

POETICIZE THE GOOD—ECCENTRICITY OF ENLIGHTENED ZEN CHARACTERS

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ABSTRACT

An enlightened Zen master, after a period of reclusive life in monastery or wildness, often chooses to return to the society and mingle with people. The tenth ox-herding picture attempts to depict this scenario, in which an enlightened one, with an eccentric appearance, seems to be making a deal in a market place. The eccentric trait seems to reflect a Zen's style of character and spiritual transmission with people. Eccentricity is a manifestation of enlightenment with a transformed personality and extraordinary capability in interaction with people. We will examine three aspects of the eccentric nature of Zen characters: the non-positional stand, the intriguing laugh, and the appearance of foolishness. The eccentricity of Zen is vividly exemplified by Ji-gong, one of the most colorful Zen characters in the history of both Chinese Buddhism and the popular culture. The paper suggests that the spirituality of Zen allows its ethics to take an aesthetic form.

Keywords: East Asian studies, religions, philosophy, Buddhism, Zen, literary criticism, language, Poetry, Chinese Poetics.

INTRODUCTION

A common critique about Zen Buddhism points its lack of significant social ethics, as Zen's journey for enlightenment seems to be an individualistic venture of self-enrichment in terms of the exploration of the world of experience, transformation of the mind, and attainment of a higher level of consciousness, which appears to be void of any social implication. This critique is somewhat based on a traditional understanding of ethics which is established on a foundation, whether it is the transcendental subjectivity, divinity or ideal principles. Those foundations provide the criterion for what is true and false, right and wrong, good and bad. Zen moves away from such foundations, as it starts its journey by deconstruction of various doctrines. However, Zen's emphasis on the "self-power"¹ does not imply that the journey of enlightenment can be fulfilled without involving others. Buddhism generally considers that enlightenment must be realized in connection with others. There is no world of enlightenment other than the world of community. The Zen slogan "ordinary mind is the way" indicates the requirement for the enlightened one to return to the world and mingle with people, which was exactly what the historical Buddha did upon his enlightenment. We will start the discussion with a painting from one of Zen's masterpiece.

The Tenth Ox-Herding Picture

Unlike most other Buddhist schools, Zen does not engage in extensive philosophical discourses, subsequently, its classical literatures are mostly artistic in nature, consisting of collections of *koans*, poetry, and paintings, etc. The ten ox-herding pictures of Zen Buddhism are recognized as the classical illustration of Zen's spiritual journey, as they vividly depict the practice of Zen in a poetic and metaphorical way. They present a visual parable of the path to enlightenment in a narrative sequence

1 In Buddhist terminology "self-power" is versus "other power" which usually refers to divine beings such as Amida Buddha.

of a boy's searching, seeing, wrestling, riding, and transcending of the ox, illustrating the progressive stages of Zen practice. Each picture is supplemented by a poem and a paragraph of poetic remarks. The pictures one through nine shows the process of a boy's seeking, wrestling, taming, riding and being one with the bull, representing Zen's journey of self realization in interaction with the world. The ethical implication is not yet clear in those nine pictures since there is only one character shown until the tenth picture.

The tenth picture, titled "Enter the market place"², portrays a barefooted monk in ragged cloth, with a big bag on his shoulder and a wine bottle in his hand, making a deal with another person in a market place.



The character of the eccentric monk in the 10th picture can be easily recognized as the Chinese legendary monk named Monk Bu-dai, who always carries a big cloth bag on his shoulder.³ The structure of the concluding picture has dramatically changed compared to all previous pictures of the series, indicating a big leap in the journey of enlightenment. For the first time, there are two people in the picture, who are interacting in a setting of a market place. The tenth ox-herding picture places the concluding scene of the journey in a market place, indicating that the ultimate test of spirituality lies in the interactions with people in society. This scenario provides a glimpse of Zen's artistic or aesthetic approach to ethics. The enlightened one, after realizing the true self, has to mingle with others in the journey of enlightenment.

The poem attached to the picture reads: "Barefooted and naked of breast, I mingle with the people of the world. My clothes are ragged and dust-laden, and I am ever blissful. I use no magic to extend my life; Now, before me, the dead trees become alive" (Reps 154).

² The title is translated from the Chinese words "Ru chan chui shou." There are other translations, such as "in the world."

³ Bu-dai is the Chinese word for "cloth bag."

The commentary reads: "Inside my gate, a thousand sages do not know me. The beauty of my garden is invisible. Why should one search from the footprints of the patriarchs? I go to the market place with my wine bottle and return home with my staff. I visit the wineshop and the market, and everyone I look upon becomes enlightened" (Reps 154).

In this picture, the young herdsman who has embarked on and pursued his spiritual journey now returns to the world as a sage to mingle with people in a market place. The *ten ox-herding pictures* select Bu-dai as the ultimate exemplar of the spirituality of Zen. Bu-dai is also known as the laughing Buddha who is one of the most colorful figures in both Chinese Buddhism and the popular culture. The tenth picture explicitly shows that the enlightened one must interact with others in the journey of enlightenment. The "I" in the verse "Barefooted and naked of breast, I mingle with the people of the world" clearly refers to the protagonist who has wrestled with the ox in the previous pictures⁴. The young man from the market place represents people in the society. Therefore, the tenth picture symbolizes that the Zen practitioner, having sought and attained enlightenment, returns to society as his final destiny and mingles with people.

The following poem is believed written by Bu-dai himself: One bowl holds food from one thousand houses. Two feet travel ten thousand miles. I just get lost in the green mountain, Stopping at the end the clouds, Asking for directions from a child. (Mo 671)

The tenth picture shows two striking aspects which constitute the poetic characteristics of Zen's manner of being with others: one is the act of mingling, and the other is the eccentric manner. This structure echoes the ninth picture whose poetic prospect is also composed of two contrasting and complementary elements: de-familiarization and ordinariness. The eccentric style corresponds to the sense of de-familiarization as an experiential characteristic of enlightenment, while the act of mingling reflects the Zen's vision of ordinariness.

