

CHINESE ZEN MASTERS

Lecture 4: Founding Patriarchs of the Linji House

Stanford University's "Buddhism in the Modern World" Series, 3/16/2006,
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In the last lecture (lecture 3) we introduced some important seventh and eighth generation Chinese Zen Masters following the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. In this lecture we will focus on three important masters who lead to the famous Linji House of Zen.

The Five Houses of Zen

By the late Tang dynasty and the Five Dynasties period of China (9th and 10th century), two to three hundred years after Huineng, his Dharma offspring have produced dozens of important and well-known Zen masters, many having hundreds or even more than a thousand disciples. The most influential masters were grouped into five lineages, called the Five Houses of Zen: the Linji House (Japanese: Rinzai), Caodong House (j. Soto), Guiyang House, Yunmen House, and Fayuan House (). The founding patriarchs of each of the Five Houses have their distinct ways of teaching their disciples, and supposedly that became the features or characters of the Houses. This is only partially true, as in Chinese Zen teaching there is rarely strict adherence to a specific set of methods (such as Linji's koans or Caodong's "just sitting" methods). Rather, Chinese Zen masters feel they can employ a wide variety of methods as they see fit in training the disciples. The different characters of each of the Five Houses are of intellectual and philosophical interest, but in reality the masters of each lineage are free to borrow the tactics and devices employed by each other.

The Five Houses of Zen, then, do not differ in their philosophy or understanding of the essential Buddhist principles, but rather are more of a historical convenience in tracing the lineages of the Zen masters.

Having said these, it is nevertheless interesting to study the characters of the Five Houses and their founding masters, as a way to understand the rich variety or flavor of Chinese Zen.

Founding Patriarchs of the Linji House

1 Master Baizhang Huaihai (720-814)

—No Working, No Eating

Master BaiZhang was a Dharma heir of Master Mazu. Mazu and Baizhang, together more than anyone, were responsible for shaping the form and structure of Chinese Zen monasteries. Later Chinese Zen disciples all learned that “Mazu built the Zen monastic system, and Baizhang set up the Zen rules of purity. ()” That is, they have set up a monastery system designed expressly for the Zen practitioners. The Zen training included the following:

1. Daily meditation and longer meditation retreats (seven days to a few months), so strict rules for the Zen Hall were set forth.
2. “Working meditation,” where monks performed shared duties. Rules for sharing the farming, tree planting, and other manual labor; administrative duties, etc.
3. Zen lectures and question sessions. How and how often they should take place.
4. Daily and special services and ceremonies. The format, content, and meaning of these services, and on which occasions.

In setting forth the rules, Baizhang departed from both some Indian Buddhist rules (e.g. no farming for the monks) and Chinese cultural traditions (e.g. setting monastic order based on one’s enlightenment and seniority in the Sangha rather than family class, society status, education, and age). Some of the rules and changes he (and others) set forth were controversial, but eventually they became the standard in Chinese Buddhism, and paved the road for the training system of generations of future Zen masters. He created a structural revolution in Chinese Buddhism to carry out the spiritual revolution of Huineng. In so doing he made a crucial step in integrating Buddhism into Chinese culture and at the same time transforming the Chinese culture with Zen.

Eventually, the Zen monastic system became so successful that it was adopted by most other schools of Chinese Buddhism. In fact, if one tours China one will find many monasteries named “Chan Monastery” when in reality they may have nothing to do with Zen except that they apply some or most of the “Baizhang’s Monastic Rules of Purity.”

I Will Be a Buddha

When Master Baizhang was young, his mother once brought him to a temple to pay homage to the Buddha. The child pointed to the large Buddha statue and asked his mother, “What is this thing?”

His mother replied, “It’s the Buddha.”

He said, “Looks just like a man! I will be one also.”

Wild Ducks

Baizhang was Master Mazu’s attendant. Once he was accompanying the Master on the road when they saw a flock of wild ducks flying by. Master Mazu asked, “What are these?”

Baizhang replied, “Wild ducks.”

“Where did they go?”

“They flew away.”

Master Mazu grabbed and twisted Baizhang's nose until he cried out in pain, and said, "To say they have flown away!"

With this Baizhang attained an awakening.

Baizhang returned to the attendant's quarters and started to wail. A fellow monk asked, "Do you miss your parents?"

"No."

"Somebody scolded you?"

"No."

"Then why are you crying?"

"The Grand Master twisted my nose so hard it hurt a lot."

The fellow monk asked, "What went wrong?"

