

Reflections on Zen Art

Cary A. Duval

The cultural links between Japan and China are many, but one of the most famous importations has been Zen Buddhism. Zen was quickly adopted by the ruling warrior class in Japan because it stressed individual character, discipline, and promoted a simple life close to nature, which fulfilled the warrior's need for inner stamina. Thus, the acceptance and patronage of Zen by the ruling class made it a powerful force in the way Japanese conceived of man's position in or relationship to the phenomena of life. However, just what were the Zen concepts? How did they differ from those of the Taoist's? How might the Zen concepts manifest themselves in the arts? The following is a discussion of these questions.

A comparison of Zen and the Taoist philosophy reveals a sense of similarity between them. Moreover, it is evident that much of the Taoist philosophy attached itself to Ch'an Buddhism (Chinese Zen) which flowered during the Tang and Sung Empires (especially in the Southern Sung). Both seem to stress the unity of man and the cosmos, and incorporated the yin/yang concept of the unity of life's apparent opposing or contradictory forces, which can only be perceived intuitively. Also, both expressed a strong love of and respect for nature recognizing in it a power much stronger than man himself.

The main difference between the two seems to be Zen's religious aspects, e.g. attainment of enlightenment and recognition of Buddhist history, and the emphasis that most schools place on meditation to know one's inner or true self, rather than the Taoist emphasis on meditation through or with nature. In this way, one may conceive that Zen recognizes a separation of man from his natural intuitive self, a separation which may be overcome through one's own efforts of meditation. The main point, though, seems to be that one does possess the inherent ability to be intuitive and should, like the Buddha himself, try to free oneself from the dualistic ideas which prevents one's intuitive powers from operating.

Another difference seems to be the importance of a teacher or 'ryoshi' to instruct one in the correct way of meditation or zazen, which is favored by the Soto school of Zen, or to present one with illogical questions (koan) designed to force one into the intuitive awareness of the non-duality of the world, which is used by the Rinzai school. Both schools, however, recognize the teacher as one who has already passed through the process and has already achieved 'satori', or state of enlightenment, in which one is united with his intuitive self and no longer looks on the world in a dualistic manner. Many of the most famous of the Zen teachers have often assumed a position similar to that of a saint in the Christian church, whereby their struggles for enlightenment have been made into examples to encourage others to persevere in the quest for their true selves.

Although the differences between Taoism and Zen may seem small, they may account for some of the differences one perceives in the art associated with each philosophy, Zen art, for example, has been accredited with seven characteristics which help to give it its unique quality: asymmetry,

simplicity, austere sublimity or lofty dryness, naturalness, subtle profundity or deep reserve, freedom from attachment, and tranquility¹. This list seems to reflect much of the Taoist sense of the beautiful, and, yet, there seems to be more than just a nuance of difference in the ideas of austere sublimity and freedom from attachment which may help to explain the general difference in feelings evoked by their respective artists.

However, one area of similarity between Taoist art and Zen art is the choice of brush and ink as their main medium. The Taoist concept of Ch'i or spirit being released by the brush seems to have been accepted in its entirety. One must remember the strong Chinese artistic tradition of calligraphy and fact that it was considered the purist of art forms because it was "pure brush and pure idea"². Similarly, Zen artists seemed to attribute to brush and ink the same qualities of purity and spontaneity. In this respect, spontaneity seems to have been considered essential for the artist to transfer his observations of nature, man, or the world intuitively from inspiration to representation on paper without intellectual evaluation to dilute it or make it impure. As a result, one may observe that the Zen artist was more concerned with depicting a scene's intuitive impact on the artist rather than an accurate, logical, and detailed depiction of a scene or event. Although one may argue in a logical, Western manner that the brush needs a very steady, controlled arm in order to depict anything, and that such control would negate the intuitive aspects of the medium, one has to accept the fact that the Zen artist and/or society attributed brush and ink with the ability to become united with artist's intuitive perceptions and impressions.

