

# No-Gate Gateway

*The Original Wu-Men Kuan*

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*Translated by David Hinton*

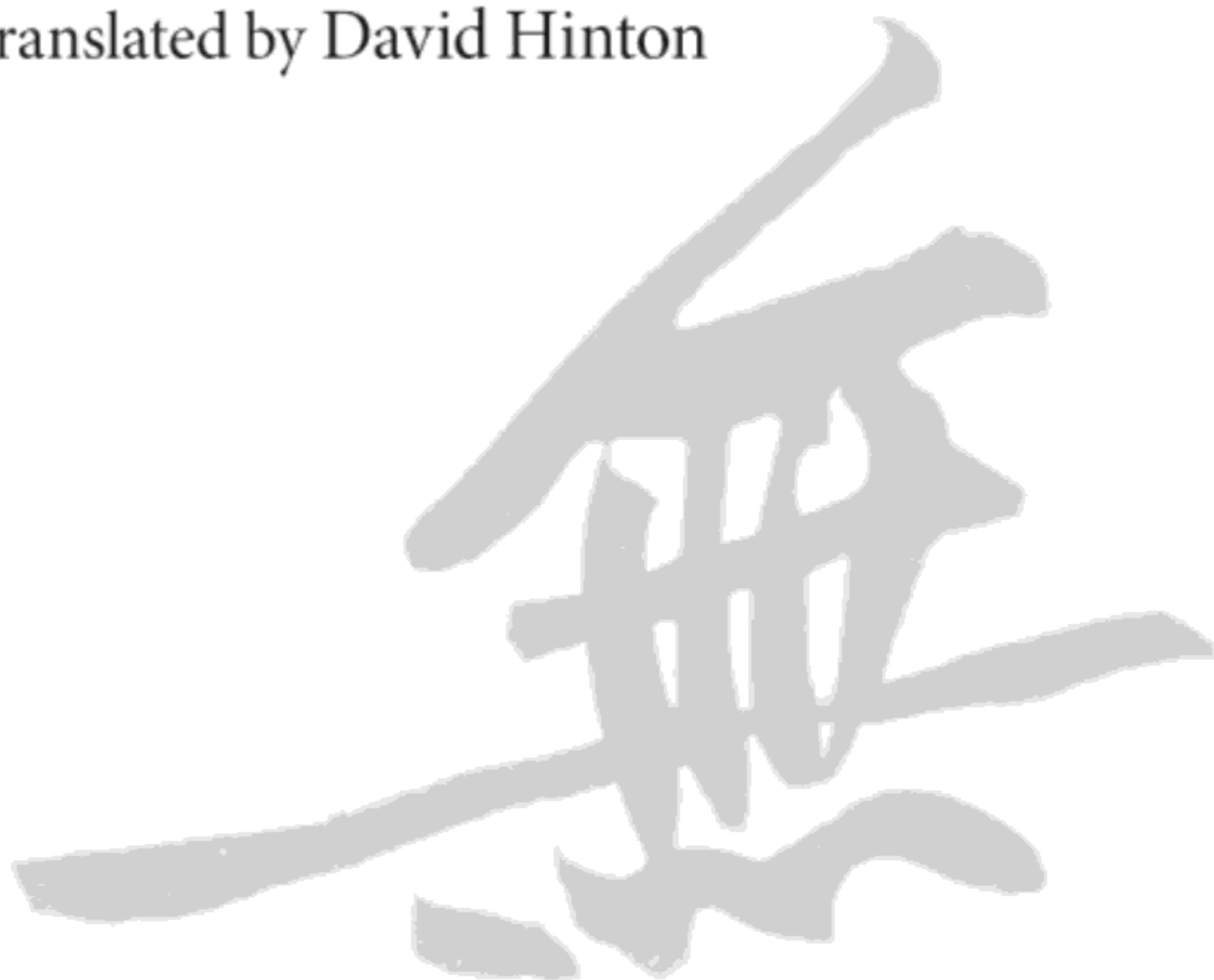


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## INTRODUCTION

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SINCE ITS BEGINNINGS in fourth-century C.E. China, Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism has produced a rich literary tradition. This is hardly surprising, since Ch'an monks were generally part of the artist-intellectual class: they were classically trained in the arts, and they associated broadly with artist-intellectuals who themselves generally practiced Ch'an in some form. The Ch'an monastery was a permeable intellectual center, allowing fluid movement in and out. Monks often visited artist-intellectuals, and those artist-intellectuals often visited monasteries to see friends, practice, and consult Ch'an masters. In addition, when traveling far from home, they often stopped at monasteries, which functioned as inns. These artist-intellectuals saw Ch'an not as a religion, but as a philosophical practice that cultivates profound insight into the empirical nature of consciousness and Cosmos, and their creative work was deeply influenced by Ch'an. In fact, poetry, calligraphy, and painting were broadly considered forms of Ch'an practice and teaching.

Ch'an monks also practiced these arts. They produced a large body of poetry, a literary form that was pervasive in the culture and also perfectly suited to the quick, deep insights of Ch'an. But the Ch'an tradition is carried primarily in prose works by and about Ch'an masters, records of their lives and teachings. These records are also typified by poetic distillation: enigmatic sayings and wild antics intended to upend reason and tease the mind past the limitations of logical thought (the reasons for this will become clear later). As such, they operate with poetic



wildness and immediacy, rather than the usual explanatory or utilitarian use of language. Ch'an teachers began drawing especially revealing moments from these records, moments that distill the essential insights of Ch'an, and assigning them as puzzles for students to ponder. These scraps of poem and story came to be known as *kung-an* (公案, now widely known in its Japanese pronunciation: *koan*).

