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## A DIALOGUE

### *A discussion between One and Zero*

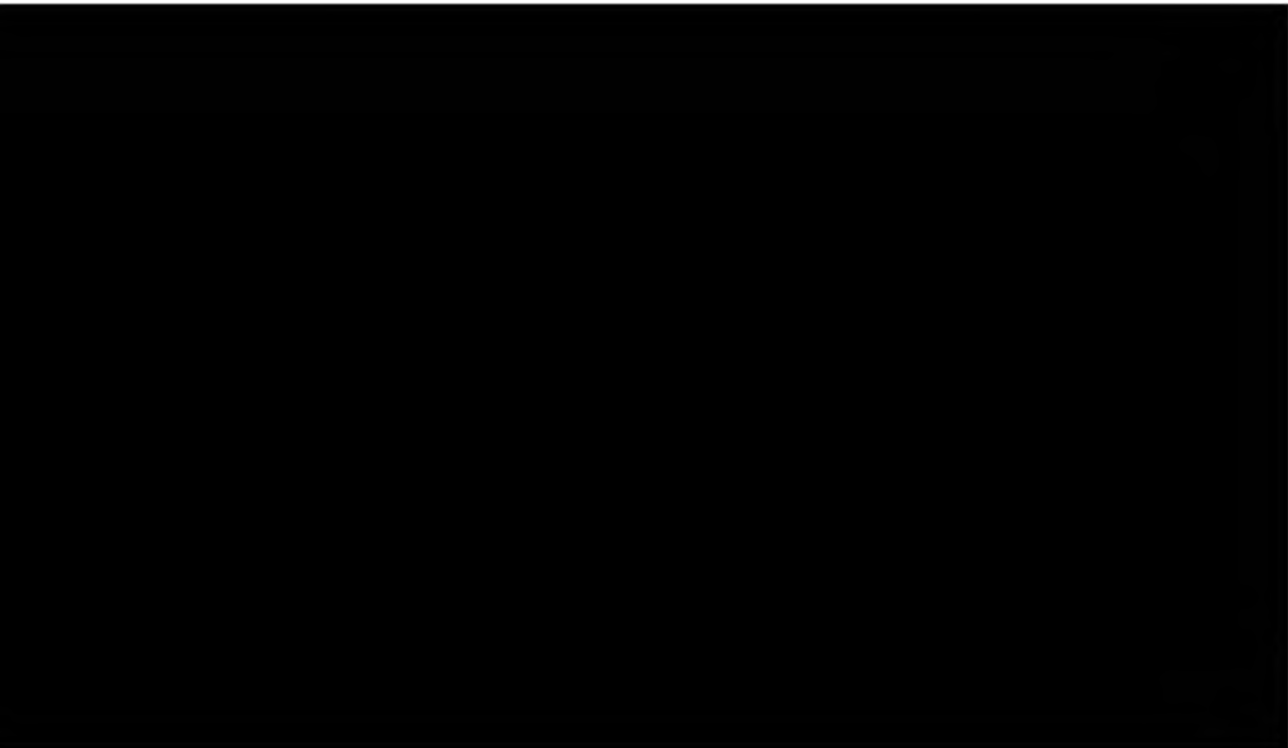
*(Continued)*

One : Good evening Sir, when I met you last, you were kind enough to instruct me about Mu Ch'i's picture of the persimmons. Since then I reflected on your words but arrived at no clear understanding. May I repeat some of my questions?

Zero : Oh yes, certainly.

One : I hear that most of the Buddhist paintings in China and Japan are generally displayed as a diptych or triptych. If this is so, could you tell me if there is any particular reason for this.

