

Genealogy of Doubt

Volume I: The Raw Origins of Zen Koans



Margarita Busqui and Shifu Cruz

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Disclaimer: This book is a work of creative non-fiction. While based on historical records and traditional Ch'an Buddhist teachings, certain dialogues and narrative elements have been rendered for literary clarity and impact.

Dedication

To all followers of the Path,
to all seekers of answers,
and to those who, even without knowing it,
are already on the path of Awakening.

Acknowledgments

To the Path, which guides me along the right trails of life,
which has taught me the profound meaning of Trust,
and which does not let me stray from the intended course.

To the people who, unintentionally, reveal truths to me,
and inspire me to reach goals
that I myself had never imagined.

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Introduction

Early zen koans: The genealogy of doubt from Proto-koans to the origins of Ch'an

The wild roots: Before the formal kōan

The Kōan did not always exist as a spiritual exercise. There were not always "gateless gates," blue cliffs, or one hundred verses to be memorized. First, there was something more elemental: the encounter.

During the 8th and 9th centuries, in the monasteries of Tang Dynasty China, Ch'an masters did not teach through numbered "cases" nor assign dialogues as meditation tasks. They taught in the act: when crossing paths in the hallway, while serving rice, or upon receiving an unexpected question under the temple eaves. A monk would ask; the master would respond with an absurd phrase, silence, a blow, or a paradox. Sometimes the disciple awakened. Other times, they withdrew confused. No one recorded the dialogue as "Kōan number seven." No one yet knew that those words would, centuries later, become the heart of a spiritual practice.

What we now call the Kōan was born from this raw material: the dialogues of encounter (*jīyuán* 機緣) recorded in the genealogical chronicles of Ch'an. These works—known as *dēnglù* (傳燈錄), or "records of the transmission of the lamp"—were not conceived as manuals for illumination. They were living memory: attempts to preserve lineages of transmission, the biographies of patriarchs, and the moments when the Dharma jumped from one mind to another like a flame passing from one candle to the next.

But within those pages, amidst monastic successions and funerary poems, sparks were hidden. Dialogues where logic breaks. Responses that divert the mind toward the ungraspable. Gestures that say more than a thousand Sutras. These fragments—still unpolished, without commentary, without explicit pedagogical function—are the sap from

which the great formal collections would sprout in the 12th century: the *Hekiganroku*, the *Mumonkan*, the *Shōyōroku*.

This volume gathers the six fundamental *dēnglù* that precede that crystallization. They are not collections of Kōans—that category did not yet exist—but primary forests where Kōans grew wild. Here you will find:

1. The *Zǔtángjì* (952): the first complete anthology, raw and heterogeneous, rediscovered after eight centuries of oblivion.
2. The *Jǐngdé Chuándēng Lù* (1004): the imperial version, polished and legitimizing, which eclipsed its predecessor.
3. The three subsequent Song dynasty *dēnglù* (1036, 1101, 1183): successive expansions that accumulate dialogues like layers of sediment.
4. The *Wǔdēng Huìyuán* (1252): the definitive synthesis that condenses five previous chronicles into a single narrative river.

These works form a textual genealogy. Each one absorbs the previous, edits it, domesticates it, and grants it doctrinal coherence. The *Zǔtángjì* shows us Zhaozhou saying "Wu" without emphasis; the *Jǐngdé Chuándēng Lù* repeats the dialogue but with a more solemn tone; the *Wǔdēng Huìyuán* condenses it further. It is possible to trace, case by case, how a spontaneous exchange gradually transforms into a *Gōng'à*—"public case"—ready to be meditated upon.

But there is a price in that domestication: the freshness of the original instant. Therefore, this volume does not aspire to be a manual. It aspires to be an archaeological journey to the origin. To return to the reader the experience of encountering the Kōan *before* it was a Kōan: naked, uncomfortable, without guarantees, without a map.