*Kung-an* means a "court case," and more literally a "public case." The term was adopted to the Ch'an situation because masters originally conducted *kung-an* training in "public," when the entire monastic community was gathered together; because a *kung-an* is a factual situation that needs to be understood accurately, like a court case (although understanding here demands responding within the enigma, at a level that precedes thought and analysis); and finally, because each *kung-an* represents a kind of precedent to which practitioners can refer. Hence the translation adopted here: "sangha-case" (*sangha* meaning "a Buddhist community"). Eventually, these sangha-cases were gathered into collections used for teaching. *No-Gate Gateway* (無門關) is perhaps the most widely used of these collections, and it is one of the great masterpieces of Chinese literature.

The author of *No-Gate Gateway* is No-Gate Prajñā-Clear (Wu-men Hui-kai: 無門慧開), a quirky Ch'an master who lived from 1183 to 1260 C.E., during the Sung Dynasty. The Sung was a golden age for poetry and calligraphy, and it was the apex of landscape painting. In this rich cultural age, No-Gate received transmission and then wandered from temple to temple as a disheveled Ch'an master: hair and beard long and wild, clothes unkempt, always participating in menial chores and fieldwork. In spite of his humble wandering, he eventually became so widely known as a teacher that in 1246, at the age of sixty-four, he was asked by the emperor to found a new monastery

near the capital. It was a large monastery, and No-Gate served as a busy abbot there for about a decade. He then retired to live out his final years at a small monastery in the mountains, where at the age of seventy-eight he “followed the vanishing way of things” (as death is described in one of the sangha-cases here).

Composed in 1228, during No-Gate’s years of wandering, *No-Gate Gateway* is usually described as a collection of forty-eight sangha-cases. But it is, in fact, a carefully constructed literary/philosophical text that uses the historical sangha-cases for its own ends. Each of its forty-eight chapters begins with a sangha-case drawn from those records of Ch’an masters, but No-Gate often reshapes and distills those original stories to create the most piercing poetic impact possible. Each chapter also contains No-Gate’s reflections on the sangha-case, consisting of a brief prose “comment” and a *gatha* (sutra-poem). These reflections are themselves like sangha-cases and are generally no less profound than the sangha-case itself.

Most notably, perhaps, No-Gate continually criticizes and ridicules the masters, undermining their teaching. He acknowledges their mastery and insight, chooses a tale that illustrates that insight at the deepest possible level, and right there he’s created the perfect place to dismantle their teaching, thereby redoubling the original sangha-case’s deconstruction of logical thought and explanation. This is the essential methodology of the book: to complicate and deepen the disorientation, to add this second intensifying layer to the sangha-case strategy of seeing through thought and explanation. It is a distinctive literary form, combining zany storytelling with poetry and philosophical prose, the separate elements of each chapter resonating with one another in revealing ways. This main body of the book is framed by a Foreword and Afterword in which No-Gate

establishes the philosophical framework through which readers can most deeply approach the sangha-cases themselves.


*No-Gate Gateway* is inevitably presented in the West as a teaching text, wherein contemporary Zen masters append large commentaries to each chapter. However valuable these commentaries may be in their own right, they dwarf the text itself, domesticating it and diluting the immediate poetic impact that is so crucial to the book's literary strategy of transforming its readers through surprise and sudden penetrating insight that is beyond logic and explanation. No-Gate's comments on the sangha-cases are quite different, for they are themselves sangha-cases incisive enough to undermine and confuse the original sangha-cases or even the Ch'an tradition itself. They are the antithesis of explanatory commentaries. No-Gate was, after all, a patriarch in the Lin-chi (Japanese: Rinzai) school of Ch'an, the school that depended least on explanation, preferring instead wild antics and sudden paradox for transmitting its insights. And in the Afterword he speaks of "adding nothing superfluous." By presenting only the text itself in its native philosophical context, this translation tries to respect the book's inherent value as a self-sufficient literary work, to render No-Gate's spirit of poetic immediacy, for that is the kind of direct impact ancient Ch'an masters like No-Gate believed could awaken consciousness.

*No-Gate Gateway's* native philosophical context extends back over two millennia prior to its composition. And yet it remains remarkably contemporary to us, for as we will see it is an empirically grounded spirituality that weaves human consciousness into landscape and Cosmos at profound levels. In its radical essence, Ch'an is a formalized philosophical practice cultivating a spiritual ecology that is an extension of Taoism, the empirically based spiritual philosophy that had shaped Chi-

nese intellectual life for over a thousand years before Buddhism arrived in China. Ch'an originated in the fourth century through an amalgamation of these two traditions: Taoism and *dhyāna* (meaning "meditation," and rendered in Chinese as *Ch'an*) Buddhism. It was widely considered by artist-intellectuals as a form of Taoist thought refined and reconfigured by Buddhist meditation practice. And *No-Gate Gateway* is especially notable in Ch'an literature for the way it explicitly grounds Ch'an practice in the deepest levels of Taoist insight, levels we can only call ontological and cosmological.