Zero : Well, paintings or sculptures of Buddha are, in actuality, made as a triptych. This seems closely related to Buddhist philosophy. If you visit Nara, the oldest city in Japan, you will find many beautiful old sculptures and paintings in the temples. You will see among them an image of Amitabha Buddha, with Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva at his right and Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva at his left. If the image is of Sākyamuni Buddha, he is accompanied by Samantabhadra to his right and Manjuśri to his left. The Bodhisattva to the left represents the wisdom of Buddha's enlightenment while his compassion is represented by the Bodhisattva who stands to his right. They always stand as a trinity. The Buddha after long years of meditation attained the final awakening. Then he started on his endless pilgrimage to save all the people in the world, however numberless they might be. The two Bodhisattvas accompanied him to support his work. The awakening of Buddha is not only the penetrating insight into the basis of all existence but is backed by the deepest feeling of compassion for others. If awakening lacks this deep emotion, the awakening is incomplete or may be a selfish one. And if this compassion is not based upon the fundamental insight into truth, it may be nothing but a sentiment of sympathy. Therefore truth, awakening (wisdom) and compassion are indispensable principles in Buddhist philosophy. But you must remember



Stone Garden (Ryūanji)

that these three principles are not to be understood as separated from each other, but they are originally one and the same. There is no fundamental truth without awakening. There is no true awakening without compassion and no compassion without awakening. But Buddhist philosophers and artists came to represent them in the form of a trinity.

One : Oh, I see.

Zero : As I see it, Buddhist painting in China, in the course of history, underwent a striking change in the form and meaning of the triptych, having been influenced by the philosophy of Zen. Instead of the traditional arrangement of the the three venerated ones, pictures of a tiger and dragon, monkey and crane, mountain and river, flowers or fruits appeared and came to be placed to the right and left of a central Buddha image. For instance, among Mu Ch'i's works, many representative triptyches are kept now in Daitokuji, the famous Zen temple in Kyoto. One of them has an image of Avalokiteśvara in the center. The picture on the right shows a monkey, stretching his long hand out to catch the moon in the water ; the picture to the left shows a bamboo grove with an elegant white crane about to move.

Again, the famous landscape painter, Li T'ang (1100-1130)<sup>①</sup> has painted two wonderful landscape pictures which are placed to the left and right of a painting of Avalokiteśvara. Later, it seems to me these side pictures came to be treated independently and a diptych form of painting developed: Mu Ch'i's persimmon and chestnut are kept as two pictures and accompany no central painting.

One : I don't quite understand why such a change was introduced into the form of painting in China, particularly by means of Zen influence. Is Zen a kind of nature worship?

Zero : In Buddhist philosophy, as you know, to understand what Buddha is has been the prime matter of concern. In this respect Zen was a unique departure which contributed greatly to the philosophy of Buddhism. I won't spend much time talking about this important subject here but let me just tell you the following story :

A monk asked Tōzan 洞山 ; "What is Buddha?" He replied, "Three pounds of flax!"<sup>②</sup>

I suppose you may not understand what this reply means. Your mind may be perplexed by it. This is the utterance of a famous Zen master. Zen is a religion designed to awaken oneself to the last state of one's existence, which is no other than the awakening of Sākyamuni, the Buddha. In other words, to open our spiritual eyes to the world of the absolute reality which is the realm of the true Buddha. This is "the undifferentiated world" which you may remember from the story of Chosei I told you last time. To enter this world, to realize this "undifferentiated world" and to live in it while we are living our work-a-day life (at the moment you are listening there I am speaking here) this is the *sine qua non* for the Zen student.

At the moment "the undifferentiated" is awakened, it cannot stay as such but changes itself into this real world, the world of differentiation, where a flower is a flower, a willow is a willow, a mountain is a mountain, you are you and I am I. Here is a new world where the undifferentiated Buddha appears as a willow, a flower, a mountain, even as a man who has a name, a man who is six feet tall, with two eyes opened, a straight nose, flat mouth, with no physical features lacking. While the world of phenomena is the world of phenomena it is that of noumena at the same time.

If you try to trace this connection with a logical reasoning, your mind is sure to be confused and suffer, but if you examine it with your full body,<sup>o</sup> you will be sure to come to a real understanding of it. From then on we need not necessarily refer to Buddha or Bodhisattva, but instead, in our everyday life, we see a flower as a flower and that is enough, a persimmon as a persimmon and that is enough too. Do you see?

