

**UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO**

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**The Search for the Essence of Being according to Advaita-Vedānta  
and Chán Buddhism**

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**The Search for the Essence of Being according to Advaita-Vedānta  
and Chán Buddhism**

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## ***Abstract***

The purpose of this dissertation is to draw a comparison between Chinese and Indian idealism as they can be encountered in the life and teachings of these two great masters, Ramana Mahārshi and Xūyun Laoeshang. This work first pretends to investigate briefly the concept of the Absolute in the Advaita-Vedānta philosophy: the author reviews the ten Vedic Upanishads, examines the writings by Shankarācharya and the practice of “Mahāvākya” (the Great Vedic Formulas), and investigates the teachings of Ātmavichāra. Secondly, this work explores the antecedents of *hùatóu*, practice in the frame of Chan Buddhism. And then the author studies two contemporary masters: Ramana Mahārshi and Xūyun Laoeshang, each representative of the two most prominent spiritual traditions in India and China respectively. Ramana Maharshi based his teachings on the inquiry of “Who am I?” within the Advaita Vedānta tradition and Xūyun, a master in the tradition of Chan Buddhism, taught the *hùatóu* technique: “Who is repeating the name of the Buddha Amitabhā?”, which in reality is equivalent to the question “Who am I?” This dissertation discusses the similarities and differences of these two practices: using the same method the practitioner would realize the Absolute as Self on one hand, and as Buddha-nature in the other case, while the emphasis lies on the absence of a “self”. The methodology used in this work will be research, deduction, analysis and synthesis, which will help to deduce that Chan Buddhism have received some or many influences from Advaita-Vedānta, and whether it has been due to chance that both traditions developed parallelly. It is concluded that the practice of the “Who am I?” or “Who is repeating the name of the Buddha Amitabhā?” are based on a meditation device whose aim is to silence the mind in order to permit a connection with the Absolute.

## **Resumen**

El propósito de esta tesis es realizar una comparación entre el idealismo de la China e India tal como se puede encontrar en la vida y enseñanzas de dos grandes maestros, Ramana Mahārshi y Xūyún Laōhášang. En primer lugar se pretende investigar brevemente el concepto de Absoluto en la filosofía Advaita-Vedānta: el autor revisa las diez *Upanishads* Védicas, examina los escritos de Shankarācharya y la práctica de los “Mahāvākya” (Las Grandes Fórmulas Védicas), e investiga las enseñanzas del Ātmavichāra. En segundo lugar, este trabajo explora los antecedentes del *hùatóu*, práctica en el contexto del Buddhismo Chán. Entonces, el autor estudia a dos maestros contemporáneos: Ramana Maharshi y Xūyún Laōhéshang, cada uno representante de las dos tradiciones espirituales más importantes de la India y China respectivamente. Ramana Mahārshi basa sus enseñanzas sobre la indagación del “¿Quién soy yo?” dentro de la tradición Advaita Vedānta y Xūyún, un maestro en la tradición del Buddhismo Chán, enseñó la técnica del *hùatóu*: “¿Quién está repitiendo el nombre del Buddha Amitabhā?” que en realidad es equivalente a la pregunta “¿Quién soy yo?” Esta tesis analiza las similitudes y diferencias de estas dos prácticas: utilizando el mismo método, el practicante debería realizar el Absoluto como el “Yo” por un lado, y la “Naturaleza de Buddha” en el otro caso, mientras el énfasis radica en la ausencia de un “yo”. La metodología utilizada en este trabajo será de investigación, deducción, análisis y síntesis, lo que ayudará a concluir que el Buddhismo Chán ha recibido algunas o muchas influencias del Advaita-Vedānta, o si ambas tradiciones se desarrollaron paralelamente. Se concluye que la práctica del ¿Quién soy yo? O “¿Quién está repitiendo el nombre del Buddha Amitabhā?” están basadas sobre la estrategia de una meditación cuyo objetivo es silenciar la mente a fin de permitir una conexión con el Absoluto.

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## ***Introduction***

For a majority of so-called “western” people, spirituality has converted itself into a mere ritual of assisting to a church (from whatever sect it may be), to pray, to discharge all the accumulated unhappiness, or to thank for all the blessings received from an invisible God abiding in Heaven.

On the other hand, for many, not to say for most human beings, the process of life has converted itself in the fulfilling of a determined cycle: to be born, to grow up, to reproduce oneself and to die, a cycle that the animals and plants too go through. Thus there arises an important question: what is it that differentiates humans from other sentient beings? The answer is quite simple: the difference lies in the possibility to connect oneself with one’s spiritual essence, through some meditative or spiritual practice.

The term “meditation” has been subject to misunderstandings, especially in the western world where it is mostly understood as referring to a process of discursive reflection on some topics such as “love” “peace”, “violence”, etc., to sum up it consists in indulging again in the thinking process. In Asia this term implicates first of all to quieten down the chaotic proliferation of random thinking. The main purpose of meditating is in order to transcend the sense doors and discover that the desired happiness cannot be met with outside of ourselves, nor does it depend on external things, situations or persons, but rather does it depend on awakening this “gem” –you may call it the Absolute, the Brahman, the Self, the Buddha Nature, the *Tathāgata*-garbha, or *Nirvāna*, which has always been present here and now, but was held captive of the veil of ignorance. Consequently, we must realize that “happiness” is not bestowed by any divinity, but is rather the fruit of a personal endeavour.

In this essay, we shall discuss the concept of the Absolute - Brahman in the philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedānta and its equivalent “Buddha Nature” inside Chán Buddhism. We will take two

eminent masters of modern times, Ramana Mahārshi from India and Xūyún Lǎohéshǎng from China as representatives of these two traditions, belonging respectively to the schools of Advaita Vedānta and Chán Buddhism.

The first chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to investigate the significance of Brahman - the Absolute inside Advaita Vedānta; we will take as antecedents the Vedic *Upanishads* and the writings of the great Vedāntic commentator, Shankarāchārya, together with the “Mahāvākyas”- “Great Formulas” from the *Vedas*, and analyze the teachings of Ramana Mahārshi, for whom the Absolute is the Self.

In the second chapter, we shall explore the meaning of Buddha Nature – *Tathāgata-garbha* (terms which are both equivalents of the Absolute) inside Chán Buddhism. We shall investigate the antecedents of huàtóu-Chán, the implications of Buddha Nature inside the *Platform Sūtra of Huìnéng* and their correspondence to the basic teachings of Indian Buddhism and then turn to the teachings of Xūyún Lǎohéshǎng.

These developments will allow us to draw a comparison between both traditions and discover if Chán Buddhism may be identified more closely with an idealistic current derived from Advaita Vedānta influences or if it is more akin to a tradition going back to the Buddha’s original teachings, or whether both traditions have developed in parallel.

Whatever the end result may be, the most important will be to discover that man possesses the potential to change himself and thereby change his environment in order to live in harmony and equilibrium with the whole of the universe.

## **Chapter I**

### **1. The Absolute in the Advaita Vedānta**

## 1.1 What is the Absolute?

### 1.1.1 The Vedic *Upanishads*

"The *Upanishads* are commentaries which were appended to the Vedas, and constitute, together with those, the oldest books of Vedic culture and a treasure of incalculable spiritual value to mankind."<sup>1</sup> The term *Upa-ni-shad* is composed of three elements: **Upa** = "near, close", the prefix **ni** means "down (-ward)" and **sad** meaning "to sit"; thus, the *Upanishads* are "Instructions received when one has sat down (at the feet of the master)". The *Upanishads* were composed between the seventh and fifth century BC.; they expound India's wisdom of non-dualism or Advaita Vedānta, which means that there is no difference between God and his creation.

The words "Brahman", "Absolute", "Ātman" or "Self" are terms referring to the same reality, a reality that is unique and absolute, i.e. "the Ultimate Truth". The meaning of the word "Brahman" is quite broad, but essentially Brahman can be understood from two points of view: 1) as the "creator" and 2) as a state of Supreme Consciousness. But even though it is the "creator", it is not different from creation. Actually, they are the same, but the veil of ignorance creates this apparent separation.

Regarding the first meaning of Brahman, in the *Mundaka Upanishad* we read the following passage: "Brahmā arose as the first among the gods, the maker of the universe, the protector of the world. He taught the knowledge of Brahman, the foundation of all knowledge to Atharvan, his eldest son...that is the Undecaying which the wise perceive as the source of beings"<sup>2</sup> This *Upanishad* refers to two kinds of wisdom: the higher as well as the lower. Lower wisdom is related to all that what is known through the senses, while higher wisdom is that one which leads to the Eternal Brahman.

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<sup>1</sup> *Los Upanishads*, Edicomunicación, S.A. España, 1998, p.9

<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1953, p.671

“That which is ungraspable, without family, without caste, without sight or hearing, without hands or feet, eternal, all-pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle, that is the Undecaying which the wise perceive as the source of beings.”<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that in this sense, Brahman is impersonal, he is definitely not anthropomorphic like the God or the Demiurge in Judeo-Christian tradition. In line with the idea of creation, there appear other important images in the *Mundaka Upanishad*: "As a spider sends forth and draws in (its thread), as herbs grow on the earth, as the hair (grows) on the head and the body of a living person, so from the Imperishable arises here the universe."<sup>4</sup> "This is the truth. As from a blazing fire, sparks of like form issue forth by the thousands, even so, O beloved, many kinds of beings issue forth from the immutable and they return thither too."<sup>5</sup>

In the same vein, the *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: "That, verily, from which these beings are born, that, by which, when born they live, that into which, when departing, they enter. That seek to know. That is Brahman... <sup>6</sup>He (Bhrigu, the son of Varuna) knew that Brahman is bliss. For truly, beings here are born from bliss, when born they live by bliss and into bliss, when departing they enter."<sup>7</sup> Reading these passages, one can understand the idea of Sri Ramana Mahārshi who said "...the mind projects the world out of itself and then dissolves it within itself"<sup>8</sup>, so that the world we perceive is merely the projection of the Self, or of Brahman.

Brahman, as a state of consciousness, refers to the experience of "bliss of the soul," a state of melting with happiness, well-being, equanimity; it means to go beyond thought and transcend pain and pleasure... We encounter this same idea of transcending thought in a passage of the *Prashna Upanishad* which says: "When he is overcome with light, then in this state, the god

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p.672-3

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p.673

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.680

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.553

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p.557

<sup>8</sup> Ramana Maharshi, *Enseñanzas Espirituales*. Editorial Kairós, 3era. Edición, Barcelona1992. p.21

(mind) sees no dreams. Then here in the body arises this happiness."<sup>9</sup> To awaken to Brahman is letting shine the inherent state of consciousness called "*turīya*"<sup>10</sup>.

In this regard, the *Mandukya Upanishad* explains that Brahman is manifest in the four states of consciousness: 1) in the waking state, 2) in the dream state, 3) in deep sleep; in this state there is no dream but a "silent awareness". The "I" and the dream world disappear, and consequently there is no desire, nor suffering, nor joy, it is an experience of unity because there is no distinction between subject and object, it is "a mass of cognition, who is full of bliss and who enjoys (experiences) bliss"<sup>11</sup> 4) The Ātman or *turīya* is the supreme state of consciousness.

"*Turīya* is not that which cognizes the internal (objects), not that which cognizes the external (objects), not what cognizes both of them, not a mass of cognition, not cognitive, not non-cognitive. (It is) unseen, incapable of being spoken of, ungraspable, without any distinctive marks, unthinkable, unnameable, the essence of the knowledge of the one self, that into which the world is resolved, the peaceful, the benign, the non-dual , such they think is the fourth quarter... "<sup>12</sup> Several passages of this same *Upanishad* refer to the Ātman as Brahman, which eventually are the same.

It is worth mentioning some Vedic *Upanishad* which refer to Brahman as a state of consciousness, as for example in the *Katha Upanishad* there appears the following passage: "Hearing this and comprehending (it), a mortal, extracting the essence and reaching the subtle, rejoices, having attained the source of joy."<sup>13</sup> "Knowing the self who is the bodiless among bodies, the stable among the instable, the great, the all-pervading, the wise man does not grieve."<sup>14</sup> In the *Maitri*

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p.662

<sup>10</sup> In the *Maitri Upanishad* it is said: "...therefore let the breathing spirit merge his breathing spirit in what is called the fourth (condition) – *turīya*. (p.831)"

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p.696

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.67-68

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p.614

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p.618

*Upanishad* (VI.19) we read the following: "That which is non-thought, which stands in the midst of thought, the unthinkable, the hidden, the highest, let a man merge his thought there. Then will this living being be without support (attachment)."<sup>15</sup>

In this case, in order to experience Brahman we must quieten the chaotic mind, go beyond thought. Once we have reached this state, what remains is silence, the silence which is the sound of the syllable OM. "What is (called) the sound is the syllable AUM. That which is its end is tranquil, soundless, fearless, sorrowless, blissful, satisfied, steadfast, unmoving, immortal, unshaking, enduring ... (*Maitri Upanishad*, VI.23) "<sup>16</sup>

As can be seen, we cannot access to this state of consciousness through the senses, but it must be experienced; for that reason words are limited to describe the experience of Brahman, as is expressed in another part of the same *Upanishad* which says: "The happiness of a mind whose stains are washed away by concentration and who has entered the self, it cannot be here described by words. It can be grasped by the inner organ (only)." (*Maitri Upanishad*, VI, 34)<sup>17</sup>

Following up the idea of Brahman as a state of consciousness, we read in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (III,2): "Having attained Him, the seers (who are) satisfied with their knowledge, (who are) perfected souls, free from passion, tranquil, having attained the omnipresent (self) on all sides, those wise, with concentrated minds, enter into the All itself."<sup>18</sup> It should be emphasized that "the omnipresent (self)" means the Brahman. And a little below, in the same *Mundaka Upanishad* (III,2) it is said: "Just as the flowing rivers disappear in the ocean casting off name and shape (*nāma-rūpa*), even so the knower, free from name and shape, attains to the divine person, higher

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p.831

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.834

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.845

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 690

than the high."<sup>19</sup> In Buddhism the idea of freeing oneself from name and form (*nāma-rūpa*) corresponds to freeing oneself from the illusion of the existence of a self.

The concept of Brahman as a state of consciousness is broad and deep, as we read in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (II.2.12) which says: "The sun shines not there, nor the moon and stars, these lightnings shine not, where then could this fire be? Every thing shines only after that shining light. His shining illumines all this world"<sup>20</sup> (see the same idea in *Katha Upanishad* V. 15, *Shvetasvatara Upanishad* VI.14, *Subāla Upanishad* p. 890, and in *Udāna.9 Bhagavadgītā* IX.15,6). In the same way, the purpose of buddhist practice is to let consciousness shine forth, since the world manifests itself due to the radiance of consciousness (*citta*). To connect oneself to this state of pure consciousness puts the being at rest, as we read in the *Prasna Upanishad* (IV.7): "Even as birds, O dear, resort to a tree for resting-place, so does everything here resort to the Supreme Self. They all find their rest in the Supreme Self..."<sup>21</sup>

From the quoted passages, it can be noticed that the Creator (Brahman) and Ātman are the same. Or, put in another way, Brahman is inseparable from the self, from the world or from anything else, since every thing constitutes a unity. Such illusory separation can only exist as long as there is a veil that obscures the reality of Brahman. Such is the case of the Ātman, which seems to be individual, but once Brahman is realized (as a state of consciousness), it becomes clear that they are one; it merges in Him and, in the same way as salt dissolved in water cannot be separated, likewise, the Ātman having realized the Brahman cannot be separated, the two are one. The *Chāndogya Upanishad* refers to this idea in the following way: "My dear, that subtle essence which you do not perceive, verily, my dear, from that very essence this great *nyagrodha* tree

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 691

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p.685

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.662

exists. Believe me, my dear. That which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for its self. That is the true. **That is the self. That art thou** (*tat tvam asi*) Shvetaketu."<sup>22</sup>

J. Mascaró explains that "when the transcendent Brahman is immanent inside of us, it is called Ātman. They are two names for the same Being"<sup>23</sup> But, due to our lack of self-knowledge we create an illusion of duality, hence it is said in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*: "Non-existent, verily does one become, if he knows Brahman as non-being. If one knows that Brahman is, such a one people know as existent. This is, indeed the embodied soul of the former."<sup>24</sup> (or "Who denies God denies himself, who asserts the existence of God, he asserts his own self,"-Mascaro). Clearly this is not mere lip service, but it is about experiencing God or Brahman.

An interesting passage in the *Katha Upanishad* (I.3. 8, 9) states: "He however, who has understanding, who has control over his mind and (is) ever pure, reaches that goal, from which he is not born again. He who has the understanding for the driver of the chariot and controls the reins of his mind, he reaches the end of the journey, that supreme abode of the all-pervading."<sup>25</sup> The meaning of this passage could be understood, within a Buddhist context, to signify cutting through the Wheel of *Samsāra*, and "the end of the journey" could be understood as the experience of Nirvana in Ancient Buddhism, or the experience of "Buddha Nature" within Chán Buddhism. This potential to connect oneself with one's own essence is accessible to every human being, as the *Katha Upanishad* (II.3.18) declares: "... Then Naciketas, having gained this knowledge declared by Death and the whole rule of Yoga, attained Brahman and became freed from passion and from death. And so many any other who knows this in regard to the self."<sup>26</sup> Or put in another

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.109

<sup>23</sup> J. Mascaró-R Crespo, *Los Upanishad*, Editorial Diana, México, 1979, p.11

<sup>24</sup> Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1953, p.547

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p.624

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p.648



way, in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (III.2.9) there appears the following statement: “He, verily, who knows the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself.”<sup>27</sup>

One important aspect of Brahman is also to understand that it is simultaneously immanent and transcendent, and this is the way in which it is described in the *Isha Upanishad* (I.U. 14) : “He who understands the manifest and the unmanifest both together, crosses death through the unmanifest and attains life eternal through the manifest.”<sup>28</sup> (“He who knows the transcendent as well as the immanent, with help of the immanent wins over death and with help of the transcendent reaches immortality.”-Mascaró) “Immortality” means to become eternal, *ie* to become Brahman. The *Katha Upanishad* gives a clearer definition of the immanent when it says that Brahman “...dwells in men, in gods, in the right and in the sky. He is (all that is) born of water, sprung from the earth, born of right, born of mountain.”<sup>29</sup> (“Dwells in men and gods, in righteousness, and in the vastness of heavens. He is on the earth and in the waters, and in the cliffs of the mountains ...Mascaró ”). The idea of immanence, is further clarified in the *Isha Upanishad*, verses 5. 8.: “It moves and It moves not; It is far and It is near; It is within all this and It is also outside all this...He has filled all; He is radiant, bodiless, invulnerable, devoid of sinews, pure, untouched by evil. He, the seer, thinker, all-pervading, self-existent has duly distributed through endless years the objects according to their natures.”<sup>30</sup> (“It moves and is motionless. It is far and near. Is on the inside and outside of all things ... The spirit pervades it all with its splendor, is immaterial and invulnerable, pure and without blemish of evil. He is the supreme vision and thought. He is immanent and transcendent. He is the dispenser of all things on the road to eternity. - Mascaró”)

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.692

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p.576

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.636-7

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p.571-3

The abode of Brahman, according to what can be read in several passages of the Vedic *Upanishad*, is located inside the human body, and more specifically in the human heart. This is what the *Mundaka Upanishad* (II.2.7) declares: "He who is all-knowing, all-wise whose is this greatness on the earth, in the divine city of Brahmā, in the ether (of the heart) is that self-established... controlling the heart. The wise perceive clearly by the knowledge (of Brahman) the blissful immortal which shines forth."<sup>31</sup> ("He (Brahman), who knows everything and sees all, dwells as the Spirit of the divine city of Brahman in the region of the human heart ... and encounters peace in the heart. Therein the wise finds it as light and joy and eternal life."-Mascaró).

We might understand under the expression "human heart" the energy center called *Anāhata Chakra*,<sup>32</sup> which is located close to the heart; we may surmise this from the *Chāndogya Upanishad* (III.143) which states: "This is my self within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice, than a barley corn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet or than the kernel of a grain of a millet. This is myself within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the atmosphere, greater than the sky, greater than these worlds...this is the self of mine within the heart; this is Brahman"<sup>33</sup> and *Ch.U.* VIII.1.3: "He should say, as far, verily, as this (world) space extends, so far extends the space within the heart. Within it, indeed, are contained both heaven and earth, both fire and air, both sun and moon, lightning and the stars. Whatever there is of him in this world and whatever is not, all that is contained within it."<sup>34</sup> ("The small space of the heart is as big as this vast universe ... because the whole universe is in Him (Brahman), and He dwells in our hearts."-Mascaró); (*Ch.U.* VIII.3.3): "Verily that self abides in the heart...He who knows this goes day by day into the heavenly world."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* p.684

<sup>32</sup> The most common theories explain that there are seven energy centres (*chakra*); the heart, or *anāhata chakra* is the fourth vortex of energy, whose physical location lies by the human heart.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p.391

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p.492

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p.496

One can understand that the human heart, being physically so small, is enough to encompass the entire universe, including Brahman which is everything. In the *Katha Upanishad* also it is said that Brahman "... is hidden in the tabernacle of the secret heart. ..."<sup>36</sup> "Hidden in the heart of all beings is the Ātman, the Spirit, the Being, smaller than the smallest atom, greater than open spaces."<sup>37</sup> Following this idea, in the *Mundaka Upanishad* it is said: "He is immeasurable in its light and reaches farther than the farthest thought, but looks smaller than the smallest. Far, far is He, yet very close, resting in the tabernacle of the most endearing heart"<sup>38</sup> When Sri Ramana Mahārshi was asked where the Self was to be found, he manifested that it was in the tabernacle of the heart; what is surprising in this answer, is that he did not answer this by a mere repetition of the sacred texts, but because he saw, had experienced by himself where Brahman dwells.