Mingle with People

The opening statement of the tenth picture defines the concluding scenario of the series: "Barefooted and naked of breast, I mingle with the people of the world." Bu-dai, the main character in that picture, epitomizes Zen's manner of mingling with people as the essential aspect of spirituality with respect to living in society and doing good to people. He begged for food in his journey as an itinerant monk, and he put all the good things into his big cloth bag and shared with hungry children. The legend of Bu-dai is his success in entering Chinese popular culture as a benevolent figure, being loved and enjoyed by ordinary people. Bu-dai becomes so cherished in China that people believe that he is the incarnation of Maitreya known as the future Buddha. Therefore, the Indian-originated Buddha was transformed in Chinese Buddhism to the laughing Buddha called Mi-lo, with an exposed potbelly and small children climbing all over and on top of him. His statues are seen not only in Buddhist temples and institutions but are also virtually everywhere from ordinary households to various public places as an auspicious icon, artistic decoration, and the spiritual symbol. Ching thinks that the image of Mi-lo as a derived version of Bu-dai indicates the syncretization between Buddhism and Chinese popular culture. In this image, the secular value system is not renounced but affirmed, as he puts it:

In this guise, we see once more the embodiment of Chinese values within a Buddhist image. This Maitreya figure, called Mi-lo, affirms the importance of worldly

⁴ Considering the status of Bu-dai, some scholars interpret this picture as an encountering with the divine represented by the eccentric monk. Correlatively, the younger person in the market place is identified as the protagonist of the whole series (Johnson 230). This interpretation superimposes a divine image which is not required in Zen whose spirituality does not rest on any divine power.

happiness.....Moreover, with his happy expression and carrying a big bag on his shoulder, Mi-lo reminds one of the Western Santa Claus, a religious figure with Christian origins who has come also to represent worldly prosperity(Ching 144)

The Buddhist images of Bu-dai and its more popular version Mi-lo become the icons of the Chinese popular culture as they represent the three essential secular values, namely prosperity, posterity, and longevity. Those images provide a vivid archetype to understand Zen's notion of "mingling" as the spiritual manner to interact with others. The act of "mingling" actually indicates a *samadhic* relationship between the self and others. *Samadhi* means the merging of subject and object as the culmination of action and cultivation presented in the previous pictures of the series. In *samadhic* experience, the conventional and habitual line between subject and object become softened or even dissolved. With regard to human relationship, *samadhi* is to mingle with people in such a manner that for a moment the conventional lines that differentiate and separate people are all broken down. In monastery settings, an enlightened one is recognized as a master who holds the spiritual authority over the disciples. The tenth picture takes the journey to a marketplace setting where common people conduct their daily business. The master-disciple relationship is transcended into a congruent union. The enlightened one at this stage no longer presents himself as spiritually superior than others, and he is not recognized by others as a master or a savior. He comes to the world to "mingle with people" rather than preaching to them.

To mingle with people in the *samadhic* relationship means to penetrate all the established lines that differentiate and separate people. This also implies the disregarding of the established basis and criteria for measuring and judging people's identities and status. In such a *samadhic* relationship the traditional labels that categorize people in terms of their spiritual nature and status, such as master and disciple, the religious and the profane, become insubstantial. As far back as the Tang dynasty when Zen Buddhism reached its golden age, Zen master Huang-bi said, "There is no Zen master in the whole kingdom of China" (Liao 169). The relationship between master and disciple is only provisional, or in Zen's term, *jia* which literally means, pretending or "act-as-if." Zen master Zhao-zhou has a famous saying that he does not even like to hear the word "Buddha," and if anybody should mention this word once in his room, he would have to flush the house three times. According to Zen, there is no substance in the distinction between Buddhism and other religions, between the religious and the profane. Therefore, those differences are dissolved in the enlightened eyes. The following *koan* reflects this idea:

In a ceremonial feast, master Yong-quan did not dress up in his robe. A monk saw that and said, "master, you look like a layman." The master replied, "Where is a monk?" (Dao-yuan 308)

Another aspect of Zen's mingling with others is reflected in the playing with the boundaries that mark people's spiritual and social status. The following two *koan* stories provide vivid examples.

A king came to visit Zhao-zhou. The master sat on his bed and greeted him, "Welcome, my lord, but I hope you understand my senile condition and allow me to remain seated while talking." The next day, the deputy of the king came to see Zhao-zhou, and the master rose to greet him. The guest was puzzled, "Yesterday, you did not rise when the king came, but why do you give me such honor by such a formal greeting?" The master said, "Well, that is just my way of to greet people. When a high-ranking person comes, I receive him by sitting on bed. When middle-class people come, I rise to greet them. If low-class people come to visit me, I will have to walk to the front gate to welcome them. (Dao-yuan 181)

Indeed, this playing with the lines that conventionally identify and sort out people is the consistent act of Zhao-zhou, one of the most celebrated Zen masters in the history. The famous term “Zhao-zhou tea” comes from the following *koan* story.

One benefactor came to the monastery, and master Zhao-zhou greeted him at the gate and asked, “You were here before weren’t you?” “Yes.” “Have some tea then.” The next visitor came, and Zhao-zhou asked, “Have you been here before?” “No.” “Have some tea please.” A monk from the kitchen was puzzled, and spoke to Zhao-zhou, “Why do you ask both the old patron and the new comer to have the same tea?” The master raised his voice, “Hey, you, have some tea.” (Qu 204)

From Zen’s perspective there is no spiritual basis to judge, distinguish, and separate people, and therefore, an enlightened one is free from any obstacle in his mingling with people. In the enlightened eyes, everyone is Buddha and the whole world is enlightened, which is articulated in the commentary of the tenth picture states, “I visit the wineshop and the market, and everyone I look upon becomes enlightened” (Reps 154). The following *koan* reflects this idea of non-distinction regarding people’s nature and degree of spirituality:

A visitor asked master Da-zhu, “Zen says that Buddha is the mind, but everyone has a mind, who is Buddha?” The master said, “Who is not? Can you point out?” The visitor was still puzzled, and the master proceeded to say, “If you are enlightened, everyone is Buddha, but if you are not, then there is no Buddha.” (Dao-yuan 107)

According to Zen, all distinctions including the one between Buddha and non-Buddha are logically valid only from the perspective of non-enlightenment. Upon enlightenment, this logical validity collapsed and all distinctions become blurred. Zen’s idea that everyone is a Buddha relates to but differs from the traditional Bodhisattva idea that no individual can be enlightened until the whole world is enlightened. Therefore, a Bodhisattva postpones his own enlightenment or salvation in order to deliver others. Zen agrees with the Bodhisattva’s ideal that enlightenment can only take place in the world of community, but Zen takes a different route from that of Bodhisattva to achieve this ideal. From Zen’s perspective, when one individual achieves enlightenment, the whole world is enlightened in his eyes, and that is exactly what is revealed in the commentary statement of the tenth picture, “everyone I look upon becomes enlightened.”

Zen’s vision that everyone is a Buddha entails a spiritual egalitarianism and harmony in which people are no longer judged and separated by their spiritual identities and social status. The enlightened one is free to mingle with others because those spiritual identities and social status no longer function as the invisible barriers among people. Zen understands that self-identity and social differentiation are the indispensable foundations of society. By birth one inherits a social identity and status provided by his culture, religion, ethnicity, and family background. Society generally orients people to strive to validate and strengthen their social identities and status which provide them the sense of who they are and the framework for them to sort out people to be properly associated with and disassociated with. A discriminatory and hierarchical social structure is thus formed where people are differentiated and ranked into various groups and classes, among which, religions provide a primordial basis for people to be differentiated and measured according to their affiliations and spiritual orientations. While such social structures provide a means for people to associate and interact with each other, they can also fixate people’s relationship. People naturally tend to go with those who share their identity and match their status. When a social order becomes sanctified in the consciousness of individuals and in principles of a society, new avenues of social interaction and communication may be obstructed, and this can raise mental stress and social tension. For example, a group of individuals who are fixated by

their social identity may fortify its inner bond by alienating others who are considered different and lower in terms of social identity and status.

When an individual dogmatically defines himself by his social or religious labels and status, he will start to judge and categorize others by the same labels, which can limit his ability to interact with people from different groups. He may attempt to deal with others in ethical ways, but people from different groups will remain the outsiders. A Bodhisattva's compassion lies in his sense of mission to deliver others, which places him in a superior position. Zen does not provide such a basis for determining one's spiritual status since everyone is already a Buddha. To mingle with people is to desanctify any established social structure and explore new forms of human relationships where one can associate and interact with others in new ways.

The poetic metaphor for the act of mingling is water which becomes the ideal emblem of both Zen and Daoism in terms of being and interacting with others. The following quote is from the *Dao De Jing*.

The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without competing and conflicting. It flows to lower places that many disdain. Thus it is like the Tao. Dwell in all places with a mind which is infinite, simple, and benevolent, and enjoy its presence.
(Chen 89)

The supreme good is like water that mingles with the world and nourishes it without assuming and claiming anything.

The Eccentric Character

To mingle with others is not to conform and level the differences between self and others. The enlightened ones mingle with but retain their distinctive characters. The following *koan* reflects this matter:

Once master Nan-quan saw a disciple greet him with palms together and said, "You look too much like a monk." The disciple then quickly put his hands down. The master then said, "Now you look too much like a lay person." (Dao-Yuan 134)

Zen does not set up any code for being with others. The practitioners have to explore and invent their unique and innovative ways and manners in interacting with others. This allows an enlightened one to obtain an eccentric appearance displayed in the tenth ox-herding picture, in which the character Bu-dai is in ragged clothes walking on a street barefooted and naked of breast, with a "foolish" smile on his face. Myokyo-ni remarks on this eccentric character of Bu-dai:

Look at him—all the things that he is not supposed to do, he does them all. He no longer cares about the precepts...Look at him! Not only he has grown his hair, he does not shave at all. Look at his Beard! Instead of being decently dressed, he is shabby. If that is meant to be a robe, it is all gaping open and sloppy. (Shubun, 136)

The eccentric trait is not just a contingent style in the appearance of a particular enlightened figure. It is a general characteristic of the Zen school as a whole, reflected in Zen's style of action, personality, and pedagogical methods. Eccentricity is a manifestation of enlightenment that has transformed the practitioner's worldview and provided them the extraordinary vision and capability in interaction with people. It is a feature of the poetic act and the embodiment of the poetic mind attained in the journey of practice reflected on the previous ox-herding pictures. The eccentric character in the tenth picture represents a common personality of enlightened ones who perform their extraordinary deeds for people in society. Suzuki calls those eccentric Zen figures "vagabond poet-ascetics" as they are also prominent poets, among who are Han-shan, Shi-de, Ji-gong, and Ryokan (182). Munsterberg notes:

What all these figures have in common is a radically different relationship to reality. To them, conventional Buddhism and accepted modes of behavior had become meaningless, and as a result, they seemed eccentric, roaring with laughter and acting like maniacs. (34)

We can analyze this eccentric characteristic into several aspects. The first striking feature of the eccentricity is in Zen's term "The Non-positional Stand", meaning the lack of conformity with conventions whether they are secular or religious. This is reflected in both the "wanton" appearances and the carefree conducts of those Zen figures. For example, Bu-dai's eccentric character is somewhat mirrored by his hilarious appearance characterized by his large protruding belly. Those Zen figures generally violate monastic code such as dietary rules by eating and drinking whatever offered to them. They do not stay in a monastery but travel around into cities and the countryside. Bu-dai often sleeps in fields, and in the morning he offers his help to farmers who enjoy his presence while laughing at his comical manner. When he falls asleep he snores aloud as his potbelly swells up and down, which attracts children to climb on his body, squeezing his nose and pulling his long ears. Once Bu-dai does come to a monastery where monks are about to have a conference; he walks straight to the front and takes the seat that is reserved for the chairman, but when people expect him to say something, he walks out without leaving a clue (Mo 80-88).

