Chan/Zen, the Oxherding Pictures,
and the World-Affirming Turn in Chinese Buddhism

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The Ten Oxherding pictures and accompanying poems of Kuo'an Shiyuan, who lived in China in the 12th century, are an iconic representation of the Bodhisattva Path in Chan (Zen) Buddhism. They also represent a turning point in the history of Buddhism in China, a moment at which the tradition was becoming what it is today. The following sketch of that moment therefore requires a bit of historical background.

Buddhism began in northern India in the 5th century BCE with the enlightenment experience of Siddhartha Gautama, commonly known as Shakyamuni Buddha ("enlightened sage of the Shakya clan"), or just the Buddha. By the 1st century CE it had entered China, brought there by Buddhist monks traveling with merchants on the dangerous branch of the Silk Road that crossed the Himalayas. Over several hundred years Buddhist teachings and practices were learned, absorbed, and modified by increasing numbers of Chinese of all social classes. In the 7th and 8th centuries several new Chinese "schools" of Buddhism began to develop, including one known as Chan. These new schools reflected indigenous Chinese attitudes and values, which differed in some respects from those in Buddhism's homeland, India. During the Song dynasty (10th-13th century) Chan Buddhism developed into roughly the form in which we know it today. It was brought to Japan in the 13th century, where it was known as Zen.

Three of the four major new schools of Chinese Buddhism each focused on particular sutras, or speeches (sermons) of the Buddha. The school known as Tiantai (named after the mountain where its major monastic center was located) regarded the *Lotus Sutra* as the most complete and important teaching of the Buddha. The Huayan school took its name from the sutra that it regarded as the ultimate teaching, the *Huayan* ("Flower Garland") *Sutra*. The Pure Land (Jingtu) school regarded a trio of sutras, collectively known as the Pure Land sutras, as its inspiration. All of these sutras had originally been written in India, in the Sanskrit language, and had been translated into Chinese during the several hundred years of Chinese Buddhism's "gestation."

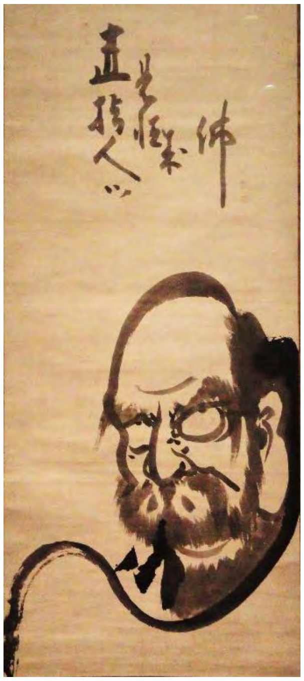
The Chan school one-upped the other three by claiming to be based on a *wordless* teaching of the Buddha rather than the written doctrines of a sutra – an ineffable teaching beyond words or concepts. This idea of ineffable truth was not a new idea in Buddhism, nor was it unique to Buddhism. Classical Daoism, in such early texts as the *Laozi* (aka the *Daode jing*) and the *Zhuangzi* from the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, had similarly claimed that the true *dao* or Way could not be expressed in words or captured in concepts. In Buddhism, the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna (1st century CE) had said that there were two levels of truth: conventional or relative truth that can be captured in words and absolute truth that cannot.

In Chan Buddhism this was expressed in terms of two "mythical moments" in the story of Chan's origins: the "Flower Sermon" of the Buddha and a poem attributed to an Indian monk named Bodhidharma who came to China in the 6th century. The Flower Sermon, which first appeared in writing during the Song dynasty, describes the mythical beginning of the "wordless teaching":

> When Shakyamuni Buddha was at Vulture Peak, he held out a flower to his listeners. Everyone was silent. Only Kashyapa broke into a broad smile. The Buddha said, "I have the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, and the Subtle Dharma Gate, independent of words and transmitted beyond doctrine (*jiao* 教). This I have entrusted to Kashyapa. (Trans. Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan & Hekiganroku* [New York: Weatherhill, 1977], 41. The original text is *Wumen guan* [Gateless Gate], by Wumen Huikai [1183-1260].)

The second "mythical moment" is a poem attributed to Bodhidharma, who was considered the monk who first brought the "worldless teaching" from India to China; he is known as the twenty-eighth Indian "patriarch" (ancestor) and the first Chinese patriarch of Chan Buddhism. The poem, which also first appeared in writing during the Song dynasty, is a characterization of Chan. The first two lines are actually a direct quotation of "independent of words and transmitted beyond doctrine" in the Flower Sermon, but with the clauses reversed:

A special transmission outside the teachings (*jiao*),
Not based on the written word;
Directly pointing to the human mind,
Achieving Buddhahood by seeing one's nature.