Virtually all aspects of Ch'an's conceptual framework are anticipated in Taoism's seminal texts: *I Ching*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tzu*. Taoist thought is best described as a spiritual ecology, the central concept of which is Tao, or Way. *Tao* originally meant "way," as in "pathway" or "roadway," a meaning it has kept. But Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the seminal Taoist thinkers, redefined it as a generative cosmological process, an ontological pathWay by which things come into existence, evolve through their lives, and then go out of existence, only to be transformed and reemerge in a new form. To understand Tao, we must approach it at its deepest ontological and cosmological level, where the distinction between Absence (無) and Presence (有) arises.

Presence is simply the empirical universe, which the ancients described as the ten thousand things in constant transformation, and Absence is the generative void from which this ever-changing realm of Presence perpetually emerges. Absence is the more foundational of the two principles, and its generative and dynamic nature is reflected in its etymological source as the pictograph of a woman dancing, her swirling movements enhanced by foxtails streaming out from her hands: 舞. This nature was felt throughout the centuries, still alive in an expressive rendering

of the ideogram 無 by Huang T'ing-chien (as seen on the cover of this book), a near contemporary of Wu-men's who was also a Ch'an master. One of the great masters of Chinese calligraphy, Huang here renders the four vertical elements of the graph as alive and organic, like stalks of grain with heads nodding under the weight of seed-clusters. He brings them together at the bottom, below ground, as if they are rooted there. And fire is what they are rooted in! The dancer's foxtails had evolved into those four horizontal dots, which are an abbreviated form of 火, the stylized version of this early pictographic rendering of flame: .

Way can be understood as the generative process through which all things arise and pass away as Absence burgeons forth into the great transformation of Presence. This is simply an ontological description of natural process, and it is perhaps most immediately manifest in the seasonal cycle: the pregnant emptiness of Absence in winter, Presence's burgeoning forth in spring, the fullness of its flourishing in summer, and its dying back into Absence in autumn. There is another Taoist term for this cosmological process, one which also appears in *No-Gate Gateway: tzu-jan* (自然). The literal meaning of *tzu-jan* is "self-ablaze." From this comes "self-so" or "the of-itself." But it is best translated as "occurrence appearing of itself," for it is meant to emphasize the particularity and self-sufficiency—the *thusness*—of the ten thousand things that make up the generative process of Tao and its cosmology of Absence and Presence.

Sage wisdom in ancient China meant understanding the deep nature of consciousness and Cosmos, how they are woven together into a single fabric, an understanding that enables us to dwell as an organic part of Tao's generative cosmological process. The cultivation of this dwelling took many forms, all of which involved a deep engagement with landscape, which was

seen as the open door to realization because it is where Tao's process of transformation was most majestically and immediately visible. Ancient artist-intellectuals lived whenever possible as recluses in the mountains, wandered there where that cosmological process could be experienced in the most immediate possible way. All of the arts were considered ways to cultivate that dwelling. Calligraphy was considered a way of enacting the dynamic energy of the Cosmos. Poetry and painting also embodied that energy, and they took landscape as their deep subject matter. And finally, that dwelling was the central concern of Ch'an practice: both meditation and sangha-case practice. Ch'an's essential nature as landscape practice will become clear below; but for the moment, it is perhaps sufficient to mention that Ch'an monasteries were typically located in remote mountains, and Ch'an masters leading those monasteries generally took the names of those mountains as their own because they so deeply identified with them. What's more, the ancient meaning of *ch'an*, before it was chosen to translate the Sanskrit *dhyana* ("meditation"), was "sacrifice to rivers and mountains," *rivers and mountains* being the term we translate "landscape," as in "landscape painting" or "landscape poetry."

Taoist dwelling is, at bottom, No-Gate's primary concern in *No-Gate Gateway*; and indeed, the wilderness cosmology of Absence and Presence is central to the book. Absence (無: *wu*), the more fundamental of the two terms, is the heart of No-Gate's own enlightenment and his teaching. In fact, it is the first word in both the name he took to represent his Ch'an identity and the title of his book: 無門 (Wu-men) and 無門關 (Wu-men Kuan) respectively.

*Wu* has a double meaning that creates a profound literary/philosophical resonance here in these names, and in the book's celebrated first sangha-case. In addition to meaning "Absence," that

fundamental cosmological/ontological principle, *wu* is a simple grammatical function word meaning “not.” So on the surface, *Wu-men* means simply “no-gate,” investing the title with the enigmatic and, as will become clear, profound concept of a “no-gate gateway,” a kind of distilled sangha-case. But *wu* must also be read as that generative Absence, transforming “no-gate” into “Absence-gate.” This adds a whole new dimension to the title—*Wu-men Kuan*—for it now means “Absence-gate gateway,” or perhaps “Absence’s gateway.” And that Absence-gate also appears in the first couplet of the four-line *gatha* that ends the book’s Foreword, where Tao (Way) also appears, together with Presence, the other fundamental element of Taoist ontology/cosmology:

The great Way is a single Absence-gate  
here on a thousand roads of Presence.

Once through this gateway, you wander  
all heaven and earth in a single stride.