"Go ask the Master yourself."

The monk went to ask Mazu, "Master, Attendant Hai (Baizhang Huaihai) is crying in his room. Pray tell me what is wrong."

Master Mazu said, "He's got it! Go ask him yourself."

The monk went back to the room and said to Baizhang, "The Master said that you got it, and told me to ask you," to which Baizhang started to laugh.

"You were crying just then, why are you laughing now?"

Baizhang answered, "Then I cried, now I laugh."

The fellow monk was baffled.

Wild Fox Zen

For a while every time Master Baizhang gave a Dharma lecture, an old man appeared in the audience, and disappeared when the assembly dispersed. However, one day the old man remained after the talk. Master Baizhang asked, "Who is it standing in front of me?"

The old man said, "Sire, I am not human. I lived in this mountain during the time of Kashyapa Buddha (the previous Buddha). Once a disciple asked me, 'Is a great cultivator subject to the laws of Causality?' to which I replied, 'No.' Because of that, I have been born as a wild fox for five hundred lifetimes. Master, pray tell me the right answer, so that I may be freed from this karma."

The Master said, "Ask me."

"Is a great cultivator subject to the laws of Causality?"

“He is not *blind* to the laws of Causality.”

With these words the old man came to enlightenment, and bowed, “I am now freed from this body of a wild fox. I live in the backside of the mountain, may I ask you to perform a funeral service appropriate for a monk?”

Master Baizhang told the *wei nuo* (master of liturgy) to assemble the Sangha to prepare for a funeral after the meal. The monks discussed among themselves, “Everyone is well, and there are no sick monks in the Nirvana Hall. What is this about?”

After the meal, the Master led the assembly to the backside of the mountain, and, with his staff, pulled out a dead fox from a cave. They then proceeded to hold a funeral service and cremated the fox.

[From then on, when someone teaches Zen wrongly it is called “wild fox Zen.”]

Parting Words

Sometimes, after a lecture and the assembly was about to disperse, Master Baizhang would call out to the disciples. As they turned their heads, the Master would ask, “What is it?”

Unfulfilled

Master Baizhang asked the assembly, “There is a person who never eats but is never hungry, and there is a person who eats all the time but is never full.”

Nobody had a reply.

Luminous Mind

The luminous mind shines by itself,

Utterly free from senses and dust.

The essence is truly eternal,

Not confined by words and expressions.

The mind-nature is undefiled,

Complete and perfect in itself.

Only let go of the delusive conditions

To be in suchness as the Buddha.

(dust: the objects of senses: form, sound, smell, etc.)

No Working, No Eating

Master Baizhang set up the system of “general labor”, a time of the day when everyone does manual labor as part of the Zen practice. Baizhang himself always lead the others in the labor work. When he was very old, the monk in charge of labor assignments was very concerned and hid the Master’s tools and begged him to rest instead. The Master said, “I have no virtue, how can I leave the work to others?” But as he could not find his tools, he refused to eat. His words “One day without working is one day without eating” became known everywhere.

2 Master Huangbo Xiyun (d.850): Rude Awakening

Master Huangbo was the Dharma heir of Master Baizhang. He was a tall and imposing man; His appearance impressed even Baizhang. He was one of those who appeared in the Zen lore already enlightened (there being no accounts of his enlightenment). Baizhang praised him, “Your insight surpasses that of your master!” Direct and uncompromising, he sometimes employed very physical methods in training the disciples, such as slapping, beating, and shouting. These were further refined into, one may say, a “teaching philosophy of beating and shouting” by his disciple Linji, who would become one of the greatest Zen masters of all time.

All this should not give one the impression that these Zen masters were uneducated thugs. Thoroughly educated in both Buddhism and worldly knowledge, the physical means were simply part of their teaching device (albeit the most immediately notable part). One of Master Huangbo’s greatest supporters was the Prime Minister Pei Xiu, who for periods of time besought Huangbo’s teaching on a daily basis. It is our fortune that Pei kept records of the teaching (called “Dharma Essence of Mind Transmission”), and together with Linji’s Records, are two of the most important documents of the early Zen masters’ extraordinary teachings.

Surpassing the Master

One day, Master Baizhang told the assembly, “The Buddha Dharma is no trivial matter. Once this ol’ monk (referring to himself) was shouted at by Grand Master Mazu, and became deaf for three days.”

Hearing this, Huangbo stuck out his tongue in amazement. Baizhang said, “So you think of inheriting Mazu’s teaching?”

