

CHAN-BUDDHIST CONCEPTIONS OF TIME IN *THE GATELESS GATE* (*WUMEN GUAN* 無門關)

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Abstract

This article examines the conception of time articulated in *The Gateless Gate* 無門關 (*Wumen Guan*, 1228), a 13th-century Chan Buddhist *gōng'àn* (“spiritual riddle”) collection compiled by the Chinese Master Wumen Huikai (無門慧開, 1183–1260). Although the text is rarely approached from the perspective of temporality, its characteristic emphasis on immediacy, paradox, and sudden awakening provides a distinctive framework for rethinking temporal experience. Through close readings of selected cases and Wumen’s commentaries, the study argues that *The Gateless Gate* articulates a practical, non-theoretical understanding of time structured around three interrelated dimensions: suddenness, non-conceptuality, and present-moment awareness. Rather than offering a systematic doctrine of time, the text employs pedagogical disruption to destabilize linear, conceptual temporality and to reorient the practitioner toward direct realization. By examining such examples, this paper argues that *The Gateless Gate* expresses a distinctive Chan-Buddhist “grammar” of time: a non-linear, non-dual temporality in which the ordinary moment embodies eternity.

Keywords: *Chan Buddhism, Wumen Guan, temporality, non-linear time, gōng'àn.*

Introduction

The Gateless Gate (*Wumen Guan* 無門關), is a collection of forty-eight cases (*gōng'àn* 公案) compiled in 1228 by the Chan Master Wumen Huikai, occupies

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a central position in the Chan Buddhist canon and later became foundational within Japanese Zen traditions.

The Gateless Gate is distinguished by its unique combination of sharp, paradoxical dialogues and Wumen's own concise commentaries. The text emphasizes direct experience over doctrinal explanation, and it consistently points toward the possibility of sudden awakening – an insight that arises not through gradual cultivation, but in a single transformative moment.

In Chan Buddhism, *gōng'àn* practice involves working with brief teaching cases that are used to challenge habitual patterns of thought. Its purpose is not to provide doctrinal answers but to provoke direct insight by disrupting conceptual and temporal assumptions.

Scholarly discussions of the text have generally focused on its aims related to awakening, its rhetorical strategies, and the pedagogical role of *gōng'àn* practice. Time itself, however, has seldom been examined as an independent view of analysis, despite the text's persistent emphasis on immediacy, sudden awakening, and non-gradual realization.

This article offers an insight into a view that *The Gateless Gate* presents a specifically Chan understanding of time that is expressed through practice rather than formulated as a theory. Through paradoxical dialogues and abrupt teaching encounters, Wumen repeatedly challenges ordinary assumptions about linear time and directs the practitioner toward an experience of awakening that does not depend on temporal progression. By examining the ways how time is expressed, implied, and deliberately destabilized in selected cases, this study shows that temporality plays a central role in Chan pedagogy.

The Gateless Gate consists of forty-eight *gōng'àn*, literally “public cases”. Chan masters borrowed this legal term to describe dialogues with their students used as key teaching cases.

Although the Japanese-derived term *kōan* is commonly used in English-language scholarship, the present study employs the Chinese term *gōng'àn* to emphasize the text's historical and cultural origins within Chinese Chan Buddhism.

Chan Buddhism developed in China around the sixth century, while Zen emerged as its Japanese continuation from the twelfth century. Although shaped by different cultural contexts, both traditions pursue the realization of enlightenment through practice.

So, while *kōan* is the familiar term, *The Gateless Gate* is in fact a Chinese collection of *gōng'àn*. Calling them “spiritual riddles” is rather metaphorical, but may be more accessible for the reader. It will therefore be used in the present article for ease of reference.

Each case in *The Gateless Gate* is typically composed of a short exchange between a Chan master and a student, followed by Wumen Huikai's brief prose commentary and a verse. Rather than offering doctrinal explanations, the collection consistently emphasizes direct experience and points toward the possibility of sudden awakening (*dùnwù* 頓悟). Awakening is presented not as the result of gradual accumulation over time, but as an immediate break with habitual conceptual understanding.