Not conforming to conventions while being able to mingle with others indicates the emancipation from all established positions so an enlightened one can fit in whatever situations he encounters. An enlightened one is able to be free from all fixed positions established by things such as ideology, interest, and social identity, which determine one's attitude and behavior toward others. Otsu thinks that the eccentric character in the tenth ox-herding picture symbolizes "unfettered freedom" as a characteristic of enlightenment (Trevor, 90). This is more than just a freedom of choice by ego-consciousness, because this freedom enables the enlightened ones to take whatever positions to suit particular circumstances, to transcend and penetrate the spiritual differences that constitute the invisible barriers which separate people.

Therefore, Lin-ji titles those who have attained such emancipation the "positionless true man." He speaks this "non-positional true man" as one who can "break *karma* in all situations, assume various appearances, travel as he wishes, sit as he likes, and abide in no fixed places" (Wu, Ru-jun 225). Lin-ji also indicates that the "positionless true man" is the one who has attained Dao. Indeed, "true man"⁵ is the Daoist title for those who become one with Dao which enables them to ride on the flow of Nature in unfettered freedom. Zhuang-zi discusses this image by comparing it to the Chinese mythological figure Lie-zi:

Lie-zi could ride the wind and go soaring around the world on a cool breeze. He can dispense with walking by foot but he still had to depend on something to get around. If he had only mounted on the "boundless" between heaven and earth, then what would he has had to depend on? A true man is able to cast off his self, to rise above where he stands, and to let go his fame. (Zheng 136-137)

A "true man" is able to engage others without presuming any position, and because he does not have a fixed position of his own, he can assume any position of others. By doing so, he is able to mingle with others and be one with the world. That is why Lao-zi says in the *Dao De Jing* that "the holy man does not have a fixed mind, so he can hold other's minds in his mind" (Chen 253). The "positionless true man" as the ideal personality of the Lin-ji school is different from the image of Bodhisattva that is the

5 "True man" or zhen ren in Chinese is the Daoist title for those who have attained Dao.

traditional exemplar of Buddhism. Bodhisattvas are known for their compassion, but they have to take a position as the savior, which draws a line between themselves and the rest of the people as being redeemed. Bodhisattvas are not able to mingle with people, because ordinary people revere them as morally superior beings.

The second aspect of the eccentric character is the image of laughing. Bu-dai, the character in the tenth ox-herding picture, is titled “the laughing Buddha.” The enlightened eccentrics are often portrayed as both the laughers and the laughable. Laughing becomes a feature of the enlightened ones in their manner of being with people. Buddha’s laugh portrayed in literature and other arts certainly reveals a profound spirit and wisdom, which, just like a poem, can be presented but cannot be pinpointed and exhausted through a philosophical analysis. The poem of the tenth ox-herding picture portrays the enlightened one as “I am ever blissful,” indicating that the jovial face is the manifestation of enlightenment that provides the practitioners with a blissful mind free from any fixation and anxiety. The laugh, however, does not indicate any negative or cynical attitude against the world. It reflects a poetic attitude in which the enlightened ones endorse the worldly happiness and at the same time laugh at it. It is true that enlightenment renders a sense of detachment from worldly things, but this detachment does not set the enlightened ones aloof against society and the conventional world. On the contrary, the wisdom of detachment removes all obstacles for the enlightened ones to enter the world and join the crowds. It reveals to the enlightened ones the new possibilities about the manners of their interactions with people. Abe, in his study of another poetic eccentric named Ryokan titled “The great fool” in Japanese Zen tradition, provides the following remarks:

It is through this curious combination of playfulness and kindness exemplified by his laughter of optimism that Ryokan’s deconstructive stance seems to escape from the danger of nihilism, a view that contemporary deconstruction is often accused of by its opponents. His eccentricity does not intend to introduce confusion or chaos to ethics by destroying conventional values. (Abe 58)

The enlightened ones are able to transcend in playfulness all the demarcations that provide the structure and boundaries of the world. On one hand, they are unfettered and detached from the conventional world, and on the other hand, they are able to see the world in a new panorama and embrace it with all sincerity and compassion. It is this freedom that renders them the blissful laughing which, in turn, contagiously provides an aesthetic power to make others enjoy and laugh. That is why the poem of the tenth ox-herding picture states, “Now before me, the dead trees become alive.” The following couplet is a tribute from Chinese people to Bu-dai, the laughing Buddha.

*The big belly can hold—hold all worldly affairs.
The laughing face always laughs—laughing at all the laughable.⁶*

Chinese people, religious or secular, not only adore the hilarious appearance of Bu-dai, the laughing Buddha, but also receive his spiritual message, as they laugh back at him. Echoing the timeless smile in the historical Buddha’s silent sermon, Bu-dai, the future Buddha⁷ also completes his profound transmission in a moment of laughter with all people around him. In this sense, the laughing Buddha does not laugh at the worldly things and people but laughs with them. The Buddha’s laugh shows an intriguing complexion which reveals a profound paradoxical attitude toward self and the others: an enlightened one realizes the self and yet is able to forget it; he accepts others with unlimited compassion and at the same time, paradoxically, laughs at them. The *Dao De Jing* says that when people hear the Dao, they cannot help laughing, and if there is no laughter, there is no Dao (Chen 227).

⁶ These two verses are often engraved on two tablets placed on both sides of his statue in Buddhist temples.

⁷ Chinese people believe that Bu-dai is the incarnation of the future Buddha Maitreya or Mi-lo.

