

Hua Tou Practice

Hua tou practice is the meditation method taught by Venerable Hsuan Hua, my teacher, and the holder of the Wei-Yang lineage of Chan/Zen. His teaching can be found in books published by the Buddhist Text Translation Society: *Chan: The Essence of All Buddhas* is a short booklet of 31 pages and is offered free from the Buddhist Text Translation Society at <https://www.buddhisttexts.org/> - click on "Free Books"; *The Chan Handbook* is a longer text of around 200 pages which can be purchased from the same website.

Ven. Hsuan Hua was transmitted the Wei-Yang lineage by the great chan master of the previous generation, Venerable Hsu Yun. A free pdf of Hsu Yun's lectures and instructions on the hua tou can be found online by searching [Master Hsu Yun's Discourses and Dharma Words](#). His autobiography recounts his remarkable life of 120 years and includes an account of his own great awakening while practicing the hua tou. You can also find this online by searching [Empty Cloud Autobiography pdf](#). I offer this introduction to the words of these two great proponents of the hua tou as a preface to my own limited words and understanding because they are my teachers and they are the masters.

The hua tou practice uses a short sentence of inquiry, usually a "who" or "what" question. The most common in recent use in China is "Who is mindful of the Buddha?" Other examples are: "Who is dragging this corpse around?" and "What was my face before my mother bore me?" Hua means "word" and "tou" means "head", so you could translate it "word head". "Who is mindful of the Buddha?" is the hua, the word. But we are cultivating the tou, the head. When the concentration has reached a critical point, there are no more words. Only the essence of the question remains. So, in a sense it really doesn't matter which hua tou you use because eventually the words drop away when the hua tou becomes effective.

In my notes for the Sunday Sit we talked about the two aspects of meditation: calming and insight/inquiry (*shamatha* and *vipasyana* in Sanskrit; *zhi* and *guan* in Chinese). The work we have done with the breath emphasizes calming the mind with focused attention, i.e. shamatha. With the hua tou we now equally emphasize the investigation of reality, i.e. vipasyana.

Hua tou practice is sometimes described as the Great Doubt. This might be confusing because we are taught that doubt is one of the five hindrances that arise in meditation. But the hua tou is different from the kind of doubt that is an obstacle to meditation. In fact, faith/confidence is essential in this practice. Hsu Yun says the stronger your confidence, the better your progress in the hua tou practice. We need to have confidence in the Buddha's teaching. We need to have confidence in our own potential for awakening: we all have the Buddha-nature. And we need to have confidence in this very hua tou practice: the Great Doubt.

The words of the hua tou are to help you generate this doubt. What are we doubting? We are doubting our own understanding of reality: our understanding of "my" body, of "my" mind, of "my" world. At the same time, we are owning up to our ignorance. We are acknowledging that our view of ourselves and the world is confused. So, this intense sense of doubt about the nature of reality and of our mind becomes the meditation object in hua tou practice.

In the beginning you might start your sit focusing on your breath for a few minutes to settle your body and mind. Then silently and mindfully repeat the hua tou a few times, intent on evoking this sense of investigation, this sense of doubt. "Who is mindful of the Buddha?" The emphasis settles on the question word, "who?", turning the mind inward to search. After some time maybe only "who?" is in your mind and a feeling of doubt can be held continuously for longer and longer periods. Once the sense of doubt starts to arise and intensify, even the word "who" is unnecessary. Eventually you won't even need the question mark. That is the "word head", the hua tou.

It is important to understand that the hua tou is not a mantra. Simply repeating it over and over again will get you nowhere. Holding the hua tou is an intense investigation of reality. In the Theravada tradition after you have worked with the breath until you have developed some calming of the mind, shamatha, you engage in vipassana/insight meditation. This means you turn your attention to contemplate teachings like impermanence, or emptiness, or conditioned co-production as ways of gaining insight/wisdom. This of course is a valuable and time-honored path. It has the characteristic of investigating using thought and language.

With hua tou practice we endeavor to investigate without words or concepts. We try to look directly at reality to see what is real. When you first switch from focusing on the breath to the hua tou, you may feel your concentration is worsening and your mind is wandering more than it was before. That is

natural and you just need to continue your practice patiently and confidently. Holding your attention on the hua tou is more difficult than focusing on the breath. When you realize the mind is wandering, just return to the hua tou. The hua tou investigates “Whose mind was wandering? And whose mind brought it back?” Eventually you will be able to do this investigation without words or concepts.

Moreover, your focused attention will need to be very strong for the hua tou to start to work for you. This requires patience and diligence. Sit with a sense of optimism and a firm intent to keep focused on the hua tou. In a sense, the vipasyana itself becomes the focus for shamatha. Your concentration and your insight/investigation develop together. All the things we talked about regarding posture, and relaxing the body apply here. Because of the intensity of the hua tou practice it is easy to become tense and agitated. Here we must practice the middle way: not too tight, not too loose.

If you have been practicing attention on the breath and you feel your focused attention has been improving, it is time to consider taking up the hua tou. I would encourage you to try. After all, we students of Master Hsuan Hua were given the hua tou practice as beginners. Of course, we had the great advantage of sitting with the aid and guidance of a great master. Even if you are only doing half-hour sits, if you can hold the hua tou it will greatly enhance your meditation practice. The Chan masters always ended with Tsan! Or Jian! Investigate! Look!

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