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REVIEW ARTICLE

Yes! We Have No Buddha-Nature  
Three Recent Publications on Zen Dialogues

Steven HEINE

ISHII Seijun 石井清純, *Zen mondō nyūmon* 禪問答入門 [Introduction to Zen dialogues], Kadokawa Sensho 463. Tokyo: Kadokawa Gakugei Shuppan, 2010, 254 pp. ¥1,575, paper. ISBN 978-4-04-703463-1.

OKIMOTO Katsumi 沖本克己, *Jōshū: Hyōhyō to Zen o ikita tatsujin no azayakana fūkō* 趙州-瓢瓢と禪を生きた達人の鮮やかな風光 [Zhaozhou: Vivid portraits of a master who lived Zen as a free spirit]. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2008, 214 pp. ¥2,730, cloth. ISBN 978-4-653-03996-9.

YANAGIDA Seizan 柳田聖山 and UMEHARA Takeshi 梅原猛, *Mu no tankyū* (*Chūgoku Zen*) 無の探求 (中国禪) [Investigations of nothingness (Chinese Chan)], Kadokawa Sofia Bunko. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2009 rpt., 385 pp. ¥800, paper. ISBN 978-4-04-198507-6.

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THESE recent Japanese publications, all published by different branches of Kadokawa, explore new territory or revisit longer standing approaches in regard to the formation and development of the tradition of Zen Buddhist dialogues (Ch. *wenda*, Jp. *mondō* 問答). The dialogues originated in Tang China with the spontaneous utterances of ancestors during teaching sessions or other kinds of encounters and evolved into formal *kōan* 公案 (Ch. *gong'an*) cases recorded and commented on extensively in major collections compiled during the Song dynasty. At that point, the tradition spread rapidly to Kamakura Japan as well as Korea in the early thirteenth century. The three books examine, from different angles, the intimate relation between the Tang-Song Chinese cultural and literary context and the development of Zen writings. This, in turn, reflects associations between biographies (or quasi-biographies) of prominent masters, which were first documented in the voluminous transmission of the lamp records, and conversational anecdotes selected from these records for inclusion in koan collections, which added intricately structured prose and poetic commentaries. The books also deal with the need to try to classify the different styles and aims of a distinctive genre of religious literature that seems hellbent on defying any attempt at categorization.

The first two volumes listed above are by prominent scholar-priests in the Sōtō and Rinzai Zen sects, respectively, who offer introductory (*nyūmonteki* 入門的) works targeting a general as well as specialist audience that are nonetheless extremely insightful in analyzing seminal writings and ideas that contributed to the dissemination of Zen dialogues. The third book is the reprint of another important introduction by two giant figures in the field of East Asian Buddhism that has appeared four decades after its original publication. Both taught at universities in Kyoto during what can be looked back upon as the “golden age” of modern (especially postwar) Zen studies in Japan. In the 1960s, authoritative editions of classical texts as well as reliable contemporary historical studies were being produced, complementing ongoing philosophical interpretations of doctrine.

Because of its central role in the transition of Chan anecdotes from the stage of informal dialogues to established koans, all three books consider the significance of the *mu kōan* 無公案 (Ch. *Wu gong'an*). According to the best known version of the case in the *Wumenguan* 無門関 (Jp. *Mumonkan* [Gateless Gate]), in replying to a monk's question about whether or not a dog has Buddha-nature, Zhaozhou 趙州 (Jp. *Jōshū*) simply says “no” (*mu* 無, Ch. *wu*), which suggests nonbeing and silence or a transcendental negation beyond the distinction of

existence and nonexistence. This case plays a role in Okimoto's study of Zhaozhou's life and records, and it is crucial for Ishii's typology of dialogues, in addition to the Yanagida-Umehara exploration of nothingness as the key element of Chinese Chan. The koan is generally thought of in terms of a particular form of meditation based on the contemplative use of a critical phrase or head word (Ch. *huatou*, Jp. *watō* 話頭), in this instance, *mu*, extracted from the case, rather than for discussions of the conceptual meaning of the dialogue. However, the collective analysis from the three books yields some surprising results regarding textual discrepancies in Zhaozhou's records, and the diversity of classical interpretations help to complexify and relativize our understanding of the most widely discussed of all koan records.