This double meaning of *wu* had long been exploited in the philosophical tradition, complicating terms such as *wu-wei* and *wu-sheng*. *Wu-wei* (無為) dates to the earliest levels of Taoist thought and means literally “not/Absence” (*wu*) + “acting” (*wei*). It was a spiritual practice among ancient artist-intellectuals, and it was further cultivated in Ch’an practice. *Wu-wei* means “not acting” in the sense of acting without the metaphysics of self, or of being *absent* when you act. This selfless action is the movement of *tzu-jan* (Tao unfurling as the ten thousand individuated things), so *wu-wei* means acting as an integral part of *tzu-jan*’s spontaneous process of Absence burgeoning forth into Presence, and Presence dying back into Absence. This opens to the deepest level of *wu-wei*’s philosophical complex, where the term’s alternate sense of “Absence” + “acting” means

*wu-wei* action is action directly from, or indeed *as*, the ontological source. As Ch'an masters dramatized in their wild antics, behavior that likens them to Chuang Tzu's zany Taoist sages, to practice *wu-wei* is to move with the wild energy of the Cosmos itself, energy ancient artist-intellectuals recognized most dramatically in rivers-and-mountains landscapes.

*Wu-sheng* (無生) plays on the two meanings of *wu* in much the same way as *wu-wei*, to give "not/Absence" (*wu*) + "born/alive" (*sheng*). *Wu-sheng* means "not living" in the sense of living with the metaphysics of self *absent*, hence "selfless living." This opens to a deeper level in which the term means "Absence born" or "Absence alive," describing our most essential identity as Absence itself. And finally, *wu-sheng* also means "not born" or "unborn," describing the fact that we are each one more fleeting form conjured in Tao's process of perpetual transformation: not just born out of it and returned to it in death, a familiar concept that still assumes a center of identity detached from the Cosmos and its processes, but never *out of it*, totally unborn. Indeed, our fullest identity, being unborn, is Tao itself, and is therefore all and none of earth's fleeting forms simultaneously.

*Gateway* (關), the third word in the book's title, also resonates with ancient Taoist cosmology. Chuang Tzu describes that cosmology like this: "The ten thousand things all emerge from a loom of origins, and they all vanish back into it." This is a mythological description of the generative Cosmos in constant transformation: Tao, or the process of Presence emerging from Absence. And Chuang Tzu's loom appears in the title's third word: 關. There are two pictographic images in 關, the first of which is a gate depicted as a pair of doors mounted on pivots: 𠄎 in ancient oracle-bone script, thereafter evolving through intermediary forms like 𠄎 before reaching its standard form: 門 (the second word of the title). To this gate was added a second



image, that of a bolt fixed through iron rings, as in this bronze-inscription form, which is among the earliest known: 闔. Hence, a gate bolted closed.

But the image was transformed through a kind of associative process, with the bolt and rings becoming the very similar pictograph for silk, showing a pair of cocoons with silk emerging in the form of three strands that would have been spun into thread: 糸. This image was doubled and combined with an element at the bottom depicting a shuttle and cross-thread passing through two strands of silk descending from those cocoons, as in these early forms: 關 and 關. With this, the gates have swung open to reveal a loom beyond.

The ideogram's meaning has undergone a parallel transformation and now emphasizes the sense of a gateway as a site of open communication between two places. This led to abstract meanings, such as "to connect or involve," "related," etc., meanings no doubt reinforced by the loom's image of weaving things together. The ideogram also retained its original sense of a locked gate or barrier, thus creating a range of meaning drawing on the idea of a place you can pass through or be blocked from passing through, exemplified by another common definition: "frontier" or "frontier mountain pass," where there would have been a checkpoint permitting or prohibiting passage. This sense of the place where you pass from human civilization into the wild and foreign unknown suggests the full resonance of the ideogram's loom, for it is nothing other than Chuang Tzu's loom of origins. And indeed, that loom of origins occurs repeatedly in the text of *No-Gate Gateway*.

Sangha-cases are a primary means of resolving what is the most fundamental question for Ch'an practice, and perhaps for human consciousness in general: how to pass through that seemingly closed gateway between us and the nonverbal

depths of the loom, which is the gateway between thought and silence, subjective and objective, mind and landscape, self and Cosmos. Sangha-case study reinforces meditation, which is the heart of Ch'an practice, its primary means of understanding the true nature of consciousness. And fundamental to that understanding is moving past the illusory separation between consciousness and Cosmos. In its essence, meditation means sitting quietly and watching thoughts come and go in a field of silent emptiness. From this attention to thought's movement comes meditation's first revelation: that we are not, as a matter of observable fact, our thoughts and memories. That is, we are not that center of identity we assume ourselves to be in our day-to-day lives, that center of identity defining us as fundamentally separate from the empirical Cosmos. Instead, we are the empty awareness that watches identity rehearsing itself in thoughts and memories relentlessly coming and going.

With experience, the movement of thought during meditation slows enough that we notice each thought emerging from a kind of emptiness, evolving through its transformations, and finally disappearing back into that emptiness. This leads to the realization that the cosmology of Absence and Presence defines consciousness too, thoughts being Presence emerging from and vanishing back into Absence. That is, consciousness is part of the same cosmological tissue as the empirical world, with thoughts emerging from a generative emptiness exactly as the ten thousand things do.

Eventually the stream of thought falls silent, and we inhabit empty consciousness, free of that center of identity. That is, we inhabit the most fundamental nature of consciousness, and that fundamental nature is nothing other than Absence. Here consciousness inhabits the primal Cosmos in the most complete and immediate way, dwelling as integral to the very source of

the Cosmos's generative unfolding, for this Absence is not simply the tranquil silence we encounter in meditation, but something much deeper: a dark vastness beyond word and thought, the tumultuous source of life and death.