Here there are no barriers to cross. Only encounters that happened. And the silent question that each one leaves behind: *What occurred in that instant between master and disciple?*

The first mirror: The Zǔtángjí and the instant before

In the year 952, while the Chinese empire fragmented into ephemeral kingdoms and political chaos shook the eastern plains, two monks of the Yunmen school—Jingxiu and Wenyi—completed a work in the remote kingdom of Min that no one celebrated, that no emperor sponsored, that no historian of the time mentioned: the *Zǔtángjí*, the Collection of the Hall of Patriarchs.

It was not an ambitious book. It did not seek to legitimize a school before the court nor establish orthodoxy. It only intended to remember. To preserve, before they vanished into the rumor of monastic hallways, the words of the Tang masters: Bodhidharma facing the wall, Huineng receiving the robe in secret, Mazu denying what he had just affirmed, Zhaozhou washing his bowl after breakfast.

Twenty volumes. Two hundred and fifty-six masters. Thousands of dialogues inserted in biographies without numbering, without titles, without commentary. A monk asks: "What is Buddha?" Yunmen answers: "Dried dung." The text continues without pause, without highlighting the answer as extraordinary. For the compilers, that was not a "case." It was simply what had happened.

That is the greatness and the rarity of the *Zǔtángjí*: it is the only complete testimony of Ch'an before its domestication. It was eclipsed barely fifty years later by the *Jǐngdé Chuándēng Lù* (1004), a chronicle sponsored by the Song dynasty that rewrote the history of Ch'an for political purposes: softening irreverent gestures, eliminating uncomfortable contradictions, granting coherence to what was originally chaotic and alive. The *Zǔtángjí* disappeared from China. It was lost for eight hundred years.

Only one manuscript copy survived, taken to Korea in the 11th century, custodied in the Haeinsa temple among the wooden plates of the *Tripitaka*. There it remained forgotten until 1909, when the scholar Kōsen Ichikawa rediscovered it among dust and cobwebs. Its

reintegration into the Ch'an canon was a silent earthquake: for the first time, scholars could contrast the "polished" versions of the Song with the oldest testimony, the roughest, the most faithful to the irreverent spirit of the Tang.

Why read the *Zǔtángjī* today?

Because here the dialogues are not yet exercises. Because Zhaozhou says "Wu" without knowing it will be the first Kōan of the *Mumonkan*. Because Yunmen compares Buddha to "dried dung" without fear of heresy. Because Mazu shouts, strikes, contradicts—and no one records those actions as a "pedagogical method."

Here Ch'an is still life. It is not technique. It is not system. It is the instant in which a question breaks the mind and a response—absurd, silent, brutal—points toward the unnamable.

This volume extracts from the twenty *juan* (scrolls or fascicles, traditional units of Chinese textual division) of the *Zǔtángjī* those fragments where that spiritual tension emerges with clarity: the *jīyuán*, the "opportune encounters." We have arranged them according to the lines of transmission that the original text preserves—Bodhidharma, Huike, Sengcan... up to the great Tang masters—not to create an artificial collection of "proto-Kōans," but to allow the reader to walk the same path traveled by the original compilers: the path of living memory.

You will not find explanations here.

You will not find "the meaning" of "Wu" or of the cypress in the courtyard.

Only the dialogue.

Only the gesture.

Only the silence that follows.

Because before the gateless gate, there existed the question without an answer. And in that open space—still undomesticated by tradition—perhaps resides the possibility of an Awakening that no one has named.

April 2026

1. The three negations

Characters

1. Bodhidharma
2. Emperor Wu of Liang

The encounter

The Emperor received the foreign monk in the palace. He had built temples throughout the kingdom, copied Sutras on rolls of silk, and ordained thousands of monks. His devotion was known throughout the empire.

"Since ascending the throne, I have built temples, copied Sutras, and ordained monks in incalculable numbers," said the Emperor. "What merit have I accumulated?"

Bodhidharma answered without hesitation: "No merit."

The Emperor frowned. "Why is there no merit?"

"These are small human and celestial rewards, causes with leakages," said Bodhidharma. "Like the shadow that follows the body: although it exists, it is not real."

"What, then, is true merit?" asked the Emperor, uneasy.

