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# *Huatou Chan:* **Have Faith You Are Buddhas!**

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CHAN MASTER GAOFENG YUANMIAO

Introduction & Translation BY GUO GU

Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238–1296) is widely regarded as one of the most influential Chan masters of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), particularly known for his teachings on Huatou Chan. He is the central figure in the famous gong’an, “Do you have mastery of yourself when you are in a dreamless sleep?” In this article, Guo Gu has selected and translated some of Master Yuanmiao’s teachings to share with the readers of *Chan Magazine*.

Guo Gu (Dr. Jimmy Yu) began studying with Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1980. In 1991 he was ordained as a monk and became Master Sheng Yen’s personal attendant. In 1995, he had his first Chan experience, and was given permission by the master to teach Chan independently. In 2000, Guo Gu left monasticism and re-entered the lay world. He is a professor of Buddhist studies at Florida State University. He is also the founder and teacher at the Tallahassee Chan Center, and the founder of the Dharma Relief.

Right: *Portrait of Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao* by Chūan Shinkō (around 1444–1457, Japan)  
Freer Gallery of Art Collection, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution



GAOFENG YUANMIAO (1238–1296) was arguably one of the most important and influential Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) Chan masters who lived through the fall of the Southern Song dynasty. His dharma heirs included Chan masters Zhongfeng Mingben (1263–1323), Duanyai Liaoyi (1263–1334), and two other lesser-known masters. Born into a family surnamed Xu in Wujiang, Jiangsu Province, Gaofeng Yuanmiao left home at fourteen, a year later had his head shaved, and received the full precepts the following year.<sup>1</sup> For two years he studied Tiantai Buddhism, then turned to Chan. He first entered Jingci Monastery to study with Duanqiao Miaolun (1201–1261), setting himself a limit of three years to practice Chan.<sup>2</sup> Making little progress, Yuanmiao went to study with Xueyan Zuqin (1216–1287), a high-profile Chan master who promoted the practice of *huatou* as a method to awakening.<sup>3</sup> He forged a close relationship with Zuqin and had two decisive awakening experiences, both of which occurred when working on the *huatou* method. Eventually Yuanmiao became Zuqin's dharma heir after a long period of study.

Yuanmiao was known as an ascetic. Among the notable features of his biography are his retreats into the mountains for long periods of protracted self-cultivation. The first of these took place in 1266. Vowing to reach understanding, Yuanmiao went to Longxu in the Tianmu mountains near Lin'an (in present-day Zhejiang province). After having spent five years there, one night while absorbed in the wonderment from his *huatou* practice, he heard the sound of a pillow falling to the ground and experienced his final awakening. He continued to stay there for a total of nine years, living austere and enduring harsh weather. On one occasion, there was a brutal snowstorm, and snow buried his niche. For over ten days, the road was cut off, and he could not light a fire. People assumed he must have died, but when the snow cleared, they found him sitting in meditation like a *nāga*.<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter, Yuanmiao began to attract students in great numbers, but the Mongol invasion led by Kublai Khan forced him into another reclusion:

“In the spring of 1276,<sup>5</sup> his students and disciples scattered to the four directions to avoid the army. Alone, the Master closed the gate, and sat defiantly, self-possessed. When affairs had settled and the door was opened, they saw the master like a *nāga* in the midst of snow, just as before.<sup>6</sup>”

Yuanmiao was unyielding in the face of social adversities and natural disasters and is often presented as a master of his environment, like the supernatural *nāgas* or “dragons” in the Buddhist scriptures. He was solitary and stern, harsh and cold, even forbidding, and had no use for social niceties.

Below is his autobiography describing his practice and insights. This is followed by excerpts from his discourse record. These writings give us a glimpse into his style of teaching on the *huatou*.

I LEFT THE HOUSEHOLD LIFE at fifteen, and by sixteen I was ordained as a monk. At eighteen, I studied the Tiantai doctrine. By twenty, I changed my robes to enter Jingci Monastery and set out three years of death date to practice Chan under Venerable Duanqiao, who gave me the huatou, “from where I came, to where shall I go?” But when I practiced this, my mind was polarized into two directions; my mind could not return to one. Also, I didn’t receive any instructions from Duanqiao on how to practice. I was held up like this for over a year, and every day I [walked around] like someone who is lost. Because I gave myself three years, I became vexed. At that time, I met dharma brother Jing from Taizhou, who said to me “Venerable Xueyan always checked on students’ practice. Why don’t you go there?” Thereafter, I joyfully brought incense with me and headed up north to seek instructions from him.