Ch'an calls this "empty-mind" (空 心). 空 is essentially synonymous in the Ch'an literature with *wu*, and the double meaning of *wu* ("not/Absence") is used to describe this empty-mind further as *wu-hsin* (無 心): "no-mind," meaning consciousness free of language and thought and memory, the mental apparatus of identity, or "Absence-mind," consciousness in its original-nature as that generative cosmological tissue. But there's more. Hsieh Ling-yün (385–433 C.E.), the great rivers-and-mountains poet, in the earliest surviving Ch'an text, calls this empty-mind "the tranquil mirror, all mystery and shadow," and then continues: "one must become Absence and mirror the whole." "Tranquil," "mirror," "mystery and shadow," "Absence"—this description distills the conceptual world of the *Tao Te Ching*, and it shares Lao Tzu's intent: to transform immediate experience so that we dwell as integral to landscape and Cosmos. Here, the act of perception becomes a spiritual act: empty-mind mirroring the world, leaving its ten thousand things free of all thought and explanation—utterly simple, utterly themselves, and utterly sufficient. This is a perennial theme in *No-Gate Gateway* (see Key Terms: Eye/Sight), and it is the heart of Ch'an as a landscape practice. In such mirror-deep perception, earth's vast rivers-and-mountains landscapes replace thought and even identity itself, revealing the unity of consciousness and landscape/Cosmos that is the heart of sage-dwelling in ancient China.

So the title's *gateway* is described as having *no gate* because there is not, in fact, any real hindrance to passage. Or more precisely, there is no difference between the two realms, however much the *gateway* of language and identity seem to close

consciousness in. Consciousness and landscape are part of the same tissue, so we have always already passed through that gateway. Or indeed, there is *no gate* at all: enlightenment is any time and any place, for that empty-mind is our most essential nature, even if we rarely pause to notice it. But however easy this seems as a concept, it is very difficult to understand in all its depth as a matter of day-to-day experience. Mastering it is the purpose of meditation practice, as we have seen, and also sangha-case practice.

The mental realm of thought and explanation establishes identity's inherent separation from the world. It establishes the things of the world as the *objects* of thought, as ontologically out there and other than us. And it replaces the immediate experience of things in and of themselves with knowledge and explanation of them. This is why No-Gate, in his comment on the first sangha-case, calls our everyday preoccupation with thoughts and ideas and explanations the "mind-road," and goes on to say with remarkable poetic image-making that "if you don't cut off the mind-road, you live a ghost's life, clinging to weeds and trees."

Sangha-cases try to "cut off the mind road." They try to tease mind outside of thought and explanation, and so, to return consciousness to silence and the more immediate experience possible to empty-mind. That empty-mind silence precludes the distancing of things as objects. Like meditation, sangha-cases establish mind in a relation of mirror-like immediacy, allowing an immediate experience of landscape's ten thousand things in and of themselves, as elemental mystery. And that mirrorlike immediacy reveals that we are ourselves wholly a part of that elemental mystery.

Solutions to sangha-cases always involve responding with a spontaneous immediacy that lies outside any logical analysis;

and in sangha-case training, the teacher may push the student toward that goal with enigmatic utterances and outbursts and antics. The correct answer to a sangha-case is whatever emerges spontaneously from that silent emptiness where the logical construction of thoughts has not yet begun, and such answers are only possible when a student has come to dwell in the wholeness of Absence, of *wu*-mind. It is *wu-wei* at the most profound level: “Absence acting.” And as such it is a cultivation of that sage-dwelling as an organic part of the great transformation of things. This is also why Ch’an is described as a teaching outside of words and ideas, for meditation and sangha-case practice directly transmit that experience of empty-mind dwelling.

This assumption that insight lies in a kind of silence beyond words and ideas is central to Taoist thought from the beginning. The very first line of the *Tao Te Ching* says: “A Way you can call Way isn’t the perennial Way,” or alternately “A Way that can be said isn’t the perennial Way.” So while it is true that Ch’an ends concepts and thought, it does so within the conceptual framework of Taoist ontology/cosmology. Without that framework, silence is a completely different thing, for it lacks the ontological/cosmological depth and resonance.

Such depths are by definition outside language, so the vocabulary attempting to name that generative emptiness proliferated in early Taoist thought. It is a vocabulary of concepts that shift and overlap and blur: Tao, Absence and Presence, *tzu-jan* (“occurrence appearing of itself”), *ch’i* (“breath-force”), inner-pattern, dragon, loom of origins, dark-enigma (see Key Terms for definitions of all these terms). Continuing the Taoist habit, Ch’an made its own contributions: mind, origin-tissue, Buddha, dharma. And in *No-Gate Gateway*’s first sangha-case, we encounter “Buddha-nature,” which becomes another term for empty-mind, or Absence in its form as empty consciousness.

This first sangha-case is widely considered the foundation of sangha-case practice—and so, perhaps the most important sangha-case in the Ch’an tradition—because it forces a direct encounter with Absence and Buddha-nature. And here too the double meaning of 無 (*wu*: “no (not)/Absence”) is crucial:

A monk asked Master Visitation-Land: “A dog too has Buddha-nature, no [無]?”

