

TAIGEN DAN LEIGHTON

*Cultivating the  
Empty Field*



*The Silent Illumination  
of Zen Master Hongzhi*

TUTTLE

# CULTIVATING THE EMPTY FIELD

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*Traditional Chinese Woodcut  
of Zen Master Hongzhi*

# CULTIVATING THE EMPTY FIELD

**The Silent Illumination of  
Zen Master Hongzhi**

REVISED, EXPANDED EDITION

*Translated by Taigen Dan Leighton with Yi Wu*

*Edited with an Introduction by Taigen Dan Leighton*

*Foreword by Tenshin Anderson*

**TUTTLE** Publishing

Tokyo | Rutland, Vermont | Singapore

[www.tuttlepublishing.com](http://www.tuttlepublishing.com)

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LCC Card No. 00030246

ISBN 978-0-8048-3240-3

ISBN 978-1-4629-1652-8 (ebook)

**Distributed by**

*North America, Latin America & Europe*

Tuttle Publishing

364 Innovation Drive,

North Clarendon, VT 05759-9436 USA

Tel: 1 (802) 773-8930 Fax: 1 (802) 773-6993

[info@tuttlepublishing.com](mailto:info@tuttlepublishing.com)

[www.tuttlepublishing.com](http://www.tuttlepublishing.com)

*Asia Pacific*

Berkeley Books Pte Ltd

1 Tai Seng Avenue #02-12

Singapore 534167

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[www.periplus.com](http://www.periplus.com)

*Japan*

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[sales@tuttle.co.jp](mailto:sales@tuttle.co.jp)

[www.tuttle.co.jp](http://www.tuttle.co.jp)

First edition

16 15 14 13    10 9 8 7 6 5 4

1306MP

Printed in Singapore

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The true form is magnificently illuminated with gleaming fire. The teaching's voice is total silence amid the ringing wind chimes. The moon hangs in the old pine tree, cold in the falling night. The chilled crane in its nest in the clouds has not yet been aroused from its dreams.

Hongzhi, *Homage to the Fourth Ancestor*

A person of the Way fundamentally does not dwell anywhere. The white clouds are fascinated with the green mountain's foundation. The bright moon cherishes being carried along with the flowing water. The clouds part and the mountain appears. The moon sets and the water is cool. Each bit of autumn contains vast interpenetration without bounds.

Hongzhi, *Practice Instructions*

FOREWORD BY TENSHIN ANDERSON

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## FOREWORD

*Homage to Shakyamuni Buddha.*

*Homage to the succession of Indian founders and Zen pioneers  
in the Way up to the present.*

*Homage to Tiantong Hongzhi, the author of this book.*

Hongzhi said, “Empty and desireless, cold and thin, simple and genuine, this is how to strike down and for up the remaining habits of many lives. When the stains from old habits are exhausted the original light appears, blazing through your skull, not admitting any other matters. Vast and spacious, like sky and water merging during autumn, like snow and moon having the same color, this field is without boundary, beyond direction, magnificently one entity without edge or seam. Further, when you turn within and drop off everything completely, realization occurs. Right at the time of entirely dropping off, deliberation and discussion are one thousand or ten thousand miles away. Still no principle is discernible, so what could there be to point to or explain? People with the bottom of the bucket fallen out immediately find total trust. So we are told simply to realize mutual response and explore mutual response, then turn around and enter the world. Roam and play in *samādhi*. Every detail clearly appears before you. Sound and form, echo and shadow, happen instantly without leaving traces.”

This teaching speaks for itself. I need not add to it. I will only say that I am most moved and grateful for these sublime encouragements.

With this book, much of the great teacher Hongzhi’s Extensive Record is now available in our language. Now we English speakers can hear the blessing of this genuine practice lineage of Buddhas and Zen founders. Step by step our language is becoming a medium to express the Buddha’s teaching. This translation has significantly expanded our literary sources for an important field of study and practice—silent illumination. Perhaps it will clarify some common confusions about silent illumination in Zen. Please enjoy reading Hongzhi’s words.

Rev. Taigen Dan Leighton and Prof. Yi Wu have worked long and hard, with great energy and devotion, to create this translation. I feel proud and deeply grateful for what they have produced.

I joyfully look forward to generations of Western Zen students having the opportunity to thoroughly study this wonderful book. I am inspired and happy that this text is available to those who are dedicated to living the way of Zen. Without exception, anyone who has real communion with an authentic lineage of Buddhas and Zen adepts is bound to become liberated. May these teachings bring welfare to all living beings everywhere.

*Tenshin Anderson, Senior Dharma Teacher  
Green Dragon Temple  
Green Gulch Farm*

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## PREFACE

The writings of the twelfth-century Chan Master Hongzhi Zhengjue are poetic expressions of meditative concentration and insight, and of the working of awakened mind. These rich and dense teachings might be read most usefully as one reads poetry. Hongzhi employed a style more holographic than the rational expository style of Western thought; each of his paragraphs encapsulates the whole teaching. This material, both spiritual literature and meditation instruction, to be deliberately savored, digested, and accepted for nourishment.

As well as being evocative literature, Hongzhi's writings are also instructions in meditative practice for students seeking to realize Zen (Chan) truth. They can assist us in the techniques and actualization of our spiritual life. His method of presentation allows beneficial attitudes and insights to filter through our habitual conditioned viewpoints to help the process of realignment with our inherent luminous true nature. These practice instructions are guides to consciousness at the unified, illuminating source of creation, and also to appropriate responsive interaction in the midst of the human world of desire and confusion.

Hongzhi was the first master fully to articulate silent illumination, a form of nondual objectless meditation in which the essence of Buddhist truth is experienced. Called "just sitting" in Japan, this practice has striking similarities to the Tibetan *Mahāmudrā* and *Dzogchen*, other examples of nondual objectless meditation teachings in the Buddhist tradition. As I was in the middle of translating Hongzhi's Practice Instructions I had the opportunity to attend a weekend teaching about *Dzogchen* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Although the preparations and devotional apparatus of the Tibetan practice were different, when the Dalai Lama spoke of the actual meditative experience of *Dzogchen*, I felt like I was hearing the same words I had translated from Hongzhi the night before.

Hongzhi's teachings are of paramount importance in the history of the development of Chan/Zen meditation practice, particularly as a primary precursor of the famed Japanese Zen pioneer Dōgen. Hongzhi left a vast body of writings celebrated for their eloquence which were preserved by his disciples in the *Extensive Record of Chan Master Hongzhi*. Composed of nine volumes, these writings included poetry, sermons, informal talks and sayings, instructions to individual students, and collections of old teaching stories. Herein is a complete translation of volume six, the Practice Instructions, along with a selection of Religious Verses from volume eight. An introduction presents approaches to Hongzhi's teaching and provides background for his life and work.

