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"Responding to Dynamic Emptiness: A Non-Dualistic Approach to Self in Zen Buddhism."
Course Module for Teaching the Zen View of Personhood in a Related Section Philosophy of Religion
Produced for NEH Grant Seminar "Philosophical Ideas and Artistic Pursuits in the Traditions of Asia and the West" 2008
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Overview:

Academic interest in eastern philosophical systems and religious traditions is no longer on the periphery of scholarly interest in the west. However, teachers in western society may have limited exposure to and knowledge of eastern thought scholarship because eastern philosophical themes seem so foreign to the western philosophical models derived from Greek philosophical traditions of which we have become accustomed. Thus, many instructors are left to the daunting task of unscrambling worldviews that are often quite different from their own, and then relating their findings to students in some coherent fashion.

Unfortunately, this unscrambling effort can lead both teacher and student into a common dismissal of eastern worldviews, labeling them as incoherent and superstitious. Such a dismissal is unfortunately common when Chan/Zen Buddhism¹ is presented to students in the West.

Often Buddhism is presented to students by simply presenting the life of the Buddha and the Four Noble Truths that unfold into the eight-fold path. Undoubtedly, this presentation is a very important part of introducing students to Buddhist thought. However, if these events and doctrines are not presented within a dynamic view of emptiness (*shunyata*), students will fail to understand the utterly responsive nature of the tradition itself. The idea of 'responsiveness' over any 'doctrine' is clearly represented by Chan/Zen Master Lin-chi's statement, "In my view, there are in fact no great number of principles to be grasped. If you want to use the thing, then use it. If you don't want to use it, then let it be."

Unfortunately, the oft-cited Zen instructions, "...Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice and if you get tired, then lie down," are typically presented to students as deeply mysterious, or more than mere instructions to conduct themselves properly in all situations, leading to a misunderstanding of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that inspired many of their own celebrated literary figures, for example the Beat Poets.

The goal of this instructional module is to present a fluid and informative account of *shunyata* in order that the doctrine of "no-self" or *anatman* can be properly articulated to students. It will be argued that this account should be used as the dynamic foundation for teaching and grasping Zen insight, at least on an intellectual level. The module is presented in three parts. First, Masao Abe's use of Wei-hsin's discourse will provide a paradigm for understanding the Zen perspective of 'no-self' that is indicative of the Buddhist doctrine of *shunyata*. Secondly, various readings of the *Lin-chi-lu* will serve as case studies for students to work out their understanding of the "responsiveness" that is demanded by the Zen view of 'no-self.' Finally, writer/director Kim Ki-duk's film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* will serve as a visual component to the material presented in the first two sections of the module.

I. Wei-hsin's Discourse: Emptiness as Suchness

* Instructor's should read Abe's chapter, "Zen is not a philosophy, but..."⁴

Masao Abe retold a discourse given by Chan master Ch'ing yuan Wei-hsin of the T'ang dynasty, noting that the discourse "provides a key by which we may approach Zen philosophy." It reads:

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, 'Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.'

After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a

good master, I said, 'Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters.' But now, having attained the abode of final rest [that is, Awakening], I say, 'Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters.'

Wei-hsin's discourse may seem irrational, especially when held to Western standards of logic and measured within the spectrum of the traditional ontological views of personhood. However, Wei-hsin's discourse is addressing one of the most ancient of philosophical inquiries. This is the inquiry into the nature of *being*, summed up in the question "Who am I?" Just as the Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was deeply concerned with *being*, so was the Indian philosopher, Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BCE). Regarding the latter, thirteenth century Zen master Dogen proclaimed, "To get disciplined in the way of the Buddha means nothing other than getting disciplined in properly dealing with your own I." ⁷