“Not [無],” Visitation-Land replied.

Rendered here in a translation that mimics the original’s grammatical structure, this might seem a simple exchange. But No-Gate’s Comment says Visitation-Land’s “not” is the *no-gate gateway* to Ch’an’s ancestral essence. In the American tradition of Zen, Visitation-Land’s “not” is taken as a blank denial of meaning-making, which is registered by letting the word remain untranslated, an inexplicable nothing: *mu* (the Japanese pronunciation of *wu*). Hence, something like:

A monk asked Master Visitation-Land: “Does a dog have Buddha-nature?”

“*Mu*,” Visitation-Land replied.

This leaves the sangha-case at a generic level of “Zen perplexity.” But when this word is seen in its native conceptual context, No-Gate’s claim begins to reveal itself in its full richness, for here the meaning of 無 is not just utter negation, but also “Absence.”

The monk’s question about the dog could have been formulated differently in the original Chinese. The stark affirm-deny construction, a standard form in Chinese, was clearly chosen

because it allows the monk's question to end with the same *wu* that immediately becomes the master's reply. In the question, *wu* would appear to be nothing more than a grammatical function word coming at the end of a sentence ("A dog too has Buddha-nature, no?"), which makes Visitation-Land's *wu* breathtaking, for it suddenly deepens that insignificant *wu* all the way to the source of everything: Absence, that pregnant emptiness from which all things arise.

That seems a large part of how the sangha-case works, and it leads us to realize that "has/have," the seemingly unremarkable word occurring earlier in the question, is in fact 有 (*yu*), which has a double meaning almost the exact opposite of *wu*: "is/has" and "Presence." With this, another version of the monk's question echoes behind the literal: "A dog too Presences Buddha-nature, or Absence?" Once the question is invested with its cosmological depth, Visitation-Land's *wu* dramatically ends thought, leaving empty-mind free to "wander all heaven and earth in a single stride" (as No-Gate says in the poem ending his Foreword).

Absence itself represents the most profound and all-encompassing of sangha-cases, teasing the mind past ideas and explanations at fundamental cosmological levels; and it is indeed the deep subject of *No-Gate Gateway's* first sangha-case, where No-Gate describes it as the great gateway into Ch'an enlightenment. In the sangha-case, a monk is asking about Buddha-nature—the essence of consciousness, our original-nature—and Visitation-Land mysteriously replies: "Absence." The master's response is multifaceted. It is an expression of his mind at that moment, implying the monk should emulate his empty-mind rather than struggle for understanding. It is an enigmatic comment on the question, a description of Buddha-nature. And it is a challenge directed at the monk, insisting that

giving up thought and explanation is the only way to fathom Absence—empty-mind in its most profound sense. So the sangha-case asks us to ponder Absence, the realization that our original-nature is that generative emptiness at the heart of the Cosmos. Not simply the tranquil silence we encounter in meditation, but something much deeper: that dark vastness beyond words and thought, origin of all creation and all destruction.

Nevertheless, No-Gate's Comment advises us: "Don't understand Absence in terms of emptiness, and don't understand it in terms of Presence." Finally, No-Gate's *gatha* says:

A dog, Buddha-nature: the whole  
kit and caboodle revealed in a flash.

Think of Presence and Absence,  
and you're long lost without a clue.

The dichotomy of Absence and Presence is a crucial element in the puzzle of the Absence sangha-case, offering a way past ideas and concepts at the most fundamental level, a way to dwell as an integral part of Tao's generative ontological/cosmological process. Luckily, the puzzle is not so difficult.

Absence was often referred to as "emptiness" (空 or 虚), the emptiness that appears in No-Gate's Comment, and described as the generative void from which the ten thousand things (Presence) are born and to which they return. Our language and intellectual assumptions have trained us to interpret such terms—*Absence*, *emptiness*, *void*—as a kind of nonmaterial metaphysical realm in contrast to the material realm of Presence. We interpret Absence and Presence as a dualistic pair, in which Presence is the physical universe and Absence is a kind of metaphysical womb from which the physical emerges. But No-Gate would not have recognized any metaphysical dimensions



in this dualism, for like all artist-intellectuals in ancient China, he was a thoroughgoing empiricist. And in the empirical reality of the Cosmos there is no metaphysical womb, no pool of pregnant emptiness. Absence is emptiness only in the sense that it is empty of particular forms, only Absence in the sense that it is the absence of particular forms. In normal everyday use, *Absence* (無) means something like “(there is) not,” and *Presence* (有) means “(there) is.” So the concepts of Absence and Presence might almost be translated “formless” and “form,” for they are just two different ways of seeing the ever-generative tissue of reality. And it should also be emphasized that both terms, *Absence* and *Presence*, are primarily verbal in Chinese: hence, that tissue of reality is seen as verbal (rather than static noun), as a tissue that is alive and in motion.

Absence is all existence seen as one undifferentiated tissue, while Presence is that tissue seen in its differentiated forms, the ten thousand things. That undifferentiated existence-tissue is only divided into individual things when we name them. Those names emerge from the undifferentiated tissue exactly like the things they name, and they emerge at exactly the same moment: it is only when the word *mountain* emerges that the mountain itself emerges as an independent entity in the field of existence. The mountain itself exists prior to the naming, of course, but it isn't separated out as an independent entity. So, when Ch'an practice returns us to empty-mind without words and logical categories, it returns us to dwell as integral to that undifferentiated existence-tissue.

