

VIEWS & REVIEWS

On the Criteria of Being Human

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IN MARCH 1986 I found in the mail (it must have been a fluke) an invitation to participate all expenses paid in a symposium in Takayama at the end of the year. One hardly declines offhand such invitations to the Land of the Ever-Rising Yen. Although I had no idea what I could possibly have to offer to this "First International Yoko Civilization Research Conference on Creating the Future of Mankind"—no less!—I accepted at once. One thing I would be able to contribute was the suggestion to change "Mankind" into "Humankind", for without the cooperation of women—and not only physically—there would definitely be no future to "create" for our species. Even with full female cooperation, however, it seemed overly optimistic to take the species' future for granted. I was sceptical about the "hundred and twenty distinguished scholars" invited to participate in this "interfaith" symposium, and writing a scenario for it in four days.

It was reassuring to find myself listed as "artist/author" in the section: "Religion and the Arts," not in that of medicine, for I hardly remember my obsolete medical training of half a century ago. As artist/author I could question at any rate, whether—assuming we still have a chance to project a future—all planning for humans is not doomed to be futile unless we can reach a preliminary consensus on what it might mean to be human. Has not all of history been an unbroken chain of tragedy and horror, because reflection on the basic riddle: "What is it to be human?" had been consistently skirted? Do not the "Historical" palavers from Versailles via Locarno to Yalta prove it sufficiently?

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My own preoccupation with the riddle is not of recent date: it has been with me since early childhood. I can even pinpoint precisely when it started.

It was on August 4, 1914. As a five-year old I stood at my grandfather's hand in the town square of my hometown, precisely on the border between Holland and Belgium. Grandfather was spelling out the Proclamation of the mobilization of the Dutch army. World War I had started. The German Big Bertha guns, already booming in the near distance, were flattening the fortifications of Liège, fifteen miles to the South. From my attic window I saw, just across the border, the town of Visé burning. A huge cigar, the first Zeppelin, was cruising lazily through a murky red sky.

Holland was to remain neutral in that first bloodletting. Yet from my fifth to ninth year, looking from our neutral grandstand into hell, I saw the endless stream of fugitives trek past my window and the trucks, pushcarts and other improvised ambulances, loaded with still-living human flesh in the tatters of French, Belgium and German uniforms. "They are dying! What is dying? Who am I? What is it to be human? I do not remember the words, but do remember the child's desperate questioning.

The horrors of World War I are still etched on my inner eye and so is the continuum of frightfulness that has never stopped since: Hitler's rise, the tidal wave of murderous hatred that made the war that followed inevitable: Dresden, Rotterdam, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, then Argentina and Chile all the way to San Salvador's "democratically elected" death squads.

I shudder, for as I write this I realize that it may have been on that summer day of 1914 that our Spaceship Titanic started on her tragic maiden voyage.

As I began to prepare my paper "On the Criteria of Being Human" for the First International Yoko Civilization Research Conference, I at first quoted dutifully Darwin's, and Simpson's and Fromm's and Dhobzansky's "scientific" definitions of being human. Then I tore it all up. As artist/author I did not have to try to play the academic quoting game. And so I wrote my paper "On the Criteria of Being Human" quickly, I might say from the heart, in confrontation with the threat of extinction hanging over us. It was scary, for what I wrote was no doubt much too unacademic for this professorial elite. However

academic they might be, they were also human! I would speak human to human.

What I could not foresee, was that these criteria of the human would elucidate both in their ancient pre-scientific and in contemporary neurobiological terms what I in these many years had gleaned from Zen as being its very core: Hui-neng's (7th century) "Original Face you had before even your parents were born," Rinzai's "True Man," Bankei's "Unborn."

In Takayama I started out questioning, very politely, the entire genre of interfaith symposia. Important as they may be, they are routinely limited to professionals, to religious "leaders," theologians, sociologists and other professors. Didn't they exclude not only all of the "laity", but also those contemporaries who, shunning religious self-labeling and affiliation, are therefore no less awake to the Transcendent, no less committed to the search for Meaning and for values one can live by? Could not movements like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Earth Watch, New Alchemy and dozens more, be imbued—in the face of our terminal predicament—with that new, unlabeled, yet profoundly religious orientation to existence-as-such, without which existence-as-such is in mortal jeopardy?

