

## CHAPTER 1

*TEXTUALITY:*  
*the “dependent origination” of Huang Po*

If things could be expressed like this with ink and paper, what would be the purpose of Zen?

Huang Po<sup>1</sup>

It is clear from Huang Po’s own words that he realized the necessity of books and teachings of various kinds for people less advanced.

John Blofeld<sup>2</sup>

When the early Buddhists proclaimed that impermanence is the fundamental condition of all things, they were certainly onto something. Almost nothing remains today of the ninth-century Zen Buddhist world of Huang Po. Nothing, that is, but texts. In the absence of everything else, it is the presence of texts that transmits this distant world of Zen to us. Although they don’t supply us with much from which to reconstruct the historical details of Huang Po’s life,<sup>3</sup> John Blofeld is certainly right when he says that these texts present us with a vivid picture of the Zen master. Huang Po was a powerful Zen master, the abbot of one of the largest and most important monasteries in South-central China where Zen came to prominence. He is placed in the genealogical charts of Zen ancestry as the student of the famous Zen master, Pai-chang Huai-hai, and as the teacher of the great Lin-chi I-hsuan (Rinzai). Huang Po is described as large in physical stature and overpowering in his presence and voice. He is presented as having evoked in his followers both fear and the experience of ecstatic freedom.

<sup>1</sup> Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 22    <sup>2</sup> Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 102

<sup>3</sup> We sample our ignorance at the outset when we discover that neither Huang Po’s birth nor his death can be accurately dated. Variant dates for his death are given in different texts as 849 and 857, but neither is verifiable in any sense. Several texts mention that he was born and raised in the Fukien area, but neither his family name nor given name, nor the name of his native village, are recorded. His official biography (*Sung Kao seng ch’uan*) tells us only that he entered monastic life at an early age in the monastery on Mount Huang Po in Fukien and was given the Buddhist name Hsi-yun.

Huang Po's ways of teaching seem surprisingly diverse. On the one hand, he lectured on abstruse philosophical topics like the nature of "mind," while on the other hand, he intimidated disciples with his strange behavior and uproarious laughter. Some sections of text show his impressive knowledge of the vast and complicated literature of Buddhist philosophy, while others present him speaking in riddles and scoffing at philosophical seriousness. Although the tension between variant images of the master was perplexing, John Blofeld could proceed with his translation fully confident that, because Huang Po was speaking "from some deep inner experience,"<sup>4</sup> whatever contradictions seemed to appear on the surface were either reconcilable at some deep level or simply unimportant.

Later in his life, however, Blofeld expressed some doubts about the purity of the Huang Po texts. What worried him was that these texts didn't come directly from the hand, and therefore, the mind, of Huang Po. Instead, they came to be through a mediator, P'ei-hsiu, who wrote what he thought Huang Po thought. So the next time Blofeld chose a Zen text to translate, he picked one that seemed to be authored directly and without mediation, "whereas what remains to us of the teachings of Huang Po and others consists only of what their disciples chose to record."<sup>5</sup> Blofeld's concern here is quintessentially modern; it expresses the scientific concern for accuracy and the parallel romantic concern for authenticity and originality. If Huang Po's Zen is our interest, we want it direct from the source – no intermediaries. This is not what we get, however. In order to attain some clarity about what these texts are and, therefore, what we are doing when we are reading Zen, we will need to consider the origins and history of the Huang Po literature.

Had John Blofeld any idea what scientific historiography would soon discover about the Huang Po texts, he would never have entertained the idea of translating them. His worst fears have come true. Not only are these texts not directly from the mind of Huang Po, but they have passed through more mediations than anyone can count. Blofeld's own mediation ("My rendering is, to a small extent, interpretive"<sup>6</sup>) was just the latest of thousands that occurred before the text came to him.

<sup>4</sup> Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 33. Blofeld obviously didn't consider this too serious a problem, however, since he could say in the same Preface that his Huang Po translation "was even then affording some people insight into the marvelous workings of an enlightened mind" (pp. 14–15).

<sup>6</sup> Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 17.

