Deliberate Religious Transformation in Japanese Buddhism

Methods of Symbolic Imitation in Shingon and Zen

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The following is excerpted from Dr. Blacker's Charles Strong Memorial Lecture delivered in Australia in 1968 and reprinted here by permission. Dr. Blacker titled her lecture "Methods of Yoga in Japanese Buddhism", using the term "yoga" in the sense of "yoke", and meaning by the phrase "a method of yoga" any discipline "of mind or body or both, which is considered a valid means towards the end of yoking, unifying oneself with God, the divine ground, the 'more' as William James called it . . . "

Those religions whose faith admits of yoga as a possibility have all devised methods whereby the deeper layers of the mind may be affected. We find exercises in concentration of mind, for example, in breathing, in the repetition of a sacred name, in mantric prayer. All of these will be seen to have an initial effect of stopping the flow of ordinary discursive thinking, the surface chatter of thought, so that the process can take effect elsewhere undistracted and unencroached ...

I propose to discuss two such methods which come to us from Japan. One of these, the meditational discipline of Zen, has been for the last ten years familiar in the west, though often greatly, even ludicrously misunderstood. The other derives from the powerful tradition of Tantric Buddhism, which arose in India during the 5th century, moved eastwards to China, and reached Japan at the beginning of the 9th century. This Tantric method is very little known in the West. Few Westerners have actually undergone the discipline I shall describe below.

The Mahayana doctrine teaches that we all possess within us an essential, original nature which is perfect and flawless: at the same time our own nature and that of the Buddha. The Buddha nature is thus reflected in all men, just as the light of the moon is reflected in countless pools, lakes and streams. But because of the circumstances of the phenomenal world, this nature has become obscured and beclouded, so that we are not aware that it exists inside us. Instead, we live by an illusory ego which forces us to act in such a way as to perpetuate the illusion. The Buddha nature is thus hidden, buried, invisible, like a jewel in a bundle of hay, like a lotus in mud.

The uncovering of this latent perfect nature is thus the basic task to be accomplished by the yoga methods of Shingon and Zen. Symbols (Buddhist iconography) must be used in such a way as to rouse the Buddha nature from its dormant state.

How then can the symbols, the icons of the Buddha, be used in such a way as to 'work', as yeast works, down in the hidden depths of our minds? One method is to imitate them; to act them out; to make the exterior performance of them a means towards rousing an interior echo. Thus by imitating them on the surface we can call them up in ourselves.

Symbolic imitation is so important in Shingon yoga that I will discuss this method first, leaving Zen, with its less obvious use of the technique, to the last.

I

Until recently very little was known about the Shingon method of yoga, because the details of the disciplines and of the initiations which followed them were always kept strictly esoteric. They were only divulged orally to those monks actually undergoing the training. The most that was ever committed to writing were hints and headings so brief as to be incomprehensible. But within the last few years there has been a considerable relaxation in this strict secrecy. Full descriptions off doctrine and discipline have now been published, and Shingon priests are often generous with their time and wisdom to uninitiated persons like myself. In consequence it is now possible to give a more coherent picture of Shingon yoga practice than would have been possible a few years ago.

Briefly this method could be described as an enactment in symbolic

form of a ritual drama depicting the awakening of the disciple's Buddha nature and its final union with the Buddha. The repeated 'acting out' of this climactic union is believed to bring about its own reality, so that the disciple achieves his final end of *sokushin-jōbutsu*, becoming a Buddha in this very body.

What are these symbols and how are they used in the drama? Basically there are three different kinds, corresponding to three different modes in which the Buddha can manifest himself. They are known as the Sammitsu or Three Mysteries and comprise the actions, the speech and the thoughts of the Buddha. Each of these different modes is projected into our world in the form of symbols which the disciple can imitate. And by thus performing them he can identify his own actions, speech and thought with those of the Buddha.

First, the bodily actions. These are symbolized in the form of the hand gestures known as *mudra*, familiar to you probably either through their use in Indian iconography or in Indian dancing. In the Shingon ritual there are an enormous number of these hieratic gestures which the disciple must memorise, each of which signifies either a particular emanation of the Buddha or a particular activity. The fingers are given various meanings, the Five Elements or the Ten Virtues, for example, so that different spiritual significances result from the various clasps and convolutions of the hands. These gestures are incidentally the vestigial remnant of what was originally a ritual dance, a meditation of movement in which the whole body was called into action. This dance survives in some parts of Tibet, or did until the Chinese invasion, but elsewhere has been lost.

Secondly, the speech of the Buddha comes to the disciple in the form of the mantra, which incidentally is the meaning of the Japanese word *shingon*, true name. A mantra is a sound which conveys nothing to the rational mind, but whose whole intention is to resound on a deeper level, awakening echoes which ordinary language is too superficial to reach. To the ordinary mind the mantra may well be unintelligible, a string of meaningless sounds with no sense. But regard them as sonorous forms of the divinity, as icons composed of sound, and it will be clear that their repetition will affect us on a different level. In Shingon practice, incidentally, it is not necessary that they be recited out loud. Their efficacy is just as great if repeated silently.