Was not the Great Divide ever more clearly *not* that between Christians, Jews, Buddhists or whatever, but between those of us to whom life—human life in particular—is still meaningful, sacred however secular the semantics and on the other hand, those others to whom it is meaningless and expendable?

"I may be standing here as the lone, ill-equipped representative of these millions of excluded ones," I said, "I am however fully aware that the Great Religious Traditions—irreconcilable as their conceptualizations of the Absolute, the Transcendent/Immanent, may be—*somehow offer a too rarely realized "trans-Traditional" consensus on what basically stamps us as either human or as "sinfully" less-than-human.*

It is consistently implied in their myths, parables, rituals and precepts. Not a single one of these Traditions preaches: Thou shalt kill, cheat, lie, commit adultery, torture. . . .' Moreover, these Traditions offer remarkably compatible paradigms of the Human inner process, its maturation and fulfillment."

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The Bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism is clearly such an exemplar: the fully matured, fully awakened one, who in his compassion foregoes entering Nirvana, but descends into the market place to bestow blessings and to liberate those others—no longer perceived as “others”—who are still suffering under the yoke of their confusions and delusions.

How compatible this Buddhist paradigm is with the Jewish one of “The Just for whom the world is spared!” And how this again is in harmony with the Christian paradigm of the “Light that lighteth *everyone* come into the world” and of “the Sleeping Christ within”. In institutional Christianity, the Christ as exemplar of the fully, the “divinely” Human remained all too implicit, too concealed under centuries of legalistic, political, institutional accretions. In the past few decades, however, He seems to have become explicit once more in the movements of regeneration and liberation of the U.S., Europe and especially Latin America.

Another consensus the Great Traditions share is that the pre-condition for the awakening of the Sleeping Christ within, of the Buddha Nature, for this maturation to Full Humanness, is the overcoming of the ruthless narcissism of the little Me and consequently of the frightful effects of the snowballing of these little egos into those in-group egos of race, nation, church, which throughout history have regressed into orgies of barbarity and mob violence.

I have to resist quoting more from my Takayama paper, which was surprisingly well received, so well, that *On the Criteria of Being Human* was chosen to be the main theme of the follow-up symposium scheduled for the autumn of 1989. Astonishing!

I had reason to be pleased with myself, but, on the contrary, from the moment I stopped speaking I was troubled and felt I had left out what was most urgent. I had not stressed sufficiently that the criteria of being human which the Great Traditions shared, had remained the *indispensable cohesive principle of all viable civilizations, not excepting ours*. It was therefore of paramount urgency to revitalize these eroded criteria, to translate them from their archaic formulations into a language to which the contemporary ear is attuned. I had a gnawing feeling that I once had found a hint of such a “translation” but however hard I tried, it seemed to have faded from memory forever, On my flight home it kept bothering me. What was missing?

Then, somewhere over Alaska, the seatbelt sign went on, and in the frightening turbulence that followed some trigger point must have been touched. The block dissolved when an ominous shudder went through the plane. I saw my neighbor cross himself, and at that very moment, tossed helter skelter on 37,000 feet through leadgrey nothingness, I saw it clearly: a small, square magazine with an article in it by a researcher in Bethesda on the evolution of our human brain as a trinity of brains—he called it a “Triune Brain”—in which the reptilian and mammalian components are still as active as ever.

A reptile, a mammal, and what I proudly call “Me” were sitting here, locked together under this one seatbelt!

I recalled how, while reading that article—it must have been in the mid seventies—I had seen as in a flash: Look! This shows the difference between being a naked ape and being human, and it expresses it, at last, in the *biological, scientific terms contemporary people can understand*.

A physician friend, equally fascinated by the Triune Brain, sent me a huge stack of MacLean’s—that was the researcher’s name—papers.¹ At the time I only read them through perfunctorily, as I was buried in a book I was trying to finish.

“When I get home, if I get home! I’ll work through all of MacLean’s four hundred pages.” It was a solemn vow.