This approach to awakening is grounded in several fundamental Buddhist ideas that shape the treatment of time in the text. The doctrine of impermanence *wúcháng* 無常 (Skt. *anitya*) presents reality as a continuous process of arising and passing away, thereby undermining the notion of stable or enduring entities. Buddhist theories of momentariness, often expressed through the concept of the *chà'nà* 剎那 (Skt. *kṣaṇa*), further challenge the idea of time as a smooth, continuous flow by describing experience as a succession of discrete moments. Chan Buddhism radicalizes these perspectives by rejecting conceptual distinctions altogether – including those between past, present, and future – and by emphasizing direct realization beyond discursive thought.

Scholarly research dedicated to *The Gateless Gate* has mainly focused on its aims related to liberation and enlightenment, its literary features, and its pedagogical role within the Chan and Zen traditions. Both East Asian and Western studies have highlighted the collection's importance for the formation of gōng'àn practice, paying particular attention to its use of paradox, concise dialogue, and deliberate shock as means of disrupting conceptual thinking [McRae 2003]. Within this line of interpretation, Wumen Huikai is often understood as a teacher who employs negation as a pedagogical strategy: his brief and pointed commentaries are intended not to convey doctrinal explanations but to prevent interpretive fixation and conceptual closure [Faure 2020].

Within this body of scholarship, spiritual riddles are commonly understood as pedagogical tools intended to bring about a fundamental shift in the practitioner's way of thinking [Heine 2014]. Scholars have shown that these cases work by frustrating logical reasoning, destabilizing ordinary language, and directing the practitioner toward forms of understanding that are embodied and non-discursive rather than conceptual. While such studies have been essential for clarifying the performative and dialogical character of Chan practice, they have generally left unexamined the temporal assumptions that structure these pedagogical techniques.

Studies of time in Buddhist thought, by contrast, have mostly focused on doctrinal and philosophical traditions outside the Chan corpus (Nattier 1992). Abhidharma¹ texts are typically discussed in terms of their detailed analyses of

¹ Abhidharma refers to a body of early Buddhist scholastic literature that offers systematic analyses of reality, including detailed accounts of mental processes, causation, and momentary time.

momentariness, causation, and temporal sequence, while Madhyamaka² philosophy approaches time by questioning the reification of temporal and ontological categories through the doctrine of emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*). Although these traditions offer important conceptual tools for understanding time, their treatments are largely theoretical and descriptive in nature.

More recent scholarship has increasingly focused on practice-oriented and phenomenological approaches to Buddhist texts, paying closer attention to embodied experience, affect, and immediacy in religious life [Faure 2020]. In Chan and Zen studies, this shift has encouraged greater interest in meditation practice, ritual activity, and concrete pedagogical encounters. Even so, time is usually addressed only indirectly in these discussions and is often treated as a neutral background condition, rather than as something actively shaped by textual form and teaching strategies [Shibayama 1975].

The present study addresses this gap by examining temporality as an active element of *The Gateless Gate*. Instead of reconstructing an abstract theory of time, it focuses on how Wumen Huikai uses suddenness, paradox, and immediacy to transform the practitioner's lived experience of time. By bringing together perspectives from Chan studies, Buddhist philosophy, and theories of temporality, the article offers a clearer account of how time operates within Chan practice.

This study uses close reading to analyse selected spiritual riddles and their commentaries in *The Gateless Gate*. Instead of reconstructing a systematic Chan doctrine of time, it examines how temporality is enacted in concrete pedagogical encounters. *Gōng'ān* are treated not as symbolic narratives to be interpreted, but as instructional tools intended to provoke changes in perception and understanding.

Any discussion of time in Chan Buddhism requires careful use of terminology. A key concept is *chà'nà* 刹那, usually translated as “instant” or “moment”. In Abhidharma texts, *chà'nà* refers to a precisely defined analytical unit of time used to describe the momentary arising and cessation of dharmas³. In Chan contexts, however, the term is no longer used in this technical sense and instead points to a form of experiential immediacy that cannot be precisely measured [Dumoulin 1988].

