The Comic Perspective in Zen Literature and Art

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SANTAYANA argued that at the heart of comedy lies a confusion of categories ordinarily kept distinct, like applying the formulae of theology to cookery, or of cookery to theology.[1] Comedy is therefore a trespasser upon the holy ground of spheres which we expend a great deal of energy in defining and keeping separate, only to have them thrown back precipitously in the same knapsack with odd bits of everything. The king is forcibly tossed by the court jester into the street with the beggar; the Bodhisattva is suddenly indistinguishable from the novice monk; gods and goddesses are made to consort with common animals; and the Buddha is placed in the lotus pond along with the frogs. It is the comedy of the scroll-scenes (*chōjū-giga*, or animal caricatures) traditionally assigned to Toba-sōjō (1053–1140) in which monkeys, rabbits and frogs take the place of monks, priests and laymen in Buddhist ceremonies and temple services, as well as a variety of secular activities, and in which, in the culminating scene of the first scroll, a monkey officiates as priest in a temple ritual, praying before a large bullfrog Buddha seated on a lotus leaf.[2] Though these are not Zen paintings—Toba-sōjō having been a priest and "bishop" of the T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) sect—they are of the same order as many Zen works, and serve to indicate that Zen was not alone in its appreciation for the importance of the dialectic of the sacred and the comic, religiously and aesthetically.[3] In

[1] George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1896), p. 188.

[2] Kenji Toda, *Japanese Scroll Paintings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), pp. 53 ff.

[3] Similarly in 1916 when two statues in the Tōshōdaiji temple were removed for repairs, playful sketches were discovered on the stands underneath. Dating from the 8th century, they included a motley array of not–particularly–divine figures: horses, monkeys, birds, rabbits, frogs, and a mantis. *ibid.*, pp.49–50.

Zen, however, the employment of this dialectic is more consistent throughout its history, more central to the tradition, and often more radical. In correspondence with the thorough-going iconoclastic temper of Zen is an equally thorough-going emphasis upon the mundane, the ordinary and everyday, the human, which constantly manifests itself in Zen literature, art and life.

The Collapse of the Sublime

Dating from the 9th and 10th centuries, Zen painting, like Zen literature, instruction, meditational practice and monastic life, marks a distinct break from the typical, Indian inspired, Mahāyānist Buddhist themes, scenes and subjects. As Osvald Sirén comments, Zen painting generally "had very slight, if any, connexion with traditional forms of Buddhist art."[4] In place of the glorified and exalted Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, elegantly and royally attired, awesomely displaying their superhuman powers and surrounded by a host of heavenly beings and lesser spirits, are the extremely plain, earthy, unmistakably human sketches of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, and various Zen masters and patriarchs. The figures are often very powerfully represented, as in the numerous portrayals of the founder, Bodhidharma; but it is a very this-worldly power, immediately open to the self-realization of all men, and the total effect is that of very simple and mundane figures. The "portraits" of Bodhidharma, or even Śākyamuni himself, are the antithesis of the magnificent imagery familiar from early Chinese caves such as Tun-huang and Yün-kang,[5] or early Japanese temples like Hōryūji:[6] Amitābha (Amida), the Savior-Buddha, beckoning from the paradisal splendor of his Pure Land; Kuan-yin

[4] Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting, Leading Masters and Principles*, 7 vols. (New York: Ronald Press, 1955–59), IV, 11.

[5] Brief descriptions of the wall paintings found in Buddhist temples and monasteries in China prior to the destruction of many of them in 845–9 are to be found in Chang Yen-yuan's *Li-tai-ming-hua-chi* (847), iii. 4. See W.R.B. Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting* (Washington, 1949), pp. 254–377. Cf. Langdon Warner, *Buddhist Wall-Paintings, A Study of a Ninth Century Grotto at Wan Fo Hsia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), and Paul Pelliot, *Les Grottes de Touen-houang*, 6 vols. (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1914–24).

[6] See T. Naito, *The Wall Paintings of Hōryūji*, trans. W.R.B. Acker and B. Rowland (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1943).

(Kannon) and the seemingly endless multitude of other benevolent Bodhisattvas, offering their treasuries of grace and merit; or Maitreya (Mi-lo-fu, Miroku), the Future Buddha, holding forth the promise of his coming dispensation. As Suzuki put it with respect to the transformation of Mahāyānist figures in Japanese Zen: "Both Kwannon and Monju [Mañjusrī, Wen-chu, Bodhisattva of Wisdom] were brought down to the market or the woods or anywhere we humans were accessible. Kwannon was pictured with a basket filled with fish, Monju came out to our world accompanied by the monkey or the crane."[7]