Indeed, according to both Daoism and Zen, laughing is a profound wisdom which not only presents a laughter on the face of the laugher but also makes the whole world laugh. This idea is reflected in the following poem by Ryokan, a prominent Japanese Zen eccentric known as “The great fool”:

*Everyone eats rice
Yet no one knows why
When I say this now
People laugh at me
If they laugh, that's just fine
Laughing is something I like too!
Laughing and laughing, we won't stop
We'll welcome Maitreya here and now. (Abe 57)*

The third noticeable aspect of the eccentricity is the “crude,” “foolish,” or even “crazy” looks and gesticulation of those poetic eccentrics. The poem of the tenth ox-herding picture describes Bu-dai as “Barefooted and naked of breast,” and “clothes are ragged and dust-laden.” Besides alluding to the carefree spirit and the sense of humor discussed earlier, this “crude” look explicitly symbolizes the wisdom of emptiness which, according to Zen, can be childlike. Concurring with Daoism, Zen believes that there are two complementary modes of wisdoms. One is the calculative wisdom that can be shown in sophistication and refinement, and the other is the deconstructive wisdom that can be reflected in a “crude” style of appearance and behavior. Zen and Daoist eccentrics want to highlight the second kind of wisdom not because they are subversive against sophistication and refinement but because conventions only recognize the first kind of wisdom. In the *Dao De Jing*, Lao-zi poetically speaks about how this primordial wisdom of emptiness may be manifested in an eccentric appearance:

*The luminous Dao seems dark.
The forward path seems backward. The smooth road appears rugged. The high virtue is like a valley. The infinite love seems indifferent. The steadfastness seems erratic. The true purity appears disgraceful. The great clarity seems obscure. The perfect square has no corners. The great music lacks sound. The great image has no form. Dao hides its name . . . The most perfect seems incomplete. The inexhaustible fullness seems empty. The most straight seems crooked. The great skill seems clumsy. The great widow appears to be foolish. The great eloquence seems stammering. (Chen 227-241)*

All of the Buddhist eccentrics are known for their extraordinary wisdom and creative energy which, however, are masqueraded in their “crazy” or “foolish” appearance. Bu-dai, for example, is an accurate weatherman according to the legend. If people see him walking back and forth on the street with his wet grass sandals, they immediately know that rain is imminent; if they see him walking to the bridge with his high wooden clogs, they know a fine weather is ahead (Mo 670). It is not that an extraordinary wisdom and creative energy have to be associated with a certain “crude” appearance. However, from Zen’s view, the wisdom attained upon enlightenment transcends the calculative wisdom which is usually demonstrated in sophistication and refinement. Abe goes too far when he states that “Being crafty, cunning, and useful in a worldly sense is the very reverse of being enlightenment” (Abe 55). The wisdom of enlightenment is a leap from the conventional wisdom, and it cannot be fixed in any form and does not have to assume a conventional style. Therefore, it is natural for enlightened ones to have their unique styles and to invent new manners in performing their extraordinary deeds and transmitting their great wisdom and spirituality. It is not that the enlightened ones want to look “foolish.” People perceive the eccentricity as “foolishness” from their conventional and “sophisticated” views, when they have not yet found other ways to understand the eccentric styles of enlightened ones.

Beyond good and evil: the Zen character of Ji-gong

We will start the examination with a legendary story about saving a person's life, featuring Ji-gong, the most colorful Zen eccentric in the history of both Chinese Buddhism and the popular culture:

Once Ji-gong saw an old man trying to hang himself from a tree. The man made a noose and was placing his neck into it when suddenly he saw Ji-gong, dressed in rags, coming his way chanting, "Die, Die, everything is over after I die, death is better than living, I will hang myself now." Ji-gong also made a noose and looked like he was going to hang himself side by side with the old man from the same tree. The old man was puzzled and asked Ji-gong why he, a monk, would want to commit suicide. Ji-gong told him that he was commissioned to raise money to remodel the monastery. He had begged for three years and collected some money, but on his way back to the monastery, he stopped at a bar, got drunk, and somebody stole all his money. Having no face to go back to the monastery, he decided to end his life. The old man believed his story and said, "Don't worry; I happen to have some money, which is no use for me anymore." He gave Ji-gong five pieces of silver, which is all the money he had. Ji-gong took the silver and said, "Your silver does not shine as much as what I used to have, but I will take them." So he took the money and walked away with a grin on his face. The old man felt even sadder and preceded his suicide attempt, but Ji-gong returned. The old man thought the monk came back to thank him for the money. But Ji-gong said: "I see you've got nice clothing, why don't you give that to me also so you can nakedly leave this world just as you nakedly came?" The old man was stunned; he looked up the sky and sighed: "Why is it as difficult to die as it is to live and how can I end my misery?" Ji-gong said, "Look, after you die, the wild dogs will come to tear you up, and your nice clothing will be wasted, but if you give it to me, I will make good use of it." Ji-gong continued to tease and play with the desperate man, until the latter became amused and started to laugh with Ji-gong. The old man soon found this eccentric monk quite friendly and extremely entertaining. He started to open his heart and told Ji-gong his tragic story about the loss of his daughter. His suicidal mind-set miraculously dissolved. Ji-gong helped him to recover his daughter and the story had a happy ending. (Wang 5-8)

Looking at the first part the story, what Ji-gong has done cannot be considered good based on conventions. He shows no pity and sorrow for a desperate man, and even cheats money out of the poor man by fabricating a story. On the other hand, he has successfully intervened a suicidal attempt and saved a person's life, which is, indeed, not bad. Therefore, what Ji-gong has done in this story cannot be judged on the basis of conventions as either "good" or "bad."

This story of Ji-gong is a classical example of samadhic play as a Zen's manner of interaction with others. As discussed earlier, samadhi refers to a non-dualistic state of the mind, and samadhic play is an extraordinary mode of action in which subject and object merge to form a "heavenly flow." In the samadhic playing with others, the line that demarcates self and others become softened or even dissolved. In the story of saving a suicidal person, Ji-gong, the savior, presents himself as a suicidal man in order to approach another suicidal man. He appears to be even more deplorable and corrupted than the one he is poised to help. In the story, the suicidal man fined himself in a situation where he cannot help feeling sympathy for Ji-gong and gives the monk all the money he has. Ji-gong does not approach the suicidal man as a Bodhisattva, the traditional image of the Buddhist savior who always dedicates his compassionate to all suffering beings. Nor does he take a position as a teacher who can preach profound wisdom about life and death. He does not even present himself as a decent person

who can show some pity or sorrow for the suicidal man. The roles are dramatically intertwined; the savior takes a position which is even lower than that of the one who is to be saved. The conventional labels, such as the good and the bad, are not apt to speak about Ji-gong's character and deeds in that story. Regarding the result of the story, Ji-gong not only saves the suicidal person but also uplifts his spirit, although what Ji-gong has done seems to mock all conventional ethical rules. The question is how this *samadhic* play, the Zen's way of being with others, can work out a greater good beyond the polarity of good and evil on conventional basis.