A more general issue that emerges from considering the three works in tandem concerns the connection involved in interpreting diverse manifestations through literature, and pedagogical styles of training, between more abstract theoretical discussions of Zen thought and more concrete historical studies of its leading figures and texts seen in light of sociopolitical trends that affected the monastic institution. Since the initial release of *Mu no tankyū*, how much has changed in the scholarly effort to balance methodologies and create an even-handed interdisciplinary approach that takes into account spiritual ideals as well as social realism? To what extent are ingrained ideas or fixed notions about Zen theory and practice based on somewhat outdated sectarian models of interpretation continually being challenged and overcome by today's scholarship? Do these models get echoed and reinforced despite an awareness of the need for critical self-assessment?

### *Revisiting the Golden Age*

The volume by Yanagida Seizan and Umehara Takeshi was originally one of a dozen books in a series on East Asian Buddhism that appeared in the late 1960s featuring such prominent scholars in their respective fields as Kamata Shigeo 鎌田茂雄 (Kegon 華嚴), Masutani Fumio 増谷文雄 (Shinran 親鸞), Takasaki Jikidō 高崎直道 (Dōgen 道元), and Tamura Yoshirō 田村芳朗 (Tendai 天台), among others. Two-thirds of the books were coauthored by Umehara, along with a specialist in the history of a particular school or figure in Buddhist thought, and a portion of each of the volumes is dedicated to a conversation between Umehara and the other main author.

Then a professor at Ritsumeikan University who specialized in classical Japanese Buddhism, two decades later Umehara became founding director of the Nichibunken International Research Institute for Japanese Studies initiated by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro. A philosopher who acknowledges in the preface that he was greatly influenced by Kyoto School thinkers, including

Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 and Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙, here Umehara teams with Yanagida, a professor at Kyoto University who was then becoming well known for his careful and probing historical analysis of textual sources. This was a couple of years after YANAGIDA published the seminal historical study of early Chan (1967) and the same time he produced an edition of writings attributed to Bodhidharma (1969) as the first of a state-of-the-art twenty-volume series on the records of the Chinese ancestors.

Prior to Yanagida's pioneering work, studies of Chan/Zen tended either to have a strictly sectarian orientation or to represent a "lump sum" approach that blurred discrepancies by failing to distinguish between sub-factions or analyze nuanced variations in their varying socio-historical contexts. To disentangle and de-essentialize the morass of history, Yanagida undertook a methodical, step-by-step chronological examination that highlighted the formative role of the Northern School as well as the need to base Zen studies on transmission of lamp records as the primary (quasi-)historical source. Yet, Yanagida was also eventually criticized for mystifying, to some extent, Zen origins by not taking historical records outside of the orbit of Buddhist textuality fully into account.

The first part of *Mu no tankyū* is vintage Yanagida toned for a general audience by providing a critical overview of the unfolding of the Zen tradition. After presenting an historical account, this section ends on a kind of ideological bent by trumpeting the role of the *mu* koan as the culmination of the school's beliefs and the key to the Chan approach to ineffability or non-reliance on words (*muji* 無字) (204–15). Yanagida points out that while the version of the dialogue from the *Wumenguan*, in which *mu* is the one-word answer given by Zhaozhou, is best known, there was an earlier version in the record of Wuzu 五祖 (Jp. Goso). In that version, the negative response is followed by an ironic comment on the dog's karmic consciousness, a dialogue that is also found in other sources, including the Zhaozhou Record 趙州錄 (Ch. *Zhaozhou lu*, Jp. *Jōshū roku*).