Huangbo replied, “Not so. Hearing your words, Master, I have witnessed Mazu’s great expertise and skill. Yet I do not know Mazu. If I were to inherit Mazu’s teaching, I would have no descendents.”

Baizhang praised him, “Just so! Just so! To be the equal of one’s teacher is to diminish the teacher’s merit by half. To surpass one’s teacher is to be one worthy of Dharma transmission. Your insights are quite superior to your master’s!”

Huangbo then bowed.

Where Is the Master?

Prime Minister Pei Xiu went into a temple to make an incense offering. He saw paintings on the wall and asked the monk in charge, “What are these paintings?”

The monk replied, “They are pictures of great masters.”

Pei asked, “I see the pictures, but where are the great masters?”

The monk had no reply.

Pei then asked, “Are there any Zen practitioners here?”

“There is a new monk who came to work here, he looks like he may be a Zen monk.”

“May I ask him some questions?”

Huangbo was called in immediately. Pei was pleased to see him, and repeated the question, to which Huangbo called loudly, “Pei Xiu!”

Prime Minister Pei answered.

“Where is he?”

Pei immediately came to a realization, as if finding a pearl hidden in his hair. He said, “Master is indeed a great teacher, showing the Dharma so directly like this! Why do you stay unknown and neglected here?”

All the monks in the temple were dumbfounded. Pei asked to be Huangbo’s disciple and invited him to stay in the Prime Minister’s residence. Master Huangbo repeatedly declined. Pei then asked him to be the abbot at Mt. Huangbo to spread the Great Way.

Zen Master Rudeness

Xuanzong was the younger brother of Emperor Muzong of the Tang Dynasty. He was clever and quick, and liked to sit in meditation. While young he playfully sat on the Dragon Throne and pretended to greet the court cabinet. When Muzong’s son Wuzong succeeded the throne, he resented Xuan and wanted him killed. Xuan escaped and became a novice monk under Master Xiangyan.

Once Xuan accompanied Master Xiangyan to the famous Mt. Lu. Inspired by the waterfall, Master Xiangyan composed (the first half of) a poem:

*“Never weary of penetrating clouds and piercing stones
Having gone far, one realizes how high the origin is.”*

The novice Xuan continued,

*“Not to be contained by rivers and brooks,
It will eventually billow in the great ocean.”*

(From these words Xiangyan knew that the novice was no ordinary person.)

Xuan later became a secretary for Master Yanguan, and at that time Huangbo was Yanguan’s head monk.

One day, when Huangbo was prostrating in the Buddha Hall, the novice Xuan asked, “(The sutra says) do not seek the Buddha, do not seek the Dharma, do not seek the Sangha. What does your venerable seek by bowing to the Buddha?”

Master Huangbo replied, “Seek not the Buddha, seek not the Dharma, seek not the Sangha, one always bows thus.”

“Why bow then?” Xuan insisted.

Master Huangbo slapped the novice.

“How rude!”

“This is no place to talk about rudeness or courtesy!” And he slapped Xuan again.

As history unfolded, Xuan succeeded Wuzong to become the emperor of China. Unlike Wuzong who repressed Buddhism, he was a great supporter of Buddhism. However, he issued a royal edict granting Master Huangbo the posthumous title “Zen Master Rudeness.” Prime Minister Pei heard it in the court and was able to appeal to the emperor to change the title to “Zen Master Duanji,” which means “severing all limits.”

Chill to the Bone

To be completely free from the burden of defilements

Is no ordinary task;

Grab the rope firmly with all your might!

Only through the bone-biting chill of winter,

Will the plum blossoms

Smack you with their delightful fragrance.

Just This One-Mind

The Master told Prime Minister Pei, “Each being, whether a Buddha or an ordinary sentient being, is just this One-Mind, there is nothing else. Since beginningless time, this mind is neither created nor will it perish, it is neither blue nor yellow, having no forms or features, neither existing nor non-existing, neither new nor old, long nor short, large nor small; it transcends all limits, words, expressions, traces, marks and opposites. This very essence is it; as soon as thought arises it is not. Like the empty space, it has no boundaries and is immeasurable. This One-Mind alone is the Buddha. Buddhas and sentient beings are not different, but sentient beings cling to appearances and seek externally; the more they seek the more they miss it. The Buddha seeking the Buddha, the mind trying to catch the mind, taking endless kalpas and exhausting all shapes one will never find it. Just you cease all thoughts and forget the worries, and Buddha will appear by itself. This mind is the Buddha, the Buddha is just an ordinary being. As an ordinary being, this mind is not any less; as a Buddha, this mind is not any more.