The *Katha Upanishad* refers to the human body as the dwelling of Brahman when it says: "The pure and eternal Spirit dwells in the castle of the eleven gates which is the body ..."<sup>39</sup>, so does the *Prasna Upanishad* when it asks and answers: "- Where does the spirit dwell?- the Spirit is here in the body"<sup>40</sup> and in the *Chāndogya Upanishad* appears the following passage: "It is true that the body is mortal, that it is subjected to the power of death; however, is also the abode of the Ātman, the Spirit of immortal life . The body, residence of the Spirit ..."<sup>41</sup>

As can be read, the significance of Brahman is vast and profound; something which should ultimately be stressed is that Brahman is not the beginning of the universe and consequently isn't the end neither, as it is stated in the *Katha Upanishad*: "The Ātman transcends the boundaries of sound and form; it is devoid of touch, taste and smell. It is eternal and immutable, and has no beginning nor end ..."<sup>42</sup> This passage refers primarily to the cyclical understanding of<sup>43</sup> time and

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<sup>36</sup> J. Mascaró, p.30

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.34

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p.64

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p.39-40

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p.119

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p.37

space which differs from the Western linear view, which implies that there is a beginning (a personal God who created the universe) and an end (the destruction of the universe through the last judgment of God). The *Katha Upanishad* also refers to the cyclical view:

"Ātman, the Spirit of understanding, is never born and never dies. There was nothing before him, and He is the One forever. Without birth and eternal, beyond the limits of time past or time to come, He does not die when the body dies."<sup>44</sup>

Finally, in the *Maitri Upanishad* we encounter a very interesting passage that says: "Just as water unites with water, fire with fire and air with air, in the same way the mind unites with the Infinite Mind, and so achieves liberation. The mind is the cause of our bondage, and also the cause of our liberation. Attachment to worldly things is bondage: freedom from them is liberation."<sup>45</sup> This passage bears much affinity to Chán Buddhism, since the ultimate goal of Chán Buddhism is also to merge the individual mind with the Universal Mind, which is called Buddha Nature.

### 1.1.2 In Shankarāchārya's writing

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<sup>43</sup> Tola, Fernando y Dragonetti Carmen, *Filosofía y Literatura de la India*, Editorial Kier, Argentina 1983. p.33

<sup>44</sup> J. Mascaró-R Crespo, *Los Upanishad*, Editorial Diana, México, 1979, p.34

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p.92-93



Shankarāchārya (788 - 820) is regarded as the great Advaita commentator of the Vedic *Upanishads*. The main idea that he develops, is that God and his creation (man), are the same. For Shankara "To know is the same as to be"<sup>46</sup> Therefore, whoever can go beyond the ordinary state of consciousness, will realize that not only is he part of the godhead, furthermore he is divinity itself, which means that he is Brahman, Ātman, the Absolute, or as Sri Ramana Mahārshi would say, he becomes aware that the Self is the absolute reality. In this way, the illusory idea of a separation between Brahman and his creation terminates.

Shankara expresses some characteristics of the state of Brahman such as equanimity and inalterability; for him, the nature of Brahman is "Existence, Consciousness and Bliss (*sat-chid-ânanda*)"<sup>47</sup>, as stated in Advaita Vedānta. However, the qualities that are attributed to Brahman, can only serve to give an idea of what it is; true understanding comes from one's own experience.

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<sup>46</sup> Deutsch, Eliot, *Qu' est-ce que l' Advaita Vedānta*, Editorial Les Deux Océans, Paris, 1971, Translated by Renaud Neubauer, p.1

<sup>47</sup> *Sloka* 23 y 111

Shankara considers that "... Brahman is the substratum of all these varieties of names, forms and actions"<sup>48</sup> which is to say, the origin of everything in existence, so "and therefore, since all beings have their origin in Brahman, we must regard them as being indeed Brahman itself."<sup>49</sup> He is always regressing to reaffirm the idea that we are Brahman, as reflected in the following passage "... this Ātman is the being of all beings and verily is Brahman."<sup>50</sup>

For Shankara there is no difference between Brahman and Ātman, as is reflected in the following *sloka*: "Only the Ātman is permanent"<sup>51</sup>, and remains unchanged, stable, fixed, without change. It is also said that "The Ātman is verily one, not compounded ... It is the insider and the ruler of the body; it is all-consciousness and holiness; it is the supreme illuminator and purity itself, it is eternal, for it is existence itself."<sup>52</sup> The *jīva* or individual soul, is indeed different from Brahman, although Shankara considers that this "*jīva*, is as illusory as the appearance of a snake on a piece of rope."<sup>53</sup> Ignorance, *avidyā*, is the material cause of the phenomenological world.

Referring to the world, Shankara also said that "... the world should be viewed as Brahman itself"<sup>54</sup>, hence Brahman should be considered as the Ultimate Reality.

It will be recalled that the merging into the state of Brahman cannot be achieved through the senses or thinking, but we must transcend. For this purpose Shankara fundamentally recommends to inquire into the question: "Who am I?"<sup>55</sup> This recommendation is reinforced by the following *Sloka*: "I am not the body, nor the combination of the five material elements, I am not an aggregate of the senses. I am something different from all this. This is the way to practice

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<sup>48</sup> *Sloka* 50

<sup>49</sup> *Sloka* 49

<sup>50</sup> *Sloka* 55

<sup>51</sup> *Sloka* 5

<sup>52</sup> *Sloka* 33

<sup>53</sup> *Sloka* 43

<sup>54</sup> *Sloka* 116

<sup>55</sup> *Sloka* 12

introspection”<sup>56</sup>. In the 64<sup>th</sup> *Sloka* he is retaking the method which indicates that it is imperative in order to know the Ātman to deny the names and forms, which are manifestations of ignorance. By “ignorance” is to be meant the ignorance of oneself which is Brahman. While negating everything with which we use to identify, Shankara is following the negative or apophatic path of mystic. Furthermore, he recommends to the sincere aspirant for the realization of Brahman that he should not be even for a single moment without the thought of Brahman<sup>57</sup>, All the Chán masters also recommended the same.

Shankara’s Vedānta describes the phenomenal world as merely an illusory appearance - *māyā*, and speaks of Brahman as the only reality or absolute truth. For Shankara, the phenomenal world is reduced to a matter of perception, since, once the ultimate experience is reached, oneself is perceived as Brahman, i.e. one perceives the transitory within the permanent and the absolute within the relative. The only false and illusory thing has been our perception of considering ourselves different from Brahman and to see the entire world from the perspective of duality. This perception is dissolved by the Realization of Being, namely the realization of Brahman.

As long as one remains a prisoner of innate ignorance, which is what determines the human condition, subject to suffering, one will be living inside the consciousness of duality, of distortion and division; hence, the main task consists in overcoming this blindness through the guidance of a Guru, the practice of Yoga, the recitation of the *Vedas* and meditation practice. All this must be accompanied by a strict moral and ethical life.

### 1.1.3 In the *Advaita Vedānta*

The Advaita Vedānta is the doctrine of non-dualistic Vedānta. Our main reference book will be *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* by Eliot Deutsch. The author of the book

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<sup>56</sup> *Sloka* 13

<sup>57</sup> *Sloka* 134

discusses the difficulties of reconstructing the "Advaita" system. However, he achieves nevertheless a systematisation on the basis of "extracting from the Advaita Vedānta the elements that have a precise philosophical meaning for a philosophical meaning for a Western mind."<sup>58</sup>

Before entering the "definition" of Brahman, we shall explain what the word *Vedānta* means:

- End of the *Vedās*. *Vedās* in Sanskrit meaning "science or knowledge".
- The term *Vedās*, also referring to the four Sanskrit texts (*Rig Vedā*, *Yajur Vedā*, *Sāma Vedā* and *Atharva Vedā*), which are at the basis of the system of Hindu sacred writings.
- Vedānta also refers to the three books: *Upanishads*, *Brahmā Sūtras* and *Bhagavadgītā*
- Finally, Vedānta can also be seen as a philosophical system based on the *Upanishads*, the *Brahmā Sūtras* and the *Bhagavadgītā*

To summarize, Eliot Deutsch understands Advaita Vedānta as follows:

- "A practical guide of personal spiritual experience".
- "A way of spiritual realization."
- "A religion and a practical philosophy."
- "A system of thought."<sup>59</sup>

Among these four points, it is considered that the first two ones are most important because they provide the seeker with a valuable tool allowing him to connect with Brahman or to experience the state called Absolute.

Now, as to the meaning, definition or content of Brahman, Eliot presents it in two ways:

- 1) "... first an elemental principle, ubiquitous in nature, the divine, that the wise discovers in absolute silence, and

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<sup>58</sup> Deutsch, Eliot, p.2

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p.1



2) The Brahman, the One, is a state of being. It is not "He", one person, nor is it "it", an impersonal concept. The Brahman is this state that *is*, when all distinctions between subject and object have disappeared. The Brahman is in the final analysis, a word that means the experience of the infinite fullness of being"<sup>60</sup>

Heinrich Zimmer explains his understanding of Brahman almost in the same terms as Eliot Deutsch, as he states: "The Self of the Vedic Āryan tradition, the Universal Being dwells in the individual and this is what gives him life. It transcends both the gross organism of his body and the subtle organism of his psyche, has no sense organs of its own through which to act and experience, and yet is the very life-force that enables him to act at all"<sup>61</sup>

From these references, it can be seen clearly that Brahman cannot be understood in one word nor in one only way. Brahman can be seen as the beginning of the material world, namely the creation, and as the supreme state of being.

Eliot explains the significance of qualifying Brahman as *saccidānanda* (*sat* = "Being", *cit* = "Consciousness" and *ānanda* = "Bliss"), as follows:

"Being-consciousness-bliss", are not attributes of Brahman, but they are words with which the content or "meaning" of Brahman can be apprehended.

"Being" (*sat*) refers to the ontological principle of unity, of oneness that does not consist of elements; it is the existential substratum of all subjects and all objects."<sup>62</sup> This sentence can be understood as referring to the "divine breath" that animates subjects and objects, or to the fact that this "breath" is responsible for giving life and movement to everything in the universe.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p.3

<sup>61</sup> Zimmer, Heinrich, *Philosophies of India*, Bollingen Series/Princeton, New York, 1974, p.409

<sup>62</sup> Deutsch, Eliot, p. 2

"Consciousness" (*cit*) refers to the principle of attention that animates the being and that, for the Advaitin, is an immutable witness of our being."<sup>63</sup> This gives an idea that there are two entities, being and the witness; this duality is present as long as consciousness has not been awakened to the reality of oneness, as long as it has not experimented the state of pure consciousness where there is no duality, and in this state equanimity manifests itself, expressed as joy in unity.

"Bliss (*ānanda*) refers to the principle of value, since the experience of Brahman is static in nature: it annuls any partial value in its incomparable splendor."<sup>64</sup> If the experience of Brahman is to merge with the whole and become one, then *ānanda* can be understood as meaning also supreme happiness, and it is supreme because it allows for nothing else but absolute wellbeing.

As can be seen, it is difficult to understand in a unilateral meaning and at the intellectual level the concept of Brahman, so that the masters recommend to practice a path of meditation that allows you to experiment or approach the wonderful state of supreme consciousness. There are two ways to reach the knowledge of Brahman. The first one is the way of cataphatic theology; the term originates from the Greek *cata-phasis* which means "affirmation". The second one is the apophatic, or negative theology, which also comes from the Greek, *apo-phasis*, which means "negation". In the frame of cataphatic theology one attempts to express what Brahman is, for example, enumerating the attributes mentioned above, while apophatic theology emphasizes what the Brahman is not, denying all the qualities, characteristics or concepts, in such a way that only remains what makes it what it really is.

Shankarāchārya and Sri Ramana Mahārshi were of those who follow this apophatic or negative path in order to achieve the state of Brahman. Eliot explains the reason of such a path; he says that the Brahman, the Absolute, is non-duality. If, in the first place, it has been said that Brahman is *saccidānanda*, it is so as to be able to express in words the experience of this state of

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p.3

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p.4

consciousness; it is not in order to provide characteristics to Brahman, nor to qualify him in a positive sense. Being the Absolute implies that it is transcendental, that it goes beyond the human language, that it is unique, that it is the ultimate reality, and is hence unlimited. Consequently Brahman cannot be *saccidānanda*, since that would be limiting it and reduce it inside certain qualities.

The sages explain that the best way to describe Brahman is through the formula "It is neither this nor that - *neti neti*."<sup>65</sup> Although Shankara says that the Brahman is "*satyam jñānam anantam Brahma*" – "Brahman is truth and infinite knowledge", Eliot explains that this definition formulated in a positive way, is only to guide the spirit towards the Brahman. However, to say something positive is simply to negate its contrary. That is to say, "Brahman is truth, is equivalent to denying the quality of un-truth, and such a negation, according to the Advaita, helps us in practice to direct ones mind toward the Brahman."<sup>66</sup>

The apophatic mysticism of Advaita Vedānta is to attain the authentic experience of the significance of Brahman and not just remain caught up in mere positive definitions. Furthermore, when qualifying this is done by means of the senses, but Brahman cannot be known through the five senses and hence cannot be fathomed by the mind either, but only through a global intuitive understanding in which neither language, nor mind nor the senses intervene.

On the other hand, the masters say that language is limited when it comes to express the experiences that go beyond the mind, so that to express in words the definition of Brahman is to impose a limit on Brahman which has no limit but, on the contrary is unlimited; this is precisely

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p.4

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p.4

why it is Absolute. For Advaita Vedānta "everything that is expressed in words is finally not-Brahman, and hence contrary to the truth."<sup>67</sup>

Words are a product of sense perception, but Brahman cannot be reached through the senses, therefore, the senses and words are limited and thus untrue compared to Brahman which is unlimited, absolute, and hence true. Seen in this way, there appears to be two aspects of Brahman: the *Nirguna Brahman* and the *Saguna Brahman*. "*Nirguna Brahman*; is the unqualified Brahman, it is merely the transcendental and indeterminate state of being, about which nothing can be said. *Saguna Brahman*, the Brahman with qualifications, is Brahman interpreted and affirmed by the spirit, from his own viewpoint which is necessarily limited."<sup>68</sup>

Based on such explanations of Eliot, it can be understood that *Nirguna Brahman* is the intuitive experience within an expanded state of consciousness experienced by the person, in which neither the mind nor the senses intervene; it is for such reason that we cannot give it any positive qualification, but only let ourselves be guided by the apophatic formula "*neti, neti*", "is not this, it is not that". The masters explained that in the supreme state of consciousness there exist no distinction between subject and object, consequently there is no duality, but harmony and unity; it is a subtle state of consciousness which is also called the state of mental and spiritual enlightenment. Being a state where the intellect is not present, it is said that Brahman is a state of being that is silence, and by silence is meant the calming of all thinking process, and going beyond thinking, or going back to the very origin of thought.

In the expression *Saguna Brahman*, *sa* means 'with', thus it means "the Brahman with attributes". *Saguna Brahman* refers fundamentally to when the person who has experienced the state of

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p.4

<sup>68</sup> *Ibis.* p.5

Brahman, starts to give description of the Brahman such as saying that *saguna Brahman* is a state of bliss and love, but as stated before, words only express the phenomenological experience of the senses, while in the experience of Brahman neither the intellect nor the senses intervene, so that anything expressed in words is limited and therefore not real, not true. In a state of awareness the phenomenological world is experienced only by the mind and the senses, and seen from such a perspective the world is not real, not true. The same applies to feelings; they are not real because they are only states of mind and mind is limited, hence unreal. In consequence, to describe about the Brahman with such or such qualification, is only meant to serve as a guidance or to give an approximation of what is Brahman.

To summarize, it may be said that Brahman is:

- “The Brahman, the One, is a state of ‘being’”.
- “It is a state that IS. Here there is no difference between subject – object.”
- It is a word with which it is possible to explain “the experience of the infinite fullness of ‘being’”.
- Brahman is the experience of enlightenment.
- It is the state of enlightenment of consciousness.
- It is state where ‘to be’ is happiness.
- It is an affirmation of the fullness of ‘being’, which carries the enlightenment and that is joy.
- For Samkarāchārya, Brahman is truth, reality, infinitive knowing.
- Brahman is a state of simply ‘being’, which is silence.
- Brahman is the divine and the divine is Brahman. But in this case, Brahman is not a deity that answers prayers, or forgives sins.

- “Brahman is also called *sac-cid-ānanda*, where *sat* means ‘being’, *cit* means consciousness and *ānanda* is bliss”.<sup>69</sup>

Concerning the relationship of Brahman to the world, Eliot explains it according to Advaita Vedānta through the three concepts: *māyā* (“illusion”), *avidyā* (“ignorance”) and *adhyāsa* (“superimposition”).

Every ordinary experience, such as the perception of the phenomenological world, ie, concrete material objects, facts, events, processes and situations of daily life, originates from the senses; being so, such a perception is not real, since it is a limited experience. It will be recalled that Brahman is real and true because it is unlimited, but to Brahman as un-real is wrong, and even more, to consider the un-real, ie the world, for real is also wrong. Such a confusion arises because of the power of *māyā* - the illusion. Any time one enounces expressions like "I", "my," "mine," one is limiting and creating a separation between subject and object -and Brahman is unlimited oneness.

Furthermore, Eliot explains that all attachments, sufferings, aversions, fears and dreams, are stained by *māyā*, and that all memories, intellectual knowledge, perceptions and logical formulations take their foundations in *māyā*, due to the fact that *māyā* exists every time we are unable to recognize the "unity" of the Real.

Within the explanation of Eliot, we can understand that this inability to recognize reality or the confusion about it, is produced because the inherent limitations of the senses are imposed upon reality; that is to say, it is because *māyā* has the power to deceive, to hide, to manipulate, to dissimulate or to distort reality, and this is so because *māyā* is the ordinary experience of the senses. If you observe serenely, you may become aware that the vast majority of times, not to say

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p.1 y 2

every time, the appearances are being taken for reality, and that which is imagination-illusion becomes the real. For example, in a conflict situation, there will be two versions of the same event and this is due to the intervention of *māyā* in the perception of the conflict which doesn't allow us to see in accordance with reality.

Now, this *māyā* is manifested because of the predominance of *avidyā* ("ignorance") in it. It is this *avidyā* which does not allow us to perceive reality as it is, it is imposing itself, inverting reality, and it is rooted in *adhyāsa* (superimposition). To understand the process of *adhyāsa*, we will resort to the explanation of how it arises and how we become subtly conditioned. Since the time of our conception, all kinds of impressions enter through the sense doors, producing patterns, of behavior ways of thinking; we learn to distinguish shapes and colors, smells, etc. All this knowledge is stored in the our mind and subsequently used to produce superimposition, that is to say to judge people, objects or situations in advance, before knowing the reality about them. Because the comprehension of the world entered through the sense doors, then it is natural but not correct, that we should take the phenomenological world for reality. It will be recalled that for Advaita Vedānta, the phenomenological world is an illusion, the result of ignorance- *avidyā*, based on superimposition-*adhyāsa*.

Shankara explains the process of *adhyāsa* with the famous example of the rope and the snake. A person, entering his room in the dark, manages to see on the floor the shadow of a snake, gets scared and believes there is a snake in his room, but as the light is turned on, he realizes that it was just a rope thrown on the floor. The belief that there was a snake on the ground was superimposed over the reality of the rope. Thus *adhyāsa* consists in attributing to something the qualities of something else. This *adhyāsa* is manifested because there is a previous knowledge of the serpent and due to the shape of the rope, which induces the belief that there is a snake. The

same thing happens with the Brahman; the masters explain that the Brahman is the reality but nevertheless the world superimposes itself as reality.

## 1.2 The search for the Absolute (the “True Self”)

### 1.2.1 The methods of practice referred to in the *Upanishads*

The importance of meditation, lies in the fact that it is only through it that we can attain the Ātman-Brahman; this is precisely what the *Mundaka Upanishad* emphasizes: "The Ātman is attained through the truth and through *tapas* (meditation), from them true wisdom and chastity arise. The sages who attempt it and who are pure, they see it in their body in its glorious and luminous purity."<sup>70</sup>

In the *Kaushitaki, Chāndogya, Katha, Kena, Mundaka, Prashna, Maitri* and *Mandukya Upanishads*, references can be found to four meditation techniques. 1) the inquiry "Who am I? 2) Meditation on the syllable OM. 3) Meditation in silence, and 4) contemplation.

The suggestion to inquire beyond personality, name and form, can be found in the *Kaushitaki Upanishad* which says: "It is not speech that we should want to know, we should want to know the speaker. It is not the seen that we should want to know, we should want to know the seer. It is not sound that we should want to know, we should want to know the hearer. It is not thinking that we should want to know, we should want to know the thinker."<sup>71</sup> In the same line of thought we can read the following lines in the *Chāndogya Upanishad*: "OM. At the centre of the castle of Brahman - our body- there is a tabernacle in the shape of a lotus flower that has a small space

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<sup>70</sup> J. Mascaró-R Crespo, *Los Upanishad*, Editorial Diana, México, 1979. p.64

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p.97



within it. We should find out who dwells there and we should try to know him."<sup>72</sup> There are two ways to reach the knowledge of Brahman, which by extension is the knowledge of oneself.