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One fruitful way to understand the status of these texts entails calling upon the seminal Buddhist concept of “dependent origination.” As Buddhists in many eras have known, this idea is useful to explain *how* it is that things are impermanent, and how they come to be the particular things that they are. According to this traditional Buddhist theory, all things, including texts, are always changing because they depend, at the moment of their origin and at all times, on other things which are themselves changing. All things come to be exactly what they are at any given moment not because it is their own inherent nature to do so, but because other things influence them, shape them, and make them what they are. To understand what the Huang Po texts are – their very essence – we need to trace in some detail just some of the factors that have brought them to be what they are today. Blofeld’s doubt about the purity of these texts turns out to be more appropriate than he could have imagined. If we work hard however, to understand the “lack of true self” that we discover in these texts through the Buddhist concept of “dependent origination,” we will be able to get over our disappointment about the status of these texts and discover something extremely important about the processes of transmission.

Through what mediation do we receive the Zen teachings of Huang Po? One place to begin would be to imagine just some of the ways in which the words and thoughts spoken by Huang Po – the supposed origin of these texts – would themselves have “originated dependent” upon a whole network of prior factors. Although we can concede, with Blofeld, that “Huang Po spoke from some deep inner experience,”<sup>7</sup> we can also acknowledge the multiple ways in which that experience has been shaped by other factors: his teachers, the ideas and texts of Buddhism, his parents, his historical setting, and so on. Huang Po was not just an independent and isolated entity; he stood within a particular lineage, within the Buddhist tradition, within the resources available to him through the Chinese language and culture of his time.

In the extensive footnotes to Iriya Yoshitaka’s modern Japanese translation of Huang Po,<sup>8</sup> we get a sense of just how widespread the “inter-textuality” of Huang Po’s text and mind was. His language is rarely just *his* language. So familiar with the corpus of Chinese Buddhist texts is Iriya that no paragraph goes by without his noticing familiar language, language taken, either consciously or unconsciously, from other texts and other speakers and added to Huang Po’s. Sometimes the Huang Po texts simply quote sutras and other texts to substantiate a point. At other

<sup>7</sup> Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 8.    <sup>8</sup> Iriya, *Denshin Hoyo*.

times, however, they just borrow language and ideas without citation and acknowledgment. Were Huang Po a modern author, we would be concerned about plagiarism charges. Medieval Chinese Buddhists, however, were not modern individualists; they assumed that borrowing certified ideas and phrases, and being influenced by them, was exactly what one ought to do. The use of prior texts is so prevalent in the Huang Po literature that it seems to be composed essentially of other writing, now grafted together and rewoven into a new form and directed at new purposes. For the modern historical philologist, these texts are a nightmare – or a dream come true – hinting at a never-ending task of tracing antecedent sources. And if dependent origination is, as the early Buddhists claimed, a truth about all things, then this task will indeed be endless, even for the computers that are now being trained for the job.

All of this is just to say that, wherever we begin our process of tracing the origins and history of the Huang Po texts, it will not be a true origin; there will always be more “dependencies,” more background, to uncover. If even the enlightened mind of Huang Po, where it all may have seemed to begin, is itself a product of innumerable coalescing factors, then our starting there in the lecture hall of Huang Po monastery is just an arbitrary point of selection. Nevertheless, this is where we begin.

So, once again, through whose mediation do we receive *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*? Blofeld knew that the answer to this was through P'ei-hsiu, the lay Buddhist devotee of Huang Po, who explains in his Preface to the literature how it came to be that he is the real author. Knowing who P'ei-hsiu was will help us understand what he wrote and why.<sup>9</sup> In 842, P'ei-hsiu, the newly appointed Governor of the Hung-chou area,<sup>10</sup> met Huang Po, who at that time had a strong local reputation as one of the leading

<sup>9</sup> P'ei-hsiu (797–860) was born into a well-known and politically important family in Hunan. He, like his brothers, passed the Imperial civil service exam at the highest level (*chin-shih*) and served in a series of official posts until being elevated to the position of Prime Minister of China in 853. He had the finest education available, and was in consultation throughout his life with China's most famous philosophers. Although a master of the Confucian classics for political purposes, P'ei seems to have turned more and more toward Buddhist thought as he grew older. In the middle of his career he became a student of the Hua-yen and Zen scholar/master Tsung-mi. He was also associated with the Hua-yen scholar Cheng-kuan and, later in his life, with Wei-shan Ling-yu, a well-known Zen master in Hunan and contemporary of Huang Po. His biographies tell of his immersion in the world of Buddhist texts, sometimes enclosing and isolating himself for extended periods of study. His calligraphy is regarded as among the finest of his era. P'ei-hsiu's official biographies are found in *Chiu Tang-shu* (177) and *Hsin Tang-shu* (182). See Broughton, *Kuei-Feng Tsung-mi*, and Gregory, *Tsung-mi*, for details about his association with Tsung-mi.

