



Silent accord

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

自如來付法迦葉已來。
以心印心。心心不異。
印著空即印不成文。
印著物即印不成法。
故以心印心。
心心不異。
能印所印俱難契會。
故得者少。
然心即無心。
得即無得。
《黃檗山斷際禪師傳心法要》

Since the Tathagata entrusted the teaching to Kasyapa until now, Mind is impressed upon mind such that these Minds do not differ; if the impressure is made in emptiness it will leave no meaningful trace; if the impressure is made in matter that impression will not fulfil the Dharma. Thus Mind impresses mind and those Minds are the same. But the ability to make the impressure and the ability to receive the impressure are both difficult to realise, and thus those who get it are few. In any case, this Mind is "no-mind" and this Getting is "no-getting."

Zen Master Huang Bo on the Transmission of Mind

THE HESITATION ALMOST got me killed. Instead of stepping off resolutely and proceeding without visible doubt to the other curb, I turned to look at the onrush of coursing metal charging towards me in the street and tried to second-guess a safe path. The result was chaos, curses, high-pitched honking of tinny horns and a bruised shin.

Limping, I turned into a quiet street lined with plane trees. This was the street that housed Shijie's restaurant. On this side of the street, however, white-washed walls towered over the narrow sidewalk. Two huge wooden doors marked the entrance to the old herbal pharmacy directly across from the restaurant.

Inside the entrance, it was charming. A pathway of white pebbles wound through a moon gate to an arched bridge over a rippling brook, the banks planted with moss and green bamboo. Only after crossing the bridge did the path lead through couplet-framed doors into the large open space of the dispensary proper.

Wide counters made of aged wood flanked two sides. Behind them bustled *zhong yao shi* in their white coats and caps, balancing scales filled with herbs.

I checked the note I'd been given, and

looked up. Four stories above me was the ceiling, and three levels of balcony ringed the central open area. The room I wanted was on the third level. The wooden stairs were wide and worn, not surprising for such an old building. This pharmacy had survived for almost 200 years by careful attention to reputation and politics.

The stairs had survived as well, but not without complaint. I mounted them with trepidation up to the third level, then counted the rooms in the dark hallway until I came to the third on the right. I stepped back to allow a couple of patients to depart, prescription in hand, and then found him sitting alone at a plain wooden table, next to a window that looked out over the black-tiled roof to a garden at the rear of the compound. The man was Shijie's husband, Dr Jiang, the Chinese doctor whose political activism had almost ended in disaster the year before. He looked up when I came in, and smiled. "I *thought* it might be you," he said. "A bit late in the day for more patients."

We'd arranged that I would stop in before we went together to Shijie's weekly meeting, held across the street at her *yaoshan* restaurant. I had come early because I had a specific question for him. He offered tea, and when I nodded, set a jam jar in front of me. Green sword-shaped leaves floated on top of the steaming water.

He sat down again and there was silence. The green leaves slowly expanded, tipped, and sank to the bottom of the glass. We both watched them.

I did not want to just blurt out my question, so we discussed the pharmacy instead.

"Yes, it is amazing to think of this old building here for so many years, a shell in which people work all their lives, then pass on to be replaced by others, like bees in a hive. You could say this building is the structure (*ti* 体), and all of us are the function (*yong* 用)." He gave a shy smile. "Jing-Xin ... I think you call her Shijie, like Fatty does ... suggested I examine the Daoist concepts pervading Chinese medicine, and this concept of *ti* and *yong* is very common."

I frowned. "Such as?"

"Such as 'the Liver is yin in structure (*ti*) but yang in use (*yong*)'. 'Structure' is not always concrete, though. Zhang Jing-Yue, for example, says 'the primal heaven is the form

(*ti*) and post heaven is the use (*yong*)' but there he is talking about the use of the *Yi Jing* in medicine." He appeared prepared to continue on this topic for a lengthy stretch, but it was already getting too far away from the question I wanted to ask. I tried to think of a way to bring the topic back around.

Finally I said, "So Shijie suggested you examine Daoism and Chinese medicine?"