Thirdly, we have the thoughts of the Buddha, symbolized by the visualisation of certain shapes and forms. The disciple is instructed at certain stages of the rite to see in his mind's eye a lotus, a round moon, the Sanscrit letter A, dissolving views of towers and mountains big enough to fill the entire world. The point about these visualisations is that, like the mantras, they are held to exist inside us in a latent form all the time. In "seeing" them we are rousing by means of an exterior reflection an image which already exists inside our minds.

This technique of visualisation is incidentally much more difficult

than it may sound. We have to see the required image in every detail with steady clarity. The Chinese Buddhist authority, Dr. Chang Chen-chi, has written of the extraordinary difficulty he experienced in visualising a Buddha image sitting on top of his head. Struggling for eight hours a day in the complete seclusion of a mountain retreat, he yet took nearly two months before he could see the image with the necessary vividness. At first, no sooner did he see the Buddha's head than he lost sight of its arms and body. And no sooner did he see its body than the head and legs disappeared. Eventually, however, the image became so vivid and bright and detailed that it was more distinct than if seen with the naked eye.

Christians may be reminded here of the stress laid on visualisation in the Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. The Jesuit exercitant has to see in his mind's eye various scenes from the life of Christ, particularly those of the Passion and the resurrection. And what is more he has to 'apply the five senses' to the scenes too; hear, smell, taste and touch them, as well as see them. But there is nevertheless a big difference between what is required of the Jesuit and what is intended for the Shingon disciple. In the Ignatian exercises the visualiser is never more than a humble spectator of the sacred events. Never is he required to become the divine figure, to draw the divinity into himself, as is the intention with the symbolic imitations in Tantric practice.

These, then, are the three kinds of symbolic imitation, the mudras, the mantras and the visualisations, which are combined together to form the ritual drama which the disciple must enact. This rite he performs three times a day for a period of a hundred days, in a secluded temple under conditions of retreat. You must imagine a large hall in the temple, divided into cubicles by paper screens. Some forty monks perform the ritual together in the hall, each in the semi-seclusion of a paper cubicle, and each at his own pace. A supervisor is always present.

The ritual is not a mere haphazard series of mantras. It has an internal structure which in effect tells a story, each step of the drama being accomplished either by a mudra or a mantra, a mantra and a visualisation, or by a combination of all three, In the time at my disposal I can only give you a brief outline of the structure of the rite, which takes about an hour and a half to perform, but enough I hope to show how it functions as a yoga method.

First the place of the rite: the instruments and the disciple himself must be purified in such a way as to make contact with divine beings possible. This is accomplished by certain mudras and mantras. Next the Buddha and his attendants must be roused from their state of spiritual contemplation, so that when the right time comes they will be able to hear the disciple's summons to the place of the rite. This the disciple accomplishes first by visualising them in their own world, sunk in spiritual trance; then by a mantra awakening them from this state.

Next comes an interesting group of mantras, designed to cordon off

the space in which we are performing the rite. We thus create a temenos, a sacred space sealed off from attack by malign forces in the profane world outside. Here Shingon follows the necessity felt by every major tradition of ritual: that the space to which divine beings are summoned must be made qualitatively different from the profane world outside. But here the process is extraordinarily elaborate. No less than five protective walls must be erected round the altar: fences, pillars, flames and nets, all brought into being by visualisation on the part of the disciple. At this early stage of the rite only two are required: four golden pillars and a 'diamond fence' made of golden vajras interlocking at top and bottom.

This accomplished, the disciple must next prepare himself for the advent of the divine guests. By means of a mantra he 'opens the gates of his mind', and then, by a visualisation, seeks to make a preliminary rousing of his own Buddha nature. He is instructed to see a round moon surrounding a Sanscrit letter A, signifying complete wisdom. Then in his imagination he must pick up this A and place it within his own mind, inside a round moon already existing there. Then by a mantra he must close the gates of his mind so that the wisdom will be securely contained.

Next comes an important visualisation known as *dōjōkan*, whereby the disciple constructs a model of the sacred world into which he can invite the Buddhas to take their proper places. This microcosm is known as a mandala, that extraordinarily pervasive symbol for sacred space. In its barest form it consists of a central point, often functioning as an axis connecting different vertical planes, surrounded by a circle and a square with a gate on each side. Here we have what seems to be an archetypal representation of the structure of the sacred world, and in the complex visualisation required of the disciple at this point of the rite several examples of it occur. The disciple is instructed to see, first the massive form of Mt. Sumeru, the vast mountain which in Buddhist cosmology stands as the axis of the universe. This vision must then dissolve and become an eight-petalled lotus so vast as to fill the whole world. This must again dissolve and become a glittering jewelled palace, surrounded by towers and pillars, again so vast as to fill the whole world. In all these visions you will recognise the motif of the circle round the central axis. Finally the disciple must see a grand and radiant vision of the Buddha Vairochana himself. His body shines like the moon and on his head he wears a crown whose glittering radiance illumines the entire world.