The first one is based on the cataphatic theology, a term which comes from the Greek *kata-phasis* and means "affirmation". The second one is based on the apophatic theology, which also comes from a Greek term, *apo-phasis*, which means "negation". The path of negative mystic consists in negating all the qualities, however "spiritual" they may be or appear to be, negate all the qualities or concepts, so that in the end only remains what really is. Shankarāchārya, the great Advaita commentator, follows this negative path; his method to find the "speaker", the "seer "..., or" the one who dwells in the small space" consists in asking oneself: "Who am I?"<sup>73</sup> This is done beginning with negating everything that is external and superficial, namely: "I am not the body, nor the combination of the five material elements, nor am I an aggregate of the senses. I am something distinct from all this.

Such is the way to proceed with introspection"<sup>74</sup>. *Sloka* 64 emphasizes that it is imperative, in order to know the Ātman, to negate names and forms, that is to say to negate all that **is not**, so that only remains what truly **is**. It seems that, when one connects to this supreme knowledge, the illusion consisting of identifying with the psyche and with the body disappears and all that remains is the experience of Brahman. Such a pure state of consciousness is described in the *Mundaka Upanishad*: "In the same way as rivers flowing to the Ocean encounter peace in it, while their names and forms disappear, so also the sages freed from name and form, enter into the splendor of the Supreme Spirit, which is larger than all greatness."<sup>75</sup> We can notice that human language is limited to express the experience of Brahman. Shankarāchārya recommends to maintain at all times the thought of Brahman, namely to keep at all time that when much

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p.112-113

<sup>73</sup> *Sloka* 12

<sup>74</sup> *Sloka* 13

<sup>75</sup> J. Mascaró-R Crespo, *Los Upanishad*, Editorial Diana, México, 1979, p.66

attention at other duties is not required, the investigation or inquiry of "Who am I?" The masters of Chán Buddhism also give the same recommendation.

As it is stated in the *Chāndogya Upanishad*, the syllable OM represents the whole universe: "In the same way as the leaves originate from a stem, all words come from the syllable OM. OM is this whole universe. OM is truly this whole universe."<sup>76</sup> Also, in the famous dialogue between Nachiketas and Death in the *Katha Upanishad*, Death tells Nachiketas that "the syllable OM is the imperishable Brahman ... It is the supreme means to salvation ... When one knows this syllable, one is great in Brahman's heaven."<sup>77</sup> Thus, to meditate on the syllable OM is equivalent to meditate on Brahman itself. *Prashna Upanishad* reaffirms this postulate when it states: "The syllable OM is the transcendent Brahman...and at the same time the immanent Brahman. With help of this sacred syllable, the sage attains one or the other.

OM or AUM consists of three phonemes. Whoever, with the help of the three phonemes of the eternal OM, settles his meditative mind on the Supreme Spirit, goes to the luminous regions of the sun. There, he frees himself from all evil and goes to Brahma's heaven from where he can contemplate the Spirit that dwells in the city of the human body ... "<sup>78</sup>

The *Mundaka Upanishad* also talks about establishing "the meditation on OM, on the Ātman, on your own Self"<sup>79</sup> The syllable OM is not only Brahman, but is also considered to be the fourth state of consciousness called *turīya*. This is found in the *Mandukya Upanishad* which states: "The syllable OM, considered as a sound, is the fourth supreme state of consciousness (*turīya*). It is beyond the senses and is the end of evolution. It is indivisibility and love. Whoever knows this, is going with his own being toward the Supreme Being...."<sup>80</sup> The term "the end of evolution" could

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid* p.104

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*. p.34

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*. P.53

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*. p.62

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*. p.67 y 68

be understood as the idea of cutting loose from the wheel of *samsāra*;<sup>81</sup> a sage who attains the end of the evolution of consciousness does not need to be born again.

References to silent meditation are found in the *Chāndogya Upanishad*: "Meditation is in truth loftier than thought. The earth seems to rest in silent meditation .... Whenever a man acquires greatness in this world, he begets his reward according to his meditation"<sup>82</sup> The saying that "the earth seems to rest in silent meditation "can be understood as meaning that the earth, since it does not have a human mind, is aloof of thoughts, therefore, the silence of the earth may be associated with silencing the noise of the mind, calming down the chaotic and pullulating discursive thinking processes. When the silence of the mind is attained, then one is firmly established on the path toward realization, as the *Katha Upanishad* says: "When the five senses and the mind are quiet and reason itself rests in silence, the Path supreme begins "<sup>83</sup> Only the stillness of the mind permits the access to the mystical experience of Brahman; there, neither the intellect nor the senses are involved, there is only silence, a silence that is Brahman. The *Maitri Upanishad* says about this: "There are two ways of contemplation of Brahman: one is loud, the other is silent. With the sound we come close to silence. The sound of Brahman is OM. With OM we proceed toward the goal: the silence of Brahman. The goal is immortality, unity, peace."<sup>84</sup>

Finally, as to the method of contemplation, we can read in the *Katha* and the *Maitri Upanishads*: "When the sage has his mind resting in contemplation of the Divine that transcends the limits of time and dwells invisible in the mystery of things and in man's heart, he rises above joys and sorrows."<sup>85</sup> " ...it is through vision, concord and contemplation that Brahman is reached.. "<sup>86</sup> "Contemplate the divine" can be understood as to contemplate the Lord, Isvara. Sri Ramana

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<sup>81</sup> *Samsāra* – la Rueda de la Vida, es decir, la rueda de renacimientos y muertes frecuentes.

<sup>82</sup> J. Mascaró-R Crespo, *Los Upanishad*, Editorial Diana, México, 1979, p.110-111

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p.42

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p.91

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p.34

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* p.89

Mahārshi said that, as long as a man lives separated from Brahman, that is to say in duality, it is necessary for him to contemplate Isvara, who will lead him toward non-duality.

## 1.2.2 Shankarāchārya and the practice of “*Mahāvākhyā*” (“the Great Vedic Formulas”)

The *Mahāvākhyā* are "Great Sayings", "Great Formulas" or "The Great Contemplations", which are found in the *Upanishads*. The most important *Mahāvākhyā* are four, with each one of them belonging to one of the four *Vedas*. The primary idea of these four statements is to demonstrate non-duality, unity, truth or ultimate reality. These are as follows:

1. *Prajñānam Brahman* - "Brahman is the supreme knowledge" (*Aitareya Upanishad* 3.3 of the *Rig Veda*).
2. *Ayam Ātman Brahman* - "This Self (Ātman) is Brahman" (*Mandukya Upanishad* 1.2 of the *Atharva Veda*)
3. *Tat Tvam Asi* - “This- the Ātman-Brahman, this is what you are” (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7 of the *Sāma Veda*)
4. *Aham Brahmāsmi* - "I am Brahman" (*Brhadāranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10 of the *Yajur Veda*)

***Prajñānam Brahman* - "Brahman is the supreme knowledge"**

“Knowing the absolute reality is the supreme knowledge”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Article “*The Mahāvākyas: Great Contemplations*”

By “supreme knowledge” is meant, in Indian traditional thinking, that what does not change, which is absolute and permanent. All other types of knowledge are impermanent and are derived from, or are part of this supreme knowledge which is not derived from nor dependent on any other, which cannot be expressed in words and can only be found at the level of Brahman, in the unity of universal consciousness. Therefore, Supreme Knowledge is not a process of intellectualization, but is a knowledge of recognition and a state of vigilant awareness. Supreme knowledge is to bring duality to an end, and thus determine that one is the same as Brahman.

### ***Ayam Ātman Brahman - "This Ātman is Brahman"***

“The individual Self is one and the same with the absolute”<sup>88</sup>

In the same way that the waves are not only part of the ocean but are the ocean itself, so the Ātman is part and the same as Brahman.

- “**Ātman** refers to that pure, perfect, eternal spark of consciousness that is the deepest, central core of our being.
- **Brahman** refers to the *oneness* of the manifest and unmanifest universe.”<sup>89</sup>

### ***Tat tvam asi – “That-the Ātman-Brahman, thou art”***

“That absolute reality is the essence of what you really are”<sup>90</sup>

Generally, human beings are identified according to “ images”<sup>91</sup> such as "American," "Hindu," "doctor," "daughter", “wife”, "mom", etc., labels which range from professional titles up to the role to be fulfilled in society; at other times they are identified with the personality, but all these

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*

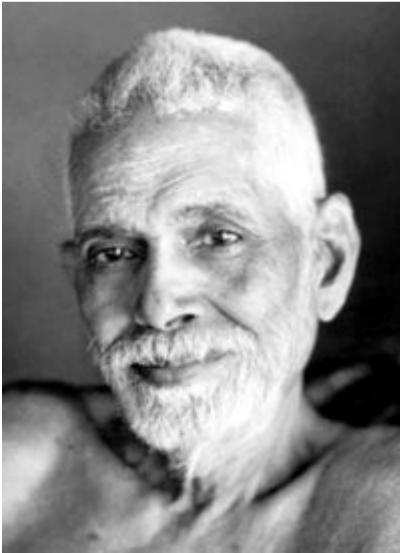
<sup>91</sup> Krishnamurti, *La llama de la atención*. Editorial Edhasa, España 1985.p.59

are only relative identities. The true nature is that we are Brahman, and this Mahāvākya, does remind us who we are.

## 1.3 Life and teachings for a modern Master of Advaita Vedānta:

### Ramana Mahārshi

#### 1.3.1 Brief Biography



**Date of Birth:** 30 december 1879

**Place of birth:** Tiruchuzhi

**Name:** Venkataraman Iyer

**Date of death:** 14 April 1950 (age 70)

**Place of passing away:** [Tiruvannamalai](#)

**Philosophy:** [Advaita Vedānta](#)

**Quote:** “Of all the thoughts that rise in the mind, the thought 'I' is the first thought”.

Master Ramana Mahārshi was named Venkataraman. He was born in an orthodox Brahmin Hindu family in a village named Tiruchuzhi, near Madurai in Tamil Nadu in the South of India. His father was Sundaram Iyer and his mother Azhagammal. He was the second of 4 siblings (2 brothers and 2 sisters). At the age of 12, his father passed away, dying of a sudden illness at the age of 42. This happening made Venkataraman aware of the fragility and ephemeral nature of the human body and the significance of the self. It seems that Venkataraman was a child like all others, very smart but not very dedicated to school and with no much interest for religion. His father wanted him to learn English so that he could work for the government service; this is why at the age of 11

Venkataraman was sent to live with his uncle Dindigul, who was a brother of his father. He was accepted at the Scott's Middle school and later moved for a short time to the American Mission High School.

When young, on a certain occasion he heard the name Arunachala – the sacred mountain, and he was touched by it and became obsessed about going to this place. His closeness to religion began when he started reading the *Periyapuranam* by Sekkilar. This book describes the life of 63 shaivitas (saivite) saints (worshippers of Shiva); he was mesmerized by this reading and his religious beliefs deepened. Later on, moved by devotion, he started to go to the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, which was linked to the practice of *bhakti* (devotion).

At the age of 16, on August 29<sup>th</sup>, he had a mystic experience consisting of an awakening of the consciousness. This experience, in the words of whom later was going to be known as Ramana Maharshi, is described as follows:

"It was in 1896, about 6 weeks before I left Madurai for good (to go to [Tiruvannamalai](#) - Arunachala) that this great change in my life took place. I was sitting alone in a room on the first floor of my uncle's house. I seldom had any sickness and on that day there was nothing wrong with my health, but a sudden violent fear of death overtook me. There was nothing in my state of health to account for it nor was there any urge in me to find out whether there was any account for the fear. I just felt I was going to die and began thinking what to do about it. It did not occur to me to consult a doctor or any elders or friends. I felt I had to solve the problem myself then and there. The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing the words: 'Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies.' And at once I dramatised the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out still as though *rigor mortis* has set in, and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, and that neither the word 'I' nor any word could be uttered. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be



carried stiff to the burning ground and there burn and reduced to ashes. But with the death of the body, am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert, but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of I within me, apart from it. So I am the Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the spirit transcending it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit.' All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truths which I perceived directly almost without thought process. It was something real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with the body was centered on that I. From that moment onwards, the "I" or Self focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death vanished once and for all. The ego was lost in the flood of Self-awareness. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time. Other thought might come and go like the various notes of music, but the "I" continued like the fundamental *sruti* [that which is heard] note which underlies and blends with all other notes."<sup>92</sup>

After this fundamental mystic experience, he lost the little interest he had for school, friends, social relationships and he almost abandoned his mundane existence. It seems that he enjoyed being alone and in deep meditation. He went every day to the Meenakshi temple in which he used his time meditating and in *samādhi*. His older brother Naga Swāmi, who took notice of the profound change in Venkataraman, scolded him for not paying attention to his studies, arguing that meditation was useless. Venkataraman reflected upon these words and realized that he must make a decision. It is not possible to meditate, reach this state and at the same time take part in every day life.

This is why on September 1, 1896 he decided to leave for the Arunachala sacred mountain, place that had grabbed his attention and that he wanted to see. Knowing that his family would not allow this, he left telling his brother that he was going to a special session at his school. With only four ruppies in his hand, he went to the train station and took a train to Tiruvannamalai. Before

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<sup>92</sup> Article about *Ramana Mahārshi* from Internet. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramana\\_Maharshi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramana_Maharshi)

arriving to his final destination, he had to walk 18 kilometers until the Arayaninallur temple. As soon as he arrived there, he took a seat and quickly reached a state of deep meditation. Upon arriving at Tiruvannamalai, he went to the Arunachala temple, which had its doors and sanctuary open. Also, a priest was there and greeted him. It is said that for him this experience was like coming back home, to where he had always belonged.

During the first weeks he spent his time meditating in the one thousand column hall. Later he was sent to other places in the temple and finally to prevent him from being interrupted during his meditation practice, he was transferred to the lingam Patala area. This was a perfect place where he reached a deep *samādhī* state to the point where he did not feel the insects bites or the pests. A saint named Seshadri Swamigal discovered him and took him under his protection. He covered him and fed him in the mouth so he would not die. Later on, the saint invited him to stay in a temple one mile away from Tiruvannamalai, in this place a Sadhu named Palani Swāmi, who upon seeing the young Venkataraman felt full of joy and peace, decided to serve him and take care of him. In this way he obtained a permanent personal assistant.

Venkataraman spent all his time in silence this alter granted him the name of “the master of silence”. Despite his simple and silent life, he started to attract the attention of visitors. When his uncle learned about his whereabouts, he visited him and asked for him to return home, promising that he would not be disturbed in his ascetic life, but he did not go. In December of 1898 in the Pavalakkunru temple, his mother and brother Naga Swāmi visited him and begged him to come back home, but not even the tears of his mother convince of him to leave the temple.

In 1899 he moved for a short period to the caves of Satguru and Hugh Manasivaya, to later live in the Virupaksha Cave for 17 years.

In 1902, a government employee named Sivaprakasam Pillai, visited Venkataraman to obtain the answer to the question: "How to know one's true identity." The first teaching he gave him was the search method of Self-enquiry. This method was later widely spread, even in a book titled *Nan Yar?* or "Who am I"?

In 1907 he received the visit of Kavyakantha Sri Ganapati Sāstri, a vedic scholar of renowned reputation for his age and knowledge of the *Vedas*. The scholar, after receiving instructions from Venkataraman, proclaimed him Bhagavan Sri Ramana Mahārshi. This is the name given to him from this date onwards.

In 1916, his mother and his youngest brother got together with him. She took the life of a *sannyasin* taking charge of the Ashram's kitchen, while his brother became a *sannyasin*, taking the name of Niranjānānda.

During this period, Sri Ramana Mahārshi composed *The Five Hymns to Arunachala* a devotional lyric poetry masterpiece.

As of 1920, his mother health became weak and she died on May 19th, 1922.

In November of 1948 a deadly cancerous tumor was detected in the arm of Sri Ramana Mahārshi. The doctor of the ashram operated him in February 1949, but another cancerous tumor appeared and he was operated again in March of the same year. The doctor suggested that his arm be amputated in order to preserve his life, but Ramana Mahārshi did not agree. He was later operated again on two occasions in August and December of 1949, but the expected result didn't concretize.

On April 14 of 1950, the breath of Sri Ramana Mahārshi was becoming increasingly imperceptible until it stopped at 8:47 pm. It is said that at that precise moment there was a bright light in the sky.

### Social Context

There is no need to describe in detail the political, social and religious happenings of India in the XX century. There are only 2 events worth mentioning:

1) In the first decade of the XX century, the political leaders of India began to motivate and elevate the political consciousness of the masses, who in turn began to request the independence from the British Empire. The protests took form in the independence movement of Gandhi. This movement was based on peaceful nationalistic activities under the principle of non-violence *ahimsā*.

2) In August 15th of 1947 the territory of India was divided officially in 2 countries: India and Pakistan, created on the based of religious criteria, India for the hindus and Pakistan for the muslims.

These two historical events with worldwide impact did not have any effect on the life of Sri Ramana Mahārashi. His only interest was centered on working with the one-self, the absolute, the Brahman.

Advaita Vedānta explains that the phenomenal world is only the projection of the "Self". In the same way as the world emerges from the "Self", similarly the world returns to the " Self". Therefore, for Ramana Mahārshi, it was more important to work internally within oneself rather than from outside. Viewed in this way, we can understand that the outside world can only be changed when we first change ourselves.

Gandhi was a natural leader to whom the coherence between what is spoken and what was done was of vital importance; he developed a kind of action very different from Ramana Mahārshi, since he tried to improve the external world while acting from the outside. Of course, Gandhi expected from the others what he himself was capable of doing.

Ramana Mahārshi developed a spiritual work which teachings have been embodied in books published by his disciples, and those have served as spiritual guide for the seekers of truth, while Gandhi realized a work of identity recovery and of increased awareness of the Indian people.

Both important contemporary figures became models to mankind and they constituted an example worth to be followed.

### **1.3.2 The doctrine of Sri Ramana Mahārshi**

The teachings of Sri Ramana Mahārshi, were based on the personal experience of having connected oneself with that supreme state of consciousness called "Brahman", "Absolute", "Ātman" or "the Self". From among these four denominations, the last term will be used preferentially, since Sri Ramana Mahārshi used mainly that word. When the Vedic *guru* Kavyakantha Sri Ganapati Sāstri heard the teachings of Ramana Mahārshi, he realized that they corresponded to the same teachings found in the sacred books such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and declared him "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Mahārshi". It is said that it was only after having experienced the highest state of consciousness, which he called "the Self" that he began to read and study the holy books.

Considering that the teachings of Ramana Mahārshi were framed within the tradition of Advaita Vedānta, which has been described in a previous chapter, it is intended hereafter to describe the teachings and/or complementary explanations conducive to the understanding and realization of the Self.

Ramana Mahārshi's doctrine can be summarized in two points:

- 1) Silence. "Silence is the true *upadesha* - teaching. It is perfect *upadesha*. It is only suitable for the more advanced seeker"<sup>93</sup>, and
- 2) The Realization of the Self. All his conversations and explanations point towards investigating diligently and sincerely the "Self".

The visitors tell that, even though he would remain long time in silence, they could obtain answers to their questions. Moreover, the fact of being in the presence of a realized master provided them with a sensation of peace, tranquility and harmony. Later on, the oral teachings that he allowed himself to give, were for the benefit of those who could neither understand silence nor connect themselves to the state of purity that he irradiated.

Ramana Mahārshi explained that it is very important to distinguish between what is real and what is illusory, or for that matter, to distinguish the eternal (real) from the transient (illusory). For this purpose, he would resort to the classic example of the rope that is mistaken for a snake; which is the superimposition of a concept, an idea, a previous image on something that seems to be it, but is not. In the same way, man sees the illusory world as real; this is a superimposition upon the Self. In this regard, Ramana Mahārshi said that the illusory idea of considering the world as real would be removed "when the mind, which is the cause of all cognitions and all actions, is silenced, (then) the world will disappear"<sup>94</sup>, making possible the realization of the Self. Put in other words, when the world, which is that-what-is-seen, will have been removed, then the realization of the Self, which is the very seer, will happen.

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<sup>93</sup> *Pláticas con Sri Ramana Mahārshi*. Tomos I, II y III. Editorial Kier, Buenos Aires 1993. p.591

<sup>94</sup> Ramana Maharshi, *Enseñanzas Espirituales*, Editorial Kairós, Tercera Edición, Barcelona 1992. p.21

Ramana Mahārshi used to explain in various ways about the Self. Nevertheless, as long as we are trying to understand through the intellect, we can only get a superficial understanding and that does not help us much. Genuine understanding will only arise when you have experienced reality.

What is the Self for Ramana Mahārshi? The Self is that state of consciousness where the idea of "I" does not exist, that state which is also called "Silence." When one realizes that the Self is an illusion, then one experiences peace, stillness, tranquility, happiness; these qualities are the experience of the Self. Therefore, the nature of the Self is happiness, and this happiness can be experienced by every human being in daily life, at some time in their life, even for fleeting moments. This means that the Self manifests itself, but in an unconscious way and it is soon overshadowed by the mind; in this way the mind moves in and out, in an alternating movement, going out of the Self and returning back to it.

It should be noted, that the happiness to which Ramana Mahārshi refers himself to, is not dependent on any external object, but is referring to happiness as a state of mind or a state of consciousness called *Turīya*. The three other states of consciousness are: the waking state, the dream state, and deep sleep (without dreams). In the state of deep sleep there are no thoughts and no world perception. In the waking state, together with the dream state, there are thoughts, and there is also the world, and those are only real insofar as one remains in such or such state of consciousness. Once one has come out of sleep or wakefulness, they stop being real. Consequently it can be stated that there is no difference between the waking and the dreaming states, apart from the fact that wakefulness lasts (relatively) a longer time whereas the dream experience is shorter. The affirmation that these states of consciousness are not real is based on the fact that they are subject to change, because they are not permanent, in contrast to the Self, which is absolute.