I did get home and kept my vow: it took me a month or more. I made notes and started to write an essay in preparation for the Second Takayama Conference. Suddenly paralyzed by doubt, I sent what I had written to Paul D. MacLean, M.D., Chief of the Laboratory of Brain Evolution at the National Institute of Health: “I wonder whether I have interpreted your work correctly . . . would be most grateful . . . etc.”

Dr. MacLean’s answer reassured me: “. . . you have not misinterpreted me at all. You seem to understand me better than many of my colleagues.”

Hence, at the follow-up conference at Takayama at the end of 1989, I could present my paper “On Criteria of Being Human # 2”, taking into account MacLean’s findings between the early fifties and today

¹ Paul D. MacLean, M.D. “The Triune Brain,” Collected Papers, U.S. National Institute of Health, Bethesda, Md., 1952-1990.

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and referring those for whom my summary might be too simplistic to the authoritative abstract in the "Lexicon of Neurosciences" Vol. II (Birkhauser: Stuttgart, Boston).

It follows here as a maximally abrogated intermezzo, unavoidably somewhat "technical" in character, but leading up to conclusions which may well touch the core of the Zen of being Human.

In his papers on the Triune Brain MacLean formulates and refines his concept of the hierarchic nature of the human brain as being indeed a trinity of brains, a "Triune Brain," which encompasses the still very active, surviving structures of the reptilian and mammalian brain. The reptilian component is functionally, but also chemically and histologically, radically differentiated from the Old or "Paleo" and Neo Mammalian brain structures that envelop it.

The Old Mammalian brain developed in the course of its evolution via the New-Mammalian brain into the convoluted neural tissue-mass of our human neo-cortex, those right and left hemispheres which fill so much of our contemporary skulls. It did not happen overnight! It took some 240 to 280 million years, the equivalent of forty million American presidential elections, sobering thought . . .

The reptilian part of our contemporary brain already knew all it needed for mating, breeding, flocking, foraging, hunting, hoarding, grooming, migrating, and fighting. What Nietzsche was to call the Will-to-Power was, some two hundred million years before him, already asserting itself triumphantly in the lowliest lizard. The reptilian brain was moreover adept at greeting rituals and the etiquette of challenge, aggression and submission. Courtship rituals were acted out in well designed choreography, and with a dazzling display of color for added sex appeal. The reptile brain even established routines and timetables for the activities of daily life: breakfast at eight, lunch at noon, followed by a siesta.

This lizard-snake-crocodile brain remains an integral part of our genetic coding, so that the patient on the couch may be bothered, even dominated, by her reptile-within; the therapist no less. Priceless assets in crocodilian relationships, may be liabilities in human conviviality.

In the transition from reptile to mammal a veritable quantum jump occurs, behaviorally speaking. The young are nursed, parental care, the capacity of play, even vocalized communication appear on the scene in the form of the "separation call" or "isolation call," an

emergency alarm which, non-verbal as it still is, functions to maintain maternal-offspring contact, and eventually serves group allegiance.

Reptiles, on the contrary, seem to have no heart at all for what emerges from those eggs lying around, hence are apt to devour their offspring without scruples—unless the young manage to escape. Those of the formidable Komodo Dragon even have to dodge parental gluttony by fleeing into the trees. For baby lizards any vocalized drawing of motherly attention would be suicidal.

In mammals, like cats and dogs, the much enlarged olfactory apparatus made them invent the marking-off of their territories by depositing urine. Baboon bigwigs devised erection displays as a simple and effectively eloquent way of signaling territorial and matrimonial sovereignty, perhaps vaguely analogous to the signaling of their enclaves of expertise by the academic and professorial use of those esoteric jargons that hamper interdisciplinary communication.

The Old Cortex of the early mammals developed the great Limbic Lobe which was to become the common denominator in the brains of all mammals. MacLean was able to locate in what he calls “the Limbic System” (1952) specific areas concerned with self-preservation, feeding, fighting, self-protection, but also with emotional and socio-sexual responses to stimuli.

In higher mammals the neo-mammalian neo-cortex continued to mushroom until it reached its summit as the superb computer-in-the-head, which makes us humans capable of deductive reasoning, learning, speech: primitive vocalization develops into verbalization.

Whereas reptiles are slaves to precedent and ritual as having survival value, assuming that what worked once, is bound to work again, mammals memorize more “critically,” even “creatively” in evaluating changing conditions as calling for changing responses. Their brain function has, to some extent, become self-corrective.

