

[lionsroar.com](https://www.lionsroar.com)

The Practice of Wonderment

Guo Gu

13-16 minutes

When your life takes the shape of a question, says Guo Gu, then you have entered the practice of *huatou*.



“Bay of Sagami, Atami,” 1997. By Hiroshi Sugimoto. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery © Hiroshi

Sugimoto

You've probably heard this famous gong'an (Jpn., koan), based on an exchange between a monk and Chan master Zhaozhou:

The monk asked, "Does a dog have buddhanature?" Zhaozhou responded, "Wu [No]!"

It's a puzzling exchange. All beings have buddhanature, so why did Zhaozhou say no? Why would the monk even ask such a question? Where is my buddhanature? Why is it that I cannot manifest it?

The genius of the premodern Chan masters was in their realization that the existential wonderment underlying such questions could be leveraged as a method of practice.

That practice is called huatou.

The Meaning

There are two critical aspects of huatou practice. The first can be found in the meaning of the word itself. Huatou (pronounced: hua-tow) literally means the source (tou) of spoken words (hua). Most of us are so conditioned by words, and the stories we make with them, that seldom do we examine what lies beyond, or before, them. What is the source of spoken words? Why do words matter so much to us? Why do we let them define us? How is it that thoughts, feelings, and ideas emerge anyway? Meditators are all too familiar with the coming and going, rising and ceasing of wandering thoughts and feelings—the birth and death of each moment. But from where do thoughts come? To where do they recede? What is it?

Chan masters realized that this energy of questioning — or wonderment — was more valuable than constructed explanations or answers.

Huatou points to this source, this abyss of the unknown. Something unfathomable is present in us, and it cannot be described through words. The site of awakening is where all the roads of rumination and story-making are cut off. Any of the names for this—buddhanature, tathagatagarbha, sunyata, nirvana, anatman (no-self), and so on—are just dead words. What is that which lies before these notions? What is it? This is the meaning of huatou.

The other critical aspect of huatou practice is that it evokes a sense of not knowing or angst that mirrors the not knowing and angst we have toward the great question of birth and death. Like Shakyamuni Buddha's great wonderment and spiritual quest to resolve the anguish of birth and death, our own practice of huatou directly confronts this wonderment and quest for resolution—not through words, discursive reasoning, or ruminations, but by making the question itself the experiential center of our spiritual practice. In fact, all the arhats and lineage masters of the past resolved their fundamental existential investigation in this way. Chan masters realized that this energy of questioning—or wonderment—was more valuable than constructed explanations or answers. When this wonderment culminates and bursts, we are freed, liberated from birth and death.

The Genesis

In the Song dynasty (960–1279), Chan masters of all persuasions and lineages collected and commented on gong'ans, but it was

Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) who used *huatou*, or “critical phrase,” to concretize *gong’an*s into a poignantly concise method of practice. In actual meditation practice, the *huatou* is a question or phrase that is derived from the turning-point, punchline, or crux of the stories in the *gong’an* collections (such as *Wumenkuan*, the Gateless Barrier). Critical phrases may also arise naturally in life from happenstance that provides an insight.

Dahui widely advocated the *huatou* “What is Wu (No)?” derived from the famous *gong’an* concerning the dog. Zhaozhou’s “no” is not the opposite of “yes,” nor is it a denial of buddhanature in dogs. Practitioners cannot practice *huatou* with a mind of yes and no, existence or nonexistence, gain or loss, having or lacking. “Answers” cannot be accepted, because answers inevitably operate within the realm of words and ideas. Everything must be left behind. All one needs to do is simply bring forth this critical phrase with an earnest wish to know: “What is it? What is No?”

After Dahui, the *huatou* method became the dominant mode of Chan practice, irrespective of practitioners’ lineage affiliation. Many different phrases have been used, but the nature of practice is essentially the same.

The Practice and Importance of Wonderment

Dahui’s emphasis on the spirit of the question became a method unto itself. When using the *huatou* method, one must cultivate a decisive “sense of wonderment” (Chn., *yiqing*; Jpn., *gijo*). The key is to never rely on any intellectual understanding, personal experience, wit, reason, logic, or even any Buddhist teaching. Everything must be put down. Simply bring forth the sense of not

knowing with regard to the critical phrase until the sense of wonderment becomes so great that it shatters into awakening.

As the essence of the huatou method, this wonderment is the gateway to awakening and liberation. All huatous point back to this not knowing. Great wonderment is nonconceptual yet potent and all-consuming. Ordinary people do not generally feel this sort of wonderment because they are too occupied with words and ideas—all of which are just fabrications, derived from delusion. Even though there will be instances in life when we are inevitably confronted by the question of life and death, most people will try to insulate themselves from these situations or distract themselves with other activities to avoid facing this existential concern.

Consciously meditating on a huatou is the opposite. It intentionally aggravates our existential concern and brings this wonderment into clear focus, leading to an abiding sense of not knowing that eventually lodges into the depths of our psyche. When there is great and all-consuming wonderment with regard to life and death, there is great awakening; small wonderment, small awakening; no wonderment, no awakening.

There are different flavors and depth of wonderment. With small doses of curiosity, one may get a glimmer of “not knowing” in a mind free from wandering thoughts, but this condition may subside quickly. Intermediate degrees of wonderment will last longer, but the energy and depth will not be adequate to sustain momentum or growth. However, when one can generate an all-consuming great ball of wonderment, everything collapses into that wonderment. One becomes absorbed until there is nothing left but wonderment itself. As Chan master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238–1295) said, when this occurs, it is impossible to stop it; the

wonderment continues in its own accord. Eventually, a momentous bursting of the wonderment will follow. This sudden dropping away of self and world is awakening, where grasping vanishes. The world is new, fresh, clear—as it has always been, without self.