Ramana Mahārshi explained that "the soul and God are just mental concepts"<sup>95</sup>, that when the mind comes out of the Self, the world appears as real, and the Self does not appear, and when the Self is manifested the world does not manifest. This can be better understood with the following analogy: Just as a spider draws a thread from within itself and then swallows it again within itself, in the same way the mind projects the world out of itself and then re-absorbs it in itself. The world is nothing but thought, thus, when the thoughts disappear, the world disappears and consequently one can experience happiness.

According to Advaita Vedānta it is said that "The Self is the world, the Self is "I", the Self is God (Isvara); all is Shiva, the Self."<sup>96</sup> What we can understand is that, if man sees himself separate and distinct from Isvara, it is because he has not realized the Self, otherwise he would be aware that the world is a projection of the Self. The world, *jīva* - individual soul and God- Isvara are manifestations of the Self. Consequently to devote oneself to God is equivalent to abiding in the Self.

Abiding in calmness and dissolving the mind in the Self, this is what is called wisdom. Self realization depends on the Grace of the Master, or of the Lord (Isvara) rather than on teachings, conferences, meditation which only constitute secondary aids. "...Grace means the presence or revelation of the Lord...Grace is the very nature of the Lord"<sup>97</sup>. What we must understand is that Isvara, the witness of *jīva* is identical to *jīva*, but as long as the "I" exists, it is necessary to accept the Lord, *i.e.* Isvara.

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<sup>95</sup> *Pláticas con Sri Ramana Maharshi*. Tomos I, II y III. Editorial Kier, Buenos Aires 1993. p. 227

<sup>96</sup> Ramana Maharshi, *Enseñanzas Espirituales*, Editorial Kairós, Tercera Edición, Barcelona 1992. p.27

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, p.44-45



"The individual soul, taking the shape of 'I,' is this very ego"<sup>98</sup> which is the cause of suffering, ill-being, and once it has been destroyed it is called Liberation - *Moksa*. Consequently, to realize the Self means to attain freedom from the slavery of chaotic and random thinking.

The goal of Self realization is the destruction of the feeling of "I" and "mine", to reach the state of silence which transcends thought and speech. This is possible through the paths of knowledge and of devotion; which both eliminate the feeling of "mine". The path of knowledge is to know the truth that the self is no different from the Lord, Isvara, and this is Self realization. It is also explained that "the Path of Knowledge tries to figure out how the separation from Reality is produced"<sup>99</sup>

"What we call the Self is the Ātman."

Regarding the mind, Ramana Mahārshi stated that the nature of the mind is thoughts and the world is but the projection of thoughts. Therefore, mind only exists in relation to something gross, which means that when the mind comes out through the brain and sense-doors, names and forms appear, but when the mind abides in the heart, names and forms disappear. The abode of the Self is located in the heart, on the right side of the chest, and mind dwells in the Self.

"I" and the mind are the same. The thought of "I" arises in the heart and this is the place where mind originates. The thought of "I" is the first thought in the mind and that is ego. "There are no two minds, one good and the other one bad; mind is only one."<sup>100</sup> What we should understand is that if the mind is under negative influences it is said to be unwholesome, but if the mind is under good influences, it will be said that the mind is wholesome.

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p.39

<sup>99</sup> *Pláticas con Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Tomos I, II y III. Editorial Kier, S.A, Buenos Aires, 1993. p.26

<sup>100</sup> Ramana Maharshi, *Enseñanzas Espirituales*, Editorial Kairós, Tercera Edición, Barcelona 1992. p.25

Ramana Mahārshi recommended to renounce both aversion and greed; the absence of desire is precisely wisdom. We must think, and better even feel, that everything we give to others is given to oneself. True detachment consists in keeping on destroying thoughts until we reach the Self.

As can be observed, throughout all the teachings expressed by Ramana Mahārshi, he never departed from the idea of Self-realization, about which we can say that it is silence, i.e. the silence of mind.

### **1.3.3 Method: “Investigation of the Self” – *Ātmavicāra***

Achieving happiness is the conscious or unconscious purpose of every human being. In spite of this, pain, suffering and discomfort arise in our lives. Ramana Mahārshi considered that happiness is the very nature of one self; this is experienced in the state of deep sleep where there is neither thought nor world. Self realization may be compared to the experience of the state of deep sleep while in the waking state. In order to experience the Self, Ramana Mahārshi taught the method of inquiry of “Who am I?” It is based on the path of apophatic mystique, which consist in denying any illusory identification about one, so that only remains that what really is.

The technique consists in investigating and incorporating the thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc. which appear during meditation, that is to say, if thoughts arise, ask oneself: “ To whom is this thought happening?” If some physical pain arises, ask oneself: “To whom is pain occurring?” etc. The answer will be. "To me". Then, ask: “Who am I? Who am I?” In this way, "the mind will return to its origin, and thinking that had arisen will quiet down."<sup>101</sup> It is recommended to maintain as far as possible this investigation running all the time. If doubt arises, one should further investigate: “Who is with doubts?” The answer is "me," thus we keep on asking: “Who am I?”

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p.23

The method consist in:

1. “The gross body which is composed of the seven humours (*dhātus*), I am not; the five cognitive sense organs, *viz.* the senses of hearing, touch, sight, taste, and smell, which apprehend their respective objects, *viz.* sound, touch, colour, taste, and odour, I am not; the five cognitive sense-organs, *viz.* the organs of speech, locomotion, grasping, excretion, and procreation, which have as their respective functions speaking, moving, grasping, excreting, and enjoying, I am not; the five vital airs, *prāna*, etc., which perform respectively the five functions of in-breathing, etc., I am not; even the mind which thinks, I am not; the nescience too, which is endowed only with the residual impressions of objects, and in which there are no objects and no functioning's, I am not”.<sup>102</sup>
2. If I am none of this, then who am I?
3. After negating all of the above-mentioned as 'not this', 'not this', that Awareness which alone remains - that I am”<sup>103</sup>

The thought of "Who am I?" will destroy all other thoughts, and then comes the Realization of the Absolute.

Ramana Mahārshi considered that the practice of the inquiry of the Self was for "mature souls", and those who do not feel capable of practicing this method should choose another one better adapted to their mental condition.

The method of breathing also calms the mind, but the limitation is that if you stop breathing, the mind goes back to thoughts. The other methods like the meditation on God, the repetition of mantras, or restriction of food aid to calm the mind, but are not conducive to knowledge of the Self.

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p.19

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, p.19-20

Ramana Mahārshi recommended eating *satvic* food (fruits, vegetables, cereals) in order to enhance the *satvic* qualities of mind, and among the rules of conduct for a practitioner must follow are: moderation in food, moderation in sleep and moderation in speech.

One must practice until the feeling of "I" and "mine" no longer exists, or put the attention on "tracking the origin of thoughts"<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *Pláticas con Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Tomos I, II y III. Editorial Kier, Buenos Aires, 1993. p.21

## Chapter II

### 2. The Absolute in Chán Buddhism

#### 2.1 Sudden awakening<sup>105</sup> and the antecedent of *Huàtóu-Chán*

##### Sudden Awakening experiences from the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni

To begin with, the tale of the Buddha's own Awakening at the foot of the *Bodhi* tree can be viewed as a typical case of Sudden Awakening (of course following many years of intense spiritual practice –namely six years of asceticism), when the Master dispelled all traces of ignorance from his mind, while he was witnessing the rise of the morning star in the sky. It is safe to consider that all the lineages of the “Transmission of the Lamp” start from this very moment.

After this historical happening, when the Buddha decided to share his understanding with the whole of suffering mankind, he first directed his steps towards the Park of the Deers in Sarnath where the “Group of the Five” was abiding, in order to predicate unto them his First Sermon. And when Kondañña, upon hearing the Buddha expound the Four Noble Truths, realized the undefiled vision of the unconditioned truth, which prompted the Buddha to exclaim “*Aññasi vata bho Kondañño, aññasi vata bho Kondañño*” (“Kondañña has understood indeed, Kondañña has understood indeed!”), it was the first case of a disciple “experiencing Great Awakening under the Words of the Buddha” (*yánxià dàwù*). Due to this realization the ascetic Kondañña received the name of Aññāta Kondañña-“Kondañña who knows”.<sup>106</sup> It is unclear whether Aññāta Kondañña attained only the experience of Stream Entry, as some scholars do suggest, or the full fruit of *Arhatship* at that moment. In any case the first discourse of the Buddha was immediately followed

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<sup>105</sup> In this essay the term “awakening” will be privileged over the commonly used term “enlightenment”, since the latter may simply refer to yogic experiences bearing no relationship to genuine realization of the absolute truth, and is therefore of ambiguous usage.

<sup>106</sup> Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, p.45, *Vinaya, Mahāvagga, Khandhaka, I*

by the second “Discourse on No-self” (*Anattalakkhana-sutta*) after which all the rest of the Group of Five attained the undefiled vision of the truth. “Now while this discourse was being delivered the hearts of the *bhikkhus* of the Group of Five were liberated from taints through not clinging. And there were then six *Arahants*, six “accomplished ones” in the world”.<sup>107</sup>

Those moments represent the very beginning of the Buddha’s ministry and of the birth of the Buddha- *samgha*.

Later on, the scriptures report about such cases as of the ascetic Bāhiya who attained great awakening when the Buddha instructed him that he should train himself in this way: “In the seen there will be just the seen; in the heard, just the heard, in the sensed, just the sensed; in the cognized, just the cognized. etc.”<sup>108</sup> and of the murderer Angulimāla who awakened to reality after he had the following dialogue with the Buddha:

- “Stop, monk: stop, monk”
- “I have stopped, Angulimāla, do you stop also.”
- ...“While you are walking, monk, you tell me you have stopped; but now when I have stopped you say I have not stopped. I ask you, O monk, what is the meaning of it? How is it you have stopped and I have not?”
- “Angulimāla, I have stopped forever, forswearing violence to every breathing thing, but you have no restraint towards anything. So that is why I have stopped and you have not.”

It is assumed that under these words Angulimāla attained the fruit of Stream-Entry, which prompted him to request the acceptance into the Buddha’s order of monks, and after deepening his practice realized the final fruit of complete Sainthood.

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<sup>107</sup> Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, p.47, *Vinaya, Mahāvagga, Khandhaka, I, Samyutta-nikāya* XXII,59

<sup>108</sup> Bhikkhu Ñānananda, *Concept and Reality*, p.29; *The Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon, Udāna: Verses of Uplift*, p.10, Oxford University Press, 1948

“...Then, dwelling alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent and self-controlled, the venerable Angulimāla by realization himself with direct knowledge here and now entered upon and dwelt in that supreme goal of the Holy Life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the house life into homelessness. He knew directly: “Birth is exhausted, the Holy Life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come”. And the venerable Angulimāla became one of the *Arahants*.”<sup>109</sup>

In Song dynasty’s China Chán theorists elaborated what seems to be the legend of the Buddha “upholding a flower” in front of a stunned audience, and of Mahā Kashyapa’s face illuminated by a large smile while he received the esoteric “transmission beyond words” (*jiāowài biéchuán*). We should pay attention to the fact that nowhere in the Indian scriptures can we find any reference to this happening<sup>110</sup>.

However, based on this story Mahā Kashyapa would be considered as the first Indian Patriarch of such a transmission beyond words and the significance of the “upholding of the flower” enters in the long list of the *gōng’àn* and *huàtóu* used until today by Chán practitioners in China, Korea and Japan as a meditation device.

After a long theoretical lineage of patriarchs in India, we arrive to the Chinese territory with the odyssey of the Indian sage Bodhidharma who led his first Chinese disciple Huike towards awakening through the famous dialogue which essence can be resumed by the sentences:

- “My mind is anxious. Please pacify it.”
- “Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it.”
- “Although I’ve sought it, I cannot find it.”
- “There, your mind has been pacified.”

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<sup>109</sup> Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, p.135--140, *Majjhima Nikāya*, 86

<sup>110</sup> According to the opinion of Wu Yi in his book *Chán yu Lao-Zhuang*, Taipei 1970

This story has entered into the archives of the Chán School as the “*anxin-gong’an*”, “the *gōng’àn* of Pacifying the Mind”

Thereafter, follows a more or less legendary succession of five Patriarchs up to the Sixth Patriarch Huìnéng (638-713). It should be noted that the stories of awakening linking one Patriarch to the next are strangely similar in their essence to the transmission of the awakening experience between Bodhidharma and Huike.

In the text of the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* we can witness a case of sudden awakening upon hearing a phrase from the Buddha-scriptures:

“..I found a man reciting a sūtra. As soon as I heard the text of this sutra my mind at once became enlightened. ...I was told that it was the *Diamond Sūtra*.”<sup>111</sup>

It is followed by the appearance of some of the first *gōng’àn* attributed to a Chinese master.

We can find a whole string of *gōng’àn* in *The Platform Sūtra*, starting with the famous *gātha* which stands as an answer to the stanza of Shénxiù:

“There is no Bodhi tree,  
Nor stand of a mirror bright.  
Since all is void,  
Where can the dust alight?”<sup>112</sup>

The former Sudden Awakening attained on the occasion of the first hearing of the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra* is deepened at the moment of formal transmission of the Dharma between Hóngrèn and Huìnéng.

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<sup>111</sup> Wong-mou Lam, p.12

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p.18



“...he expounded the Diamond Sūtra to me. When he came to the sentence, “One should use one’s mind in such a way that it will be free from any attachments” I at once became thoroughly enlightened, and realized that all things in the universe are the essence of mind itself.”<sup>113</sup>

The content of that experience is described as follows:

“Who would have thought that the Essence of the Mind is intrinsically pure? Who would have thought that the Essence of the Mind is intrinsically free from becoming or annihilation! Who would have thought that the Essence of the Mind is intrinsically self-sufficient! Who would have thought that the Essence of the Mind is intrinsically free from change! Who would have thought that all things are the manifestation of the Essence of the Mind!”<sup>114</sup>

After this transmission of the Chán dharma to Huìnéng, his life suddenly seems to be in danger due to undefined “jealousies”.

To Huímíng (Huishun in the Dunhuang version), who was at first pursuing Huìnéng and thereafter asked for some teachings, Huìnéng said: “When you are thinking of neither good nor evil, what is at that particular moment, Venerable Sir, your real nature (lit., original face)?”...

It is well known that the search for the “Original Face” (“before both parents give birth to me”- *fùmǔ wèi shēng yǐqián zhī běnlái miànmù*) will become in time one of the most favoured *huàtóu* practiced in the Chán tradition.<sup>115</sup>

“What I can tell you is not esoteric, if you turn your light inwardly<sup>116</sup>, you will find what is esoteric within you.” ...Now thanks to your guidance, I know it (my self-nature) as a water-drinker knows how hot or how cold the water is. Lay brother, you are now my teacher.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> slightly different in the Dunhuang version, Wing-tsit Chán, p.41

<sup>114</sup> Wong-mou Lam, p.19, (doesn’t appear in the Dunhuang version, cf. Wing-tsit Chan, p.41)

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Neubauer, Renaud “La Indagación del “¿Quién soy yo?” en el *Advaita Vedānta* y la practica del *Huàtóu* en el Buddhismo Chán”.

“It happened that one day, when a pennant was blown about by the wind, two *bhikkhus* entered into as dispute as to what it was that was in motion, the wind or the pennant. As they could not settle their difference I submitted to them that it was neither, and that what actually moved was their own mind.”<sup>118</sup>

These are among the most famous *gōng’àn* attributed to Huìnéng in the *Platform Sūtra*.

Among the first great disciples in Huìnéng’s lineage, the Patriarch Mǎzǔ Dàoyī (馬祖道一709–788) was a disciple of Nányue Húairàng (677-744), and illustrated himself due to his paradoxical behaviour and strange utterances. He is supposed to be the first in using unconventional teaching methods like sudden shoutings, surprise blows with a stick, calling a person by his name as he is leaving. He also employed silent gestures, non-responsive answers to questions, and was known to grab and twist the nose of a disciple.

In the *Transmission of the Lamp* compiled in 1004, Mǎzǔ is described in the following terms: "His appearance was remarkable. He strode along like a bull and glared about him like a tiger. If he stretched out his tongue, it reached up over his nose; on the soles of his feet were imprinted two circular marks." All these external signs would definitely signal him as an outstanding man (the *mahāpurusha* of the Indian tradition).

Utilizing a variety of unexpected shocks, his teaching methods challenged both habit and vanity, a push that might inspire suddenly the *seeing of one's true nature*.

Mǎzǔ was fond of using the *gōng’án* "What the mind is, this is precisely what the Buddha is."

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<sup>116</sup> *Huíguāng fǎn zhào*; this expression will sum up in later *Huàtóu* Chán practice the essential aspect of the introspective attitude implied by this technique (see Renaud Neubauer, “La práctica del *Huàtóu* en la tradición del Buddhismo Chán”)

<sup>117</sup> Wong-mou Lam, p.21, (doesn’t appear in the Dunhuang version, cf. Wing-tsit Chan, p.41)

<sup>118</sup> Wong Mou-Lam, p. 22; (this story doesn’t appear in the Dunhuang version, cf. Wing-tsit Chan, p.41)

Among his followers the most outstanding ones were Huángbò Xīyùn (黃檗希運, + 850; disciple of Bǎizhàng Huáihǎi (720-840) and teacher of Línjì Yìxuán) and Línjì Yìxuán (臨濟義玄) (?–866).

The *Record of Linji -Línjì-lù*) is considered to be the king of all the Chán *loggia* (*yǔlù*) and an important source of *gōng'àns*. The awakening story of Línjì, relating how he went thrice to see Huángbò and ask him about the way, and was beaten up thrice, is a famous episode in the formation of the Línjì-school. Here is one of the references to this story inside the *Record of Linji*.

“A monk asked: “Master, to what house (school) belong the tunes that you are singing? Which lineage are you following?”

“When I was dwelling at Huáng Bò’s place, I asked a question thrice and was beaten thrice”.

The monk hesitated. Then the Master shouted at him, and after that he hit him, saying: “We cannot nail a stake in empty space!”<sup>119</sup>

Master Línjì is famous for his iconoclastic tendencies, as can be seen from the following passage:

“Followers of the Way [of Chán], if you want to get the kind of understanding that accords with the Dharma, never be misled by others. Whether you're facing inward or facing outward, whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you meet a Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet a Patriarch, kill the Patriarch. If you meet an *Arhat*, kill the *Arhat*. If you meet your parents, kill your parents. If you meet your kinfolk, kill your kinfolk. Then for the first time you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go.”<sup>120</sup>

An important aspect of Linji’s teachings, which pervades the whole of later Chán tradition, is the equivalence drawn between the experience of Awakening, i.e. “Seeing into one’s Own-Nature”

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<sup>119</sup> Translation by Renaud Neubauer

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*

and the experience of encountering the subject of the actions of seeing, hearing, thinking, etc., as can be understood from the following examples:

“Do you want to know who the Buddha or Patriarch is? He is no other than the one who is, at this moment, right in front of me, listening to my talk on the Dharma. You have no faith in him and therefore you are in quest of someone else somewhere outside. And what will you find? Nothing but words and names, however excellent. You will never reach the moving spirit in the Buddha or patriarch. Make no mistake.”<sup>121</sup>

“O Venerable Sirs, let us take hold of this person who handles these reflections. For he is the source of all the Buddhas and the house of truth-seekers everywhere. The body made up of the four elements does not understand how to discourse or how to listen to a discourse. Nor do the liver, the stomach, the kidneys, the bowels. Nor does the vacuity of space. That which is most unmistakably perceivable right before your eyes, though without form, yet absolutely identifiable -- this is what understands the discourse and listens to it.

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More clearly even:

“O Followers of the Way, Mind has no form and penetrates every corner of the universe. In the eye it sees, in the ear it hears, in the nose it smells, in the mouth it talks, in the hand it seizes, in the leg it runs. The source is just one illuminating essence, which divides itself into six functioning units. Let all interfering thoughts depart from Mind, and you experience emancipation wherever you go. What do you think is my idea of talking to you

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<sup>121</sup> *The Sayings of Master Rinzai (A Selection)*, Translation by D.T. Suzuki

<sup>122</sup> *ibid*

like this? I simply wish to see you stop wandering after external objects, for it is because of this hankering that the old masters play tricks on you. “<sup>123</sup>

The following famous dialogue is also a demonstration of the “True Man “ that the Chán practice must unveil, and which is discovered “turning the radiance of the mind inward in order to illuminate the origin (of the mind)”:

“Having ascended the teaching platform, the Master said: “On top of this lump of red flesh (the human body) there is a True man of No-abode (the True Self; the Self-Nature). He constantly comes in and out from the openings in the face of all of you people (This is the “spiritual knowledge”- *língzhī*- thanks to which the sense organs and the cognitive faculties can function).<sup>124</sup>

Those who haven’t realized it, look carefully. At that moment a monk came out and asked: “How is this True man of No-abode”? The Master came down from his preaching platform and grabbed him saying: “Speak out, speak out!” That monk hesitated. The Master let him go and said: “The True Man of No-abode is some kind of shit-stick! “After that he returned to his cell.””<sup>125</sup>

This iconoclastic statement evokes immediately to our mind the famous dialogue in the *Zhuangzi* where it was stated that the Dao is omnipresent, and that it can even be found in urine and excrements:

“Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, “This thing called the Way-where does it exist?”

Chuang Tzu said, “There is no place it doesn’t exist.”

“Come”, said Master Tung-kuo, “you must be more specific!”...