R. G. Collingswood argued in his aesthetics that "the theory of laughter belongs to the philosophy of art; the satisfaction which we find in it is an aesthetic satisfaction, and to this extent the comic is a form of the beautiful. . . . A mere collapse or disappointment is not comic; it must be an aesthetic collapse, a collapse of the sublime."[8] Zen art hardly signals a disappointment, but it definitely signals a collapse of the sublime, and does so both aesthetically and religiously. This is the reason—or one of the reasons—why the comic perspective is so much at home in Zen and Zen art; for one of the functions of comedy is to bring everything back to earth, if need be by making things fall into the mud. And the very juxtaposition of the gorgeous, heavenly Buddha, arrayed in his radiant power and glory, with his lavishly decorated and richly costumed Buddha-field, or the awesome thousand-armed and thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara, or the overwhelming multitude of compassionate Bodhisattvas, with the perfectly plain and unpretentiously humble figure of Bodhidharma facing the wall of his cave (Sesshū), or of the Fifth Ch'an Patriarch carrying his hoe (Mu-ch'i), or the Sixth Patriarch bending over, cutting a stalk of bamboo (Liang-k'ai), is itself comic, quite apart from any specific inclusion of comic motifs or effects. This is just as true whether one takes the type of portrait that becomes official from the 13th century on, in which Bodhidharma is pictured as burly, stern and awesome, with heavy brows and piercing eyes, and a visage suggestive of a tiger or dragon, or the slight, rather ordinary, and more compassionate-appearing patriarch found in the manuscript illustra-

[7] D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Buddhism*, 4th ed. (Tokyo: Japanese Tourist Bureau, 1965), p. 35.

[8] *Essays in the Philosophy of Art* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1946), pp. 81–2.

tions of the *Chuan-fa-chêng-tsung* (*ca.* 1054) and the palace roll of figures painted by Chang Shêng-wên (*ca.* 1176)—although the former treatment tends more toward caricature and lends itself more to comic subtleties.[9] In either case, as Suzuki put it, Zen "took away from Buddhist figures that aloof, unconcerned rather unapproachable air which had hitherto characterized them. They came down from the transcendental pedestal to mingle with us common beings and with common animals and plants, rocks and mountains."[10] The divine became human, as it were, in its peculiarly mundane and profane Zen form as the dimension of Buddha-nature (*Buddhatā*) in all human beings, indeed in all things.

The radicalism of the Zen transformation is even more striking when compared with the magnificent imagery of the Mahāyānist sutras, which provide the literary counterparts of such artistic splendor and profusion. In one of the Pure Land sutras, for example, the wondrous form of Amitābha is offered to the devotee as an object of contemplation:

> His body is coloured like the pure gold in a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, and a hundred thousand Yamalokas [Yama heavens], (with the height of) as many yojanas as there are sand grains in six hundred thousand lacs of nayutas [millions] of Ganges rivers. The white hair between his eyebrows curls five times to the right like five mount Sumerus. His eyes are like the water of four oceans with the blue and white clearly distinguishable. The pores of his body send out rays of light as great as a mount Sumeru. The halo (round his head) contains a hundred lacs of great chiliocosms [billion worlds] wherein appear Nirmānakāya Buddhas as many as there are sand grains in a million lacs of nayutas of Ganges rivers. Each Nirmānakāya Buddha has a following of countless Transformation Bodhisattvas serving him. Amitāyus Buddha has 84,000 marks; each mark has 84,000 excellent characteristics; each characteristic sends out 84,000 rays of light; and each ray of light illumines and attracts to

[9] Cf. Helen B. Chapin, "Three Early Portraits of Bodhidharma," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, Vol. I. (1945–6), pp. 66–97.

[10] D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), p.379.

> it all living beings in all the worlds in the ten directions who (earnestly) think of him.[11]

In relation to this fabulous immensity and overwhelming brilliance the Zen treatments of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, insofar as they are treated at all, appear as if starkly and nakedly human, abruptly and unceremoniously stripped as it were of all mythical fantasy, regal splendor, and preternatural glory. As Suzuki says of the equally marvellous Buddha of the *Gandavyūha:* "He no more sits on a high seat decorated with seven kinds of jewels, discoursing on such abstract subjects as Non-ego, Emptiness, or Mind-only. On the contrary, he takes up a spade in his hands, tills the ground, sows seeds, and garners the harvest. In outward appearances he cannot be distinguished from a commoner whom we meet on the farm, in the street, or in the office. . . . The Buddha in his Chinese Zen life does not carry his *Gandavyūha* atmosphere ostentatiously about him but quietly within him."[12]

The same inversion occurs with respect to other orthodox Buddhist themes and scenes. In place of the depiction of the seemingly inexhaustible *Jātaka* episodes from the life of the Buddha and his previous incarnations, or the profusion of myths associated with the host of other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, or the variety of levels and tortures in Buddhist hells and the correspondingly extravagant Paradise scenarios, Zen painting, like Zen literature, offers the this-worldly landscapes and commonplace events of everyday life: Ma-yüan's "Old Man Asleep in a Boat," or his "Man Fishing," or his "Monks Playing Chess in a Bamboo Grove" (12–13th c.); Liang-k'ai's "Sixth Patriarch Cutting Bamboo" or his "Monk Eating Pig's Head" and "Monk Playing with a Shrimp" (13th c.); Mu-ch'i's "Monkeys," "Swallows" and "Persimmons," or his "Priest Sewing his Mantle" (13th c.); Yü-chien's "Mountain Village in Clearing Mist" (13th c.); Mokuan's "Four Sleepers" and "Kingfisher" (14th c.); or Josetsu's "Fishing for a Catfish with a Gourd" (15th c.). This not only reflects a movement away from stock religious themes and pious devotional images—Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods and goddesses, monsters and devas, mythological episodes—but the admission of almost any aspect of existence as a legitimate

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[11] Charles Luk, *Secrets of Chinese Meditation* (London: Rider and Co., 1964), pp.94–5.