Hongzhi's writings, with their inspiring vision of the essence and potential of the universal spirit, have previously been available in English only in scattered fragments. I hope that this volume will serve as a comprehensive introduction to Hongzhi for interested Westerners.

The Practice Instructions are presented in the fifty-six paragraphs of the Chinese original. I have drawn headings for each paragraph from the text. The titles and subheadings of the Religious Verses, however, are all by Hongzhi himself. These selected poems appear in the same order as in volume eight of Hongzhi's *Extensive Record*. Bracketed material in the text indicates interpolations deemed necessary for clarity, for example unstated subjects.

All Chinese terms and names in the text are spelled with the contemporary Pinyin transliteration system except for titles of English works that use the older Wade-Giles system. With a few exceptions Pinyin transliteration is pronounced approximately as it appears. All grouped vowels are diphthongs. “C” pronounced like the “ts” in tsetse fly. “Q” is pronounced like the “ch” in chuckle. “X” is pronounced like the “s” in sugar. “Zh” is pronounced like the “dg” in fudging. The equivalent Wade-Giles transliteration for Chinese names is provided in Appendix C.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Yi Wu, Professor of Chinese Language at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. He reviewed the first stage of translation with me to clarify questions of vocabulary and grammar and to verify accuracy. Yi Wu informed the translation not only with his linguistic understanding, but also with his expert knowledge of classical Chinese wisdom and literature.

I am grateful to Mark Tatz, Rina Sircar, and Jim Mitchell for careful reading and suggestions, and to Rosalind Leighton for adept editorial aid. Indispensable assistance and encouragement was rendered in various ways by Paul Schwartz, Marty Wolfe, Lou and Blanche Hartman, Kazuaki Tanahashi, Linda Heslop, Stephen Colgan, and Jack Earley. Thanks also to Bhikkhu Heng Shen of Gold Mountain Monastery in San Francisco, who provided the drawing of Hongzhi. Thanks also to Gary Snyder for encouraging publication of this book, and to Jack Shoemaker, Barbara Ras, and the people at North Point Press for their support of its initial publication.

I especially dedicate this work to Rev. Kandō Nakajima, who firmly set me on the path of just sitting, and to Tenshin Reb Anderson for his whole-hearted patience and guidance over many years, and to Thomas Clearwater to whom all English-speaking students of East Asian wisdom are immeasurably indebted. This revised and expanded edition, published to greet the new millennium by Tuttle Publishing, features minor revisions to the Introduction, the Notes, and the previous Religious Verses; nine additional, newly translated Religious Verses; additional Appendix material; and an updated Selected Bibliography. I am deeply grateful to Tuttle for allowing Hongzhi’s writings to remain available, and especially to Jan Johnson of Tuttle, and to my agent, Victoria Shoemaker. Thanks to Shohaku Okumura, John McRae, and Kazuaki Tanahashi for their helpful assistance with some questions on the newly translated verses.

Hongzhi’s disciple Puqung, the compiler of volume six of the *Extensive Record*, asks in his preface for the reader to excuse his attempt to record Hongzhi’s talks, given the shallowness of his own realization compared to that of his master. How much more must a modern translator apologize, separated from Hongzhi not only by depths of realization and eight and a half centuries, but also by the difference between Chinese and English! Despite the inevitable inadequacies of such translation, even at its best, this attempt is offered with the faith that Hongzhi’s expression of clear radiant mind will shine through and will still have the capacity to guide and inspire spiritual practitioners in the process of realizing their own omnipresent illuminating mind.

*Taigen Dan Leighton*

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## INTRODUCTION

The silent illumination that Zen Master Hongzhi expounds is both a form of sitting meditation practice and an orientation to spiritual way of life. His meditation instructions do not specify yogic postures or rituals such as would have been familiar to his students in the procedures at the temple where he taught. Instead his writings display the many facets of the universally available experience of nondual objectless meditation and the endless refinements and attunements involved in living out this awareness.

Most traditional meditation, both Buddhist and Non-Buddhist, involves concentration on specific objects such as visual images, sounds, breathing, concepts, stories, or deities in order to develop heightened states of concentrated awareness called *samādhi*. Silent illumination, however, involves withdrawal from exclusive focus on a particular sensory or mental object to allow intent apprehension of all phenomena as unified totality. This objectless meditation aims at a radical, refined nondualism that does not grasp at any of the highly subtle distinctions to which our familiar mental workings are prone and which estranges us from our experience. Such subject-object dichotomization is understood as artificial, a fabrication.

Silent illumination is also objectless in the sense of not seeking after specific limited goals. The ultimate purpose of spiritual practice, universally awakened heart/mind, cannot be set apart from our own inhere being and our immediate, moment-to-moment awareness. As Hongzhi emphasizes, the entire practice rests on the faith, verified in experience, that the field of vast brightness is ours from the outset. The practitioner's exertion and dedication are devoted to manifesting this ultimate truth with constancy right in ordinary existence. Silent illumination is thus fully experienced in meditative contemplation, and then naturally expressed in sincere compassionate behavior in the world.

Hongzhi's expression of silent illumination is the culmination of a sophisticated Zen Buddhist teaching tradition inspired by the founders of the Chinese Caodong lineage (pronounced "tso-dong"), later called Sōtō in Japan. (Although Hongzhi was Chinese, Japanese terms such as "Zen" and "Sōtō," which are more commonly known in the West, will be generally used in this work for the sake of clarity.) This Chinese Sōtō tradition developed a theoretical understanding through the dialectic of insight into universal truth and interplay with the particulars of the phenomenal world. A corresponding practice model was enacted with the dialectic between meditative introspection and naturally appropriate activity in everyday life. Hongzhi's Practice Instructions are the graceful and subtle expression of the practical fruition of this tradition. His work was later elaborated and developed in Japan by Zen Master Dōgen and the Sōtō tradition that derives from him.

Hongzhi's silent illumination is of great relevance to contemporary spiritual seekers. His teachings are as important as a primary source for Dōgen, whose work remains highly influential to Zen practice. Even more, Hongzhi is valuable as a lucid guide, beyond any particular tradition, to the subtleties of spiritual awareness and its life in the world.

Hongzhi's vast luminous buddha field is the field of buddha nature, our inalienable endowment of wisdom. Hongzhi tells us that this bright empty field, which lies immanent in us all, can in no way be cultivated or artificially enhanced. We must only recognize it and not allow our busy, mischievous thinking

and conditioning to interfere with our own radiant clarity.