When I saw him, I paid obeisance and lit incense, but was beaten and chased out, and he shut the door on me. In tears, I returned to the sangha hall. The next day, after I finished my congee, I returned to him and inquired about what had happened before. I conveyed every experience I had earnestly, and immediately he resolved and eliminated all the illnesses [from practice] I had accumulated in the past. He had me observe the word, “Wu” and begin anew in my practice. This was like obtaining light in the midst of darkness, or like being suspended and suddenly saved. From his instructions I knew how to practice. Moreover, every day I was summoned by him to see how I was doing in my practice. Like someone traveling, every day there must be progress; it can’t be the same today and tomorrow.

Each day I entered his quarters he would ask, “How’s your practice today?” One day, because



Wu Chinese calligraphy by Venerable Chi Chern

every time I had something to say [in response to his inquiry], he didn’t ask me how I was doing. Instead, as soon as I entered, he just asked, “Who’s dragging this corpse around?” Before he even finished his sentence, he started to beat and chase me out of the room. After that, every day he would ask me this question and beat me, pressuring and pushing me to my limits.

The master was later invited to Guiyang. Before he left, he said to me, “Once I’m at the cloister, I’ll have someone fetch for you” but I never heard anything back. I accompanied dharma brother Ze to temporarily stay with his lay relatives for a while to lay down our belongings. But his relatives thought we were too young to sojourn by ourselves so kept our belongings and ordination certificates. When February came

around, we were able to convince them that monastics cannot stay with them. Consequently, we were able to pack our bags to leave for Jingshan Monastery. By mid-February, we entered the Chan Hall.

The following month, on the night of the 16<sup>th</sup>, I suddenly dreamt of Duanqiao's words in his quarters, "The myriad dharmas return to one; where does the one return to?" From these words the wonderment burst forth, everything became one pervasively whole, where east and west became indistinguishable and I'd forgotten to eat and sleep. On the sixth day morning, as I was walking in the corridor, I saw the monastic assembly exiting out of the sangha hall. Without awareness I just joined them, and we ended up at the pavilion of the three pagodas reciting the scriptures. When I looked up, I saw a portrait of Wuzu Fayan (1018–1104) with verses. The last two lines read, "One hundred years and 36,000 mornings, and it's still this same old fellow." At that time, the former question of Xueyan, "Who's dragging this corpse around" suddenly shattered – I felt like my soul and spirit had completely dispersed and exterminated, and yet came back to life, as if I had put down a hundred and twenty pounds of weight. At that time, I was twenty-four years old and had just fulfilled the third year [that I had given myself to investigate Chan].

I left for Guiyang to seek out Xueyan. Having arrived where he was at, even though I continued my practice and was able to understand all the gong'an without being deceived by anyone, whenever I opened my mouth, I felt muddled. In the midst of the day, I was not free. It felt like I owed some debts. I wanted to attend to the master for the rest of my life.

At that time, brother Ze left for another monastery and didn't stay. When the old master began teaching again, I was fortunately able to attend to him, and accompany him to Tianning Monastery. On the way there, he asked me, "Amidst the chaos of the day, are

you able to be your own master or not?" I replied, "I am able to." Then he asked, "What about in your sleep are you able to?" I said, "Yes." Then he retorted, "What about in the midst of sleep when there are no dreams or thoughts whatsoever, when there are neither seeing nor hearing, where is the master then?" When I heard that, I had no words to respond and nothing to say. He then told me, "From now on, there's no buddha to learn from, no dharma to study; there's no need to examine the teachings of the past and present. Just eat when it's time to eat and sleep when you're tired. But when you awake from sleep and feel refreshed, look into this wakefulness and ask, "Just where is this master, and how is he established?"

Even though I had conviction of these words and observed them closely, due to my dull natural aptitude, it was difficult to fathom their meaning. Following this, there was an opportunity to go to Longxu in the mountains near Lin'an [in present-day Zhejiang province]. I vowed to live like a fool and only to observe this question until I fully understood it. After five years, one night I was in the midst of this wonderment and my companion's pillow fell to the ground; suddenly, the sound shattered the great ball of wonderment. It was like leaping out of a web of an entangled net. Recollecting the gong'an of the buddhas and the ancestral masters and the differences between the ancients and the present, this is like Sizhou meeting Dasheng (628–710) [i.e., they're the same person], or like a traveler returning home. Originally, it's the same old person; without changing, the old one travels at will. This is the way to bring peace and stability to the nation, where under heaven all is good. A single moment of non-contrivance and the ten directions are all put to rest.