Abe uses Wei-hsin discourse to present a proper view of 'self' within the Zen tradition. He clarifies the first phrase of Wei-hsin's discourse, "Mountains are mountains, waters are waters," as one of affirmation and differentiation. That is to say, mountains are mountains (affirmation) and not waters (differentiation) and waters are waters (affirmation) and not mountains (differentiation). Together, the affirmation and differentiation testify to Wei-hsin's early propensity towards the ontological objectification of 'self' before he undertook the study of Zen. In this first phrase, Wei-hsin discriminates between "this and that," "here and there," and "I and you." Abe writes of this first understanding:

There is a duality of subject and object in this understanding. And in differentiating mountains, waters, and all the other things, which constitute our world, we also differentiate *ourselves* from *others*. Thus we say, "I am I, and you are you: I am not you, but I; you are not I, but you." Behind the understanding in which mountains are discriminated from waters lies the understanding in which self is discriminated from other. In short, the

distinction between mountains, waters, and any other phenomena in the objective world, and the distinction between self and other are inseparably connected. Herein, the 'I' is the basis of discrimination, placing itself as the centre of everything.⁹

In Wei-hsin's first understanding, the discriminating "I," the ego-self, lies at the center of all existential experience. This view is quite agreeable for those who hold a dualistic perspective of personhood. For example, the Cartesian model of personhood argues that there is an autonomous or independent "self" or "soul" that exists apart, or at least has the ability to separate, from the physical body. Within this perspective there exists a clear distinction between subjective 'self' and the objectified 'other,' and consequently the phrase, "I am not you, but I," holds true.

The question that should be asked of the first phrase is, "Who is it exactly who affirms mountains as mountains and differentiates mountains from waters?" In his initial understanding presented in the first phrase, Wei-hsin would certainly remark, "It is I; I affirm and differentiate." To illustrate the difficulties in such an understanding, an instructor could ask a student, "Who is it that is sitting here in class?" The student's most direct response would likely be "I am." But what if further clarification was sought by asking, "Who is that?" The answers would be numerous, but most likely fit the simple formula "I am x." They could say something like, "I am a student" or "I am a daughter." Both of these responses represent only a piece of the whole person responding to the inquiry. When pushed further, "Who is this daughter or student?" the student soon realizes the utter futility in locating one's true 'self' in this "objectified approach." The regression is infinite.

David Hume, the eighteenth-century philosopher of the west and champion of Materialism, illustrates this point beautifully. He writes,

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.¹⁰

For Hume it is clear that there is no substance that constitutes the grammatical subject in the statement, "I am cold" or "I am in pain." That is to say, there is no "self" beyond perceptions, because nothing else can be observed. Hume writes:

When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate, after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect nonentity.¹¹

It must be noted, however, this dialogue between the Materialist tradition of Hume and Zen can only be extended this far. Hume's ultimate response to the question "Who am I?" allows no room for what Masao Abe calls the "true Self" or what Zen master Lin-chi calls "this lone brightness without fixed shape or form..."

Although it is true that Zen offers no room for the view of an abiding self that exists independently from experience, this should not be read as an equivalent to the reductionism of the Materialistic tradition of the West. The point here is to illustrate the endless recession of the objectified "I" when one is repeatedly asked to reveal self objectively. This exercise suggests that we are unable to locate a permanently abiding 'self' that lies behind or beyond our perceptions. This is problematic for Zen thinkers who are, as Dogen wrote, "getting disciplined in properly dealing with your own I." Abe writes,

"The endless regression implied in the 'objectification approach' indicates the futility and inevitable collapse of this approach...no matter how many

times we may repeatedly ask ourselves, our true Self always stands 'behind'; it can never be found in 'front' of us. The true Self is not something attainable, but that which is unattainable.¹²

This collapse or elimination of subject-object duality is illustrated by the negation of the first phrase found in Wei-hsin's second phrase: "After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, 'Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters." Abe writes, "In this second stage there is a negation of the first stage of understanding and we realize that there is no differentiation, no objectification, no affirmation, no duality of subject and object. Here it must be said that everything is empty" 13

This initial realization of emptiness (*shunyata*) offers a kind of liberation from the isolation that is very present in the conceptualization of a permanent "I" that discriminates itself from everything else. According to Buddhism, any conception of an eternally abiding self that discriminates or objectifies the world through the subjective and private experience is fundamentally flawed.