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid*

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Neubauer, Renaud “La Indagación del “¿Quién soy yo?” en el *Advaita Vedānta* y la práctica del *Huàtóu* en el Buddhismo Chán”.

<sup>125</sup> Translated by Renaud Neubauer

“How can it be so low?”

“It is in the piss and the shit!” Master Tung-kuo made no reply.”<sup>126</sup>

In the following iconoclastic statement Master Línjì emphasizes that all concepts, even the loftiest ones, those which seem so sacred to Buddhism, actually constitute a mental hindrance:

“Followers of the Way, when you come to view things as I do, you are able to sit over the heads of the Enjoyment- and Transformation-Buddhas; the Bodhisattvas who have successfully mounted the scale of ten stages look like hirelings; those who have attained the stage of full enlightenment resemble prisoners in chains; the *Arhats* and Pratyeka-Buddhas are cesspools; Bodhi and *Nirvāna* are a stake to which donkeys are fastened. Why so? Because. O Followers of the Way, you have not yet attained the view whereby all *kalpas* are reduced to Emptiness. When this is not realized, there are all such hindrances. It is not so with the true man who has insight into Reality. He gives himself up to all manner of situations in which he finds himself in obedience to his past karma. He appears in whatever garments ready for him to put on. As it is desired of him either to move or to sit quietly, he moves or sits. He has not a thought of running after Buddhahood. He is free from such pinings. Why is it so with him? Says an ancient sage, "When the Buddha is sought after, he is the cause of transmigration."

“There is just one parenthood for you, and outside of it what do you wish to acquire? Just look within yourselves. The Buddha tells us the story of Yajñadatta. Thinking he had lost

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<sup>126</sup> *Zhuangzi*, XXII, “Knowledge Wandered North”, in *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, p.240-1

his head, he wildly ran after it; but when he found that he had never lost it, he became a peaceful man. O Followers of the Way, be just yourselves, stop your hysterical antics.”<sup>127</sup>

After Línjì, one of the most important Chán Master during the Táng dynasty was Zhàozhōu Cōngshěn (趙州從諗; 778–897), who got awakened when his master Nánquán Pǔyuàn (南泉普願, 748–835) said to him: “The ordinary state of mind is the Dao” *píng cháng xīn shìdào*, (平常心是道)

Zhàozhōu’s gōng’àn constitutes a main source for the main huàtóus practiced until present days in the Far-East; among the important huàtóu assigned to him we can find the following ones:

1. - “Does this dog also possess Buddha Nature?”
  - “Wú!!!”
  2. - “What is the Buddha?”
  - “The cypress in the courtyard.”
  3. - “What is the Buddha?”
  - “Three pounds of hemp!”
  4. “Go and drink a cup of tea!”
  5. “The ten thousand *dharmas* go back to the One; where does the One go back to?”
- (*wànfǎ guī yī, yī guī hé chù?* 萬法歸一，一歸何處)

To the challenging question brought up by Master Nánquán while he was upholding a cat during a quarrel between two monks: “If nobody can utter a word I’ll kill the cat, if someone speaks a word I’ll also kill the cat.”

Zhàozhōu, who arrived later, was the only one who could give an answer, putting one shoe on his head.

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<sup>127</sup> *The Sayings of Master Rinzei* (A Selection), Translation by D.T. Suzuki

One other brilliant star in the spiritual firmament of Tang dynasty Buddhism was Yúnmén Wényan (860-949). He was known as a great enemy of the use of words and teachings. Yúnmén shared the same iconoclastic tendencies as Línjì as can be seen, when, referring himself once to the birth of the Buddha, he said: “If I had been there I would have stabbed him to death and given his corpse to the dogs. I would have thus served greatly peace and harmony in this world!”<sup>128</sup>

As we arrive to the time of the Song dynasty, Hongzhi Zhengxiu (1091-1157), while promoting the practice of silent contemplation, *mòzhào-chán*, criticized the use of *gōng’àn*, saying that it was against the basic tenet of the Chán school which is “to avoid words and concepts”, and presented the danger of creating a dependence on the intellect, to the contrary of the meditation on emptiness, and without support, which he deemed to be the only one capable to lead the practitioner toward awakening.<sup>129</sup>

Contemporary to him was Dàhuì Zōnggāo (1089-1163), a disciple of Yuánwù Keqin (Yuánwù, “Perfect Awakening” was a title bestowed on him by the Song Emperor Huizōng<sup>130</sup>), nicknamed “the second coming of Línjì”<sup>131</sup>.

In that time people started to consider that the golden age of Chán teachings had reached to an end with Yúnmén, and started to recollect the words and footprints of previous Patriarchs. Such endeavours coincided, in Dàhuì’s times, with the broader diffusion of the use of *gōng’àn* as a means to check the level of understanding of Chán students. The first one to devote himself to such a task was Xuědòu Chóngxiǎn (雪竇重顯, 980-1052), Fourth Patriarch in the Yúnmén School, in his collection of *Hundred Verses on Old Cases* 頌古百則. Among the hundred examples quoted by Xuědòu, eighteen were anecdotes related to Yúnmén. This first anthology of ancient cases of awakening became so famous that about sixty years later Yuánwù saw himself in the

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<sup>128</sup> cf. Jacques Brosse p.150

<sup>129</sup> cf. Jacques Brosse p.151

<sup>130</sup> *The Blue Cliff Record*, Introduction, p. xxii

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p.xxii



obligation to comment on them, producing thus the famous compilation *The Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyān-lu*). However this book has got the reputation to be of difficult understanding.

In the same order of ideas, the *Wúmén-guān* 無門關, or *Chán Zōng Wúmén Guān* 禪宗無門關, compiled by Wúmén Huìkāi (無門慧開, 1183-1260), is a selection of 48 gōng'àn considered to be more accessible than the *Blue Cliff Record*; the title of the book is translated either as *The Gateless Gate*, or *The Chán School's Gateless Barrier* or *The Gateless Checkpoint of the Chán Lineage*, or *The Gateless Passage*, *The Gateless Barrier* or *The Gateless Checkpoint*. It was first published in 1229. Master Yuelin Zhiguan had instructed his disciple Huìkāi to meditate on Zhàozhōu's character *wú*; after six years dedicated to that practice, Huìkāi became so eager to encounter the answer that he decided to give up sleep until he would awaken to its meaning.

Dàhuì burnt the printing blocks of the *Blue Cliff record* which had become very popular, in spite of it having been authored by his own master, because he considered that there was a great danger in utilizing the gōng'àn in a stereotyped and overly intellectual way, not conducive to a genuine understanding and authentic awakening. He therefore devised the method of focusing on the “key-word” (*huàtóu*) of each “encounter dialogue”.<sup>132</sup>

This method became quickly the most popular meditation device in Chinese Chán practice starting from the Yuán and Míng dynasties, thanks in particular to the influence of three great masters: Gāofēng Yuánmiào (高峰原妙 1238-1295), and his disciple Zhōngfēng Míngběn (中峰明本 1263-1323), and later Hanshān Déqīng (憨山德清; 1545-1623), this last master being credited with the stress laid on the *huàtóu* “Who is invoking the name of the Buddha (Amitabhā-念佛是誰)?” which had already been initiated by Zhōngfēng and was to become prevalent throughout modern times,

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<sup>132</sup> Jiang Wu, “Problems with Enlightenment; the Performance of Encounter Dialogues in Seventeenth Century Chinese Chán Buddhism”, The University of Arizona, <http://www.acmuller.net/zen-sem/2005/wu.html>

especially with the teaching of masters like Láiguǒ and Xūyún. The formulation of this huàtóu continues the long trend in Chinese Buddhism to unify opposite tendencies, like in this case combining the practice Pure Land Buddhism (淨土宗), the Niànfó念佛, with the Chán practice of *Kànhuà chán* 看話禪.<sup>133</sup>

Gāofēng and Zhōngfēng belonged to the Zuxian lineage of Southern Chán, which constituted the mainstream of the Chán School during the Yuan dynasty. Its main characteristic was that the masters of this school maintained almost no contact with the imperial court and the outside world and used to remain living for very long periods of time deep in the mountains. They were closely related with the lower classes of society and lower officials and considered the *kànhuà* practice to be the “authentic effort” (*zhēnshí gōngfū*) required for the Chán realization.

Gāofēng focused his teachings on Zhàozhōu’s huàtóu “The ten thousand dharma go back to the One; where does the One go back to?”, which he privileged over “the character *wú* of Zhàozhōu”, considering that it was of more help in order to arise the “feeling of doubt”, which is of such great importance for the progress in one’s practice. As “the One” refers to the one mind, this huàtóu can be considered to be an equivalent of the huàtóu “*Shì shénmo?* i.e.” “What is the Mind?”

Zhōngfēng was a master whose influence on the areas and countries bordering China was very deep, since he received as disciples Mongolians, Nanzhao people, Koreans, Japanese, etc.

One of the main huàtóu that he taught, in addition to “Who is invoking the name of the Buddha?” was: “In which place may I firmly establish my body and my destiny after the four great elements

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. Neubauer, Renaud “La Indagación del “¿Quién soy yo?” en el *Advaita Vedānta* y la practica del *Huàtóu* en el Buddhismo Chán”.

(which constitute the physical body) have scattered?” (*Sìdà fēnsǎn hòu, jiāng yú hé chǔ ān shēn lì mìng?* - 四大 分散後, 將於何處 安身立命)”.<sup>134</sup>

The essence of huàtóu practice is that the problem it represents cannot under any circumstance be resolved by the rational mind. The *huàtóu* is therefore a powerful device to silence the discursive mind; this is realized by focusing on the ineffable aspect of the question; that is to say on the impossibility to “know” the answer in a logical manner. As we saw previously, this is what is known in the history of religion as negative or apophatic mysticism, or theology.

It is very similar to what we find in a dialogue of the *Zhuangzi* which says: “No-Beginning said, “Not to understand is profound; to understand is shallow. Not to understand is to be on the inside; to understand is to be on the outside.” Thereupon Grand Purity gazed up and sighed, saying: “Not to understand is to understand? To understand is not to understand? Who understands the understanding that does not understand?”<sup>135</sup>

This is also in the vein of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a classical handbook in catholic contemplation from XIVth century’s England, which states that the deepest we experience our ignorance about the true nature of God, the closest we get to a genuine knowledge of Him. Quoting (pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite (St. Denys) it says: “The most divine knowledge of God is that which is known by not-knowing”<sup>136</sup>

When working with a huàtóu the practitioner should enter deeply into the feeling of not knowing, or “feeling of doubt” (*yíqíng*), and through it realize various levels of profound silence of the mind, one of which corresponds to a state of perfect oneness of the mind (*dǎchéng yīpiàn*) in which the

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<sup>134</sup> *ibid*

<sup>135</sup> *Zhuangzi*, XXII, “Knowledge Wandered North”, in *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, p.243

<sup>136</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 70, p. 139 (*La Nube del No-Saber*, 70, Anónimo Inglés s. XIV, p.195-6)

duality between subject and object is obliterated; this will in due time enable him to awaken to reality.

The following poem by a Yuan Dynasty Chán Master represents a good illustration of the complete cycle of this practice:

**Discourse on the *Dharma* by Master Gütán Héshǎng (古潭和尚法語)<sup>137</sup>**

“If you wish to practice Chán,	若欲參禪
You shouldn’t talk too much.	不用多言
But you should maintain constantly in your mind,	
Thought after thought,	趙州無字
The character <i>Wú</i> of Master Zhàozhōu. (趙州無字)	念念相連
Walking, standing, sitting and reclining,	行住坐臥
(The question) should always be present	
in front of your eyes.	相對目前
Upholding a willpower similar to diamond,	奮金剛志
One unique thought will last for ten thousand years.	一念萬 ▪
Drawing back the radiance (of consciousness)	
toward it’s source in order to illuminate its origin	迴光返照
You investigate and examine continuously its’ significance.	察而復觀
When drowsiness or restlessness (mental agitation) arise	昏沉散亂
You should, with all your energies, bestow the whip.	盡力加鞭
Polishing and transmuting one thousand and	
ten thousand times,	千磨萬 ▪
You should maintain forever a fresh interest.	轉轉新鮮

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<sup>137</sup> Quoted and translated by Neubauer, Renaud “La Indagación del “¿Quién soy yo?” en el Advaita Vedānta y la práctica del *Huàtóu* en el Buddhismo Chán”.

With the passing of days and months,	日 久 月 深
You behold your concentration without interruption.	密 密 綿 綿
Without any necessity for you to make an effort	
to raise the question, it rises in the mind by itself,	不 舉 自 舉
Exactly like a flowing fountain.	亦 如 流 泉
Your mind empties itself and	
you are in a state of absolute stillness.	心 空 境 寂
In which you encounter happiness, bliss and serenity.	快 樂 安 然
Good and evil Demons appear;	善 惡 魔 來
Don't fear and don't rejoice.	莫 懼 莫 歡
If in your mind you give way to aversion or craving,	心 生 憎 愛
You 'll loose the correct way and be subject to the inversions.	失 正 成 顛
Establish your will like a mountain,	立 志 如 山
Quieten your heart like the Ocean.	安 心 似 海
Then your Great Wisdom, like the sun,	大 智 如 日
Illuminates the layers of clouds of confusion	
throughout the multitude of universes.	普 照 三 千 迷 雲
And scatters them completely over ten thousand miles	
of blue sky.	散 盡 萬 里 青 天
The precious moon of the mid-autumn festival	中 秋 寶 月
Reflects itself in all fountainheads transparent.	湛 徹 澄 源
The sky sends forth flames,	▪ 空 發 ▪
And from the bottom of the ocean smoke comes up.	海 底 生 烟
Comprehension appears suddenly;	驀 然 嗑 着
The many layers of accumulated darkness open themselves.	打 破 重 玄
The gōng'àn of the Patriarchs,	祖 師 公 案

As soon as one is drilled through, all the others are pierced.	一串都穿
There is none of the profound teachings of all the Buddhas,	諸佛妙理
Which is not thoroughly and perfectly comprehended.	無不周圓
When you reach such a moment,	到伊 ▪ 時
You should quickly go in search of a realized master,	早謗高玄
In order to perfect your understanding.	機味完轉
When there is neither right nor wrong,	無正無偏
The enlightened master allows you	明師許你
To enter newly into the forest or the mountains	再入林巒
And live in a hermitage or a cave.	茅庵土洞
You reap sorrows and happiness in accordance with conditions,	苦樂隨 ▪
And dwell in no-action, unfettered;	無爲蕩蕩
Your nature is like a white lotus.	性若白蓮
When the time comes to leave the mountains,	時至 ▪ 山
You ride a bottomless boat	駕無底船
And, following the stream, you obtain marvels.	隨流得妙
You convert broadly to the truth humans and celestial beings,	廣度人天
Taking them together with you, up to the other shore	俱登彼岸
In order to attain all together the fruit of the Golden Immortal".	同證金仙

## 2.2 Basic premises of Indian Buddhism

### 2.2.1 The Four Noble Truths

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta* - "Setting in motion the Wheel of Truth", we find the following passage:

"The Noble Truth of suffering (*Dukkha*) is this: Birth is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation is suffering, dissociation from the pleasant is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering-in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering."

"The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is this thirst (craving) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed ..."

"The Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipation oneself from it, detaching oneself from it."

"The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of suffering is this: It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration"<sup>138</sup>

### **The First Noble Truth: *Dukkha***

*Dukkha* is a Pâli term which has several common meanings such as 'suffering', 'pain', 'sorrow', 'misery', 'dissatisfaction', that is to say, 'unwholesome'. But *dukkha* also has other deeper meanings as 'impermanence', 'emptiness', 'insubstantiality.'

It is necessary to make clear that the Buddha does not invite to suffering, neither has he said that life is only *dukkha*, but the idea is that we should be aware of the existence of *dukkha* in the world. It is important to emphasize this aspect in order not to consider Buddhism as it is generally conceived as 'pessimistic', but, as Walpola Rahula says, Buddhism is realistic, and inviting to see the world as it is; one of the three aspects of this reality is to realize that all phenomena or things are impermanent *anicca*; in other words nothing is eternal, or absolute with the exception of *Nirvāna*, which is addressed in the Third Noble Truth.

*Dukkha* can be understood from three aspects: a) *dukkha-dukkha*, which refers to the ordinary suffering as the Buddha says in the above quoted speech: illness, death, old age, etc., are *dukkha*;

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<sup>138</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha taught*, editorial Gordon Fraser, Londres, 1982. P.93

b) *dukkha* is produced by change; for example, if a person enjoys good health and suddenly becomes ill with cancer, or if a family is rich and suddenly falls into bankruptcy, and so on. These changes are difficult to accept; c) *dukkha* as conditioned states. To explain this third aspect of *dukkha*, which is the most important part of Buddhist philosophy and to understand them, is necessary to understand the meaning of 'being', 'individual', 'I', 'ego' or '*ātman*'. For Buddhism, the 'being', 'individual' or 'I' are simply the combination of five forces, or physical and mental energies. These psychophysical energies are known as the five aggregates constitutive of living beings.

#### The Five Aggregates

1. The Aggregate of Matter refers to the physical body with the four elements (solid, fluid, heat and movement). This gives rise to the six sensory organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind and it also includes in it the six faculties of the organs: the eye sees, the ear hears, and so on, with their corresponding objects in the outside world: the eye sees shapes and colors, the ear hears sounds, etc.
2. The Aggregate of Sensations refers to the various sensations that humans feel, or the savor at the moment when there is contact with any of the sensory organs with the respective objects. There are six types of sensations, which in the same way stand in connection with the six sensory organs mentioned above. Each of these sensations can be pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. The Buddha gave added importance to this aggregate, as you can read in the following sentence from *Angutara Nikāya*, The Nine # 14, which says: "All things converge in feelings".<sup>139</sup> It is equivalent to saying that all our experience in life is motivated by the drive to get pleasant feeling and to avoid all unpleasant feelings; all humans strive to get pleasant feelings even knowing that these later on become unpleasant. Hence, *Vipassanā* Meditation – Insight Meditation allows one to observe the reality concerning sensations, which amounts to say that it

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<sup>139</sup> Lily da Silva, *Kamma and vedanānupassana*



allows us to develop awareness of *anicca*-impermanence, since sensations are like bubbles which appear and disappear, rise and fall. Therefore, after having understood this through your own experience, you should not remain attached to sensations.

3. Aggregate of Perceptions. The characteristic of this aggregate is to recognize the external objects. There are six kinds of perceptions, which are in relation to the six sense doors, their internal faculties and their corresponding external objects. Perception is also produced by the contact of the six senses with the outside world.
4. The Aggregate of Mental Formations. In this aggregate are included all the volitional activities that human beings perform, whether wholesome or unwholesome; as such, it is equivalent to the aggregate of Karma. Also, the six types of volitions are related to the six sense doors, their faculties and their external objects. Sensations and perceptions are not volitional actions, therefore do not produce karmic effects.
5. Aggregate of Consciousness. The term “Consciousness” inside of Buddhism, does not mean “Spirit”, as is usually the case in other religions. Consciousness is the reaction or response to something and it works directly with the six sense doors, then the bases of the six consciousnesses (visual consciousness, olfactory consciousness, mental awareness, etc.) are the six sense doors. For example, the base of the olfactory consciousness is the nose and its external object, the smells. The basis of visual consciousness is the eye and its external object is the shapes and colors, and so on.

### **The Second Noble Truth: *Samudaya*: ‘The arising of *Dukkha*’**

When the Buddha saw the state of pure consciousness called *Nirvāna*, he discovered that ‘Thirst’, i.e. desires, greed, craving are the causes for the appearance of *Dukkha*. It is this thirst that keeps people tied to the wheel of *samsāra*<sup>140</sup>, which is to say, to the wheel of rebirths. This ‘Thirst’ of

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<sup>140</sup> *Samsāra* - The Wheel of Life, is the doctrine of successive rebirths. The theory of karma is linked to this doctrine, it is to say, the karma keeps being in continuous cycles of becoming.

rebirth is centered on the false idea of 'I', an idea that has been created by the ignorance of not understanding that the 'being', is only a combination of five psychophysical forces as described in the explanation of the Five Aggregates. Following the teachings of the Buddha, it is possible to tell that the origin of suffering, pain, discomfort, dissatisfaction, and so on, is due to an unsatisfied desire, a desire which could not be realized, and remained uncompleted. This 'Thirst' is not the first neither the only cause of *Dukkha* since everything is relative and everything is interdependent, but this 'thirst' is considered the most important and the most easy to be aware of. There are three types of 'thirsts': 1) thirst for sense-pleasures, 2) thirst for existence and becoming and 3) thirst for non-existence (self Annihilation).

Also, there are four nutriments in the sense of 'cause' or 'condition' for the existence and continuity of beings: 1) material foods, 2) the six senses contact with the outside world; 3) consciousness, and 4) the mental volition or will. The last point four is the most important, because 'It creates the root of existence and continuity, striving forward by way of wholesome and unwholesome actions.'<sup>141</sup> We should pay attention to the fact that the most important among the three actions -mental, verbal or physical- is the mental action, because it depends on both words and physical actions. "The difference between death and birth is only a thought-moment: the last thought-moment in this life conditions the first thought-moment in the so-called next life, which, in fact, is the continuity of the same series."<sup>142</sup>

### **The Third Noble Truth: *Nirodha*: 'The Cessation of *Dukkha*'**

When the Buddha discovered that 'thirst' was the cause of *dukkha*, he also realized that it is possible to bring an end to *dukkha* while eliminating its main cause, that is to say "eliminating 'thirst' or 'desire'". This is possible when the practitioner reaches the state of pure consciousness, where there is no duality, and therefore ends with all false identification with the self or ego, and

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<sup>141</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha taught*, editorial Gordon Fraser, Londres, 1982, p. 31

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, pag. 34

establishes instead equanimity and balance in the mind. This subtle state of consciousness is called *Nirvāna*. It is explained that this term is difficult to define through words, because language is limited to express "the true real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality"<sup>143</sup>, however, one may give some definitions like:

'Extinction of Thirst', 'Uncompounded', 'Unconditioned', 'Absence of desire', 'Cessation', 'Blowing out' or 'extinction'.

