Image, Power, Zen Discourse

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Given its prominent role in Chinese intellectual history, Zen Buddhism is often discussed as if it were an anti-intellectual movement and an extension of Taoist thought. Few scholars have approached it from the perspective of social and discursive formation, i.e., in terms of its relationship to other modes of expression or social organization. It seems to me that the rise of Zen Buddhism is historically significant as an emergent discourse that resists the standardization of the Chinese language; it is therefore not accidental that it should come into being soon after the *Ch'ieh-yün* system is introduced. Originally a method to bring peace to the mind, Zen becomes an active discursive activity in China, focusing on image and power relationship. Unlike their counterparts in India, Chinese Zen masters frequently engage in a series of activities of rewriting or redefining by resorting to words and pictures with their disciples. Not only would Chinese Zen masters dismantle and subvert the Buddha's words, but they encourage their disciples to overturn and question the authority – even of their own speech. In *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu* (景德傳燈錄 Transmission of the Lamps) for example, we find the following dialogue:

The disciple: 'What is the spirit of your teaching?'
T'ien-chu Shan-ch'ung: 'White clouds come to shut the door, while the moon and wind are locked within the hills.'
D: 'Where does the monk go when he passes away?'
T: 'Green leaves cover the mountains; the moon shines brightly on the stream.'
D: 'What is the Tao?'
T. 'Snowy clouds cover the green hills; a humming bird wanders from flower to flower in the yard.'
D: 'What is the benefit a monk can bring to the world?'
T: 'Rain pours everywhere; all mountains are beautiful.'
D: 'Why should our first master come from India?'

T: 'Up to the green hill, a white monkey carries its baby; bees and butterflies vist flowers among the green leaves.'
(Bk 4)

問：「如何是天柱家風？」
師答：「時有白雲來閉戶，更無風月四山流。」
問：「亡僧遷化向化何處去也？」
師答：「灩嶽峰高長積翠，舒江明月色光暉。」
問：「如何是道？」
師答：「白雲覆青嶂，蜂鳥步庭華。」
問：「如何是和尙利人處？」
師答：「一雨普滋，千山秀色。」
問：「如何是西來意？」
師答：「白猿抱子來青嶂，蜂蝶啣華綠葉間。」

Instead of providing a direct answer to the disciple's questions, here the master uses poetry, which verges on landscape painting, to suggest something more in a very subtle way, without imposing his political authority. His first reply to the disciple hints at the forceful self-enclosure of his own sect (with the door shut) and the effective control over desires which otherwise might run wild like the wind and moon. Yet, it also points to something that is free and flexible: the clouds, the wind, and the hills (the world outside). In a symbolic gesture, the master indicates that his teaching should not restrain the disciple from developing his own self-nature, as the political space authorized by the master is only covered with "snowy clouds," which, as a conventional metaphor for empty things that fool the ignorant but prove to be nothing essential for the enlightened, will not bother the disciple. Indeed, the disciple's self-nature is like the green hills covered temporarily by the clouds and is actually always green and alive (長積翠). As the humming bird wandering from flower to flower, so the disciple is nourished for the time being by the master's teaching, but is free to be on his own. The master tactfully deploys the language of images to suggest the possibility for the disciple to turn away from the master's word, to see what is outside of the master's door. His language functions both to institute and to challenge his political authority, since his words illuminate and consolidate the discipline, while at the same time they deviate from the scripture and provide no definitive answer. By constructing a series of pictures in response to his disciple's questions, which are largely based on the scriptures, T'ien-chu demonstrates a most active way of rewriting the scripture and of responding to the other's words or questions.

To be sure, scholars of the Wei-Chin period have already resorted to pictorial representation in their Pure Talk to convey ideas, but the use of literary imagination is largely to the effect of showing the speaker's ability to go beyond the conventional ways of communication, to bring in something new and authentic to surprise the audience. Self-expression and originality, rather than the attempt to subvert authority, are crucial in their intellectual discussions. In an age in which wars and political prosecutions drive the intellectuals to the habit of using drugs, such as the Five Stone Powders (五石散), of leading a hedonistic life, it is small wonder that scholars should engage in the pure art of talking and carnivalization with a scatological sense of excess. In any event, Zen discourse is more political in nature, to overturn the standard and scriptural language. It may be indebted to Pure Talk, but its content and form differ very much from those of its precursor.