A related distinction concerns different models of awakening. Chan discourse commonly contrasts sudden awakening (*dùnwù* 頓悟) with gradual awakening

² Madhyamaka, by contrast, is a Mahāyāna philosophical tradition that critically examines all conceptual categories, including time, by arguing that they lack inherent existence and are empty (*śūnya*) of fixed essence.

³ Dharmas are the basic elements of experience or reality in Buddhist philosophy. They are momentary phenomena – mental or physical – that arise and pass away according to causes and conditions.

(*jiànwù* 漸悟). Although this opposition has generated extensive doctrinal debate, *The Gateless Gate* clearly emphasizes sudden awakening as a way of understanding realization in time. Awakening is not presented as the final result of a step-by-step process, but as an event that breaks with ordinary temporal progression and brings about an immediate shift in experience.

Finally, the “present moment” in Chan texts does not simply refer to the current point in a linear timeline. Chan practice does not treat the present as one segment opposed to past and future, but instead aims to dissolve this temporal framework altogether. In this sense, the present moment is the point at which distinctions between past, present, and future cease to function.

Suddenness and the instant of awakening

One of the most salient temporal features of *The Gateless Gate* is its emphasis on suddenness. Awakening is repeatedly presented not as a process unfolding over time but as a decisive event occurring in a single instant. A paradigmatic example appears in **Case 1**, *Zhàozhōu’s Dog*.

— 趙州狗子 *Zhàozhōu gǒuzi*

趙州和尚、因僧問、狗子還有佛性也無。州云、無。

A monk asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, “Does even a dog have Buddha-Nature?” Master Zhaozhou answered, “Wu.” (No!)

This exchange takes less than a second. The teaching occurs in the impact of the answer, not in any subsequent explanation. The temporal structure of insight is compressed into a single moment – a moment without duration.

The pedagogical force of this exchange lies in its immediacy: insight is neither prepared nor explained but delivered as a temporal rupture that collapses conceptual continuity.

Wumen’s commentary emphasizes that even a single word can overturn deeply ingrained patterns of thinking. Suddenness here does not mean speed, but a break in ordinary, linear time. The expectation of gradual progress is disrupted, and the practitioner is drawn directly into immediate experience.

Time as non-conceptual – “Beyond before and after”

The second temporal dimension is non-conceptuality – the dissolution of temporal categories such as before, after, past, and future.

The text actively destabilizes these categories. A central example comes from **Case 2**, *Baizhang’s fox*, offers one of the most explicit engagements with temporality in *The Gateless Gate*, precisely because it centres on the problem of causality. Cause and effect ordinarily presuppose temporal succession: actions precede consequences,

and past conditions determine present outcomes. The riddle, however, refuses to stabilize this sequence.

二 百丈野狐 *Bǎizhàng yěhú*

百丈和尚。凡參次有一老人。常隨眾聽法。

While Chan Master Baizhang⁴ was giving a certain series of dharma talks, an old man always followed the monks to the main hall and listened to him.

眾人退老人亦退。

When the monks left the hall, the old man would also leave.

忽一日不退。師遂問。面前立者復是何人。

One day, however, he stayed behind, and Master Baizhang asked him, “Who are you, standing here before me?”

老人云。諾某甲非人也。

The old man replied. “I am not a human being.”

於過去迦葉佛時。曾住此山。

In the distant past, I was the Master, living here on this mountain.

因學人問。大修行底人還落因果。也無。

One day a student asked me, “Does an enlightened person fall into the realm of cause and effect (samsara)⁵?”

某甲對云。不落因果。

I answered, “No, they are not subject to cause and effect.”

五百生墮野狐身。

Because of this answer, I have been reborn as a fox⁶ for five hundred generations.

今請和尚。代一轉語貴。脫野狐。

“I implore you now to give a turning word and release me from this foxes’ body.”

⁴ Baizhang Huaihai (720–814) was a Chinese Chan Master during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

⁵ Samsara is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, marked by suffering and driven by ignorance, desire, and karma (the law of action and result).