It is important to note, the Buddhist view of personhood is articulated in the doctrine of *anatman* or non-self. This doctrine is a rejection of the *atman* that was first posited in the Upanishads of the Hindu tradition. *Atman* is that unchanging subtle essence or soul in individual persons that is identical to the unchanging *Brahman* (the ultimate reality). The Buddhist *anatman* is the rejection of this belief. *Anatman* is generated out of the view that the marks that constitute this existence are both impermanent (i.e. constantly in flux) and interdependent (see doctrine of *pratityasamutpada*).

Thus, as autumn moves to winter, and winter to spring, so life moves to death, and

death to life. The unique marks of suffering (*dukkha*) arise when we are ignorant to this totally interdependent flux. In ignorance, we establish ourselves as independent and permanent beings, and thus fail to see the absolute interdependence of all beings. This is the view present in Wei-hsin's first phrase in which the 'self' is understood as permanently and ontologically distinct from 'other.'

Wei-hsin's second phrase comes when, as quoted previously, "we realize that there is no differentiation, no objectification, no affirmation, no duality of subject and object. Here it must be said that everything is empty."

When this is existentially realized with our whole being, the ego-self disappears...then the objective world disappears as well. This means that the subject-object duality which underlies the first stage of understanding is now eliminated ¹⁴

The statement of negation, "Mountains are not mountains" is evidence of this elimination of ego-self. One could say with the second phrase, "ego-self is no-self." Masao Abe writes, "To realize that the true Self is really unattainable is to realize that the true Self is empty and nonexistent... Realization of no-self thus entails a kind of emancipation from the ego-self and liberation from the anxiety inherent in the ego-stucture." In this phrase, Wei-hsin realizes the true Self is unattainable.

Wei-hsin's second phrase is an important step to grasping Zen insight. However, the same pattern of objectification that is problematic in the first phrase is present in the second phrase.

Even in its 'no differentiation', the second stage implies a hidden form of differentiation – that is, the differentiation between 'differentiation' and 'no differentiation', ego-self and no-self – and thereby not completely free from distinction. Hence one is apt to objectify and become attached to no-self as something to be distinguished from ego-self. There remains an implicit, negative form of attachment latent in the 'detachment' realized in the second stage." ¹⁶

Before proceeding, a pedagogical note is needed here. From my experience, bringing students to an intellectual understanding of the first two phrases and their inherent problems is not difficult.

- 1. Utilizing the first phrase, the instructor can present the problems inherent in the objectification of self (i.e., the realization that the ego-self is unattainable).
- 2. The second phrase responds to this understanding by negating the objectifying ego-self, i.e. no-self.
- 3. However, the negation in the second phrase is not free from objectification. No-self is just as prone to attachment as the ego-self found in the first phrase.

Yet, if the responsive nature of Wei-hsin's final phrase fails to translate to students, then they are left with a view of Zen Buddhism that is essentially nihilistic. For true understanding, one must realize that the unattainable Self is the true Self.

After awakening Wei-hsin affirms, Mountains are *really* mountains, waters are *really* waters." This phrase presents a new form of differentiation that comes through the negation of the negation found in the second phrase. Masao Abe writes:

With this great affirmation of mountains and waters, we have a realization of the true Self. The true Self is realized only through the total negation of no-self, which is in turn the total negation of the ego-self....The total negation of total negation is necessary to attain the true Self as the great affirmation. One can objectify not only *something positive* but also *something negative*. One can conceptualize 'no-self' as well as 'ego-self'. To overcome all possible objectification and conceptualization in order to attain ultimate Reality and awaken to the true Self, the double negation of the 'objectification approach' is necessary.¹⁷

This "double negation" is in fact a great affirmation. The emptiness illustrated in the second phrase empties itself, "becoming non-emptiness, that is true Fullness" Personhood in the Zen tradition is not the static ego-self presented in the first phrase.