<sup>10</sup> This was the area in South-central China settled two generations earlier by the famous Zen master Ma-tsu, and, by the mid ninth century, was spotted with numerous newly opened temples and monasteries of the new, avant-garde Zen tradition.

figures in the newly emerging – avant-garde – form of Buddhism, Zen. Very shortly thereafter, P’ei-hsiu became a lay disciple of Huang Po, and, as a wealthy and powerful figure, ordered a monastery built for Huang Po off in the rural mountains, several days’ walk west of the capital of Hung-chou.<sup>11</sup> It was named Mount Huang Po after the mountain temple in Fukien where the Zen master first entered the Buddhist order, and it is after this mountain that our protagonist came to be named Huang Po.<sup>12</sup> In 845 a massive government suppression of Buddhism was ordered by Emperor Wu-tsung, deposing and sending into exile the thousands of monks resident in numerous monasteries like Huang Po. None of the accounts of Huang Po’s life discuss his whereabouts during this period. A biographical note on one of his students, however, mentions that, at the end of the suppression, P’ei-hsiu invited Huang Po to come out of the mountains and to serve as his teacher where he was then posted, in the district of Wan-ling.<sup>13</sup> In his Preface to the Huang Po texts, P’ei describes how “day and night” he received the teachings from Huang Po with eagerness and exactitude: “After leaving him [Huang Po], I recorded what I had learnt and, though able to set down only about a fifth of it, I esteem it as a direct transmission of the Doctrine.”<sup>14</sup> Then, sometime either shortly before or after Huang Po’s death,<sup>15</sup> P’ei was called to the capital to become Prime Minister. After a few years of service in that prestigious office, he retired, turning his attention entirely to Buddhist practice.

One practice that he initiated right away was the textual practice of reconstructing the teachings of Huang Po. From voluminous notes that

<sup>11</sup> Recently, Japanese Buddhist scholars, searching this area for traces of the early Zen tradition, located the monastery site of Mount Huang Po. Shortly after this “rediscovery,” I made my way to this rural area in search of Huang Po. According to locals, the monastery had functioned, although at significantly reduced levels, all the way into the mid twentieth century. It was used by Maoist revolutionaries as a base camp during and following the “long march.” The monastery itself was destroyed during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, so that nothing remains of the original edifice but the monastery well. The building materials from the monastery were used to build new structures, including the commune store that now sits on the ancient temple site. Having undergone a “revolutionary” name change sometime in the fifties, local residents have now renamed the community the “Huang Po commune.” They now seek “foreign investment money” to rebuild the edifice into a functioning Buddhist monastery and, not insignificantly, into a tourist attraction for wealthy Japanese travelers on pilgrimage to the ancient “holy land” of Zen. Impermanence indeed!

<sup>12</sup> This Fukien temple, rather than the Kiangsi temple featured in our story, is the place of origin for the Obaku or Huang Po sect of Zen Buddhism in Japan, which traces its lineage to the Fukien area in the Ming Dynasty. <sup>13</sup> *Sung kao-seng ch’uan*, T. 50, p. 817c.