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### *Hongzhi's Life*

Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157) was born in Xizhou in present-day Shanxi Province, to a family named Li. Although Hongzhi, or “Vast Wisdom,” was a posthumous name bestowed by the emperor, in the interest of clarity and consistency it is used throughout this work. During his life he would have been called Zhengjue and later Tiantong Zhengjue; Zhengjue, “Correct (or True) Awakening,” was his monk ordination name and Tiantong was the mountain where his temple stood. In Japanese Hongzhi is known as Wanshi Shōgaku, the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters for Hongzhi Zhengjue.

Hongzhi was a very intelligent child, memorizing several thousand characters before he was seven years old. His father, Congdao, was a lay disciple of Desun, who was in turn a disciple of Huanglong Huinan (1069), a founder of one of the two main branches of Linji Chan.<sup>2</sup> Desun was impressed with Congdao's son and predicted he would become a vessel of dharma, one who realizes and transmits the teaching of truth.

When he was eleven, Hongzhi left home to become a monk. At eighteen he went to Ruzhou in modern Honan Province to study with the Sōtō Zen master Kumu Faqeng (1071-1128). Kumu's style of practice involved sitting meditation so still that his body was said to resemble a block of dry wood, hence his name which means “Dry Wood Complete Dharma.” Hongzhi emulated this practice of immobile sitting throughout his career. Such cross-legged sitting in lotus posture is the fundamental practice for the Sōtō tradition, the unstated physical context for all of Hongzhi's meditation instructions.

After a few years Hongzhi traveled to other temples. At Xiangshan (Incense Mountain) Temple Hongzhi overheard a monk reciting the line from the Flower Ornament Sutra, “The eyes which our parents give us can behold three thousand worlds.” Upon hearing this, Hongzhi experienced an awakening.<sup>3</sup>

When Hongzhi told Master Xiangshan (as often happened, the abbot was known by the name of the temple) of his experience, Xiangshan pointed to a box of incense and asked, “What is inside?” Hongzhi said, “What does Mind do?” Xiangshan asked, “Where does your enlightenment come from?” Hongzhi drew a circle in the air with his hand and threw it behind him. Xiangshan said, “You are a man who produces muddiness. What is your capacity?” Hongzhi said, “Mistake.” Xiangshan said, “Don't see people as others” and Hongzhi answered, “Yes, yes.”

Such dialogues have their own logic, and function most effectively with minimal explanation. Hongzhi's response to Xiangshan about the incense box reflects his understanding of the total inter-penetration of mind and phenomena. Later Dōgen would echo Hongzhi when he called his own life “one continuous mistake.”

Hongzhi left Xiangshan and, at age twenty-three, arrived at the temple of Danxia Zichun (1054-1119). Danxia asked him, “What is your self before the empty kalpa?”<sup>4</sup> Hongzhi said, “A frog in a well swallows the moon; at midnight I do not borrow a lantern.” Danxia said, “Not yet.” As Hongzhi was about to respond, Danxia beat him with his whisk, then asked, “You still say you do not borrow?” Hongzhi experienced some understanding and bowed. Danxia said, “Why don't you make a statement?” Hongzhi said, “Today I lost my money and was punished.” Danxia said, “I have no time to beat you up.”

Hongzhi's response about not borrowing a lantern at midnight can be viewed as an expression of the Sōtō sense of the interfusion of light and darkness. Right in the blackness of merging with emptiness the light of differentiation naturally emerges. Furthermore, in the introspective withdrawal from attachment to sense phenomena, one's own inner illumination appears. Hongzhi's response also refers to the story of a monk departing from his teacher in the middle of the night. The teacher handed the student a lantern but

then, as the student started out into the dark, blew out the flame, whereupon the student was awakened. Danxia, however, did not accept Hongzhi's first answer and picked up on his word "borrow" to emphasize the student's relationship to the teacher and the necessity of intimately experiencing the truth.

Danxia Zichun was a dharma-brother of Hongzhi's former teacher Kumu, both disciples of the famed master Furong Daokai (1043-1118). A couple of generations after the Sōtō Zen transmission almost died out, Furong revitalized the school, establishing strong standards for the monastic community. Furong refused the offer of elaborate honors from the emperor as being inappropriate for a monk, which led to him being exiled for a number of years. This model of integrity greatly impressed Hongzhi, whose poem praising Furong may be found in the Religious Verses below.

Hongzhi spent several years studying with Danxia Zichun, following him when Danxia moved from his temple on Danxia Mountain in Henan to Mount Daqeng and later to Mount Dehong in Hubei. In both places he took the position of "first seat" as Danxia's teaching assistant. Before Danxia's death in 1111, Hongzhi received his seal of transmission, which certified Hongzhi's understanding and qualification to teach the dharma.

Hongzhi then lived in various temples, including visits to Chenju Juyuan monastery on Yunju Mountain in Jiangxi, where Yuanwu Keqin (1063-1135) was teaching. Yuanwu's famed collection of one hundred stories with commentary, the *Blue Cliff Record*, is one of the most frequently used sources for Zen meditation study of the dialogues and stories of the old masters, called *kung-an* in Chinese and *kōan* in Japanese (literal "public cases").<sup>5</sup> Hongzhi's study with Yuanwu probably gave him some familiarity with formal koan practice as done in the Rinzai school of that time. Hongzhi later compiled his own collections of old koans, one of which became the basis for the popular *Book of Serenity*.

In 1129 Hongzhi accepted an invitation to teach at the Jingde (Bright Virtue) Monastery on Mount Tiantong in Ming Province in modern Zhejiang. When Hongzhi arrived, the Jingde Monastery was small and in disrepair. Under Hongzhi's supervision, the temple was reconstructed and eventually accommodated twelve hundred monks. Its huge meditation hall could hold all the monks drawn to his rich teaching. Hongzhi seems to have been unflappable amidst the difficulties of this expansion. The Japanese Sōtō successor Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253) tells the story about a time when Hongzhi's monastery had provisions for a thousand monks, and fifteen or sixteen hundred had gathered. An officer of the temple implored Hongzhi to send away the extra monks. Hongzhi resolutely replied that "each of them has his own mouth. It is not your concern. Do not worry about it."<sup>6</sup> Dōgen commends Hongzhi's faith in sincere practice as the essential affair.

This was a period of political and social turmoil in China, often accompanied by sporadic disruptions of agriculture and widespread hunger. Although it was no longer the custom in Zen temples, Hongzhi himself took no food after noon. On various occasions he donated food from the temple supply to nearby villages, thereby saving many lives.

From his arrival in 1129 Hongzhi remained on Mount Tiantong, refusing all invitations to leave. He was widely learned, accomplished in Confucian and other Chinese cultural lore, and able to apply his eloquence to the teaching of Zen practice. He articulated the meditation praxis of the Sōtō tradition in his teaching of silent illumination, formulating the guideposts for meditation in this tradition as Furong had for monastic community life.