"Yes."

"What is it like to be married to a Daoist teacher?" I winced at the awkward segue, but that was the question I'd been waiting to ask.

He drew his head back and gave me a puzzled look. "Fine," he said.

"No, I mean, what is it like being married to someone more spiritually advanced than yourself?"

I sucked in breath. This was really going all wrong.

But Dr Jiang just laughed. "Well, I have been told one needs to be very careful about making those sorts of judgements, unless you are, for your own part, considerably advanced."

I grimaced. "Which of course we all think we are."

He nodded and leaned forward. "That is a fact. So we should all be very careful all the time when making an assessment about someone else's standing with the infinite. It may be exactly the person that *you* think is hopelessly lost who may, in fact, be truly the opposite." His eyes shifted upwards and to the right, then back at me, as he said "In fact, I remember a story the boatman told about just that."

I lifted my eyebrows as I took a sip of tea and waited for the story.

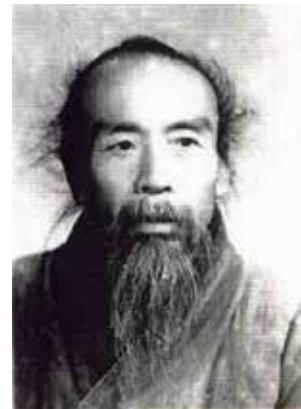
A Daoist teacher was reputed to also be a powerful magician, and was approached by a student who wished to learn this magic.

"Why do you wish to learn it?" the prospective teacher asked.

"So that I can help mankind," the student replied.

"This magic I know is powerful, able to change the course of history and indeed is used only in the service of mankind. None but those who are worthy may learn it. I must test you."

The student was told to wait for one whole



The boatman.

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方寸莫教昧，便是上乘人。

Only one whose square inch of heart has not been darkened by 'teachings' is truly wise.

— Li Dao-Chun,
13th century Daoist

day at the bridge over which all travellers into the city must pass, and to report on any incident that caught his eye. In the evening he returned, and the teacher asked him what he had seen.

“I saw many things. But the incident that impressed me the most was when I saw the guard at the bridge bullying a poor old barrow-driver who had a heavy load of cotton which he hoped to sell in the city. The guard would not let him in unless he paid a large bribe. The barrow-driver could not, and was driven away with blows.”

“And how did you feel when you saw that happen?”

“I felt very sorry for him, and thought that if I only knew your magic, I could have made things very different for that bullied old man.”

The Daoist teacher nodded his head and looked sad. “And that, in fact, is exactly why you have been tested, like I was many years ago, when my teacher wished to see if I was capable of using this magic wisely, or was ruled by such shallow emotionality that I would jump to conclusions and use it frivolously. My teacher, whose ability to use this magic is far greater than mine, you should know, is none other than that poor old barrow-man you saw today at the bridge.”

I thought for a moment as I blew on my tea, then shook my head. “That story is about a lot more than just mistaking someone’s spiritual standing.”

“That is a fact.” He took a sip of his own tea and was silent for a moment, then said “But you wanted to know what it is like being married to Jing-Xin ... Shijie.”

“Yes. When did you meet her?”

“We met when we were both young, and we had the usual wedding ceremony of those days: we just went around to our friends and family together, handed out candy, and bang, that was it, we were married. But soon after she was sent away to the northwest to work, around Linxia. That was where she met Fatty and their teacher.”

“Was she different when she came back?”

He thought for a moment. “Different? Yes, you could say that. She had always been serious and clever, but now she was ... what is

the word ... perceptive. She could anticipate what I was going to say most times, and often when something occurred in the neighbourhood or the country that surprised me, I would find that she had anticipated it and made preparations.”

“Did this bother you?”

He reddened slightly and bit his lip, then sighed. “This is not very flattering, but it was hard on the ego, at first. She would say something and I would take it as an attack. I’d respond defensively and attack back. She would look surprised, and I realised she had only been making a descriptive observation, she had not been judging me.” He looked down and shook his head. “It took a few years to settle down and be able to take a cold hard look at myself.” Then he looked up. “But it has been worth it.”