The symbolic practice of overthrowing the authority of the Buddha's (as well as the masters') worlds is in accordance with what the literati do to the official language. Often, Zen masters would use "banquet" or "carnival" imagery (and sometimes real actions) to refer to the body of the Buddha as meat to feed the dogs, a corpse with golden clothes on, or a pile of human waste, etc. The blasphemous words are conveyed either through totally "unofficial" everyday speech or through poetic-pictorial discourse which goes beyond the immediate context. Buddha can be designated as a "piece of firewood" for the oven, or the "snowy cloud blocking the way to the valley." Whether using everyday speech or employing poetic-pictorial discourse to enlighten the disciples, Zen masters seem to carry on what poets, such as Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien, do to the established language and conventional rime schemes by drawing the distinction between the "static and dead" sentence (死句) and the "dynamic and living" sentence (活句). The link is far from arbitrary, for it is soon after the institutionalization of the "official" language in the Sui-T'ang period that we begin to hear phrases like "dynamic sentence" or "koan" (公案). The connection is further complicated by the interaction and mutual influence between the Zen masters and the literati. In many Zen paintings, we witness the impact of the literati painting on the masters. Not only would Zen painters utilize the conventional poetic imagery, for example, moon, flute, mountain, lake, pavilion, etc., but deploy the technique of the literati calligraphy and painting, such as light washes and darker splashes of ink, which might have something to do with Zen Buddhism and Taoist aesthetics from the outset. However, Zen painters also teach the literati a few things, for instance,

the simplest composition to bring out a maximum poetic suggestiveness, the design to inspire rather than to represent, the serenity or speculative mood, the withdrawal from the world, and perhaps more importantly, the discursive and contestatory nature of lyric inscription.

It is a common practice for Zen masters to compose poetry to convey their mental state. Zen poems are often discursive, functioning to contest the authoritative words or to persuade the Zen students to seek their own self-nature. Hui-neng (惠能 638-713), the Sixth Patriarch, is reported to have written the following poem:

The Bodhi is not a tree,
Nor is the soul a mirror bright;
Since there was nothing from the outset,
Whereon should the dust alight?

菩提本無樹，
明鏡亦非台，
本來無一物，
何處惹塵埃？

The contestatory character of the verse should become more apparent when one visualizes the setting in which the poem is produced. As a rice-pounder, who barely reads the scriptures (though gets to listen to the master's exposition of the texts from time to time), Hui-neng is a marginal figure in the monastery. None would expect to find his poem inscribed on the wall side by side with that of Shen-hsiu (神秀 died 706), the chief disciple of the Fifth Patriarch. Being the most learned of all disciples and thoroughly versed in the lore of his religion, Shen-hsiu is naturally considered by his brethren in the faith to be entitled to the honor of acting as the Sixth Patriarch. And indeed when Shen-hsiu writes down the following poem on the wall, he gives a piece of advice to every member of the community as if he were the authority:

This body is the Bodhi-tree,
The soul is like a mirror bright;
Take heed to keep it always clean,
And let on dust on it alight.

身爲菩提樹，

心如明鏡台，
時時勤拂拭，
勿使惹塵埃。

Juxtaposed with the authoritative and official verse by Shen-hsiu, Hui-neng's poem challenges and in fact deconstructs what the chief disciple tries to communicate. That an insignificant layman of whom nobody ever thought much should write in response to the recognized authority immediately sets the entire community astir and eventually forces the Fifth Patriarch to pass the staff and robe secretly to Hui-neng, who has to escape to the South. The uncanny story has been proven to be a later fabrication to reinvent the "origin" of the Southern School in opposition to the Northern School, a distinction which might not have taken place in reality (Shih Ying-shen 85-128); yet it does become an essential part of Zen Buddhism, which not only celebrates the direct confrontation between Hui-neng and Shen-hsiu, between an alien and the authority, between popular culture and elite culture, but draws upon the episode to criticize learning and to overturn authority. The confrontation is frequently acted out in the discoursing between the master and the disciple, and sometimes even played out in the form of physical assault: knocking on the disciple's head, cutting his thumbs off, or throwing the disciple out of the monastery, to enable him to come to a realization of the void of selfhood (*sunyata*). In such a symbolic practive, the proper space of knowledge, which is represented by the body, is invaded or mutilated.

Yün-men Wen-yen (雲門文偃 881-966), for instance, is reported to have held his staff before a congregation of monks and declared:

> In the scripture we read that the ignorant [unenlightened] take this for a real thing, the Hinayanists resolve it into a nonentity, the Pratyekabuddas regard it as a hallucination, while the Boddhisattvas admit its apparent reality, which is, however, essentially empty [sunyata]. But monks, you simply call it a staff when you see one.
>
> (quoted in Ch'u 208)

