THE LAUGHING BUDDHA

Zen and the Comic Spirit

Conrad Hyers

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Your singing and dancing is none other than
the voice of Dharma.
Zazen Wasan, Hakuin

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CHAPTER ONE

The Other Side of Zen

A million Mount Sumerus are but a drop of dew
On the end of a single hair;
Three thousand worlds are only a seagull
Floating on the ocean waves.
The two children of the tiny creatures
In the eyebrow of a mosquito
Never stop quarrelling between themselves
As to whose earth this is.

HAKUIN[1]

In writing a book about Zen one has the double sensation of attempting, on the one hand, to compress a million Mount Sumerus into the tip of a single hair, and, on the other hand, to inflate the utter simplicity of a single hair into a million Mount Sumerus. One also has the haunting suspicion that one is turning into an argument, a debate, perhaps even a quarrel, what is only available as a fundamental intuition and experience which no amount of discussion in itself can effect, and which may simply result in a dispute as to who possesses authentic title to what is freely open to all.

On how to sing
The frog school and the skylark school
Are arguing.

Shiki[2]†

The radically intuitive, experiential and wordless character of Zen does not easily lend itself to book form, as anyone who has entertained the notion of writing about Zen, or the prospect of being taken for an authority on the subject, is inevitably aware. There is a certain humor in the very suggestion of offering a book on Zen, let alone on Zen and humor, which is not unlike propositioning a man with

† *Dates of Zen masters, poets, and artists cited are given in the Index. In the case of most Chinese names, Japanese pronunciations are also given.*

a fish and giving him a stone—or an embalmed cat! Any addition, accordingly, to the already long parade of books which Zen has elicited in recent decades—no matter how neglected and important its theme, or how unique and intriguing its approach—must be willing to be placed, from the start, within the comic parenthesis of Master Chao-chou's exclamation on joining the funeral procession for one of his monks: "What a long train of dead bodies follows in the wake of a single living person!"[3]

Yet hopefully, despite these and other limitations, the reception will be more favorable than that which Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Chinese Zen (Ch'an), is alleged to have given to one of the Chinese classics when brought before him in order to solicit his reaction to its significance. Taking the book, he put it to his nose: "It has a kind of quarrelsome smell about it!"[4]

The Oddity of Zen

There are many ways into the way of Zen. Essays and books have been written on Zen in its relationship to art, archery, the tea ceremony, the martial arts, haiku poetry, the Noh theater, gardening, flower arrangement, and even cookery. But of these various ways, or even of the ways added by foreign and largely alien interests in psychoanalysis, comparative philosophy, and theology, to approach Zen from the standpoint of its relationship to the comic spirit will no doubt appear to be, at first sight, the oddest and most oblique—as well as the most likely to stir a controversy between the skylark school and the frog school!

On the one hand this reaction is entirely fitting, considering the place of the odd, the eccentric, and the outlandish in humor, clowning, and comedy as part of their very point and play. This *is* the odd way into Zen. But it is also the odd way of Zen itself, and an important part of the oft-noted oddity of Zen. It is, therefore, not nearly so odd in relation to Zen as it might appear to be in relation to any other religious tradition, whether within or without the Buddhist world. Where else could one meet a stranger assortment of spiritual guides, teaching methods, and religious expressions? In no other tradition could the entire syndrome of laughter, humor, comedy, and "clowning" be said to be more visible and pronounced than in Zen,

where the comic spirit has been duly rescued from those miscellaneous and peripheral moments to which it is so commonly assigned and restricted. So much is this so that it is difficult to imagine authentic Zen, or to survey the unusual history of Zen, completely apart from the comic vision.

As remarkable and unique as this is, however, it is the one dimension of Zen that has been given the least attention and interpretation. To be sure, references to the prominence and importance of comic elements in Zen and Zen art are scattered through much of the literature on Zen; and two brief essays have been devoted to it in English by R.H. Blyth and D.T. Suzuki.[5] The significance of this, nonetheless, far exceeds the meager attention it has received. In no other religious movement are its principal records (comprised largely of anecdotes relating to the lives and sayings of masters), its techniques for spiritual realization, its art and aesthetic, and its portrayals of the spirit and style of those masters whom one is called to emulate, so intimately intertwined with the comic spirit and perspective.

It is not easy to identify the reasons for the neglect of this "other side" of Zen, except to attribute it to the widespread taboo against associating the comic too closely with the sacred. Comic elements of whatever sort, found in connection with religious forms, we are often inclined, at best, to relegate to some presumably minor and inferior category—something on the order of an embellishment, like spice added to rice, which may give a certain palatability to religion at the elementary level, or a reprieve from its rigors, but is not an essential ingredient, and decidedly not the stuff of the religious life itself. At worst, we are inclined to see the comic as a distraction from, if not an eventual negation of, the seriousness and earnestness and holiness of the religious task—to be moving away from rather than toward religious goals and spiritual attainments. As a result, in most traditions outside of Zen, the various protagonists of the comic —whether iconoclast, humorist, clown or fool—have been barred from the temple precincts, and kept strolling in the streets, or imprisoned under ecclesiastical interdicts.

Such prejudices, often shared by priest and scholar alike, reflect a failure to understand the importance, in fact necessity, of the interplay between the sacred and the comic. Much too hastily it is presupposed that the comic is either so trivial that it has nothing to

say, or that it is so pointed in what it has to say that it is threatening and destructive. Yet the comic spirit and perspective plays a far greater and more significant role in religious experience and expression than priestly safe-keeping and scholarly investigation have been ready to admit or careful to recognize.

The Laughing Buddha

One of the early Buddhological debates, in fact, was over the question whether the Buddha ever laughed, and if so in what manner and with what meaning. This debate ranks somewhat above the debate in Western medieval scholasticism over how many angels could comfortably dance on the head of a pin—though the Buddhist debate seems characteristic of scholasticism wherever it is found. The issues, however, do have important consequences, so important that they affect the way in which the whole of Buddhism is perceived, practiced, and lived.[6]

There were those among the Buddhist scholastics who would probably have preferred to believe that the Buddha never laughed at all, especially after his enlightenment experience at Bodhgaya. The Buddha's wisdom and the Buddha's mission seemed to require the ultimate in gravity and solemnity. There could, of course, be no objection to the suggestion that the youthful Siddhartha Gautama had laughed during his self-indulgent period in his father's palace. Indeed, laughter might well be seen as a characteristic expression of the materialism and sensuality of his early years, prior to his discovery of the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. Laughter seems inextricably bound up with both the pleasures of palace life and the very sources of suffering later identified as ego, desire, attachment, ignorance, and bondage. Relative to the fundamental problem of suffering (*dukkha*), laughter seems to represent the hollow, superficial, and finally empty levity of momentary delight (*sukha*), foolishly evading or ignoring the deeper issues of life and death.