[12] D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 3rd ser., 2nd ed. (London: Rider and Co., 1953), p. 82.

religious theme and artistic subject. The sacred cosmos is profaned in order that the sacredness of the "profane" world might be revealed.

This is not to suggest that the conventional Mahāyānist motifs are never treated by Zen artists; but they are certainly no longer dominant motifs, and even when they are treated it is in a distinctively this-worldly, concrete and ordinary-human manner. As in Ch'ên-hsien's (17th c.) illustrations of Śākyamuni, Kuan-yin, Arhats, monks and priests, the treatment does not, as Sirén puts it, "always seem to be as reverential as the traditional motifs might imply. . . . [He] has transformed the saintly men into ordinary human beings divested of their holiness."[13] In Suzuki's words, "The Chinese practical genius has brought the Buddha down again on earth so that he can work among us with his back bare and his forehead streaked with sweat and covered with mud. Compared with the exalted figure at Jetavana surrounded and adored by the Bodhisattvas from the ten quarters of the world, what a caricature this old donkey-leading woman-Buddha of Shou-shan, or that robust sinewy barefooted runner of Chih-mên!"[14]

The same may be said of the Mahāyānist paradises, as exemplified in the magnificent murals of Hōryūji, which presented the four paradises of the four directions, with Śākyamuni's paradise in the south, Amitābha's in the west, Bhaisajyaguru's in the east, and Maitreya's in the north.[15] Paradise, for Zen, is immediately accessible and is indistinguishable from the world of ordinary perception—though not as ordinarily perceived. It is not to be located in some other world, nor in a world which one enters by closing the eyes and shutting out the mundane and the commonplace, nor a world which by its holiness and infinity and brilliance devalues this world, empties it, and renders it impure, drab and profane. It is not the world at the end of the rainbow of fantasy and mind-expansion, or at the furthest remove from this world. As in the T'ang master Yên-yang's (Gonyō) characterization of such Buddhist fundamentals as the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and the corresponding Three Refuges ("I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha"), it is the world in which "the Buddha is a mass

[13] Sirén, V, 69.

[14] Suzuki, *Essays*, 3rd ser., p.107.

[15] Naito, pp. 59 ff., 88 ff., 102 ff.

of clay, the Dharma is the moving earth, and the Sangha is one who eats gruel and rice."[16] Or as Jōshū commented, referring to the contemplative image of the Buddha as golden in color and sixteen feet in height: "Zen makes a humble blade of grass act as the Buddha-body sixteen feet high, and conversely, the Buddha-body sixteen feet high act as a humble blade of grass."[17]

If one moves from subject matter to style, the same mundaneness and unpretentiousness is evident. The Zen style, so clearly reflected in the techniques and effects which it utilizes, is not the extravagant, the luxurious, the ornamented, not the riotous display of lines and colors, nor the seemingly endless proliferation of subjects and objects filling every particle of space, but the plain, unadorned, suggestively sketchy strokes of the brush, the aversion to detail—let alone adornment—and the impressionistic capture of moments of fleeting experience. In relation to the extravaganzas of Mahāyānist art which had made its way into China from India, Zen art represents a determined refusal to indulge in the embellishments and profusions of mythological fantasy or the ornateness and splendor of the pious imagination, hardly in fact even to indulge in coloration at all, with its decision to return, most frequently, to the earlier, non-Buddhist, Chinese monochromatic tradition of painting, stemming from calligraphy, and its favoring of the unorthodox *i-p'in* style and *p'o-mo* techniques.[18]

[16] Suzuki, *Essays*, 3rd ser., p.372.

[17] Cf. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, p. 348. The reference is to one of the typical recommendations of Pure Land Buddhism concerning contemplation: "He who is determined to be reborn in the Western Realm should first visualize a sixteen-foot image (of Amitābha) above a pool (one of the eight pools in Amitābha's Paradise), for it is impossible for a worldling's mind to reach the boundless body of Amitāyus Buddha." *Kuan-wu-liang-shou ching* (Luk, *Secrets*, p.98).

[18] This is not intended to imply that Zen singlehandedly produced this type of painting or its aesthetic interpretation; for Zen had been in formative existence for several centuries in China before it accepted, during the Sung dynasty (960–1126), painting as an appropriate technique for spiritual realization and form of expression for that realization. It is rather that the art and aesthetic of the Sung dynasty, aspects of the *i-p'in* style and *p'o-mo* technique that had begun to receive recognition from contemporary art critics and historians, and elements of the Taoist tradition, integrated so well with emerging Zen attitudes and religious teachings that this presented itself as a natural spiritual technique and religious expression. Yet, undoubtedly, Zen painters added their own inspiration, interpretation and influence.