Neither is it the negative no-self found in the second phrase. Rather Zen Buddhism supports a narrative view of personhood: "the person represents the whole dynamic confluence of characters and actions in the world. Distinctions such as self and other, outside and inside, operate only as conventions within the story." The wonderful story of Nan Yueh Huai Jang's awakening illustrates this narrative view of self:

Nan Yueh Huai Jang who was later to become the successor to the Sixth

Patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China, the famous Hui Neng, came
to visit the latter. Quite abruptly Hui Neng asked him: 'What is
this thing that has come to me in this way?". This put the young Nan Yueh
completely at a loss for a reply. He left the master. And it took him
the problem. The answer...which Nan Yueh
presented to the master after
'Whatever I say in the form of *I am x* will miss the point. That exactly is
the real L'²⁰

Thus, the third phrase of Wei-hsin's discourse illustrates an emptiness that is beyond negation. Practicing Zen Buddhism is really the practice of responding to this narrative of emptiness with one's 'True Self.' Zen masters are constantly testing their student's understanding of this absolute emptiness (i.e. the emptiness that has emptied itself, which should be affirmed as pure 'suchness'). Of course, this does not come in the form of an objective test in which the pupil is expected to list various philosophical propositions in order to arrive at a correct answer. Rather, this is a test that requires a proper response. Any objectification of personhood, as ego-self or no-self, is rejected by the Zen Master.

The previous section demonstrated the difficulties in both the objectifying egoself and no-self through Wei-hsin's discourse. Rather than locating the True Self in the former or latter objectifying views of self, we should recognize the boundless nature of emptiness, realizing that the True Self is pure subjectivity. Any attempt at objectifying the "True-Man with no Rank," as Lin-chi calls it, leads to an attachment to permanence. More importantly, in the passages that follow, the emphasis is on one's conduct or response to the temporal horizon's of individual experiences within the dynamic narration of emptiness.

II. Responding to emptiness: Various Readings of the Lin-chi-lu

*Required Reading: Burton Watson's Preface and Translator's Introduction²¹

In this section, five passages of the *Lin-chi-lu* have been chosen for class reading. The first reading is simply a brief historical account of Zen Master Lin-chi's life and understanding. Each of the following four readings corresponds to one of the four parts of the text. Zen Master Lin-chi's sole effort was to bring his students to the threshold of awakening and then demand that they respond, IMMEDIATELY with their true nature! He is constantly admonishing his students to 'Speak! Speak!' or 'Look! Look!' Instructing his students:

If you don't have faith in yourself, then you'll be forever in a hurry trying to keep up with everything around you, you'll be twisted and turned by whatever environment you're in and you can never move freely. But if you can just stop this mind that goes rushing around moment-by-moment looking for something, then you'll be no different from the patriarchs and buddhas. Do you want to get to know the patriarchs and buddhas? They're none other than you, the people standing in front of me listening to this lecture on the Dharma!

In each passage, Lin-chi is either demanding his listeners to respond to dynamic emptiness that has emptied itself, i.e. pure suchness, without any objectification or dualistic thinking, or he is responding himself.

* Watson's notes have been included because of their important insights into the meaning of the text. The reader should quickly pick up on the constant themes of non-

dualism and responsiveness found within each reading. Below, I will suggest some key points of each passage and possible questions that the instructor may find useful to assess student understanding.

Reading 1:

Included for its historical reference, this passage outlines Lin-chi's spiritual journey. For the purpose of this module, it is important to point out the fact that Lin-chi was well learned in the various sutras and treatises of Buddhism. However, though his personal study had a deep impact on his understanding of Chan/Zen Buddhism, Lin-chi sought the true understanding that goes beyond words or letters.

In teaching this selection, the instructor would do well to emphasize the following passage:

studying and treatises.

