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ADVAITA ON ZEN
COMMENTS ON HUANG PO

The Chün Chou Record of Huang Po

PREFACE

The Chün Chou Record is a short diary written by P'ei Hsiu detailing the talks he heard of the great Zen Master Hsi Yün, sometime around 850CE in the city of Chün Chou, China. Hsi Yün lived as a hermit for many years on Mount Huang Po, and became known posthumously by that name alone. He is regarded as one of the great masters of the southern branch of the Zen sect of Buddhism, which taught the doctrine of non-duality, or 'sudden enlightenment'.

Just as English is recognisably the same language whether spoken in America, England, or India, the various teachings of non-duality, whether from Lao Tzu, Bankei, or Ashtavakra, all point to the same non-conceptual Truth. Consider the following, "The existence of things as separate entities or not as separate entities are both dualistic concepts... a man drinking water knows well enough if it is cold or warm." This quotation of Huang Po (Wan Chi Record, 50) could easily have been written by Ramesh S. Balsekar, the modern Indian Advaita Master. In the following pages, Ramesh brings home this point in his commentaries on the Chün Chou Record. He begins each section by paraphrasing the original wording of Huang Po's talks, and then goes on to elucidate its meaning in the conceptual framework of Advaita Vedanta.

A few reference points to differences in the wording of some key concepts may be helpful: Zen uses the word 'Mind' to refer to what Advaita calls either 'Consciousness'



or 'Impersonal Awareness', and uses 'mind' for what Advaita would call the personal consciousness, or ego (which in the ordinary person is based on the sense of personal doership and the thinking mind). Where Huang Po says, "When body and mind achieve spontaneity, the Way is reached, and Mind is understood" (chpt. 29), Advaita might say, "In the absence of the sense of personal doership, all actions are seen to be spontaneously arising appearances in Consciousness, Awareness-in-motion, which is all there is." And, when Huang Po uses the word 'Buddha', as in, "The Ever-Existent Buddha is not a Buddha of form or attachment" (chpt. 2), he is not referring to a man who lived in India 2500 years ago. Similarly, Ramesh does not mean a very old man with a white beard passing judgement on sinners when he uses the word 'God'. They are both referring to the Source – Eternity – pure Subjectivity devoid of any objectivity, which is what we truly Are.

INTRODUCTION

BY RAMESH BALSEKAR

In the teachings of the Zen Masters can surely be seen the brilliant exposition of some valid inner realisation of the basic Truth, not unlike the exposition of the same basic Truth in Advaita, by masters like Adi Shankaracharya and the sage Jnaneshwar. Indeed, there is the theory that Bodhidharma arrived in China bringing with him a doctrine of great antiquity from India.

Huang Po is regarded by many as the founder of the great Lin Chi (Rinzai) Sect which still continues in China and flourishes widely in Japan. Huang Po is generally known in Japan as Obaku.

Zen followers are not content to pursue Enlightenment through eons of varied rebirths, inevitably burdened with pain and ignorance, approaching with infinite slowness the supreme experience which Christian mystics have described as 'union with the Godhead'. They believe in the possibility of the happening of full Enlightenment through going beyond conceptual thinking and grasping the Intuitive Understanding.

This book has been broadly based on *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, translated by John Blofeld in 1958.

1. The Master said, "All sentient beings, including the Buddhas, are in reality nothing but the One Mind: It is all that exists. This Mind is without beginning and is indestructible. It has neither form nor colour, and transcends all attributes and comparisons. It is That which exists before you, the boundless void that cannot be measured; start thinking about it and you fall into error.

The sentient beings, attached to form, seek externally for Buddhahood, and are not aware that whatever they do for a full eon, they will be frustrated. They do not understand that if only they stop their conceptualising and worrying, they will realise that the One Mind is the Buddha and the Buddha is all living beings. This One Mind is not greater in the Buddha and smaller in the ordinary man."