In autumn 1157 Hongzhi journeyed down the mountain for the first time in nearly thirty years. He visited local military and government officials and lay patrons of his temple to say goodbye and thank them for their support. He returned to Jingde Temple on November tenth and the next morning bathed, put on

fresh robes, and went to the dharma (lecture) hall, where he gave a farewell talk to his monks. He asked his attendant for a brush and wrote a letter to his colleague and sometime critic, the Zen teacher Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163),<sup>7</sup> asking him to take charge of the temple. Then Hongzhi wrote:

Illusory dreams, phantom flowers-  
Sixty-seven years.  
A white bird vanishes in the mist,  
Autumn waters merge with the sky.<sup>8</sup>

He then passed away in formal meditation position. It is said that his body remained fresh in its coffin for seven days.

Six months later the Southern Song Emperor Gaocong gave him the posthumous title Hongzhi Chanshi, “Chan Master Vast Wisdom.” Hongzhi’s immediate influence was maintained through his numerous direct successors, eight of whom merited their own biographies in the *Five Lamps Merged in One Source*, a thirteenth-century abridged compilation of five major Zen history texts.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Sōtō Context*

Hongzhi’s practice of silent illumination includes an implicit devotional element: reverence, expressed in his writings through his great appreciation of nature, and gratitude, apparent in his respect for the lineage teachers who have transmitted the practice. Especially he venerates the great Ancestors, the founding figures in the lineage who established or enriched the tradition, and to whom Hongzhi addressed some of his verses. Hongzhi’s personal attitude of “serving the ancestors” is concretized generally in Zen temples with the daily ritual recitation of the names in the lineage reaching back to Shakyamuni Buddha.

Hongzhi’s Practice Instructions can be more fully appreciated if it is understood how they echo and synthesize the root teachings of the Caodong/Sōtō lineage. Particularly important to a comprehension of Hongzhi’s philosophy and vocabulary are the works of Shitou and Dongshan and their teachings regarding the interplay of universal and particular, which Dongshan formulated in the five ranks.

The Sōtō lineage descended from the famed Sixth Ancestor of Zen, Dajian Huineng (638-713), through his second generation successor Shitou Xiqian (700-790). Shitou and Mazu Dao-i (709-788), another second-generation descendant of Huineng, were the two great masters of their age in China from whom the later Zen descends.<sup>10</sup>

Hongzhi often makes references to the teachings of Shitou, whose name means “Above the Rock,” so named after a hut he built on a large boulder near his temple and in which he resided. Shitou was awakened when reading a passage by Sengzhao (374-414),<sup>11</sup> “The ultimate man is empty and hollow; he has no form, yet of the myriad things there is none that is not his own making. Who can understand myriad things oneself? Only a sage.” Thereupon Shitou said, “A sage has no self, yet there is nothing that is not himself.” From this insight into emptiness and interconnectedness Shitou formulated the basic principles of his understanding of what came to be the Sōtō tradition in his classic long poem “Harmony of Difference and Equality.”<sup>13</sup>

“Harmony” describes the dialectical interaction between the universal, or ultimate, and the particular, or phenomenal. Although the poem is an expression of Shitou’s personal insight, its categories of

philosophical analysis derive from native Chinese Daoist yin-yang dialectics and, to a great extent, from the Chinese Huayan Buddhist dialectical system, extracted from the Huayan, or Flower Ornament Sutra. The sutra, said to be the declaration of Shakyamuni Buddha upon his enlightenment, was incomprehensible to prospective students at Shakyamuni Buddha's time. Later, in East Asia it was widely considered to be the loftiest expression of Buddhist philosophy. While the sutra itself is a highly visionary and exalted depiction of universal interdependence and of the vastness, power, and development of the activity of bodhisattvas (enlightening beings dedicated to universal awakening), the Chinese commentators derived from it many theoretical systems for classifying the stages and aspects of enlightening mind and teaching. Such systems, like the Huayan fourfold *dharmadhatu*, or reality realm, were concerned with the relationship between principle and phenomena, and were a basis for these Sōtō theories.

The interplay between ultimate and phenomenal more or less explicitly pervades all subsequent Sōtō teaching including Hongzhi's, using various terminology as seems most helpful at the time. In "Harmony of Difference and Equality," Shitou equates the ultimate or universal with darkness (also sometimes called principle, unity, undifferentiated sameness, or what Shitou terms "the spiritual source"). The light, by contrast, signifies the world of particulars, this being the light that differentiates phenomena, the "ten thousand" objectified things of the sense-desire realm. In addition to universal and particular, these two also have been called: real and apparent, noumenal and phenomenal, true and partial, upright and inclined, straight and bent, equal and diverse, or empty and formed. They are analogous to the relationship between realization of truth and its functioning. The universal and particular have also been expressed in terms of relationship between host and guest, lord and vassal, black and white, subject and object, and yang and yin.

The full development of the relationship between universal and particular is expounded in the five ranks (or degrees) teachings of Dongshan Liangjie (807-869), a third generation successor to Shitou, in his poem "Song of the Precious Mirror Samādhi" and in two sets of verse commentaries.<sup>14</sup> What came to be called the "Caodong" (Sōtō) school is named after Dongshan, combined with the name Caoqi, the place where the Sixth Ancestor Huineng taught, or perhaps (according to some sources) the name of Caoshan Berke (840-901), one of Dongshan's most prominent disciples, who elaborated the theoretical side of the five ranks teaching.

Hongzhi speaks directly of the five ranks once in the Practice Instructions, referring to the "five levels of achievement" version of the teaching; his verse commentaries on the five ranks are included in the Religious Verses. The theme of the relationship between realization of the ultimate and functioning amid phenomena, which underlies all of the five ranks formulations, is clearly of central concern in Hongzhi's teaching. He plays with this theme through poetic nature metaphors and by encouraging and exhorting his listeners, and frequently describes the process and fulfillment of this integration of universality and particularity. For example:

Where emptiness is empty it contains all of existence, where existence exists it joins the single emptiness.  
The merging of sameness and difference becomes the entire creation's mother. This realm manifests the energy of the many thousands of beings.