In the human brain, however, intra-cranial communication is handicapped by having a trio of rather disharmonious control “processing assemblies” of which the two older ones are insufficiently “wired” and programmed for transmission of the symbolic signalings of language.

MacLean speculates—perhaps stretching the point—that the jurisprudence of our legal systems may well have its earliest antecedents in the reptilian brain’s fidelity to precedent and ritual, and that this might also account for certain “religious” conventions of awe and submission:

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kneeling, bowing, folding of hands, and perhaps even for the veneration of certain axiomatic pre-suppositions harkening back to our most distant forebears. Might reptilian rituals also survive in practices like national rituals, inaugurations, parades, coronations? Lizards' aggression rituals include a stiff-legged goose-step unequalled by the Changing of the Guard.

The much expanded capacity of the human neo-cortex for verbal communication, far transcending the primitive "separation call," which eventually produced symbolic language and speech, enabled us to give verbal expression to those wants and needs which were bound to remain inarticulated by the reptilian, the paleo-mammalian and neo-mammalian components of the contemporary human brain.

The remarkable computer of our neo-cortex is relentlessly logical, consistently "rationalistic" in its operations. It is however also *devoid of all intuition and feeling*, so that one may suppose that the neo-cortical computer has managed to devise all those remarkably clever and demoniacally cruel ways in which humans exploit, manipulate, ill-treat, maim and kill their own species, retail and wholesale. Could its apotheosis be the H bomb, or the brilliantly planned slaughter houses for human beings which the Nazis invented? Are trillions of victims possibly the prey of this feelingless intra-cranial computer, which routinely, yet somewhat prematurely is *mistaken to be a fully "human" brain? For it is not yet human, it is at most pre-human, proto-human.*

Could it be this pre-human brain which in its feelingless arrogance is steering our Spaceship Titanic on its collision course with the relentless iceberg of Reality?

Chuang Tzu (500 B.C.), in the face of life's mysteries, mused: "One may well suppose the True Controller to be behind it all. That such a Power works I can believe. I cannot see its Form: it acts but has no Form."

The Western mystical poet Angelus Silesius wrote in the 17th century:

Mystery Thou art
Fathomless abyss.

To see Abyss in all that is
Is seeing that which IS.

Submerged in mystery as we are, we might indulge in the fantasy that God, or Plato's Anima Mundi, or Chuang Tzu's "True Controller"

realized a few million years ago that he had created a monstrous creature, and that this little Frankenstein, given time, was bound not only to destroy himself and his offspring—a sustainable loss—but with him this privileged little planet and all that lives on it. With a little luck he might even succeed in destabilizing the entire cosmic order.

In this wistful gloss on Genesis I, one might surmise God or the True Controller or Plato's World Soul in an act of limitless mercy, having given a twist to the course of evolution, by adding to the mammalian neo-cortex its newest and latest outcropping, the *prefrontal cortex*, which would function as a corrective, a "humanizing" influence indeed, on the mercilessly "rational" computer.

With the development of the pre-frontal cortex, the still essentially pre-human brain acquired the capacity, the potentiality, to become at last fully, authentically, yes, *specifically* human. This pre-frontal cortex namely, connected as it is with the sub-divisions of the limbic system concerned with parental care and the capacity for play, appears to grace us with the unprecedented capability of *insight into, consciousness of, our own life-process*. This looking-inward, in turn, opens up the capacity to attain a visceral realization, a gut feeling, for the life process in other living beings. Consequently it makes possible those first stirrings of *empathy*—the perception of the needs, the joys and the pains, the identification with other life forms. It announces the arising of *compassion* and the tendency to alleviate suffering. The pre-frontal cortex also makes *foresight* possible, *a first inkling of causality*, of the causes and effects of our actions. It should be stressed that no ethical principles are "interpreted into" the purely biological data of MacLean's research.

The Human has appeared on stage, the Triune Brain has become Triune Plus!