Yanagida furthermore shows that the case was not included in the collection by Xuedou 雪竇 (Jp. Setchō) and is therefore not in the *Biyan lu* 碧巖錄 (Jp. *Hekiganroku* [Blue Cliff Record]) by Yuanwu 圓悟 (Jp. Engo) which was based on his work. However, the *mu* koan did become the crucial ingredient of the koan-introspection Zen 看話禪 (Ch. *kanhua Chan*, Jp. *kanna Zen*) approach of Dahui 大慧 (Jp. Daie), which was half a millennium later cited vigorously by Hakuin 白隱, and in modern times was used by Suzuki as a prime example of Oriental nothingness in contrast to the Western emphasis on being. In this approach, the term *mu* is evoked not for its discursive meaning, but as a supra-linguistic vehicle that cuts off thought and language and spontaneously catapults the practitioner to a nonlogical experience of sudden enlightenment. Significantly, in Yanagida's account, there is no mention of the "yes" 有 (Ch. *you*, Jp. *u*) response attributed

to Zhouzhou in the *Congrong lu* 從容錄 (Jp. *Shōyōroku* [Book of Serenity]) and numerous other Chinese and Japanese texts.

This section of the book ends with a picture of Suzuki which makes a useful segue to the second part (217–62), in which Yanagida and Umehara discuss at length the *mu* koan and the *Wumenguan* more generally in light of related texts and approaches to nonbeing and negation as the key to understanding the distinctive characteristics of the Chan tradition. In the third part, which deals with the “Philosophy of Absolute Freedom” (*zettai jiyū no tetsugaku* 絶対自由の哲学), although his main focus is on *The Platform Sutra* and the Linji 臨濟 (Jp. Rinzai) Record, Umehara returns to Zhaozhou and the *mu* koan on several occasions, especially in the final section on the role of humor in the *Wumenguan* and the *Biyuanlu* (334–54). The book ends with a brief discussion of the impact of the *mu* koan on the approach to nothingness of Kyoto School philosophers Nishida and Tanabe Hajime 田辺元.

### *Two More Recent Approaches*

Okimoto Katsumi, a Rinzai Zen abbot who is professor emeritus at the sect’s Hanazono University in Kyoto and has recently been president of the International Research Institute for Zen Buddhism founded by Yanagida Seizan and Urs App, specializes in Chinese Buddhism and the early history of the Chan School. In this work, he treats the biography and writings attributed to Zhaozhou, who was said to have lived for one hundred and twenty years from 778–897. The book is part of a ten-volume series on Tang masters, and features an expressive subtitle that contrasts with the straightforward subtitle in the series volume on Weishan 滎山 (Jp. Isan) along with his disciple Yangshan 仰山 (Jp. Kyōsan), “What is the Teaching of the Gui-Yang School?” (*Ikyō no oshie to wa nanika* 滎仰の教えとは何か).

Okimoto approaches issues of biography (*denki* 伝記) by elaborating on how Zhaozhou functioned as a free spirit throughout the “four seasons” (*shiki* 四季), or four main stages, of his career that can be pieced together by looking over the various transmissions of the lamp materials as well as his Record. The first season is his precocious contact around the age of seventeen with master Nanquan 南泉 (Jp. Nansen) when he gained an initial awakening experience. The second period is when Zhaozhou spent over thirty-five years studying with his mentor until the time of Nanquan’s death. Then, after the three years of mourning, Zhaozhou began the third stage at age sixty, which was twenty years of itinerancy in pursuing training or an exchange of ideas with masters such as Huangbo 黄檗 (Jp. Ōbaku). This was followed by the final forty years of heading a temple in his home town of Zhaozhou, where along with Linji he was a leader of the Chan School north of the Yellow River in Hebei province and was often compared to the leadership of Xuefeng 雪峰 (Jp. Seppō) in southern Fujian province.