The five ranks' embeddedness as a conceptual background for Sōtō praxis enactments and imageries requires their inclusion in any discussion of Hongzhi, and examples of each of the five ranks may be discerned throughout Hongzhi's Practice Instructions. The five ranks are, first, "the phenomenal within the real," seeing particulars against the backdrop of the ultimate; second, "the real within phenomena," seeing the ultimate universal in each or any one particular event; third, "coming from within the real," emerging



silent and shining from the experiential state of union with the ultimate; fourth, “going within both the phenomenal and the real,” using both particulars and the sense of the universal with familiarity; and fifth, “arriving within both together,” freely using either the phenomenal or the ineffable reality without attaching to either and without seeing them as separate. These five ranks represent ontological aspects of awakened mind more than stages of spiritual development.

Dongshan also presented a second, parallel system called the five degrees of meritorious achievement which do reflect degrees of development of realization. These are conversion or intention (mindful commitment); service (obediently carrying out the practice); achievement (immersion in nondiscrimination); collective achievement (return to caring interaction with beings); and fulfilled achievement (individual being and their universal interpenetrating connectedness seen as identical).

Although always philosophically relevant, the five ranks, schemata have received varying emphasis in the tradition. The priority of actual practice has been asserted by figures such as Dōgen, who downplayed the five ranks, feeling that they encouraged fixation on an overly formulaic understanding. Indeed, the surviving Sōtō lineage descended from Dongshan’s disciple, Yunju Daoying (d. 902), who emphasized practice, rather than from Caoshan Benji, who promoted the five ranks teaching. Nevertheless, at different times Sōtō monks have continued to speculate about these teachings, following the various alternate formulations suggested by Caoshan. The five ranks also are considered one of the highest levels of koans, prior only to the precepts, in the Japanese Rinzai school’s contemporary graded system of koans.<sup>15</sup>

Such systems of Buddhist phenomenology can seem abstract and esoteric, but Dongshan intended the five ranks for study in conjunction with practice. Hongzhi also echoes the practice teaching that Shitou developed, along with his insights into the universal and particular. Traditional Buddhist practice involves transcending our attachment to desire objects, which results from the illusion of phenomena as inherently self-existent, separate, and alienated. This clinging is seen as the source of suffering. Yet Shitou’s practice also seeks to transcend attachment to our experiential realization of the ultimate. As he says in “Harmony of Difference and Equality”: “According with sameness is still not enlightenment.” The goal of Shitou’s practice, as of Hongzhi’s, is the full integration of deep experiential awareness of the ultimate source with our particular functioning amid worldly phenomena, referred to as being in the world but not of it.

Shitou articulated a practice model to lead to this integration in another long teaching poem, “Song of the Grass-Roof Hermitage” (see Appendix A). Here Shitou describes the establishment of a meditative practice/way of life that enables one to turn within to find the ultimate source and then return to the world to “relax completely; open your hands and walk, innocent.” Shitou matches the ontological dialectic of integrating the universal and phenomenal with the practice dialectic summed up in the line, “Turn around to let the light to shine within, then just return.” This oscillation between realizing the ultimate, often actualized through meditation and in the monastic impulse, and functioning responsively in the world, often expressed with the bodhisattva model, becomes the paradigm for Sōtō practice. It is a pattern that Hongzhi demonstrates throughout his Practice Instructions.

The Sōtō tradition has evolved its own “family wind,” or style, since Dongshan, having developed expedient teaching methodologies and surviving today in various manifestations in China, Japan, and the West. One primary Sōtō teaching method is reflected in Hongzhi’s frequent encouragement that practitioners embody the teaching with independence, illumining fully on their own. The awareness that nobody can experience the truth for another led to the characteristic Sōtō style of usually not giving explicit directions, leaving students to realize personally their own inmost nature. The central importance of this method is well illustrated in a story about Dongshan. When performing a memorial service for his teacher Yunyan Tansheng (781-841), Dongshan was asked by a monk why he so honored the relatively unknown

Yunyan rather than other, more famous teachers Dongshan had studied with, such as Nanquan Puyuan (748-834) or Guishan Lingyou (771-853).<sup>16</sup> Dongshan answered that it was only because Yunyan had never directly explained anything to him.

Shining through the stories of Dongshan and his successors is the commitment to personal experience, the immanent presence of suchness, and the radical transcendence of all dualistic views, however subtle. When Dongshan was leaving Yunyan, he asked how to describe Yunyan's reality. Yunyan said, "Just this is it." After some pause, Yunyan added, "You are in charge of this great matter; you must be more thoroughgoing." Dongshan left and while crossing a stream saw his reflection. He was thoroughly enlightened and composed this verse:

Just don't seek from others, or you'll be far estranged from Self.

I now go on alone; everywhere I meet It:

It now is me; I now am not It.

One must understand in this way to merge with thusness.<sup>17</sup>

Hongzhi emphasizes the practical experiential enactment of this teaching of nondual awareness throughout his Practice Instructions.

### *Is Silent Illumination Quietistic?*

Despite Hongzhi's extraordinary literary expression of dharma, he has been most noted in many historical surveys of Zen for an alleged dispute with the prominent Rinzai Zen teacher Dahui Zonggao. Dahui criticized silent illumination meditation as leading to excessive quietism and neglect of enlightenment. But Hongzhi and Dahui were actually friends who cooperated as teaching colleagues. Indeed, Dahui at times visited Hongzhi and sent students to him. Dahui's criticism was thus not directed personally at Hongzhi, but at some of his followers. Hongzhi in turn refrained from any comment on Dahui's criticism of his meditation teaching, and sent food to help Dahui's temple when it faced shortages. As previously mentioned, just before his death Hongzhi wrote a will requesting that Dahui take charge of his affairs.

Later adherents of the Rinzai (or Linji, named after the great, dynamic master Linji Yixuan [d. 867]) and Sōtō schools, as well as writers of Zen histories, sometimes made much of the supposed disagreement between Dahui and Hongzhi.<sup>18</sup> But despite differing teaching styles and praxis emphases, Sōtō and Rinzai teachers have a tradition of cooperating in their work with students as did their early progenitors Shitou and Mazu. In fact, when the Sōtō lineage in China almost died out, it was preserved by a Rinzai master (see note in Appendix B). Eihei Dōgen, considered the founder of the Sōtō school in Japan, also succeeded to the Rinzai tradition in Japan before finding his Sōtō master in China, and later refused even to identify with such a thing as a "Zen School," much less Sōtō or Rinzai.

But even if the nature of his criticism has been distorted, the questions Dahui raised about silent illumination are very useful for examining the relevance and practicality of Hongzhi's teaching and seeing the possibilities for its misapplication. The issues and excesses that concerned Dahui are still alive in modern Zen practice, and can be seen reflected in potential imbalances in all spiritual traditions.