One : Well, well, I don't think I do, but..... Could I say that the persimmon or the chestnut drawn by Mu Ch'i are nothing but his depiction of a Buddha image?

Zera : You are apt to understand things with a knowledge which is given by others. Then the understanding you have made is not your own. You have first of all to understand things without reference to what others have said. The immediate understanding is the only way through-which you will be able

to live a creative life. Just look at a flower, just listen to a bird singing, just place your foot upon the floor. Out of the midst of a total undifferentiation let your single step move, let a flower bloom, let a bird sing, let your lips touch a cup of hot tea. Even though this total absolute undifferentiation cannot be expressed in words, yet we are men who have an inner impulse to express it some way. A painter may symbolize it by a pure white space of paper on which no ink nor color is spotted. If it is a Nō player, he may use a definite period of silence without a word and without the sound of a drum. If it is a genius of a garden designer, he might symbolize it with a vast space of white sand without a single plant, or a single stone. But just as the total undifferentiation will have nothing to do with our actual life, so a mere whiteness of paper, a silence from the beginning to the end, or a vacant expanse of white sand without a single plant or a single stone, does not make any sense to man. Look! In the midst of the pure white paper, an instant touch of black ink is flashed and with the minimum possible number of strokes a persimmon is composed. There are no unnecessary strokes at all. The brush has caught a purest moment of change in which beginningless, endless undifferentiation has cut into differentiation—persimmon! Do you understand?

One : Ah, I feel better!

Zero: If it is a Nō player on the polished wooden stage, for a long period he will be silent and make no sound. Suddenly he stamps powerfully on the boards; the sound of one step breaks the entire silence and may be followed by words, the beating of a drum.....

The silence and the sound make a delicate interpenetration where the eternal soundlessness penetrates into a sound and a sound inspires the eternal soundlessness. Again in the case of a garden like Ryōanji Temple,<sup>⑥</sup> on the vast white sand, one central stone is placed accompanied by a few small ones in harmony with it. Here “undifferentiated form” has changed itself into a visible form, that of a stone. The stone inspires a formless undifferentiation—form and formlessness accomplish a creative interpenetration with each other. In Mu Ch’i’s picture, “undifferentiated” color has changed into simple black

ink--the colorlessness and color here make a delicate interpenetration.

There is an old Zen verse :

The landscape with flowers and birds is  
As beautiful as gold brocade ;  
Let us change them to become  
A black and white painting by Genki<sup>①</sup>

As you know, art in the Far East is called " an expression out of nothingness ". Black is a color to transform the colorless, infinite undifferentiation into the simplest color where a spot of black ink is a creation out of the infinite possibility, nothingness. Here the infinite just cuts into the finite. Now you see what the painting of the persimmons means, don't you?

One : Oh, thanks a lot. I feel most relieved.

*Nanrei S. Kobori*

#### NOTES

① 季唐筆山水圖双幅 大德寺高桐院藏。

② 洞山和尚，因=僧問フ“如何是佛。”山曰“麻三斤”……無門關第18則。

③ 體究 Examination with one's full body (體究練磨). This term seems first to have been used by 臨濟 Rinzai in his record 臨濟錄 Rinzai roku and later is referred to by 白隱 Hakuin, the reorganizer and the revivifier of the Japanese Rinzai Zen. It means that the study of Zen is not to be concerned only with our intellectual investigation. Intellect is the function of man's brain which is nothing but a partial function of man's body. Instead, with all one's total function, one has to wrestle with one's problem which is fundamental to one's life. The whole personality, without a single bit lacking should be in operation. Even the nail on a finger, a strand of hair, each one of the cells which composes our body should partake in the awakening. This is not only the attitude of a Buddhist in the pursuit of awakening but should also be that of those who lead the Buddhist life, dedicated to helping others.

④ 龍安寺石庭。

⑤ 却テ錦標鶯花ノ地ヲ將ツテ，變ジテ元暉ガ水墨ノ圖ト作ス (禪林句集) 元暉，宋代水墨畫家 (1086—1165)