According to Advaita:

- a) I dream the universe, and all that is dreamt is 'I' – I who am but not as a 'me'; you perceive the universe, but you ARE only as 'I' and not as any 'you'.
- b) I alone can look, but I do not see what is seen by a 'me'; I alone can speak, but I do not say what is said by a 'me'; I alone function, but I do not do what is done by a 'me'.
I AM, but there is no 'me' or 'you' or 'him' or 'her'.
- c) I am the seeing of all that is seen; the hearing of all that is heard; the knowing of all that is known or can be known; I am the Awareness of all that is aware, the conceiving of all that can be conceived and, therefore, I cannot be conceived.
'I' can only be 'conceived' as AWARENESS, unaware of being aware.

2. You are the Buddha-Mind, fundamentally complete in all respects; it is futile to supplement that perfection by any meaningless practices like performing the six paramitas (charity, morality, patience under affliction, zealous application, right control of mind, and the application of the highest wisdom), and many similar practices, or gaining merits as countless as the sands of the Ganga. You may perform them whenever you like performing them, but not under compulsion. Otherwise, your way of thinking is not compatible with the Way. To make use of your mind and think conceptually is to attach yourselves to the form and miss the substance. The ever-present Buddha is not a Buddha of form. Just awake to the One Mind, and there is nothing whatsoever to be attained.

The Buddha and all sentient beings are the One Mind and nothing else.



According to Advaita, what is at the root of bondage and unhappiness is the sense of personal doership, the notion of volition. The entire mechanism of daily living is based on the notion that volition is behind every act of the human being and that, therefore, he is 'responsible' for those acts. The fact of the matter, however, is that human beings do not 'act' but 'react' to an outside stimulus. Most of the time living, for most people, is conditioned by a series of reflexes based essentially on instinct, habit and even propaganda. The scope of deliberate, considered action is in actual life extremely limited, and yet almost every person firmly believes that he is the doer, and it is for this reason that the sage Ashtavakra refers to this notion of individual volition as the bite of the deadly serpent, the ego.

The only practice which can free man from the poison of personal doership is the abandonment of the identification

with a particular object as a separate entity with doership. Human beings may think that they live their lives, but in fact their lives are being lived as part of the total functioning of this entire manifestation. All events together constitute the functioning of the manifestation according to the inexorable chain of causation. It would be incredible to imagine that such functioning of Totality could leave any scope for individual volition except, of course, as part of that very functioning.

The only remedy for the snakebite of doership is the 'faith' that the human being exists not as an individual body-mind entity – a mere object – but as Noumenon*, the One Subject. Such faith brings about the sudden and spontaneous understanding that 'I' am the One Subject and the entire manifestation is My objective expression. 'I Am' the Universal Consciousness within which has spontaneously arisen the totality of the phenomenal manifestation, the functioning of which is what we call our daily living.

* Noumenon: A word widely used by the great philosopher Immanuel Kant to show the distinction between the invisible world of Reality (Noumenon) and the apparent world of sensible 'phenomena'.

3. The sun shines throughout the four corners of the world and illuminates the whole earth but the void does not gain in brilliance, nor does the void darken when the sun sets. The phenomena of light and dark are the basic duality of the manifestation, but the nature of the void remains unchanged.

If you look upon sentient beings as a foul, dark or a mortal-seeming appearance while you look upon the Buddha as a pure, bright, Enlightened being, such conceptual thinking, resulting from attachment to form, will keep you away from the Supreme Understanding. If you are not awake to the fact that there is only the One Mind and not a particle of anything else to get hold of, you will overlay Mind with more and more conceptual thinking which will make you seek the Buddha outside of yourself, and you will remain attached to forms, pious practices and similar things which will keep you away from the Supreme Understanding.



Advaita tells us that sudden enlightenment comes about only through an understanding which needs no effort of any kind. The basis of sudden enlightenment is the deep understanding that there cannot exist any individual as such, because all there is, is Consciousness, in which appears the totality of the manifestation, including the individual human beings.

Just as sunlight makes objects in a room perceivable but is not concerned with what happens to the objects, it is in Consciousness that all phenomenal objects appear, and all such objects are perceived and cognised by Consciousness through the sentient objects, but Consciousness is not involved in what happens to the objects.

The Witness cannot be the doer, and you are not a phenomenal object but Consciousness which merely witnesses the operations in the manifest world. With this

understanding, detachment from the wrong identification with the body as an individual doer of deeds can take place. The state of being disidentified from the body as the individual doer of deeds is the state of witnessing. And this state of detached witnessing is indeed the state of liberation from the bondage of doership.

