

Pure Land Practices, the Huatou Revolution, and Dahui's Discourse on the Moment of Death

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CHAN AND ELITE SCHOLAR-OFFICIALS IN SONG DYNASTY CHINA (960–1279)

Song dynasty Chan, like all of Chinese Buddhism, depended for its place in society and its financial resources on wealthy patrons. Furthermore, in the Song dynasty most monasteries were incorporated into the state, and thus the appointment of abbots depended on the recommendation of state officials to the emperor's court. It is abundantly clear that every monastery and every abbot depended on the favor of members of the educated gentleman-official (*shidaifu*) class who in the Song dynasty were the wealthiest and most powerful of men.

Scholars have pointed out that the outpouring of Chan literature that occurred during the Song dynasty, not only the Northern but also the Southern Song, and the incorporation of some Chan literary works into the Song editions of the Buddhist canon, reflects the taste of members of the *shidaifu* class for Chan discourse records, *gong'an* collections, "transmission of the flame histories" of Chan that incorporated "encounter dialogues" that would become *gong'an*, poetic commentaries on selected *gong'an*, letters and personal instructions by Chan masters, both to monastics and to *shidaifu* students and friends, sermons by Chan masters, etc.

Gentlemen-officials, who studied history, classics, government policy, essay writing, and poetry in order to pass entrance examinations for the central government bureaucracy, were themselves accomplished students of poetry, and were not unfamiliar with the notion that truth can be presented through enigmatic encounters and dialogues that were present in non-Buddhist classics like the *Analects of Confucius* and the *Zhuangzi*. It is clear from the Song publishing record

that for them the use of words in Chan literature was highly attractive. In his description of the Chan lineage's success, Yuan dynasty Chan master Zhongfeng Mingben (1263–1323) noted the literary qualities of Chan works: "Eloquent are their words, crafty are their techniques; lofty is their style, pleasing are their rhymes, majestic are their commands, and great is their school."¹ Those who read Chan literature took up the challenge of understanding truth through these enigmatic exchanges, but at one remove: instead of confronting the "hammer and tongs" of a Chan master, they could safely decipher the dialogues at home in their libraries.

Scholars now agree that there was a shift in the prevalent Linji school Chan practice method between Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135) and Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163). From Dahui Zonggao's time, Linji teachers shifted from elaborate comments on *gong'an* in regular sermons to monastic students and lay followers combined with written commentaries on *gong'an*, to a new "keyword" or "critical phrase" method of *gong'an* inspection that used only a few words.²

Using the *gong'an* commentaries in verse by Xuedou Chongxian (980–1052)³ as his basic text, Yuanwu Keqin produced his generation's

1. Quoted in Natasha Heller, "The Chan Master as Illusionist: Zhongfeng Mingben's *Huanzhu Jiaxun*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 69, no. 2 (Dec. 2009): 271–308.

2. Morten Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute Over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song Dynasty Chan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Schlütter, "Silent Illumination, Kung-an Introspection, and the Competition for Lay Patronage in Sung-Dynasty Ch'an," in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel Getz (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), 109–147; On Yuanwu, see Ding-hwa Evelyn Hsieh, "Yuan-wu K'och'in's (1063–1135) Teaching of Ch'an Kungan Practice: A Transition from the Literary Study of Ch'an Kungan to the Practical K'anhua Ch'an," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17, no. 1 (1994). See also Miriam L. Levering, "Miao-tao and Her Teacher Dahui," in *Buddhism in the Sung*, 188–219; and Robert E. Buswell, Jr., "The 'Short-Cut' Approach of K'anhua Meditation: The Evolution of a Practical Subitism in Chinese Ch'an Buddhism," in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 321–77.

3. Xuedou's poetic commentary on one hundred *gong'an* was published in the Northern Song and circulated widely. It is recorded in a Southern Song catalogue dated 1151. The text included in the *Sibu Conkan* appears to be a Song dynasty edition; it is called *The Collection (ji) of Poetic Commentaries (Song)*

most intriguing collection of enigmatic exchanges with both prose and poetic commentary, the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyuanlu*). On the other hand, while Yuanwu and Dahui both wrote commentarial poetry and gave extensive commentary on *gong'an*, both Yuanwu's and Dahui's records are filled with criticisms of the scholar-officials' standard practice of attempting to penetrate the truths cherished by Chan masters by studying such texts. Dahui's long discourses on the faults of *shidaifu* literati as Chan students are anticipated in Yuanwu's discourses.

Abbots like Yuanwu Keqin and Dahui Zonggao presided over large bodies of monks who would practice Chan for twenty or thirty years at least. Their practice could be influenced and tested by verbal expressions. As Yuanwu often said, "Words cannot express it but words must be used to teach it." As Robert Sharf has pointed out, much of the constant rehearsal of encounter dialogues and the production of commentaries on Chan sayings and *gong'an* in large Chan monasteries must have been for the sake of training future Chan teachers in the Chan use of words.⁴ In *Chan Master Foguo [Yuanwu] Keqin's Essentials of the Mind*,⁵ what is emphasized in his instructions to monks is a kind of mindfulness meditation focused on the present moment in which one (perhaps using *samādhi* power and growing insight into emptiness) discards delusions and attachments. As one is practicing this, he or she routinely listens to the teacher's sermons to the whole group in which *gong'an* are raised and hints are offered. The teacher raises a different *gong'an* with the monastic student when he enters the teacher's room to test and trigger deeper awakening.⁶ Yuanwu assured his monastic students

on the [Words of the] Ancients (*Gu*) by the Teacher Xuedou Chongxian Also Known as the Great Teacher Mingjue (*Xuedou Xian heshang Mingjue dashi songgu ji*). That text is preserved in the *Sibu Congkan*, Xubian jibu, ser. 2 (Shanghai: Hanfen Lou, 1935), v. 370.

4. Robert H. Sharf, "How to Think with Chan Gong'an," in *Thinking with Cases: Specialist Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Charlotte Furth, Judith T. Zeitlin, and Ping-chen Hsiung (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 229–35.

5. *Foguo Keqin chanshi xinyao* [Chan Master Foguo Keqin's Essentials of Mind]. XZJ 120.

6. Dahui mentions in his discourse records that he once pointed out to Yuanwu that because Yuanwu always used the same *gong'an*, the students could prepare in advance, defeating the exercise.

that deep awakening will come to them if they keep on practicing in this way uninterruptedly for twenty or thirty years.

Dahui taught his monastic students in much the same way, but in addition he invented a method of practice that does not rely on command of poetic skills or insights triggered by poetry or the contemplation of cleverly disguised Buddhist theory. In what follows I will argue that Dahui's invented practice method, and his excitement about it, are related to its usefulness in addressing elite lay men and women's anxieties and doubts about the fate that awaited them on the other side of the grave.

Where did people go after death? And would their record of selfish and unselfish thoughts and deeds be good enough to bring them a good rebirth? Some people puzzled over these questions early in life. But many more raised them urgently as their careers wound down and the next lifetime seemed closer. In the Song dynasty on this topic it was not Chan lineages that offered the best hope of, and the best practices toward, a good rebirth. Teachers who offered faith in Amitābha's vow and urged Pure Land practices were in some instances Chan lineage monks, but in most cases were Tiantai school monks. Chan teachers pushed students, even lay students, toward awakening.

DOUBT AND THE HUATOU

One problem that Dahui identified with the practice of almost all lay students and some monastics, practice toward awakening, that is, was that doubt was not focused and overcome. One can remain a student forever without actually experiencing awakening as an event, without in fact freeing oneself from attachment to and entanglement with the realm of illusion, i.e., samsara—that is, deluded mind.