"Pure wisdom, perfect mystery; its essence is empty and silent. Such merit is not sought in the world."

There was a silence. The Emperor took a deep breath and formulated the definitive question: "What is the holy first principle of Truth?"

Bodhidharma looked at the Emperor without blinking. "Vast emptiness. Nothing holy."

The Emperor paled. He sought at least a point of support, something to name, someone before whom to bow. "Who is this who stands before me?"

Bodhidharma replied: "I do not know."

And the encounter ended.

Core tension

The Emperor builds from the visible: temples, texts, monks.

Bodhidharma dismantles from the invisible:

- first, merit (what is accumulated),
- then, the holy (what is venerated),
- finally, identity (what is named).

Three negations.

Three descending steps into a space without floor.

The Emperor seeks an answer he can possess.

He receives an absence that strips him bare.

There is no reward.

There is no holiness.

There is no one who responds.

And in that void—neither comfortable nor hostile—
remains only the question without an owner.



2. Bring me your mind

Characters

1. Bodhidharma
2. Huike (then called Shenguang)

The encounter

Bodhidharma was facing the wall. He had spent days in silence, without moving, without responding to those who sought him. In the Shaolin cave, the wind blew cold, and the monk Shenguang waited under the rain.

He did not ask to enter. He did not call out. He only remained there, wet and shivering, until Bodhidharma turned his head slightly.

"What do you seek?" he asked without looking at him.

"Peace for my mind," said Shenguang. "My mind finds no rest. I cannot pacify it."

Bodhidharma turned his face back to the wall. "Bring me your mind," he said. "I will pacify it for you."

Shenguang fell silent. He searched within. He looked in every corner of himself, in every thought, in every shadow. Hours passed. The rain ceased. The sun set.

"Master," he said at last. "I have searched for my mind... but I cannot find it."

Bodhidharma turned completely and looked him in the eyes. "I have already pacified it for you."

And in that instant, Shenguang understood.

Core tension

The disciple seeks something to calm: *the restless mind.*

The master asks for the impossible: *bring it to me.*

But upon searching for it...

- there is no object to deliver,
- there is no thing called "mind" that can be shown,
- only the search itself vanishes.

Peace does not arrive because the mind calms down.

It arrives because the mind that was seeking peace... never existed as a separate entity.

There is nothing to pacify.

Only to see that what seems like unrest
is already stillness without an owner.



3. Who binds you?

Characters

1. Huike (Second Patriarch)
2. Sengcan (Third Patriarch, then a layman suffering from illness)

The encounter

Sengcan arrived at the monastery with his body marked. Illness had left its trace on his skin; some said it was ancient karma, others that it was divine punishment. He knelt before Huike with his forehead on the ground.

"Master," he said, "I am an impure man. My body carries the weight of past actions. I wish to ordain as a monk, but first I need to purify myself. Liberate me from this karma."

Huike did not look at him with pity nor with rejection. He observed him as one observes still water.

"Who binds you?" he asked.

Sengcan raised his head, confused. "Karma, Master. The actions of previous lives. This that I carry in my body..."

"I do not ask about the *what*," said Huike. "I ask about the *who*. Who is the one who feels bound?"

Sengcan fell silent. He looked within. He searched for the one who suffered, the one who carried the burden, the one who awaited liberation. He searched for a long time, in silence, while the wind moved the curtains of the hall.

Finally, he said: "Master... I cannot find anyone who is bound."

Huike nodded. "Then, why do you seek liberation?"

In that instant, the illness did not disappear from Sengcan's body. But something in his gaze changed forever.

Core tension

The disciple starts from a certainty: *I am bound.*

The master does not deny suffering.

He does not deny illness.

He only asks for the subject of the binding.

And upon searching for it...

- there is no one who suffers,
- there is no one who carries the burden,
- only suffering itself, without an owner.

Liberation does not arrive because the chains break.

It arrives because the one who believed themselves chained never existed as a separate entity.

There is no bondage.

There is no liberation.

Only the question that dissolves the one who asks.