Anyone, Westerner or other, watching a master sumi-e painter at work, as I myself have done, would swear that the brush seemed to have a life of its own as it flew across the paper. I still remember the first such experience I had in the home of a master, Gofu Sano, in 1969. Although he was already near eighty, his brush painted with the speed and accuracy of a youth as a few strokes created birds in flight, a few more, trees, and a few washes became distant mountains. When he had finished he had painted sixteen small paintings, one for each member of our group in only about fifteen or twenty minutes.

One of the most observable differences between Zen art and Taoist art is the way in which nature is depicted. Although nature is still important to the artist there is a definite shift from the grand landscapes typical of the Tang and Northern Sung to the depiction of simple details like branches of trees, leaves, blades of grass, or birds, against a void or ink wash background. This simplification may be seen as a reflection of the Zen idea that "the eye of the Zen Buddhist has been opened to the 'True Dharma', and it recognizes every creation and every thing, however ordinary and 'profane', as identical with the absolute, as a manifestation of the Buddha-being, at once unique and yet encapsulating the whole universe."³ Likewise, an expansive void may be perceived as representing the idea that only by emptying oneself of all the assumptions, facts and prejudices learned over the years will one be able to regain one's original nature and become capable of looking at and reacting to the phenomena of life in an original and fresh manner.

The simplistic patterns of Zen art do give rise to idea that there might be some kind of "Zen meaning" to the different kinds of trees or birds and the manner in which they are depicted. In this area, one may sense the "Zen message" in a painting which the Taoist may not have tried to

evoke. For example, one may imagine that a heron depicted sitting on a branch of a tree gazing into a stream in search of its prey might really be symbolic of one's search for enlightenment. Granted, this example may stretch one's imagination, but it does seem to be a possible interpretation. Certainly, it is logical that Zen art might encourage the search for enlightenment.

Among the often used symbols of Zen painters are the plum blossom, bamboo and rock, which have been called the "Three Pure ones (Chinese:*san-ch'ing/sanging* , Japanese:*sansei*)."⁴ These were used with others to symbolize the purity of the enlightened spirit. The plum tree, for example, was often used by Dozen (Japanese founder of the Soto sect of Zen Buddhism) as a symbol for enlightenment. Likewise, bamboo has often been associated with "straightness", perhaps of character or of one's own course in life. Rock also seems to symbolize strength and determination, or perhaps loyalty to one's quest for enlightenment. In addition, the pine tree may be seen as evoking a sense of chastity, or purity which were associated with Zen quest for enlightenment, and the cherry tree may be viewed as another symbol of enlightenment or the transient nature of life.

However, symbols for enlightenment were not the only contributions of the Buddhist religion. The rich historical legacy of the development and propagation of the religion has supplied a seemingly endless assortment of stories about encounters between famous Buddhist and individuals seeking the truth or enlightenment which Zen offered. These stories then have become the subject of many Buddhist and Zen paintings. At this point one might ask what is the difference between Zen art and other Buddhist art. The main difference seems to be that Zen art is much more worldly, that is it seeks to emphasize the normal phenomena of life rather than the supernatural which seems to be represented by other Buddhist art. In this way, one may sense a combining of the sacred and the profane in a delicate balanced yin/yang relationship that may seem anarchistic to normal Buddhist tradition.

Perhaps it is the Zen artist's commitment to the plain and simple which made him choose ink, rather than a more colorful medium which might have evoked a supernatural or otherworldly feeling in the viewer. In this way the Zen artist seems to reflect a similar aesthetic prejudice to that of the Taoist, by making the viewer respond to the painting from their own experience and not be distracted by artistic details such as color. In addition, there seems to be a similarity in their concept of accepting and depicting the unity of what are often considered dualities in their paintings. The Taoists, however, seemed to be concerned only with the problem of reality and non-reality, whereas the Zen artist wished not only to express this unity, but also the unity of the sacred and profane, seeing them both as artificial or imaginary and certainly a hindrance to true enlightenment.