If one compares the low-brow profile of a Neanderthaler with the unmistakably high-brow contour of a Cro-Magnon skull, as correlated with the expansion of the prefrontal cortex, it becomes plausible at once that the Cro-Magnon spawned the so convincingly human cave artists who painted the magnificent bulls on the rock walls of Lascaux and Altamira, some thirty thousand years ago. These Cro-Magnon ar-

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tists, said J. Bronowski “placed their mark on their rock walls, as if to proclaim: ‘This is Man! Man has been here!’ ”

Ludwig von Bertanaffly wrote:

“...symbolism...is the divine spark that distinguished the poorest specimen of True Man from the most perfectly adapted animal...” And Nicholas Berdyaev: “It is the divine in man that justifies my faith in God.”

Something new had appeared under the sun!

In the epic of our origins the prefrontal function constitutes a 180 degree turnabout from what for untold millions of years had been a purely reptile-eat-reptile, dog-eat-dog universe. MacLean's findings at last confront us with scientifically, genetically, biologically based criteria of what constitutes Specifically Human behavior patterns. They supply us moreover with indisputable biological NORMS of what is Specifically Human nature, and conversely, of what, on scientific evidence, may be discriminated an infra-human (pre-human, sub-human, in-human, even anti-human) conduct. To be Human then means: the control by the genetically encoded pre-frontal capabilities over the—equally genetically encoded—reptilian and mammalian drives.

In short: This control by the Specifically Human capabilities of empathy, compassion, foresight based on “in-sight,” over the reptilian and mammalian impulses, I venture to characterize as THE HUMAN IMPERATIVE.

It would be naive to expect that the establishment of biological criteria of what is Specifically Human would automatically bring about a change from infra-human to human conduct. The function of criteria is: to supply us with norms. The function of a fever thermometer is not to lower body temperature, but to measure it as being within the normal range or not.

In our present situation of ever increasing violence, survival may depend on retrieving those norms which became eroded when the religious traditions of which they were part lost their grip. With it the depth dimensions of life were lost sight of. The secularization which followed became one-dimensional and degenerated into the all-pervading nihilism in which the cohesive principles that had sustained civilizations throughout recorded history were flouted.

The biological criteria of being human—*strikingly congruent with*

the pre-scientific trans-Traditional consensus—may make it possible to rehabilitate a concept of “human nature” as being genetically encoded in each one born human, characterized by norms of specifically human behavior, namely by the *control of the pre-frontal capabilities over the drives—equally encoded genetically*—of crocodiles, snakes, lynxes and shrews.

Either we attain this “kinder and gentler” control over our archaic predatory constituents or we waste the great windfall of having been born human and fall to infra-human, even reptilian levels of action and conduct.

Obviously there is more to human nature than conventionally assumed when we cynically excuse acting like a boa constrictor as being “just human nature”.

It cannot be overemphasized that neither the reptilian and mammalian components surviving in us, nor the pitiless intelligence of the neo-cortical computer are here disregarded, even less are they denied. They are indispensable, *but only provided they are integrated and brought under the control of the Human Imperative can our lives be evaluated as being fully human*. The process of this integration is characteristic of our human journey. *The potentiality in everyone born human to attain true humanness, is the bedrock of human dignity and inviolability*.

The criteria of being human which the Great Traditions stated in their archaic language may have become alien to the average contemporary ear. Their confirmation in scientific, biological, “technical” terms may be plausible, comprehensible and acceptable to our contemporaries, *even trans-culturally transmissible*.

I was struck by von Bertanaffly’s use of the term “True Man.” It immediately recalled Rinzai (Lin-chi), the 9th century Zen sage, saying to his disciples: “There is a True Man without rank nor label in this hulk of reddish flesh. He goes in and out of your sense gates incessantly. Whom of you has met this True Man?”

One of the monks asked: “Who is that True Man you are talking about?”

Rinzai took him by the collar and shouted: “Speak! Speak! Show me that True Man!”

The monk stood nonplussed. Rinzai pushed him away: “Ah, this True Man is (still) a piece of dirt!”

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Hui-neng, two centuries before, had spoken of “The Original Face you had before you, or even your parents, were born. . .”

And another master, Bankei, stressed “the Unborn” as the solution to the riddle of humanness, reiterating the Buddha’s saying that there must be something Unborn, something unconditioned in us humans, for without it we could not overcome what is born and conditioned.