4. The mind that does not seek

Characters

1. Daoxin (Fourth Patriarch)
2. An unknown monk

The encounter

A monk arrived at Daoxin's monastery after years of pilgrimage. He had studied Sutras, practiced meditation in remote mountains, and questioned masters in every temple he found. But the unrest persisted.

He knelt before Daoxin and said: "Master, I have sought the Way everywhere. I have meditated until my bones ached, I have memorized texts until the words lost their meaning. And still, I find no peace. How should I practice?"

Daoxin looked at him without haste. "What is it that your mind seeks?"

"Illumination," responded the monk. "Awakening. The end of suffering."

"And that mind that seeks..." said Daoxin, "where is it right now?"

The monk fell silent. He looked within. He searched for the mind that longed, the one that suffered, the one that asked. He searched as one searches for a lost coin in a dark room.

A long silence passed.

"Master," he said at last. "I cannot find any mind that seeks."

Daoxin nodded gently. "When there is no mind that seeks... what remains to be realized?"

The monk opened his eyes. There was no lightning. No ecstasy. Only a

silence that no longer needed to be filled.

Core tension

The disciple starts from an invisible premise: *there is a mind that must find something.*

The master does not teach a new method.

He does not correct the posture.

He does not assign a Kōan.

He only asks for the seeker herself.

And upon not finding her...

- the search loses its subject,
- the object sought loses its meaning,
- only remains what was always present.

There is no need to reach illumination.

Only to see that the one who believes themselves far from it never existed as a separate entity.

Practice is not a path toward.

It is the discovery that one never departed from anywhere.



5. The barbarian from the south

Characters

1. Hongren (Fifth Patriarch)
2. Huineng (Sixth Patriarch, then a young illiterate woodcutter from the south)

The encounter

Huineng arrived at the Dongshan monastery with rough hands and the marked accent of the south. He was poor, illiterate, the son of an exile. The monks looked at him with disdain: a barbarian without education, without memorized Sutras, without noble lineage.

Hongren saw him from the threshold of the main hall. He approached while Huineng bowed clumsily.

"What has the barbarian from the south come to seek?" asked Hongren.

Huineng raised his gaze without fear. "I came to seek the Dharma. I came to Awaken."

Hongren frowned, aware of the monks' eyes upon them. "You are from the south. Your people are barbarians. Your nature is coarse. How do you pretend to be a disciple of the Buddha?"

Huineng did not lower his gaze. "There is north and south in people's bodies. But, Master... does Buddha-nature have north and south?"

Hongren fell silent. He looked at the young woodcutter and saw something that the educated monks did not have. He said nothing more in public. He assigned him work in the kitchen, away from prying eyes. But that night, in secret, he went to see him.

And from then on, something changed in the monastery.

Core tension

The master tests with a question that divides: *north/south, cultivated/barbarian, worthy/unworthy.*

The disciple does not defend his origin.

He does not ask for permission.

He does not humble himself.

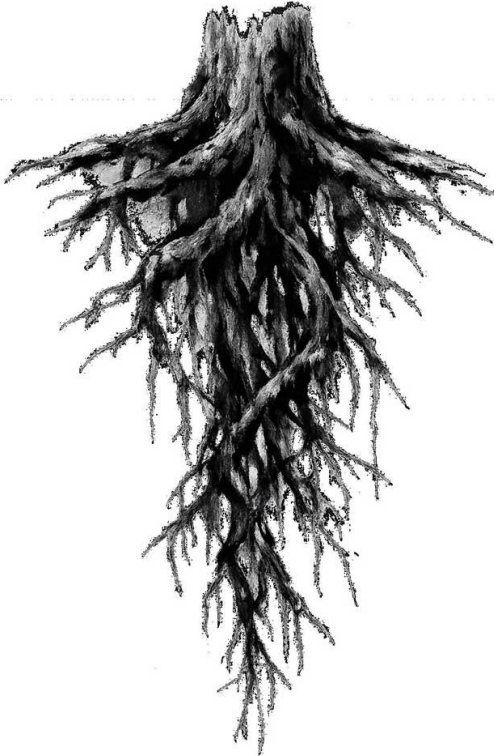
He only points to the evident and forgotten:

- Buddha-nature knows no borders,
- it distinguishes no dialects,
- it discriminates neither between those who read Sutras nor those who chop wood.

