



Lin-chi and the True Man without Rank Scott Mandelker

One of the greatest Zen Masters of all time, who spoke powerfully to awaken without compromise, was Ch'an Master Lin-chi I-hsuan Hui-chao (Japanese, "Rinzai Gigen"). His recorded sayings, encounters and travels are preserved in the Lin-chi lu (Japanese, Rinzai-roku). The translation I'm using here is by Ruth Fuller Sasaki, working with a team of Japanese and American scholars, published in 1975 by the Institute for Zen Studies in Kyoto. It is a scholarly, rigorous work, yet preserves the color and vitality of the original language and dialogue.

Through various unconventional means, including shouting, beating, paradox, and personally driven reinterpretations of classical Mahayana Buddhist scripture, Lin-chi sought to wake his students from their clumsy slumber. And yet, his 'skillful means' were simply a straight, simple expression of his own enlightenment. In that way, he was not really trying to do much of anything at all. In his own words:

"As I see it, there isn't so much to do. Just be ordinary — put on your robes, eat your food, and pass the time doing nothing." (Discourse XVIII)

Nevertheless, Lin-chi was famous for his wild martial style, which later gave rise to the harsh, austere Rinzai lineage in Japan — alive to this day, as one of the two major Zen schools. So how can we consider him to be "ordinary" in any way? His own words suggest the answer:

"As for me, what I want to point out to you is that you must not accept the deluding views of others. If you want to act, then act. Don't hesitate." (Discourse X)

With a mind free of deluding views, his contact with phenomena was clear and direct, immediate without hesitation — and thus, his innate power could manifest in all its intensity. This is the power of a true Master, with no obscuring veil between mind and experience: mind and phenomena freely mingle and play. His teaching, verbal or otherwise, emerges from this state of being.

So it is interesting, at least to me, that for all his martial power, Lin-chi also gave lengthy discourses. Chief among his teachings, repeated many times in these accounts, is his notion of "the true man." One example:

"The Master took the high seat in the Hall. He said: 'on your lump of red flesh is a true man without rank who is always going in and out of the face of every one of you. Those who have not yet proved him, look, look!'" (Discourse III)

Lin-chi makes a distinction here between the body (the so-called "lump of flesh") and the true agent that makes use of it. In another discourse, it is recorded:

“The Master said: Look at the wooden puppets performing on the stage! Their jumps and jerks all depend on the man behind.” (Discourse IX)

This is the classical dichotomy between Self and vehicle, spiritual agent and mechanism. It might surprise us that his view is essentially the same as Western Cartesian dualism — the old mind/body split at the root of so many of our problems. This kind of ontological statement seems more Hindu than Buddhist, as Hindu doctrine posits a Higher Self-principle (the “Atman”) as being the agent who uses the physical body. It is interesting that Lin-chi, enlightened as he was (I assume!), still made use of this notion — although I am sure he only used it as an expedient teaching tool. The following statement clarifies the matter:

“This physical body of yours, composed of the four great elements, can neither expound the Dharma [Buddhist teaching] nor listen to it... Then just what can expound the Dharma and listen to it? This very you standing distinctly before me without any form, shining alone — this can expound the Dharma and listen to it! Understand it this way, and you are not different from the Patriarch Buddha.” (Discourse X)

Lin-chi is really saying that the essential Buddha is none other than the One who controls the physical body. This “true man without rank” has no form and is definitely not a fixed thing. The “true man” is intrinsically free from the basic qualities of material and mental phenomena. The One who sits upon this lump of red flesh is free of impermanence, suffering, and insubstantiality — what Buddhists call “the three marks” of conditioned phenomena. True nature is intrinsically free, now and forever.

Yet, this is also the “very you” whom Lin-chi states “stands distinctly” before him. The teaching here is really not too different from the Hindu conception. Our Buddha-nature is the formless human essence, not particularly different, or so it seems, from the Western conception of “soul.” Actually, Lin-chi probably wouldn’t consider this to be an “eternal” soul (as in the Judeo-Christian notion), so there is not total agreement here. The same discourse explains:

“Followers of the Way, mind is without form and pervades the ten directions... Fundamentally, it is one pure radiance; divided it becomes the six harmoniously united spheres of sense [the five physical senses, plus intellect]. Since the mind is non-existent, wherever you are, you are emancipated.” (Discourse X)

Stated simply, each and every form that appears to be apart from this total pure luminosity is but a false, illusory display. Only true Mind is “Buddha” (which is, itself, beyond all description!). Furthermore, the personal mind we use is but an apparently separate expression of the unified, all-pervading Mind — just a temporary “division into the six spheres of sense.”