<sup>14</sup> T. 48, p. 379c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> An event which is not precisely datable. The revival of interest in the ancient site of Mount Huang Po has made it possible to locate a grave marker for Huang Po Hsi-yun in the hills near the old monastery site, along with grave markers for hundreds of other important monks and subsequent abbots of the monastery over the last millennium.

he claimed to have written following two intensive sessions with Huang Po, he did his best to reproduce the “essential teachings on the transmission of mind.”<sup>16</sup> Now, let’s consider some possible effects of the fact that the Huang Po texts “originated dependent” upon the mind and notes of P’ei-hsiu.<sup>17</sup> First, without P’ei as medium, there may never have been a text of Huang Po’s teaching. Or, even if there was, P’ei is clearly a condition without which *this* text would have never existed. Second, let us consider that one form that P’ei’s mediation may have taken was the systematization and rationalization of what may have been less systematic and rational in the spoken original. Why should we postulate this? Several reasons. Written versions of oral discourse are frequently and naturally brought into sharper focus when they appear as text. We don’t notice our rambling when we speak; but when we see a written transcription we are often appalled at our own rhetorical incoherence. P’ei was offering Huang Po to the world; most importantly, to his world of highly educated Chinese scholars. No doubt Huang Po’s best and most sophisticated foot was placed forward. Another reason might be that P’ei himself was trained to be a systematic Buddhist philosopher by his earlier and equally famous teacher, Tsung-mi. By the time P’ei would have met Huang Po, he was already himself a Buddhist philosopher in his own right. What he learned from Huang Po would have been added to the system already organized in his mind. Given their prior training, P’ei-hsiu’s ears would have heard Huang Po “systematically.” This would be true even though one of the most important things P’ei-hsiu would have learned from Huang Po would have been how to dislodge and disrupt mental systems, how to free the mind from rational structure by seeing its inadequacy and emptiness. We can see P’ei-hsiu’s eagerness to teach in his Preface. There, before we even get to Huang Po, P’ei can be found offering his own teachings on the nature of mind. He had something he needed to teach, regardless of where he had gotten it.

A third effect of P’ei Hsiu’s transmission surfaces when we consider the character of the language through which Huang Po comes to the reader of Zen. Whose is it? P’ei-hsiu was a highly educated, highly polished member of the wealthy *literati* class. Huang Po was a rising star in

<sup>16</sup> One of the titles later given to the text.

<sup>17</sup> A lot has been thought and written recently about what occurs to spoken discourse when it makes its way into textual form, and about the differences between speech and writing. In *Chan Insights and Oversights*, Bernard Faure reflects on the bearing this recent literature might have on the medieval Zen tradition. The sources he draws upon in doing so – Derrida, LaCapra, Ong, and Ricoeur – are the best places to look for ways to understand the orality/textuality relation.

a newly emerging rural Buddhist movement that mocked cultural polish and that purposefully employed the most shocking slang of the day. In whose rhetoric is Huang Po’s “transmission of mind” made? “Both” would be a good guess. P’ei-hsiu would not have become Huang Po’s disciple unless he was attracted to the form and content of his teachings. He must have liked the way Huang Po spoke, however shocking it may have been to his urbane disposition. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine the Prime Minister writing that way himself, particularly when he knew that his highly educated friends might end up reading it. Indeed, an analysis of the form of writing does show both tendencies. Much of the text is written in a polished, literate style. But even these sections occasionally burst into colloquialisms. Other sections (to which we will return later) show no *literati* polish, featuring their slang in both form and content.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, and finally, let us consider how the fate of the text – what ended up happening to it – would have “originated dependent” upon the enormous prestige of P’ei-hsiu. P’ei was no ordinary lay disciple. In fact, a better advocate of Huang Po’s Zen could not have been found. It was P’ei-hsiu’s fame and legitimacy, when placed in the service of Huang Po, that would have brought the Zen master to national attention. P’ei’s advocacy would have deeply affected who would have sought this text and in what numbers. In the long run, of course, Huang Po’s fame would outrun P’ei-hsiu’s. Blofeld had no interest in transmitting P’ei-hsiu to the west; he wanted the great Huang Po. The question still remains, however: who did he get?