Illumination is not a privilege of the educated.

It is what is already present

in the one who has not yet learned to hide it.



6. It is not the wind

Characters

1. Huineng (the Sixth Patriarch, still young)
2. Two monks from the Guangzhou monastery
3. A group of monks gathered under an awning

The encounter

At the Guangzhou monastery, a banner hung from the eaves of the Dharma hall. The wind blew from the east, and the fabric flapped vigorously.

Two monks were arguing beside it.

“It is the wind that moves,” said one. “Without wind, the banner would be still.”

“No,” replied the other. “It is the banner that moves. The wind is invisible; we only see the movement of the cloth.”

The discussion dragged on. Other monks approached, taking sides. Some for the wind, others for the banner. The mind divided itself between two objects.

Huineng, passing by with a sack of rice on his shoulder, stopped.

“It is not the wind that moves,” he said calmly.

“It is not the banner that moves.

It is your mind that moves.”

The monks fell silent. They looked at the banner. They looked at the wind. They looked at the young woodcutter from the south.

And for an instant, nothing moved.

Core tension

The monks argue about the object of movement:

- the wind?
- the banner?

Both start from the same invisible premise: *something is moving outside of me.*

Huineng does not choose between the two.
He does not deny the wind.
He does not deny the banner.
He points to the movement prior to both:

- the mind that divides,
- the mind that compares,
- the mind that needs to name in order to feel safe.

The wind blows.
The banner waves.
But whoever says “this is moving”
is already movement without root.



7. Polishing the tile

Characters

1. Nanyue Huairang (disciple of Huineng)
2. Mazu Daoyi (young monk, future great master)

The encounter

Mazu spent his days sitting in meditation. Hours entirely motionless under the courtyard tree, back straight, gaze fixed on the void. He believed that thus, with body still and mind concentrated, he would attain Awakening. He would become a Buddha.

Nanyue observed him for several days without saying anything. Then, one morning, he sat before him with a broken tile in his hand and a smooth stone at his side. He began to rub the tile against the stone. Over and over. The harsh scraping sound broke the silence of the monastery. Mazu, annoyed, opened his eyes. “Master,” he said, “what are you doing?”

“I am making a mirror,” replied Nanyue without stopping.

Mazu frowned. “How can you make a mirror by polishing a tile? It is impossible.”

Nanyue stopped rubbing. He looked at Mazu calmly. “And you... do you intend to become a Buddha simply by sitting in meditation?”

Mazu fell silent. The question pierced him without violence, like a breeze entering through an open window.

Nanyue resumed the rubbing. Scrape.

Silence. Scrape. After a while, Mazu stood up. He said nothing. But he never again meditated as before.

Core tension

The disciple trusts in a method: *if I sit like this, I will become that.*

The master does not criticize the posture.

He does not deny meditation.

He only shows the absurdity of spiritual calculation:

- polishing tile → mirror
- sitting still → Buddha

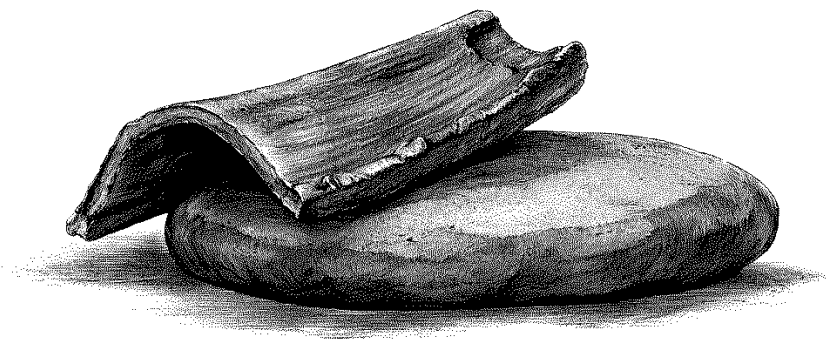
Both stem from the same illusion:

that the fruit can be manufactured through a technique.