Seeing and Not Seeing

The original mind is not seeing, hearing, feeling, and cognition, and it is not apart from seeing, hearing, feeling, and cognition. Just do not conceptualize what one sees, and do not discriminate based on the seeing, and yet do not seek the mind apart from the seeing, and do not grasp beyond the seeing. Neither attaching nor detaching, neither abiding nor clinging, being free here and there, there is no place you cannot cultivate.

3 Master Linji Yixuan (d.867): True Man with No Rank

The account of Linji’s enlightenment is a classic koan, exemplifying many facets of Zen. It shows the transformation of a somewhat timid and restrained disciple into an uninhibited, highly creative and effective master of the Dharma. It shows the fruitful and selfless cooperation of two masters in bringing a disciple to awakening. And it shows the lively, uncompromising Zen spirit, where not social convention, not education, not traditional etiquettes, but Truth is the only thing that ultimately matters.

While Master Linji is most well known for his “shouting”, which is used to shock the disciples out of the stream of conscious thoughts and come directly into the experience of reality, he is in fact a very sophisticated elaborator of Mahayana teachings, having a thorough command of the classics. As can be witnessed in his Recorded Sayings, Linji produced some of the most beautiful expressions of Zen (as well as some of the most shocking). Culminating two hundred years of Zen experience, he elaborated several Zen teaching principles and strategies which later

on came to be called the “three subtleties and three essentials,” the “fourfold master and guest,” “four discerning conditions,” and the “art of shouting,” etc., that constituted the Linji character of teaching.

The House of Zen that bears his name became the most successful and influential of the Five Houses, producing the greatest number of well known masters. It spread to Korea and Japan (where it is known as Rinzai Zen), and it is alive even today.

Master Linji’s Enlightenment

1. Shock Treatment

Master Linji was a disciple under Master Huangbo. He practiced diligently and followed rules to the letter. One day the head monk, Muzhou asked Linji, “Venerable, how long have you been here?”

Linji said, “Three years.”

“Ever asked the Master for a question session?”

“Never. Don’t know what to ask.”

“Why don’t you ask the Master, ‘what is the essence of Buddha Dharma?’”

Linji went and posed the question to Master Huangbo. Before he finished his question, Huangbo gave him a beating. When Linji returned, Muzhou inquired,

“How did the question go?”

“Before I had finished my question, the Master beat me up. I don’t understand.”

“Go ask again.”

Linji went in again, and again Master Huangbo beat him. This happened again on the third time. Finally Linji told Muzhou, “Thank you for encouraging me to ask for the Dharma teaching. The Master repeatedly granted me the beatings. It is my bad karma that I do not understand the profound teaching. I have come to bid farewell.”

Muzhou said, “If you’re leaving, you should bid farewell to the Master.”

Linji bowed and retreated. Muzhou went ahead to Master Huangbo and said, “That venerable who came to ask the questions—even though a novice, he is something special. If he comes to bid farewell, please use some expedience in teaching him. In time he will be a great tree, providing shade for all people in the world.”

The next day Linji came to the Master to take his leave. Huangbo said, “No need to go elsewhere, just go to Gao An Shoal where Master Dayu is, he’ll explain it to you.”

2. Grandmother’s Zeal

Linji went to Master Dayu (the name means “Great Idiot”), who then asked him, “Where are you from?”

“From Master Huangbo.”

“What did Huangbo say?”

“Three times I asked for the very essence of the Dharma, and three times I was beaten. I don’t know whether I am at fault or not?”

Master Dayu said, “Huangbo is so zealous like a grandma, wanting you to break free! And

you come here asking who's at fault?"

Linji came to a great enlightenment. He said,

"So! There is nothing much in Huangbo's teaching!"

Dayu grabbed Linji and said, "You bed-wetting imp! You were just wondering who's at fault, and now you said there is nothing much in Huangbo's teaching. What is it that you see? Speak now! Immediately!"

Linji punched Dayu three times in the ribs.

Dayu pushed Linji aside and said, "Your Master is Huangbo; I have nothing to do with you."

Master Linji bid farewell to Dayu, and returned to Huangbo.

3. Talks Too Much!

Master Huangbo saw that Linji returned, and said, "This guy keeps coming and going, when will you ever be done?"

Master Linji said, "Because of your grandmotherly zeal, so all is done." And he stood in attendance by Huangbo.