“In what way?”

“In many ways. But to give you a concrete example, I found that the more in harmony we were, the better my professional life progressed. Everything just seemed to fall into place for me.”

“How does that work?”

“I have no idea.” He shook his head. “But I don’t think one is meant to become too interested or excited by these things. *Side effects* Jing-Xin called them.”

I was quiet for a moment, then asked “But how do you get by, living in the same house with your teacher?”

“My teacher?” He laughed. “No, Jing-Xin ... Shijie is not my teacher. That would be too complicated. She might describe herself as a fellow-wayfarer. Meanwhile, I ...” he paused and indicated me with a lift of his chin “like you, Xiaoyao, am counted as an ‘auditor’ in her circle: always welcome, but the program is not designed with our special characteristics in mind. In the classes, I am given the chance to notice any stirrings of chagrin at being on the level of a ‘student’ and encouraged to use them to reduce my illusory self.”

But it was another word that had caught my attention. “Designed?”

He looked at me with surprise. “Of course. Each formal group is comprised of a certain selection of individuals who form a certain balance and need a certain program. It is always different for different groups, because the component parts are different. You can cook, can’t you?”

I was silenced by the tangent. "Uh, yes, but..."

"If you tried the same recipe with different components, how do you think it would go?"

"It might work."

"Remind me not to eat at your place." He laughed, softening the criticism. "But a good teacher is like a good chef: many recipes to fit the different ingredients."

I sipped my tea and thought about many of the so-called "spiritual teachers" in the West: in most, everybody got the same program, no matter what.

There was silence for a moment, then he shrugged. "But look, it is not all other-worldly and esoteric, you know: Jing-Xin and I are just two human beings in a household, it is not something weird. This path, whether you call it Daoism or whatever, is actually part of the human heritage, a heritage that one engages in order to be all that a human

can be. Not so that you can act like some sort of ethereal presence wafting about in a bit of incense smoke."

"Two normal people."

"That's a fact." He checked his watch. "We are late."

As we crossed the street I reflected on his "part of the human heritage" statement. It jelled well with something the Abbot had said: "People think enlightenment is difficult because so few reach the goal. But this is only because we aim our lives in the wrong direction, *away* from the source that supports its natural unfoldment. When we turn the light around and give that source its due attention, illumination is the natural development of a properly lived life. We would expect it as something normal."

The three aspirants knelt in the middle of the floor, on a rug designed with octagon

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patterns. Arranged on chairs behind them in a half-circle were the rest of the people attending the meeting. Entering the room quietly, Dr Jiang and I took up positions behind those seated. Shijie stood before the three applicants, preparing to deliver the instructions that would allow these three to become members of her circle. She lit five sticks of incense and the rich fragrance spread throughout the room.

“We are met to recognise three applicants who have completed their audition period and have been accepted for formal membership. Tonight they will be given guidelines which will form a framework for their learning in the formless realm.”

Shijie had been looking at the applicants but now raised her head and spoke to everyone.

“These guidelines as a whole are specifically for the three applicants, and should not be blindly copied out of greed, in an attempt to steal spiritual advancement. However, each one of them has some value in and of itself, and everyone here is invited to consider and assess their applicability to themselves ...” here she paused and looked around at the circle of seated people, “... paying particular attention to those guidelines that they find least attractive.”

She was silent for a moment as she turned towards the kneeling figures, then began to speak. I had been expecting words of mysterious import and arcane secrets, so what Shijie actually said surprised me.

“You have completed your audition with the understanding that the path has many pitfalls, and that a Guide is needed to lead you safely through these pitfalls until you are competent to travel on your own.”

The three aspirants bowed their heads in unison.

“The Guide is like the captain of a ship or the leader of a caravan. To reach the goal, everyone must cooperate, and you are certainly encouraged to assess and verify the directions of the Guide according to commonsense and your humanity. But arguing with every instruction that you do not like will hamper the arrival of all. Similarly, to ignore these instructions is to cast yourself into the sea or to wander away from the caravan into the trackless desert. You are perfectly welcome to do so, but

the chances of safe arrival are considerably diminished.”