Throughout the discussion, Okimoto connects the seasons of Zhaozhou's life to famous dialogues, such as his response to Nanquan killing a cat and learning the middle way between knowing and unknowing from his mentor, or answering questions about the famous stone bridge of Zhaozhou when he was abbot of a temple nearby. Known more for his paradoxical utterances than the shouts and slaps that characterized some of his contemporaries' teaching methods, Zhaozhou is said to have taken part in more koan cases that are prominently recorded in the major collections than any other Tang dynasty Chan monk except Yunmen, who often praised his senior colleague.<sup>1</sup> In looking at examples of rhetoric, Okimoto shows that a textual analysis of the use of words in Buddhist writings, including the *Lotus Sutra*, the recorded sayings of Linji, and the record of Zhaozhou, indicates that the term *mu* is used in all of these texts more frequently than *u*, which makes a striking contrast with conventional language patterns. However, it is very interesting that of the three books being discussed here, Okimoto's volume on Zhaozhou has the least amount of discussion of the *mu* koan. Is this some kind of oversight?

Actually, I do not think so but rather feel that it is probably because the case is not really so important for understanding Zhaozhou's teachings as is usually thought, such that our view of the tradition is often somewhat skewed by an overemphasis on this so-called "no-word" (*muji* 無字) almost invariably seen in light of *huatou/watō* practice. The dog dialogue does not appear in the earliest records of the life and teachings of Zhaozhou in the seminal Chan and related Buddhist texts from the late-tenth to early-eleventh centuries, including the *Zutang ji* 祖堂集 (Jp. *Sodōshū*) volume eighteen of 952, the *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Jp. *Sō kōsoden*) volume eleven of 988, and the *Jingde chuan-deng lu* 景德傳燈錄 (Jp. *Keitoku dentōroku*) volume eleven of 1004. In these texts, Zhaozhou is known more for the case about his master Nanquan cutting a cat in half, when Zhaozhou puts his sandals on his head and walks away, than for the record about the dog.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the first anecdote to have a question raised about the dog's Buddha-nature is attributed to Weikuan 惟寬, who lived a generation before Zhaozhou. The association of the latter with the *mu* koan stems from a subsequent period—which is difficult to pin down but was probably at least a century after the seminal texts—and it is quite varied in that the master appar-

1. There are 12 cases featuring Zhaozhou in the *Biyān lu* (as opposed to 18 for Yunmen): 2, 9, 30, 41, 45, 52, 57, 58, 59, 64 (cat), 80, 96; 6 cases in the *Wumenguan*: 1 (dog), 7, 11, 14 (cat), 31, 37; 5 cases in the *Congrong lu*: 9 (cat), 18 (dog), 39, 47, 63; and 17 cases in Dōgen's *Mana Shōbōgenzō* 真字正法眼藏: 11, 46, 67, 74, 80, 114 (dog), 119, 133, 135, 136, 138, 181 (cat), 233, 239, 281, 288, 291—some of these instances are the same case.

2. Unlike the *mu* koan, which appears in just two collections in different versions, the cat koan attributed to Nanquan is included in all of the "big three" collections—*Biyān lu* cases 63 and 64, *Wumenguan* case 14, and *Congrong lu* case 9—and it is also in *Mana Shōbōgenzō* case 181.

ently answered both positively and negatively, and with fuller dialogues related to the core query.<sup>3</sup>

When the tradition is closely examined, this discrepancy between the Yanagida-Umehara emphasis on the *mu* koan and the variability of the sources becomes a central theme of the fascinating new book by Ishii Seijun, a Sôtō Zen priest who is on the faculty and is currently president of the sect's main institution of higher learning, Komazawa University in Tokyo. Ishii is a specialist in the life and thought of Dōgen, who in the *Shōbōgenzō* “Busshō” 正法眼藏『佛性』 fascicle on Buddha-nature interpreted a version of the dog dialogue that features positive as well as negative answers with fuller dialogues for both, as cited from the record of Hongzhi 宏智 (Jp. Wanshi) that was the basis of the *Congrong lu*. He shows that both yes and no responses are relevant, and that there has been far too much attention to the former over the latter.<sup>4</sup>