It is only because Blofeld thought that the story of the text’s origins ended here that he was, initially at least, satisfied. The truth is, however, that this is just one of many beginnings. What happened to the text after P’ei-hsiu wrote it? “I gave the manuscript to the monks T’ai Chou and

<sup>18</sup> To get a glimpse of how significant these last two factors might have been, compare the images of Huang Po that we receive from two distinct sources, P’ei-hsiu and Lin-chi. Huang Po would have taken the young monk, Lin-chi I-hsuan, into his “Great Peace Temple” (*T’a-an ssu*) in the capital city of Hung-chou province several years before meeting P’ei-hsiu, but the *Lin-chi lu*, or *Record of Rinzai*, is a text that comes to us from a later period than P’ei-hsiu’s. P’ei-hsiu, the wealthy, influential scholar-official, projects a Huang Po well-versed in Buddhist doctrine and texts, articulate and convincing in his sermons before throngs of respectful listeners. Lin-chi, famed for his unconventional style of Zen, projects Huang Po as overpowering in his ridicule of unenlightened speech and action, and unconcerned with the intricacies of traditional doctrine. Perhaps these accounts differ because Zen monks (like Lin-chi) differ from scholar-officials (like P’ei-hsiu) or because Sung dynasty images of greatness differ from those of the T’ang. Or perhaps they can be reconciled, as Yanagida suggests (in Iriya, *Denshin Hoyō*), in one complex individual. The point here, however, is that perspective shapes who and what is seen, and that this is a vital dimension of the fate of these texts.

Fa Chien, requesting them to return to the Kuang T'ang Monastery on the old mountain and to ask the elder monks there how far it agrees with what they themselves used frequently to hear in the past."<sup>19</sup> How far might it have agreed? No sane monk would have risked saying that it was just plain wrong, no matter what he thought. After all, this was the manuscript of the former Prime Minister! In such circles, caution is wisdom. Furthermore, P'ei-hsiu's continued attention to their master would have been considered a great opportunity. On the other hand, P'ei-hsiu did ask to be corrected, at least implicitly. He didn't want to misrepresent his revered teacher; therefore, he called for editorial assistance from those who had heard Huang Po many more times than he had. No one now knows what corrections or deletions were made.

There is strong evidence, however, that substantial additions were made. This can be seen from a "form-critical" analysis of the text. Some passages are written in a different style and presuppose an entirely different point of view. That point of view is clearly monastic, coming from the monks at Mount Huang Po to whom the manuscript was given. What did they add? Yanagida Seizan thinks that many of the elder monks would have had in their possession "private notes" compiled over many years of encounter with the abbot Huang Po, and that the arrival of P'ei-hsiu's manuscript would have enticed them to bring these forth so that they could be used to check P'ei's version of the teachings.<sup>20</sup> This makes sense. It also fits nicely with our understanding of the overall genre of Zen literature within which the Huang Po texts have been placed.<sup>21</sup>

The "recorded sayings" genre of Zen literature is at the very center of the emergence of this sect of Buddhism. The sheer fact that such literature was ever written tells us a lot about Zen. As we will see in the next chapter, Zen masters were frequently, almost stereotypically, critical of texts and textual practices. They didn't want their students focusing on sutra study, and they didn't want them writing down or even memorizing Zen phrases.<sup>22</sup> For example, the *Lin-chi lu* harshly criticizes students who "revere the words of some decrepit old man as being the profound truth writing them down in a big notebook, which they then wrap up in

<sup>19</sup> T. 48, p. 379c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 28. <sup>20</sup> Yanagida in Iriya, *Denshin Hoyo*, p. 172.

<sup>21</sup> See Yanagida, "The Recorded Sayings Texts."

<sup>22</sup> P'ei-hsiu was certainly aware of the ambiguity of his writing practice. One story in the texts shows Huang Po mocking P'ei for trying to express "Zen" in poetry. Also, P'ei says in his Preface, as any pious Zen Buddhist would do before publishing: "At first I was diffident about publishing what I had written. But now fearing that these vital and penetrating teachings will be lost to future generations, I have done so" (T. 48, p. 379c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 28).