Later, when he shaved his head and received full ordination in the precepts, he took up residence in the lecture halls, assiduously the *vinaya* and reading widely and diligently in the sutras

Suddenly he sighed and said, "These are mere medicines and expedients to save the world. They are not that doctrine that has been separately transmitted outside the scriptural teachings!

Question:

1. What is Lin-chi referring to when he states, "These are mere medicines and expedients to save the world."

Reading 2:

This narrative comes from the first part of the text, entitled, "Ascending the Hall." This division of the text, "consists of short narratives in which the master in shown "ascending

the hall," that is, taking the seat of honor in the lecture hall and addressing a group of monks and lay believers, or responding to questions from members of group."²²

Lin chi's statement, "If you come in a certain way, you'll just be losing track of yourself. And if you don't come in that way, you'll be tying yourself up without using a rope." illustrates the flawed nature of discriminative thought.

Question:

1. How could the inclusion of Shih-shih Shan-tao (see note 2) in the narrative suggest non-dualism and responsiveness?

Reading 3:

This narrative comes from the second part of the text, entitled, "Instructing the Group." This division of the text "is very similar in nature, being descriptions of sermons or addresses that Lin-chi delivered to the group of monks gathered under him for training and instruction."²³

In this section, Lin-chi continued to stress *shunyata* or absolute non-duality. His instruction was clear, if a person had a true understanding, "no matter what environment he [or she] may encounter, with its peculiarities and differences, he [or she] cannot be swayed or pulled awry." This is because he or she is not looking for anything outside, and thus constantly prepared to awaken to the absolute non-dual flux, in which everything is interdependent. Lin-chi said, "If he meets a buddha he preaches to the buddha, if he meets a patriarch he preaches to the patriarch, if he preaches to the patriarch, if he meets an arhat he preaches to the arhat, if he meets a hungry ghost he preaches to the hungry ghost."

Question:

I. This passage states, "Everything I am saying to you is for the moment only, medicine to cure the disease. Ultimately it has no true reality." How does this relate to Lin-chi's statement, in the first selected reading, "these are mere medicines and expedients to save the world. They are not that doctrine that has been separately transmitted outside the scriptural teachings!"

Reading 4:

This narrative comes from the third part of the text, entitled, "Testing and Rating." This division of the text, "Describes encounters or interviews among Lin-chi and his students or other persons in which the participants endeavor to test one another and rate each other's level of understanding."²⁵

Again, we see the demand for responding spontaneously to emptiness or *shunyata*. In the Zen tradition, Lo-p'u's shout is a common response to questions that test non-discriminatory thought. That is to say, Lo-p'u's shout was an attempt to display his nondiscriminatory understanding. However, when Lin-chi inquired into the intended receiver of the shout, Lo-p'u failed to respond correctly. This failure is not found in the words that came from his mouth, but rather in the response itself:

These old teachers complimented their students by criticism, blows even. When they praised, it usually meant belittling. This was the custom. They had a deep concern for their pupils but showed it in presence, not words. They gave questions for which the only answer was

one's whole being.²⁴

Ouestion:

1. How do you think Lo-p'u fared in his response to Lin-chi's question, "Was it

me you shouted at a moment ago?" Why? (Think back to Lo-P'u's initial rebuke of the Study Director)

Reading 5:

This narrative comes from fourth and final part of the text, entitled, "Record of Activities." This division of the text contains narratives pertaining to Lin-chi's various activities when he was a monk in training and when he was traveling about the country. ²⁵

Passages such as this one often give the impression that Zen, at its most elementary level, is rude. Antinomian labels on Zen are often generated out of such misinterpretations. To avoid such misguided labels (or any labels at all!) we should be reminded that Lin-chi was at the memorial tower for some reason. His harsh response to the Keeper should be measured by the question the Keeper asked. That is to say, Lin-chi refused to participate in any discriminatory thinking. By looking at a piece of section 56 we see a different response to ritual propriety:

The Master came to Huang-po's place in the middle of the summer session. There he saw Huang-po reading sutras. The Master said, "I thought you must be quite some person. But now I find you're just an old reverend who munches on black beans!" After staying a few days, the Master prepared to take leave. Huang-po said, "You broke the rules by coming in the summer. Now you're going to leave without finishing out the session?" The Master said, "I just came for a short time to pay my respects, Reverend." Huang-po struck him a blow and drove him out. After the Master had gone a few miles, he began to have doubts about the matter, so he went back and finished out the summer session.²⁶

Question:

1. Select a phrases from the previous four readings to support Lin-chi's actions demonstrated in this section.

III. Film component: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring

Many films are available that address various aspects of Buddhism--the life of the Buddha, various schools of Buddhist thought, or a Buddhist perspective. With respect to the material addressed in this module, I recommend showing students *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring.* Writer/director Kim Ki-duk has given us a Buddhist film that is aesthetically magnificent. Not only is it beautiful, but also the film's content can (and should) be used as a teaching companion to module. Impermanence, interdependence, and suffering act as characters in the plot of the movie.

Question:

1. What is the relationship between Lin-chi's remark, "Everything I am saying to you is for the moment only, medicine to cure the disease. Ultimately it has no true reality." and the Master's response to the sudden health in the girl?

After murdering his wife the student comes back to the monestary full of anger. The master has him carve a passage from the Prajnaparmita.

2. Read the following passage from the Heart Sutra of the Prajnaparmita.

<u>The Heart Sutra: The Dialectics of Emptiness</u>
Therefore, O Sariputra, in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose,

tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight organ element; There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so forth, until we come to: There is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and decay. There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. There is no cognition, no attainment and no nonattainment.

Why do you think the master wanted him to carve out such phrases? How do these phrases correspond to Wei-hsin's final understanding?

Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Zen is the Japanese term for the Mahayana School of Buddhism known as Chan in China, which came from the
Sanskrit term Dhyāna meaning meditation.
          <sup>2</sup> I-Hsuan, The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-chi lu, trans. Burton Watson (Columbia
University Press, 1999), 21.
          <sup>3</sup> Ibid. 31
4
          <sup>4</sup> Masao Abe, Zen and Western Thought. ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 3-
24.
          <sup>5</sup> Ibid. 4
          <sup>6</sup> Ibid 6
          <sup>7</sup> T.P. Kasulis, Zen Action Zen Person (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 88.
          <sup>8</sup> Masao Abe, Zen and Western Thought. ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 6.
          <sup>9</sup> Ibid 8
1
          <sup>10</sup> David Hume, "Personal Identity," in The Philosophical Quest: A Cross-Cultural Reader, ed. Gail M. Presbey,
Karsten J. Struhl, and Richard E. Olsen (McGraw Hill, 2000), 298.
          11 Ibid. 398-399
          <sup>12</sup> Masao Abe, Zen and Western Thought. ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 7.
          <sup>13</sup> Ibid. 8.
          <sup>14</sup> Ibid. 7-8.
          <sup>15</sup> Ibid. 9.
          <sup>16</sup> Ibid. 9.
          <sup>17</sup> Ibid. 9.
          <sup>18</sup> Ibid. 9.
          <sup>19</sup> Peter D. Hershock, "Person as narration: the dissolution of 'self' and 'other' in Ch'an Buddhism." <u>Philosophy East</u>
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          <sup>20</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy,
1977), 69.
          <sup>21</sup> I-Hsuan, The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-chi lu, trans. Burton Watson (Columbia
University Press, 1999), ix-xxxii.
          <sup>22</sup> Ibid. xxix.
          <sup>23</sup> Ibid. xxix.
          <sup>25</sup> Ibid. xxx.
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²⁴ Paul Reps, Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings (New York: Anchor Books), 85-86.

² I-Hsuan, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-chi lu*, trans. Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, 1999), xxx

²⁶ *Ibid*. 114.