Although teachers such as Yuanwu and Linji always spoke of doubt as a hindrance to be broken through rather than a useful tool in *gong'an* meditation,⁷ as is well known, Dahui devoted a lot of energy to explaining the need for focused doubt in *gong'an* meditation. He may have had a precursor in this regard: passages in Yuanwu's dharma-brother Foyan Qingyuan (1067–1120)'s discourse record also suggest that most

7. Levering, "Ch'an Enlightenment for Laymen: The Teachings of Ta-hui Tsung-kao (1089–1163)" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1978), and Ding-hwa Evelyn Hsieh, "Yuan-wu K'o-ch'in's (1063–1135) Teaching of Ch'an Kung'an Practice."

meditative *gong'an* study succeeds because of doubt.⁸ Qingyuan tells the story of his teacher Wuzu Fayan's (1024–1104) early studies with Fushan Fayuan (also known as Yuanjian, 991–1067), with whom he stayed for a year. Fayuan “instructed him to contemplate” (*lingkan*) the case of “the Tathāgata has esoteric teachings; Kāśyapa does not conceal the treasury.”⁹ With this *gong'an* unresolved, Fayuan sent Wuzu to Baiyun Shouduan (1025–1072). One day when Shouduan was giving a talk, Wuzu experienced a great awakening. Qingyuan shares with us Wuzu's thoughts at that moment: “The Tathāgata has esoteric teachings; Kāśyapa does not conceal the treasury. Of course! Of course!” Wuzu further recalls other puzzling phrases that he had encountered in his previous studies, which he now understands as well. Qingyuan concludes the story by asking, “Was that not deep doubt?” There is nothing unusual about the story about Wuzu, but Foyan's comment is unusual, and perhaps also historically significant.

Foyan Qingyuan elsewhere also spells out his insight clearly:

If you wish to understand clearly this matter, then you must give rise to doubt and investigate thoroughly. If you are deeply puzzled about this matter, then that is the precursor to *prajñā*-knowledge. Why is this? The business of the wandering monk is only to put an end to the feeling of uncertainty (*yi*, doubt). If you do not give rise to doubt, then how will you put an end to the feeling of uncertainty?¹⁰

In Foyan's view, *gong'an* may trigger insight without any new arousal of doubt, but only if faith and doubt are present. And a *gong'an* given to a student to ponder over a period of time definitely will arouse and focus doubt.

The problem that Dahui faced up to squarely was that not all *gong'an* study as practiced in his day focused enough doubt or effectively removed entanglements with words. Dahui's method compresses and

8. *Gu zunsu yulu* 古尊宿語錄 [Recorded sayings by the old venerable masters]. *Shuzhou Longmen Foyan heshang pushuo yulu* 舒州龍門佛眼和尚普說語錄, Manji Zokyo, CBETA X68, no. 1315, juan 32, 207a10ff. I am indebted here to Alan Gerard Wagner's 2008 Harvard University dissertation, “Practice and Emptiness in the Discourse Record of Ruru Jushi, Yan Bing (d. 1212), A Chan Buddhist Layman of the Southern Song.” Wagner's dissertation is available online at http://rurujushi.com/Wagner_thesis_Ruru_Jushi_2008-10-07.pdf

9. Zokuzokyo CBETA X1315.xxxii.68.211c9–10.

10. *Zokuzokyo* 1315.xxxii.68.211b19–22. Translation by Wagner, “Practice and Emptiness,” 66.

intensifies the monastic process of raising doubt to consciousness and focus that may be characteristic of *gong'an* study more broadly by inventing the practice of focusing one's attention on "observing the key phrase" or "critical phrase" (*kan huatou*) of a Chan "case" (*gong'an*, Jpn. *kōan*) to focus doubt while avoiding entanglement with words.

Dahui invented a non-discursive method of practice that does not rely on command of poetic skills or insights triggered by poetry, wrestling with Buddhist theory, or even words. One has to have some familiarity with the case. One then has to focus on the central question of the case, expressed in the "keyword," to arouse doubt. But one does not respond with verbal thought or imagination to the words contained in the "critical phrase." All "affective thinking," that is, verbal thought and imagination, must cease before awakening can happen.

This invention by Dahui, a serious attempt to imagine different functions for language, either required or inspired serious philosophical engagement on Dahui's part, as can be seen in Dahui's explanations in both his *Letters (shu)* and *Individual Instructions (fayu)*. His philosophical insights are reflected in his practice instructions to his students, which are calculated to wall off any entanglement with words or meaning as one continues to concentrate on inspecting the *huatou*. Dahui explains the process as follows:

Here just observe the *huatou*. A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddha-nature or does it lack it?" Zhaozhou said, "It lacks it (*wu*)." When you observe it, do not use extensive evaluation, do not try to explicate it, do not seek for understanding, do not take it up when you open your mouth, do not make meaning when you raise it, do not fall into vacuity, do not hold onto your mind waiting for enlightenment, do not catch a hold of it when your teacher speaks, and do not lodge in a shell of no concerns. But keep hold of it at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. "Does a dog have buddha-nature or not?" Hold onto this "lack" until it gets ripe, where verbal discussion and mental evaluation cannot reach. The square inch of your mind will be in a muddle. When it is as if you have clamped your teeth around a tasteless piece of iron and your will does not retreat—when it is like this, then that is good news!¹¹

11. T. 1998, 47:901c27–902a6. Translation by Heller, "The Chan Master as Illusionist," 301. This passage is also translated and discussed in Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen*, 108.

As Natasha Heller points out, here the procedure for using the *huatou* is largely explained by negation: One is not to evaluate or subject the *huatou* to interpretation, or to figure it out through exchanges with one's teacher in the teacher's room. The most positive suggestion comes through metaphor, when the practitioner is advised to gnaw on the word like tasteless iron. Dahui's instructions tie the practice to the removal of illusion/delusion with no possible generation of attachment to a new delusion. Heller writes:

The practice of observing the word is significant in that it does not eschew language and does not claim that language is always an obstruction. Rather, it indicates that one must approach words in a certain way. As Zhongfeng Mingben says, "You should know that the teaching of great illusion is under your feet; you do not need to move in the least. Only wait for your emotions to dissipate and your views to be extinguished, and you will tread on it as you walk."¹²

Here Zhongfeng Mingben is in definite accord with his predecessor Dahui.

DID DAHUI BURN *THE BLUE CLIFF RECORD*
(*BIYANLU*), AND IF SO, WHY?

Although the contemporary evidence for Dahui's act is slight, the facts are that the *Biyānlǔ* disappeared from use for more than a century, and that Dahui Zonggao is the only person mentioned in connection with its disappearance. Scholars are inclined provisionally to accept that Dahui burned the woodblocks that made wide circulation of the *Blue Cliff Record* possible.¹³ But why? Was there a reason to single out the *Blue Cliff Record* as a particularly egregious case of the kind of Chan publishing product that distracted literati, lay supporters, and monastics from breaking through the delusion of *samsara*? Dahui had himself demonstrated understanding of old cases by writing poetic commentaries.¹⁴

12. Heller, "The Chan Master as Illusionist," 303.

13. On this, see Ogisu Jundō, "Daie zenji no Hekigan shū shōki ni tsuite" ["On the Commitment of Pi-Yen Chi to Flames by Chinese Zen Master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163)"], *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū* 印度學佛教學研究 [Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies] 11, no. 1 (1963): 115–118. In English, see Levering, "Ch'an Enlightenment for Laymen."