Whether, therefore, in terms of subject matter or style, it is the kind of art world in which, as it were, court jesters are much more at home than their kings and queens, buffoons than their lords and ladies, and in which priests and devotees look more out of place than clowns and fools, or for that matter than birds, fish and frogs. It is the kind of world in which Hakuin can sketch a scene of a Zen priest urinating, or Sengai engage in the grossness of his "One Hundred Days Teaching of the Dharma." It is the kind of world in which it is not inappropriate for both Hakuin and Sengai to accompany their works with "crazy verses," or for Sengai to substitute himself for the Buddha in the most sacred Parinirvāna scene. And lest this should appear to be an example of a low point in Buddhist spirituality, it must be remembered that Hakuin was one of the most significant and prominent masters in the history of Japanese Zen, and that Sengai, a great master in his own right, was only giving expression in ink and verse to an unusually profound appreciation for the significance and sacrality of even the lowliest and most "profane" aspects of life. When confronted with such individuals it is easy to react, as does Munsterberg, with the customary misgivings of aestheticians and religionists when faced with similar phenomena: "It is on this note that Zen painting drew to its close—a note of gaiety and charm, no doubt reflecting the decline which Zen had suffered in modern Japan."[19] One might just as well have said, "reflecting the decline which brought Zen into being," i.e., the collapse of the sublime.

Overcoming Sacred and Profane

So thorough-going is this collapse of the sublime that it has been seen by some interpreters as the result of secularizing tendencies, either in Chinese culture in general or Zen in particular. It is to be acknowledged that there are certain historical realities which have some part to play in this shift. The various persecutions of Buddhists, the most devastating of which was that of Emperor Wu Tsung in the years 842–845, were misfortunes which a radical Zen iconoclasm, and a Zen incorporation of much of the Chinese outlook and sensibility, were exceptionally well-suited to weathering. And Zen itself was not unrelated to the corresponding resurgence of an emphasis upon indigenous

[19] Hugo Munsterberg, *Zen and Oriental Art* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles Tuttle, 1965), p.90.

Chinese thought and culture, with its distinctively this-worldly and humanistic character, over against alien forms of Indian spirituality.

In dealing with Zen one must pay special tribute to the very practical, realistic and moderate character of the traditional Chinese philosophy of life which would not accept Buddhism apart from a stress upon the mundane and the human. High-flown metaphysics and extended forays into other-worldly spheres of pious speculation and yearning must often have appeared as much ado about nothing before the realism and common sense of the Chinese perspective, informed as it was by both Confucianism and Taoism. In Hu Shih's well-known description of the context out of which Zen emerged: "The Chinese mentality is practical and abhors metaphysical speculation. All the religions and philosophies of ancient China were free from the fantastic imaginativeness and hair-splitting analysis and gigantic architectonic structure which characterize all religious and philosophical literature in India. When China was brought face to face with India, China was overwhelmed, dazzled and dumbfounded by the vast output of the religious zeal and genius of the Indian nation. China acknowledged its defeat and was completely conquered. But after a few centuries of bewilderment and enthusiasm, the Chinese mentality gradually reasserted itself and began to search for those things which it could really understand and accept. It now undertook to sift from this vast literature of Buddhism those elements which might be regarded as essentials in distinction from the impressive images and grandiose rituals and unintelligible metaphysics and superstitious charms and spells."[20]

The kind of secularity and humanism and good-humoured matter-of-factness that has always graced Chinese culture, and that is early manifest in such a delightful manner in Chuang-tzu, is now manifest in the happy marriage of Taoism with its Chinese dowry and Buddhism with its Indian legacy, the offspring of which is Zen. "There is no question that the kind of thought and culture represented by Chuang-tzu was what transformed highly speculative Indian Buddhism into the humorous, iconoclastic, and totally practical kind of Buddhism that was to flourish in China and Japan in the various schools of Zen."[21] This Chinese contribution to Zen of the mundane and the comic is

[20] Hu Shih, "The Development of Zen Buddhism in China," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review* (April, 1932), pp. 481–2.

[21] Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang-tzu* (New York: Norton, 1964), p.16.

illustrated, perhaps as well as by anything, in Lin Yutang's comment that "Chinese scholars always bequeath to us so many collections of 'notebooks' . . . consisting of unclassified paragraphs, in which opinions on the authorship of literary works and corrections of errors in historical records are mixed up with accounts of Siamese twins, fox spirits and sketches of a red-bearded hero or a centipede-eating recluse."[22] This is very much, in fact, an apt description of what a collection of Zen paintings or of Zen anecdotes looks like.

Chinese art and literature, generally, reflects a devoted attention to the endless variety of this-worldly objects, a congeniality to even the lowliest creatures and most common particulars of day-to-day existence. The whole range of earthly life is opened up as if, in itself, a sacred mystery, as if in its very miscellaneousness the proper locus of reverent attention, and as if the true paradise, realistically perceived, were to be found in the beauty and refined awareness of the "pure land" immediately available to experience. The most cursory glance at a collection of Chinese, as well as specifically Zen, paintings, or skimming of the classical records and accounts, reveals the same detailed surveillance of the menagerie of ordinary delights. There is Chang Sêng-yu who is remembered for his snow scenes; Chuo Fang for his court ladies; Pien Luan for his birds and flowers. Han Kan excelled in horses, Chang Hsüan in women and girls, Han Huang in oxen, Tai Sung and Tai I in buffaloes. Fêng Shao-chêng is noted for his dragons and birds, Sun Wei for his dragons and turbulent water. Li Ai-chih's specialty was cats. Hsu Hsi's forte lay in flowers, butterflies and garden vegetables, including cabbages; Mei Hsing-ssu's was barnyard fowl. Prince Chün was eulogized for his treatment of bamboo, and also as a "clever painter of shrimps," while the prince of Chiang-tu was acknowledged as an "expert painter of sparrows, cicadas, and donkeys." Ch'i-tan was at his best in "the hairpins and hatstrings of the Court," and Fa-shih in "picnicking noblemen." K'uai Lien was especially fond of cranes, and Ts'ui K'o remarkably captured the subtle distinctions between hares.[23]

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[22] Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (New York: Reynal and Hutchings, 1935), p.89.