Because it is generative by nature, magically generative, the tissue of existence is perennially shaping itself into the individual forms we know—the ten thousand things—and reshaping itself into other forms: the natural process of change, of life and death, transformation and rebirth. From this it follows

that Absence and Presence are not two separate realms of reality, but are instead a single tissue that is all origin through and through. Hence No-Gate's explanation: "Don't understand Absence in terms of emptiness, and don't understand it in terms of Presence."

This bedrock insight has a long history in China, stretching back to the beginnings of Taoist thought: *Tao Te Ching* and *I Ching*. Wang Pi (226–249 C.E.) was a major philosopher of the Dark-Enigma Learning school, which was crucial in the creation of Ch'an through the reformulation of Buddhism with Taoist thought. Wang wrote the most influential commentary on the *I Ching*, which is the earliest work of Chinese philosophy and the text where Taoist concepts first appear. Of the remarkable line "In return itself, you can see the very mind of all heaven and earth," Wang wrote:

Return means turning back to the source-tissue, and that source-tissue is the very mind of all heaven and earth itself. Wherever activity ceases, stillness begins; but there's no opposition between stillness and movement. Wherever words end, silence begins; but there's no opposition between silence and words. It's like this even if the vastness of all heaven and earth is rich with the ten thousand things, rich with the activity of thunder and the movement of wind as they sweep the ten thousand transformations turning through their seasons. The tranquility of Absence, that is the source-tissue. It's only because activity ceases for us in our everyday earthly lives that we can see the mind of all heaven and earth. If Presence were the mind of all heaven and earth, how could different kinds of things come to exist?

In speaking of “no opposition between stillness and movement,” Wang Pi is describing the unity of Absence and Presence in the empirical Cosmos; and in speaking of “no opposition between silence and words,” he is describing the unity of Absence and Presence in the realm of consciousness. And this same unity of Absence and Presence appears in the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* (for which Wang Pi also wrote the standard commentary), the first “mature” statement of the deep ontological/cosmological levels of Taoist philosophy:

In perennial Absence you see mystery,  
and in perennial Presence you see appearance.  
Though the two are one and the same,  
once they arise, they differ in name.

One and the same they're called *dark-enigma*,  
dark-enigma deep within dark-enigma,  
  
gate of all mystery.

*Dark-enigma* is a philosophical term that attempts the impossible task of naming Absence and Presence as a single existence-tissue, as it is in and of itself before any names, before Absence and Presence give birth to one another, and before all the other words and concepts and distinctions we use to approach the nature of reality. And the “gate of all mystery” is clearly the same gate that appears twice in the title *No-Gate Gateway*: first as the simple *Gate* (門), and second as the primary element in the *Gateway* ideogram: 關.

When No-Gate speaks of “passing through this gate,” he means understanding Absence and Presence together as a single generative tissue; and that transforms things completely, for

the fundamental dichotomies structuring everything vanish. Absence and Presence, generative emptiness and the ten thousand things, become a single tissue. Word and silence become a single tissue, as does meaning and meaninglessness, self and Cosmos. Thought and empty-mind become a single tissue. The mirror-deep empty-mind that perceives and the ten thousand things filling perception become a single tissue. And there, suddenly there, we are wholly a part of that dark-enigma: not just in moments of empty-mind enlightenment, but also our thoughts and obsessions and memories as we move through our routine self-involved lives: Buddha-nature as ordinary mind, ordinary mind as Tao.

Concepts at this level blur. Absence is one half of the Presence/Absence dichotomy and, at the same time, the resolution of that dichotomy, for it is the undifferentiated tissue that includes all the differentiation of Presence: landscape's ten thousand things, individual identity, words. And so, it is hard to distinguish Absence from dark-enigma or Tao. All of which is what No-Gate means when he says Absence is beyond even the most fundamental explanatory distinction: "Absence: don't think it's emptiness, and don't think it's Presence." This understanding leads to a remarkable realization: if our original Buddha-nature is Absence, and Absence is the undifferentiated and generative tissue that includes all of Presence, landscape's ten-thousand things; then our original-nature is itself all of those ten thousand things. Hence the desire among artist-intellectuals and Ch'an monks to inhabit rivers-and-mountains landscapes: for to face such a magisterial landscape is to make one's own internal dimensions magisterial.

It is Absence at this foundational ontological level that is the heart of No-Gate's teaching, as he explains in his comment on the first sangha-case:

What is this gateway of our ancestral patriarchs? It's the simplest of things, a single word: *Absence*. Absence is the sole gateway of our empty-gate household. And so, it's called the *no-gate gateway* into our Ch'an household.