The identification of laughter and humor with sensuality and self-indulgence is very common. Western medieval physiology determined that the seat of laughter was the spleen.[7] This not very intellectually or spiritually promising location likely derived from the belief that each bodily organ had a function, and this was the function assigned

to the spleen. Laughter seems to well up from some dark, abysmal region. It belongs not to matters of the heart or head, but to the stomach, intestines, sex organs, and bladder. Such abdominal associations seem further verified inasmuch as three of the most common topics of comic conversation are the earthen trinity of food, sex, and evacuation—justly earning the designation "low comedy."

Laughter is also commonly personified by dubious and ambiguous characters: clowns, fools, jesters, simpletons, comedians, and tricksters. And there are kinds of laughter and humor that indulge in the elevation of one person or group over another, as in the case of racist or sexist or ethnic jokes. Here ego and pride are fortified, injustices and cravings are legitimated, and people are separated and alienated from one another.

Given such earthy, zany, and divisive associations, it is not surprising that laughter and humor are commonly seen as inappropriate to holy places and serious disputations. It is also understandable that Buddhist scholastics might have preferred to disassociate the Buddha entirely from laughter in his post-enlightenment life and teaching. The difficulty is that some sutras seem to suggest, if not state outright, that on such and such an occasion the Buddha laughed.

Nowhere is the significance of this laughter more profoundly appreciated and frequently displayed than in the Zen tradition—even to the point of employing low comedy. Here the intention and result is quite the opposite. Laughter leads toward the debunking of pride and the deflating of ego. It mocks grasping and clinging, and cools desire. It cuts through ignorance and precipitates insight. It turns hierarchies upside down as a prelude to collapsing them, and overcomes dualities and conflicts by embracing and uniting opposites. The whole intellectual and valuational structure of the discriminating mind is challenged, with a result that is enlightening and liberating.

Early Buddhism, especially in its Mahayanist forms, recognized a variety of methods, called *upaya*, which are an accommodation to the condition and needs of the person, and to the context in which the teaching is delivered. So if one requires a justification for the presence of the comic in Zen, one may see it as a species of *upaya*, a device for bringing the Buddha-dharma into conscious awareness and existential realization. Laughter and humor may function both as a technique for precipitating spiritual understanding and as an

expression of new levels of insight and freedom.

Running Sideways

Important as calling attention to this may be, nevertheless to write a book about Zen and the comic spirit demands a measure of hesitancy because of the understandable frustration and dismay, if not justifiable holy indignation, of Zennists over Western books on Zen. For Western Zen and Western interpretations of Zen often reflect more talent in revealing the nature of Westernization than that of Zen. It is not that Westerners are singularly impervious to and incapable of Zen, but that the cultural and religious background of the West commonly moves in such different and even alien directions that so often Zen is appropriated for the wrong reasons, fostered by half-correct or simply incorrect expectations and interpretations. As Nyogen Senzaki protested with respect to the Americanization of Zen: "[It] is running sideways writing books, lecturing, referring to theology, psychology, and what not. Someone should stand up and smash the whole thing to pieces. . . ."[8] This kind of "smashing," however, is itself characteristic of the iconoclastic temper of Zen and is an important part of the comic method and vision of Zen.

The present effort is no doubt a form of "running sideways" in pointing toward and appreciating these dimensions of Zen. Yet, like the person who runs back and forth along the river bank calling attention to the fact that it is actually possible to cross over to the other shore, there may be some value, however limited and provisional, in moving sideways in order to move forward. Just as surely, though, the fool is one who confuses a great expenditure of energy in running back and forth with the accomplishment of actually getting somewhere. From the Zen standpoint such a person is like the small boy who shifts nervously from one foot to the other, while the real problem is that he needs to go and find a lavatory. One master, indeed, is reputed to have replied, in answer to a monk's inquiry as to the present abode of the Buddha: "The Buddha is in the outhouse!" Once we have realized the comedy of our situation we are already on our way to Zen, which is itself an illustration of one of the many affiliations between Zen and the comic spirit.

Still, there is a certain precariousness in writing about the comic

spirit, as well as the Zen spirit, in any context. For as with all things in the realm of the spirit, to talk too long, to examine too meticulously, to pile qualification upon qualification and add theory to theory, is to be in danger of upsetting the delicate balance of that life which one wishes to understand, or of destroying the fragile tissue into which one wishes to breathe new life. Here, too, "the letter kills, while the spirit gives life." The book, therefore, no doubt omits many of those niceties of academic notation and qualification which might enable the operation to be more successful at the expense of killing the patient. Even at that, so long a discourse no doubt comes under the interdict of the ninth-century master Ling-ch'ui who said that explanations of fundamental matters were "like drawing legs on a painted snake."[9]

The book is not, of course, nearly as short as might exemplify Zen, which might well be more accurately illustrated simply by offering a few humorous anecdotes, and concluding with an abrupt *Ho*! Yet, in a context which is not steeped in Buddhism or Oriental culture, this has never been sufficient, and opens itself to too many misuses and misinterpretations. There is therefore a place for restrained interpretation; while at the same time it must be undertaken only from within a keen awareness of the comic awkwardness about the very proposal to analyze both Zen and the comic spirit. For analysis has a way of failing to participate in the very spirit which it would analyze, and therefore not only involving itself in an ironic self-contradiction, but in a violation and negation of that to which it is attempting to do justice.

Recognizing the awkwardness of this dilemma, the effort has been made, as far as the stubborn woodenness of language and sterility of verbal interpretation will permit, not only to point to but enter the spirit of Zen, and the comic spirit of Zen. From an academic standpoint this is a spirit and a perspective that must be defined, and defined with all due philosophical and psychological precision. Yet from a Zen standpoint it must, above all, be experienced, while academic definitions have a special facility for standing squarely in the way of such experience and its understanding from within that experience. Such, in fact, is the concern of many a Zen anecdote. Master Chao-chou, for example, was once asked, "When the entire body decomposes, something spiritual seems to remain. What becomes of

it?'' As the monk awaited a disquisition which would clarify the doctrine, Chao-chou replied, ''The wind is blowing again this morning!''[10]

It must be emphasized, then, that though there are many ways into the way of Zen, along with which the present approach may be classified, in the final sense there are *no* ways. It is not simply a matter of proceeding down a certain established path, or discovering some magic key that might unlock Wu-men's celebrated ''gateless gate'' to Zen experience. All ways into Zen are limited by the peculiarity that they never arrive at their destination; they are like an endless guided tour around the outside walls of one monastery after another. The pointing finger, however straight and accurate, never quite reaches the moon!

Fixing and Not Fixing the Standards

A wide range of terms have been introduced in an effort to point in the direction of this ''other side'' of Zen—terms which are loosely related, and in some of their forms not necessarily related, or simply not related at all: smiling, laughing, joking, clowning, as well as nonsense, humor, comedy, absurdity, foolishness, and playfulness. Obviously the concern here is not with any kind of smiling, laughing, joking and clowning, or with any kind of context in which these expressions may occur. Laughter may be sadistic, demented, nervous, morbid, crude, teasing, taunting, cynical, bitter. Humor may be a way of evading truth and avoiding responsibility. Joking may be a convenient vehicle for ridiculing others in order to magnify one's own position and fortify one's own prejudices. Comedy may contain expressions of hostility and aggression, fear and anxiety, and so forth. Certainly, therefore, laughter, smiling, and joking are not necessarily reliable indices of the comic spirit, nor are all kinds of nonsense, absurdity, and playfulness necessarily informed by the comic perspective.