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Below are excerpts from the *Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao*:

## Prerequisites of Chan

In order to genuinely investigate Chan, you must fulfil three prerequisites: First, you must have the faculty of great faith or conviction. To be patently clear about this matter [of awakening] is like leaning against Mount Sumeru.<sup>7</sup> Second, you must have great ferocious determination, like meeting the wrongful murderer of your father, and right then and there you want to cut him in half with a single strike of your sword. Third, you must have great wonderment. The feeling is like having covertly done something heinous and you're about to be exposed. If you're able to have these three essentials during the twelve time periods [24 hours of day and night], then for sure you will succeed within the timeframe you have set out to accomplish this task. There is no need to be concerned; it's like catching a turtle trapped in a jar.<sup>8</sup> However, missing any one of these essentials would be like a three-legged cauldron with a broken leg – it would end up being useless. Even though it's like this, when someone has fallen into a ditch, I still need to try to save this person. Duo!

## How to Steady and Persist in the Method

Regarding this matter [of practice], it's like throwing a rock into a ten thousand meters deep lake, and the rock sinks down to the bottom without interruption. If you are able to sincerely practice like this without interruption for seven days and not resolve this matter [of birth and death], then I, [Yuan]miao, shall forever plunge down and dwell in *avīci* hell.<sup>9</sup>

## Have Faith You Are Buddhas!

Regarding this matter, there is no difference between sacred and profane, old or young, men or women, and sharp or blunt. For this reason, our teacher Śākyamuni at the site of his awakening, on the eighth night of December exclaimed, “How odd, sentient beings are replete with the wisdom and virtue of the tathāgatas!” He also said that “Mind, buddhas, and sentient beings are not distinct from one another” and that “all dharmas are equal – there are no distinctions of high or low.” Yet, for all the buddhas and ancestral masters

of the past to all the exemplars, and even all the elder venerables, who have attested and gained realization, how is it that there are those who arrived slowly or quickly, experienced it difficultly or easily? For instance, all of you present here with your own “family [karmic] affairs.”<sup>10</sup> If you're able to suddenly revert your perfect luminosity and shine [within] to recall where you came from, some of you may have arrived here when you were quite young, some old; some of you took months to get here, while others only took days, and some even



Photo by Hong-Jun Fu

took only an instant. Still, there are those who died trying to get here. It is because your home is far or near that there is a difference of how slowly or quickly you arrive. Even so, amidst of it all, there is someone who is without a home to return to, without a path of Chan to learn, with no birth and death to relinquish, and no *nirvāṇa* to realize. This someone is prancing around freely from morning to night. Examining this person closely, Śākyamuni and Maitreya are none other than you picking up your cup or holding your bowl. How is it not like this? [Yuanmiao] hits the platform twice with his fly whisk. *Haaa! Haaa!* When you arrive, don't make any mistakes about this!

## On Determination and Persistence

The myriad dharmas return to one, but where does the one return to? Wakefully latch onto this uncertainty until this wonderment reaches a point where all emotions are forgotten, and your mind has extinguished. The Golden Crow<sup>11</sup> would then soar in the sky at midnight.

If you're able to thoroughly examine into this matter by bringing your practice to its pinnacle, then it would be like plucking flowers in the sky, or like scooping out the moon in the water – there wouldn't be any place to lay your hands, nor apply yourself. Typically, when practitioners encounter obstructions, five out of ten would start beating the battle drum for retreating. They fail to realize that those [obstructions] are precisely a sign that they're about to arrive home. If you're bold and fearless, then right where you stand, where you can't put your hands on it nor can you apply yourself, go forward. Like the general Guan Yu (d. 219), who amidst hundreds and thousands of soldiers in the chaos of the battlefield, without any concerns of gain or loss, directly beheaded Yan Liang (d. 200). If you're able to be sincere and carry

yourself in this fashion, with ferocious power, then you would be able to succeed with a snap of a finger. In an instant become a sage. If you're unable to be like this, then, even if you investigate this matter until Maitreya descends, you would still only be just another venerable monk.