What is needed is to remain relaxed in and as Consciousness. No rigorous practices and disciplines are needed. All that is needed for enlightenment *to occur* is a clear understanding of a dimension that is quite different from intellectual comprehension. Belief is different from faith. Intellectual comprehension brings about a belief in what is comprehended but an intuitive apprehension is based on faith. Belief is based on argumentation, logic, effort and conflict; intuitive apprehension – faith or apperception* – is based on a certain inescapable inevitability, a relaxed and total acceptance of ‘what-is’, that opens the ‘eye of the heart’ to apperceive the Truth.

* Apperception: Mind’s perception of itself. (Concise Oxford Dictionary)

A term that was coined by Leibniz in his *New Essays* (1696), widely used by Immanuel Kant and Terence Gray (Wei Wu Wei).

4. It is much better to revere the one who has had the Ultimate Understanding than to make offerings to all the Buddhas of the universe, because the Enlightened one has been rid of all conceptualisation.

The Absolute is neither subjective nor objective, has no particular location, is formless and, therefore, cannot vanish. What may be considered as the substance of the Absolute is inwardly motionless and outwardly like the void, without either obstructions or boundaries. Those who seek the goal through cognition, the many, hasten toward the Absolute, but dare not enter it for fear of being hurtled down the void, with nothing to hold on to. So they go up to the brink and retreat with their conceptualising.

Few are those who receive intuitive knowledge of the Way.



According to Advaita, it is only when the sense of Presence – I AM – arises on the original state of Unicity that Consciousness concurrently comes into movement and brings forth upon Itself the totality of manifestation. The movement of Consciousness also simultaneously brings about the concepts of knowledge (I AM, the sense of *impersonal* Presence) and ignorance (when the impersonal Presence becomes identified with each sentient being as a separate, volitional entity).

The unicity of the potential plenum – the I-Subject – gets dichotomised in the process of manifestation as subject and object – the ‘me’ and the ‘other’ – each object considering itself as the pseudo-subject-observer *vis-à-vis* all other observed objects. This itself is the conceptual bondage of the individual, and liberation consists in the realisation that our true nature has always been the Impersonal Consciousness and not the psychosomatic apparatus with which Consciousness has identified Itself (so that the functioning of manifestation,

as daily living, could take place through interhuman relationships).

When such a realisation happens – the metanoesis or *para-vritti* – the pseudo-subject ceases to be an object and becomes void by the superimposition of the opposites (subject-object), and through this void or nothingness, returns to the original I-Subject, the potential plenum. This total potentiality – the I-Subject – cannot offer Itself for comprehension because then it would be an object. The eye can see everything else, but the eye cannot see itself.

5. ‘Manjushri’ means the fundamental law of the Real and unbounded Void, ‘Samantabhadra’ means the inexhaustible activities beyond the sphere of form; ‘Avalokiteshwara’ represents boundless compassion, ‘Mahasthama’ the great wisdom, and ‘Vimalakirti’ the spotless name referring to the real nature of things.

There are the students of the Way who are not aware that all the qualities typified by the Bodhisattvas are inherent in human beings, and are not to be separated from the One Mind. They are not aware of this important fact and are either attached to appearances or seek for something objective outside their own minds, and have thus turned their backs on the Way.

As the Buddha has put it:

“If all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, with Indra and all the gods, walk across them, the sands of the Ganga do not rejoice; and if oxen, sheep, reptiles and insects tread upon them, the sands are not angered. For jewels and perfumes they have no longing, and for the stinking filth of manure and urine they have no loathing.”



The Advaitic concept of *Sat-Chit-Ananda* is an attempt to describe the indescribable. Presence cannot produce presence; manifestation cannot produce manifestation. Phenomena that can be sensorially perceived can be produced (can become present) only from the potential (absence) that is the Noumenon. But, the absence is not an absent ‘thing’ that is not perceivable sensorially, because in that sense it would be ‘not present’. The Noumenon, the Absolute Absence, is the source of all objectivity, which Advaita has called *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (existence-consciousness-peace) because people have, in the phenomenal sense, always felt the need of a positive approach to better comprehend the point.

