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IS BUDDHA'S NATURE LEFT OR RIGHT?
A COMPARISON OF TWO DARUMA PAINTINGS
BY NANTENBŌ FROM THE GITTER-YELEN
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Among the people who contributed to the survival and continuation of Zen in the twentieth century, Nantenbō Tōjū is certainly one of the most eminent. The energy and commitment he always put in his teaching have made him one of the leading Zen figures in modern Japan.

Born in 1837 in Kyūshū Nantenbō entered a Zen monastery at the age of eleven. From the beginning he distinguished himself for the eagerness of his studies and long meditations and for his rational and practical approach toward the knowledge of Zen. Writings, travels, pilgrimages, lectures were carried on throughout his life, directed to learning through experience rather than just the study of scriptures which are nothing more than, to put it with his own words, “someone else’s treasure; painted ricecakes.” ¹ Determination, a great spiritual power and yearning to achieve satori made of him a popular monk in his day, though the nickname Nantenbō, meaning “Nandina staff” - the one he used to “help” his pupils in their progress - is revealing also of his severity. But as one can see in his paintings there is more to him than an earnest monk and stern teacher, a kind of playful humor, a joyous approach to Zen and life. He found in the brush the way to express this strain of his being. Nantenbō felt that, among the forms of art, calligraphy especially comes from the inside, and its quality lies not so much in the aesthetic result, than in the spiritual strength it transpires. The characters become windows on the paper, eyes through which energy shines. The brush in Nantenbō’s hand, his way of letting it flow, linger, go crazy, reflects his spirit: sturdy, resolute, impetuous and immediate like

¹ Nantenbō, Nantenbō zenwa, p. 105.
a katsu. “The brush is me, I am the brush – he would assert – When this happens, the hand is the foot and the foot is the hand. One does it with the entire body.” 2 In the act of painting, Nantenbō achieved that unity which is one of the goals of the Zen practice.

Nantenbō witnessed a period (Meiji and Taishō; he died in 1925, the year before the beginning of the Shōwa era) charged with wars and political, social and cultural upheavals. In her efforts to catch up as fast as possible with modern Western world, Japan underwent a cultural shock. This was the inevitable result to the end of a period of isolation which had lasted more than two hundred years. And Nantenbō’s painting activity increased in the last decades of his life, when he felt how better a Zen message might be conveyed through the direct impact of images rather than explanatory written words in that socially and spiritually difficult period.

One of his favourite subjects was Daruma (scr. Bodhidharma), the twenty eighth patriarch of Indian Buddhism in line of descent from the historical Buddha and the founder of Chan, later to be known in Japan as Zen. In the following centuries the semi-legendary father of this doctrine became one of the main themes of Zen artists. Daruma is an emblem of meditation and inner struggle; but at the same time the mirror of the spiritual experience of the painter who interprets this common motif in his personal way. So it happens that when looking at Zen paintings one might come across Darumas looking at the same time sullen and thoughtful, yet witty, droll, startled, humble, or even with a menacing glance. Nantenbō’s Darumas look often baffled, comic, doubtful, and much so since that is certainly not the expression of saints one would expect to find in the portrait of the first Zen master. Neither is it the expression one is accustomed to find in the traditional, non-Zen, iconography.

In this respect it might be interesting to compare two of Nantenbō’s scrolls kept, among other works by the artist, in the Gitter-Yelen Collection in New Orleans – henceforth called scroll 1 and scroll 2 – which are emblematic of his style and rendering of the subject. Both works have been published, the first one in Zenga: Brushstrokes of Enlightenment, and commented upon by John Stevens 3, the second one in A Myriad of

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2 Nantenbō, Nantenbō anyaroku, p. 356.
3 Stevens, Zenga: Brushstrokes of Enlightenment, p. 68.
Autumn Leaves by Stephen Addiss. A recent publication, the catalog for a Zenga exhibition held in Japan from October 2000 to June 2001, also shows the two paintings facing each other on the same page. Nonetheless, they have not yet been the subject of a comparative study. Although the dimensions of the two paintings are not the same (but the proportions height-width are) – scroll 1 is 97.2 x 40.6 cm.; scroll 2 is 137.2 x 56 cm. – the formal composition is very similar.

Scroll 1 is a brushwork painted in 1917, at the age of seventy-nine, and the second dates probably to the same period, or is slightly earlier.