## Wonderment

Attendant Jing: It has taken 24 years to arrive here. Being sickly, I have sought out physicians and taken lots of medicine, experiencing much hardship. It was a struggle to realize that the illness I had was difficult to treat. Later, when I went to Jingshan Monastery, one night I dreamt of master Duanqiao's medicinal pill, which lasted for six days until I was unexpectedly triggered by Xueyan's poison, causing me to disperse my soul and extinguish my spirit. I came back to life after having died. Just then, the four great elements became pliant and light, as if I put down a hundred and twenty pounds of weight. Today, I give you this medicinal pill. If you wish to take it, then take your six emotions (of joy, anger, despair, happiness, love, and

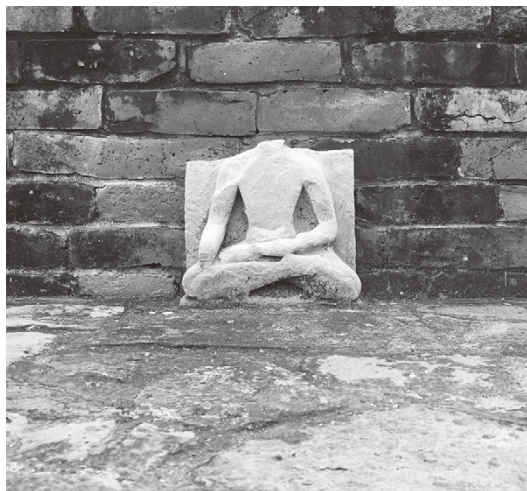


Photo by Ven. Chang Zhai



hatred) and six consciousnesses (arising from eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind), the four great elements and five aggregates, as well as the mountains and rivers and the myriad forms in all its magnitude, and smelt all of that into a single ball of wonderment, blocking your sight. No need to go to war with anything using your spears and flags. Just very quietly [bring it forth] and the whole world is at peace.

In walking there is just this ball of wonderment; sitting, there's just this ball of wonderment; putting on clothes and eating a meal are all this ball of wonderment; taking a dump or a piss are also just this ball of wonderment; seeing, hearing, perceiving, and knowing are just this ball of wonderment. Coming and going in this this ball of wonderment until this wonderment reaches a place where you're saving power – that's when you're gaining power. Even when you don't want to wonder about it, the wonderment continues; even when you don't bring it up, it persists. Stuck to this wonderment from head to toe – one pervasive whole. Not a single gap. Shake it, and it doesn't budge; avail yourself to it, and it never goes away. Luminous and potent, ever present. It's like a boat floating down the river – there's no need to use your hands [to row the oars]. This is when you're about to gain power from your practice. This is when you must earnestly bring forth the correct thought and be careful not to give rise to other thoughts. Again and again, polish this [wonderment]; again and again, wash away [everything else], until all sublime states are exhausted and the mysterious is extinguished. To the utmost, to the most subtle, like taking shelter at the tip of a hair. Solitary and lofty – motionless and unwavering; not coming, not going. When a single thought does not arise, before and after are cut off. This is where the dustlike defilements suddenly cease, and confusions are terminated. Walking you won't know you're walking; sitting you won't know you're

sitting; when cold you won't know it's cold; when hot, you won't know it's hot. Drinking tea, you don't know you're drinking, having a meal you're unaware that you're eating. Dull like an imbecile, like a clay statue or a wooden carving. Indifferent like a wall. Just this state is a harbinger that you're about to arrive home. You're not far from it. It is within your reach and totally obtainable. It's only a matter of time.

However, you can't, upon hearing this, get all wired up and seek after this state. Nor can you simply wait for it to happen or just let things be. You also cannot give up. Just bring forth the correct attitude. Take awakening as the standard.

In this process there are eighty-four thousand demon soldiers of Mara waiting upon you at your six senses. Every miraculous, auspicious, extraordinary, and dreadful phenomenon is your own projection. These states are born of the mind, arise from craving, and manifest through thoughts. Whatever you crave, don't follow it. If you have the slightest interest in discerning them, giving rise to even the subtlest wandering thought, then you will be enslaved by them. They will order you around – causing you to say erroneous things and think of wicked acts, like criticizing people to advance your reputation. Then the direct cause of *prajñā* will perish as a result and the seed of bodhi will never sprout. You will wallow in *samsāra* kalpa after kalpa. All of these demonic states arise from the mind. If your mind doesn't arise, there would be nothing to oppose. Tiantai [Zhiyi] has said, “The exhaustion of your ploys is the boundlessness of me not caring.” How true are these words!