This legacy of Buddhist and Zen history seems also to be responsible for what I think is the main difference between Taoist and Zen paintings, that is the apparent new emphasis on man. No longer is he depicted as small and insignificant in relation to his surroundings; rather, he is by necessity made the main subject of the painting about the quest of enlightenment or with his encounter with a great teacher, e.g. Sesshu's painting of "H'ui K'o (Eka) Offering His Severed Arm to Bodhidharma as a Pledge", Shin K'o's "Patriarch Meditating with a Tiger" or "The Second Patriarch in a Composed State of Mind". Certainly, one can see that the *raison d'être* of any religion

is to spread its worldview to people and because of this motive force man must appear in its art; in this respect, it appears that Zen is no exception. Of course, nature is still important as I have discussed earlier, but the action of men as they pursue enlightenment becomes important too, for it is only through enlightenment that one can become one with nature. Consequently, one can see paintings depicting an encounter between a famous Zen teacher and a student which seems to strike a better balance between man and nature, i.e. Ma Kung-hsien's "Li Ao Visiting the ch'an master Yao-shan Wei-yen".

However, man is not always portrayed in a dignified manner by the Zen artist. It seems that the Zen artist is often trying to show man in a very natural or even crude manner. Perhaps this reflects the egoless state towards which Zen seems to be striving. Certainly, many, if not most, of the Zen paintings depict men, priests or others, in the plainest of clothes, some even appear to be semi-nude, e.g. "Hotei" by Mukuan Reien. This sense of plainness may be attributed to the sparsity of lines as the Zen artist tries to capture only the feeling of a man and his actions by using only the barest number of brush strokes to give meaning to the void of the paper on which he is painting. In other paintings priests may be depicted in torn or patched clothing, e.g. "Kensu the Shrimp Eater" by Kao, or in such common situations as sleeping, e.g. "The Four Sleepers" by Mukuan Reien. These paintings seem to evoke Zen's basic distrust of the glorification of priests or man in general. Even the Bodhidharma himself is often depicted as a rough, common man, devoid of any otherworldly serenity, e.g. "Bodhidharma" by Kei Shoki. It seems that to a Zennist the humblest of men and their endeavors or actions rank with the noblest, for he knows that all such notions are imaginary, all ranks are part of the universal "Dharma-Body".

Another source of themes for Zen paintings comes from Zen literature. For example, the story about an abbot of a monastery who had vowed never to cross the bridge that spanned the gorge which separated the monastery from the outside world. One day, however, after entertaining some old friends, he decided to see them off as far as the bridge. But so engrossed was he in the merry conversation with his friends that he inadvertently crossed over the bridge. When his visitors pointed out that he had broken his vow, they all laughed at the way life triumphs over the vows and intentions of man. This story became the subject for Shohaku's "Three Sages Laughing on Rozan Bridge". The Zen idea that life cannot be directed or controlled by man is clear in this story so it is only natural that painters might depict it as a theme of a painting. This love for parody of man's ego and pride is apparently a common element in many Zen paintings. Perhaps the paintings encourage some viewers to realize the impotence of their will and assumptions about life, and promotes the feeling of acceptance of each phenomena according to its nature and not one's own predetermined concepts.

Zen painting certainly seems to have a different assortment of themes, but still retains much of the flavor of Taoism. Perhaps they are really impossible to separate because of the long period of association between the two worldviews, Certainly, some Zen artists seem to recognize the legacy of China as they have depicted Sakayammuni or Gautama, Confucius, and Lao-tzu as a united triumvirate indicating a belief in the idea of the "Three Creeds and Single Source"(Chinese: *San-chiao i-chi/sanjiao vizhi*; Japanese: *san-kyo itchi*)⁵, e.g. "The Three Creeds" by Josetsu and "The

Three Vineger-tasters" by Reisai. This idea seems to indicate that some Zen followers found it difficult to separate the three influences.