[23] From the *Hsuan-ho-hua-p'u* (1120) and the *Li-tai-ming-hua-chi* (847). Quotations are from W.R.B. Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*.

The recognition that Zen adopts rather than creates this climate does not, however, in the least depreciate the contribution of Zen itself; for the primary context of Zen was still religious and Buddhist, and in relation to the established conventions and treatments of this tradition Zen self-consciously turned away to more "secular," mundane and comic forms of art and literature. And to be sure there is here a kind of secularization process at work in Zen, which on one side is a purging of holy things and lofty compositions of their special sanctity and sublimity. Yet at the same time this process takes place in a religious context, and involves a sanctification of its own: the sacrilizing of the earthy, the human, the commonplace event, the "meanest creature and flower." As in the practice, dating from the earliest Zen monasticism, the master meditates and teaches and guides; but he also participates, like everyone else, in building, cultivation, cooking, sweeping and washing. The one activity is not sacred, and the other secular; rather, the distinction has been transcended. Indeed, particularly from the viewpoint of the Southern, Sudden Enlightenment School, it is just as possible to achieve enlightenment in the act of cleaning as in meditating or studying the sutras.

There is, of course, the story of the prominent 11th century painter, Li Lung-mien, who was warned by a (Ch'an?) monk[24] that if he continued to paint so many horses he would be reborn as a horse, whereafter, it is said, he began to deal with more obviously religious themes! As the evidence suggests that he nevertheless continued to paint horses, and other "secular" matters, in his later years, the anecdote either originated in a jest or was the apocryphal invention of a Buddhist attempt to situate his religious works in his mature years.[25] Even in dealing with religious themes, however, Li was apparently instrumental in mellowing and further humanizing the earlier manner of representing Arhats (which was in itself quite this-worldly), softening the severity and grimness of their features, replacing the "rather terrifying old men with their ravaged and foreign [Indian] features . . . by more pleasant-looking, well-nourished monks of a rather jovial appearance."[26]

[24] Teng-ch'un's *Hua-chi* (1167) seems to suggest a Ch'an monk, while in the *Hsuan-ho-hua-p'u* this advice was given by a Taoist.

[25] Cf. Agnes Meyer, *Chinese Painting, as Reflected in the Thought and Art of Li Lung-Mien* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1923), pp.56–8.

[26] Sirén, II, 55.

The effect of the Zen achievement is not secularization as such, but a kind of spiritual democratization of things in which the categories of importance versus unimportance, value and valuelessness, profundity and triviality, wisdom and simplicity, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, sacred and profane, no longer apply. Or, to put it more positively, it is a revaluation of things in which the distance between great and small, lofty and lowly, powerful and weak, magnificent and plain, extraordinary and common is reduced to nothing, permitting a magnanimousness of spirit in which even the humblest and poorest and dullest of creatures is seen as having its own significance and value. The exalted is humbled, and the humble is exalted, as it were. A dualistic way of thinking which arranges things and compares things and separates things, and which interposes its classifications between the experiencer and the experienced, is toppled. As master Kuei-shan (Isan) remarked: "When all feelings about the saintly and the profane have been wiped out, there will be exposed the body of true eternity."[27] In the same way Hui-nêng (Enō) instructed his disciples: "If someone asks you about the meaning of existence, answer him in terms of non-existence. If he asks about the worldly, speak of the saintly. If he asks of the saintly, speak of the worldly."[28]

Such a perspective can, of course, be viewed as a very serious and sobering one; yet, like the collapse of the sublime, it is also at the heart of the comic perspective. The clown and the comedian have often functioned at their best as the great levelers in relation to all hierarchies and all distinctions, however sacred. Through overturning, or puncturing, or collapsing, or standing things upside down, they effect a reversal or "flattening" of categories and discriminations, the result of which is closely akin to that sense of unity and fellow-feeling, that oneness or identity of all things, that mystical experience realizes. And it is in this sense, too, that Zen masters and artists have commonly performed the clown's role in relation to and within the larger Mahāyāna tradition. If the dualities and oppositions such as beauty and ugliness, sacred and profane, truth and error, are seen as a part of the spiritual problem, it has always been a primary function of the clown and the fool to annul just such distinctions by reducing the sublime to the ridiculous, by profaning the sacred, by turning

[27] Charles Luk, *Ch'an and Zen Teachings*, 3 vols. (London: Rider, 1960–2), II, 74.

[28] John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (Taipeh: National War College, 1968), p.89.

reason into nonsense, by giving the prize to the ugliest man in town. Their's is the Emersonian motto: "I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred, none are profane." The precious gem is treated as a common pebble, while the common pebble is foundled as a precious gem.