"Giant Daruma" [Bodhidharma],
by Hakuin Ekaku (Japan, 1685-1768).
Indianapolis Museum of Art / Wikimedia Commons.
The calligraphy is the last two lines of the poem.

The story continues, in historically-verified time, to Bodhidharma's student, Huike (487-593), who received the "worldless teaching" and passed it down to his student Sengcan (d. 606?), and thence to Daoxin (580-651) and Hongren (601-674), the "Fifth Patriarch." In another text, the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, the story is extended to a sixth patriarch, Huineng (638-713), although this part of the story returns (at least in the view of contemporary scholars) to myth. Nevertheless, all subsequent teachers recognized as Chan/Zen Masters trace their lineages to the Sixth Patriarch, and therefore to Bodhidharma and the Buddha himself.*

This origin myth of Chan Buddhism – part history, part "myth" in the popular sense of fiction – depicts a direct line of teachers and students beginning with the Buddha through Bodhidharma to a series of Chinese teachers in fairly recent historical time – not a long time ago and far far away in India but recently and "right here" in China. Thus the source of truth – the Buddha Dharma – became more easily and directly accessible to both monastic and lay followers of the Buddha. This included those who could not read or could not afford an education, because that truth was embodied not in sutras but in actual, living teachers – namely the abbots of monasteries who had been certified as successors in the various lineages that had evolved after the Sixth Patriarch. These abbots taught not only monks and nuns but also laypeople affiliated with their temples. (The overall Buddhist community was known as the "Four-fold Sangha," comprising monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.)

Chan Buddhism thus understood and presented itself as unique among the Chinese schools of Buddhism, offering what Nagarjuna had called the most perfect truth (*paramartha satya*) that transcends words and concepts. To convey this truth Chan emphasized the personal encounter between teacher and student and meditation to prepare the mind to realize that truth. In fact, the word Chan is a short form of the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word for that meditative state of mind: *dhyana*, which was transliterated into the Chinese *channa* 禪那 and shortened to *chan* 禪. The other Chinese schools also incorporated meditation, but placed greater emphasis on teachings or doctrines (*jiao* 教, as mentioned in the two "mythical moments" above).

The Oxherding pictures were part of this rhetoric of Chan uniqueness, portraying the path of becoming a Bodhisattva in the form of pictures and poems, both of which are non-discursive forms of communication. Poems, although composed of words, convey their meanings through metaphor, imagery, and such; potentially stimulating the more intuitive and subtle understanding that Buddhist enlightenment entails.

Path, pictures, poems

"Bodhisattva" – literally "enlightened being" – was originally a term in early Indian Buddhism that referred to the Buddha in his previous lifetimes – a "Buddha-to-be." The forms of Buddhism that spread into China, though, for the most part were part of a newer movement or branch of Buddhism, called Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle"). The bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism was reconceived as an enlightened being who chooses to remain in this cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) instead of achieving *nirvana*, or the "extinction" of rebirth. The "Bodhisattva vow" is to remain in this world in order to help others achieve enlightenment and release from suffering. Bodhisattvas are characterized by wisdom and compassion. Their compassion for others is based on their intuitive understanding (wisdom) that all beings are fundamentally interdependent; thus any suffering is the suffering of all. Interdependence is the real meaning of "emptiness" in Mahayana Buddhism: things are "empty" in the sense that they lack *independent* natures. Mahayana

Bodhisattvas are something like savior figures who can take quite mundane forms, sometimes unrecognizable to ordinary people.

"Path" is a familiar trope in Buddhism, going back to the original teaching of the Buddha, the "Four Noble Truths." The fourth Noble Truth is in fact the "Eightfold Path," which covers morality, meditation, and wisdom. In Mahayana, the Bodhisattva Path – the process of realizing one's inherent "Buddha-nature," which is wisdom and compassion -- was often portrayed in various numbers of stages, including ten in the *Daśabhūmika* (Ten Stages) *sutra* (later incorporated into the *Huayan sutra*), an obvious precursor to the Ten Oxherding pictures. "Path" in Chinese, incidentally, is *dao* 道, usually translated "way".

Series of pictures were used in India to portray the life of the Buddha early in Buddhism's history. The same was true of Confucius in China. Another famous Buddhist story, which was eventually incorporated into the *Huayan sutra*, depicts a young man name Sudhana traveling to meet fifty-three teachers, including various bodhisattvas, in his quest for enlightenment; this too was portrayed visually – e.g. in carved relief panels in the 9th-century Borobudur temple in Java and in 11th-century Nepalese paintings. In China picture series were also used to illustrate particular virtues, such as a famous series called "Twenty-four Cases of Filiality."