In his general discussion of koans, Ishii highlights diverse styles of dialogues, which give rise to multiple interpretations and cannot necessarily be reduced to one and only one view. He analyzes the following categories:

1. The records of first ancestor Bodhidharma 達磨 (Ch. Damo, Jp. Daruma) and of sixth ancestor Huineng 惠能 (Jp. Eno), such as the latter's dialogue about Buddha-nature in relation to people from the south.
2. Reflecting on the mind 心 (Ch. *xin*, Jp. *shin*), such as Mazu's 馬祖 (Jp. Basō) notion of “mind itself is Buddha” 即心是佛 (Ch. *jixin shifo*, Jp. *sokushin zebutsu*).
3. Expressing that which cannot be expressed in words including a) preaching the dharma without words, b) explaining through denial, c) teaching with a single word such as the dog dialogue, and d) cases where the highest form of expression is silence, such as Bodhidharma's “skin, flesh bones, marrow” dialogue.
4. Inquiring about the meaning of the Buddha or Dharmakaya 法身 (Ch. *fa-shen*, Jp. *hosshin*), such as in *Biyān lu*, case thirty-nine.
5. Dialogues involving doctrine, such as whether or not insentient beings preach the dharma.
6. Cases that deal with the role of practice, such as “a day without work is a day without food.”

Ishii points out that the *mu* koan has been appropriated in Song Chinese and Kamakura Japanese commentaries much more diversely than a special emphasis on transcendental negation indicates. Alternative approaches include affirmative, indirect, ironic, and expansive in addition to negative responses to the core question, which reflect a broader range of hermeneutic perspectives. There are also

3. The *Zutang ji* record of Zhaozhou does include the dialogue, “Does an oak tree have Buddha-nature?” which is cited below.

4. This point is also made by ISHII Shūdō (2004, 230), citing noted Chan scholar Iriya Yoshitaka.



alternative responses in the Zhaozhou Record itself, including “The door to every house leads to the capital (Chang’an)” (SUZUKI and AKIZUKI 1964, 61), a phrase that has been compared to “All roads lead to Rome.” In addition, the text contains another query about Buddha-nature that involves a sentient being: “A student asked, ‘Does an oak tree also have Buddha-nature or not?’ The master replied, ‘Yes.’ The student said, ‘Then when will it become a Buddha?’ The master said, ‘When the sky falls to the earth.’ The student said, ‘When will the sky fall to the earth?’ The master responded, ‘When the oak tree becomes a Buddha’” (SUZUKI and AKIZUKI 1964, 53). The non-sequitur-like progression in this dialogue, which recalls the last passage in Kenkō’s *Tsurezuregusa* 徒然草, seems to be an impossible, circular response; therefore, according to Zhaozhou, yes really means no. Or does it?

### *Whither Studies of Zen Dialogues?*

The juxtaposition of these three books helps to relativize and problematize an exclusive focus on a particular view of the *mu* koan that is reflected in the Yanagida-Umehara approach but is challenged by Okimoto and Ishii, which shows that the case was either not so important for understanding Zhaozhou or was interpreted through a variety of styles and ideologies. A survey of traditional sources further supports a relativist rather than absolutist standpoint by indicating, as Ishii points out, that answers are just as often positive as negative, or are so enigmatic or ambivalent that conventional categories of affirmation and denial no longer seem appropriate. In one instance a lay disciple is quoted favorably as saying, “Zhaozhou says ‘No,’ but I say ‘Yes!’” Before Dahui and Hongzhi were referring to the case, the record of Yuanwu’s teacher Wuzu contains the remark, “The master ascended the hall and said: ‘Does a dog have the Buddha-nature or not? Still, it is a hundred thousand times better than a cat.’ He stepped down” (T. 47, 660a).