It is to be acknowledged, in fact, that in putting together such a broad spectrum of terms and phenomena, albeit related, and however qualified, the result may be seen as guilty of the exhaustively conglomerate definition which Corbyn Morris in his *Essay Towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and*

Ridicule, (1744), saw as the principal success and failure of Dr. Barrow's "Sermon Against Foolish Talking and Jesting":

> There being perhaps no variety, in all the extent of these subjects, which he has not presented to view in (his) description. . .For instead of exhibiting the properties of wit in a clearer light, and confuting the false claims which are made to it, he has made it his whole business to perplex it the more by introducing, from all corners, a monstrous troop of new and unexpected pretenders!

Such terms, nevertheless, serve to point in the direction of that "other side" of existence, and of the human spirit, which is only too commonly seen as outside, if not inimical to, religious concerns and spiritual attainments. In relation to the ultra-seriousness and anxiety, and consequently the fanaticism and dogmatism, which frequently accompany the intensities of religious conviction and commitment, this definitely contains an element of truth. For what unites all these lighter manifestations of the spirit is a lightheartedness and playfulness which refuses to absolutize, or to take with an inflexible and unqualified seriousness, anything—especially one's self and one's situation. In its highest Zen form, it is the refusal, born of the freedom and perspective which in Buddhism is known as enlightenment, to be contained within and defined by the vicious circle of grasping and clinging, and that resists the temptation to enter the bondage of attachment to anything, however consequential or sacred. At this point the "other side" of the comic and "this side" of seriousness and sacrality become one in the freedom of him who has gone beyond holy and unholy, sense and nonsense, having and not-having, self and other.

In stating the matter in this way, it is clear that we have to do here with a very special kind of spirit and perspective, which it will be the task of the following essays to attempt to delineate. It is a spirit and perspective, an outlook upon life and a way of life, which involves a very special stance and set of attitudes in relation to existence. It is a way of perceiving reality and of experiencing reality, of being real, and not just any parlor witticism, clownish caper, or comedian's trick that commands our attention. It is a way and an experiencing, in fact, which cannot finally be delineated. As Master Tao-ch'in

responded to a monk asking about the message brought by Bodhidharma from India to China: "I will explain it to you if you wait until I am dead."[11]

The Dragon's Song

Monk: "What is Tao?"
Ts'ao-shan: "A dragon singing in the dry wood."
Monk: "I wonder whether there is anyone who can hear this?"
Ts'ao-shan: "There is no one in the entire world who does not hear this."
Monk: "I do not know what kind of composition the dragon's song is."
Ts'ao-shan: "I also do not know; but all who hear it lose themselves."

The Transmission of the Lamp[12]

CHAPTER TWO

The Smile of Truth

When one has understanding, one should laugh;
One should not weep.

HSUEH-T'OU

The smile of Asian peoples has often been represented, usually in the caricatures of politically inspired cartooning and the stereotypes of popular Caucasian imagination, to which both the Chinese and Japanese have been subjected. That smile, insofar as it corresponds to reality at all, has a profound basis in the unusual stress in both Chinese and Japanese culture upon the human sphere and the natural graces, and indeed upon the most practical, earthen, everyday phenomena of life. It is a smile that is grounded in the peculiarly Oriental aversion to the more abstract flights and ethereal delights of Indian and Western peoples, and a preference for the concrete, this-worldly, ordinary-human, even trivial moments of day-to-day existence. In fact, if one may speak of a special, and seldom appreciated, contribution of Asian peoples to world civilization, it is to be found here: in this smile and what it symbolizes.

A smile, of course, can mean many things. Here it may be said to represent a special sensitivity to the comic-mundane, a tender affection for the commonplace things of life. Or—relative to the spiritual other-worldliness and mythological fantasy and philosophical grandeur of so many other cultures—it may be seen as a collapse of the sublime, an affirmation of unaffected naturalness and simplicity. As in the Tao of Lao-tzu, it is the smile of the child, and the smile of the sage.

It is in this soil, simple, earthy, pragmatic, and humanistic in its most sophisticated forms, that the comic spirit of Zen is rooted, like the lotus flower that radiates from the lowliness of the mud at the bottom of the pond, and whose leaf-pads provide seats for all those little bullfrog Buddhas that are favored in Zen art and poetry. In both

its Chinese origins and its later Japanese elaborations, the development of Buddhism known as Ch'an and Zen owes much of its particularity to the distinctiveness of this Chinese and Japanese world-view. Out of the collision of the lofty spiritualism of Indian Buddhism and the earthiness of Oriental humanism and naturalism come both Zen and the comic spirit of Zen. For all of the austerities and rigors of Zen, and the serenity of its religious vision, in it the Chinese dragon smiles and the Indian Buddha roars with laughter.

Out from the hollow
Of the Great Buddha's nose
A swallow comes.

Issa[1]

The Zen tradition, in fact, according to legend, begins with a smile. This in itself, however apocryphal its basis, is a remarkable distinction in the history of religion, and profoundly suggestive of the character of Zen. Insofar as Zen has concerned itself with the question of its lineage, and of its relationship to the historical Buddha and his teachings, it has traced its ancestry not only to the awesome meditation master, Bodhidharma, or to the philosophically formidable figure of Nagarjuna, but to one of the Buddha's disciples, Kasyapa, whose principal distinction is that, at a critical moment, he smiled. According to the tale, when once the Buddha was gathered with his disciples, a Brahma-raja came to him with an offering of a bouquet of sandalwood flowers and requested that he preach a sermon which would summarize his teachings. When the Buddha ascended his customary seat of instruction, however, he did not address the expectant audience, but simply held up a sandalwood flower before the assembly. None of those present understood the Buddha's meaning except for Kasyapa, who received the teaching instantly and acknowledged it with a smile.

This is the peculiar and profoundly symbolic origin attributed to Zen. And it is this smile, this sudden intuition of Truth, and this wordless transmission of the Dharma, that is said to have been handed down through twenty-eight Indian Patriarchs, the last of which was Bodhidharma who brought the doctrineless "teaching" to China a thousand years later (6th c. CE). The Buddha's silent gaze on Vulture

Peak is the commencement of that propositionless communication of the innermost nature of things that is pivotal to Zen, that first and last word which cannot be spoken and which cannot be heard. This is the emphasis customarily and not incorrectly given to the Zen use of the legend. Yet the other aspect of the story is also important, and that is Kasyapa's smile of understanding—a smile that is carried through in the subtlest to the most raucous forms throughout the later developments of Zen. This smile is the signature of the sudden realization of the "point," and the joyful approval of its significance. It is the smile of Truth, or the Truth smiling. It is the glad reception of that moment of insight which has taken the whole world by surprise, a moment of seeing with the freshness and immediacy of the little child, full of amazement and wonder—a "holy yea" which is capable of transforming even specks of dust into stars and frogs into Buddhas. It is this smile, historically authentic or not, which is the beginning and the end of Zen.

