

Serene Reflection.

Rev. Koten Benson

The term *serene reflection* has been in general use since the time of Great Master Wanshi Shokaku, 1091–1157,¹ to describe the original meditation practice of the Ch’an (Zen) tradition,² in contrast to the *introspecting the koan* (C: *k’ang hua*; J: *kanna-zen*) method that was then becoming popular through the teaching of the master Daie, 1089–1163.³

“Serene reflection” is a translation of two Chinese characters, *mo* (J: *moku*) and *chao* (J: *sho*). A study of these characters and the levels of meaning within them may be of help to us in understanding more about our practice. I am by no means an expert in the Chinese language so I have made use of several dictionaries, books of character analysis and commentaries on the term itself to put together this article and ask forgiveness for its shortcomings.

The first character, *mo*, has an element in it that means black or darkness, making the whole character signify “dark, secret, silent, serene, profound” and also “to close the lips, to become silent”.

The second character, *chao*, has an element meaning “the brightness of the sun”. The whole character translates as “to reflect light, to shine on, to illumine or enlighten”, as well as “to reflect upon, to look upon, to have insight into”.

Reprinted from *The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives*, vol. 4, no. 1: 33–35.

The whole term thus becomes “serene reflection”, “silent illumination”⁴ or “luminescent darkness”.⁵ In the very description of our practice we have the ‘light in darkness—darkness in light’ spoken of in the works of the great masters of our tradition.⁶

We can also see in this the origin of the references to the reflection of the moon in water. As the water of the spirit within us becomes still, clean and bright through meditation, so does the reflection of the “moon”, of the Eternal, become clear and True. There is more than “stillness” in this, more than mere quietism. The water must be clear and bright and clean or there will only be the false “stillness” of stagnation, a dirty pool in which the moon’s reflection will be dim and shallow. This is why we are warned about the consequences of clinging to blissful states and urged to maintain a bright mind while meditating—the importance of the ‘stillness within activity and activity within stillness’.

Another important point in the characters is that there is no “thing” that can be grasped as the source of the light nor a “thing” that reflects the shining. Neither is the darkness or silence a “thing” that can be grasped. This is because in the face-to-face encounter with the Eternal of meditation there is no separate self, just the serene, profound, illuminating light.

Dogen says it better than I:

Lament impurity.
Within the silent waters of the heart
Dwells the moon, the lonely waves—
Brightness everywhere.⁷

* * *

Notes.

1. Hung Chih Cheng Chueh, disciple of Tanka Shijun, author of *Mo Chao Ming (Notes on Serene Reflection)*.
2. Chang, *The Practice of Zen*, pp. 66–69.
3. Ta Hui Tsung Kao (J: Daie Soko).
4. Another translation of *mo chao*.
5. See Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom or How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death*, 2nd ed. rev. (Mount Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey, 1993), p. 165.
6. See *Hsin Hsin Ming (Faith in Mind)* by Kanchi Sosan; *Ts'an T'ung Ch'i (Sandokai)* by Sekito Kisen; *Pao Ching San Mei Ko (The Most Excellent Mirror—Samadhi)* by Tozan Ryokai; *Mo Chao Ming (Notes on Serene Reflection)* by Wanshi Shokaku; “Ko Myo” (“Divine Light”), chapter 13 of *Shobogenzo* Dogen; *Komyozo-Zanmai (Samadhi of the Treasury of the Radiant Light)* by Koun Ejo and many other works in various translations.
7. See *The Story of Rev. Dogen*, translated from the Japanese by Rev. P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett.

Bibliography.

1. Chang, Garma C.C. *The Practice of Zen*. New York: Harper and Row, 1959.
2. Kodera, Takashi. *Dogen's Formative Years in China*. Boulder, Colorado: Prajña Press, 1980.
3. Mathews, R. H. *Mathews' Chinese English Dictionary*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948.
4. Okumura, Shohaku. *Shikantaza: An Introduction to Zazen*. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto Soto Zen Center, 1985
5. Sheng-Yen, Master. *The Poetry of Enlightenment: Poems by Ancient Ch'an Masters*. Elmhurst, New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 1987.
6. Soothill, William Edward and Lewis Hodous. *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*. Taipei, Taiwan: Buddhist Cultural Service. and various and sundry dictionaries, footnotes, hints, etc., in many books.