Instead of silent illumination, Dahui especially advocated the practice of meditation using koans or objects. Dahui's advocacy of intent contemplation of koans, aimed at dramatic opening experiences, was due largely to his own dedication to working not only with monks, but also with laypeople, including social and political leaders. Dahui encouraged laypeople to engage in personally transformative spiritual practice rather

than merely subsidizing monastic institutions. Given the pressures of political and social upheaval facing his students, he believed that the dynamism of formal koan practice was more accessible to them than the less dramatic, traditional sitting meditation that was the format for silent illumination. He also believed koan practice more efficacious for awakening experiences, which he seemed to have valued above the ongoing deepening and maturing of inherent awakening that silent illumination emphasizes.

Despite Dahui's new accentuation of them, the use of old teaching stories among Zen students goes back at least to the eighth century, used in various ways at different times in all branches of Zen. Although they have been more commonly associated with the Rinzai tradition, Sōtō teachers also discussed koans regularly. As already noted, Hongzhi studied briefly with Dahui's teacher, Yuanwu Keqin, compiler of the model *Blue Cliff Record*. Hongzhi refers to koans in his Practice Instructions; he also compiled two noted collections of one hundred koans, one with his own verse commentaries and one with prose comments. A Chinese Sōtō master, Wansong Xingxiu (1166-1246), later took these collections of Hongzhi's and added extensive explication, thus creating the *Book of Serenity* and *Record of Further Inquiry*. Similarly, Hongzhi's teacher Danxia Zichun had also assembled one hundred cases with his own appended verses, which became the basis for another koan anthology, the *Vacant Hall Collection*. Eihei Dōgen likewise devotes much of his masterwork *Shobogenzo* (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*) to commentary on the old stories.

Dahui's criticism of silent illumination relates to the differing effect of koans and sitting meditation in practice, rather than to a total rejection of one mode or the other. We know that Dahui himself remained dedicated to sitting meditation from Dōgen's praise for Dahui's determination to maintain such meditation on an occasion when he was seriously ill.<sup>19</sup> Dahui was also sensitive to overemphasizing koan practice about personal experience, which sometimes led to excessively intellectual, obsessive literary study of the old stories. (So great was his concern, in fact, that Dahui destroyed the printing blocks for the *Blue Cliff Record* compiled by his own teacher. Fortunately, copies of the work survived.)<sup>20</sup>

With regard to silent illumination specifically, Dahui charged that its advocates "just teach people to stop and rest and play dead"; they "sit wordlessly with eyes shut beneath the black mountain . . . [and] don't see subtle wondrous enlightenment."<sup>21</sup> To be sure, the misapplication and misunderstanding of silent illumination meditation sometimes has led to self-satisfied, tranquilized, un insightful, and unresponsive practitioners. Conversely, highly systematized koan practice, predominately a feature of the Rinzai tradition, sometimes has the tendency to encourage the student to "pass through" successive koans in a formalized program of accomplishment, rather than "becoming" the story and its teaching. In both cases a role of the teacher is to correct such deviations and to keep the practice balanced.

Dahui claims that silent illumination produces addiction to calmness by overemphasizing concentration at the expense of insight. However, the teaching of Hongzhi himself, as presented in the Practice Instructions, balances these two qualities. And in his important poem "Guidepost of Silent Illumination" Hongzhi clearly stresses the indispensability and interdependence of both serenity (or calm) and illumination (or insight): "if illumination neglects serenity then aggressiveness appears... if serenity neglects illumination murkiness leads to wasted dharma" (useless teaching).

Hongzhi's teaching, though perhaps misapplied by some of his followers, encourages active functioning appropriate to the everyday phenomenal world. The balancing of serenity and illumination is analogous to the balancing of awareness of the universal and of the phenomenal described in the five ranks. The ultimate purpose of spiritual practice is to realize both wisdom's illuminating insight and its appropriate functioning in the ordinary world of beings: bodhisattvic responsiveness and responsibility. Hongzhi depicts this process of meditative realization:

The ancestral masters' nostrils and patch-robed monks' life pulse consist of holding firmly and the releasing in activity so that we all discover our own freedom. So it is said that false [thinking] is stopped and stillness [concentration] necessarily arises, stillness arises and wisdom appears, wisdom arises and stillness necessarily disappears [in active functioning]. Clear and distinct, this is the only authentic view.

For Hongzhi the whole purpose of practice is to “graciously share yourself with the hundred grass tips [i.e., myriad beings] in the busy marketplace.” Hongzhi frequently exhorts his listeners to study and embody the teaching more thoroughly and penetratingly, and to persist in going beyond their current realization. Again and again he urges us to actualize the state of total awareness.

### *Hongzhi's Relation to Dōgen*

The influence of Hongzhi's teachings since his lifetime is not predominately through a direct lineage of successors but in his expression of the fundamental attitudes of Zen meditation. This influence is perhaps most apparent in the development of his teachings by the Japanese Sōtō school, which derives from Dōgen and in recent decades has spread to Western countries. In this tradition Hongzhi is revered as a major forerunner, even though the Japanese Sōtō school descends not from him but from one of his dharma-brothers. Hongzhi's writings are also still greatly appreciated in Chinese Zen, although given the cooperative intermingling of schools and lineages in modern Chinese Buddhism, it is unclear whether any contemporary Chinese Zen teachers are descendants of Hongzhi.

Hongzhi's direct lineage did achieve some degree of longevity. One of his direct successors, Si-chi Huihui, had two successors four and five generations after him who went to Japan, Dongming Huiji (1271-1340) and Dongling Yungyu (d. 1365).<sup>22</sup> There they established a branch of the Sōtō tradition referred to as the Wanshi-ha (Japanese for “Hongzhi school”), which was housed mostly amid the Japanese Rinzai temples (where prowess in Chinese cultural matters was valued), and whose followers also extensively studied the first ranks teachings. This lineage survived well into the sixteenth century, but seems to have had little contact with the Sōtō branch established by Dōgen.

Because awareness of Hongzhi in contemporary Buddhist studies and practice has been dwarfed by the appreciation of Dōgen, whose genius is esteemed as a unique and fresh Japanese synthesis of Buddhist teaching as it developed in the Chinese Zen tradition, it seems appropriate in tracing Hongzhi's influence on Zen to compare his teachings with those of Dōgen. Examining primary aspects of Dōgen's practice is also helpful in more fully understanding practical implementations and intentions of Hongzhi's meditative teachings, and in turn reveals the great extent of Dōgen's indebtedness to Hongzhi.