The term 'noumenon' may be used either as the counterpart of the term 'phenomenon', or more accurately, to indicate the non-objective source of all cognition. The actual counterpart of 'phenomenon' can only be 'non-phenomenon'; the mutual negation of *both*, the absence of 'non-phenomenon', would be Noumenon.

Advaita has called Noumenon *Sat-Chit-Ananda* as a positive practical approach. Unfortunately, *Ananda* has usually been translated as 'bliss', but the more accurate term would be 'peace'. But, fundamentally, it must be clearly understood that Noumenon means the absence of both phenomena and non-phenomena.

In fact, the three attributes are not to be understood literally or separately. It is really necessary to apperceive the understanding behind the words. The totality of the three words must be understood as PEACE. 'Peace' does not mean positive joy or pleasure but the absolute abolition of suffering in both the positive and the negative sense. 'PEACE' is supposed to indicate both the absence of the presence of suffering and the absence of the absence of suffering; a norm of equilibrium that cannot be experienced relatively.

Being unmanifest, the Absolute Absence knows neither intellectuality nor affectivity, both being concerned with phenomenal presence. This absence, this void, known as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, would need some explanation:

Brightness, hardness and the gold itself all together mean 'gold'.

Whiteness, softness and fragrance together combine to make camphor. Just as the whiteness and the softness of camphor merge into the pervading fragrance, similarly, existence and Consciousness merge in the supreme, intense feeling of PEACE.

6. The One Mind is not the mind of conceptual thinking and is totally detached from form. It is for this reason that the Buddhas and sentient beings are not fundamentally different. If you could rid yourself of conceptual thinking, you would not need anything more. If, however, you are not able to rid yourself instantly of your conceptual thinking, you will never accomplish anything even if you strive for eon after eon; enmeshed in the usual practices of the Three Vehicles, you will never be able to attain Enlightenment.

There are those who, upon hearing the teaching, have been able to rid themselves of conceptual thinking in a flash; there are others who are able to do this after following through the Ten Beliefs, the Ten Stages, the Ten Activities, and the Ten Bestowals of Merit; yet others are able to achieve it after passing through the Ten Stages of a Bodhisattva's Progress. (The conceptualised *form* of a Buddha, to whom the unenlightened pray, is truly unreal inasmuch as he is regarded as an entity and, as such, is quite apart from the One Mind.)

Whether the transcendence of conceptual thinking happens by a longer or a shorter way, the result is a state of 'BEING' – there is no question of any pious practising and no action of realising.

The Ten Stages of a Bodhisattva's Progress merely entails eons of unnecessary suffering and toil.



In the Advaita tradition, the sage Ashtavakra tells his royal disciple:

“If you detach yourself from the identification with the ego as an individual doer, and remain relaxed in and as Impersonal Consciousness, you will, this very moment, be happy, at peace and free from bondage.”

This is the very core of the teaching, and can stun the seeker into a spiritual shock. The seeker immersed in a host

of practices and disciplines expects to have to do hard work for a long time to 'achieve' enlightenment.

The understanding which leads to sudden enlightenment comes about merely through a very, very deep ap-
perception, much deeper than an intellectual acceptance, which needs no effort of any kind. The basis of this very important concept is:

- a) 'You' are not the body-mind organism that is composed of the five elements; you are that Consciousness which has provided that inert body with the sentience that evokes the senses to function in relation to their objects. It is sentience which makes the psychosomatic apparatus work as a unit.
- b) 'You' are not the physical organism but Consciousness which works not as some entity in charge of the operations but merely as the Witness of the operations.
- c) The Witness cannot be the doer of any action. With this understanding, you can detach yourself from the wrong identification with the body, and then you will naturally assume your true position as the Witness of whatever happens through any body-mind organism as the functioning of Consciousness, and not the doing by any individual entity.
- d) Just as sunlight makes objects in a room perceivable but is not concerned with what happens to the objects themselves, it is in Consciousness that all phenomenal objects appear, and such objects are perceived and cognised by Consciousness through the sentient beings. But, Consciousness is not involved in what happens to the phenomenal objects, including human beings.
- e) The state of being disidentified with the body, as the doer of any deed, is the state of witnessing. And that, indeed, is the state of liberation which is sudden and immediate.