⁶ The fox in Chinese mythology is representative of the Western image of a “black cat”. It is considered sneaky and represents bad omens for the common population.

遂問、大修行底人還落因果。也無。

Finally, the old monk asked Baizhang “**Does an enlightened man fall into the realm of cause and effect?**”

師云。不昧因果。老人於言下大悟。

Baizhang answered, “**Cause and effect are clear.**” No sooner had the old man heard these words than he was enlightened.

Cause and effect imply temporal sequence. But the riddle paradoxically affirms and denies this sequence at the same time, making it impossible to rely on chronological reasoning. When the student tries to grasp what comes “before” and what comes “after”, the concept collapses.

From a temporal perspective, the case challenges linear causality by keeping affirmation and negation unresolved. Awakening does not occur through correcting a past mistake or working toward a future goal, but at the moment when reliance on chronological thinking is abandoned. The fox is released instantly, showing that liberation is not a gradual process in time but the collapse of fixation on cause and sequence. Time is not rejected, but it no longer functions as a guiding conceptual framework.

Temporal disruption reaches an extreme form in **Case 14, Nanquan Kills a Cat**.

十四 南泉斬猫 *Nánquán zhǎn māo*

南泉和尚因東西堂爭猫兒。

Once the monks of the Eastern and Western halls quarrelling about the ownership of a cat.

泉乃提起云、大衆道得即救、道不得即斬却也。

Nanquan⁷ Chan Master took the cat and while holding it up in front of the assembly said, “You! If you can give me one word of Chan, you will save the cat. If you cannot, I will kill it.”

衆無對。泉遂斬之。

No one could answer, and Nanquan cut the cat in two.

晚趙州外歸。泉舉似州。

That evening when Zhaozhou⁸ returned from a trip outside of the temple, Nanquan told him of the incident.

⁷ Nanquan Puyan 南泉普願 (748–835)

⁸ Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778–897)

州乃脫履。安頭上而出。

Zhaozhou took off his sandal, placed it on his head⁹, and walked away.

泉云、子若在即救得猫兒。

“If you had been there, you would have saved the cat,” Nanquan remarked.

Nanquan’s demand – “If you had been there, you would have saved the cat,” – allows no temporal extension whatsoever. There is no space for reflection, moral deliberation, or narrative sequencing. The situation is structured such that any attempt to think in terms of before and after, right and wrong, or consequence and responsibility arrives too late.

In both examples, riddles remove the possibility of stepping back into linear time. The practitioner must respond from a place before thinking, where temporal distinctions do not apply.

Thus, time becomes something to be seen through, not understood: a conceptual grid that must dissolve for insight to arise.

The third aspect of temporality in the text concerns practice, especially the cultivation of the present-moment mind.

This is beautifully illustrated in **Case 7**, *Zhaozhou’s “Washing the Bowl”*, articulates Chan temporality through radical simplicity. After confirming that a monk has finished eating, Zhaozhou instructs him to wash his bowl. The exchange contains no doctrinal explanation and no reference to future realization. The teaching unfolds entirely within an ordinary, present-moment activity.

趙州洗鉢 *Zhàozhōu xǐ bō*

趙州、因僧問、其甲乍入叢林。乞師指示。

A monk said to Chan Master Zhaozhou, “I have just entered this monastery. Please teach me, Master.”

州云、喫粥了也未。

“Have you had breakfast?” asked Venerable Zhaozhou.

僧云、喫粥了也。

“Yes, I have,” replied the monk.

州云、洗鉢盂去。其僧有省。

⁹ The act of placing one’s shoes on one’s head in Asian culture is like the action of wearing black to a funeral.

"Then," said Master Zhaozhou, "go and better wash your bowl." The monk was enlightened.

Here there is no doctrinal instruction, no projected future moment when understanding will arrive. The teaching is embedded directly in an ordinary action. Wumen's comment emphasizes that awakening is realized precisely in immediate activity, when the mind is fully present.

Across this spiritual riddle, Wumen repeatedly brings the practitioner back to this moment, the only place where awakening can occur. Temporal fragmentation – dividing time into past, present, and future – becomes a hindrance. When the mind remains fully present, time is experienced as immediacy.