The mystical goal of bringing about a collapse of categories, curious as it may seem at first sight, is also the intent of the comic spirit. In some respects it intensifies the categories and contrasts as a mock prelude to collapsing them. The beauty is placed with the beast, the king is made to walk hand in hand with the beggar, the wise man and the village fool are put side by side in the seats of honor, and the Buddha and the bullfrog are placed on adjacent pads in the lotus pool. Such a mystical integration of opposites is already pre-figured in the body-paint and costume of the clown in so many cultures, an amalgamation which sets together white and black, order and disorder, symmetry and finery and patchwork, fastidiousness and dishevelment, royal insignia and peasant attire. It is the separation and yet coincidence of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the juxtaposition-in-unity of the baggy pants and undersize coat of a Charlie Chaplin, or the clumsied gracefulness of many a clown. It is the circus fat lady paired off with the thin man, the beautiful maiden parading with the ugly dwarf, or the graceful trapeze artist soaring above the stumbling imitations of the clown in the ring below. The mystical *coincidentia oppositorum* is symbolically achieved in the motley figure and the *punctum indifferens* of the clown-fool. His is an amorphousness and an ambiguity that represents an order of being and knowing that lies before and beyond all duality and hierarchy and intellection, in that region of freedom and innocence and playful spontaneity attained only by little children and great sages.

The Recovery of Simplicity

Parallel to this movement in Zen art is a similar collapse of the sacred and the sublime in Zen literature, almost in fact a collapse of literature at all, with the Zen preference for anecdotes and abbreviated discourse, if not simply shouts and exclamations. A comparison of the incredibly profuse productivity of the Mahāyānist literature introduced into China, as well as the extensive Theravāda *Tripitaka,* with the sparse and minimal production and use of literature in Zen is most significant. Mahāyānist sutras are even more effusive in both extensiveness and in fantastic content than Mahāyānist art which

certainly attempts, but is physically unable to more than hint at the colossal proportions and stupendous numerations of the Mahāyānist visionary imagination. Mahāyānist literature opens up like an unending and inexhaustible treasurehouse of spiritual delicacies, in relation to which Zen seems to stand like a small plot of arid scrub-land to an infinity of cosmic jungles.

In place of the monumental *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra,* for example, with its 600 fascicles, Zen uses the brief *Hridaya* (heart) epitomization of the great sutra, which in its Chinese translation by Hsüan-tsang contains only 262 characters. Similarly the massiveness and luxuriance of the *Saddharma-pundarīka,* the *Vimalakīrti* and the *Avatamsaka* stand in stark contrast to the explosive abruptness of Chao-chou's (Jōshū) "*Wu!*" or Lin-chi's (Rinzai) "*Katz!*" It is as if one had been invited to a sumptuous banquet table in a great hall, expecting to be gorged on a seemingly endless feast of choice meats and rare delights, only to find beneath the elegant lid of the great silver serving platter the crisp remains of a common sparrow. In fact, this is the suggestion of an anecdote told of master Fa-yen (Hōgen) who was about to deliver a discourse to his waiting monks; but, upon ascending the platform, he heard the twittering of a swallow outside the assembly hall. Whereupon he remarked, "What a profound discourse on Reality, and a clear exposition of the Dharma!" and descended from the platform.[29] Here the accolades of Mahāyānist piety in the *Amitābha Buddha Sūtra* are brought to a most straightforward fulfillment: "Streams, birds and trees are all chanting Buddha and Dharma."

The Japanese *haiku,* too, frequently associated with and used by Zen, is a fascinating instance of this same emphasis upon the common and the simple. The *haiku* is sublime in its very aversion to the sublime, and magnificent in its insistence upon being completely bereft of adornment. Clothed in the plainest and most modest garment of but seventeen syllables, and using only the most everyday elements for its subject matter, it is a poetry that only a culture with a devoted attention to the most trifling particulars, and an unusual sense of the comic, could have imagined.

[29] *Ibid.*, p.230.

On the temple bell
Perching, sleeps
The butterfly. Oh![30]

There are, of course, some *haiku* which are overtly humorous, as this one by Buson, or Issa's lines:

Yes, the young sparrows
If you treat them tenderly
Thank you with droppings.[31]

But the *haiku* itself is a comic achievement. For when confronted with that which would require an infinity of words to express, it proposes to restrict itself to the very least intelligible number; and, offering itself thus as the most exquisite and purest form of poetry, it has only a beggar's display of the most mundane experiences and everyday objects, immediately accessible to anyone.

On a withered branch
A crow has settled—
Autumn nightfall.
Bashō

New Year's Day:
Clouds dispersed, and sparrows
Chattering away.
Ransetsu[32]

The *haiku* presents, as a special gift, what everybody everywhere has in his possession at all times!

There is also a sense in which—as unrelated as the two may seem—one may even speak of a collapse of the sublime and the sacred in Zen meditational practice. Again the larger Mahāyānist context must be kept in view. According

[30] Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, p.248.

[31] R.H. Blyth, *Haiku*, 4 vols. (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1949–52), II, 235.