7. Building up the good and leaving off the evil both involve attachment to form. Those who do evil are supposed to undergo various incarnations unnecessarily, while those who, being attached to form, do good, subject themselves to trials and tribulations equally, all to no purpose. The goal, in either case, is to achieve Self-realisation by grasping the fundamental Dharma. This Dharma and Mind are not different. Mind in itself, is not mind; and yet it is not no-mind either, because no-mind implies something that exists. In other words, Mind is an arbitrary term for something that simply cannot be adequately expressed in words.

What is really needed is a mere silent, deep understanding *without words*, without any thinking and conceptualising. In other words, what is needed is the cutting off of words and the elimination of the movements of mind.

The Mind is the pure Buddha-Source inherent in sentient beings, both human beings and all wriggling beings. All the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas are of this One Substance and, in this sense, there is no difference between them. Differences arise only from unnecessary conceptualising and wrong-thinking that can only lead to all kinds of unnecessary karma.



Advaita clearly acknowledges the value of the 'word'. It is because of the word that sound assumes the dignity of meaning. It can indicate the nature of what is sensorially not perceptible and is, therefore, a mirror to the Unmanifest. The usual mirror enables only the one who has eyesight to see the reflection of his face, but the word has the power to enable even one without eyesight to see his real Self.

The word is born in the unique family of the Unmanifest, and it is the word that has given the name *ambar* to the sky, or to space. It is like the sun which brings into existence what otherwise would have remained unseen. The word

‘Unmanifest’ has been used with different interpretations in the traditional Advaita texts. Whether in the *Brahma Sutra* or the *Bhagavad Gita* the common factor is, of course, that the *word denotes something beyond sensorial perception*.

The Unmanifest becomes manifest only with the arising of Consciousness on the Absolute – ‘I AM’. But the fact remains that what is manifest does not have any independent existence. The phenomenal objects are merely reflections or illusions which owe such existence to *Maya* – thought, conceptualisation, or the ‘word’.

The Sanskrit word *ambar* means the ‘word’; the word holds space and, therefore, space (the sky) is also called *ambar*. It is only through conceptualisation that the medium of space has been created within which phenomenal objects can be perceived; and thus the concept of space and along with it the conceptual universe are ‘created’ as appearances in Consciousness. It is the word that has created both the concepts of the Absolute-Unmanifest and the relative-manifest.

The word, like the proverbial ‘flower in the sky’, is non-existent, but it produces fruit in the form of the manifested universe; there is nothing in the world that can be called ‘immeasurable’ when it can be measured by the word. Other than the Absolute which is pure Subjectivity, nothing else can really be said to exist. All things owe their existence to the word; a word is itself merely a concept but it is instrumental in creating all the conditioning that makes the individual accept something non-existent as existent.

So long as there is no realisation of the non-existence of the word, the individual continues to accept the conditioning conveyed by the word and also continues, as an object, to suffer all the experiences associated with living in this conceptual world.

It is the word which conveys to the world the dos and the don’ts which every religion seems to insist on. It is also the word that brings into existence the concepts of bondage and liberation.

There have been so many reformers, religious heads, prophets and philosophers, each with his own code of dos and don'ts for attaining self-transcendence, but nothing has changed in the world. People have been branded as heretics and unbelievers, and whipped and tortured, ironically not in anger but in sorrow, "for the good of their immortal souls!" Obviously, it is the word which has goaded people to such excesses, not only to maim and kill others, but also to suffer themselves and perish in their religious zeal.

Then there are the words 'bondage' and 'liberation'. It is the word which gives the message that one should treat the 'other' as oneself, and thereby at once creates bondage by announcing that there is the 'other'. In reality there is neither the 'one' nor the 'other'. This conditioning gets stronger and stronger as the word piles on more verbiage. The fact of the matter is that in the absence of consciousness, in deep sleep for example, Consciousness is subjective, impersonal. Each one of us is, in reality, 'I', the only Subject, without any object at all. As Subject, one just IS, here and now.

In the process of manifestation, the Impersonal Consciousness becomes identified with each phenomenal entity, which thereafter regards itself as the subject of all other objects. The ego is the illusory effect of such identification, necessary for the functioning of the manifestation as daily living, based on interpersonal relationships.