First, this *samadhic* play, as an act of mingling, gives rise to an extraordinary bond between people that can effectively release the sense of alienation people may suffer. In the story, the person attempts to commit suicide because he has lost all his families and feels estranged from society. Part of Ji-gong's strategy is to build a sense of connection by closing the distance between him and the suicidal man as two strangers so the latter can feel an extraordinary intimacy with people. Suicide can be considered an unethical action, but Ji-gong does not repudiate it, instead, he imitates it. If Ji-gong chooses to approach the suicidal man as a master who takes a position to preach or criticize the latter based on any abstract doctrine, the distance between the two people will increase, and the latter may feel even more alienated.

Second, the story is not only about how Ji-gong intervenes in a suicidal attempt, but also about how the *samadhic* play gives rise to an event of enlightenment so the suicidal man is saved both physically and spiritually. It seems extremely cruel on the part of Ji-gong to ask the suicidal man to give up his clothing. However, this is one of Zen's eccentric tactics for shattering a person's habitual mindset and inducing the experience of emptiness. This tact is similar to a sudden roar projected toward a disciple or a blow on his head with a stick, which is widely used in Zen monasteries. Zen prefers to "directly point to a person's mind" rather than to preach or criticize a man for his ignorance, because, from Zen's perspective, enlightenment is not a theoretical understanding but an existential breakthrough or a leap into a new world of consciousness. In order to transform the suicidal person's view about reality which underlies his suicidal mindset, Ji-gong has to conduct a show in which he plays a clown. A jovial world suddenly unfolds against the background of the desperate situation, in which the suicidal man suddenly feels emancipated from his attachment. The transmission is completed when Ji-gong and the suicidal man start to laugh together. They laugh at each other, at themselves, and at the world.

What is beyond good and evil in the spirituality of Zen may not be easily summarized in philosophical statements but can be best illustrated in Zen characters who are able to perform great deeds which cannot be fully reconciled with conventions, whether religious or secular. Ji-gong is the most colorful example of such Zen personalities. Just like the monk Bu-dai depicted in the tenth ox-herding picture, Ji-gong is another legendary monk known as a living Buddha who mingles himself with ordinary people doing good things in eccentric and miraculous ways. People generally believe that Ji-gong was a real person living in the late Sung dynasty. An English encyclopedia describes him as "the dissolute preceptor—a name given him from the dissolute life he led as a monk" (Werner 54). He is portrayed in various literatures as a cheerful and playful monk who often appears to be crazy and drunk, dancing his way to places and joking with whomever he comes across. As exemplified in the above story of saving a suicidal person, he often miraculously comes to peoples' rescue and fulfills justice in spontaneous and dramatic ways. His performances are enlightening as well as entertaining.

The popular image of Ji-gong is the result of reconstruction by vernacular fictions, movies and other forms of art and media. Shahrar, in his work, *Crazy Ji*, has conducted an extensive textual study about those vernacular fictions of Ji-gong. This popular image of Ji-gong reflects a popular expression of Chinese Buddhism which marks the complete synchronization of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and the popular culture. The personality of Ji-gong is a manifestation of Buddhist enlightenment,

Zhuang-zi's playfulness, Confucian kindness, and the pragmatic spirit of the popular culture. Indeed, Ji-gong has become a timeless spiritual icon in the mind of Chinese people who see him as a living Buddha, a benevolent god, a divine jester, and a poet.

One way to understand the personality of Ji-gong is to compare him with the traditional Buddhist images of *Arhat*, Bodhisattva and Zen master. *Arhats* are the enlightened ones who do not necessarily see interaction with others as a moral or spiritual vocation. They were revered as ascetic saints aloof from the secular world. Ji-gong obviously does not fall into this category since he mingles with all kinds of people. His major activities are in streets and marketplaces rather than in monasteries. There are many hilarious stories about his playfully breaking of monastic precepts, mocking at superior monks, and performing of various kinds of pranks in monasteries. He is finally dismissed from the Ling-yin Temple, the famous monastery where he became a monk. This monastery remains one of the most famous ones in China partly because Ji-gong is from there. There is a great hall in that monastery hosting the statues of 500 *Arhats*. Ji-gong's statue is not among them but right across from them outstandingly in a corridor specially dedicated to him. This arrangement clearly indicates that Ji-gong is not considered one of the *Arhats* who detach himself from the worldly life. Indeed, Ji-gong does not take a superior position in his mingling with all sorts of people including those dishonored ones such as thieves, vagabonds, and prostitutes. When he intermingles with corrupted people, he himself appears to be a corrupted person, as in the aforementioned story in which he appears to be a suicidal monk in order to intervene in a suicidal attempt. The mingling with people in such a *samadhic* manner not only constitutes a practical and expedient strategy to approach people, but also renders an "inner touch" people by successfully dismantling the boundaries that separate them. Hershock believes that Zen's fashion of interaction with others forms a "liberating intimacy" as a social virtuosity of Zen. As he puts it:

Liberating a sentient being means taking off the mantle of both conceptual and felt distinctions by means of which he or she is individuated or made into some 'one' existing apart from others even while in the closest contact with them. (98)

Ji-gong's intermingling with others, as exemplified in the aforementioned salvation story, not only provides people with practical relief but also forms a *samadhic* relationship among people, in which the boundaries between people soften. The rapport gives rise to an uplifting "rapture" flowing among people. This relationship is a realization of the collective enlightenment envisioned by Mahayana Buddhism as the "big vehicle" versus the "small vehicle" reflected in the image of *Arhat*. This *samadhic* relationship can achieve a sense of harmony which is clearly different from the one envisioned by Confucianism in which harmony is rendered through a hierarchical social structure. Confucianism emphasizes the rectification of social categories and labels that tend to fixate people's social identity, roles, and status.