The 15th century Christian mystic and mathematician Nicholas of Cusa saw “in all faces the Face of faces, veiled as in a riddle.” Where the Gospel speaks of “the Light that lighteth every man come into the world,” I understand this to be the genetically encoded light of our Specific Humanness, as is John XXIII’s “Law imprinted on the human heart, which our conscience enjoins us to heed.” Rinzai’s “True Man,” Hui-neng’s “Original Face,” Bankei’s “Unborn,” Cusa’s “Face of faces” all point at the True Self, resonating Zen’s demand to “see into one’s own Nature,” this own Nature, which is no one’s private domain.

The wonderful *mondo* of Enen and Ejaku fits our science-dominated world as precisely as it did that of centuries ago: When Enen asks Ejaku “What is your name?” and Ejaku answers: “My name is Enen,” Enen protests: “Now listen! Enen is me!” Ejaku then relents: “All right then, in that case I am Ejaku!” And both burst out laughing.

This roar of laughter Bergson would agree is the laughter of liberation. Here the liberation is that from all particularization. Enen and Ejaku celebrate the True Self’s liberation from the delusions of ego, affirm their grounding in, their shared identity based on, their specific humanness. This humanness, in modern biological terms, is genetically encoded, phylogenetically and ontogenetically transmitted. It is characterized by the prefrontal cortex’s capacities of insight, empathy, compassion, foresight.

Of the latter Albert Schweitzer, who lived his “reverence for life” by practicing for half a century empathy and compassion, wrote: “Man has lost the capacity for foresight. He will end by destroying the earth” (quoted by Rachel Carson in “Silent Spring,” 1960).

I think it justifiable to see Enen and Ejaku’s “liberation” in the cosmological, or rather cosmogenetic, context of Kegon’s *ji-ji-mu-ge hokkai*, namely in the total inter-relationess—to the point of mutual interpenetration—of all phenomena in the Universe.

I read the story somewhere of the young American lieutenant in Vietnam, who in the midst of shooting at anything that moved, whether animal, child or adult, suddenly put a stop to the firing. Through his field glasses he had seen an old man fleeing with a little girl on his arm. In a flash, becoming aware of the love between those two human creatures, all he could do was to grab a can of peaches and share a meal with them.

Breakthrough of the Human imperative.

There is a similar breakthrough in the tale about the Nazi soldier in Holland, who, when ordered to shoot innocent hostages, refused. He was promptly pushed into the row of hostages and killed with them. Had he at this moment of supreme crisis retrieved the Human Imperative in Himself? Had it taken over the controls, made him abandon the security of the pack, to die as the epiphany of Rinzai's "True Man in this hulk of mammalian flesh?"

Both these soldiers' stories point directly at the Zen of being Human. Is Zen the ultimate depth dimension of being Human, or conversely is the full realization of our humanness what we call Zen? Reflecting on this it is almost unavoidable to contemplate the concept of the *alaya-vijnana*, the Storehouse consciousness.

Must the Stalins, Hitlers, Idi Amins of our time be seen as merely prefrontal cripples? Could the riddle of Evil be related to the malfunction of the prefrontal cortex? Could Evil be none other than the regression to pre-human, sub-human, anti-human levels of existence? Is not **Absolute Avidya + Absolute Power = Absolute Evil?**

And is not what distinguishes anthropos from anthropoid that which the ancient Zen masters ever since Bodhidharma not only realized but transmitted from heart to heart, "directly pointing at the Buddha mind"?

At long last science, the traditional arch-enemy of religion, confirms Hakuin's "This body is the Buddha," Bankei's "Unborn, that you habitually pervert into fighting demons or hungry ghosts" and Seng-tsan's "When we return to where we have always been."

It was this "return" which kept playing in my mind, while listening to the learned papers at Takayama, so that I had to jot down:

**When we return to where we have always been
we do not have to ask**

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what it is to be human
for we all know it in our bones
just as we know
this water is cool, is hot
this fruit is sweet, is sour
thus we know
what it is to be human.

The Buddha Mind, scientifically confirmed as being our genetically encoded human specificity, is a not to be underestimated achievement in this cruel century resounding with the war cries of fighting demons and the hue and cry of insatiable hungry ghosts.