to us?"

The Master said, "Buddha—this is the cleanness and purity of the mind; The Dharma—this is the shining brightness of the mind. The Way—this is the pure light that is never obstructed anywhere. The three are in fact one. All are empty names and have no true reality."

"Suppose you yearn to be a sage. Sage is just a word, *sage*. There are some types of students who go off to Mt. Wu-t'ai looking for Manjushri. They're wrong from the very start! Manjushri isn't on Mt. Wu-t'ai. Would you like to get to know Manjushri? You here in front of my eyes, carrying out your activities, from first to last never changing, wherever you go never doubting—this is the living Mafijushri!

"Your mind that each moment shines with the light of nondiscrimination—wherever it may be, this is the true Samantabhadra. Your mind that each moment is capable of freeing itself from its shackles, everywhere emancipated—this is the method of meditating on Kuan-yin.⁴ These three act as host and companion to one another, all three appearing at the same time when they appear, one in three, three in one.⁵ Only when you have understood all this will you be ready to read the scriptural teachings."

Someone asked, "What was Bodhidharma's purpose in coming from the west?"⁶

The Master said, "If he had had a purpose, he wouldn't have been able to save even himself!"

The questioner said, "If he had no purpose, then how did the Second Ancestor manage to get the Dharma?"

The Master said, "Getting means not getting."

"If it means not getting," said the questioner, "then what do you mean by 'not getting'?"

The Master said, "You can't seem to stop your mind from racing around everywhere seeking something. That's why the Ancestor said, 'Hopeless fellows—using their heads to look for their heads!'⁷ You must right now turn your light around and shine it on yourselves, not go seeking somewhere else. Then you will understand that in body and mind you are no different from the Ancestors and buddhas, and that there is nothing to do. Do that and you may speak of 'getting the Dharma.'

"Fellow believers, at this time, having found it impossible to refuse, I have been addressing you, putting forth a lot of trashy talk. But make no mistake! In my view, there are in fact no great number of principles to be grasped. If you want to use the thing, then use it. If you don't want to use it, then let it be.

"People here and there talk about the six rules and the ten thousand practices, supposing that

⁴ The method of calling on the saving power of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, or Kuan-yin, described in chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sutra*.

⁵ The three bodhisattvas represent wisdom (Manjushri), religious practice (Samantabhadra), and compassion (Kuan-yin). At different times one or the other takes the leading role, with the other two acting as attendants.

⁶ A standard inquiry in Ch'an practice, similar to the question "What is the basic meaning of Buddhism?"

⁷ The identity of the Ancestor and source of the quotation are unknown.

these constitute the Dharma of the buddhas.⁸ But I say that these are just adornments of the sect, the trappings of Buddhism. They are not the Dharma of the buddhas. You may observe the fasts and observe the precepts, or carry a dish of oil without spilling it, but if your Dharma-eye is not wide open, then all you're doing is running up a big debt.⁹ One day you'll have to pay for all the food wasted on you! ...

"As for those who go off to live all alone on a solitary peak, eating only one meal a day at the hour of dawn, sitting in meditation for long periods without lying down, performing circumambulations six times a day—such persons are all just creating karma.¹⁰ Then there are those who cast away their head and eyes, marrow and brains, their domains and cities, wives and children, elephants, horses, the seven precious things, throwing them all away.¹¹ People who think in that way are all inflicting pain on their body and mind, and in consequence will invite some kind of painful retribution. Better to do nothing, to be simple, direct, with nothing mixed in.

"Followers of the Way, don't take the Buddha to be some sort of ultimate goal. In my view he's more like the hole in a privy. Bodhisattvas and *arhats* are all so many *cangues* and chains, things for fettering people

"Followers of the Way, there is no Buddha to be gained, and the Three Vehicles, the five natures, the teaching of the perfect and immediate enlightenment are all simply medicines to cure diseases of the moment.¹² None have any true reality. Even if they had, they would still all be mere shams, placards proclaiming superficial matters, so many words lined up, pronouncements of such kind.