Eihei Dōgen went to China and received transmission of the Sōtō teachings in 1227 from Tiantong Rujing (1163-1228), the abbot of the same Jingde Monastery on Mt. Tiantong where Hongzhi had been the abbot, and a third generation successor to Changlu Qingliao, a dharma-brother of Hongzhi (both were disciples of Danxia Zichun). Dōgen clearly reveres Hongzhi, referring to him particularly as an ancient buddha, and says that Hongzhi is also the only person Rujing ever called an “ancient buddha.”<sup>23</sup>

Hongzhi's influence on Dōgen can be seen most clearly in their meditation practice and in the understanding of its meaning. Dōgen calls the silent illumination meditation taught by Hongzhi *shikan ta* or “just sitting,” an expression for silent illumination used by Rujing. This objectless and nondualistic meditation does not involve stages or striving for any goal or achievement; thus it is an activity radical other than the usual worldly activity, which grasps and seeks for some result. Hongzhi encourages this practice when he says, “Stay with that just as that. Stay with this just as this.” For Hongzhi, you already have

the shining “field of boundless emptiness... from the very beginning.” There is no place else to look. “People who sincerely meditate and authentically arrive trust that the field has always been with them.” Hongzhi clarifies this grounding exhaustively through continual emphasis of wholeness and nonseparation. Nothing is external to this luminous present mind.

Dōgen expresses the same understanding when he urges practitioners to “have no design on becoming buddha,” since this meditation is already “the dharma gate of repose and bliss, the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment.”<sup>24</sup> The unity of practice and enlightenment is central to Dōgen’s teaching. While it is essential to realize fully this perfect, all-pervasive Mind, which is no place other than right here, and is naturally undefiled, arriving at some theoretical understanding of this truth is not enough. It must be personally practiced, enacted, fully exerted, and celebrated.

Hongzhi likewise repeatedly urges his listeners to fully express this teaching and experience it personally. “Even if you thoroughly understand, still please practice until it is familiar”; Mind must actively “accord and respond without laboring and accomplish without hindrance.” For Dōgen this is enacted in zazen (seated meditation), and also in sincere mindful conduct of ordinary everyday life (as expressed, for example, in Zhaozhou’s “wash out your bowl” and “drink your tea,” mentioned by Hongzhi in his Practice Instruction).

One distillation of Hongzhi’s meditation is his poem “Acupuncture Needle of Zazen” (see Religious Verses), which Dōgen praises and compares favorably with other Zen teachers’ descriptions of meditation. He calls the latter “nothing but models for reverting to the source and returning to the origin, vain programs for suspending considerations and congealing in tranquillity,” unlike Hongzhi’s “Needle” which “says it is right. It alone radiates throughout the surface and interior of the realm of the dharma.”<sup>25</sup>

In this poem Hongzhi speaks of “illuminating without encountering objects,... complete without grasping, [and] knowing without touching things, ...never engaging in discriminating thinking.” This dynamic, radiant awareness, not the suppression of thoughts characteristic of the quietistic concentration that Dahui warned against. The Sōtō monk and scholar Menzan Zuihō (1682-1769),<sup>26</sup> who was instrumental in establishing contemporary Sōtō Zen understanding, comments on Hongzhi’s verse:

If you think that you have cut off illusory mind, instead of simply clarifying how illusory mind *mine* [italics mine] illusory mind will come up again, as though you had cut the stem of a blade of grass ...and left the root alive.<sup>27</sup>

Hongzhi’s objectless illumination does not deny the objectifications in our experience, but simply allows them to melt naturally into unified awareness.

In Dōgen’s essay named after Hongzhi’s poem, in which he quotes the “Acupuncture Needle of Zazen,” Dōgen ends by offering his own version as an elaboration and development of Hongzhi’s.<sup>28</sup> Dōgen’s “Needle” poem amplifies Hongzhi’s “illumination without encountering objects” to emphasize that completeness is itself realization and is enacted by effort without desire (themes also apparent in Hongzhi’s Practice Instructions). Dōgen concludes his own poem by saying that it is not that Hongzhi “has not yet said it right, but it can also be said like this.”<sup>29</sup>

Although this meditation does not ultimately involve concentration on an object or stages of advancement, it is not without technique. In his “Song of the Grass-Roof Hermitage,” Shitou had said “Turn around the light to shine within and then just return.” In his Practice Instructions Hongzhi makes similar suggestions, urging practitioners to “take the backward step and directly reach the middle of the circle from where light issues forth,” and elsewhere to “turn within and drop off everything completely, and

realization will occur.”

The backward step of turning the light to shine within, directing one's attention to observe closely one's own awareness, is a basic Zen meditation technique, called *ekō henshō* in Japanese. Dōgen says it is necessary to put aside practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate yourself. Body and mind of themselves will drop away and your original face will be manifest.<sup>30</sup>

Dōgen elucidates this key technique, which he refers to as “the essential art of zazen,” by quoting a story about Yaoshan Weiyan (745-828), who was the direct successor to Shitou and the teacher of Dongshan teacher, Yunyan. A monk asked Yaoshan what he thought about when he was meditating. Yaoshan said he thought of that which doesn't think. The monk asked *how* he did that, and Yaoshan said, “beyond thinking.”<sup>31</sup> In a different version of this essay, in place of this dialogue Dōgen wrote:

Whenever a thought occurs, be aware of it, as soon as you are aware of it, it will vanish. If you remain for a long period forgetful of objects, you will naturally become unified. This is the essential art of zazen.<sup>32</sup>

This turning the light of attentive awareness within to see and feel the nature of one's own thinking process and the vast luminous space around and beneath these thought nodules (i.e. that which doesn't think) is the central technique of Hongzhi's meditation teaching.

If the technique of objectless meditation is to “turn your light inwardly to illuminate the self,” fulfillment occurs when “body and mind of themselves drop away and the original face is manifested.” Hongzhi describes this enlightening letting go of body-mind in his Practice Instructions when he says, “The essence is to empty and open out body and mind, as expansive as the great emptiness of space. Naturally the entire territory all is satisfied.” Hongzhi also urges his students to “cast off completely your head and skin,” suggesting they “let everything entirely fall away and put it all together without any extraneous conditions. This is referred to as the occasion of solitary, glorious unselfishness.”