Bodhidharma and Pu-tai

Insofar as one can speak of fundamental images in a tradition that is so strongly non-symbolic and iconoclastic, there may be said to be two basic types of images in Zen, most noticeable at first in Zen paintings where they are constantly recurring, as if each calls forth and counterbalances the other. One is the epitome of resolute seriousness; the other of buoyant laughter. One is seated in the placid stillness of meditation; the other is airily dancing a folk-dance. One suggests the extremities of earnestness and commitment; the other a light-hearted and carefree playfulness. One presents the visage of the master or sage; the other of the child or clown or fool.

The first set of images in Zen is typified by the figure of Bodhidharma, determinedly facing the wall of a cave for nine years in intense meditation until, according to legend, his legs rotted off. Or Bodhidharma, accepting Hui-k'o as a disciple after the latter had cut off his arm to demonstrate his absolute sincerity and utter seriousness. Or Bodhidharma, confronting all would-be seekers of enlightenment like some fierce and formidable giant whose sheer presence overwhelms the staunchest defences of the ego. Or Bodhidharma, whose piercing eyes shoot forth like daggers from

beneath shaggy brows set in a great craggy forehead, seeing through all the schemes of desire and fortresses of ignorance.

The other set of images in Zen is typified by the figure of Pu-tai, the semi-legendary monk of the 10th century, who is even larger in bulk than Bodhidharma, yet more like an overgrown child, and no more awesome and fearsome than the pot-bellied "laughing Buddha" which he becomes. Pu-tai, who refuses to enter a monastery on any basis of permanence, and instead wanders freely without attachment even to the securities of cloistered walls and the forms of monkish discipline. Pu-tai who, like a carefree vagabond, carries a large linen sack from place to place as his only home. Pu-tai, whose jolly, roly-poly figure is to be seen dancing merrily, as if (as in Liang-k'ai's sketch, 13th century) floating gracefully in the air in spite of his size, seeming barely to touch the earth or leave a trace (Plate 3). Pu-tai, whose religious life consists of playing with village children, as if life had now come full circle, as if the end were in some way a return to the beginning, as if even children and fools knew what priests and monks did not.

In consort with the herculean image of Bodhidharma is an impressive train of like figures, such as Lin-chi with his lion's roar, snarling face and clenched fist, shouting and frightening monks directly into Nirvana, as it were. Or Te-shan sitting almost menacingly with his oak-stick poised in his lap, intently awaiting the precise moment when it will be needed for the collapsing of all categories (e.g., the Bodhidharma triptych by Soga Shohaku, 15th century). Similarly, one may point to the two favorite Zen creatures, the tiger and the dragon, which seem to have reincarnated themselves in so many Zen masters, and which, sharing in this same symbolism, serve as powerful animal emblems of the Zen sect.

Yet Pu-tai also has his retinue of attendant "Bodhisattvas" and "totems." And a strange retinue it is. There are the two poet-recluses and monastery fools of the seventh century, Han-shan and Shih-te, with their boisterous, almost mad, and seemingly near-demonic laughter (Plate 1). And there are the three laughing sages of Hu-hsi, overcome with mirth in every painting, as if a Zen trinity were enjoying some eternal joke (Plate 2). Or there is the hermit Ryokan (1758-1831) of the Japanese Soto tradition who, like his Chinese predecessor and counterpart, delighted in playing games with children,

or folk-dancing in the village. In fact, so absorbed would Ryokan become in this kind of "zazen" that in one game of hide-and-seek he is reputed to have hid himself with such success under a haystack as not to be discovered until the next morning by a farmer!

Furthermore, this set of comic figures has its favorite animals with which it, too, is associated, like the animal vehicles (*vahanas*) of the Hindu gods. But instead of the tiger and dragon, in this case it is the monkey, the frog, the chicken, or even the louse! Liang-k'ai depicts Pu-tai in one painting as deeply and delightedly engrossed in a cock-fight, like a little boy hovering over a crucial game of marbles. Mu-ch'i, in addition to tigers and dragons, featured monkeys, cranes, and swallows. Sengai was fond of frogs. Indeed, one of his frog sketches carries the heterodox inscription: "If by sitting in meditation one becomes a Buddha. . .[then all frogs are Buddhas!]" (Plate 6). Ryokan, among his many peculiarities, devoted special attention to lice, not only giving them a place of honor in his poetry, but sheltering them in his robe. And haiku verse—a literary oddity in itself—under Zen inspiration came to add a motley garden variety of lowly creatures to the sublime objects of aesthetic and religious representation: dogs, geese, and carp; the thrush, the cuckoo, the sparrow, and the crow; yes, and butterflies, fireflies, caterpillars, locusts, ants, bees, and common flies.

Sitting like the Buddha,
But bitten by mosquitoes
In my Nirvana.

Demaru[2]

The tiger is now reduced to a house cat, grinning from the veranda. The dragon is gone, and in his place a dragonfly.

He who appears
Before you now is the toad
Of this thicket.

Issa[3]

The set of images and symbols that cluster about the figure of Bodhidharma have been dealt with extensively in the literature of Zen. Yet what is one to do with this other set of images and symbols,

especially when they, and their lowly animal "vehicles," are given such prominence in Zen legend, literature, poetry, and art? What is their function and meaning in this curiously unfolding dialectic? What is it that they reveal? What mysteries do they open up? To what level of being and knowing do they point?

Most of what has been written about Zen, to phrase it as boldly as possible, is Bodhidharma Zen to the virtual exclusion of Pu-tai Zen; or dragon and tiger Zen apart from frog and flea Zen. Only occasionally in some writings, and never at all in others, does this dimension make its appearance and suggest its significance—as if it were only accidentally related to Zen, or perhaps not related at all. In some cases, no doubt, this fairly accurately reflects the character of the Zen of a certain period, or school, or master, or interpreter; and especially when Zen is reduced to an orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Yet the images of Pu-tai, and his strange brethren, and his stranger menagerie of fellow-creatures, right down to the despicable louse, have persisted with the persistence of exhuberant children, chirping crickets, and croaking frogs. In their earthiness and unorthodoxy, their lowliness and commonplaceness, their playfulness and laughter and freedom, they continue to call attention to something very important, perhaps even supremely important, about both Zen and life.

In these terms, a basic Zen question—a koan in its own right—is: What does Pu-tai symbolize? Toward what level of existence, into what kind of spirit, unto what insight and realization, does he, and the odd train of figures that accompany him, like the Pied Pipers of an Oriental carnival, lead?