Again, the bowing of heads, acknowledging understanding.

“Now, some specifics. You will observe your own patterns of attention: what attracts it, what captures it, how long it can be sustained. You will turn that attention around to look and listen within for a short period each day. Eventually this will allow you to make more sustained contact with the original source of the Daoist tradition.”

Once more, the bowing of heads.

I glanced at Dr Jiang. He stood with his full attention on his wife, listening intently.

“You will strive to ask effective questions, knowing that active thinking and questioning is essential to verifiable experience, and an efficient counter to mindless acceptance.”

“You will strive to avoid reflexive or mechanical questions, or questions that serve simply to attract attention to yourself. Similarly, you will refrain from questioning or commenting on the progress of your fellow students.”

Acknowledged.

“You will undertake a physical training program in a movement discipline that is unfamiliar. It could be dance, martial arts, theatre, yoga; the crucial thing is that the program forces you to become aware of your body in an unaccustomed way.”

“You will reduce time-wasting distractions, lessening and eventually ceasing your involvement in activities that are inconsistent with the goals of the path. In all other activities you will strive to be as efficient as possible, gathering the energy conserved that it may be used for your progress and that of the group.”

“You will familiarise yourself with modern research on group dynamics and psychology, and the research on brain-washing and cult formation. You will remember that any group, even one that begins with the highest aims, can devolve into a cult, and you will be on the lookout for the tell-tale signs, especially among the senior students and the teacher.”

The three students hesitated, and looked at each other. This was obviously unexpected. Following this brief moment they again bowed their heads.

“Remember that this is a circle that aims

at fostering your autonomy, it is not a group you join because you want to feel protected, praised, cared for and guided by a substitute parent figure. This is not your new family. You must maintain your normal family and social ties.

"You will direct some of your resources, whether these be time, money, skills or whatever towards the enrichment of your local community. This may include, but *must not be* limited to, the present circle of seekers."

There followed a short series of instructions which Shijie said were strictly for these three applicants, and were not to be followed by anyone else present. As my brain was already overwhelmed by the previous list, I remembered only one:

"You will strive to take 50 completely aware breaths during the course of a single day, breaths in which you are completely present and not distracted by wandering thoughts. These breaths need not be consecutive," she added. I probably remembered this one because of my reaction: Fifty breaths did not sound like much, I thought. That one, at least, would be dead easy.

After the crowd had dispersed, Dr Jiang and I were sitting with the fat monk in a different room, very cosy with scrolls and bonsai and wooden engravings.

"I am surprised," I said, "that there was so little mention of all those things we usually consider part of spiritual advancement, you know, that the applicants will not lie, cheat, murder and so on."

The fat monk frowned, shook his head as if to clear it, then focused on me with an incredulous expression. Finally he said, "Ok, look. People who need to be told those things are not even on our radar. This is not kindergarten. We assess people from first contact on through auditorship and if they are not suitable we have to deflect them." He looked me up and down and added: "although there are special cases for special situations."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "You might ask Shijie one day."

I frowned. When he was in this mood it was impossible to get more out of him.

I went back to the question of "designing" a group, and found him more forthcoming

on that topic.

He said, "Groups – that is, formal teaching groups, not just casual discussion groups – can be divided into three types: true, imitation and relic. True groups are always organic, designed for the individuals involved, and definitely not set up with a fixed program that operates by rote. A fixed program is a sure sign of either an imitation or a relic."

"But what does the design accomplish?" I asked.

He paused before answering. "The most crucial function is to allow a subtle communication and enhancement of energy both within the group and between the group, the cosmos, and the greater community. To do this you may need all different types, even, perhaps, including some elements that are deliberately inharmonious. It is the relationship between *ti* (体) the body, and *yong* (用) the function. How the body is designed affects the function. Only the teacher knows exactly how a given group should be composed. It is a sense, a matter of feeling, I think," he said.