*Nirvāna* "is the complete cessation of that very 'thirst', giving it up, renouncing it, emancipation from it, detachment from it."

"Calming of all conditioned things, giving up of all defilements, extinction of "thirst", detachment, cessation, *Nirbbāna*."

"O *bhikkhus*, what is the Absolute? It is, O *bikkhus*, the extinction of desire, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of illusion. This, O *bikkhus*, is called the Absolute."

"O Radha, the extinction of" thirst "is *Nibbāna*"

"O *bhikkhus*, whatever there may be things conditioned or unconditioned, among them detachment is the highest."<sup>144</sup>

"The abandoning and destruction of desire and craving for these Five Aggregates of Attachment: that is the cessation of *dukkha*"

"The cessation of Continuity and Becoming is *Nibbāna*."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, pag. 35

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, pag. 36

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, pag. 37

According to the dictionary, “absolute” means: “which excludes any relation or comparison”, “unlimited, unrestricted”, “complete, total”, which means that it is permanent, unchanging, no fixed, that is forever. However, we can see that in the world, there is nothing or no one remaining unchanged; everything is constantly changing, moving, everything is relative, conditioned and interdependent. But in Buddhism there is one thing that is absolute, that is permanent, that does not change, it is the state of *Nirvāna*, which is experienced by the *Arahant*.

### **The Fourth Noble Truth: *Magga*, "The Path"**

The path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*, is the middle path that avoids the two extremes: 1) the pursuit of happiness through the pleasures of the senses, and 2) avoids the mortification of self through ascetic practices. This way is also known as the 'Noble Eightfold Path', which is composed of eight factors, such as:

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Thought
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

The practice of these eight factors is to develop the three capital principles of Buddhist training and discipline. The practice of Right Understanding and Right Thought is to develop Wisdom - *Pañña*. The practice of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood is to develop ethics - *Sīla*

and the practice of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration is to develop concentration – *Samādhi*.

### **Right Understanding**

It consists in understanding reality as it is, and the Four Noble Truths explain it clearly. This understanding can be based on theoretical knowledge and accumulated memory, but more important is the understanding that is based on direct experience of seeing things in their true nature. This investigation is only possible through meditation, when the mind is free of conditionings, when it is quiet and without impurities.

### **Right Thought**

It involves having thoughts of renunciation, free of attachment, of selfishness, and to have thoughts of love and non-violence toward all living beings.

### **Right Speech**

Consists in: 1) not telling lies, 2) not to slander, not to say offensive words, 3) not to utter rude, discourteous or offensive words, and 4) give up speech without sense or tattling. Avoiding them, it is possible to speak words of truth and of kindness. It is recommended that if there is nothing to say, it is better to remain silent.

### **Right Action**

Means to act ethically, morally and peacefully. This factor is related to the five basic precepts that Buddhism has for the laity men: 1) not to kill, 2) not to steal, 3) not to lie, 4) no to have inappropriate sexual behavior, and 5) not to take intoxicants.

### **Right Livelihood**

Means that one must work and earn a living honestly, without causing harm to anyone or other living beings, for example: a business of alcohol, drugs or weapons, produces good economic returns, but is harmful to humans therefore, the Buddha rejects this kind of livelihood. The practice of *Sīla* - ethics is essential, because without a moral basis it would be impossible to become an *Arahant* or an Awakened.

### **Right Effort**

It consists of "the energetic will 1) to prevent evil and unwholesome states of mind from arising, and 2) to get rid of such evil and unwholesome states that have already arisen within a man, and also 3) to produce, to cause to arise, good and wholesome states of mind not yet arisen, and 4) to develop and bring to perfection the good and wholesome states of mind already present in a man."<sup>146</sup>

### **Right Mindfulness**

"Is to be diligently aware, mindful and attentive with regard to (1) the activities of the body, (2) Sensations or feelings, (3) the activities of the mind and (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things."<sup>147</sup>

### **Right Concentration**

It refers to the practice of certain meditation techniques that have to do with breathing – *Anāpāna sati*, observation of sensations - *Vipassanā*, etc. The important thing is that the technique chosen as a practice, permits to look at the body, mind and emotions in their true nature. Right concentration leads straight to experience all four stages of *Dhyana* 'absorption'. According to Walpola Rahula: "In the first stage of *Dhyāna*, passionate desires and certain

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, pag. 48

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, pag. 48

unwholesome thoughts like sensuous lust, ill-will, languor, worry, restlessness, and skeptical doubt are discarded, and feelings of joy and happiness are maintained, along with certain mental activities. In the second stage, all intellectual activities are suppressed, tranquility and "one-pointedness" of mind developed, and the feeling of joy and happiness are still retained. In the third stage, the feeling of joy, which is an active sensation, also disappears, while the disposition of happiness still remains in addition to mindful equanimity. In the fourth stage of *Dhyāna*, all sensations, even of happiness and unhappiness, of joy and sorrow, disappear, only pure equanimity and awareness remaining"<sup>148</sup>

These Four Noble Truths are paralleled to the exposition of medical theory, as described by Jean-Noël Robert in *L'expérience religieuse*, who compares the Four Noble Truths with "the medical methods advocated by an Indian school", these are:

Medical method	Four Noble Truths
The diagnosis	The sickness of the world is <i>dukkha</i>
The etiology	The cause of <i>dukkha</i> is 'thirst'
The healing	The healing of <i>dukkha</i> is experiencing of <i>Nirvāna</i>
The therapy	The therapy is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

According to this formulation, the Buddha is regarded as the physician of humankind.

Something important that is also worth mentioning is that a man reaches perfection when he develops two fundamental qualities: 1) compassion - *Karuna* and 2) wisdom (*paññā*). Compassion in the West is seen as simply feeling sorry for someone, while in Buddhism, compassion is to provide universal love (*metta*), charity, goodness, *i.e.* to manifest the qualities of the 'heart'.

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, pags. 48-49

Taking the ideas of Jean-Noël Robert, the teachings of the Buddha are not merely “a revelation of the nature of things, but first it is a method”, the method that helps you free yourself from the slavery of *samsāra* and the slavery of the mind. Hence, Buddhism can be considered as a way of life rather than a simple method, a philosophy or a religion.

### 2.2.2 Karma

The word “*karma*” originates from the Sanskrit root *Kṛ-karoti*, which means ‘to do’. In ancient times, the letter “ṛ” was pronounced “ar”. The suffix “-ma” is added to build a substantive, so that KARMA means ‘that what is done’ more commonly known as ‘action’. It will be recalled that these actions are mental, verbal and physical actions, and the most important of those are the mental actions.

It is necessary to mention that in Buddhism, not every action produces an effect, only ‘volitional action’, which means “actions that are carried out with determination to achieve something good or bad”. This law of Karma is also known as the “Law of cause and effect,” - (*hetu-phala*) which is meant by the Sanskrit term '*Karma-Vipāka* ', *Vipāka* meaning – “reward”.

In this respect, Buddhism denies the two following theories: 1) The creation of the world by Brahma or God, who would be responsible for the happiness or unhappiness of sentient beings. 2) The theory of chance, according to which happiness or unhappiness has no cause. These two theories are diametrically opposed to the theory of the law of karma, because poverty or wealth, health or illness, do not depend on any creator or on good or bad luck, but depends on the karma accumulated in stock of past and present karma. This does not mean that we should be unperturbed by the unfortunate, but the Buddha taught to feel compassion for all beings. It can be understood that positive karmas produce nice or sweet fruits and negative karmas produce bitter or unpleasant results. Accordingly, the future of the current or next existence depends on



the actions committed by every human being, and therefore, each person is responsible for the life he has. An important point to take into account, is that karma is not static but dynamic, meaning that the past karmas can be modified through a change of mindset, which should go in the direction of developing compassion and wisdom from moment to moment.

"According to the *Mahā-Kammavibhanga-Sutta*, there are three kinds of karma:

1. The karma committed in this life, whose results are limited to this life. If these karmas do not find the time to produce results before the death of its author, its potential energy becomes zero and it will bear no future result;
2. The karma that produces no results in the present life of the author, but only in his next life. If it does not find the conditions to produce results during the next life of its author, its potential energy becomes zero and it will bear no future result;
3. The very heavy karma, which produces results no matter how favorable moment in life to come no matter what the *samsāra*. His effectiveness is indefinite until its author reaches the *parinibbāna*.<sup>149</sup>
4. Concerning the explanation of these three types of karmas, it is important to say that the theory of karma is not deterministic or fatalistic, as the rewards of certain karmas decrease or increase depending on the actions taken. For example, the past karmas by an *Arahant* can only be enforced in this life, because he had dropped the wheel of *samsāra*, and there will be no rebirth for him.

Keeping this theory of karma would help to lead an ethical life, taking responsibility for the karmas, knowing that it creates our own "destiny" and allows us to be the owner of one's own future.

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<sup>149</sup> Jean Delumeau, *El hecho religioso*. Pag.451.

### 2.2.3 The doctrine of no-soul: *Anatta*

In most religions soul is understood as "that in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world."<sup>150</sup> Such idea of an eternal and absolute soul is rejected by Buddhism, because everything is in motion, nothing is absolute so everything is impermanent. According to Walpola Rahula, man has two deep entrenched ideas within himself: these are the idea of self-protection and the idea of self-preservation. In the first case, man has created the idea of God to feel secure, caring and dependent on someone, in the latter case, men have created the idea of an immortal soul or Ātman which lives eternally either in heaven or Hell, according to the ruling of God their creator. In other religions, it is argued that this entity called soul passes through many stages, and that each rebirth is a chance to evolve until one reaches a final state of purification and union with God or Brahman, the universal soul. These two positions are rejected by the Buddha, because the final aspiration of the devotee is the release from the slavery of the wheel of *samsāra*.

The theory of Buddhism justifies the no-soul, under the premise that everything in the world is conditioned, relative and interdependent. Therefore, the so-called 'Being' is merely the product of a series of circumstances and conditions. This theory is known as "Conditioned Genesis" or "Conditioned Origination." In the following formula of four phrases, we can better understand the premise of Conditioned Genesis:

"When this is, that is

This arising, that arises

When this is not, that is not

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<sup>150</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha taught*, editorial Gordon Fraser, Londres, 1982, p. 51

This ceasing, that ceases"<sup>151</sup>

The principle of conditionality, relativity and interdependence brings the whole process of existence and its cessation. "Conditioned Genesis - *Paticcā-samupāda*" consists of twelve factors:

1. Through ignorance are conditioned volitional actions or karma-formations
2. Through volitional actions is conditioned consciousness.
3. Through consciousness are conditioned mental and physical phenomena
4. Through mental and physical phenomena are conditioned the six faculties
5. Through the six faculties is conditioned (sensorial and mental) contact.
6. Through (sensorial and mental) contact is conditioned sensation
7. Through sensation is conditioned desire, 'thirst'
8. Through desire ('thirst') is conditioned clinging.
9. Through clinging is conditioned the process of becoming
10. Through the process of becoming is conditioned birth
11. Through birth are conditioned
12. Decay, death, lamentation, pain, etc.

A.K. Warder, in his book *Indian Buddhism* explains more clearly that the doctrine of Buddha is basically a doctrine based on causes and conditions that occur in the phenomenal world, which, one can understand that everything is impermanent and nothing is absolute, that "The real nature of the universe is that it consists of temporary principles, which cease to exist, but not without serving as conditions for further temporary principles, not with continuity."<sup>152</sup> To understand and integrate into everyday life this key teaching of the Buddha helps to have a better quality of life. Something additional noteworthy, according to the explanations of the Tibetan Lama Geshe

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, pag. 53

<sup>152</sup> Warder, A.K., *Indian Buddhism*, Editorial Motilal Banarsidas, 2da. Edición. New Delhi, 1980. Pág.130

Ngahuang Sherap, is that impermanence is functional, for example, death is functional, everything that is born has to die; it should not be seen as a tragedy. Let's imagine if no one would die, how would the planet be? Obviously when the understanding is purely intellectual, this truth cannot be accepted. Hence the importance of practicing meditation to integrate this truth into everyday life.

As a conclusion about the basic teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni, one can say that:

- *Dukkha* is a reality that is present in any conditions as social, economic, religious, etc.
- Behind every 'suffering, pain – *dukkha*' there is an unfulfilled desire.
- The impermanence is another reality that can be felt from moment to moment.
- The practice of the Noble Eightfold Path and specifically the meditation is to free oneself from constant rebirth within *samsāra*.
- The spiritual practice can be made solely within the human condition, therefore, take this condition is "gift from heaven".
- The teachings of the Buddha were useful in his time, are useful now and will be useful in the future, because the human nature is one where greed, envy, hatred, fear, etc., prevail until the attainment of liberation.

### 2.3 The concept of “Buddha Nature”-“Self Nature” (*Fóxìng*, 佛性-

*zìxìng*, 自性) and *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*

*Huìnéng*

(六祖壇經, or南宗頓教最上大乘摩訶般若波羅蜜經六祖惠能大師於韶州大梵寺說法壇經)

### 2.3.1 The Significance of “Buddha Nature” (*Buddha-dhātu*) and “Buddha Matrix”, “Embryo of Buddha” (*Tathāgata-garbha, rúlái-zàng, 如來藏*)

Starting with some of the first Mahāyāna Sūtra like the *Lotus Sūtra*, there arose in Mahāyāna literature the idea that there exists a cosmic principal, an essence of the universe, inherent in every living being, which is uncreated, unborn, immortal, unconditioned, unfathomable, blissful, the intermediary between the essential and phenomenal worlds, equivalent of Wisdom-*prajñā*, and of Emptiness-*śūnyatā*, which is the seed of the experience of Awakening and corresponds to the potential enshrined in every sentient being to become a Buddha.

Sanskrit and Chinese sources refer to this principle through various expressions, but they all fundamentally refer to the same reality. These are:

The “Essence of Awakening” (or “Buddha-Element”, *buddha dhātu, fójiè* 佛界), the “Element (or Sphere) of the Law” (of the Teaching, *dharma dhātu, fǎjiè* 法界), the “Body of the Law” (or the “Body of Teachings”, *dharma-kāya, fǎshēn* 法身), the “Element of Self” (*ātma-dhātu, wǒjiè* 我界), the “Buddha Matrix”, “Buddha Embryo”, (*buddha-garbha, fózàng* 佛藏), the “Womb (or The Embryo) of the Thus-come (gone)” (*tathāgata garbha, rúlái-zàng* 如來藏), the “Element of the Thus-gone” (*tathāgata dhātu, rúláijiè* 如來界), the “Matrix of the Well-gone” (*su-gata garbha*), the “Essence of Self” (*svabhava, zìxìng* 自性), “the Self” (*ātman, wǒ* 我), the “Sphere of the Self” (*ātma-dhātu, wǒjiè* 我界).

In the texts of the Chán school they boil down mostly to the following expressions:<sup>153</sup>

"the Heart, or the Spirit" (*xīn*, 心), "the Unique Mind" (*yī xīn*, 一心), "the Original Mind" (*běn xīn*, 本心), "the Buddha Mind" (*Fóxīn*, 佛心), "Nature" (*xìng*, 性), "the Self Nature" (*zìxìng*, 自性), "the Original Nature" (*běnxìng*, 本性), "Buddha Nature" (*Fóxìng*, 佛性), "True Nature" (*zhēnxìng*, 真性), the "True Self" (*zhēnwǒ*, 真我), "the Master, the Lord" (*zhǔréngōng*, 主人公), "the Original Face" (*běnlái miànmù*, 本來面目), etc. etc.

In the *Tathāgata garbha sūtra* the Buddha reveals how inside each person's being there exists a great buddhic "treasure that is eternal and unchanging". Only a Buddha can see this "inner Buddha"

In the *Lankāvatara Sūtra* the *tathāgata garbha* is described as "by nature brightly shining and pure", also as "originally pure". We also find a reference to the immaculacy of the *dharmakāya* in the "Exposition of Non-Decrease and Non-Increase" (*Anunatva-apurnatva nirdeśa sūtra*, 不增減經).

However, the main emphasis of the *tathāgata garbha* theory is mainly soteriological, in the sense that it emphasized that the attainment of Buddhahood is at the reach of every sentient being. From that point of view it stands in dire opposition to the opinions of several traditional schools of Buddhism. As a matter of fact, in sectarian Buddhism there was a controversy as to whether everybody could attain Awakening, or whether some categories of people were barred from it, like those who had committed the four unredeemable sins (*anantariya kamma*), the *icchāntika*,

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<sup>153</sup> Cf. Neubauer, Renaud "La Indagación del "¿Quién soy yo?" en el *Advaita Vedānta* y la practica del *Huàtóu* en el Buddhismo Chán".

etc. *The Lotus sūtra* however emphasizes that, even the followers of the Two (inferior) Vehicles (二乘), women, bad people, etc., will eventually attain Buddhahood, which is also the view of the full-length *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra* and of the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*.

In order to make clearer the meaning of the expression *tathāgata garbha* I'd like to explain here the word *tathāgata*.

Originally the term *tathāgata* was one of the 10 traditional attributes of the Buddha and of the *arhat*. At the same time, it is known that the Buddha didn't refer to himself by the common pronouns "I", "me", "mine", but used the term *tathāgata* as the pronoun for the first person, avoiding in this way the trappings of common language in respect to the identification with an ego.

Etymologically the term *Tathāgata* may be translated in various different ways: "The thus-come", "The thus-gone", "Come from Suchness", "Arrived at Suchness", "Gone to Suchness", in accordance with the fact that one reads it *tathā+āgata* or *tathā+gata*. The Chinese rendering of *rúlái*, suggests the meaning of the "thus-come", or "arrived at suchness". *Tathā*, "suchness", refers to "reality as it is" (*yathā bhūta*), free of the inversions of the deluded mind.

Among the many characteristics conveyed by the idea of Buddha Nature is that it is unfathomable. That is to say that the Buddha state, *i.e.* the condition of the Arhat, both before and after *parinirvāna* "cannot be reckoned" or "named".

Therefore Nāgārjuna, in the most celebrated chapter "Examination of Nirvāna" (*Nirvāna parikṣā*) of his *Mūlamadhyamaka kārikā* (XXV, 17, 18) states: "It cannot be said that the Blessed One exists after *nirodha* (*i.e.* release from worldly desires- *i.e.* death). Nor can it be said that He does not exist after *nirodha*, or both, or neither."

“It cannot be said that the Blessed One even exists in the present living process. Nor can it be said that He does not exist in the present living process, or both, or neither.”<sup>154</sup>

In the same order of ideas, we find in chapter VII, “Arahants”, stanza 91 of the *Dhammapada* a mention that “the trail of the *arhats*, like that of birds flying through space, can’t be traced.”

According to the texts expounding the *tathāgata garbha* theory, although the Buddha state cannot be described, if we forcefully attempt to define it, then we can know that it is endowed with the four following characteristics which are most frequently listed in texts like the *Sūtra of the Lion’s Roar of Queen Srimala-devi (Shrīmālā-devī simhanāda sūtra)*: 1. permanent (*cháng*, 常), 2. blissful (*lè*, 樂), 3. Self-hood (*wǒ*, 我) 4. Purity (*jīng*, 淨). It is interesting to notice that these four characteristics attributed to the Buddha state represent, in pre-Mahayanistic texts, the marks of fundamental ignorance, in the form of the four inversions of meaning (*samjñā viparyaya*; *diāndào* 顛倒). And even in a Hindu classic such as Patañjali’s *Yoga sūtra (Aphorisms on Yoga)* we find a similar idea in the aphorism II, 5 which states: “Ignorance is taking the non-eternal, the impure, the painful and the non-self for the Eternal, the pure, the happy, and the Ātman or Self respectively.”<sup>155</sup>

The theorists of *tathāgata garbha* accept naturally the validity of those four inversions in reference to conventional experience, inside samsāric existence, but for them it does not apply to the ultimate reality. The modern Buddhist scholar established in Taiwan, Master Yinshun nuances this idea when, referring himself to the *Sūtra of the Exposition of Non-Decrease and Non-Increase*

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<sup>154</sup> Inada, Kenneth K., *NĀGĀRJUNA, A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakārikā with an Introductory Essay*, p. 157

<sup>155</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*, p. 172



(*Anunatva-apurnatva nirdeśa sūtra*, 不增減經), he says: “What is permanence? Permanence is that which transcends time “<sup>156</sup>

Throughout time, the main worry pertaining to the *Tathāgata* theory has been to avoid to get confused with the theory relative to the Upanishadic Ātman, *i.e.* not to fall in the pitfall of a belief in a substantial self. Therefore the *tathāgatagarbha* is frequently presented as a positive way to describe emptiness, and the main stress is maintained on the idea that every sentient being harbours the potentiality to realize Full Awakening. Consequently, we may consider, like Yinshun Daoshi, that the *tathāgatagarbha* theory fulfills a soteriological function rather than an ontological one.