14. "The writing of such collections of *songgu*, short verses on episodes and anecdotes culled from the discourse records and biographies of Chan masters

He also understood the value of a Chan teacher making a collection of cases for his own study and use, as he did in creating his *Zhengfayanzang* (Jpn. *Shōbōgenzō*), “Treasury of the True/Correct Dharma Eye.”¹⁵

My hypothesis is that Dahui saw that Yuanwu’s prose commentaries on the cases, unlike the prose and poetic commentaries of others, gave too many cases away, making it difficult for students to give rise to doubt with respect to those cases. It is possible to acquire familiarity with Chan language and Chan metaphors for various Mahayana Buddhist concepts in a way that results in “getting the point” of Chan cases without actually being freed from affective thinking. This is a serious obstacle to the kind of awakening that Dahui insisted was the only real entrance gate to Chan practice. Perhaps when Dahui became a teacher it was obvious that many readers, lay and monastic, not only thought they had penetrated Xuedou’s hundred cases thanks to Yuanwu’s all too kind comments, but intellectually had understood them too well.

DAHUI’S MOTIVATION

What remains to be better understood is Dahui’s motives for creating a new verbal practice form. Why did he do it?

In his book *When Zen Became Zen*, Morten Schlütter points out that Dahui started using the *huatou* as a means of instruction during the same year that he lived close to the large monastery whose abbot was Zhenxie Qingliao (1088–1151), a key player in the dramatic revival of the Caodong Chan lineage during the late Northern and early Southern Song dynasty. The Caodong revival began in the lifetime of

of the past was common from the eleventh century onward. ...Dahui compiled and wrote verses for a collection in collaboration with one of his dharma heirs, Wan’an Daoyan (1094–1164). Daoyan is also known as the Abbot of Donglin [monastery] (*Donglin heshang*). This collection is preserved in the *Discourse Records of Ancient Worthies*, Z1315.xlvii, as the *Verses on Old Cases by the Abbot of Donglin and [the Monk] Residing at Yunmen’s Retreat* (*Donglin heshang Yunmen anzhu songgu*); it was written during the period from 1131–1133 while Dahui was living at or near the site of Yunmen Wenyan’s old retreat (Levering 1978:26). After each case we find a verse by ‘Donglin’ and then one by ‘Yunmen,’ ” (Wagner, “Practice and Emptiness,” 74–75).

15. The *Zhengfayanzang* in 3 *juan*, each divided into two parts, is in *Zokuzokyo* 2, 23, 1, pp. 1a–78b. A Song edition, which appears to have been published around 1162, still exists for this work.

Furong Daokai (1043–1118), and continued with conspicuous vigor as his dharma-heirs gained important positions at major monasteries in areas where support for Buddhist teachers was strong. This revival of course depended on finding and maintaining lay *shidaifu* patrons. Schlütter argues rather convincingly that Dahui saw the rise of the Caodong lineage teachers as a threat to the dominance of the Linji lineage during the Song dynasty, went on the attack against its practice method, and simultaneously improved and defined the Song Linji school's practice method as inspecting the *huatou*.

There is of course no direct historical evidence in Dahui's records to support Schlütter's proposal. The compilers of Dahui's records for wide circulation and for inclusion in the Song dynasty official Buddhist canons would omit any evidence of such worldly motivations on the part of a great Buddhist teacher.

Two other motives for Dahui's energetic teaching of *kan huatou* practice can be advanced. The first is simply a desire to shorten the time between the beginning of Chan practice and the culmination of Chan practice in sudden event called "awakening," which for Dahui was the entrance into real Chan practice. In Dahui's *Letters* he suggests that after beginning *huatou* practice one can see a dramatic difference in one's practice after ten days. *Gong'an* study never offered such rapid progress.¹⁶

The second, which I want to expand on here, is a competition that certainly existed in the Song dynasty between "orthodox" Chan practices based on the goal of completely breaking through the deluded mind of affective thinking on the one hand, and Pure Land practices that offered an intermediate goal of rebirth in Amitābha's land based on one's preservation of Amitābha mindfulness *samādhi* at the moment of death on the other.

KAN HUATOU AND DAHUI'S CHAN DISCOURSE ABOUT THE MOMENT
OF DEATH: CHAN RIVALRY WITH Tiantai-SPONSORED AND
INDEPENDENT LAY PURE LAND PRACTICE

In the Pure Land scriptural tradition, single-minded devotion to Amitābha Buddha would enable the pious to be reborn in Amitābha's buddha-land, known as the Pure Land. In the Song dynasty there was

16. Levering, "Ch'an Enlightenment for Laymen."

not an independent Pure Land school with separate patriarchs, lineages, monasteries, and so forth. Monks in any school could believe in Amitābha Buddha and his vows, and practice Pure Land practices in addition to those of his school. Monks could organize societies of Pure Land practitioners, as could lay people without the support of monks.

Ritual practices varied, given the general rubric of *nianfo samādhi*, i.e., visualizing Amitābha Buddha or becoming mindful of him by reciting his name.¹⁷ Performance of these practices on one's deathbed was particularly important, for maintaining one's concentration on Amitābha Buddha in the final moments could result in rebirth in paradise despite a lifetime of misdeeds. *Nianfo* could result in visionary encounters with Amitābha Buddha, as well as visions of golden lotuses, marvelous fragrances, lights, and enchanted music, all drawn from imagery found in Pure Land scriptures. Such miracles confirmed the promise that the efforts of practitioners would result in their rebirth in the Pure Land.¹⁸

These practices saw considerable revision and revitalization in the Song dynasty, as part of the re-emergence and expansion of Pure Land devotion and organization, seen especially in South China.¹⁹

Lay people participated extensively in this movement, either individually or in societies. Clergy of various Buddhist traditions, including Chan, responded, composing new texts and liturgies that replaced those lost in the late Tang period. These new texts included liturgies for laity. Among the most important figures in this movement were the Chan cleric Changlu Zongze (1056?–1107?), author of the *Rules of*

17. For an introduction to Pure Land practices germane to this discussion, see Daniel B. Stevenson, "Pure Land Worship and Meditation in China," and "Deathbed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful," in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995), 359–79, 593–602.

18. I have availed myself here of Mark Halperin's useful summary in his "Domesticity and the Dharma: Portraits of Buddhist Laywomen in Sung China," *T'oung Pao* 92, nos. 1–3 (2006): 50–100, especially 86–90.

19. See Daniel A. Getz, "T'ien-t'ai Pure Land Societies and the Creation of the Pure Land Patriarchate," in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 477–523; and Daniel B. Stevenson, "Protocols of Power: Tsu-yun Tsun-shih and T'ien-t'ai Lay Buddhist Ritual in the Sung," in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Gregory and Getz, 340–408, especially 359–363.

Purity for the Chan Monastery (Chanyuan qinggui), compiled in 1103, and also many Pure Land texts. Another important figure was the Tiantai cleric Ciyun Zunshi (964–1032).²⁰ Zunshi also wrote many Pure Land ritual and meditational manuals, including one for laity that included a regular practice of “ten moments of mindfulness of Amitābha,” which entailed a ten-fold verbal recitation of Amitābha’s name.²¹ According to Daniel Stevenson, Zunshi “designed this simple formula both as a minimum daily quota of Pure Land practice and a dress rehearsal for the deathbed.”²² This ritual for laity was prefaced by prayers for a clear and easeful death, accompanied by all the auspicious signs of immediate rebirth in Amitābha’s Pure Land, and included the basic ritual elements of ritual purification, worship, confession, and vow.