Huangbo asked, "Where have you been?"

Linji said, "Following your kind guidance, I visited Master Dayu and now I have returned."

"What did Dayu say?"

Linji retold the encounter.

Huangbo said, "That ol' fella Dayu talks too much. If he comes I'll give him a good beating!"

Linji said, "Why bother to wait? The beating can be done now!" And he slapped the Master.

Huangbo said, "This lunatic is pulling the tiger's whiskers!"

Linji gave a shout.

Huangbo called the attendant, "Bring this lunatic to the Zen Hall."

True Man With No Rank

Master Linji said, "On this lump of red flesh is a True Man With No Rank, who often goes in and out of your face. Those of you unsure, take a look!"

A monk came out and asked, "What is the True Man With No Rank?"

Master Linji jumped down from his seat, grabbed the monk and said, “Speak! Speak!”

The monk tried to reply, and Linji pushed him aside and said, “What kind of a shit-stick is the True Man With No Rank!¹”

With that he returned to the abbot’s quarters.

True Understanding

The Master said, “Cultivators now just don’t get it; what is the problem? The problem is the lack of faith. If you don’t have enough faith in yourself, then you’ll be busily whirled around by everything, unsettled by all that is happening, and never be free. If you can rest that ever-seeking mind, then you’re no different from the Buddhas and patriarchs. Do you want to know the Buddhas and the patriarchs? It is this right here which is listening to the Dharma.

Lacking Nothing

Cultivators! As I see it, you’re no different from Shakyamuni. With all the things you can do, what do you lack? The six miraculous lights have never stopped. If you can see this, there is nothing to do all your life. (The six lights refer to the six senses: eyes, ears, ..., and mind.)

Pure Awareness

Your body, made of the four great elements, does not hear or understand Dharma. Your kidney, stomach, liver, and gallbladder do not hear or understand Dharma. Empty space does not hear or understand Dharma. What is it that hears and understands Dharma? It is right here, distinct, clear, formless, this pure awareness, it is this that can hear and understand Dharma. If you see this, then you’re no different from Buddhas and patriarchs. At all times, never let it be interrupted. Whatever you see, it is always there. ... Cultivators! The mind-Dharma has no form, it permeates all ten directions; at the eyes it is called vision, at the ears it is called hearing, at the nose it is called smell, at the mouth it can talk, at the hands it holds and catches, at the foot it walks and runs. It is one luminous essence, separated into six functions working together ... it’s all because your seeking mind never rests, so you get stuck in the old sages’ traps. (This means that the disciples get stuck in the words of the teaching without understanding the true meaning).

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¹ Shit-stick: literally, “Shit-wiping stick,” used as toilet paper. Another interpretation is “a lump of dry feces.”

That Which Can See

Cultivators! If you want to be Buddhas, do not chase after things. When thoughts arise, all the myriad things arise; when thoughts cease, all the myriad things cease. When there is no mind, all dharmas are in harmony. In samsara and in nirvana, there is no Buddha and no Dharma; nothing manifests and nothing is lost. Whatever exist are only words and expressions, they are for teaching children, medicine to cure diseases. Besides, words are not words themselves. It is this clear, sentient awareness, that which can see, hear, feel and know, which creates all the words and names.

Host and Guest

Master Linji often used shouts as a teaching device, and his disciples liked to follow the master's example. The Master said, "You all like to shout like I do. I ask you now: one person comes from the east side of the hall and meets another one from the west side. Both make a shout. Can you tell who is the host and who is the guest? How do you tell? If you cannot tell, then you're forbidden to shout like this ol' monk."

The Art of Shouting

The Master told the monks, "Sometimes the shout is like the sword of the Diamond King; sometimes the shout is like the crouching lion. Sometimes the shout is used to trap the fish in the water; sometimes the shout is not a shout. What do you make of it?" A monk tried to reply, and the Master shouted.

References and Further Readings

- (1) Original Chinese Sources:
- (2) "Zen's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings" by Andy Ferguson, 2000, Wisdom Publications. (*A good reference book of translated Chinese Zen records.*)
- (3) "The Zen Teaching of Huang Po—On the Transmission of Mind," John Blofeld, Grove Press, 1959. (*A quite reasonable and probably the only English translation.*)
- (4) Two translations of Linji's Record are: "The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi," Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, 1999, and "The Recorded Sayings of Linji," J. C. Cleary, in the collection, "Three Chan Classics", Numata Center, 1999.