Under all circumstances, just be cold and steady, pure and spotless; one thought for ten thousand years. Be a zombie, guarding your own corpse. Observe and guard this wonderment. Then this wonderment will, in its own accord, explode. Then heaven will shake, and the earth will shatter. Apply yourself this way! 🍀

1. Age fourteen is by Western reckoning; in Chinese calculation, he left home at age fifteen. For biographical information on Gaofeng Yuanmiao, see those biographies appended to his *Gaofeng Yuanmiao Chanshi Yulu* (*Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao*), in Manji Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–1989), a.k.a. Xuzangjing (The Supplementary Buddhist Canon), X.70, No.1400: 698c–701b. See also his letter to Xueyan Zuqin, in which he offers a spiritual biography, X.70: 711c–712c, translated in Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 239–42. His biography is also redacted in *Jideng Lu* (*Records of the Succession of the Lamp*), X.86: 529b–530a, and *Nan-Song Yuan Ming Chanlin Sengbao Zhuan* (*Biographies of the Treasured Chan Sangha from the Southern Song to the Ming Dynasties*), X.79: 621b–622b.
2. Jingci Monastery is one of the several Chan monasteries located on Jingshan 徑山, in the northeastern part of the Tianmu range. Duanqiao Miaolun is a monk in the lineage of Wuzhun Shifan; his biography is appended to his discourse record. See *Duanqiao Miaolun Chanshi Yulu* (*Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Duanqiao Miaolun*), X.70, No.1394: 548c–573b.
3. Zuqin himself had been contemplating the character “wu” when he had his first major breakthrough. See P. Wu, *The Confucian's Progress*, 82, and *Xueyan Zuqin Chanshi Yulu* (*Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Xueyan Zuqin*), X.70: 607a. Zuqin's arguments about practice were in response to what he saw as laxity in the Chan practice of his time. On this issue, see X.70: 612c.
4. See X.70: 699b.
5. In 1276, the empresses of Southern Song surrendered to Kublai Khan of the Yuan Mongols at Lin'an. There were still some Song loyalists who established the Song state in Fuzhou, installing two emperors in Fuzhou and then Lantau Island (Hong Kong) but on March 19, 1279, the Mongols defeated the last of the Song forces at the naval Battle of Yamen.
6. See X.70: 699b. Although his immediate concern may be self-preservation, this passage suggests his retreat into the mountains was motivated by objections to Mongol rule. Such a response to displeasure with the government is well attested in the history of reclusion. For one discussion of various types of recluses, see Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2000), 17–63. Yuanmiao, unlike many recluses, retreated not to avoid government service but to flee potential harm from representatives of the government.
7. Mount Sumeru is the mythological *axis mundi* of the Buddhist cosmology. It is a mountain, in the center of a great ocean, in the center of the world surrounded by four continents oriented toward the cardinal directions and eight subcontinents. It is also on a golden wheel, and it rises 80,000 (or 160,000) *yojanas* 由旬 above sea level. Surrounded by eight mountains and eight seas (and thus there are nine mountains and eight seas 九山八海; but some works list only seven mountains), and the sun and moon 日月 circle around it, with the six realms 六道 and various heavens around and above it. On its peak is Indra's heaven 帝釋天 (Trāyastriṃśa Heaven 兜率天), below this on its slopes are the Four-Quarter Kings 四天王; around are eight circles of mountains and between them the eight seas, the whole forming nine mountains and eight seas. To its south is the continent of Jambudvīpa 閻浮提, home to human beings.
8. “A turtle trapped in a jar” or *Wengzhong zoubie* 甕中走鼈 means easy, as in the Chinese expressions: 輕而易舉 (light and easy to lift), 十拿九穩 (nine chances out of ten), 易如反掌 (as easy as turning over your hand), or the English expressions: shooting fish in a barrel, a piece of cake.
9. *Avīci* hell is the hell of incessant suffering and uninterrupted scorching. In Buddhism, hell, the lowest of the six realms of existence, is divided into eight categories, with the *avīci* hell being the last and deepest of the eight hot hells, where the culprits suffer, die, and are instantly reborn to suffering, without interruption.
10. “Family affairs” or *jiaye* 家業 here refers to karmic stock.
11. Golden Crow is a mythological bird from ancient China that resides in the sun; later the term came to refer to the sun.