Many *shidaifu* and their female relatives participated in these practices, though evidence of their effectiveness is more readily found in the epitaphs (*muzhiming*) of Song women than of men. Devotees displayed the fruits of their piety in their unshaken mindfulness of Amitābha and his buddha-land at the moment of death.

How popular were these preparatory and deathbed practices among *shidaifu*? Many more collections of “splendid deaths” through Pure Land devotion and practice were produced in the Song than in other periods, compiled and recommended by *shidaifu*.²³ Here are the

20. On Changlu Zongze, see Yifa, *The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Chanyuan Qinggui*, Kuroda Institute Classics in East Asian Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

21. The ten recitations (*shinian*) of Amitābha’s name draw from passages in Pure Land scriptures. See Jacqueline L. Stone, “By the Power of One’s Last Nenbutsu: Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan,” in *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 81. For more on Zunshi and his liturgies on behalf of the laity, see Stevenson, “Protocols of Power.”

22. For Stevenson’s comment that this short but frequently performed ritual was a rehearsal for the moment of death, see *ibid.*, 362.

23. See Daniel B. Stevenson, “Death-bed Testimonials of the [Chinese] Pure Land Faithful,” in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 592–602. An excellent review of the development of this literature over the course of the Song dynasty and before, as well as of what little is known about lay Pure Land practice in the Song, is provided by Robert H. Sharf in “On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch’an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China,” *T’oung Pao*, 2nd ser., 88, fasc. 4/5 (2002): 282–331.

dates of Chinese collections of accounts of auspicious deaths with complete concentration on Amitābha followed by signs of assured rebirth in the Pure Land (*Jingtu wangsheng zhuan*):

Pre-Song dynasty:

1. After 653: *Treatise on the Pure Land (Jingtulun)* compiled by Jiakai. T. 1963
2. 785, probably expanded in the Five Dynasties period: *Accounts of Auspicious Responses Accompanying Birth in the Western Pure Land (Wangsheng xifang jingtu ruiying zhuan)*. T. 2070.

Song dynasty:

3. 1064: *Biographies of those reborn in the Pure Land (Jingtu wangsheng zhuan)* Compiled by Jiezhu (985-1077). T. 2071.
4. Material before 1063: *Biographies of those Reborn in the Pure Land (Wangsheng jingtu zhuan)*. Probably compiled in Japan from material from Feizhu's (?-1063) *Lost Compilation of Those Reborn [in the Pure Land] Following Their Karmic Conditions (Suiyuan wangsheng ji)*.
5. 1084: *Newly Compiled Biographies of Those Who Attained Deliverance in the Pure Land (Xinxiu wangsheng zhuan)*. Compiled by Wang Gu.
6. 1155: *Newly Edited Compilation of Precious Pearls of Ancient and Modern Rebirth in the Pure Land (Xinbian gujin wangsheng jingtu baozhu ji)*. Compiled by Lu Shishou.
7. 1160: Wang Rixiu's (?-1173) [*Layman*] *Longshu's Pure Land Anthology (Longshu jingtu wen)*, T. 1970.
8. 1200: Zongxiao's (1151-1214) *Topical Anthology of the Land of Bliss (Lebang wenlei)*, T. 1969.

Yuan dynasty:

9. 1269: *Record of the Establishment of the Teaching Concerning the Pure Land (Jingtu lijiao zhi)*. This was actually a collection of biographies. Compiled by Zhipan. T. 2035. Included in *Fozu tongji*.
10. Date and compiler unknown. *Han Family Classified Biographies of Persons Reborn in the Pure Land (Hanjia leiju wangsheng zhuan)*.
11. 1381: *Various poems about people of Supreme Goodness (Zhu*

shang shanrenyong). Compiled by Daoyuan.²⁴

A prominent member of the scholar-official class offered testimony about the popularity of these practices among that group, despite the fact that he disliked them. Ye Shi (1150–1223), a prominent *shidaifu*, eulogized one Madame Lou (d. 1216), a member of a prominent Mingzhou clan of that name and niece of a high official. Madame Lou devotedly followed Buddhist ways, often sitting in meditation and never eating only half a bowl of coarse fare. After falling very ill, she refused to take any medicine. She bathed, changed her clothes, and bid her mother-in-law farewell, saying she had nothing to do with the luxurious superficiality of this world. Soon she died. Her daughters in their grief stamped their feet, shook the bed, slapped her shoulders, and bit her arms. During the commotion Madame Lou came back to life. She opened her eyes and said, “You don’t understand the world. Let go of me.” She then assumed a cross-legged posture and began chanting the Buddha Amitābha’s name, passing away the next day with a vision of Amitābha Buddha.²⁵

Ye Shi recounted these scenes, but did not approve of them. At the end of his epitaph for Madame Lou he denounced Buddhism, lamenting how intelligent, energetic literati (gentlemen officials) had fallen prey to its bizarre notions. When death arrived, however, few could maintain their self-mindfulness.²⁶

Barend Ter Haar, in a study of Buddhist aspects of lay religious life in the lower Yangzi River valley from 1100 until 1340 that draws on sources interested in stories of people from a wider range of social locations—all produced, of course, by *shidaifu*—reports that a burning concern for many people was the moment of death (*linzhong*). Ter Haar mentions that the Yuan monk Pudu (1255–1330) wrote about how devout believers were often extremely afraid of the moment of death, but they would put off preparing for it. They counted on the efficacy of ten recitations of Amitābha Buddha’s name at the moment of death,

24. I have supplemented a list provided by Christoph Kleine in his “Portraits of Pious Women in East Asian Buddhist Hagiography. A Study of Accounts of Women Who Attained Birth in Amida’s Pure Land,” *Bulletin d’Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient* 85 (1998): 325–361.

25. Halperin, “Domesticity and the Dharma,” 94–95.

26. *Ye Shi ji*, 423–4. This summary is taken from Halperin, “Domesticity and the Dharma,” 95.

but they would wait until almost their last breath “before they started the ten recitations to sound the bell, just like closing the door after the thief has gone.”²⁷

Even though Dahui Zonggao lived in a world flooded with compilations of accounts of exemplary deaths by Pure Land faithful, he did not himself believe in the effectiveness of Pure Land practice at the moment of death for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land, as this practice presupposes a “real” Pure Land in the West.²⁸ Dahui held the doctrinal position that the Pure Land is only in the mind (*weixin jingtu*), which also can be expressed as “when the mind is pure the land is pure.” This doctrinal position has a long history in China, but in the Chan context came to the fore again during the Five Dynasties in writings of Yongming Yanshou (904–975), and was held by Chan teachers who adopted Pure Land practices alongside Chan ones, such as Changlu Zongze (mentioned above).

Those who hold the doctrinal position that “the Pure Land is only in the mind and Amitābha Buddha is your own Nature” fall into one of three categories with respect to the “real” existence of the Western Pure Land. First, some denied the “real” existence of the Western Pure Land of Amitābha in the sense that naïve lay people might believe in it. Second, some took the view that as a matter of *upāya*, those of superior capacities/good roots should be taught that the Pure Land exists only in the mind, while those of middling or inferior roots should be taught that the Western Pure Land exists in the western part of the Buddhist cosmos. Third, some of those who held the “mind only Pure Land” position recognized it as also existing in the West, at least on the phenomenal level. Judging by his written legacy, Dahui clearly belonged to the first category, as the eighteenth century Zen master Hakuin Eikaku later remarked.²⁹

27. Barend Ter Haar, “Buddhist-Inspired Options: Aspects of Lay Religious Life in the Lower Yangzi from 1100 until 1340,” *T’oung Pao*, 2nd ser., 87, fasc. 1/3 (2001): 92–152; quotation from p. 124.