凡夫以爲有，二乘以爲無，緣覺以爲幻，菩薩以爲當體卽空，衲僧看到柱杖，就叫做柱杖。

In an attempt to call the monks' attention to the language degree zero — the staff itself, and by implication self-nature (自性), Yün-men dismantles the idea of a certain authoritative way of seeing or naming. For words and rules can never reach the essence of things; it would be inadequate to be entangled in the world of words without any consciousness of one's subjectivity, and even more so, if one is obsessed with the definition or concept of Buddha-nature. Another story reveals that a monk named Etcho asks him master the perhaps all too familiar question: "What is the Buddha?" To which the master replies: "You are Etcho" (quoted and translated in Kapleau 150). And when a magistrate tries to outwit the master Nan-ch'uan (南泉普願 748-834) by posing a tough question, the master resolves it with grace and ease:

> Lord Lu Ken, the Magistrate of Hsüan District, once asked Master Nan-ch'uan: 'In ancient time, a person raised a goose in a container. But as the goose grew day after day, it could no longer get out of the container. Now, master, without breaking the container or harming the goose, how would you free the goose from the container [liberate me from my office]?' Nan-ch'uan said: 'Your lordship!' Ken responded with a 'Yes.' The master then said: 'See, you are not out.' Ken was immediately enlightened and thanked the master with due respect. (quoted in Pa 58)

> 宣州刺史陸亘大夫問南泉禪師：「古人瓶中養一鵝，鵝漸長大，出瓶不得。如今不得毀瓶，不得損鵝。和尚作麼生出得？」南泉召：「大夫！」亘應諾。南泉：「出也。」亘從此開悟，遂禮謝。

What interests me here is the redistribution of power and the displacement of authority. The focus of attention shifts from the Buddha to the disciple, from the goose to the magistrate, from the scripture (another's words) to the self. Indeed, Yün-men is famous for reminding his disciples of the need to "kill the Buddha to feed the dogs" (一棒將佛打殺與狗子吃). Hsüeh-tou Ch'ung-hsien (雪竇重顯 980-1052) even tells his disciples that he would summon the Buddha to wash his feet. Both Yün-men and Hsüeh-tou live in the early Sung, and their violent ways of dismantling the Buddha's body and words are carried on to the end of the Northern Sung. During the Southern Sung, however, Zen Buddhism degenerates and seems to consist mainly in meditations (默照禪) or literary interpretations of the

masters' (or earlier masters') discourses (參話禪). As a consequence, Ta-hui Tsung-kao (大慧宗果 1089-1163) has to warn his disciples not to confuse the "finger" – words written on the page or spoken by the master – with what it points to – the "moon," self-nature (Ch'u 232-34). In the Northern Sung, Zen masters tend to employ a brief phrase to disrupt their disciples' thoughts and thereby release them from the "impediment of the scriptural language" (文字障), in order to enlighten them to the truth that they are subjects, not objects, of language. Sometimes, not only poetic discourses but pictures are used to intercept the disciples' stock responses, as in the Kuei-yang Sect (溈仰宗). The practive of turning to poetry or painting is already obvious in the late T'ang, and it is developed further by Hsüeh-tou, who is both a famous poet and a Zen master, and then by Liang K'ai (梁楷，風子) as well as Mu-ch'i (牧溪，法常), two remarkable Zen painters of the early thirteenth century. Both Liang and Mu-ch'i produce pictures of the simplest kind that not only demonstrate their supreme technical dexterity, but convey glimpses from a world embracing infinity of space and eternity of time. This trend of pictorial expressionism becomes so popular that by the Yüan the Zen monk Ying Yü-chien (瑩玉澗 fl. 1320-1350) is considered to be more a landscape painter than a member of the Zen community (Siren II 142).

It is apparent that the Zen masters tend to resort to image constructing and deconstructing to convey their subtle conceptions of what constitutes the power relations between the masters and their disciples. What is perceived to be static, definitive, authoritative, or final is revealed to be in need of further contestation and investigation. The rhetoric of the Zen masters opens up, therefore, a problematic space which insists on reflecting on itself, demonstrating its own inability to rise above or be superior to that in which it is positioned and internally challenged. I find this sort of self-reflection interesting and illuminating in teaching Humanities and in studying Third World literature. When Jean Francois Lyotard talks about the question of "just gaming" or "differend," he thinks like a Zen master without knowing it. For Lyotard the major issue is that of phrasing and of political justice. Or, to put it another way, it is the question of who can speak for whom and in what capacity. If the master speaks for the disciple, what kind of understanding does he achieve except that which is defined and phrased by the master himself? How can one let the other speak his "silent" language without repressing it? How can one not find a phrase for the other immediately, so as to speak for the other? How can one arrive at

a situation in which the other is not spoken for by an attorney, who, in the case of Third World studies, might be using the logic of late capitalism which would inevitably appropriate the objects and define them as culturally as well as economically backward? These are some questions Lyotard asks with the Zen masters.

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