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numerous covers and not let anyone else see.”<sup>23</sup> Without seeming to notice the irony, the Ma-tsu “recorded saying” text says that the “sayings of Ma-tsu written down by people who cherished facts” do not really capture the spirit of the real Ma-tsu.<sup>24</sup> This, in any case, was the widespread attitude toward texts. In view of this harsh criticism, we can understand why this tended to be done secretly. But why was it done at all? Yanagida explains the process like this:

The greater the number of disciples that surrounded a great teacher became, the smaller each student’s opportunities for individual instruction. Hence moments of direct contact with the teacher became prized experiences for the disciples involved, some of whom soon began making secret notes of the events. Eventually certain monks prone to such activity started making anthologies of the teacher’s words and actions based on what they heard from other students in addition to their own experience. This was a perfectly natural development.<sup>25</sup>

Why should we think that this was a “perfectly natural development?” Primarily because, in spite of Zen rhetoric on the matter, and in spite of our own modern romantic and utilitarian views of language, the link between what the Zen master said and his enlightened mind was assumed to be very close.<sup>26</sup> When Huang Po spoke, everyone in the monastery listened. Nor was listening enough. Huang Po’s utterances literally evoked memorization, mental repetition, and reflection. These were enlightened words, words which bear repeating over and over in one’s own mind. In order to do that, and to get it right, what better way than to write them down, secretly perhaps, so that the mind is relieved of the burden of continual memorization, and so that accuracy and authenticity are guaranteed? Freed from the work of just keeping the saying straight in one’s mind, one could focus on the saying itself in contemplation and meditation.

Very likely such secret collections of sayings existed on Mount Huang Po and very likely they emerged, perhaps with a smirk of embarrassment and pride, when P’ei-hsiu’s manuscript arrived for verification.<sup>27</sup> When someone’s saying collection contained something important which was missing from P’ei-hsiu’s version, an addition might have been made. The manuscript must have grown; how much, no one knows.

<sup>23</sup> See Yanagida, “The Recorded Sayings Texts,” p. 188.

<sup>24</sup> Pas, *The Recorded Sayings of Ma-tsu*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Yanagida, “The Recorded Sayings Texts,” p. 187.

<sup>26</sup> This is one of my topics in chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>27</sup> One early text, the *Chodang Chip*, refers to “notes” about Huang Po which were in circulation at the time of its writing in the mid to late tenth century. See Iriya, *Denshin Hoyo*, p. 172.

Which sayings would have been jotted down over the years, waiting there in reserve to be included in the “recorded sayings” texts? Certainly not everything Huang Po said would have been recorded. Some things must have seemed too pedestrian, too ordinary to qualify – things already known or not worth remembering. Sayings which met with awe and enthusiasm would have stuck in the mind most forcefully – whatever really seemed to strike home.<sup>28</sup> Most worth recording might have been sayings that stood at the very edge of understanding, those that, with just a little reflection, might open great reserves of insight. Those that pushed too far beyond the graspable might have been too hard to remember, unless, of course, they were so strange, so Zen-like, as to capture the imagination. Sayings noted for their extravagance, for their irregular and unusual qualities, are commonly found in these collections. Some sayings were just so far out of context and out of the ordinary that they became focal points of meditation. A few of these made it all the way into later *koan* collections, puzzles for subsequent generations of minds.

Consider the following enigmatic event on Mount Huang Po: “One day the master entered the hall. When the monks were all assembled, he lifted his staff as if to hit and drive them away. As they were leaving he called to them and when they turned, he said: ‘The crescent is like a bent bow, very little rain but only strong winds.’”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, like us, no one had the slightest idea what Huang Po was talking about. Or perhaps there were clues, present only in that immediate context or decipherable only to an exclusive few. Either way, this was a memorable event, one well worth writing down to see what it might yield upon more thorough meditation.

Here we see two kinds of editorial gatekeeping. Not only did sayings have to make it past the editors who formed and reformed the collections. First, they had to survive the mechanisms of censorship inherent in human interpretation – someone had to notice, remember, write, and preserve the saying in the first place. Transmission, both oral and written, presupposes more forgetting than it does remembering. But we can imagine the excitement generated by the arrival of P’ei-hsiu’s manuscript version of their master’s teaching on Mount Huang Po. If the secret wasn’t out already, this would have been the occasion for confession –

<sup>28</sup> Consider Ma-tsu’s now famous saying: “Do not remember my words!” (Pas, *The Recorded Sayings of Ma-tsu*, p. 39) It is hard to imagine a more memorable saying, nor one more difficult to put into practice. In attempting to carry it out, you would be violating it.

<sup>29</sup> *Ku-tsun yu-lu*, Lu K’uan Yu, *Ch’an and Zen Teachings*, p. 125.