But Awakening is not the result of a cause.

It is what remains

when the belief that something must be produced falls away.



8. Ordinary mind

Characters

1. Mazu Daoyi (master of the Hongzhou school)
2. A monk seeking the Way

The encounter

A monk arrived at Mazu's monastery after years of practice in remote mountains. He had meditated until his body ached, had studied Sutras until the words stuck in his mind like thorns. But the Way remained distant.

He knelt before Mazu and asked: "Master, what must I do to find the Way?"

Mazu looked at him without solemnity. He was sitting by the hall door, watching the monks come and go with their daily tasks.

"The Way is not something to be found," said Mazu.

"Then how should I practice?" insisted the monk. "Should I meditate? Study? Keep silence?"

Mazu pointed to a monk sweeping the courtyard, to another carrying water, to an old woman lighting incense at the altar.

"Do you see these?" he asked. "They do not seek the Way. They walk, sweep, drink, sleep. And the Way is already there."

The monk frowned. "But then... what is the Way?"

Mazu replied calmly: "Your ordinary mind. Not the mind that seeks, not the mind that meditates, not the mind that wants to Awaken. The mind that right now hears the wind, feels the weight of the body, breathes without thinking about breathing. That mind... is already the Way."

The monk fell silent. He looked at his hands. He looked at the ground. He looked at Mazu.

And for the first time in years, he stopped seeking.

Core tension

The disciple starts from an invisible belief: *the Way is far away and must be attained.*

The master offers no new method.

He points to no higher state.

He promises no transformation.

He only points to what is already happening:

- walking without thinking about walking,
- breathing without observing the breath,
- living without asking for the meaning of living.

There is no need to become a Buddha.

Only to recognize that the mind reading these words right now
is already what it seeks.



9. The wild duck

Characters

1. Mazu Daoyi (master)
2. Baizhang Huaihai (young disciple)

The encounter

Mazu and his disciple Baizhang were walking along the monastery path at dusk. The air was fresh, birds were returning to their nests. Suddenly, a wild duck crossed the sky, flying west.

“What is that?” asked Mazu without stopping.

“A wild duck,” replied Baizhang.

“Where is it going?” asked Mazu.

“It flies to the west,” said Baizhang, watching the bird disappear among the trees.

Mazu stopped. Without warning, he grabbed Baizhang’s nose and pulled hard. Baizhang cried out in pain, tears sprang to his eyes.

“Ouch! Why do you do that, Master?”

Mazu let go and looked at him firmly. “Where did it go now?”

Baizhang fell silent. The pain in his nose, the tears on his cheeks, the sky still clear... and the question resonating without answer.

In that instant, something broke inside him. Not the duck. Not the sky. Something deeper.

Core tension

The disciple observes the world as an object:

- a duck,
- a movement,
- a direction (west).

The master does not correct the perception.

He teaches no philosophy.

He only breaks the continuity of attention with a violent and absurd gesture.

And then he asks:

- where did it go *now*?

Not the duck.

Not the bird that crossed the sky.

But what just happened: the pain, the cry, the tears.

Where did that instant go?

Can it be followed as one follows a duck?

Awakening is not understanding something.

It is seeing that what seems to pass

never had a place from which to depart

nor a destination to arrive at.



10. Wu

Characters

1. Zhaozhou Congshen (elderly master)
2. An unknown monk

The encounter

The monk approached Zhaozhou with a question he had studied in the Sutras. He knew the correct answer according to doctrine: all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature. It was a fundamental truth of Mahāyāna. But he wanted to hear it from the lips of the old master.

“Master,” he asked, “do dogs have Buddha-nature?”

Zhaozhou, sitting by the threshold of the hall, did not hesitate. He did not reflect. He consulted no texts or doctrine.

“Wu,” he said.

Just that.

The monk blinked. He waited for more. But Zhaozhou was already looking at the courtyard, as if the conversation had ended.

“Wu?” repeated the monk, incredulous. “How can that be? The Sutras clearly state that all beings...”