Half-a-person Zen

It is to be expected that some objection, perhaps even offense, will be taken because of the association suggested here, and frequently made hereafter, between Zen and the clown-figure and the comic-mundane, as if this were making light of, or ridiculing, or debasing Zen. Quite the contrary. This is not to detract or subtract from Zen in the slightest, but rather to add to it that dimension apart from which one is left with only "half-a-person" Zen. Of course, if one understands Zen as simply a "serious business" and therefore sees

clown-figures like Pu-tai or Ryokan or Han-shan and Shih-te, as threatening to a Zen so conceived, or if one understands the clown as being a peripheral, shadowy, base, or corrupting figure in relation to the priest or master or seer or sage, then this is correct. Yet there is far more depth and significance, yes, and spirituality in the clown-figure than has commonly been recognized. Clowns, too, belong to a venerable tradition, and have an ancient history, and are no more intrinsically superficial or childish or base than the sacred personages which they often stand over against, parody, and counterbalance. If the clown's function and meaning have suffered many abuses and misunderstandings, so have theirs. If the historical record and actual performance of the clown have often been coarse or demeaning, they are no exception either. Yet at their best and profoundest, clowns, too, can be religious figures and symbols. In this role they stand at least on a par with all other religious personae, and, in some respects, even above them. As in the case of Pu-tai, they may represent a larger spirit and a fuller, more embracing truth. The roundness of Pu-tai is the full circle of existence and the completed vision of life—as in Hakuin's self-portrait in the image of Pu-tai [Frontispiece].

One of the peculiar distinctions of Zen in the history of religion is to have appreciated this possibility, indeed necessity, and to have made it an integral part of the Zen experience and perspective. Among the many unusual—though from the Zen standpoint perfectly normal—features of Zen is precisely that there is a singular and delightful at-homeness of the comic in Zen, and of Zen in the comic, an at-homeness which is surely remarkable and significant enough to be worthy of more extended treatment than it has heretofore been granted. If this appears to be a way into Zen, and a way of Zen, which is strange and uncommon, it must be remembered that Zen masters themselves, as evidenced from the earliest anecdotal records, have often had some strange and uncommon ways of coming into Zen, and of pointing others to it: ways frequently eccentric and unorthodox, nonsensical and clownish, absurd and humorous. A tile falling off the roof and cracking the skull, the ping of a stone striking a stalk of bamboo, a slap in the face or a kick in the chest, a deafening roar or a rollicking guffaw, a single finger held up in silence or an enigmatic barrage of doubletalk: this is but a small sampling of the bizarre

techniques and curious occasions for spiritual realization that form the patchwork of Zen history.

What is being alluded to here, then, is not the clown as some inferior species, approaching the infantile or subhuman or chaotic, but the clown who in all lowliness and simplicity and childlikeness, as well as in iconoclasm and a healthy profanity, is truly great, truly profound, truly free. In this sense Pu-tai is a larger image of the Zen-person than Bodhidharma. For his is Bodhidharma having transcended the cave and returned to the light—and, as legend would have it, the very incarnation, in this lowliest of human forms, of the Future Buddha, Maitreya.

Like all mysticisms, Zen is concerned to overcome certain dualities which are seen as splitting up existence, delimiting experience, and hiding true reality. Yet in overcoming such dualities, it is very easy to become caught up, perhaps quite unwittingly, in certain other dualities. These essays are concerned with just such other dualities, in particular those in which the dialectic of Bodhidharma and Pu-tai are involved: seriousness and laughter, sobriety and gaiety, holiness and humor, the dramatic and the comic, commitment and detachment, zealousness and carefreeness, earnestness and disinterestedness, sense and nonsense, purpose and purposelessness, work and play. If the resolution of Zen does not resolve this, then everything has only been resolved into yet another duality, and one is still left with only "half-a-person" Zen.

Defeating the ego, desire, attachment, and discrimination is one thing. Defeating the mentality of seriousness, labor, and the dramatic alone is another—especially when the latter is seen as fundamental not only to the defeat, but also to the marking and maintenance of the victory over the former. If this is all that Zen achieves, then even the little child knows more than Bodhidharma. If this is the terminus of Zen, then even the fool is wiser than the supreme wisdom of the *Prajnaparamita*. If Bodhidharma cannot laugh, it is because he has not seen through his meditation wall. If he cannot play, it is because he is still imprisoned in his cave. If he cannot dance, it is because his legs have indeed rotted off.

The Master's Loud Roaring Laugh

Among the 1700 *koans* which are said to be suitable for precipitating or deepening an inner spiritual illumination, and also for providing a test of its genuineness as an awakening, is the following question attributed to Hsiang-yen, and furnished with commentary by Wu-men in his 13th-century *Gateless Gate to Zen Experience:*

> (Zen) is like a man up a tree who hangs on a branch by his teeth with his hands and feet in the air. A man at the foot of the tree asks him, 'What is the point of Bodhidharma's coming from the West [i.e., from India to China]?' If he does not answer he would seem to evade the question. If he answers he would fall to his death. In such a predicament what response should be given?
>
> [Wu-men's commentary and verse:] It is as useless to be gifted with a flowing stream of eloquence as to discourse on the teaching in the great *Tripitaka*. Whoever answers this question correctly can give life to the dead and take life from the living. Whoever cannot must wait for the coming of Maitreya and ask him.
>
> > *Hsiang-yen is really outrageous.*
> > *The poison he brewed spreads everywhere.*
> > *It closes the mouths of Zen monks,*
> > *And makes their eyes goggle.*[4]

According to the later *Imperial Collection of Ch'an Sayings* (1723-35), when Hsiang-yen first posed this koan, a leading monk of another monastery who was present commented: "I do not ask this question when the man is on the tree, but I ask it before he climbs up! Will the Venerable Master speak to this?" Whereupon Hsiang-yen gave a loud roar of laughter.[5]

In the elements of humor and laughter visible in such enigmatic koans and mondos (dialogues) and their witty commentaries or versified parodies is to be found but one of many examples of the important place granted to the whole spectrum of the comic in Zen. In Zen, too, in fact especially, there is a time to laugh and a time to dance,

as well as to weep and to mourn (Eccl. 3:4). D.T. Suzuki has argued that "Zen is the only religion or teaching that finds room for laughter."[6] Though in relation to other religions this is, no doubt, an overstatement, in relation to Zen it is more of an understatement. Zen does more than find room for laughter—which might, after all, mean only a very small and rarely occupied room at the back of the house. In a unique sense, the house of Zen *is* the house of laughter.