28. I am indebted to Dr. Jeong Young-Sik’s 鄭榮植 excellent 2006 doctoral dissertation at Tokyo University, “Daie Soko to Kankoku koan zen no tenkai,” 60–65, for making this point absolutely clear.

29. Hakuin wrote: “Dahui and others raised up the teaching style of steepness. They never spoke of rebirth in the Pure Land.” Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 147. Hakuin further wrote: “This is because at the very moment that they saw

Occasionally Dahui seemed to act as though he belonged to the second category, which may be evidence that the Pure Land beliefs and practices of *shidaifu* put him under some pressure. After Dahui returned from exile he was a highly esteemed abbot, given special favor by the court. In many recorded instances he was asked by prominent *shidaifu* to conduct funereal merit-making services for recently deceased relatives. In a few instances those educated gentlemen-officials wanted Dahui to publically recognize in the service the Pure Land piety of the deceased and the auspicious signs of rebirth in the Western Pure Land that occurred on her or his deathbed. Dahui accommodated those laymen, saying also that if heavens exist, then good people will enter them.³⁰

There is another sign of the extent to which Pure Land beliefs not only permeated the *shidaifu* world of lay patrons but also put pressure on Dahui. In 1160 Dahui wrote a postface for a deservedly famous Pure Land rebirth tale collection, *The [Layman] Longshu's Pure Land Anthology* (*Longshu Jingtu wen*) compiled by Wang Rixiu. Even though in his postface Dahui made his "Pure Land in mind only" position quite clear and did not endorse the "reality" of a Pure Land of Amitābha in the west or the goal of being born there, he still offered his support to the project.³¹

the way and gained awakening, they penetrated to the understanding that any place in the ten directions was the Pure Land of the treasure trees, and that anybody at all was possessed of the complete body of the pure, golden Amida Buddha" (*ibid.*, 172).

30. See Dahui's *pushuo* ("universal explanation") sermon requested by District Governor Sun, 4 fascicle edition of *Dahui Pujue Chanshi pushuo* in four juan, *Zokuzokyo* 1, 31, 5, juan 4, p. 477c; and Dahui's *pushuo* sermon invited by Chief Minister Tang Situi in the same fascicle of the same edition, p. 468b. I have written extensively about the *pushuo* sermon requested by Tang Situi in Levering, "Ta-hui and Lay Buddhists: Ch'an Sermons on Death," in *Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval Chinese Society*, ed. David W. Chappell, Buddhist and Taoist Studies Series Vol. II (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 181-206.

31. Here I disagree with Robert H. Sharf about the significance of Dahui's having contributed a preface. He implies that Dahui praised Wang Rixiu's collection because he had no objections to the prevalence of *nianfo* even in Chan monasteries. I read his postface as praising Wang Rixiu's motivation as a bodhisattva to help others, not as praising the collection. He makes this clear by concluding the postface with his approval of the goal of finding the Pure Land in one's own mind, and Amitābha in one's own body. This is quite

With this evidence in mind, I suggest that Dahui's repeated insistence in his letters to elite laymen that *kan huatou* practice offers sufficient protection at the moment of death opens up the possibility that creating and promoting a more effective use of words in the quest for "awakening (Jpn. *satori*) as an event" might have been a response to a rising concern of lay patrons about the moment of death.

Dahui's letters and individual instructions make clear that together with his repeated criticisms of Caodong's "silent illumination" practice, Dahui simultaneously expanded and repeatedly deployed a discourse about effectiveness of *huatou* practice in preparing for the moment of death. Since Dahui was a Buddhist teacher and not just a worldly businessman, he no doubt desired to do something effective about the fact that in his world lay people and some monastics came to the moment of death without the ability to maintain the mindfulness that would enable them to negotiate that dangerous passage successfully. But competition for lay practitioners may well have played a role. Dahui's discourse on the *huatou* and death, particularly the discourse aimed at lay recipients of his letters, took place at a time when gentry-officials were being attracted to lay Pure Land practices sponsored in part by the Tiantai school as a way of dealing with the problem of the moment of death.

Dahui was not the first Chan master, and his *Letters* and other records are not the first pieces of widely circulated Chan literature that brought up the importance of the moment of death. The *Extended Record of Yunmen*, compiled in the Northern Song dynasty, puts these words in Yunmen's mouth:

Teachers who not even in a dream have ever seen the significance of [the teaching] of our original teacher's lineage—for what purpose do they consume the alms of the faithful? On the last day of their lives, every one of them will have to reimburse those [almsgivers].³²

The phrase translated here "on the last day of their lives" literally reads: "on the 30th day of the last month (*la yue sanshiri*)." This is the

different from the goal held out by the stories in the collection. Sharf, "On Pure Land Buddhism," 291. The postface begins at T. 47.1970.283b, the very end of *juan* 10.

32. *Yunmen guanglu*: T. 47.552c18–22. Translation adapted from Urs App, "Facets of the Life and Teaching of Chan Master Yunmen Wenyan (864–949)" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1989), 95.

day on which by Chinese custom all debts have to be paid. According to Chan teachers, in a similar manner on the day of one's death, indeed at the moment of death, all one's karmic debts must be paid through the judgment rendered in the assignment of one's next birth. Since without awakening one can spend eternity wandering in samsara, translated into Chinese as "birth and death (*shengsi*)," experiencing merited suffering and causing oneself new suffering, according to Chan teachers "samsara is something one must fear." Right now one has a human birth, the best condition for attaining release from samsara. Who knows when one will have one again?

One's circumstances and sufferings in one's next birth may be more painful than in this one. Of the six rebirth destinations, three are considerably more painful than the best human births: the many Buddhist hells; the realm of hungry ghosts, where one insatiably suffers terrible hunger pangs; and the insect and animal realm, where intelligence is limited and one is frequently either killing or being killed. Humans experience somewhat longer life spans and much suffering mixed with fleeting pleasures; only the superior intelligence of humans that makes possible the cultivation of wisdom makes this a positive rather than negative destination. The life of *asuras*, like that of the Greek Titans, is considered "a favorable birth," but is actually not much better—a long life span and pleasures, but constant conflict. Only the realm of the gods and goddesses has definite positive advantages: a much longer life span and many pleasures. Death in a state of ignorance about one's next birth leads to fear of rebirth in the hells to suffer untold torments and be unable to cultivate the wisdom, concentration, mindfulness, and morality that lead to buddhahood.

It is not really the last day of your life that matters, it is the last moment of your life. This is because Buddhists around the world believe that one's next birth is determined by one's last thought, which generates linking consciousness, which in turn produces the first thought in one's next birth, and is the means by which one's karmic seeds are conveyed to the next life. A common and widely used phrase in Dahui's works, as in many other writings of his period, is "at the approach of the end of your life" (*lin ming zhong shi*). Juefan Huihong (1071–1128), a good friend of Dahui's from when the latter was studying with Linji Huanglong lineage masters, quotes the *Śūraṅgama-sūtra*'s summary of the central Buddhist doctrine about the moment of death: "At the near approach of the end of one's life, all the good and bad

[deeds] of a lifetime suddenly appear.”³³ How you respond at that moment, whether or not you form an attachment to a particular scene, determines your next birth. Anger, greed, lust, hatred, attachment, or confusion at the moment of death can override one’s many good deeds in this lifetime and turn one’s karma from earlier lifetimes directly toward one of the three unfavorable realms of rebirth. On the other hand, if one’s mind is peaceful, clear, rejoicing in the good, and pervaded by awakening rather than delusion, one can “turn” one’s karma toward rebirth in one of the three favorable realms of rebirth: human, *asura*, or god.