While other Ch’an Masters have espoused the same doctrine, it is the somewhat esoteric formulation Lin-chi gives it — set in the matrix of his own unique, gunshot style — that sets it apart from others. Yet, as he was the first to admit, all his words and deeds were but empty teaching tricks...

Notably, the “true man” is associated with light and vision, and many of the metaphors Lin-chi uses to describe true Mind are visual:

“Followers of the Way, he who at this moment, before my eyes is shining alone and clearly listening to my discourse — this man tarries nowhere; he traverses the ten directions and is freely himself in the three realms... In traveling everywhere through every land, in bringing enlightenment to sentient beings, he is never separate from his present mind. Everywhere is pure, light illumines the ten directions, and the ten thousand dharmas [things] are one as is.” (Discourse XIII)

For Lin-chi, realization is attained by clear perception and union with the “true man” — the One who changes not, despite all outer flux. In fact, this One is none other than the Light pervading all ten directions. Pure Mind is the “true man,” the Buddha. The true human agent, separate, yet tied to the lump of red flesh, is the universal principle of pure light/intelligence. Actually, this is a very esoteric statement, not often seen in Zen teaching.

Extrapolating further, we can say that this light-self manipulates the body, and thus interacts with material phenomena. This is a most ‘occult’ notion, in total agreement with the ageless wisdom of Theosophy. Lin-chi is basically saying that true human nature (a.k.a. “soul”) is none other than radiant luminosity, engaged with, yet absolutely free of all body/mind phenomena. His teaching is actually esoteric Buddhism set in a Ch’an context.

When this pure intelligent light identifies with transitory forms (physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual) it is called “a deluded sentient being.” When it realizes its own self-nature to be none other than pure, formless Mind, that One becomes a Buddha. Indeed, the only true existence, beyond all change, shape, and shift, is this formless, boundless, impersonal awareness. Of course, for most of us, such total luminosity is shrouded by our identification with the flux of body/mind matter.

Again and again, Lin-chi expounds this same teaching:

“There is only the man of the Way, listening to my discourse, dependent upon nothing — he it is who is the mother of all Buddhas... Followers of the way, the you who right now is listening to my discourse is not your four elements; this you makes use of your four elements. If you can fully understand this, you are free to go or stay [as you please].”
(Discourses XIV, XV)

It is only by direct contact with the “true you”, the One who uses the four elements of the dense fleshy form, that one gains existential freedom. Since this freedom is ultimately dependent on nothing, it can’t be gained by spiritual practice, nor by virtue or good deeds. In the final analysis, “there is only” this true Way-man, because everything else is impermanent, without abiding self-nature. But lest we get stuck in duality, we should also remember that such “all-pervading radiance” is also the true nature of all things, not located ‘in some place’ above or beyond our little lump of red flesh...

In the achieved recognition of the inner man, the One who remains spotless and untouched by all phenomena, one regains the inner freedom that had been lost through our depending on causes and conditions — our “thirst for becoming.” But frankly, all this discussion is still nothing but concepts, and even Lin-chi’s teaching of the “inner man” is only used to counteract our mistaken self-identification with body/mind process. In true liberation, there is no more talk of inner man or outer conditions...

In its most non-dualistic form, existential freedom comes only from realization of the “true man”:

“If you want to freely live or die, go or stay, to take off or put on [your clothes], then right now recognize the man who is listening to my discourse. He is without form, without characteristics, without root, without source, and without any dwelling place, yet is brisk and lively.” (Discourse XIV)

Freedom arises when we recognize who we really are — and in our normal way of being, it is shattered when we think, speak, and act from habitual identification with body/mind phenomena. The process of such identification, this “thirst for becoming” (a deeply insightful teaching of the Buddha himself), is manifest in the endless stream of our personal tendencies, divided neatly by Buddhists into the triad of desire, aggression, and ignorance. When we realize ourselves to actually be this free inner agent, then we become that freedom itself.