R.H. Blyth, with his penchant for dashing comment and characterization, has defined the essence of Zen as humor.[7] Whether or not one might be satisfied to state the matter so bluntly, such an equation of Zen and humor nevertheless points to the possibility of interpreting Zen as that point in the movement of Buddhism from India to China and Japan in which humor comes to be most fully developed and self-consciously employed as an integral part of both a pedagogical method and an enlightened outlook—that is, both as one of the stratagems for realizing enlightenment and as one of the consequences for enlightenment. Indeed, no more fitting token of this could be found than that of the "loud roaring laughter" for which so many Zen masters have been noted. When a monk asked Shui-lao of Hung, "What is the meaning of Buddha-dharma?" the Master rubbed his palms together and burst into loud laughter. The *Transmission of the Lamp* goes on to report that "this was his normal way of teaching students."[8]

A standard phrase in Zen training, applied to a monk who is so ultra-serious about his disciplines and his "Zennishness" that his very zeal and fanaticism is self-defeating, is that "he stinks (or reeks) of Zen." In the *Transmission of the Lamp* the Indian guru Jayata, who is counted as the twentieth patriarch after Kasyapa, on hearing the diligence of the celebrated Vasubandhu extolled by his followers, criticized him for seeking the Way so earnestly. Said Jayata, "When the string of a musical instrument is too tautly set it will snap."[9]

Over against what is seen here as bondage to earnestness, striving and sincerity, if not a bit of that old demon Pride, stands the commonly repeated phrase in the extensive corpus of Zen anecdotes, with the catharsis and wisdom which it brings: "And the monk (or master) clapped his hands and gave a loud roar of laughter." When Master Kuei-shan sat in evening meditation in the lecture hall, the directing

monk came in and beat the fish-shaped wooden drum, snuffed out the lantern, then burst out laughing and clapped his hands. Afterwards the Master asked, "Is there another man like him in the congregation?"[10] Or when Chao-chou asked Master Huan-chung, "What is the essence of wisdom?" the Master repeated the question, as if in echo. Chao-chou burst into peals of laughter and went out. The next day, finding Chao-chou sweeping the yard, the Master demanded, "What is the essence of wisdom?" Chao-chou dropped his broom, burst out with a great guffaw, and clapped his hands in delight.[11]

This is particularly striking when one recalls that the Indian Buddhist scholastics, following the dramatic classifications of Bharata (4th century CE), carefully distinguished between six classes of laughter arranged in hierarchical fashion from the most sublime to the most sensuous and unrefined. Only the most restrained forms were considered appropriate to the comportment of aristocrats and monks, and to the theatrical representation of such. The descending scale of categories itself suggests that the fullest and most pronounced and enjoyable forms of laughter are at the furthest remove from both piety and propriety: *sita*, a faint, almost imperceptible smile manifest in the subtleties of facial expression and countenance alone; *hasita*, a smile involving a slight movement of the lips, and barely revealing the tips of the teeth; *vihasita*, a broad smile accompanied by a modicum of laughter; *upahasita*, accentuated laughter, louder in volume, associated with movements of the head, shoulders and arms; *apahasita*, loud laughter that brings tears; and *atihasita*, the most boisterous, uproarious laughter attended by movements of the entire body (e.g., doubling over in raucous guffawing, convulsions, knee-slapping, and hysterics, "rolling in the aisles").[12]

Given this classification, obviously influenced by the ideals of aristocratic sophistication, it was understood that the first two types represented the restrained, polite laughter of the highly cultured and refined individual; the middle categories, the moderate laughter of the average person; and the last two the intemperate and vulgar laughter of the lower classes. The religious interpretation of this dramatic scheme followed suit, if it did not to some extent influence it. The first two forms approach the spiritual and the sublime; the

last two descend into the crassness of the physical and the sensual, lowering and degrading the spirit. As might be expected from the logic of the system, and the presumed threat of laughter with respect to holy things, the Buddha was supposed to have indulged only in *sita*, the most serene, subtle and refined form of laughter.[13] It is almost as if to say that the Buddha was only "guilty" of the first form of laughter!

To the puritanism of the pious imagination, and the humorlessness of the scholastic lack of imagination, it has always seemed unthinkable that the Buddha should have stooped to the barbarous level of openly displaying the teeth in a jovial grin, or of emitting even modest chuckles of amusement, let alone the more immodest forms of hilarity. Yet what is commonly found in Zen, so much so as not only to characterize Zen but to be symbolic of it, is none other than *apahasita* and *atihasita*, the loud, uproarious, unrestrained laughter that is presumably at the furthest distance from the delicate and scarcely detectable smile of the Buddha, and from the placidity that Nirvana represents. As Christmas Humphreys has commented: "There is more honest 'belly laughter' in a Zen monastery than surely in any other religious institution on earth. To laugh is a sign of sanity; and the comic is deliberately used to break up concepts, to release tensions, and to teach what cannot be taught in words. Nonsense is used to point to the beyond of rational sense."[14]

While it may be true at a preliminary level that, as one Japanese *senryu* puts it, "the man who giggles is omitted from the selection for the ambush,"[15] it is also true at another level that those who are incapable of laughter, and of seeing the humor in their situation, are both trapped by their own ambush and omitted from the celebration that follows the ambush. Zen is a kind of ambush undertaken against the traditional Buddhist "devils" of ego, ignorance, desire, attachment, and bondage. But what a strange ambush it is! The peculiarity of the Zen onslaught and surprise is that it is often undertaken in the spirit and with the weapons of the comic rather than the dramatic, in laughter as well as seriousness, and therefore stands from beginning to end within the comic parenthesis. As Yuan-wu commented with respect to a Zen episode which culminated, like so many Zen episodes, in the Master's hearty laugh: "His laughter is like a cool,

refreshing breeze passing through the source of all things.''[16]

Thus, while one may be accustomed to seeking for signs of enlightened attainment in the sober features of deep meditation and intense absorption, in Zen one may like as not be presented with images of gaiety, lightheartedness, and mirth. Where we expect a representation of determined resolution and grave demeanor, we are often given instead a picture that seems to suggest profanity more than piety, and frivolity rather than zealousness. When intimations of sublime serenity and unperturbable tranquillity are anticipated, we may in fact be confronted with the raucousness of a laughter that seems to shake the very foundations of the world—which, indeed, is exactly what it does! Zen is not only the tradition of the overwhelming ferociousness of Bodhidharma, who seems to pounce like a great Bengal tiger out of every ink-sketch to break the arms and legs of unsuspecting monks, or like a celebrated Chinese dragon summarily to devour all traces of ego, desire, and attachment. It is also the tradition of the jolly Pu-tai, spurning cloistered confinement, dancing with innocent abandon, and playing with children in the streets, or of the clamorous laughter and mad buffoonery of the monastery fools, Han-shan and Shih-te. Here, too, one discovers that ego, desire, and attachment have a way of getting themselves broken and devoured in the realization of some great Cosmic Joke, and in the greatness of a Cosmic Laughter, which reveals itself in the strange holiness and wisdom of these Holy Fools.