One may begin huatou practice by simply repeating the unanswerable question. For example, “What is No?” or “The myriad dharmas return to the one, but where does the one return to?” or simply, “What is it?” Mechanical repetition is of little help, so there must be an earnestness accompanying the asking of the critical phrase. When the flavor of wonderment kicks in, genuine investigation begins, and wandering thoughts will vanish. But still, the sense of wonderment may be inconsistent—sometimes present, other times not. Therefore, intensive retreats may be necessary, which provide occasions for practitioners to dive deeply in the wonderment while being supported by the community and the teacher. This is a precious opportunity. Under these conditions the wonderment may become all-consuming.

Gaofeng described the workings of the wonderment in an intensive retreat setting like this:

In this way, walking is just this ball of wonderment; sitting is just this ball of wonderment; putting on clothes and eating rice is just this ball of wonderment...the wonderment reaches a point where no efforts are wasted, and it is at this point that one gains power.... From morning to evening, from head to toe, the wonderment becomes a single pervasive, seamless piece. Shaken, it doesn't waver; nudged, it doesn't leave. Radiant and potent, it is always present. It is like a boat that flows with the currents, without a need for your hands [to guide the oars]. This is the occasion when the wonderment gains power.

—from *Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao's Discourse Record*

This gaining of power refers to awakening itself. In the midst of the unified, all-consuming wonderment, the body and mind are one; the questioning and wonderment are one; the environment and oneself are one. This state is a unique kind of samadhi, in which the questioning prevents one from falling into a quiescent, motionless state. Instead, the concentrated power of this unified wonderment leads headlong into the explosion of prajna, or wisdom of no-self. Some practitioners and teachers believe that awakening is simply the experience of oneness, an embodiment of the question. This is untrue and inadequate. Oneness is not awakening, because oneness must be shattered in order for genuine selfless wisdom to manifest.

Daily Life

The practice of the huatou method must not be limited to sitting. Many people believe that seated meditation is the way to practice buddhadharma. Certainly, meditation has its place in buddhadharma, but for huatou practice, seated meditation is only a foundation; it is the activities of daily life—walking, working, and navigating the ups and downs of human interactions—that bring huatou practice to life. Because huatou practice is organic, not formulaic at all, the sense of wonderment cultivated through this practice can be all-encompassing, not limited to motionless sitting. Dahui said:

If you can be clear at the juncture of responding to various conditions, then as time passes, immersed in practice, your practice will naturally be whole and seamless. What is “the

juncture of responding to various conditions”? It is the moment of joy and anger; the times when you discern the various affairs at work; when you socialize with colleagues or friends; when you spend time with your spouse; when your mind gives rise to good and bad; when you face challenges and encounter conditions—all of these are opportunities for awakening! You must remember: when worldly emotions arise, don’t use force to suppress them.

...Only bring forth what the monk asked Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have buddhanature?” Zhaozhou said, “No!” In that moment, worldly passions will dissipate in their own accord. Wordiness will only give rise to more words, which will always be misleading. Tens and thousands of explanations [within buddhadharma] just point to this. If suddenly you lose your life by this “No!” then you’ll realize that these explanations are only floating flowers in your vision.

—from *Chan Master Dahui Pujue’s Discourse Records*

Dharma practice cannot be like a hobby, doing it when you feel like it. Nor can it be an escape, doing it when things are not going well. Practice should be “whole and seamless.” This is particularly true for huatou, which is to be maintained amidst daily life. One also needs an experienced, qualified teacher who has the skillful means to work with students, adapting to their dispositions and temperament to bring forth the student’s full potential. Yet, no matter how great or skillful a teacher may be, or how poignant a huatou is, if a person only has a lukewarm interest in the deeper questions of life and death, wonderment cannot be sustained. It takes great conviction, great determination, and most importantly, great wonderment about birth and death.

Dispositions

Everyone experiences this wonderment differently, and how quickly or easily a practitioner produces the great ball of wonderment depends on the person's karmic capacity. Great wonderment and the bursting of awakening sometimes come spontaneously to people with keen karmic capacity, even without the guidance of a master. However, such awakening experiences are usually shallow, a temporary glimpse of selfless state.

The analogy I have for such a state is like a needle piercing through a paper. The piercing may be genuine, and there is a hole, but the paper is basically still there after it's pierced. The piercing is awakening; the paper is the self.

I've met several people who had such a glimpse of awakening spontaneously earlier in life, but they've spent too much time trying to find out what exactly they experienced or trying to recreate it. In many cases, their experience has become yet another object of attachment. Without a skilled teacher, they may feel arrogant or special. Worse, if they practice on their own, they may develop deranged understandings of their experience or side effects from their spiritual path.

In the case of individuals with dull karmic capacities, even small amounts of wonderment can be extremely difficult to generate. Yet the potential for awakening is still there. During the time of the Buddha, the arhat Cudapanthaka was such a person. His life was heavily burdened by karmic mental obstacles, and many considered him to be dull-witted. But due to the skillful guidance of the Buddha, being instructed to attentively sweep and remove the dust and dirt from the vihara, he was able to realize awakening.

Thus, all people along the spectrum of karmic capacity can deepen their practice and eventually experience great wonderment and awakening. But the importance of guidance cannot be overstated.