The personality of Ji-gong can also be compared with the traditional image of Bodhisattva who is known for his compassion and dedication to the salvation for ordinary people. One of Ji-gong's well-known titles is "living Bodhisattva." The term "living" indicates that Ji-gong is different from the symbolic image of Bodhisattva which remains a religious ideal and the object of worship. The traditional images of Bodhisattva, such as Guan-yin, are conceived in Chinese culture as divine being who can answer peoples' prayers and help them through supernatural ways. Ji-gong obviously does not take such a position as a superior savior, as he mingles and plays with all sorts of people. His compassion for people is human but unconventional. His statue at the Lin-ying Temple fairly captures the complexity of his compassion for people. From one side of the statue, people see Ji-gong laugh graciously, but viewing from the other side of the statue, Ji-gong appears to be sad. Referring back to

the aforementioned salvation story, Ji-gong seems to not show any pity and sorrow to the person committing suicide. It appears that all Ji-gong does is to tease and play with the suicidal person until the latter attains a new insight that dissipates the suicidal mindset. The following quote provides a clue for understanding Ji-gong's compassion for others:

One near enemy of compassion is pity. Instead of feeling the openness of compassion, pity says, 'Oh, that poor person is suffering!' Pity sets up a separation between oneself and others, a sense of distance and remoteness from the suffering of others that is affirming and gratifying to the ego. Compassion, on the other hand, recognizes the suffering of another as a reflection of one's own pain: 'I understand that; I suffer in the same way. It's a part of life.' Compassion is shared suffering. Another near enemy of compassion is grief. Compassion is not grief. It is not an immersion in or identification with the suffering of others that leads to an anguished reaction. Compassion is the tender readiness of the heart to respond to one's own or another's pain without grief or resentment or aversion. It is the wish to dissipate suffering. (Kornfield 84)

As illustrated in the salvation story, Ji-gong's way to dissipate suffering is through a *samadhic* play which not only involves himself but also those with whom he mingles and interacts. According to Zen, in such *samadhic* play, the practitioner acts spontaneously following his mind and responding to ever shifting situations, and he can speak spontaneously wherever the spirit of words leads. One who has realized *samadhi* is emancipated from all conceptual boundaries that enable the division between subject and object, self and others, the religious and the profane, the wise and the ignorant, and the upper and the lower, which forges the "reality" of society. A *samadhic* player, in his intermingling with others, is able to present them a living show that can immediately and dramatically alleviate them from their old view about their social "reality" to which they are deeply attached.

A Bodhisattva is believed to have the compassion, dedication, and power to deliver people from the *samsara* world which is full of ignorance and suffering. Ji-gong seems to have no intention to help people with their ultimate salvation from this world. Instead, he tries to mingle with the suffering people and become one of them. In his playing with people, he surely affirms and respects their conventional values and rules, but at the same time kindly laughs at them, and through his playfulness he artistically reveals to people the limitation and transient nature of all conventionally established "reality," so they may loosen their attachment to it. Ji-gong is completely content with living in this suffering world with "ignorant" people. This agenda is obviously different from the Bodhisattva's, who wants to deliver people out of this suffering world.

"Zen master" is another title given to Ji-gong, but he is very different from the traditional Zen masters who spent most of their time in monasteries and interacted with their disciples. Without affiliating to any religious institution and assuming any superior moral or spiritual position, Ji-gong does not appear to be a Zen master of any kind. Lai thinks that Ji-gong represents the later period Zen movement which has completed its course of secularization and synchronization with the practical spirit of Chinese culture (143-148). Zen's coming to streets and marketplaces in embracing the Chinese popular culture is Zen's final step to liberate itself from doctrines and intellectual frameworks emphasized by traditional Buddhism. This process of secularization and synchronization not only infuses Chinese culture with spirituality but also further transforms Zen by directing its attention to the practical needs in the context of the secular culture. Zen's spirituality comes to integrate with Chinese literary and performing arts, giving rise to the extraordinary Zen images such as Ji-gong, which is fully developed and circulated in popular forms of Chinese art and media. The joyful spirit of Ji-gong is appropriated by the ordinary people as the source of spirituality, wisdom, and entertainment. Shahar

believes that the eccentric character of Ji-gong “offers members of society liberation and relieve (albeit in most cases temporary) from accepted social and cultural norms” (223). Indeed, the eccentricity and playfulness of Ji-gong embodies Zen’s vision of *samadhi*, which provides people, especially those marginalized, a spiritual way to see through and tackle social injustice and suffering. The following verse is from the theme song of a movie series about Ji-gong’s legendary stories.

*Torn sandals, worn hat, shabby monk’s robe . . .
Wherever there is injustice, there I am. (Shahar 163)*

We label those eccentric Zen figures such as Ji-gong and Bu-dai as poetic not only because they are all poets, but also because their attitudes, deeds, and styles cannot be described, explained, and measured in any conceptual frameworks whether doctrinal or philosophical. For example, we cannot summarize Ji-gong’s attitudes toward social injustice and suffering in philosophical statements. We cannot use conceptual terms such as “positive” or “negative” to pinpoint Ji-gong’s “thought” about conventional rules and values. If we really want to find a word that can capture Ji-gong’s personality, one of the options is “laughter.” Shahar puts it this way:

One element, however, is common to all representations of Ji-gong, in fiction and religious practice alike—his laughter. Be it a novel on Ji-gong, or a spirit-written morality book attributed to him, an actor playing the eccentric god’s role on the stage, or a medium possessed by him—the eccentric god always laughs. (222-223)

The meaning of laughter, however, essentially resists philosophical analysis. Ji-gong’s laughter, just like the one made by Mahakasyapa in the silent sermon given by the historical Buddha, cannot be reduced to conceptual statements. However, Zen’s laughter is the richest and the most accessible sign that inspires and entertains Chinese people of all generations.