This is, as it were, something of the little comedy that Zen presents in relation to the whole of the Buddhist drama. In fact, the initial impression when confronted with the classical literature and artistic representation of Zen is that one has searched diligently for a spiritual master only to find a figure more akin to a court jester of Mahayana, or has thought oneself to have entered the peaceful repose of the Monastery of Eternal Rest, only to be greeted by shouts and roars seemingly having more affinity with insane or drunken laughter and the blows of a tavern brawl. Bharata's aristocratic and spiritualistic schema seems abruptly to have been stood on its head! Yet it is precisely this entire range of laughter, and the many related categories of nonsense, absurdity, foolishness, playfulness, joking, and humor, that have come to be endowed by Zen with important

religious functions and significance, and woven into a remarkable way of perceiving and experiencing life.

There are many things that even the wise fail to do,
While the fool hits the point.
Unexpectedly discovering the way to life in the midst of death,
He bursts out in hearty laughter.

Sengai[17]

CHAPTER THREE

Zen Masters and Clown Figures

Monk: "During my travels since leaving Chang-an,
I have never struck anyone with my staff."
Chao-chou: "That proves that the staff you were
carrying was too short."

TRANSMISSION OF THE LAMP

One of the first impressions that one receives in reading tales of the often unorthodox lives and ways of many Zen masters is the peculiar correspondence between these figures and that of the clown. Regardless of the problem of authenticity, and the separation of legend from fact, this image is too common and consistent to be dismissed as simply a popular embellishment alien to the character and approach of the Zen master. Whether in part fictional (and therefore still of great symbolic importance) or not, the historical records convey the persistent form of a personality and role to which the designation "clown" is not inappropriate.

This is not to associate the concerns and intentions of Zen transmission with a vaudeville performance, but rather to indicate a level of comic freedom in which the Zen master lived, and the eccentricity of the techniques which he frequently employed, through his own "clownishness" or some humorous artifice, in order to evoke the spiritual awakening and development of his disciples. By odd antics and strange attire, or by crazy sayings and a "divine madness," he gives expression to the special freedom he has attained, and in that freedom reveals some truth through the outlandishness of his behavior.

Zen "Buffoonery"

One of the immediate precursors of the Ch'an tradition was Fu Ta-shih, who is said to have been invited by the emperor Liang Wu-ti to expound the *Diamond Sutra.* As soon as he had ascended the seat for his exposition, the emperor listening intently, Fu Ta-shih rapped the table once with a stick and descended from his seat. He thereupon asked the startled emperor, "Does Your Majesty understand?" "I do not!" the incredulous emperor replied. Fu Ta-shih said simply, "The Bodhisattva has finished expounding the sutra."[1] On a later visit it is said that he presented himself at the palace before the emperor wearing a hat, a monk's robe and a pair of shoes, it being accepted practice that a monk wears no hat, a Taoist no shoes, and a layman no monk's robe.[2]

When Master Pao-ch'e was asked what, by the eighth century, had become the proverbial question about the nature of the teaching delivered from India to China by Bodhidharma, Pao-ch'e is said to have stood up, pivoted around on his stick, raised up a leg, and then asked in return, "Do you understand the message?" When the monk did not understand, Pao-ch'e struck him with his stick.[3] Later Kakua, reputedly the first Japanese to study Zen in China, upon returning was requested to address the emperor of Japan concerning all he had learned of this strange sect. Kakua produced a flute from the folds of his robe, blew one short note, bowed politely, and walked out.[4] In stark contrast to the voluminous writings of so many prominent philosophers and theologians, East and West, Kakua reduced truth to this one thing: a single note on the flute.

Aside from the problem of legendary embellishment (or, in this case, abbreviation), the seemingly endless proliferation of like tales in Zen accounts is too conspicuous to be set aside as peripheral to the nature and method of Zen. It is apparent from the host of such anecdotes that have been preserved, and used in subsequent Zen pedagogy, that not only are the early masters depicted as commonly employing various comic techniques in their dealings with monks, laymen, and even local and imperial dignitaries, but as themselves living in the spirit and style of comic freedom. Notorious for their peculiarities and eccentricities, odd in their behavior, and unorthodox in their methods, the Zen masters often suggest something of the

trickster, jester, clown, and fool all rolled into one.

The Japanese traveller Ennin, who visited China from 838 to 847, having met Ch'an monks on several occasions, reported that they were "extremely unruly men at heart."[5] Though this appears to be an unsympathetic observation on the part of one who was a member of the T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) sect, and who may have misunderstood and misconstrued what he saw, it points to a trait which is nevertheless there. It is a trait which, in some respects, is reminiscent of that delightful, playful, and sagacious attribute which Lin Yutang called "the old roguery of the Chinese character."[6] In other respects one is reminded of the peculiarities of the early Franciscan monks who claimed an affinity with wandering troubadours and fools, such as Friar Juniper who wore a ragged cowl and was called a blockhead by the people, yet who was seen as having special powers in relation to the Devil, and whose strange antics were accepted as the sign of some special insight and grace. A similar movement is also found among the Holy Fools of the Greek and Russian Orthodox Church: through a divine madness, whether real or affected, they became "fools for Christ's sake" assuming that role as an authentic religious role, and in this way manifesting spirituality through acts of foolishness rather than piety. Selfishness and pride were conquered through an identification with the fool; and through comic exaggerations the folly of the people was dramatized and exposed.[7]

This is not to imply that all Zen masters are clown-figures or holy fools, or that all who achieve awakening within the tradition of Zen do so in the context of comic techniques. Rather attention is being called to a comic spirit and style which achieves its fullest acceptance and development, among Buddhist sects, within Zen, and to a remarkable procession of individualists—one might even say characters—who often appear to be as much at home in the comic as the sacred. In perusing their biographies, and their koans and mondos, one has the impression of being witness to a kind of Buddhist "circus." There is Hsueh-feng who, like the clown that plays at juggling, used to toy with three wooden balls, and who, when a monk would come to him to learn of Zen and the Zen way, would simply begin rolling the balls about.[8] There is Shih-t'ou who, when anyone would ask him to interpret some aspect of Buddhism, would like as

not reply, "Shut your mouth! No barking like a dog, please!"[9] There is T'ien-lung who, when Chu-ti, earnestly seeking the true path of the Buddha, solicited his direction, without comment simply lifted up one of his fingers.[10] There is P'u Hua who would clang his meditation bell in the ears of people high and low, aiming to provoke an awakening—though probably seeming only to be provoking. There is Yun-men who would frequently respond, whatever the question, by yelling, "*Kan!*" (No!), and Lin-chi who would shout the meaningless exclamation, "*Kwatz!*" (Ho!).[11] Ma-tsu, also noted for his lion's roar, once shouted so loudly at a disciple that he was deafened for three days—and also thereby enlightened.[12] There is also the case of Tao-lin who was called the "bird-nest master" because he did his zazen seated in the crotch of a pine tree, looking from a distance like a large magpie nest himself.[13]

The *Transmission of the Lamp (Ching Te Ch'uan Teng Lu)*, compiled by Tao-yuan in 1004, is a major source of such information about the early Ch'an masters. Very frankly, and certainly without flattery, it notes the personal idiosyncracies and behavior of notable masters. Of Ma-tsu, for example, the text comments: "His appearance was strange; when he spread his tongue it covered his nose; and he had two wheel-shaped marks on his feet. He walked like an ox, and he looked at things like a tiger."[14] Such statements are doubly remarkable in that they are part of a document being presented to the emperor (Chen-tsung) and by a monk of the Ch'an school.