Thus, *The Gateless Gate* treats time not as an abstract idea but as a discipline of practice. The moment of action and the moment of realization coincide.

Taken together, these four cases articulate complementary dimensions of Chan temporality in *The Gateless Gate* – destabilize causal and chronological time; eliminate the possibility of delay; and demonstrate the complete coincidence of practice and realization in the present moment. Rather than advancing a theoretical account of time, Wumen Huikai employs *gōng'ān* practice to reconfigure how time is lived and experienced in practice.

Taken together, these three dimensions of temporality – suddenness, non-conceptuality, and present-moment awareness – reveal that *The Gateless Gate* presents a **practical** understanding of time. Unlike philosophical treatises that analyse temporal categories, Wumen uses riddles to reshape the practitioner's lived experience of time.

What distinguishes Wumen's approach is that temporality becomes part of the pedagogy itself. Suddenness interrupts linear thinking; non-conceptuality dissolves temporal distinctions; and present-moment awareness anchors the practitioner in direct experience. In this sense, Wumen is not offering a theory about time but rather demonstrating how time functions in the process of awakening.

Compared with broader Buddhist discussions of impermanence or momentariness, Chan Buddhism – and Wumen Huikai in particular – shifts the focus to **immediacy of practice**. Time is not something to be understood conceptually; it is something to be recognized, transcended, or dissolved in the very act of confronting a spiritual riddle.

Awakening is framed as an event that disrupts ordinary temporal flow rather than as the outcome of disciplined repetition over time.

When the *gōng'ān* tradition was transmitted to Japan and developed within Zen lineages, especially Rinzai and Sōtō¹⁰, its understanding of time shifted. Rinzai Zen

¹⁰ Rinzai and Sōtō are two major schools of Japanese Zen Buddhism.

continued to emphasize sudden breakthrough, but *gōng'ān* practice became part of long and structured training programs. In Sōtō Zen, the focus on *shikantaza*¹¹ further reshaped temporality by emphasizing sustained practice and repetition rather than sudden moments of rupture [Dumoulin 1988].

From this comparative perspective, *The Gateless Gate* presents a highly compressed view of time. The immediacy central to Wumen Huikai's teaching resists later forms of institutionalization and ritualization. Time does not function as a medium for gradual cultivation, but as a point of tension in which awakening either happens immediately or does not occur at all. This contrast underscores the historical specificity of Chan views of time and cautions against reading later Zen interpretations back into Song-dynasty¹² Chan texts [Schlütter 2008].

Conclusion

This article has shown that *The Gateless Gate* presents a distinctive Chan Buddhist way of understanding time, not through abstract theory, but through teaching practice. By closely examining selected spiritual riddles and Wumen Huikai's commentaries, the study has identified three closely connected aspects of Chan temporality: suddenness, the rejection of conceptual time, and attention to the present moment.

First, the emphasis on sudden awakening (*dùnwù*) highlights the power of a single moment. Awakening is not described as something that develops gradually over time, but as an immediate shift that breaks with ordinary, linear ideas of progress. Second, the text shows that common temporal distinctions – such as past, present, and future – can become obstacles to realization when they are treated as fixed or meaningful in themselves. Third, the focus on the present moment demonstrates that practice and awakening are not separate stages in time, but occur together in direct, immediate activity.

By treating time as an active element of Chan teaching, rather than as a neutral background, this study contributes to broader discussions in Chan and Buddhist studies about lived religious practice. It suggests that time in Chan Buddhism is not primarily something to be analysed philosophically, but something that is challenged, disrupted, or even set aside in the moment of awakening.

¹¹ *Shikantaza*, meaning “just sitting” or “nothing but just sitting,” is a core practice in the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, emphasizing effortless, non-judgmental awareness, where one sits without focusing on any particular object (like breath or kōans) but simply experiences the present moment, allowing thoughts and sensations to arise and pass without engagement.

¹² The Song dynasty in China spanned the period from 960 to 1279 CE.

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