Zhaozhou did not answer. He did not even look at him. The monk insisted, raised objections, cited authorities.

Zhaozhou remained silent, watching a cat cross the stone path.

Finally, the monk withdrew, confused. The answer made no sense. It contradicted the teaching. It wounded logic.

But the word remained there, dry and absolute:

Wu.

Core tension

Doctrine affirms: *all beings have Buddha-nature.*

The monk expects confirmation.

Zhaozhou responds: *Wu* — no, nothing, absence.

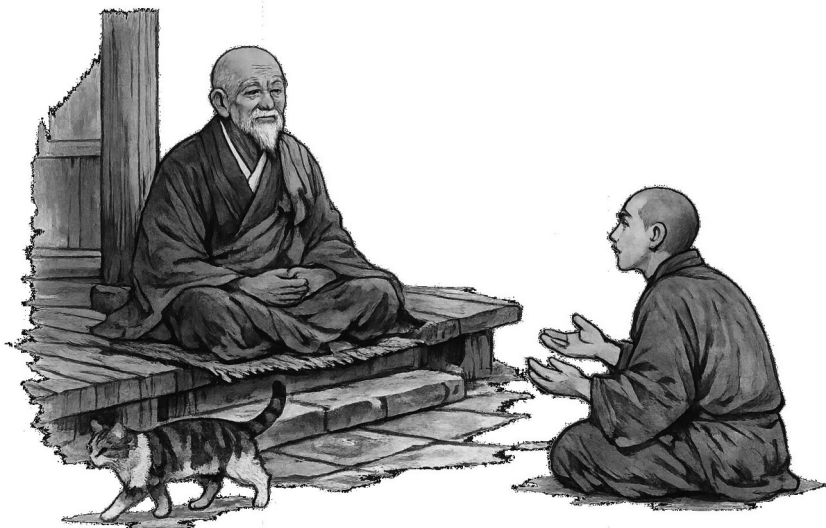
It is not a conceptual negation.

It is not a doctrinal correction.

It is a sharp cut that breaks the question itself.
Because the question stems from an invisible premise:

- that “Buddha-nature” is something one *has* or *does not have*,
- that there is a “dog” separate from that nature,
- that the answer can be yes or no.

Wu does not answer within the frame.
It destroys the frame.
It does not say what Buddha-nature is.
It says that asking about it as a possession
is already to lose it.



[Note on this excerpt]
A Glimpse into the Origins

What you have just read is no ordinary collection of koans. You will not find here the smoothed-over, domesticated versions that appeared centuries later in traditional manuals.

These pages are a fragment of a literary and spiritual excavation. We have traveled back in time to an era before Zen solidified into a rigid institution, seeking to recover the raw voice of the masters of the Tang Dynasty. These are dialogues not written to be solved as riddles, but to be experienced as brutal encounters with reality.

This excerpt includes:

- The introduction, which contextualizes the difference between the Zutang Ji and later imperial compilations.
- The first proto-koans, ranging from Bodhidharma's silence to Zhaozhou's radical negation.

If these lines resonate with you, if you have sensed that “nuclear tension” we describe, we invite you to continue the journey. The complete book, *Genealogy of Doubt*, brings together six foundational collections and offers a panoramic view of how the fertile doubt that characterized early Chan came into being.

[About the Work and the Authors]
Genealogy of Doubt: The Proto-Koans

This volume is the first in a series dedicated to exploring the roots of Zen thought. Unlike other works, it does not seek comfort or simple answers. It aims to restore the original unease of awakening.

Available as:

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About the Authors

Margarita Busqui and Shifu Cruz combine rigorous historical research with the living practice of the Zen arts. Their work focuses on translating not only the words but also the spiritual atmosphere of classical Chinese texts, making the depth of Chan accessible to Western readers without losing its rough and direct essence.

Together, they have also developed the trilogy “Shaolin, Land of Pilgrims” and the initiatory novel “Empty Bowl or Full Bowl,” which explore Zen from the perspectives of fiction, history, and martial arts practice.

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