In the chronicle of Lin-chi's rugged teaching, we see a beautiful example of action without hesitation. His wild ways — shouting, beating, knocking over tables, and so on — is but skillful means in accordance with clarity, without fixed root. The true man, ever and always, is free and unperturbed. In Discourse XVIII, we hear a teaching which sounds curiously like the Chinese Taoist, Chuang Tzu:

“Only you, the follower of the Way right now before my eyes listening to my discourse, [only you] enter fire and are not burned, enter water and are not drowned, enter the three hells as though strolling in a pleasure gardens, enter the realms of the hungry ghosts and the beasts without suffering their fate. How can this be? There are no dharmas [genuine objective phenomena] to be disliked.”

Actually, this is a very radical statement, and begins to undercut Lin-chi's own previous teaching. Such self-dismissal, and awareness of the relativity of all conceptual teaching, no matter how clear, is the hallmark of the Ch'an school. It is the essence of what constitutes “living Zen” as opposed to “dead Zen” — the latter, being that old finger pointing to the moon. Words may be able to point us to the goal, but pondering their intellectual matter is surely not the goal itself.

Two ideas stand out here. First, the true inner Way-man is utterly non-physical, formless, and beyond all phenomenal activity. Thus, that One can never be burned, drowned, or in any other way essentially affected by physical conditions. Without intending to do so, this statement is not too far from the ordinary New Age understanding of Higher Self, but that is another matter!

What is pure spacious light cannot be affected by the movement of the four elements. Thus, the Taoist sage, as described by Chuang Tzu, is unruffled by gain or loss or disaster of any kind. The true man, real sage knows himself to be, and has fused in awareness with, this essential agent, and thus stands free of misfortune and the cycles of phenomenal display.

Secondly, Lin-chi states that there are no real dharmas to like or dislike anyway — they are all but conditional mirages and the play of phenomena without abiding self-nature — so we need not hate anything, and knowing our innate formless ‘self’ (dare I use this word?), we can go anywhere without care. The true man is beyond form, and form itself is empty — so why not be ordinary and do nothing? Or shout, or just do as you please? Of course, acting freely without total comprehension and fusion in this state of inner freedom can have disastrous consequences, as many a recent teacher-scandal shows.

Regarding action and non-action, which gives us another comparison with Taoist thought (as Taoists speak extensively about wu-wei, or non-doing), Lin-chi states:

“Motion and motionlessness both are without self-nature. If you try to seize it [Buddha-nature] within motion, it takes a position within motionlessness. If you try to seize it within motionlessness, it takes a position within motion... Virtuous monks, motion and motionlessness are merely two kinds of states; it is the non-dependent Man of the Way who utilizes motion, and utilizes motionlessness.” (Discourse XVIII)

If we try to seize upon the conditioned states of motion or motionlessness, within our own mind-stream and/or the so-called external environment, we are still far from liberation. These two patterns are expressed by our ordinary self-oriented action-reaction patterns, and the quietist attachment to stillness — and both are forms of false freedom (if such a phrase can be used!). Only when we at last recognize the insubstantiality of all such states, can we utilize them all freely. At that point, we begin to be a real teacher and guide to others on the ‘path to’ enlightenment.

Hence, a Master may fall silent, shout, beat, or walk away from an inquiring student. Since the essential Way of liberation cannot be found in any state, the teacher must undercut all

forms of grasping in the student's mind — grasping at form, feelings, opinions, stillness, energy conditions, and supersensible states. All are still conditioned, and all are still far from real enlightenment.

I am sure some Buddhists criticized the Taoist notion of wu-wei as just another form of quietism, an apparent attachment to motionlessness. However, the real meaning of Taoist wu-wei is not quietism at all, but rather, activity in harmony with the ever-changing, ever-unchanging Way of all life.

Later on in this same talk, Lin-chi speaks of the vanity of the act of searching itself for the true man, the inner Buddha-nature:

“Do you know who it is who right now is running around searching this way? He is brisk and lively, with no roots at all. Though you try to embrace him, you cannot gather him in; though you try to drive him away, you cannot shake him off. If you seek him he retreats farther and farther away; if you don't seek him, then he's right there before your eyes, his wondrous voice resounding in your ears. If a man has no faith [in this], he'll waste his entire life.” (Discourse XVIII)

Again, to search for true self is to deny its very presence — right here, right now — like “searching for your head with your head” (from the Surangama Sutra, another Chinese Mahayana work). Lin-chi's description of the true man fits the ideal Ch'an Master (or student): brisk and lively, with no roots at all. The “inner agent” clings to nothing: “the man of the Way leaves no trace of his activity.” That which is beyond form cannot really cling to form at all — but it can cling to a mistaken identification with form. What is non-physical can never touch the physical, in truth — all else is an illusion.