The apparently overlapping traditions of Taoism and Zen demonstrated by the similarities in painting may cause one to expect parallel developments in the fields of poetry and music. Certainly, the association of "pure idea" with brush and ink is continued by the Zen tradition, and with it the close relationship between poetry, calligraphy and painting. Many teahouses (or *Ochaya* in Japanese) have decorated their special display area (*tokunoma*) with beautiful works of calligraphy that are often short poems written to induce quietude or give one something to contemplate while one drinks one's tea. In this way, it functions in a similar manner as paintings or floral arrangements (*ikebana*) which were also displayed in the *tokunoma*. Also, Zen artists continued the practice of the Taoist painters by including poetry along side their paintings or sometimes even over the painting, e.g. Sengai. It must be remembered that the Zen artist was both a poet and painter as were the Taoist before them.

The first Japanese Zen poets wrote in Chinese copying the Ch'an Buddhists, who were strongly influenced by the Taoist style. As time passed, though, Japanese poets wished to write in their own language, and so utilized indigenous Japanese forms like *tanka* or *waka*, Later still, there developed the *renga* or linked verse, *baikai renga*, finally the *haiku* of 17 syllables. But the Taoist love for nature and the practise of using nature or certain natural phenomena as metaphors for men or of human qualities was continued by the Zen poets.

However, the main difference appears to be the recognition of Buddhist history and the religious concept of enlightenment which the Zen poet might wish as his theme. As an example one might look at the famous poem of Bodhidharma:

Transmission outside doctrines,
No dependencies on words,
Pointing directly the mind,
Thus seeing oneself truly,
Attaining Buddhahood.

This short poem expresses the Zen distrust of doctrine and words, its belief in the intuitive, mind to mind conveyance of an idea (or enlightenment), and the need to find one's true "face" in order to attain true Buddhahood. Similar ideas seem to be lacking in Taoist poetry. The Taoists seemed to be content with just describing the scenes they saw, and, if there was a deeper message, it was only the futility of man's attempt to struggle against nature, or the glorification of the harmony of and unity of all things in the universe.

Zen poets were also concerned with death and created many 'death' poems which were written perhaps to help people overcome their dualistic thinking of life and death, like the poem of Tendo-Nyojo:

Sixty-six years
Piling sins,
I leap into hell—
Above life and death.

Certainly, one can see the yin/yang relationship of life and death and how one may be released and above both of these "illusions" as Zen considers them to be. This kind of poetry seems to be related to the Zen master's sense of duty to his disciples whom he wishes to guide even after he is gone. Not all Zenists feel such a serious commitment to them as is demonstrated by Daie-Soko:

Life's as we
Find it – death too.
A parting poem?
Why insist?

But even in these lines one can perceive that the poet might just be expressing in a different manner the Zen distrust in doctrines and belief that each person must rely on himself or herself to become enlightened, the teacher is just a guide.

Another kind of Zen poem deals with enlightenment or at least tries to explain the sensation of enlightenment:

On the rocky slope, blossoming
Plums – from where?
Once he saw them, Reiu
Danced all the way to sandai.

Hoin

Leap-splash – a frog.

Basho

The first poem seems to express the idea that enlightenment can take place in the strangest of places and even uses the idea of the plum tree symbolizing enlightenment just as the Zen painters did. Basho's poem seems to express his personal experience of enlightenment, and the suddenness with which it occurred.

The important aspect concerning Zen poetry is the shortness of the verse. It does resemble some of the short Taoist verses in that there seems to be a lack of detail so that the reader is free to respond to a given verse in a manner based on his own experiences or intuitive powers. This distrust of details seems to be common to both Taoists and Zenists.

Zen poetry does not, however, seem to have the sentiments of nostalgia or longing to return to one's home, at least not to the same degree as the Taoists'. Perhaps this is due to the fact that most of my literature has come from the Japanese Zen experience and not the Ch'an Buddhist experience. Of course, the differences in the history of China and Japan would seem to allow for most of the differences one perceives between the poetry of the two. That being as it may be. I do think the Japanese do take a lot of material from history to create their haiku. For example:

The Autumn winds,
Resembling somewhat
The frozen heart
Of Lord Yoshitomo.

Basho

Although this does not really evoke a sense of nostalgia, it does remind people of a famous story. Other poems by Basho and others also cause one to recall history and perhaps the folly of man.