In both scrolls no more than the round face of the saint appears, the eyes wide open – two circlets indeed – with a startled expression. Both are painted with very diluted ink, with the exception of the pupils and the big earring, which are in black ink. A denser, blacker brushstroke frames the face by descending from above the left ear of the Saint down to the lower left corner of each scroll. It outlines the hem of the robe and frames Daruma’s expression which is one of nearly shiness. The starting point of this stroke is similar in the two scrolls. It looks as if Nantenbō, before applying the brush to the paper, had lingered, letting it hover vertically above the white surface and dripping. A moment later his wrist must have descended with strength and one can sense the vehemence of the Author in the course of the action. There is no hesitation and, if in scroll 1 the line seems fluider and firmer, this is only because in scroll 2 the speed of the stroke brought forth more “flying white” and because the brush was probably drier. In the “flying white” itself one can see an alternation of lighter and darker areas; this effect comes from painting on the floor, that is on tatami, the texture of which shows in fact by the wavy pattern of the stroke.

In scroll 2 the splashes from which the line of the robe starts are a continuation of the upper inscription bearing the artist’s name and signature; in scroll 1 they are connected to the last trait of the second character of the calligraphy, as an

4 A Myriad of Autumn Leaves, p. 106.
5 YAMASHITA, Zenga: the Return from America, p. 150-151.
6 I had the opportunity to see both scrolls during a stage at the Gitter-Yelen Collection in the spring 1999, for which I received a joint scholarship by the Gitter-Yelen Collection and the Hokusai Centre of Milan.
7 A Myriad..., p. 68.
ideal extension of it. The vigorous, almost impulsive brush-strokes appear as if accidental but are instead directed by the idea of a complex composition, resulting in a controlled accident. The very splashes and blots due to the performance of painting appear as casual, not directionable. And it is this quality to make them particularly appreciated: they reveal the immediacy, the “right here and now” aspect which is the essence of every Zen experience.

Inscriptions surmount Daruma’s face and fill the upper part of both scrolls. But here differences between the two become stronger. The inscription on scroll 1 consists of two characters only, and their lines descend diagonally from the upper left corner down to the right as far as the drifting from which the Saint’s robe originates. At first sight the solution of continuity is marked by the tone of the ink which is almost the same, deep black. It looks as if Daruma were speaking, saying: “I don’t know” (不識). He might be paradoxically referring to his knowledge of Zen. The humour of his expression reflects the irony of the sentence. How can the first Zen patriarch be so utterly ignorant of the doctrine which was born from him? But this is part of the nature of Zen, the search of a truth which is never to be grasped completely with one’s whole self, and even less so, by one’s intellect alone; it also appears to be a paradox which bears the same flavour of a Zen kōan. In scroll 2 there are four characters which divide vertically the upper part of the scroll in two halves. They read: “vast emptiness nothing sacred” (廓然無聖). Stephen Addiss suggests that the head of the patriarch right under the last character might actually represent a fifth character in the inscription, but he does not elaborate any further his assumption. Read as a possible fifth character, Daruma might identify himself with those emptiness and non-sacredness, as a searcher of the Way he would look for them inside himself to free into satori. However, it is certainly a fact that the expression on the monk’s face is in tune with the meaning of the answer. And, in fact, Zen teaches to doubt of everything, even of one’s own certainties.

From a philological point of view one can finally turn to the last elements in the scrolls. The rakkan are placed on the right side of both paintings. They consist of the age of the monk at

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8 Ibidem.
the moment of the execution and his signature, which, in Nantenbō's case, is characterized by his typical two or three connected ending circles followed by what might look like a horizontal crescent moon (fig. 3-4).

The seals show a great variety in shapes and inner composition. In scroll 1 they are four, one in the left upper corner (Nantenbō), two under the signature (Hakugaikutsu and Tōshū), and one in the right lower corner (a peculiar variation for Tōshū). In scroll 2 the seals are more or less in the same position and read the same, though they are not really the same at a closer look: in fact, a different rendition of the inner elements is given. Moreover, a fifth seal is added in the shape of a skull. As Stephen Addiss points out, this is unusual, since seals are generally created out of words rather than images, and it would also echo the shape of the head of Daruma. This seal appears also in other works such as a fan painting made in 1916, and a scroll representing a Snow Daruma of 1917. Since the dating of this scroll is not clear, it might be supposed that it was painted around these same years as the others bearing the same seal. At a closer look one can also see, somewhat below the middle of the painting to the right of the earring, something looking like a faded seal. This does not appear to be like any of the seals used by Nantenbō on his other works I had the chance to study directly or in books.

Observing all the similarities and subtle differences between the two brushworks, one can better appreciate Nantenbō’s skill in giving different interpretations of the same subject.