[32] Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1958), pp. 18, 53.

to the Pure Land meditation manual, *Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra,* there are sixteen subjects of contemplation given by the Buddha to aid the devotees of Amitābha in visualizing and ultimately attaining the glories of rebirth in his Western Paradise: the setting sun, pure water, the ground of Paradise, its jewelled trees, its merit-giving water, its jewelled palaces and heavenly music, its gem and pearl studded lotus throne, the three Holy Ones, the radiant body of Amitābha, the golden body of Avalokiteśvara, the golden body of Mahāsthāmaprāpta, Amitābha's realm of bliss, the bliss of the three Holy Ones, the superior class of rebirth in Paradise, the middle class of rebirth, and the inferior class of rebirth. In each step of the elaborate progression, the devotee is to saturate his mind with, and be elevated by, the stupendous and overwhelming images that are offered to his imagination—as in the tenth stage of contemplation, which is directed to the golden body of Avalokiteśvara (Kuan-yin):

> (His) golden body reaches the height of 800,000 lacs of nayutas [millions] of yojanas [distance of a day's march], with an *uśnisa* [cranial protuberance of a Buddha], and a halo around his neck. His face, *uśnisa* and halo are each a hundred and a thousand yojanas high. Within the halo there are five hundred Nirmānakāya Buddhas who look like Śākyamuni Buddha. Each Nirmānakāya Buddha has a following of five hundred transformation Bodhisattvas together with an incalculable number of devas who serve him.... The Bodhisattva's face is of golden hue and between his eyebrows a curl of seven colours emits rays of 84,000 kinds of light. Inside each ray there is a countless number of Nirmānakāya Buddhas. Each Buddha is surrounded by an incalculable number of Transformation Bodhisattvas who serve him and reproduce at will all the transformations that fill all the worlds in the ten directions.... The Bodhisattva's palms are coloured like five hundred lacs of many hued lotus. Each finger tip has 84,000 lines as (clear as) if they had been printed thereon. Each line has 84,000 hues each of which sends out 84,000 rays of soft light which illumine everything. With these precious hands he receives and delivers living beings.[33]

[33] Luk, *Secrets,* pp. 95–6.

The meditational practices of Zen stand in much the same kind of relationship to such contemplative luxuriance as does Zen in relation to the larger portion of such Mahāyānist literature, art and piety. Zen meditation is not meditation *on* something, let alone an infinitely expanding horizon of holy things. Nor is it contemplation attempting to soar on phantom wings to ever more grandiose and supernatural heights. The distinguishing mark of *zazen* is its utter simplicity. It does not proceed by filling the mind with an incalculable parade of images, however glorious and edifying, but by emptying the mind of all objects of attachment. It is the utter simplicity of *śūnyatā* (the Void), which is not mere emptiness, but emptiness of the clutter of objects of desire and clinging, even holy desires and a clinging to sacred things. It is an emptiness wherein lies all fullness, a fullness which comes not through filling the mind to overflowing but through emptying it, and hence opening it in the widest manner possible. Here the infinite is not reached by expanding the mind to the limits of its imagination, but by vacating it to the infinity of the Void.

The first time one is introduced to Zen meditation one searches about for something on which to contemplate. The mind furtively dances, like the monkey that it is, about the meditation hall in the frantic hope of finding something to do, some object to fix itself upon and hold to. Impatiently one waits for the show to begin, for the ritual to be performed and the sermon to be preached, for some treasury of myth and symbol to be opened up, for someone to at least say something or do something. But the show never begins; no lesson is given; no land of enchantment is offered; no edifying thought is developed; not even any background music or interlude is provided to shield one from the silence; nothing happens. One is confronted only with bare walls, the minimum of ritual, and the silence of emptiness, interrupted only by the awakening and alerting blows of the *keisaku*.

This is not, however, a substitution of a mere nothingness for the bewildering profuseness of Pure Land contemplation. *Śūnyatā* is not a quantitative but a qualitative emptiness. The possibility of such a misunderstanding is provided with a typically Zen corrective in K'uo-an's (Kakuan, 12th c.) meditational drawings, with commentary, of the Ten Bulls, based on the earlier Taoist Eight Bulls. The Taoist sequence had symbolized the culmination of the search for Truth and Reality by an empty frame, representing the Nothing-

ness beyond both object (bull) and self (man). K'uo-an, however, added two more scenes which rescued the progression from what might have been construed as a temination in the dead end of a barren nothingness. His ninth scene, "Reaching the Source," depicts a tree, a bird, and a stream with fish; while the tenth, that of "In the World," depicts a monk approaching a child, and "mingling with the people of the world." Another line of K'uo-an's commentary reads, "I go to the market-place with my wine bottle and return home with my staff." This escape from a sterile, if not abstract, emptiness is what is also so clearly seen in the popular figure of Pu-tai, dancing or playing with the village children—of which K'uo-an's tenth scene is reminiscent. Insofar as pictures are appropriate at all, the picture which best symbolizes the Zen experience of emptiness, and the context of that experience, is not the empty frame, but the ordinary world of trees and birds and fish, the world of shops and wine bottles and walking-sticks, seen now through and in the experience of *śūnyatā*. As Shan-nêng, a Zen master of the Southern Sung period, put it: "We must not cling to the wind and moon of the day and ignore the eternal Void; neither should we cling to the eternal Void and give no attention to the wind and moon of the day."[34]

Like the world of the comic spirit and perspective, which also has its way of returning everything to the Source and to the World, Zen brings everything back down, not only from a mythic otherworldliness, but from a vacuous emptiness, down to the very humble and unpretentious level of mingling with people, going to the marketplace, and returning home. As Chia-shan (Kyōzan, d. 881) once remarked to his disciples: "You should perceive this old monk in the tips of the grass, and recognize the son of heaven in a crowded market."[35] The point is similarly expressed as the achievement of the fifth and highest stage in Tung-shan's (Tōzan) schematized path of enlightenment:

> Lo, he has arrived at supreme unity!
> Beyond the "is" and the "is not,"
> Who dares to follow the rhymes of his poetry.
> Let others aspire to the extraordinary!
> He is happy to return home and sit amidst ashes.[36]

[34] Wu, p. 247. [35] Luk, II, 191. [36] Wu, p.182.