In his *Blue Cliff Record* Yuanwu points out that Chan practice and Chan awakening brings one a necessary strength at the moment of death, the strength to remain mindful at a moment at which all one’s past good and evil deeds appear before one and the mind is ordinarily both weak and confused. Yuanwu writes:

Yanguan³⁴ one day called to his attendant, “Bring me my rhinoceros-horn fan.” Although This Matter [what Chan insight discovers and the subject of such insight embodies] does not lie in words and phrases, yet if you want to test someone’s ordinary disposition and clever tricks, it is necessary to make them evident by using words in this way.³⁵ If on the last day of your life [i.e., the thirtieth day of the last month of the year] you can exert the power you have obtained, and master the situation by holding on firmly, so that even when a myriad visions [of your past deeds] appear in profusion, you can look upon them without being moved, then this can be called accomplishment without accomplishment, effortless power/strength (*li*).³⁶

33. Juefan Huihong, *Linjianlu* (Anecdotes from the Groves [of Chan]), X87n1624.270b18–20.

34. Yanguan Qi’an [?-842] was a student of Mazu. His biography is found in the *Jingde chuandenglu*, juan 7.

35. In the story Yanguan is testing the Chan insight of his attendant, who is one of his most advanced students, by calling for his fan. When the attendant replies that the fan is broken, Yanguan says, “If the fan is broken, then bring me the rhinoceros.” Suddenly it is clear that this is a conversation about Mind or Suchness and phenomenon or object of perception. Can the attendant show that he knows that the ordinary and the ultimate are not divided?

36. This is from Case 91 in the *Biyuanlu* (Blue Cliff Record). T48n2003.215c13–17. The English translation is from Thomas and J.C. Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 584 with a few changes.

Dahui was the dharma-heir of Yuanwu, from whom he may have learned this rhetoric of promise and exhortation. But it is far more prominent in Dahui's writings than in Yuanwu's.

Yuanwu's *Essentials of the Mind* is mostly composed of instructions to individual monastics, male and female. In those he writes that his style of Linji Chan practice is "Chan for the Nirvana Hall," that is, for the monk or nun who is close to death, and therefore resides in a special hall prepared for those who are dying. His style of Chan will prepare the monastic for the moment of death. This exhortatory phrase he attributes to his teacher Wuzu Fayan.³⁷ He also urges his monastic students to awaken (*wu*) and then continue with their cultivation of all kinds of good actions. If the monk or nun does so, he or she will be able to avoid rebirth in any of the three undesirable realms:

You must awaken to this mind first, and afterward cultivate all forms of good. ...We must search out our faults and cultivate practice; this is like the eyes and the feet depending on each other. If you are able to refrain from doing any evil and refine your practice of the many forms of good, even if you only uphold the elementary forms of discipline and virtue, you will be able to avoid sinking down to the [rebirth destinations] of animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings. This is even more the case if you first awaken to the indestructible essence of the wondrous, illuminated true mind and after that cultivate practice to the best of your ability and carry out all forms of virtuous conduct.

Let no one be deluded about cause and effect. You must realize that the causal basis of the hells and the heavens is all formed by your own inherent mind.

You must keep this mind balanced and in equanimity, without deluded ideas of self and others, without arbitrary loves and hates, without grasping and rejecting, without notions of gain and loss. Go on gradually nurturing this for a long time, perhaps twenty or thirty years. Whether you encounter favorable or adverse conditions, do not retreat or regress—then when you come to the juncture between life and death [the last moment of your life], you will naturally be set free and not be afraid.³⁸

By contrast, Dahui's *Letters*, which were collected and circulated separately soon after his death, and which thereafter entered Song

37. Yuanwu Keqin, *Zen Letters: Teachings of Yuanwu*, trans. J.C. Cleary and Thomas Cleary (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1994), 86–87.

38. *Ibid.*, 86–87.

dynasty and all future East Asian Buddhist canons as a section of his *Recording Sayings (yulu)* in thirty fascicles, make clear how uncertainty about one's fate at the moment of death and *huatou* practice should connect in the mind of the layman.³⁹ From the extant letters that Dahui's students wrote to him and those he sent to them we can see the power that the fear of dying as a deluded, self-centered being only to be trapped in the endless cycle of lives and deaths and to face an unfavorable rebirth had on members of the elite in his day. A common sentiment expressed in letters to Dahui is that the writer is now retired from or relatively free from time-consuming worldly affairs. Looking back he can see that he has wasted his life thus far in pursuit of wealth, fame, status, and security for his family. He is now aware that none of these efforts fall outside the realm of self-centered pursuits of illusory satisfactions. Deluded about life's goals, he has not pursued Buddhist practice wholeheartedly or consistently enough to become an awakened buddha. Perhaps he hasn't even practiced unselfish behavior enough to avoid an unfavorable rebirth. He now wants to make a big effort to master himself and break through the deluded mind of life and death (*samsara*), and asks for Dahui's guidance.

The very first letter in the Dahui's *Letters*, a letter to Dahui from Zeng Kai (*zi Tianyou*), falls into this category.⁴⁰ So does Letter 24, an answer by Dahui to Judicial Commissioner Zhang (*zi Yangshu*) that quotes Zhang's letter to Dahui. Also similar is Letter 10, an answer to Fu Zhirou (*zi Jishen*). In all of these letters Dahui advocates or instructs

39. Dahui *Pujue Chanshi shu* today is still a fundamental text of *kanhua Chan*, *kanhwa Son*, and *kanna Zen* in China, Korea, and Japan. Hakuin Ekaku lectured on it more than once. Woodblocks for an 1166 edition were carved after Dahui's death at his retirement residence, the Miaoxi an at Mt. Jing in Jejiang province. *Pace Shiina Koyu*, no Song dynasty text is extant. A reliable text is found in T. 47.1998, juan 25–30, and in Araki Kengo, trans., *Daie sho* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1969).

40. The letter is entitled "To Vice Minister Zeng." He served as Vice Minister of Rites. His "presented gentleman" degree was awarded in 1103. His biography is found in the official dynastic history, *Songshi* (Song dynasty history), fascicle 382. An entry on Zeng Kai is also found in the *Song Yuan Xue'an* (Philosophical Record of Song and Yuan Scholars), fascicle 26, indicating that Zeng Kai was later considered a scholar who was inspired by the emergent *Daoxue* (Learning of the Way) movement represented by the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi.

about using a *huatou* to break through to awakening and freedom from *samsara*.