One important consequence of the presence of the pure Buddha nature beneath the deep layers of defilements is the assertion of the fundamental identity of Samsāra and Nirvāna, which had already been demonstrated in the following terms by Nāgārjuna in the stanzas 19 and 20 of the afore mentioned chapter XXV of the *Kārikā*:

“*Samsāra* (i.e., the empirical life-death cycle) is nothing essentially different from *nirvāna*. *Nirvāna* is nothing essentially different from *samsāra*.”

“The limits (i.e., realm) of *nirvāna* are the limits of *samsāra*. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.”<sup>157</sup>

The fact that the *tathāgatagarbha* is both the pure *dharmakāya* and the defiled realm of all sentient beings is what allows the assertion that *samsāra* equates *nirvāna*, in the same way as Brahman and Ātman are both the underlying fundamentals of reality according to the *Upanishads*.

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<sup>156</sup> Hurley, Scott, “The doctrinal transformation of twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism: Master Yinshun’s interpretation of the *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine” in *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol.5, No1, 2004

<sup>157</sup> Inada, Kenneth K., p. 158

As was explained by Master Xūyún, the name changes according to whether one views the original nature from the perspective of ignorance or from that of Awakening. In the state of ignorance, the hindrances and mental impurities cover over and hide the Buddha nature; in Awakening it is revealed. In both cases, of the Saint and of the commoner, the Buddha nature remains unadulterated. This is the reason why it is also called “the Inconceivable Self”, “the Great Self”, or “the True Self”. Master Yinshun suggests that the similarities between the theories of the Ātman-Brahman and of the *tathāgatagarbha* are not casual but deliberate.

### 2.3.2 Scriptural Sources

The main texts developing the *Tathāgata* Theory are such as follows:

The *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma pundarika Sūtra*), the *Sūtra of the Avatara from Ceylan* (*Lankāvatāra Sūtra*), the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*, the *Tathāgata garbha sūtra*, the *Sūtra of the Lion’s Roar of Queen Shrimala* (*Shrī mālā sūtra*, or *Shrī mālādevī-simha-nāda- sūtra*), the *Shurangama Sūtra*, the *Ratnagotra Vibhaga*, the *Mahā Vairocana Sūtra*, the *Sūtra of Angulimala* (*Angulimaliya Sūtra*), the *Sūtra of the Exposition of Non-Decrease and Non-Increase* (*Anunatva-apurnatva nirdesha sūtra*, 不增減經)

### 2.3.3 What had Huineng to say about Buddha Nature and Self

#### Nature?



The whole *Platform Sūtra* is filled with references to the importance of the “Buddha Nature”-“Self Nature” in the spiritual realization but, we here shall limit ourself to the analysis of some passages in the First Chapter dealing with this subject.

The first words of Huineng in the *Platform Sūtra*, as soon as he starts to really expound the Dharma, is the expression “Self Nature of Awakening” (which evidently is a synonym of “Buddha nature”), when he says:

“Learned Audience, our Essence of Mind (literally, self-nature) which is the seed or kernel of enlightenment, is pure by nature and by making use of this mind alone we can reach Buddhahood directly”<sup>158</sup>

This gives us from the start an idea about the importance of this concept in the frame of his teachings.

In spite of the apparent importance of the *tathāgatagarbha* rhetoric in Huineng, the famous contest of poems seems to point to the opposite. As we know, the main disciple of the Fifth Patriarch Hóngrèn, Shénxiu wrote the following stanza (*gāthā*):

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<sup>158</sup> *The Sutra of Hui Neng*, translated by Wong Mou-Lam, Shambala, Boulder, 1969, p.11

“Our body is the Bodhi-tree, and our mind a mirror bright.

Carefully we wipe them hour by hour. And let no dust alight”

This *gāthā* points clearly to the fact that, below the adventitious impurities of the mind, there lies the pristine and radiant Buddha Nature and, if we only remove those hindering mental impurities, it will reveal itself in all its splendor.

To this Huìnéng answers with the *gāthā*:

“There is no Bodhi-tree, nor stand of a mirror bright.

Since all is void, where can the dust alight?”<sup>159</sup>

If we analyze its content it seems obvious that Huìnéng’s *gāthā* is expressing his understanding from the point of view of vacuity (*shūnyatā*), which may serve as a proof that Chinese Chán is operating a transition from the former emphasis on the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* and *tathāgata garbha* theory to stressing the teaching of emptiness as they are expounded in the *Diamond Sūtra*.

Or we could rather say that we find in Huìnéng’s teaching a synthesis between both trends, as we may surmise from the following phrase:

“...His Holiness used to encourage the laity as well as the monks to recite this scripture (i.e. the *Diamond Sūtra*), as by doing so they might realize their own Essence of Mind (i.e. see their self nature), and thereby reach Buddhahood directly.”<sup>160</sup>

Even more suggestive of such effort of synthesis is the passage:

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid* p. 15, p. 18

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid* p. 12

“When he (the Fifth Patriarch Hóngrèn) came to the sentence, “One should use one’s mind in such a way that it will be free from any attachment (i.e., to abide in Emptiness),” I at once became thoroughly enlightened, and realized that all things in the universe are the Essence of Mind (Self Nature, *svabhāva*) itself.”<sup>161</sup>

This means that Huìnéng, through the realization of Emptiness, could at the same time realize the universality of the Buddha Nature – Self Nature. This last idea is reinforced by the following description by Huìnéng’s of the content of his Enlightenment:

““Who would have thought,” I said to the Patriarch, “that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically pure! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically free from becoming and annihilation! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically self-sufficient! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically free from change! Who would have thought that all things are the manifestation of the Essence of Mind!”<sup>162</sup>

These statements of Huìnéng at the moment of Awakening seem to come straight out of a textbook in *tathāgathagarbha* philosophy, and correspond precisely to the classical definitions of Buddha nature!

In Huìnéng’s teachings, the Buddha Nature theory is reminiscent, for Chinese readers, especially for the cultivated literati, of Mèng Zǐ’s and *The Doctrine of the Means’s* (*Zhōngyōng*) ideas of the fundamental goodness of human nature. This is one more proof that the contempt towards book knowledge in *The Platform Sūtra*, as in subsequent Chán tradition, is more rhetorical than real; it is because the Chán tradition is more concerned by the practical application of such knowledge than by an artificial and sterile accumulation of it<sup>163</sup>.

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid* p. 18

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18-19

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Hurley, Scott

A group of Japanese scholars including Hakayama Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiri formed a trend called “Critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkō* 批判仏教) whereby they analyze that, if we base ourselves on the core of the Buddha’s traditional teachings, the criteria for defining the orthodoxy of these teachings are the theories of the absence of a self (*an-ātman*) and of the dependent co-arising (or conditioned co-production, *pratitya samutpāda*); therefore the *tathāgata* theory would clearly stand outside the limits of such orthodox Buddhism. Unlike them, Yinshun Daoshi (印順導師) considers that the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings have an important role to play inside Chinese Buddhism as provisional teachings, or expedient means (*kaushalya upāya*, *fāngbiàn*, 方便). He explains that to the ordinary person the orthodox teachings of Vacuity may seem too lofty and as a result he may feel scared by the perspective of “giving a jump (into emptiness) from the top of a hundred yards pole” (*bǎizhàng gāntóu, gèng jìn yí bù* 百丈竿頭, 更進一步), that is to say sacrificing radically the ego and sensual desires.

According to master Yinshun, the conviction that every sentient being is endowed with the pure Nature of Buddha, and consequently has the potential to achieve Buddhahood definitely can give them a comforting feeling of self-confidence and set them on the path towards Liberation.

This is a stance which runs contrary to the traditional attitude of Chinese Buddhism, as expressed by someone like Zongmi who upheld that the *shūnyatā* teaching were provisional teachings while the correct and definite understanding was the one related to the *tathāgata* theory.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Cf. Hurley, Scott

## 2.4 Life and Teachings of Chán Master Xūyún - 虛雲老和尚.



### 2.4.1 A brief biography

Xūyún in Chinese means “Empty Cloud”. Master Xūyún was born on April the 26<sup>th</sup> of 1840 in Fujian province. Soon after he was born his mother died. Then he was adopted by an uncle who had no children. His adoptive “father” sympathized with Taoism so that the child got educated in that line. However, the ritual performed for the funerals of his grandmother, were connected with Buddhism, and he later made a pilgrimage to Nanyue. His step-father got two wives for him, but apparently the marriage was never consummated, because the youngster had other interest. For Xūyún, Taoist practices were not sufficient in order to know “the deeper truths of existence”<sup>165</sup> and he thus began to study secretly the *sūtras*. At the same time he started to teach what he was learning from the *dharma* to his wives.

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<sup>165</sup> Article from internet about Xūyún Master

Keeping on this impulse, when he became 19 years old, he fled to the Gushan monastery in Fuzhou together with his cousin. There he was ordained as a monk and in order to avoid being discovered by his father, he took refuge in a cave right behind the monastery. He lived there three years, devoting himself to austerities and at the age of 25, he received the news of his 'father's death. During those years as an hermit, he visited the master Jingyong, who invited him to leave the ascetics way and exchange it for temperance. Under his tutelage he studied the *sūtras* and devoted himself to the meditative practice of investigating the *huàtóu* "Who is dragging this corpse of mine?" At the age of 36 he realized a seven years long pilgrimage to the island of Putuoshan off the coast of Ningbo, a place regarded by Buddhists as the *bodhimandala* of Avalokiteshvara. He also visited the King Asoka Monastery and other holy places of Chán Buddhism. Having experienced the "oneness of mind", Xūyún continued to travel throughout China, toward the west and the south, crossing into Tibet. There he visited many monasteries and holy places, like the Potala, seat of the Dalai Lama, and the Tashi Lunpo, the residence of the Panchen Lama. From there he traveled to India, Ceylon and Burma. It is said that during all this traveling, the mind of Xūyún remained clear and his body became stronger. Moreover he composed many poems.

At the age of 55, i.e. in 1895, Xūyún returned to China and established himself at the Gaoming monastery in Yangzhou. During that period one day he slipped into a river and got trapped in the net of a fisherman. He was saved and taken to a nearby temple where he was revived and where he healed his wounds. Still in a weak state, he returned to the Gaoming-sì where he was asked by his teacher if he would take part in an approaching meditation retreat of several weeks. He answered respectfully that he would not do so, but without revealing his disease. Consequently the Master Gaoming had him beaten up with a wooden ruler. He accepted this punishment without any protest, so that his health further deteriorated. In spite of his weakness, during the following days, Xūyún sat continuously in meditation, and described his experience in the



following terms: "In the purity of the uniqueness of my mind, I forgot all about my body. Twenty days later, my disease disappeared completely. From that moment, all my thoughts were suppressed and my practice was effective throughout day and night. My steps were as quick as if I flew in the air. One evening, after meditation, I opened my eyes and suddenly saw myself in the midst of a brightness similar to that of daylight in which I could see everything inside and outside the monastery ..."<sup>166</sup> The description of this experience motivates the adept to practice seriously, as it connects him with this wonderful spiritual state known as the "Buddha Nature", the "Original Mind". From that experience onward, and until the end of his life, Xūyún devoted all his time and energies to teach the Buddhist precepts, sūtras and restore temples.

He realized this work throughout all of Asia with a mind free from attachment, and won many followers in Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Tibet and China.

By 1920 Chinese Buddhism was in decline and corruption reigned everywhere. Nánhuá Monastery, located in Shaoguan, was no exception. It was said that devotees flocked to the monastery in the same manner as people who would go to have fun in Disneyland. Nobody was in charge of the monastery, no one was in control over one hundred monks and nuns living and quarrelling all the time. Neglect and physical deterioration of the monastery reflected the state of decadence of the monks.

The Master Shi Jidin says in his book, *Empty Cloud. The teachings of Xūyún*, that the Sixth Patriarch Huìnéng appeared to Master Xūyún in a vision, and asked him to go to Nánhuá-sì (founded in the year 675 AD) to put order over all the confusion that reigned in that monastery. So in 1934, Master Xūyún arrived at Nánhuá-sì with the clear objective of reviving Chinese Buddhism, for which 1) he introduced strict discipline, and 2) he designed a program of reconstruction of several monasteries and edification of some statues. In accordance with the

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<sup>166</sup> Article from internet, took of his autobiography.

established rule, if a monk broke a rule for the first time he would be punished, but on the second occasion he would be expelled from the monastery. This would put an end to the discussions and misconduct of monks and nuns, and establish instead law, order and peace. For the reconstruction of temples and the edification of statues, Xūyún went out to look for funding, and upon getting funds his first priority went to fixing the monks dormitories at Nánhuá-sì.

The conditions of life in the monastery were difficult; monks and nuns grew their own vegetables, they sewed their own clothes, and on top of this one more hardship was going to sum up. In 1937 the Sino-Japanese War broke out and the following year, in 1938, Xūyún was invited to give dharma lectures and to realize ceremonies in Hong Kong, just when the Japanese were attacking Shanghai, and Nanjing; the victims ascended to the thousands. For this reason, the Master concluded the lectures and returned to Nánhuá-sì to receive refugees. Due to this new reality in the monastery, Xūyún decreed that the monks would eat only twice a day (breakfast and lunch). In the same way as the Theravada monks. The food saved in this manner would be transferred to the refugees and to the Chinese soldiers. Not even the war could bring the program of reconstruction at the monastery to a halt. So in 1939 he built the famous statues of the Four Heavenly Kings and the temple to harbor them.

After the attacks of the Japanese in the year 1938, the governors of 40 provinces decided to conduct a meeting at Nánhuá-sì. The Japanese became easily aware of that meeting and started to bomb the monastery. In this situation Xūyún installed the monks and the governors in a safe place and entered himself into the meditation room to pray for the safety of all. The imperial Japanese air forces launched three bombs, of which, two collided one against the other and felling on top of the mountains. This event was considered a miracle, and the Chinese were convinced that it was due to the spiritual power of Xūyún. Luckily for the Chinese people, Japanese soldiers also considered it to be so, and they never again bombed the monastery.

In 1949, the civil war in China ended and the communists rose to power. Communist cadres, imagining that the temples were hiding gold and other valuables, irrupted into the temple, beating up the monks and demanding from them that they deliver what wasn't actually there. In 1951, while Xūyún was overseeing the reconstruction of the Yumen monastery, again some cruel and inhuman communist hooligans came to the Yumen-sì and requested from Xūyún that he hand over the gold and valuables "hidden" in the temple. As Xūyún explained that there were no such hidden treasures, the monks were brutally beaten up and one of them died on the spot. After that, the monks realized that many of their brethren had disappeared and their bodies were never found. Xūyún was beaten to the point of breaking his bones, but fortunately for humanity, he did not die even though he was already 93 years old, while many younger and stronger monks died. This inhuman treatment lasted for three months. Xūyún was tortured, locked up in a room without food or water; he was beaten up until he lost consciousness and almost to the point of death. However, the spiritual force of Xūyún did not allow him to die until his work was terminated, and also to inspire his followers. Although the Communists did their utmost to try and keep the abuse secret, the Chinese public found out and complained to the government in Beijing, saying that if the Japanese military were able to respect the monks, why did the Chinese military not; is it acceptable that the Chinese communists behave in a worse manner than the Japanese? Thus the abuses were stopped and Xūyún could recover his health. Still weak, he traveled to Beijing to ask personally three things from the Chinese government: 1) that all the religious orders should be respected, 2) that the monks should not be disturbed and 3) that the Chinese people should enjoy freedom of religious practice. Those requests were accepted, especially because in some way the Chinese government remembered the miracle of the bombs dropped on the temple by Japan. During Xūyún's lifetime it appears that these promises were respected. "In this way, said the master Shi Ji Din, Master Xūyún knew in his wisdom that he had prevented the threat to our Chinese Buddhist Dharma, the Dharma of Huìnéng, Línji and Hanshan"<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Jy Din Sk, *Nube Vacía, Las enseñanzas de Xu Yun*, Hawai 1996, pag. 12

Another very important issue in the frame of Master Xūyún's teachings was that, as a friend and collaborator of the outstanding Pure Land Patriarch Yinguang, he advocated for integrating the practice of Chán with the practice of the Pure Land School, i.e. not merely invoke the name of the Buddha Amitabhā, but investigate into the question of "Who invokes the name of Amitabhā Buddha?"

Towards the end of his days, it seems that he expressed to his assistant the following: "After my death and cremation please mix my ashes with sugar, flour and oil, knead everything into nine balls and launch them into the river as an offering to the living beings inside the water. If you help me to fulfill this wish, I will be forever grateful to you"<sup>168</sup> On the following day, October the 13<sup>th</sup> of 1959, Master Xūyún entered the final Nirvana, at the venerable age of 120 years.

From this short collection of data about Master Xūyún, we can understand the reasons for which he ought to be considered as an outstanding master inside the modern Chán tradition, one of the most influential Buddhist teachers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even more an important historical figure of modern China.

## 2.4.2 The basic teachings of Xūyún Lǎohéshǎng

The teachings of Master Xūyún which will be described below are derived from two important collections which have been widely distributed in China: the *Xūyún Héshang Fahui* (虛雲和尚法彙, "Chán Training") and the *Xūyún Héshang Niánpu* (虛雲和尚年譜 "Daily Readings in two weeks of Chán training" from *Chronology of Master Xūyún's life*), and two important texts such as *Empty Cloud. The teachings of Xūyún* and *Speeches and Works of Dharma Master Xūyún* (虛雲和尚方便開示錄). Both books were translated by the Ven. Shi Yin Zhin.

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<sup>168</sup> Article from internet about Xūyún master.

Within the Chán training, the first teaching consists in learning to discriminate the real from the illusory. It is explained that our inner experience is the real world; here we can encounter peace, joy, truth and freedom, whereas the outer world is illusory. Every human being is endowed with two natures (self-natures): one is apparent and the other is real. For “apparent nature” it is referred to the self or ego which is undergoing constant changing, while by “real nature”, we refer ourselves to the Great Buddha Nature which is always the same and is permanent. This immaculate state of being is usually called "the Heart, or the Spirit" (*xīn*, 心), "the Unique Mind" (*yī xīn*, 一心), "the Original Mind" (*běnxìng*, 本性), "the Buddha Mind" (*Fóxīn*, 佛心), "Nature" (*xìng*, 性), "the Self Nature" (*zìxìng*, 自性), "the Original Nature" (*běnxìng*, 本性), "Buddha Nature" (*Fóxìng*, 佛性), "The Embryo of the Thus-come" (*rúlái-zàng*, 如來藏), "True Nature" (*zhēnxìng*, 真性), "the Master, the Lord" (*zhǔrén-gōng*, 主人公), "the Original Face" (*běnlái miànmù*, 本來面目), etc. in the texts of the Chán school.<sup>169</sup>

From among all these names, we shall limit ourselves to the use of the term "Buddha Nature" to refer to the subtle state of consciousness called Nirvana in Early Buddhism. According to the teachings of Xūyún, it is explained that the small self lives in the world of appearances, in *samsāra*, whereas the Buddha Nature corresponds to the real world, the world of *Nirvāna*.

*Samsāra* is the world perceived through the ego; it is a warped and sick world, due to the incessant desire of the ego; this desire is comparable to the barrel of the Danaides (Δαναίδες) in Greek mythology, which is a bottomless barrel, since it is based on the fulfillment of all the desires

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<sup>169</sup> Cf. Neubauer, Renaud “La Indagación del “¿Quién soy yo?” en el *Advaita Vedānta* y la practica del *Huàtóu* en el Buddhismo Chán”.

that can be fulfilled, but which can never be really satisfied. According to their own nature, living beings always want more, more and more. The main purpose of Chán practice is to determine through one's own experience that the Buddha Nature is real, because it is unconditional and permanent, while everything else is illusory, fictitious, since it is impermanent.

*Nirvāna* and *samsāra* are the same. This is what the Master Xūyún explains while commenting in *Heart Sūtra* the formula: "Form is not different from emptiness and emptiness is not different from form"<sup>170</sup>, which eventually means that *samsāra* and *nirvāna* are the same. Concerning this apparent contradiction, the master explains that it all depends on how reality is perceived. That is to say, if one perceives the world directly from the standpoint of reality, then one sees it in its nirvānic pristine purity. If one perceives it indirectly, through the filter of ego consciousness, then one sees it through the "samsāric distortion"; this explains that *samsāra* is merely the world's apparent perception that the small 'I' gets through the sense-doors. For a better understanding, we may refer ourselves to the classical explanation from the Advaita Vedānta tradition named "superimposition" - *adhyāsa* – which in Chán Buddhism is understood as the "perception of things". The story goes on like this: someone is walking in a forest at dusk and comes across a coil of ropes on the floor and because of memories from his prior experiences, he associates this image with the shape of a snake, and then runs away scared. For this man, the rope was perceived as a snake and upon his arrival at home he'll tell of his encounter with a dangerous snake and may even say that it was about to bite him. It is in such a manner that fear arises in the mind; the fear in itself is indeed genuine, but the reasons or causes for that fear, are not.

This example explains how the little selfish "I" perceives reality mistakenly and imposes preconceived judgments on objects such as ugly or beautiful, whereas things or situations are neither ugly nor beautiful, but simply "are". For example, if a she fox kills a mother rabbit, for those baby rabbits it will be bad since it will starve them to their death, but for the fox babies this

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<sup>170</sup> Jy Din Shakya, *Nube Vacía. Las enseñanzas de Xu Yun*, pag. 13

happening will be good since they won't starve. To judge, interpret or categorize something as a good or bad action is the working of the small self. According to Xūyún the reason why we have two 'selves' is because we are human beings.