As Alan Watts has suggested, "according to Zen, the reason why our quest for some ultimate reality is so difficult is that we are looking in obscure places for what is out in broad daylight."[37] What is needed is not a closing of the eyes, or some dazzling psychedelic vision, but their opening to the reality that stands plainly and nakedly before us and within us. The only requirement is the very difficult, and yet perfectly simple and natural, one of seeing things as they are apart from the filter of categories, without the interposition of value judgments, and thoughts of possession and use—without even the enhancement of some symbolic aura or mythic coloration—of simply seeing the world and the self in that isness or suchness, that emptiness, which lies behind and beyond all words, all estimations of value and purpose, all symbols and myths. For these only serve to cloak reality in the very act of attempting to mediate and clarify it. Thus a new monk once asked master Chao-chou (Jōshū), thinking to obtain some lofty teaching or profound discourse: "I have just entered the brotherhood and am anxious to learn the first principle of Zen. Will you please teach it to me?" Chao-chou responded, "Have you eaten your supper?" The novice replied, "I have." "Then go wash your bowl!"[38]

It must be said, nevertheless, in all fairness, that the incredibly sublime visions of so much of Mahāyānist art, literature and meditation, if not taken literally but as highly symbolic profusions of imagery, may be seen to be pointing, in their own fantastic and allegorical way, to many of the same insights as are to be found in Zen. As Suzuki points out, the thesis of the intricate interrelatedness of all things, and the interpenetration of the most infinitesimal particle and the totality, the profound sense of inscrutable mystery, the realization of the presence of the whole in its meanest part—[39]such motifs are already there in the Mahāyānist tradition, but now intuited by Zen in the most plain, straightforward and no-nonsense manner. It is gotten to in Zen, not through a fabulous display of fantasy which runs the risk of simply swelling the imagination and boggling the mind, but through a complete elimination of all marvels and embellishments in an effort to move directly to the

[37] Nancy Wilson Ross, ed., *The World of Zen* (New York: Random House, 1960), p.123.

[38] N. a., *Zen Buddhism* (New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1960), p.33.

[39] Suzuki, *Essays*, 3rd ser., pp. 78ff.

heart of the matter, as in the laying aside of the 600 fascicles of the *Mahāprajñā-pāramitā Sūtra* for a concentration upon the bare 262 characters of the *Hridaya* (heart) of the sutra, or the reduction of the entire scriptural corpus, as it were, to a single "*Katz!*"

There is a definite dialectical relationship here between the two Buddhist poles represented by Amidism and Ch'an of the sublime and the common-mundane, the fantastic and the ordinary, the infinitely complex and esoteric and the utterly simple and obvious. The Zen emphasis does not stand alone; rather it has meaning in the larger context of the Great Vehicle of Mahāyāna. The very acts of profanation and inversion involve an element of relationship and interdependence. Its impact derives in part from the force of its counterpart, and exists relative to it, just as the point of a joke cannot be made unless at least a modicum of its opposite (seriousness and rationality) precedes it. Like the opposition and yet harmony of the *yin* and the *yang* in relation to the Tao, the sublime and the simple are relative perspectives which counterbalance and complement each other, which are in tension and yet in harmony, and whose harmony moves into that higher harmony that is the Tao or the Dharmakāya itself. Both in their own ways point toward the ultimate mystery of being, the one by the overpowering majesty of its images, the other by the amazing simplicity, the incredible poverty, of its forms.

The relationship between the sacred and the comic is really the same as all polar tensions which stand in dialectical relationship. It is a dialectic which both heightens the tension and annuls it, bringing it into a higher and profounder unity on that plane of experience in which both elements are transcended and brought to fulfillment. This is captured so well in Anagarika Govinda's charming analysis of the juxtaposition of sacred dancers and ritual clowns in the Tibetan Buddhist mystery plays. The primary participants in the ceremony are the gorgeously costumed and fantastically masked representatives of superhuman saints and celestial and demoniacal beings. But as these "awe-inspiring figures solemnly wheel around, the almost unbearable tension and exaltation, which has gripped the spectators, is suddenly relieved by the appearance of two grotesquely grinning masks, whose bearers are aping the movements of the sacred dancers and seem to mock the Buddhas and even the terrifying Defenders of the Faith. They are weaving in and out of the solemn circle, gaping into the faces of the dancers, as if defying and ridiculing

both the divine and the demoniacal powers. These, however, seem to take no notice and move on with unperturbed dignity. The effect is astonishing: far from destroying the atmosphere of wonder and sacredness, the juxtaposition of the sublime and the ridiculous rather seems to deepen the sense of reality, in which the highest and the lowest have their place and condition each other, thus giving perspective and proportion to our conception of the world and of ourselves. By experiencing opposite poles of reality simultaneously, we actually intensify them. They are like the counterpoints in a musical composition. Seriousness and a sense of humour do not exclude each other; on the contrary, they constitute and indicate the fullness and completeness of human experience and the capacity to see the relativity of all things and all 'truths' and especially of our own position."[40]

[40] Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (London: Hutchinson, 1956), pp. 176–7.