Poems also had a long history in Buddhism. The early literature included verses (*gathas*) in praise of the Buddha. The *Platform Sutra*, mentioned above and dating to the 8th century, includes another "mythical moment" in Chan's constructed early history, in which the Fifth Patriarch (Hongren) chooses the Sixth Patriarch (Huineng) by means of a poetry contest. Later Chan masters up to the present day have used poetry as representations of their enlightenment, including "death poems" near the end of their lives. (See, for example, Yoel Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* [Rutland: C.E. Tuttle, 1986]).

Turning point

Several versions of the Oxherding series appeared in China beginning in the 11th century. This is the period in which Chan/Zen Buddhism developed many of the characteristics that are still evident today. These include the role of charismatic, often iconoclastic teachers; the reliance on non-discursive expression; the greater use of art, especially in spare and spontaneously-produced forms; the focus on meditation; the use of humor; and the often enigmatic stories and sayings of legendary Tang-dynasty (6th-9th century) masters. The version of the series discussed in this book – the one by Kuo'an Shiyuan from the 12th century – reflects not only some of these characteristics but also an important turning point in the history of Chinese Buddhism. It has to do with the attitude toward ordinary, everyday life – the mundane world of ordinary experience.

Early Buddhism reflected a rather negative view of mundane existence – the realm of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*, the "cycle" of existence). This world and everything in it is the occasion for *duhkha*, which is usually translated "suffering" but really means something like *unsatisfactoriness* or *frustration*. The frustration is caused by our human tendency to grasp for permanence in a world that is constantly changing, or impermanent – including life itself, which we know will come to an end. This unsatisfactoriness is the starting point and *raison d'être* of Buddhism. In fact it is the first of the Four Noble Truths: All life is *duhkha*. The second truth is that *duhkha* is caused by craving for permanence, and the third is the corollary that *duhkha* can be eliminated by eliminating its cause, craving. The fourth Noble Truth is the way to eliminate craving: the Eightfold Path.

In early Buddhism the meditative part of the Eightfold Path is known as the Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga* in Pali, the language of the early sutras), the progressive dropping-away of all mental states; the purification of the mind. This is necessary because it is the everyday life of the mind that fetters us to the eternal cycle of rebirth. Continual rebirth, it is important to bear in mind, also means continual death and dying. The ordinary experience that keeps us in the realm of *samsara* includes family life, which of course is full of craving and attachment – the cause of suffering. Hence it is necessary – either in this life or a future one – to forego family and live a monastic life, where temptations to craving and attachment are reduced to a minimum. The goal is transcendence of ordinary life and consciousness, which enable "salvation" from the unsatisfactoriness that is inevitable in *samsara*. This includes transcendence (to the extent possible) of the body, which of course is the source of endless craving.

Some of the early techniques, therefore, included meditation on the distasteful elements of the body and on rotting corpses, as lessons in the impermanence of the human body. The *Satipatthanasutta* (Sutra on Establishing Mindfulness) includes this "meditation on mindfulness of the body:"

> A monk considers his body *per se*, from the soles of his feet upward and from the top of his head downward, wrapped as it is in skin and filled with all sorts of impurities. He reflects, "In this body, there is hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, colon, intestines, stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, lymph, saliva, snot, synovia, and urine."
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> … And also, if a monk should see a corpse abandoned in a cemetery, dead one day or two or three, swollen, turning blue, and beginning to fester, he should concentrate on his own body and think "This body of mine is just like that one; it has the same nature, and it will not escape this fate." (John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism*, 2nd ed. [Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002], 119.)

After the Indian forms of Buddhism were fully understood and digested by the Chinese we begin to see innovations reflecting the traditional Chinese worldview, which was in general more positive and affirmative in regard to ordinary life and mind. For example, in Confucianism ordinary life is the arena for human *fulfillment* in family, community, and state. The highest calling for an educated man was to be a "scholar-official" serving in government; for a woman it was being a wife and mother. The ultimate goal for both genders was to become a Sage, one who embodies the perfection of human relationships and has a morally transformative effect on those around him and on society at large. The basis of Sagehood was the innate goodness of human nature, a theory developed by Mencius (Mengzi) in the 4th century BCE.

In Classical Daoism – the intellectual tradition based primarily on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* -- the ultimate truth, the *dao*, was to be found in the natural world, which is characterized by change and transformation. The ultimate goal was to live a long and healthy life in harmony with nature. In the Daoist religion, which began in the 2nd century CE, the human body was understood as a microcosm of the *dao* and the locus of spiritual perfection. The ultimate goal shifted from longevity to immortality. (See my *Chinese Religious Traditions* [Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002], chapters 3-4.)