The same eccentric tradition carries over into Japan, with such figures as Ryokan of the Soto sect. Apparently considered by nearby villagers to be bordering on lunacy, if not over the border, his name literally means "Great Fool." It was he who played with children, and who played with lice. It was also he who, upon being confronted by a burglar in the predicament of being unable to find anything to steal in Ryokan's simple forest hut, apologized to the burglar for not having anything worth taking, gave the man his extra robe, and afterwards composed the poem:

A burglar, failing to carry off the moon,
It shines in from the window![15]

This motley parade of individuals with their odd behavior and

"holy foolishness" seems to file almost endlessly through the voluminous accounts of the Ch'an/Zen masters. Though the purpose is, in a sense, quite serious and the setting acutely authoritarian, nevertheless the panorama has a distinct comic quality intrinsic to it. Through riddles and enigmas, through nonsense and insults, through scowling and laughter, ejaculation and silence, as well as through slapping, kicking and striking, the point is made in, to say the least, a most eccentric manner. It is almost as if one were watching an ancient Oriental version of the slap-stick characters in a Marx brothers film, with the wise-cracking Groucho, the tune-playing Chico, and the wordless Harpo. But, as in all profound comedy, one soon discovers that the object of laughter is really oneself in the larger predicament and folly of humanity.

The familiar self-portrait of Hakuin (1686-1769), the pivotal figure of Japanese Rinzai Zen, is illustrative of the intentional projection on the part of a Zen master of the image of the fool. Hakuin does not sketch himself in the idealized form of an enlightened one, or even in the realistic image of an austere *zenji*, but as a bald, fat, cross-eyed, and hunch-backed old man (Plate 9). The calligraphy Hakuin inscribed above the portrait is even more revealing:

In the realm of the thousand buddhas
He is hated by the thousand buddhas;
Among the crowd of demons
He is detested by the crowd of demons.
He crushes the silent-illumination heretics of today,
And massacres the heterodox blind monks of this generation.
This filthy blind old shavepate
Adds more foulness [ugliness] still to foulness.[16]

A similar portrait, possibly by a disciple and bearing the same poem, depicts Hakuin as looking almost sheepishly, with pursed lips, out of the corner of his eyes—through all of which, however, one can detect the sagacious twinkle of one who was not easily fooled by sanctimony and pretension.[17] In another sketch Hakuin goes so far as to give his meditating form the unmistakable shape and smirk of the pot-bellied Pu-tai (Frontispiece).

The figure of the clown which stands out here in relation to the

person of the master emerges just as clearly in the various tales of Zen monks at the point of death. The classic instance is that of Teng Yin-feng in the eighth century who, when he was about to die, asked, "I have seen monks die sitting and lying, but have any died standing?" "Yes, some," was the reply. "How about upside down?" "Never have we seen such a thing!" Whereupon Teng stood on his head and died. When it was time to carry him to the funeral pyre he remained upside down, to the wonder of those who came to view the remains, and the consternation of those who would dispose of them. Finally his younger sister, a nun, came and grumbling at him said, "When you were alive you took no notice of laws and customs, and even now that you are dead you are making a nuisance of yourself!" And with that she poked him with her finger, felling him with a thud; and the procession carried him away to the crematorium.[18]

In this way Teng, assuming what, from the remarks of his sister, was a not unfamiliar clownishness, expressed his achievement of spiritual freedom, his liberation from a desperate clinging to life and anxiety over self, and therefore his transcendence of the problem of death. What was said by Il Pistoia of the Italian court-fool, Matello, on his death-bed could well be said of Teng Yin-feng: "With him, even Death made sport."[19] There is here an element of both a Promethean laughter in the face of death, and a comic freedom within the larger freedom of enlightenment. The realization of an authentic liberation, as in so much of the Zen tradition, is attested by humor; and the symbol of that liberation is the paradoxical figure of the clown.

The clown in most cultures, in fact, symbolizes emancipation and freedom, even though not necessarily in the most refined or most spiritual sense. Often the antics are simply a retrogressive leap into the irresponsible freedom of the child, or a socially tolerated rebellion against virtue and authority. Partly because of this there is an understandable religious suspicion of the clown, and an attempt to restrict and contain these liberties and profanations. The clown, nevertheless, through the capacity to stand apart from the crowd, its conventions and mores, is a useful symbol, and indeed a herald, of the uninhibited spontaneity and joyful laughter of that spiritual freedom that lies beyond good and evil, not in regression but in transcendence, not in rebelliousness but in emancipation. As Enid Welsford

characterized the peculiar role of the clown-fool: "Under the dissolvent influence of his personality the iron network of physical, social and moral law, which enmeshes us from the cradle to the grave, seems—for the moment—negligible as a web of gossamer. The Fool does not lead a revolt against the Law; he lures us into a region of the spirit where, as Lamb would put it, the writ does not run."[20]

In this we are given a hint, at least, as to the basis on which the modern master, Harada Sogaku (1871-1961), lecturing on the text of the third Case of the *Wu-men-kuan*, could direct: "My admonition, then: Be a great fool! You know, don't you, that there was a master who called himself just that [Ryokan]? Now, a petty fool is nothing but a worldling, but a Great Fool is a Buddha. Sakyamuni and Amitabha are themselves Great Fools, are they not?"[21]

If a central characteristic of the fool is foolishness, what defines clowning is a tendency to turn things upside down and behave in a manner opposite to normal expectations. Thereby the clown-figure challenges all those hierarchies that elevate one person above another and those dualities that separate one person from another. The exalted is humbled, and the humbled is exalted; opposites are united, and distances softened. The best modern example of this clownish capacity is Charles Chaplin who, in film after film, played the paradoxical role of the Tramp. The secret of the popularity and profundity of this ambiguous figure was that he was not simply a tramp but a Gentleman-Tramp. Chaplin had ingeniously put together the bowler hat, dress coat, and walking cane of English aristocracy with the baggy pants and floppy shoes of the gutter bum. In this manner he embraced and united in one remarkable individual the top and the bottom of the social order. He was, as Robert Payne said of him, "the whole human comedy wrapped in a single frail envelope of flesh." He became both gentleman and tramp, and neither gentleman nor tramp, and in so doing put the Humpty-Dumpty of our humanity back together again.

From this perspective one may understand the clownish effect of many a Zen anecdote. One day the Prince Governor came to visit Chao-chou, along with royal princes and scholars. Chao-chou, however, remained seated and did not rise in greeting, giving as his excuse for this impropriety a weakness brought on by years of strict vegetarian diet. The next day the prince sent a message to Chao-chou