This “dropping off body and mind,” called *shinjin datsuraku* in Japanese, is crucial to Dōgen's teaching and involves the incident of his enlightenment at the Jingde Monastery in China in 1227. Dōgen was sitting in the meditation hall when his teacher, Rujing, chastised the monk next to Dōgen, who was sleeping, by saying, “To study the way is to cast off body-mind. Why are you engaged in single-minded sleep instead of single-minded meditation?” It is said that Dōgen was thereupon greatly enlightened. He went to Rujing's room and said, “Body-mind is cast [or dropped] off.” Rujing agreed, “Body-mind is cast off, casting off body-mind.” Dōgen asked that he not be approved so easily, and Rujing replied that this was “casting off cast off.”<sup>33</sup>

This dropping off or letting go of attachment to body-mind is the purposeful yet unlabored release of all obstructions to fundamental clear illuminated Mind. As Shitou says in the “Song of the Grass-Road Hermitage,” “Let go of hundreds of years and relax completely.” In a frequently quoted passage, Dōgen says:

Studying the Buddha Way is studying oneself. Studying oneself is forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things. Being enlightened by all things is causing the body-mind of oneself and the body-mind of others to be shed. There is ceasing the traces of enlightenment, which causes one to forever leave the traces of enlightenment which is cessation.<sup>34</sup>

The dropping off or shedding of body-mind is itself thorough realization of universal illuminating emptiness as the all-pervading nature of existence, and is understood as the highest awakening in Sōtō Zen; Menzies equates it with *anuttarasamyak-sambodhi*, unsurpassed perfected buddhahood.<sup>35</sup>

There has been speculation as to whether Dōgen's teaching of dropping off body-mind really derives from Rujing—that Dōgen misunderstood Rujing, who was really speaking only of casting off the dusts (defilements) from the mind, and that this misunderstanding, or his intentional reinterpretation, led to Dōgen's enlightenment and his own, original formulation of *shinjin datsuraku*. These speculations now seem dubious.<sup>36</sup> Certainly Dōgen fully developed and articulated the teaching of dropping body-mind beyond Rujing's usage. Yet the extent of Dōgen's connection with the understanding of his Sōtō forerunners may be elucidated by seeing how this teaching actually echoes Hongzhi.

The sparse records of Rujing, other than those from Dōgen, reveal many suggestions to drop off the mind's dusts but not to “drop off body-mind.” Hongzhi's Practice Instructions, however, include frequent exhortations to drop off dusts, as well as many references (such as those mentioned above) to a more totalistic letting go that refer not to a dualistic view of sense dusts as real and external, but clearly refer to the same vast awareness as Dōgen's *shinjin datsuraku*.

Because this teaching is so important in Dōgen's Zen, and given contemporary questions about its derivation, a bit of linguistic comparison is called for, even in a general introduction to Hongzhi. The two characters that Dōgen uses as a compound for dropping off, *datsuraku* (in Chinese, *to lo*), individually mean to remove, and, somewhat less actively, to fall away or scatter.<sup>37</sup> When describing the experience of total letting go, Hongzhi frequently uses these same characters separately, *to* being combined with *ji* (exhaustively) to mean cast off completely. In one place in the Practice Instructions, however, Hongzhi does use *to* and *lo* in combination, specifically to speak of this process of letting go in meditation:

You must completely withdraw from the invisible pounding and weaving of your ingrained ideas. If you want to be rid of this invisible [turmoil], you must just sit through it and let go of everything. Attainment, fulfillment and illuminate thoroughly, light and shadow altogether forgotten. *Drop off* [*to lo*—my italics] your own skin, and the sense-dusts will be fully purified, the eye readily discerning the brightness. Accept your function and be wholly satisfied.

This teaching of casting off body and mind articulated by both Hongzhi and Dōgen points to the essence of silent illumination, which is simply focusing awareness on the totality of self to return to and enact the bright shining empty field that is our own fundamental nature.

The writings of Hongzhi and Dōgen also share the use of rich poetical imagery and metaphor. Dōgen is particularly known for his artful use of language, turning conventional language patterns inside out to undo conditioned thinking and demonstrate the logic of awakening. Linguistic comparisons of Hongzhi and Dōgen may well reveal further connections, both in teaching style and practice, as they both actualize the mind “beyond-thinking.”

### *The Empty Field of Buddha Nature*

Hongzhi's Practice Instructions also can be framed and even introduced in terms of the teaching of buddha nature, an approach expressed in Hongzhi's case 67 in the *Book of Serenity*:

The Flower Ornament Scripture says, “I now see all sentient beings everywhere fully possess the wisdom and virtues of the enlightened ones, but because of false conceptions and attachments they do not realize it.”<sup>38</sup>

This is said to be the utterance of Shakyamuni Buddha at the time of his great enlightenment, signifying recognition of the inalienable buddha nature of all beings.

Hongzhi echoes this when he says, “How amazing it is that all people have this but cannot polish it into bright clarity. In darkness unawakened, they make foolishness cover their wisdom and overflow.” This insight is also the basis for the very beginning of the Practice Instructions, which can be seen as a declaration of Hongzhi’s whole teaching:

The field of boundless emptiness is what exists from the very beginning. You must purify, cure, grind down, or brush away all the tendencies you have fabricated into apparent habits. Then you can reside in the clear circle of brightness.

This awakening, or buddhahood, is not something created or achieved, neither nonexistent nor existent. The essential practice, as understood in the Zen tradition, is simply to wake up to this, what Hongzhi calls the empty field. “It cannot be cultivated or proven. From the beginning it is altogether complete.”

Although we may realize more or less thorough vision of the empty field, in practice we are often thrown back into conditioned habitual responses concocted previously by our limited human consciousness. This practice thus further involves closely observing our delusions and using these obstructions themselves to clarify and illuminate the fundamental field of awakening. We must practice at grinding down, curing, and brushing away the “dusts” until we can enact this awareness and allow the fundamental pervasive purity to shine. Hongzhi says:

Empty and desireless, cold and thin, simple and genuine, this is how to strike down and fold up the remaining habits of many lives. When the stains from old habits are exhausted, the original light appears blazing through your skull, not admitting any other matters. Vast and spacious, like sky and water merging during autumn, like snow and moon having the same color, this field is without boundaries beyond direction, magnificently one entity without edge or seam. Further, when you turn within and drop off everything completely, realization occurs.

The importance of purifying or resolving one’s conditioning informs the practice which underlies Hongzhi’s vision of inherent illumination; once the obscurations of conditioning are shed, free functioning is manifested. This process is reflected in the traditional Sōtō approach to koan practice, which is to see the events and conflicts of our own lives as cases to be penetrated, both in meditation practice and consultation with a teacher. This approach, called *genjōkōan* (the koan manifesting) in Dōgen’s Japanese teaching, may use the traditional koan stories, but only as they apply to our own experience. Hence we may see *genjōkōan* as a technique to work through our own conditioned dusts to the original boundless field and its expression in our lives. It is an aspect of turning the light within to illuminate ourselves, and so, perhaps allow the dropping off of body-mind.

Hongzhi also emphasizes the teaching of buddha nature in his close scrutiny of perception and discrimination, showing how we falsely estrange ourselves and objectify the phenomenal world. “Have you yourself established the mind that thinks up all the illusory conditions? ...The eye cannot see itself but neither can [its function] be dimmed.” The importance of this investigation is indicated by Hongzhi thus:



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