Moreover, there seems to be evidence that was some borrowing from older or famous poets as occurred in Chinese poetry. Sengai's painting and poem referring to Basho's famous frog haiku quoted above serves as a good example:

An old pond—
The sound of water,
When a frog jumps in.

He is trying to make a joke on the original and thus counting on his readers to remember the original and enjoy his joke.

I think one can see that while Zen poetry has retained the love of nature and uses natural phenomena to describe human conditions it does contain the additional concept of enlightenment and can draw on the legends of Buddhist stories for materials if desired. The Japanese use of the haiku seems to have been a fitting development for an art of a worldview that distrusted words and wished each person to find his own way to enlightenment. But how did this worldview affect the music of the culture? How could one create a sense of enlightenment in music?

When I listen to shakuhachi music. I am impressed with a sense or feeling of non-movement. The music seems to evoke a sense of floating, as if one were floating through a cloud bank; yet, there was no sense of insecurity or fear, rather only a quality of peacefulness. Perhaps this sensation was caused by the creator of the music, whose own sense of or experience of enlightenment made him desirous of relating the feeling of non-movement or non-involvement in the whirlwinds of life that enlightenment may bring to those who find it.

While listening to *Hachigaeshi* and *Shin no Kyore*, two representative Zen works. I found it difficult to associate feelings of thankfulness claimed to be a motivating factor in the former. This, however, could have been caused by the subtle unattached manner in which the music was played. On the other hand, *Shin no Kyorei* did seem to create a sense of longing which might be interpreted as the longing for the dead monk to which it was dedicated, but the piece did not seem to be entirely sad, there seemed to be a sense of acceptance—perhaps of the unity of or the non-duality of life and death. Indeed, I was impressed by what I perceived to be the acceptance of both death and the loneliness that resulted from it. Certainly, the piece did not carry a sense of extreme emotional attachment to the one who had gone beyond and perhaps above the illusion of life.

Also, one might perceive that the choice of the shakuhachi, a bamboo, instrument, is consistent with the position of bamboo in Zen painting and poetry. Perhaps the fact that bamboo grows throughout most of China and Japan and is used for many things, e.g. food, tools, toys, building materials and musical instruments, made it a logical choice as a symbol of strength and of the mundane. Consequently, one may sense that the shakuhachi itself embodies the Zen emphasis on the mundane as this simple instrument proves capable of creating beautiful, contemplative, and perhaps enlightenment-inducing music.

The sound of the shakuhachi also seems to be consistent with the Zen emphasis on nature for it

seems capable evoking images of birds singing and winds blowing. The manner in which it is played may even cause one to imagine a similarity between the sound of the instrument and brush strokes of a Zen painting as the notes fade in and out with different strengths as the musician desires. Certainly, the simplicity of the music would seem to be consistent with Zen painting's economy of strokes and lack of detail.

However, beyond the so-called normal arts like painting, poetry and music, Zennist have created arts of the more mundane things of life like the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, garden design and even martial arts like archery and aikido. Perhaps it is in these arts that the Zen ideas of detachment, intuitive freshness and the recognition that everything has its own nature which one can and should try to accept or become one with, without trying to impose some preconceived laws we learned somewhere on to phenomena can most clearly be seen. One might observe that these arts take much time to perfect and seem rather artificial in their emphasis on procedures and ceremony, but the Zennist believes that by repetitive practices of simple procedures, one may become free of outside thoughts and concentrate all of one's intuitive powers on understanding the nature of archery, tea or even brush and ink. Once one can feel the nature of the phenomena, then one can stop trying to shoot an arrow and let "it" shoot itself. One may even become like Chi Ch'ang and no longer feel the need to touch a bow or any other outside device, for one's real "bow" is inside oneself as are all of one's longest journeys. It is the discovery of this inner self at which Zen art aims and to which it points the way.

Footnotes

- 1 Helmut Brinker, *Zen In The Art of painting* (New York: Arkana, 1987), p. 21.1
- 2 Sherman E. Lee, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (New York: Harper & Row), p. 5.
- 3 Brinker, p.41.
- 4 Ibid., p. 38.
- 5 Ibid., p. 12.