In his first letter to Zeng Kai, Dahui urges this layman who has in the past studied with Dahui's own teacher and who, now old, wants to take up serious practice again after years of intermittent neglect as follows:

Only push your investigation to the limit, and at all times in the midst of surpassing stillness, at all costs do not forget these two *huatou*: [Yunmen's] "Mt. Sumeru" and [Zhaozhou's] "Drop all attachments." Only grasp the reality that comes from the bottom of your own feet and work on. You must not be fearful about what has already passed in your life, nor do you need to think about those things. Thought and fear obstruct the Way. Only make a great vow before all the buddhas. Vow that your mind [your intention] will be firm, and that you will never retreat or lose this intention, that you will depend on the protection of all the buddhas, and that when you meet a good teacher [*kalyanamitra*], at the utterance of a single word you will suddenly forget life and death, be enlightened to and authenticate the peerless true Awakening, and continue the life of the wisdom of the buddhas, so that you may repay the unsurpassed great favor of all the buddhas. If you make such a vow and persevere like this, then there is no reason why in time you should not be enlightened.⁴¹

In his answer to Zeng Kai's second letter to Dahui (Letter 2), Dahui repeats his insistence that for this scholar-official who believes in Buddhism, Buddhist practice promises awakening and buddhahood. Zeng, even though he is a lay student and not a monk, should not be satisfied with any other goal:

If you are a man with bones and sinews, as soon as you hear [a *gong'an*] mentioned, you immediately take the treasure sword of the Diamond King and with one blow cut off the four entangling paths of conflicting words—thus the road of births and deaths is cut off, the road of spiritual and worldly is cut off, the road of comparative calculation and discriminating thought is cut off, and the road of gain and loss and right and wrong is cut off too. Where that man stands on his feet, he is pure and naked, totally free. There is nothing to grab onto. Isn't this delightful? Isn't this happiness? If you can have sufficient faith in this practice to attain penetration into true reality, you will be a person who attains a great freedom from life and death.⁴²

41. Araki, *Daie sho (Dahui's Letters)*, 7. Translation by Cleary, with minor changes

42. Araki, *Daie sho*, 15–16.

In his answer to Zeng Kai's sixth letter, Dahui brings up the dreaded moment of death at which Yama the Lord of Death and King of the Hells sends his servants to drag the newly dead down into the hell realm for judgment.

I have read your letter several times in detail. I can see that your mind is like iron or stone, that you have established a firm resolution and that you are completely unperturbed. If you continue to study like this, you will be a good match for the King Yama at the time of your death (*layue sanshi ri*).⁴³

In the first instance, someone who has awakened to the fact that his true nature is buddhahood is sure not to end up in the hells. Given the seriousness of Zeng's practice and commitment, Dahui sees Zeng as on a path to awakening. In Letter 6 Dahui contrasts what Zeng is doing now with a popular alternative somewhat reminiscent of Zunshi's ritual for lay Pure Land practice:

There are some who say that "to set aside all external matters, sit in silence, and embody the ultimate is to waste time; it is better to read a few chapters of Buddhist sutras, recite a buddha's name a few times, bow a few more times to the buddhas, and confess and repent the faults one has committed in one's ordinary life, in order to avoid when you die having to suffer from the iron rod in King Yama's hand." This is something stupid people do.⁴⁴

Toward the end of his sixth letter to Zeng, Dahui reassures him that even if he does not awaken during this lifetime, his *huatou* practice and its fruits will ensure that he will not fall into one of the three unfavorable rebirth destinations:

If from moment to moment you do not retreat from your first aspiration to seek awakening, and take your own mind that attaches itself to all the different mental afflictions of the world, and turn it around so that it firmly rests on *prajñā*, then, even if in this lifetime you are unable to reach a thoroughgoing liberation, still, when you reach the end of your life, you definitely will not be dragged off by the karmic fruit of evil deeds, and end up being reborn in an evil form of rebirth.⁴⁵

43. *Ibid.*, 30.

44. *Ibid.*, 31.

45. *Ibid.*, 31.

Throughout this sequence of letters, Dahui advocates *kan huatou* practice for Zeng Kai. But Dahui's fifth letter to Zeng Kai reveals that in Dahui's opinion Zeng Kai has reached a point in his practice where the method of reaching insight that he has practiced through holding the *huatou* can be used with more discursive texts:

If you had not set your mind on *prajñā*, and continued mindfully in *prajñā* from thought to thought without any interruption, you would not be able to comprehend clearly all the various expedient methods of the past patriarchs and buddhas. You have already grasped the handle [to awakening]. Simply practice as you are doing. When you read sutras and teachings and all of the discourse records (*yulu*) of the ancients with their various verbal distinctions, also simply practice as you are doing. With respect to stories/phrases (*hua*)⁴⁶ like "Mount Sumeru," "put it down," "a dog lacks buddha nature," "the bamboo whisk," the story/phrase "with one gulp swallowing completely the waters of the West River," the story/phrase "the cypress tree in the garden," also just practice as you are doing. You must not give rise to some other interpretations, otherwise seek principles, or otherwise do calculations. You are able to practice like this from moment to moment in the midst of the stream [of activities]. If you were now to accomplish nothing on the path, then the Buddha's dharma would be seen to have no miraculous power.

Another category of letter is one in which the person to whom Dahui is writing is practicing, but not effectively or with great energy and determination. Here, Dahui uses the approach of the moment of death to light a fire under the recipient of the letter, or motivate him to hold on to a *huatou*. Although Dahui discourages any preoccupation with one's failings in the past, he does encourage the eagerness of students or prospective students to devote themselves to practice. He also supports and fosters their perception of the moment of death as a momentous final exam on the success of their practice, an exam that will determine their fates. This is Dahui's strategy particularly if the letter's recipient is not young.

Dahui responds to letters from laymen who need to become serious about their practice with reminders that death is coming. For example, in Letter 30, in answer to Bureau Director Lu (*Zi Longli*), Dahui writes:

46. Araki uses "*huatou*" for all these instances of "*hua*." There are passages in Dahui's writings and records in which "*hua*" or even "*huatou*" may best be read as "story" or "*gong'an*."

I received two letters from your elder brother, Lu Zhuren (1048–1145) [Lu Benzong, a famous poet, writer, and literary theorist and long-time friend of Dahui's], saying that he was very busy with his practice concerning This Task. He should hasten even more. He is already sixty years old and retired from his government service. What is the point of waiting any longer? If he doesn't hurry up, how can he deal with things successfully on the last day of his life (*la yue sanshi ri*)? I heard that you were also busy with practice these days, but the only thing you should be busy with is the matter of the last day of your life (*la yue sanshi ri*). [A monk asked Yunmen,] "What is the Buddha?" [Yunmen replied:] "A dried stick of shit." If you don't penetrate into this [*huatou*], what difference will there be between the way you are now and on the day of your death (*la yue sanshi ri*)?⁴⁷

In Letter 7, Dahui's first letter to another layman, Li Bing (*zi Hanlao*) (1085–1146), another poet friend and Vice Grand Councilor who had attained awakening, Dahui cautions that practice must continue unabated after awakening.⁴⁸ For those to whom awakening came too easily, it is tempting to slack off on practice. They lose their resolve and don't put in effort. They give in to temptations and egocentric thinking and their delusions deepen. The result may well be that at the moment of death such a person has no power to turn his karma toward a good rebirth:

Seeing the great extent of your joy the last few days, I did not dare to clarify anything for you, for fear my words would harm you. Now that your joy has stabilized, I will dare to point something out. This matter truly is not easy. You must give rise to a mind of repentance. Frequently those with sharp faculties and superior knowledge attain [awakening] without a lot of effort, and then because they think it is easy, they don't continue to practice. Their minds are grabbed and held by the objects before their eyes, and they are not able to become the master. As time goes on they are deluded and do not turn back [to *prajñā*]. If the power of the Way cannot triumph in them over the power of their karma, demons seize the opportunity to attack. They are sure to be controlled by demons, and when they come to the end of their lives (*lin ming zhong shi*), they won't have gained strength (to use against King Yama's messengers).⁴⁹

47. Araki, *Daie sho*, 128.

48. Li Bing's biography is found in *Song Dynasty History (Song shi)*, juan 375.

49. Araki, *Daie sho*, 36.

In Letter 19, an answer to Liu Ziyu (zi Yanxiu) (1097–1146), Dahui writes to Liu about his brother, Liu Zihui (zi Yanzhong) (1101–1147), famous later as Song dynasty Confucian scholar Zhu Xi's early tutor:

Yanzhong in fact doesn't have various vexing confusions, it is only that he has been deeply affected by the poison[ous teachings of the false teachers], so all he does is wander around confusedly on the outside edges of the truth, talking about motion and stillness, words and silence, gain and loss.... He (Yanzhong) has not yet cut through the *gong'an* of birth and death (samsara) that is impenetrable by thought. How can he settle [his accounts] and depart at the moment of death (*la yue sanshi ri*)? It will be impossible, when he is about to lose the light of his eyes, just before its complete disappearance, for him to say to the King of Hell, "I will see you later, when I regain clear consciousness and composure." However free and fluent his words are or however hard his mind is, even if it is like sticks and stones, they will be useless for getting him through that moment. The only thing that will help is for him is to break through and destroy the deluded mind of life and death.⁵⁰

In both of these cases, the practice of his old friend Li Hanlao and his successful student Liu Yanxiu's brother, Dahui advocates using a *huatou*. In Letter 30 from Dahui to Lu Longli, Lu Juren's brother, which is partially quoted above, Dahui lays out the connection between the sensation of doubt and the *huatou*. He emphasizes the importance of concentrating the many doubts into one doubt raised by the *huatou*. By breaking through the concentrated sensation of doubt, all doubts will be resolved; when all doubts disappear, that is the awakening. In other words, that is the end of the affective thinking by the samsaric mind that is the realm of births and deaths. Dahui writes:

[*Shidaifu*,] having wasted their lives in this world, when they cast off their bodies do not know where they will find themselves next, whether in a heaven or a hell. They do not know at all that "this being" continues to flow into different worlds as a result of its karma; nevertheless there is nothing that they don't know about the business of others, whether significant or insignificant.⁵¹

50. *Ibid.*, 47.

51. *Ibid.*, 129.

After giving precise instructions on how to inspect the *huatou*, Dahui continues: “If you don’t destroy the sensation of doubt, life and death (i.e., samsara) will afflict you over and over.”⁵²

Lu Juren has written Dahui asking the following:

Should I only focus on *huatou*, or is there something else on which I should focus? Having not accomplished the work of “raising a great doubt” [on the *huatou*], how can I know exactly whether one is extinct or not extinct after one’s death? Please do not quote from the words of scriptures and treatises, or refer to the *gong’an*(s) of the ancients, but, based on what is before your eyes, show me clearly the real essence of extinction or non-extinction by analyzing and demonstrating it.⁵³

Dahui only sees in this question a student who does not have enough trust to continue with *huatou* practice, and wants his doubts dispelled without breaking through samsaric mind. In Letter 32, an answer to Lu Juren (Lu Benzong) himself, Dahui brings up the urgency of the coming of the moment of death, and urges Lu Benzong to stick to *huatou* practice:

Impermanence [i.e., another word for death] comes quickly, our life of one hundred years will pass like a lightning flash, and your moment to reap the results of your karmic deeds will soon arrive. How do you understand “dried stick of shit?” If you have no grasp of it, if it has no flavor, if your stomach feels oppressed, that is very good news.

Following these words Dahui gives instructions very similar to the ones above, and writes: “When all of your cleverness is suddenly used up, then you will naturally awaken. But don’t wait for awakening.” Dahui then writes:

If you practice according to my words, even though you can’t thoroughly awaken [i.e., do not reach awakening as an event], you will be able to distinguish between correct and distorted, you will not be hindered by the troop of devils, and will plant seeds of wisdom deeply. Even if you cannot finish the task in this lifetime, in the next life you will certainly receive the complete functioning of wisdom without wasting your effort while being not afflicted by unwholesome karma,

52. *Ibid.*, 130.

53. *Ibid.*, 131–32.

and will be able to turn your karma on your dying day (*lin ming zhong shi*).⁵⁴

In Letter 59, an answer to Chief Minister Tang Situi (*zi Jinzhi*) (?–1164), Dahui writes:

That you cleverly rose from being a poor student to the Chief Minister is the most admirable thing in the world. But if you do not penetrate this matter, when you leave Jambudvīpa reaping the fruits of your activities during your useless stay, you will return only carrying evil karma. ...Since it is so hard to attain a human body and to encounter the Buddha's teaching, if you don't direct yourself toward liberation in this life, in what other life will you save yourself?

If you place a *huatou* before you, even if you do not attain penetration, by having planted seeds of wisdom deeply, on your last day you will not be dragged by karmic consciousness into the three evil destinies, and when being transformed into another body, you will be free from the illusion of self.⁵⁵

Examples could be further multiplied, but by now Dahui's message is clear. If the prospect of death and rebirth already motivated the layman, he recommended a *huatou* as a powerful and relatively speedy method of breaking out of samsara's delusions so as to be free of King Yama's judgment. If a layman were already motivated to inspect a *huatou*, but his focus were not yet strong enough, it could be strengthened by asking him to focus doubt by contemplating the moment of death and rebirth. The practice taught by Yuanwu might take a monk or nun thirty years to complete, as he often said. The needs of the elderly layman could be met by *huatou* practice. Even if these lay people did not experience awakening as an event, they could expect rebirth in one of the three favorable realms and a real start on deepening *prajñā* in a way that would make Buddhist practice attainable and relatively easy in the next birth.

It is possible to imagine that Dahui delighted in designing and testing a new use of words to add to standard *gong'an* practice. His new verbal tool had many advantages, particularly for lay practice. It could be done anywhere, anytime, in the midst of daily activities commonly required in lay life. It had a great power to concentrate doubt. It had great power to enable people to reach a point the feeling of ease that

54. *Ibid.*, 141–42.

55. *Ibid.*, 232.

he calls “saving strength,” and beginning at that point to “gain power” from the practice. It offered a form of practice that might overcome the drifting away of lay patrons of the Linji school toward Caodong teachers. Finally, it offered an effective approach to a critical node in samsaric experience: the moment of death.

In his book *Out of the Cloister*, Mark Halperin suggests that the propagation of Dahui’s *kanhua* method may have had the unintended effect of lessening literati interest in Chan. He argues that “the novelty and simplicity of *gong’an*, with the promise of sudden enlightenment and without the demand for considerable textual mastery, might well have made salvation appear easy, attracting a stream of dilettantes.”⁵⁶ If we substitute the word *huatou* for the word *gong’an* in Halperin’s sentence, I believe we can all see his point. *Shidai fu*, literati, were being asked to do something that might bring big personal benefits, but that required them to deconstruct their own identity as scholars first and foremost. Their intellectual, emotional, and moral formation inclined them to rest authority on a claim to superior scholarship, and to prefer a form of learning and practice that rewarded textual mastery, as *gong’an* practice seemed to do. For Dahui *kan huatou* was a tool designed to get the Chan student “inside the gate” of the school; it produced an intuitive bodily and mental grasp of the school’s cardinal teaching. After entering the gate, there was no reason why Buddhological or Confucian scholarship could not be pursued, as Dahui’s student Zeng Kai discovers and Dahui’s student Zhang Jiucheng demonstrated after his awakening. But in Chan authority rested not on scholarship or literary ability but on awakening, which many gentlemen officials might not really want to pursue.

All the better, then, that the *huatou*, like *nianfo* leading to *nianfo samādhi*, was a powerfully transformative way to attain the ability to make an effective response to the challenge of life and death, including centrally the challenge of the moment of death.

56. Mark Halperin, *Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960–1279*, Harvard East Asian Monographs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 110.