This affirmative view of ordinary experience and the human body begins to be seen in the new Chinese schools of Buddhism, and most clearly in Chan. The goal was no longer to purify the mind of its "defilements" (the negative psychological states causing attachment and suffering), but to discover one's inherent "Buddha-nature" – one's innate wisdom and compassion – an idea influenced in part by the Confucian idea of the innate moral nature. It also drew upon earlier themes in Indian Mahayana Buddhism, including Nagarjuna's theory that the true nature of *samsara* is in fact *nirvana*; i.e. *nirvana* is *samsara*, correctly understood (another difficult concept that I cannot amplify here). The result was a consistent and persistent theme in Chan Buddhism: *nirvana*, enlightenment (the Chinese preferred the latter formulation), or freedom is to be found in the realm of everyday life. One of the famous sayings of the 8th-century Chan master Mazu, for example, was "Ordinary mind is the Way (*dao*)." In other words, wisdom is realized and manifested by compassionate action in the world – not transcendence of it. Other Chan and Zen masters said that Buddhahood is to be found in insects, dung, and inanimate roof tiles. Here we get into some of the enigmatic sayings that Chan and Zen are known for, but they are all based solidly on well-reasoned philosophical claims.

Oxherding

The earliest version of the Oxherding series appeared probably in 11th century China, but consisted of only five (now lost) pictures. The ox in this series, representing the mind, began as black and progressively became whiter, illustrating progressive stages of enlightenment. It ended with an empty circle, symbolizing the mystical experience of undifferentiated unity in enlightenment, a state of mind in which the distinction between subject and object is gone. This represents the culmination of the purification of the mind and the transcendence of ordinary thought and experience, as in early Buddhism. Later versions extended the series to six, eight, and ten pictures. The six-picture series, now also lost but attributed to Zede Hui (11th century), apparently culminated differently than the one in five stages, because a poem accompanying it, which does survive, goes like this:

> Even beyond the ultimate limits there extends a passageway,

> Whereby he comes back among the six realms of existence;
> Every worldly affair is a Buddhist work,
> And wherever he goes he finds his home air;
> Like a gem he stands out even in the mud,
> Like pure gold he shines even in the furnace;
> Along the endless road [of birth and death] he walks sufficient unto himself,
> In whatever associations he is found he moves leisurely unattached.
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> (Trans. D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* [1934; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1960])

The opening lines of this poem clearly describe the Bodhisattva who remains in this "dusty world" to spread wisdom and compassion. So here the culmination of the path is not transcendence of worldly distinctions but affirmation of this world, where enlightenment is to be found and realized.

Kuo'an's version of the Ten Oxherding pictures likewise represents the turning point I have described. In this series, in which the ox remains black throughout and probably represents the Buddha-nature, the empty circle is number 8 in the series, not the last one. Following it are two more: "Returning to the Source," which is simply a landscape painting with no ox and no herder, and "Entering the Marketplace with Helping Hands." This last one depicts a portly, jolly man carrying a large sack on a stick. The image is based on a real 10th-century Chinese monk nicknamed Budai ("Cloth Sack"; Hotei in Japanese), who supposedly wandered around and gave gifts or treats to children. Later he was identified as Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, and today he is often referred to as the "laughing Buddha." In Japan he was incorporated into a group known as the Seven Gods (*kami*) of Good Luck, primarily associated with Shinto. But in the Oxherding pictures he clearly represents the bodhisattva, having returned to the dusty world after his enlightenment and manifesting his Buddha-nature of wisdom and compassion.

The ninth picture, a simple landscape, also illustrates the turning, the shift in the value of "this world" from negative to positive. It resonates with a well-known saying by another Chan master from this period, Qingyuan Weixin (11th-12th century):

> Before I had studied Chan for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers as rivers. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have achieved a place of rest, I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers. (Trans. D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, First Series, modified [1949; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1961])

By "I saw that mountains are not mountains" Qingyuan means that he saw the true nature, what Nagarjuna called the perfect truth, of mountains – namely their emptiness of any independent nature. By "I see mountains once again as mountains" he means that emptiness, the interdependence of mountains with all other things, is precisely what mountains truly are. In Nagarjuna's terms, *nirvana* is nothing but *samsara*, correctly understood. Or as the singer Donovan Leitch put it in 1967, "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is."

Kuo-an's version of the Ten Oxherding pictures therefore represents a fundamental transformation of worldview in Buddhism as it spread from South to East Asia. In it, *this world* is the arena in which fulfillment or "salvation" can be achieved. It requires no extra-worldly intervention, and its completion does not involve any transcendence of this world. This world is not something to be "saved" from; it is where ultimate meaning and value – sacredness, if you will – reside.

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[*] For the sake of brevity I have simplified the story a great deal. For the dates and an excellent discussion of the early history of Chan in China see Master Sheng Yen (with Dan Stevenson), *Hoofprint of the Ox: Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path as Taught by a Modern Chinese Master* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a more thorough discussion see John C. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).