So Lin-chi had to cut through all that his disciples brought him, and most certainly, their understanding of Buddhism, coming as it did from conceptual process, and not liberation itself:

“Neither in this world nor beyond this world is there any Buddha or any Dharma. Even if such things existed, they would only be works and writings for the guidance of little children, expedient remedies for illnesses, and displays of names and phrases. Moreover, names and phrases are not of themselves names and phrases; it is you, who right now radiantly and vividly perceive, know, and clearly illumine [everything] — you it is who affix all names and phrases.” (Discourse XXI)

Buddha, Dharma, and all the profound Buddhist scriptures themselves — all are but more display of names and phrases. Their concepts are not particularly important at all. What is really important is simply the One who considers them. It is no less than the true man searching outside himself, for himself. The very searcher that which is sought. Indeed, Hindu yoga says the exact same thing:

“When the Knower, Known, and the means to knowledge are unified, then there is Brahman.” (Traditional Vedic Saying)

Thus, in all his words and acts, Lin-chi uses expedient means to cut through his students' endless round of seeking and conceiving. His teaching of the “true man without rank” is merely yet another form of “name and phrase.” And yet, its goal (and hopefully, its effect as well), is only to help the student turn his own mind-light back upon itself, reversing it from its normal focus outwards into the three worlds of samsara. It is a case of a true man, who realizes himself as such, offering guidance and dog-and-pony shows for other true men who have forgotten themselves; and thus live their lives like little children. And lest we think he is proud of his own circus act, or that these tricks of the tongue are sacred word from the great sage on high, Lin-chi

is the first to cut away our praise:

“Virtuous monks, at present I’ve no other choice than to speak so much trash and rubbish. Don’t be mistaken.” (Discourse XIX)

Even the Master’s words, no matter how clear, are only words. Compared to the jewel of true liberation, realization of essential freedom and the “true inner man,” they’re just shit. Of course, not too many spiritual teachers speak this way, and certainly not today. It seems that most students actually do want to remain little children and idolize their holy daddy, and holy mommy. Few teachers themselves would risk losing their devotees, ashram, or income by cutting down their own hallowed words. And thus, few teachers are as free and complete as Lin-chi I-hsuan Hui-chao. Most teachers still need their students, and thus bind them still...

It is the glory of Lin-chi that he knew, and didn’t hide the futility of trying to deliver that which can only be self-generated. As with Gautama Buddha himself, the intention here is simply to help the student wake up, and not to create new doctrine or debate old theory. The only thing that really matters is conscious fusion in awareness with the inner One who seeks.

Can we really know this One and let go all “guidance for little children?” Actually, it is ironic (or perhaps, tragic) that already-enlightened beings suffer so much to remember our own enlightenment. But this seems to be the state of affairs in the human, 3D realm.

Overall, Lin-chi’s life, teaching, practice, and realization can be summed up thus:

“When at these words you turn your own light in upon yourselves and never seek elsewhere, then you’ll know that your body and mind are not different from those of the Patriarch-Buddhas and on the instant have nothing to do — this is called obtaining the Dharma.” (Discourse XX)

Therefore, Lin-chi can state without doubt:

“As I see it there really aren’t so many problems.
If you want to act, act; if you don’t, don’t.” (Discourse XX)

The final result of Ch’an simplicity is just freedom and straight-forward living. Self-doubt and all forms of seeking — material, mental, and spiritual — are quelled at last. And thus the sage becomes quite ordinary, and disappears into the mass of humanity. And soon, he returns to forever.

Essay Notes

Source: Sasaki, Ruth Fuller; *The Record of Lin-chi*. Kyoto, Japan: Institute For Zen Studies, 1975.

About the Author

Dr. Scott Mandelker has an MA in Counseling, a Ph.D. in East-West Psychology, and over 20 years experience in Zen and Vipassana Buddhist traditions. His teaching blends the metaphysics of UFO/ET studies with the principles of spiritual growth, joining the wisdom of Eastern mystics with Western culture. His first book, *From Elsewhere: Being ET in America* (Birch Lane Press, 1995), examined the sub-culture of people who claim to be from other worlds. His second title, *Universal Vision: Soul Evolution and the Cosmic Plan* (UV Way, 2000) includes extensive teachings on Buddhist practice.

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