Another subject which should be correctly grasped is the subject of interdependence. That is to say that the actions which we perform are not separate or independent from one another; you cannot undo an action without affecting or altering the others. If one should observe closely every event that happens in life, one could assert that this merely happens. Everything is interconnected, so that a web of experiences and misunderstandings is set up, which, according to Xūyún, leads to confusion until at some time in their life, moved by anguish and anxiety, people get to question themselves "Who am I?" The little selfish self, led by confusion and despair, turns life into *duhkha* - a state of "ill-being", as the Buddha taught in his First Noble Truth.

The only valid way to end such confusion is to produce a change in the consciousness of each one of us, starting with "to reject the outside world of complexity in favor of the inner world of simplicity, while discovering the glory of Buddha Nature"<sup>171</sup>. Now, in order to achieve a change in our consciousness, it is necessary to practice Chán. The Chán training permits us to transcend ordinary human nature and in its place realize Buddha Nature. This is the purpose of Chán training, beginning with the act of clarifying our vision, acquiring a new perception of our true identity until we reach the final experience of Awakening.

It is also important to distinguish the permanent from the transitory. We should realize that the Buddha Nature is the permanent and that the thoughts arising from the ego are the transitory.

Xūyún emphasizes that the most important teachings of Bodhidharma and Huinóng, the two main patriarchs of the Chán school, were: "!" Free the mind from selfishness! Free it from impure

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<sup>171</sup> In the book *Nube Vacía. Las enseñanzas de Xu Yun*, traslate "self-buddhico" inside of "Naturaleza de Buddha

thoughts!"<sup>172</sup> Such liberation will be possible only if the meditative practice is accompanied by the practice of *shīla* – ethics, including the basic precepts taught by the Buddha. Without such a practice of morality there can be no success in the practice of Chán, nor in any other serious way of meditation "The Way of Chán is in front of you! ¡Follow it!. It will provide you with peace, joy, truth and freedom. It should be emphasized that "enlightenment"<sup>173</sup> cannot be found in a dictionary, nor can it be understood through the intellect; the only way is to practice the path of meditation, more specifically the investigation of the *huàtóu*.

The disciple should be endowed with the two following requirements: 1) Having selected a single method, he should follow it faithfully without switching to any other technique; only in this way can you attain the goal. Otherwise, in the same way that in order to reach the summit of a mountain there are several paths, but if you follow one path, then another and then another, and so on, you will never reach the goal, the same applies to meditative practice. 2) Whatever the method the practitioner decided to follow, it is very important to meet with four basic requirements. This leads more safely towards the attainment of a noble goal such as the experience of Buddha Nature. These requirements are:

1. Understanding the Law of Causality;
2. Acceptance of the rules of discipline;
3. Upholding a firm belief in the existence of the Buddha Nature, and;
4. Be determined to succeed, whatever be the method you chose.

### **The Law of Causation**

This law bears close relationship to the concept of karma. The Buddha taught that karma is essentially "volitional action", which carries consequences - *Vipāka* (in Sanskrit). Seen in this

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<sup>172</sup> *Idem*, pag. 15

<sup>173</sup> *Idem*, pag.15



perspective, all acts, whether good or bad cannot be erased. It is a mistake to think that because there are no witnesses to an action, one is free from the consequences; "a given karma cannot be changed".<sup>174</sup> In the chain or network of actions, a certain cause produces an effect and this itself in turn becomes the cause for another effect, and so on endlessly. So that the "Law of Causation" is action and reaction. Sooner or later the result of the actions reaches the offender. "The only way to prevent the effect is to prevent the cause."<sup>175</sup> A simple success in meditation cannot erase karma. Neither is it guaranteed that, having reached the state of the Nature of Buddha, one will be freed from the Law of Causality. Even the Buddha himself used to suffer from heavy migraines as a karmic result from previous lifetime.

In summary, the Law of Causality implies that unwholesome actions produce bitter fruits, and wholesome actions produce good results. Therefore, you are advised that to perform acts which are born out of greed, lust, anger, pride, envy and sloth, constitute a very bad investment, since they warrant consequences which will be painful, bitter, rooted in anxiety, remorse, suffering and discomfort. While on the other hand the result of good acts without expectation of a reward will bring sweet fruits such as peace, tranquility, equanimity and spiritual realization.

If we understand this law of causality, and decide to apply it with the utmost awareness, then we'll be able to forgive, not to harm anyone physically or verbally, to forsake vengeance, bitterness, resentment, etc., which amounts to say that we train ourselves to be benevolent at all times towards all living beings.

### **Accept the rules of discipline**

Success in meditation is closely related to the strict observance of rules of moral behaviour and of courtesy. In the frame of the Noble Eightfold Path the Buddha taught the practice of *Shīla*-ethics,

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<sup>174</sup> *Idem*, pag. 19

<sup>175</sup> *Idem*, pag. 20

consisting of the following three factors: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. It is emphasized that there can be no spiritual progress if there is no morality and meditation practice. Master Xūyún points out that: "Moral discipline is the foundation upon which Awakening rests. Discipline regulates our behaviour and makes it stable. Perseverance becomes steadfastness and this is what leads us to the attainment of wisdom"<sup>176</sup>

### **Firm belief in Buddha Nature**

At first it is understandable that people feel uncertain or skeptical in respect to the existence of Buddha Nature, but once the practitioner has gone through a serious practice and has attained by himself certain spiritual states which may give him an indication of the existence of something greater, then faith arises. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the Buddha encouraged people "to come and see" (*ehipassika*), not to come and believe. Once the practitioner has acquired the faith that every living being is endowed with the Buddha Nature, this faith must become unwavering, because this helps us to have a strong determination in order to achieve and experience this state of pure consciousness called Buddha Nature, etc., which, in the wording of Master Ramana Mahārshi in the Advaita Vedānta tradition would correspond to "freedom from the shackles of the mind".

### **Be determined to attain success, whatever the method one chooses**

We must have a strong determination to attain success, starting at first by choosing a technique, and under no circumstances should we neglect it; we must uphold it at all times. Such perseverance is already an achievement in itself. We must maintain an accepting and patient attitude; if it doesn't work out today, it will function tomorrow and we shouldn't get discouraged easily. We must understand that the mind is similar to a wild horse, which is hard to tame, but with patience and perseverance we will attain success.

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<sup>176</sup> *Idem*, pag. 21

Master Xūyún also used to teach the Four Noble Truths, which have been expounded previously in this work. We should only remember now the medical connotations of these Four Noble Truths, namely:

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|---|---|
| 1. Life in <i>samsāra</i> is bitter and painful   | diagnosis: we must recognize that we are sick |
| 2. Desire is the cause of bitterness and pain     | etiology of our sickness                      |
| 3. There is a cure for this disease               | faith in the healing                          |
| 4. The cure is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path | follow a trustworthy therapy                  |

The Noble Eightfold Path is a valuable and simple guidance that anyone may practice. The Buddha, considered as mankind's physician, has cured millions of people, therefore we should have faith in the doctor and in the effectiveness of his treatment.

### 2.4.3 Guidelines on *Huàtóu* practice

Before entering into the explanation of the method, it is important to first know the meaning of the term "*huàtóu*". Literally it means "the beginning of speech", but it can also be understood from three other perspectives. 1) It is the "place" (Original Mind), where thought is produced, 2) It is the pristine and pure state of mind before thought arises and 3) It is the technique which permits to experience the state of consciousness called Buddha Nature. Fundamentally a *huàtóu* is a question designed to calm down the mind or burn up the random thoughts, focusing instead the mind on a single point, i.e. a point immediately prior to the moment when a thought enters into the ego-consciousness; a *huàtóu* is a "fountainhead" thought<sup>177</sup> thanks to which it is possible to experience Buddha Nature or the Original Mind.

The *huàtóu* mostly taught by Master Xūyún was "*Niàn Fó shì shéi*", "Who invokes the name of the Buddha (Amitabhā)?" Xūyún considered this to be the most powerful from among all the *huàtóu*.

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<sup>177</sup> *Idem*, pag. 36

He explained moreover that the two Sanskrit names of the Buddha Amitabhā, or Amitāyus, in reality were two descriptions of the pure state of the Original Mind, *i.e.* “Unlimited Light” (無量光明) and “Unlimited Life” (無量壽). All *huàtóu* actually point to a fundamental question: “Who am I?”, whose answer should come from the same place where it originated, *i.e.* the “source”, or the fountainhead of Buddhahood. It should be emphasized that the ego cannot answer the question; the answers arising from the same random thinking are invalid if they are not accompanied by a genuine experience. To answer intellectually “I am Buddha Nature”, “I am light”, “I am energy”, do not serve any purpose. If such “answers” should arise, then it is advisable to investigate as to “Who is this “I”?”. While we investigate in such a manner, there arises a confrontation of the ego fighting the ego; sometimes the ego wins and some other times the ego is defeated.

As we get deeper into the inquiry, there appear other subtle questions as “What is the mind?”, “What is consciousness?”, “How do I know who I am?”. In such case you should gently return to the inquiry “Who is thinking this?”. The answer is “I am”; thus “Who am I?”. A *huàtóu* is not a mere repetition, as in the case of the repetition of a mantra, but a serious investigation that a seeker of the truth realizes until he finds an authentic answer. The question “Who am I?” may superficially seem to be an easy question, but at a deeper level, it is a difficult question whose answer is also difficult. It is difficult to answer the question, because many people, due to their conditioning, identify themselves with a function, a title or their relationship with other people. Like for example, they may be a daughter, a sister, a friend, a wife, a mother or a wife ..., a doctor, etc...

But who are we really when we are not a daughter, a wife, a mother? Who is one really? The only true answer is the experience of Buddha Nature.

Generally, people act according to the welfare of others and therefore, people forget about their real needs and about their spiritual life. This is the reason why many elderly people feel empty, and begin then to search for and connect themselves with a meditative path that will lead to an experience of wellbeing. It is worth mentioning the Master's explanations that social bonds create attachments; people are eager to be admired, loved, valued, praised, and so on.

All these are nothing more but desires of the ego, this ego that would be willing to humiliate oneself in exchange for receiving affection.

In the inquiry of "Who am I?", it is necessary to be vigilant and be well aware if one is identified with money, social position, religion, nationality, profession, and so on. If such should be the case, then it is advised to ask also: "What would happen if I'd lose my money, or if I were expelled from my social group, or if I were to change my religion?", or "Am I my bank account?", "Am I my work, my nationality, my profession, etc. ..?" "Do I lose some part of myself if I were to move to a new location?" It is important to inquire in this manner.

People also use to identify themselves with their body, but are we really our bodies? If a person originally complete physically were to lose one limb, what would happen with that person?

Is it correct to define ourselves as our egos, as "I", "me" and "mine"? What happens when we sleep? Do we stop existing then? What happens when our attention is completely focused on a problem, or on a drama, or on some wonderful music? What happens when we meditate and completely lose our sense of "I"? Have the Saints who reached a state of non-self ceased to exist? And the Buddha Shakyamuni, freed from his personality as Siddhārta, calling himself the Tathāgata ("The one who comes-or goes- just like that"), did he cease to exist because he was devoid of an egotist nature? If one exerts oneself to consider the physical body as only a corpse, then peace will come soon.

When we are attempting to answer the *huàtóu* “Who invokes the name of Buddha Amitabhā?” - which in essence is identical to “Who am I?”-we must examine the illusory identity created by the ego. All the afore mentioned identifications are changing and conditioned by time, space and circumstances within the *samsāra*, thus we are invited to break the old bonds, to dissolve the self-images rooted in pride and vanity, and instead of that, seek our true identity with firm determination and humility. As part of the practice, it is also important to develop benevolent qualities such as kindness, respect, consideration towards all sentient beings, without limiting ourselves just to our family. This helps us to detach ourselves from affective relations and extend our love to all sentient beings. Thus a new force of character, a new level of consciousness start emerging. Within this shift of consciousness we should contemplate each day of our life as if it were the last; only thus shall we not waste even a single minute of our life in meaningless actions, such as indulging in feelings of resentment, revenge, anger, etc.

The answer to the *huàtóu* “Who invokes the name of Buddha Amitabhā?”, is not an intellectual answer, but if the answer “oneself” should come up, then investigate in this way: “Am I repeating through the mouth or through the mind?” If it is through the mouth, then why don’t you do it when you’re asleep? If it is the mind which is repeating, how is it? Since the mind is not a concrete thing, but intangible, a small feeling of doubt arises about “Who?” This doubt should not be repressed<sup>178</sup> The masters of old explain that the feeling of doubt is essential in the *huàtóu* practice, hence the phrase: “Under a big doubt there will necessarily happen a great awakening” (*dà yí zhī xià bì yǒu dà wù*, 大疑之下必有大悟). They also say: “If the doubt is great, the Awakening will be great, if the doubt is little the awakening will be small. If there is no doubt, there will be no Awakening”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> *Discursos del Maestro Hsu Yun*, colección Conocimiento Escuela ShinkaiDo Ryu. Pag. 28

<sup>179</sup> Cf. Neubauer, Renaud “La Indagación del “¿Quién soy yo?” en el *Advaita Vedānta* y la practica del *Huàtóu* en el Buddhismo Chán”, p. 18

In *huàtóu* practice, one must emphasize the word 'Who'; the other words only give an idea of the sentence, for example: "Who is eating?" "Who has questions?", etc... The "who" should be the main focus while walking, standing, sitting or reclining.

Xūyún explains that the *huàtóu* "Who am I?" is a *vajra* (diamond) sword which, when properly handled, will cut through the bothering ego. When the *huàtóu* is practiced efficiently all the time, "the root of existence will be automatically cut off"<sup>180</sup>, *i.e.* there will be no more rebirth.

To make the *huàtóu* more effective, we must hold it as long as possible, as long as you are not involved in an activity that requires much attention, such as driving a car. If you sincerely practice in this way, the fruit can ripen at any time.

For example, the *huàtóu* of a female disciple of Chán master Huijue from Langye mountain, was "Let go" (*fàngxià*, 放下). She practiced incessantly, at all time "Let go", "Let go", "Let go".

When her house burnt down, and later when her son was drowned, she kept on meditating, imperturbable. Then one day, when she was frying noodles, suddenly, while she was putting the noodles into the hot oil, it sizzled and this crunching sound caused something to happen in her consciousness, which allowed her to attain the state of "Awakening". This was later confirmed by her master.

Let's see another example. There was a man who was meditating on the *huàtóu* "Who has Buddha Nature?" Whenever he was passing by a butcher's stall, he always heard the customers saying to the stallholder: "Give me pure meat!" One day, the butcher got irritated by the clamor of "give me pure meat", and yelled to a customer: "What piece is not pure?" When the man heard this, he realized that all the meat was pure, that is to say. the whole world contains the

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<sup>180</sup> Discursos del Maestro Hsu Yun, colección Conocimiento Escuela ShinkaiDo Ryu. Pag. 47

Buddha Nature. Upon asking himself the question: “Who has the Buddha Nature?” it occurred to him: “Who has not the Buddha Nature?”, and awakened this very instant.

The meditator who experiences his true nature will by himself come to the understanding that the ego is an illusion, and moreover is harmful.

Master Xūyún explains that, once this confusion has been removed, the resulting state of mind is imperturbable; there appears one-pointedness (*ekagrata citta*), which is connected with a shining pure identity. In such one-pointedness there is equanimity and balance, hence a feeling of wellbeing. Although we may have attained such a state, nevertheless we must continue to meditate in order to preserve this “Adamantine Wisdom Eye”. We must be careful not to permit that the ego be reaffirmed. We know from sutras of the Buddha, that even after his “awakening” he kept on meditating regularly. Therefore, we must follow His example.

#### **2.4.4 Meditation posture**

Master Xūyún used to explain that the best posture should be natural, relaxed, but nevertheless upright. We must sit without stiffness, as comfortable as possible, so that no pain is produced. One must be erected, so that the lungs expand. We should neither bend forward nor on the sides. In case of drowsiness (*thîna-middha*, sloth and torpor), one should take a cup of tea in order to wake up, swing from side to side and breathe in deeply.

Before practicing any meditation technique, it is necessary, as a preliminary step, to learn something about breath-control. There are two mechanisms:

- 1) “unstructured breathing”, which refers to observing how the breath is naturally produced, while counting ten breaths in a row. If we lose the counting, we should start again. After ten breaths we start again.



Another method consists in paying attention to how the air enters and comes out, observing how the air enters through the throat, into the lungs, and how it comes out.

2) “Structured breathing” refers to breathing in, holding the breath and breathing out, then you start again. The proportion may be 4-16-8, which means counting until four while inhaling, holding the breath while counting up to 16 and then exhale while counting up to 8. Each count may be of approximately one second. There are other proportions, but this is the basic one.

The purpose of all the breathing exercises is to establish a controlled and rhythmic breathing; once we have achieved this, we may start with the *huàtóu* practice.

Finally, the masters emphasize that the time we devote to the practice of meditation should be considered as the most wonderful time of the day. We must pay attention to the demons of sloth, pride and gluttony. Having established a firm determination, we should not be afraid to fail, and if such should be the case, we must be prepared to try again and again. Remember that the practice of Chán is to transcend the ego and to achieve the state of nirvana, or of the Buddha Nature, to realize that we are Buddha and live the present in such a way, which means when you eat, eat, when you sleep, sleep, and when you look, look; this is Natural Chán.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this study we have seen that the two masters on whose teachings we focused this present investigation were contemporaneous and lived under approximately similar historic conditions.

Ramana Mahārshi lived in India when his country was under foreign (British) rule, and Xūyún Lǎohéshǎng lived in China when his country was prey to the greed of imperialistic interests, first from western powers, later from Japan.

In the midst of the hardships of such external turmoil, both strove to connect themselves with the transcendent reality beyond the upheavals of the illusory world.

Both, after following an intense spiritual discipline, attained realization and devoted the rest of their lives teaching the students, disciples and devotees who gathered around them the path to self-realization.

We have examined in details the concrete techniques taught by both masters and ascertained their similarities in many respects, in spite of doctrinal differences emphasizing that in Indian idealism the search focuses on the True Self, whereas for Chán Buddhism realization is paramount to the realization of the Absence of a Self (*wúwǒ*). We saw that, at the same time as the illusory manifestations of the self are discarded, the practitioner establishes the connection with an absolute state called “Buddha Nature” (or its many linguistic equivalents).

In this respect there arises an important question as to whether or not such an idealistic quest is in conformity with the original teachings of the historical Buddha.

Two modern Buddhist scholars, Master Yinshun and David Kalupahane, among others, have raised a skeptical opinion toward that theme, considering that it reflects a brahmanical contamination of Buddhism due to historical factors.

Yinshun explains how, starting from the third century A.D., after several centuries of continuous Buddhist predominance, there occurred in India a restoration of Brahmanism. It

was under those circumstances that the Mahāyāna current developed theories such as the Tathāgata Garbha whereby the emphasis is laid on the idea that all living beings possess an “Embryo of the Thus-come” which is paramount to a True Self in disguise.<sup>181</sup>

It is well known that in that same period many Chinese pilgrims used to go to India and trained in *dhyāna* practices in meditation centres throughout Kashmir and the North-western regions. Back home they were instrumental in the establishment of the first Chán communities in China. No wonder then that from a start the Chán ideology was strongly influenced by Indian idealism, either in the form of vedāntic or tathāgata garbha doctrines.

According to Yinshun, Chinese Buddhism can be divided into three main currents, namely 1) Madhyamika and the Theory of Emptiness, related to the teachings of “conditioned arising”, 2) the theories of Consciousness-Only, centered on the teachings about the Storehouse-consciousness and 3) the Tathāgata-garbha theories, centering on the teachings of Buddha Nature. Both former currents are attested in the ancient scriptures of Buddhism: *Āgama* and sectarian treatises, whereas no trace of the third trend can be found in those texts, therefore appearing as a definitely “distinct teaching” (*biéfǎ*), even though it would seem to bear some remote relationship to the famous statement that “the mind is originally luminous (pure), but is tainted by upcoming defilements”.

The Dharma-kāya, Tathāgata-garbha, or Buddha Nature theories, fundamentally distinct from the teachings of Emptiness and of Storehouse consciousness, would eventually become the mainstream teachings of Chinese Buddhism and the basis of Chán training.

In Indian Buddhism the tendency toward idealism was first manifested in the attempts at doctrinal reinterpretations of the Buddha’s teachings by the Sarvāstivāda (resulting in the

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<sup>181</sup> See the self-preface to *Rulaizang zhi yanjiu* by Yinshun.

introduction of the concept of “self-nature”, *sva-bhāva*) and Sautrāntika (resulting in the personalist ideas of the pudgalavādins) schools, and it was in reaction to them that Nāgārjuna wrote his *Treatise on the Middle Way* .

Kalupahane writes that “Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is a mere restatement of the empiricist and pragmatist philosophy of the Buddha”, a reason why it was welcome in China, due to the pragmatism of the predominant Confucian school<sup>182</sup>. In India, idealistic Buddhism was finally reabsorbed into Brahmanism.<sup>183</sup>

A fundamental idea of Advaita Vedānta and idealist Buddhism which stands in dire contradiction to the Buddha’s original teachings is the emphasis on the ineffability of the truth.

According to Kalupahane, such terms as “indescribable”, “indefinable”, so common in later Mahāyāna literature, especially in Tathāgatagarbha texts, cannot be found in the early discourses of the Buddha, whose teachings (*dhamma*), qualified as “well-expounded” (*svākhāto*). This is because the Buddha was well aware of the trappings of “absolute language” and formulated His teachings, steering always in the “middle” of all extreme views, avoiding thereby all types of dogmatism<sup>184</sup> .

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<sup>182</sup> Kalupahane, p.8

<sup>183</sup> *ibid*, p.8

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, p.17

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