My heart had given a jump. *Ti*, and *yong*! These were exactly what Dr Jiang and I had been discussing at his pharmacy earlier. Could the Daoist read minds? I glanced at the doctor, but he did not seem excited by the coincidence. In fact, he was taking up where the fat monk had left off.

"Jing-Xin told me that sometimes the design will be such as to correct aberrations that were created by the relics or imitations of previous programs," he said.

The Daoist nodded, seeming to go within himself.

"Aberrations such as what?" I asked, after a moment.

The fat monk looked up and became animated again. "Well, say a teacher finds herself among a population who is very lazy. She may, just to restore necessary balance, emphasise physical activity. After she passes on – and I have to emphasise that no school or circle or group is meant to last forever – inevitably imitators will set up schools claiming that physical activity is the end-all and be-all of The Path. The next real teacher that comes along will again have to redress the balance, perhaps by emphasising quiet sitting, after which the followers of *those* students will claim that quiet sitting is the

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only thing necessary. Meanwhile, the followers of the imitation physical activity school will fight with the followers of the students of the quiet sitting school. Then, around the fringes will pop up scholars who do not have the faintest clue about this principle requiring a ‘redressing of the balance’ and the necessity of a whole organic teaching, and they will theorise that the second teacher was deliberately trying to encroach on the territory of the first teacher ...”

Dr Jiang laughed and said: “Which is of course only projecting their own mindset and jealousies from academia into areas where this is absolutely irrelevant.”

Something popped into my mind about a paper I had read recently – in fact I had jotted down a quote from it. I searched my bag and pulled out my notebook, then, translating, read it to Dr Jiang and the Daoist:

“The story told by the writings of [the 14th century alchemist Chen Zhi-Xu] is, in the main, a story of social competition between rival intellectuals within a soteriological marketplace. Chen is competing against other purveyors of daos, anonymous salesmen of salvific teachings ...”

The fat monk sat up, rolled his eyes, then leaned forward on the table, buried his face in his hands and shook his head, laughing. I glanced at the doctor, but he looked nonplussed. The fat monk composed himself and managed to ask “Is that just one bit? Or is the whole paper like that?”

“All 800 pages worth,” I said.

He shook his head. “The problem is worse than I thought. But I hope it is clear to you two, at least, that a paper like this tells us much more about the academic who wrote it than it tells us about Chen Zhi-Xu. A true teacher thinks only of the necessities of the situation, how to restore balance and foster progress, and not at all about ‘selling’ or ‘competition’. In fact, these concepts are incompatible with functioning in the realm of the formless.”

“That is a fact,” said the doctor. “But with all this going on, the disciples of relic or imitation schools fighting, academics theorising and confusing things even more, it sounds like a total mess.”

The Daoist nodded. “It is, but that is the situation we are working in all the time. This is the reason that sincerity on the student’s part is so crucial: truth attracts truth. If a student thinks that learning in this area will give him power or that he can adorn himself with it somehow, he will find himself attracted to that sort of group and that sort of teacher.”

“And so people really do find the teachers they deserve,” I marvelled. It now made sense.

Shijie bustled into the room followed by two waiters carrying steaming plates. They arranged them on the table before us then went back for more. Shijie sat next to her husband and, nudging him, gave him a smile. “Your favourite,” she said, indicating the fish with dark brown sauce. “*Dou ban yu*, not too spicy.”

He had just finished saying “You know I only like that with beer!” when a waiter arrived with several bottles of Qingdao and placed them amidst the growing number of dishes on the table.

Dr Jiang chuckled. “Jing-Xin, you know me too well,” he said. He gestured around at us, “Come on everyone, let’s eat.”

We sat down and there was a moment of Chinese etiquette in which we waited for Shijie to pick up her chopsticks. She hesitated slightly, waiting for her husband to go first, and then we all dug in. He lifted a glass of beer and we responded.

“A toast! To the harmony of hearts!”

And we drank to that.

■ The entire Fat Monk series is available for free download at our website: www.thelantern.com.au