According to a verse from this period by Fo Yinyuan 佛印元 that conveys an inconclusiveness which de-essentializes our understanding of the *mu* koan, “The great function of total activity expresses freedom./Yes and no are two parts of a pair./How much karmic consciousness comes into people and dogs?/Henceforth we shall always remember Zhaozhou for commenting on this” (*Xu zangjing* 續藏經 (J. *Zoku zōkyō*), volume 115, 237a).<sup>5</sup> Another verse by Benxue Yi 本覺一 reads,

5. A verse by Wuzu which favors the critical phrase approach is in *Xu zangjing*, volume 115, 237a: “Zhaozhou shows his sword/Which reflects the frost in a blaze of light;/If you persist in looking for reasons,/It will cut you in shreds.” However, the final two lines in the *Wumenguan*’s verse comment, 纔涉有無/喪身失命 (“As soon you get caught up in yes or no, your body fails and your life is lost”), may leave the door open to a more ambiguous or relativist position that does not necessarily favor negation over affirmation. It is interesting that in the *Chan zong songgu lianzhu tongji*, the *Wumenguan* verse is somewhat misplaced because it is listed under the section of verses on the yes-no version of the case (actually, it is no-yes in this instance) rather than under the *mu*-only version.

“The dog has Buddha-nature/The dog does not have Buddha-nature/Always walking toward both ends./One arrowhead cannot be used to reach two targets,/ And even with its karmic consciousness deriving from the past, it is only a dog” (*Xu zangjing*, volume 115, 236b).

Zhaozhou’s apparent ambivalence was subsequently explained by Song Chan masters not as wavering between simply denying and supporting the doctrine of the universality of Buddha-nature, but as a matter of using provisional means to make the teaching appropriate to the level of understanding of the disciple. Several modern commentators have noted that by looking at the different versions of the *mu* koan in the Zhaozhou Record, there seems to be an arbitrary quality to the responses. As Robert SHARF suggests, “Does a dog have buddha-nature? It depends on what day it is” (2007, 236), and John WU remarks, “If the same question were put to Zhaozhou for the third time, he might well have answered, ‘Yes and no!’ Yes, that is, in one sense, and No, in another sense” (1975, 142), to which it could be added that a fourth occasion might have yielded “Neither yes nor no.” Or, to cite a recent lyric, “It’s either one or the other or neither of the two.”

In another intriguing modern pop culture example of saying one thing while meaning another, or of not being sure what to say, according to the 1920s hit song, “Yes! We Have No Bananas,” “When you ask [the shopkeeper] anything, he never answers ‘no’/He just ‘yeses’ you to death, and as he takes your dough/ He tells you ‘Yes, we have no bananas/We have-a no bananas today.” Perhaps Wumen, who once wrote a four-line, five-character Chinese verse with twenty consecutive *mu* kanji—無無無無無，無無無無無，無無無無無，無無無無無—just “no’s” you to death, so that instead of, Yes! We have no Buddha-nature, according to his view it should be, No! We have Buddha-nature. Or do we go back and forth between the two approaches?

In summary, even though the *mu* koan seems to represent a transcendental negation beyond the polarity of assertion and denial that epitomizes Zen’s thoroughgoing iconoclastic, barriers-shattering attitude toward cogitation and rhetoric, understanding the case’s multifarious implications is often shrouded in orthodoxy and convention, as in *Mu no tankyū*, which tends to insist on only one view of the case’s meaning and function and to reject alternative standpoints as misleading or heretical. In other words, traditional arguments favoring the use of the *huatou/watō* method—as opposed to rival standpoints—get played out in contemporary scholarship, when advocates may fall back on an unconscious leaning as an avenue or angle by which to comment on the unfolding of mainstream approaches, thereby conflating ideology with historicity. By contrast, the newer studies by Okimoto and Ishii demonstrate that an understanding of the koan based entirely on the critical phrase method tends to overlook a number of other important historical, textual, and philosophical elements which

must be taken into account to develop a broader, more open-ended hermeneutic view of the multivalent significance of the case.

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