Absence does indeed represent the most profound and all-encompassing of sangha-cases, teasing the mind past ideas and explanations at fundamental cosmological levels, and No-Gate made it his own. Indeed, No-Gate himself struggled for six years with the Absence sangha-case as a student, and that struggle led to his enlightenment. On the day after his awakening, he wrote this poem in the traditional quatrain form, quite remarkable poetically for its audacity in making an entire poem with a single word, *Absence* (無):

無	無	無	無	無
無	無	無	無	無
無	無	無	無	無
無	無	無	無	無

Once this whole conceptual framework is established in No-Gate's Foreword and first sangha-case, the purpose of all the following sangha-cases is to "cut off the mind-road" and establish this identification with Absence as our original-nature, our Buddha-nature. For this is the answer to No-Gate's first sangha-case: not some profound insight, but to inhabit Absence wholly, to make it the whole of consciousness, to become it, to enact it. A central concern in *No-Gate Gateway*, this identification with Absence is described repeatedly as a "kindred intimacy," and it explains the adoption of No-Gate as a spiritual name, for its deep meaning is of course Absence-Gate. This identification with Absence, this "kindred intimacy," entails

a radical transformation in everyday life. One acts always as landscape/Cosmos in its most fundamental generative nature, as *wu-wei* (Absence-action) and *wu-hsin* (Absence-mind): movement through daily activity becomes the Cosmos living a life; sight becomes the Cosmos gazing into itself; thought becomes the Cosmos contemplating itself. And it also entails a transformation in death, for death becomes a return home to the generative Cosmos as our truest self, meaning that our most essential nature is therefore as boundless and enduring as the Cosmos itself. So No-Gate is being quite literal when he says:

Once through this gateway, you wander  
all heaven and earth in a single stride.



## READING GUIDE

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**N**O-GATE GATEWAY is full of zany storytelling, iconoclastic humor, and enigmatic twists of thought, so it's tempting to read it like any other book: straight through. Reading it that way can be great fun, but there's only one way to really enter the depths of its insights: reading the brief chapters slowly, allowing enough time to think down through them one by one.

The conceptual framework necessary for this deeper level of reading (notably for the crucial first chapter) is presented in the Introduction. An extensive Notes section follows the *No-Gate Gateway* text, providing detailed information about specifics that appear there. These notes are not indicated in the text to avoid creating a scholarly layer that might prevent the sanghas from first having their immediate impact. Finally, the Key Terms section defines a constellation of essential philosophical concepts, thereby outlining Ch'an's conceptual framework from a different perspective than the Introduction. This section can be read piecemeal, as the concepts are encountered in the *No-Gate Gateway* text (notes reference the Key Terms section), or it can be read as a whole.





## NO-GATE GATEWAY

## NO-GATE'S FOREWORD

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**B**UDDHISM CALLS MIND its ancestral nature, its household, and no-gate its dharma-gate. If it's an absent gate, no gate at all, how could anyone pass through it? We've all heard that whatever enters through a courtyard gate can't be the household treasure, and whatever arises from the origin-tissue must be limited to beginning and end, fruition and ruin. But that kind of talk—it's like waves churned up without any wind, like wounds cut deep into healthy flesh. In the search for understanding, what's worse than using a tangle of words? You're just swinging a stick as if you could hit the moon, scratching a boot as if you could itch a foot! How could that ever work?

In the Bestowal-Accord reign, *wu* year of the rat, I, Prajñā-Clear, led the sangha at Dragon-Soar Monastery in East-Revered. It was the summer session, and monks were hungry for insight. So I taught in accord with whatever moment the loom of origins unfurled, using sangha-cases from ancient masters like clubs to batter down that gate and scatter the roof-tiles.

I copied them down without a goal. I just started, not thinking about structure, the before and afters, a finished book. Now there are forty-eight, and together I call them the *No-Gate Gateway*.

If you're like the long edge of the Star River, wielding your lone blade fearlessly, no care for danger and death, you'll enter through the gate with a single slash. Not even the eight-armed demon-king could stop you. Heaven's twenty-eight Indian patriarchs and earth's six Chinese patriarchs: you'll leave them all gazing at wind and begging for their lives. But if you hesitate,

it's like looking through a window across the room and glimpsing a horse gallop past outside: scarcely seen and already gone vanishing away.

## GATHA

•••

The great Way is a single Absence-gate  
here on a thousand roads of Presence.

Once through this gateway, you wander  
all heaven and earth in a single stride.

## 1 : VISITATION-LAND DOG NATURE

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A monk asked Master Visitation-Land: “A dog too has Buddha-nature, no?”

“Absence,” Land replied.

## NO-GATE'S COMMENT

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To penetrate the depths of Ch'an, you must pass through the gateway of our ancestral patriarchs. And to fathom the mysteries of enlightenment, you must cut off the mind-road completely. If you don't pass through the ancestral gateway, if you don't cut off the mind-road, you live a ghost's life, clinging to weeds and trees.

What is this gateway of our ancestral patriarchs? It's the simplest of things, a single word: *Absence*. Absence is the sole gateway of our empty-gate household. And so, it's called the "no-gate gateway" into our Ch'an household.

Pass all the way through it, and you meet Master Visitation-Land eye to eye! Visitation-Land, and the whole lineage of ancestral patriarchs too! You wander hand in hand with them, eyebrows tangled with theirs, looking with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears. How is that not great good fortune and wild joy? Don't you, too, long to pass through this gateway?

To penetrate the depths of this single word, *Absence*, summon all three-hundred-sixty bones and joints, all eighty-four thousand sacred apertures of your intelligence, summon your whole being into a single mass of doubt. Devote yourself day and night. Absence: don't think it's emptiness, and don't think it's Presence.

You'll feel like you've swallowed a red-hot iron ball: retching and retching at something that won't vomit out. But let all the delusions of a lifetime go, all the understanding and insight; and slowly, little by little, nurture the simplicity of occurrence appearing of itself.