"Followers of the Way, even if you can understand a hundred sutras and treatises, you're not as good as one plain monk who does nothing. As soon as you acquire a little of such understanding, you start treating others with scorn and contempt, vying and struggling with them like so many *asuras*,¹³ blinded by the ignorance of self and others, forever creating karma that will send you to hell. You're like the monk Good Star who understood all the twelve divisions of the teachings but fell into hell alive, the earth unwilling to tolerate him.¹⁴ Better to do nothing, to leave off all that.

⁸ The ten thousand practices are various kinds of devotional acts.

⁹ Monks were expected to fast from noon until morning of the following day. The practice of filling a dish with oil and carrying it on the head for a given distance without spilling any is ... an exercise for cultivating concentration of mind.

¹⁰ Circumambulating a statue of the Buddha and paying obedience to it at six fixed times, three in the daytime and three in the night.

¹¹ As the ruler did who is described in chapter 12 of the *Lotus Sutra*. The seven precious things in the *Lotus Sutra* are gold, silver, lapis lazuli, seashell, agate, pearl, and carnelian.

¹² The Three Vehicles [are the three main streams of Buddhism]. The five natures, a doctrine of the Fa-hsiang school, divides human beings into five groups according to their inborn capacity for enlightenment. The teaching of the perfect and immediate enlightenment is the One Vehicle doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, especially as expounded in the T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen schools.

¹³ [The *asuras* are fighting titans, one of the six forms of being ill classical Buddhism, here (as customary in Ch'an) interpreted as representing human experience.-Eds.]

¹⁴ Good Star, or Sunakshatra, was a disciple of the Buddha who was proficient at reciting the scriptures but could not understand their true meaning. As a result of his mistaken views he fell into hell while still alive. (See Chapter 33 of the *Nirvana Sutra*.)

When you get hungry, eat your rice;
 when you get sleepy, close your eyes.
 Fools may laugh at me,
 but wise men will know what I mean.¹⁵

"Followers of the Way, don't search for anything in written words. The exertions of your mind will tire it out, you'll gulp air and gain nothing.¹⁶ Better to realize that at every moment all is conditioned and without true birth, to go beyond the bodhisattvas of the Three Vehicle provisional doctrines.

"Fellow believers, don't dawdle your days away! In the past, before I had come to see things right, there was nothing but blackness all around me. But I knew that I shouldn't let the time slip by in vain, and so, belly all afire, mind in a rush, I raced all over in search of the Way. Later, I was able to get help from others, so that finally I could do as I'm doing today, talking with you followers of the Way. As followers of the Way, let me urge you not to do what you are doing just for the sake of clothing and food. See how quickly the world goes by! A good friend and teacher is hard to find, as rarely me with as the *udumbara* flower.¹⁷

"You've heard here and there that there's this old fellow Lin-chi, and so you come here intending to confront him in debate and push him to the point where he can't answer. But when I come at students like that with my whole body, their eyes are wide open enough but their mouths can't utter a word. Dumbfounded, they have no idea how to answer me. Then I say to them, "The trampling of a bull elephant is more than a donkey can stand!"¹⁸

"You all go around pointing to your chest, puffing out your sides, saying, 'I understand Ch'an! I understand the Way!' But when two or three of you turn up here, you're completely helpless. For shame! With that body and mind of yours you go around everywhere flapping your two lips, hoodwinking the village people, but the day will come when you'll taste the iron cudgels of hell! You're not men who have left the household—you belong, all of you, in the realm of the *asuras*!

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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.

¹⁵ From the poem by Ming-tsan, or Lan-tsan, of Mt. Nan-yüeh.

¹⁶ It has been suggested that the person "gulps cold air" because he is reading aloud, though the meaning is uncertain.

¹⁷ The *udumbara*, an imaginary plant often mentioned in Buddhist writings, blooms only once in three thousand years.

¹⁸ Lin-chi is quoting from the end of chapter 6 of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*.