Now we come to ask, why is the eccentricity as Buddha’s manner of mingling with people beyond good and evil? Zen never answers such question in a propositional statement, but this question is reflected in many Zen *koans* such as the following:

A disciple asked, “What kinds of people are good?” Master Po-zao answered, “Those who wear armors and use spears.” “Who can be considered bad then?” “Those monks who are meditating.” The disciple said, “What you just said is utterly against what I know; can you explain that for me?” The master said, “Evil is not relative to good, and good is not relative to evil, good and evil are just like clouds that arise from nowhere and end in nowhere” (Dao-yuan 75)

The question asked by the disciple seems to be a very common one, which represents the conventional approach to the issue of good and evil. This approach assumes a system of ethical principles formed in a conceptual system, which provides a universal and definitive criterion for judging what is good and what is evil. This gives rise to a dualistic polarity of good versus evil, based on which things can be judged as “either good or evil.” Zen’s approach to ethics and spirituality alike is not based on a conceptual system which renders any definitive judgment about good and evil impossible. Abe’s following statements is helpful to understand this matter:

In Zen, to distinguish good and evil and to think of matters on the basis of their discrimination is itself evil or illusory thinking. Awakening to ‘Mind’—which because it is free from and essentially prior to such discrimination, does not contemplate their difference. (114)

From Zen’s perspective, judgment in terms of good and evil reflects a pre-enlightened worldview constitutive of a fixed conceptual paradigm which renders a “black and white” picture of things. This

worldview enables one to sort out other people in terms of good and evil, and consequently, one will associate with the “good” people and disassociate from the “evil” ones based on one’s judgment. This conventional approach to ethics thus renders entrenched demarcations among people, which is against Zen’s vision of *samadhi*. Zen’s endeavor in enlightenment is to attain the emancipation from the bondage arising from this dualistic paradigm, which inhibits the *samadhic* interaction with people.

Zen’s critique of the good-evil polarity does not intend to negate the conventional paradigm of good and evil. Zen simply indicates that enlightenment is an existential leap from this polarity which lies at a conventional level of ethics. Zipory thinks that this dualistic designation of good and evil is relative and provisional, and it can be transcended in enlightenment. He puts it this way:

In short, good and evil go together, as provisional designations made in relative distinction to one another and vanish together when provisional designations are transcended—just as when the fire destroys the bamboo, both vanish. (244)

However, Zen does not imply that the transcendence of good and evil leads to a lack of ethics. Zen suggests that enlightenment gives rise to an extraordinary goodness beyond the conventional good which is relative to the evil. Compared to the primordial goodness, the conventional sense of good as the opposite of evil is secondary or derivative from the spiritual perspective. It is from this primordial sense that the eccentric Zen images such as Ji-gong and Bu-dai are considered good.

The next question is how Zen verbalizes this primordial good and maps out the path for achieving it. Hui-neng’s first teaching, after he became the sixth patriarch, consists of a question: “think neither good nor evil, what is your original face?” To answer this question, Zen masters usually throw another *koan* question: “what is your face like before you are born?” The primordial good is beyond any established conceptual framework; therefore, it cannot be properly defined with conceptual terms, and it cannot be measured by any established system of ethical principles. However, this primordial good can be demonstrated through the extraordinary Zen characters such as Ji-gong and Bu-dai in their *samadhic* play. Whenever enlightenment takes place, the world becomes good in the eyes of the enlightened who then performs the good for others. The world appears to be good in the enlightened eyes and is made good through the *samadhic* play, in which whatever the enlightened presents or performs is good, although it may appear to be eccentric. Nishida, attempting to philosophize this primordial good, thinks that the good lies in the merge of subjectivity and objectivity, which is the characteristic of *samadhi* in enlightenment. He puts it this way in *An Inquiry into the Good*:

We find that truly good conduct is neither to make objectivity follow subjectivity nor to make subjectivity follow objectivity. We reach the quintessence of good conduct only when subject and object merge, self and things forget each other, and all that exists is the activity of the sole reality of the universe. (135)

The goodness reflected in the *samadhic* play can be exemplified by Zen characters such as Ji-gong and Bu-dai, who vividly demonstrate the extraordinary social function of Zen’s spirituality. Zen, however, does not want to define the good in philosophical terms, because delimiting the good in a conceptual framework can still fix its meaning and reduce ethics to a system of judgment about good versus evil. The good realized in enlightenment can be exemplified and demonstrated but cannot be defined.

In a conclusion, the eccentric appearance is an integral characteristic of the Zen school of Buddhism, reflecting its style of action, personality, and pedagogical methods. Eccentricity is a manifestation of enlightenment as a transformed and exalted vision and extraordinary capability in interaction with people. The mingling with people in *samadhic* play not only constitutes a practical and expedient strategy to approach people, but also renders an extraordinary intimacy in which the boundaries that

separate people soften. The eccentricity is also a feature of the poetic act and the embodiment of the poetic mind attained in the journey of enlightenment depicted by the ten ox-herding pictures and embodied by extraordinary Zen characters. Those Zen eccentrics not only write poetry, but also embody their spirituality through their poetic attitudes, deeds, and styles rather by doctrinal or philosophical frameworks. Zen does not provide creeds to guide and judge behavior, but it does offer spirituality, wisdom, and styles to act responsively, successfully, and marvelously. This course echoes Shusterman's call for "aestheticization of the ethical" as his responding to Wittgenstein's statement that "Ethics and aesthetics are one" (Shusterman, 237). After the traditional foundation of ethics is culturally undermined and philosophically deconstructed, ethical lives will take aesthetic forms, which will expand both ethics and aesthetics in their fusion. Ethics will open up itself for an aesthetic transformation, while aesthetic life will go beyond "private perfection" or "self-enrichment," and infiltrate social and public domain, making human life more enjoyable and good at the same time.

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