It is interesting to look at the two scrolls together, side by side. They are part of a conversation that Bodhidharma, on his arrival from India, is said to have had with the Chinese Emperor Wu. The Emperor asked Bodhidharma:

"We have built temples, copied holy scriptures, ordered monks and nuns to be converted. Is there any merit, Reverend Sir, in our conduct?"
"No merit at all."

The Emperor somewhat taken aback, thought that such an answer was upsetting the whole teaching, and inquired again:
"What, then, is the holy truth, the first principle?"
"In vast emptiness there is nothing holy."
"Who, then, are you to stand before me?"
"I know not, your Majesty."  

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9 Ibidem.
10 Watts, The Spirit of Zen, p. 31.
The calligraphies of the two scrolls are the last two of the three answers the Indian Sage gave to the Chinese Sovereign. To a Zen monk or a scholar of the doctrine the whole episode surely comes to mind even reading just one sentence, since it is one of the most famous and told cases of Zen history. In the same way the words spoken by Bodhidharma have become favourites of Zen artists who can then evoke a whole scene only by the way of a little hint.

The fact that our scrolls bear the two second utterances by Bodhidharma might suggest the existence of a third scroll with a calligraphy for “No merit at all” making thus part of a triptych with the other scrolls. Nevertheless, the unequal sizes and the differences in the seals of these latter invalidate such hypothesis. All the same, just looking at the two present brushworks, it is interesting to imagine the actual situation that took place in 6th century China. One might see first the Daruma in scroll 2 giving his Zen answer, looking straight into the Emperor’s eyes, and then in scroll 1 looking askance, saying that he really does not know the ultimate answer. Those eyes slanting to the right are indeed extremely ironic, they might be looking for the answer, for the truth, somewhere else; is it left?, is it right?, or is it out of the scroll itself?

Nantenbō’s brushworks are powerful works. In these scrolls one does not see Daruma, just the way Nantenbō imagined him, but how the expression of the artist’s personality reflected in the Indian Saint and in the combination of painting and calligraphy. It is as if one heard Daruma himself speaking; the monk’s physical substance and voice are put together on the same surface at the same level. They are works of art stimulating our senses in the process of our searching their meaning. We see them, hear them, we imagine Daruma speaking and, as it is the case with Japanese scrolls, we can touch them while unrolling the paper, and smell them, the odour of the paper, of its wooden box. All this would not be so vivid if the work did not reveal the personal vigour and humor of the artist, as well as his independence of thought and quest. Great energy and at the same time an almost childish simplicity emanate from the scrolls. Perhaps what Nantenbō wanted, was suggesting that it is not necessary to take anything too seriously, not even Zen; that sometimes a different approach, like that of humor, by breaking the usual logical and rational schemes, can lead to new and unexpected paths of awareness.
It is in this way that Nantenbō was able to take Zen into a new era of the Japanese history. He imparted it with freshness, but without discarding its profound teachings that he inherited from the long tradition of the monks who preceded him. He could achieve this not only through his writings, travels and lectures, but also with his brushworks which have the power to communicate to anyone, in any time and space.

Bibliography

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Fig. 1: Nantenbō Tōjū, Daruma, 1917 (ink on silk, 97.2 × 40.6 cm., New Orleans, Gitter-Yelen Collection).

Fig. 2: Nantenbō Tōjū, Daruma, 1917 (ink on paper, 137.2 × 56 cm., New Orleans, Gitter-Yelen Collection).
Fig. 3: Nantenbō Tōjū, *One-line Calligraphy* (detail, 1925, New Orleans, Gitter-Yelen Collection).

Fig. 4: Nantenbō Tōjū, *Two-lines Calligraphy* (detail, 1923, New Orleans, Gitter-Yelen Collection).
ABSTRACT

Nantenbō Tōjū, one of the most eminent Zen monk who lived between the XIX and the XX centuries, is the author of two scrolls portraying Daruma, the semi-legendary patriarch of the Zen school of Buddhism. The two scrolls are powerful in that they reveal the strength and commitment, both physical and spiritual, put by the artist in the creative act. They also bear a piquant humour typical of Zen and here developed by Nantenbō in a utterly personal way. These brushworks are two examples of zenga, term which refers to the creation of calligraphies and paintings by Zen monks, especially in the Tokugawa period, when their style in the use of the brush became more expressive, immediate and vigorous than before, thus reflecting the essence of the Zen doctrine which stresses the importance of the “here and now” aspect of every act in life.

KEY WORDS