Now that the model of their world is ready constructed, the Buddhas can be summoned to the place of the rite. By mudras and mantras the disciple dispatches a magical jewelled carriage to the realm where the Buddhas reside, which transports its divine passengers to the space directly above the temenos. He then opens the gates of his mandala, invites the divine host inside, and then makes them fast within by means of four curious mantras known as the Lock, the Rope, the Chain and the Bell.

Having cajoled the guests safely inside the temenos, the disciple now adds the last three of the five protective walls. First a Diamond Net, a golden network of three-pronged vajras, to seal off the upper air of the sacred space from malign influences. Next a further layer round the enclosure, this time a wall of red flames. And lastly a fifth fence, a final encirclement of golden vajras round the previous pillars, fences and flames. The enclosed space thus appears in its final and complete form like a spiky cage in red and gold, utterly impregnable.

The divine guests having been securely sealed in, they must next be celebrated and entertained. Each one must have his own particular mantra recited and his mudra performed, and as there are in all no less than 73 deities inside the temenos, this stage of the rite is a lengthy one. It is followed by the entertainment of the guests by the traditional five means: incense, flowers, food and drink, light and the music of bells. All of which the disciple accomplishes by means of mantras.

All is now ready for the climax of the rite: the steps whereby the disciple's Buddha nature is made one, indissolubly interfused and identified with the Buddha he has summoned. First comes an important visualisation, known as *nyugaganyukan*, which means 'entering me and me entering'. The instructions run: "I have become the Buddha Vairochana. I possess in all completeness every virtue. The Buddha with all his blessings has entered my body and I have entered the Buddha's body. I am one with him." A mantra and another visualisation follow whose intention is likewise the identification of the disciple's nature with the Buddha. He is told to see a full moon on which are written in letters of gold and in the form of a quincunx the five mystic Sanscrit syllables A BA RA KA KYA.

After this climactic union, to which all the long and complex preliminary steps have led up, the final stages of the rite are short. The divine guests must be sent back to their own world, and music provided to speed them on their way. The laboriously constructed walls, fences and nets must be 'untied' to enable them to depart. Finally, with a mantra, the disciple strews flowers under their feet as they take their leave. He then makes three prostrations and leaves the hall.

Here, then, in brief outline, is the ritual which constitutes the yoga method of the Shingon disciple. Three times a day for a period of a hundred days he must act, in symbolic terms, the awakening of his Buddha nature and its union with the Buddha, who comes, summoned like a guest, to the place of the rite. By the repeated performance of these symbols, he hopes to bring about, in reality, the shift in consciousness implied by the release of his Buddha nature.

Here, then, is one method of Yoga, making abundant use of the technique of symbolic imitation. But before I make any comment on it, I would like first to discuss the other yoga method which comes to us from Japan; the *koan* exercise practised by the Rinzai sect of Zen.

II

I mention these *koans* with some diffidence, because I am well aware that it was the misleading distortion of these enigmatic exercises by certain writers, both Western and Japanese, which led to most of the nonsense talked about Zen in Beat circles in the west some ten years ago. It was through merely reading the text of these riddles, without knowing how they functioned as a practical discipline, that some westerners were led to reject Zen as a weird and alien discipline, uncongenial to the western mind, and others to seize on what seemed to be the dotty kind of 'freedom' in Zen to use it as an excuse for extravagant and libertine behaviour. Both views, especially the last, are misguided, and to avoid them it is important to understand how the *koans* function in the whole context of Zen teaching and practice.

I said before that nearly every yoga method will have as one of its objects the stopping of the flow of ordinary thinking. In the *koan* we find the device of presenting the mind with a riddle or a paradox about which it is impossible to 'think' at all. As presented to the beginner as an exercise in meditation, the *koan* appears to be a statement, a story, a dialogue, with no rational content at all. Some look like insoluble riddles. Others like sheer nonsense. In fact they are statements made by masters, at a certain moment and in a certain situation, from an enlightened state of mind, from the world behind the barrier we are trying to cross. Tackle these *koans* in the right way and they will serve as instruments for attaining that very state, as means without recourse to words or concepts, to a direct realisation of reality. Many of these *koans* are now celebrated, particularly those found in the collection called *Mumonkan* and *Hekiganroku.* Here are a representative few:

"A monk asked the master Jõshu, What is Jõshu? Jõshu answered, east gate, west gate, south gate, north gate."

"A monk asked, What is the Buddha? The master answered, a stick of dried dung."

"Thinking neither of good nor of evil, what was your original face before your father and mother were born?"

The following two *koans* are particularly well known as they are used as 'opening *koans*' for beginners:

"Listen to the sound of a single hand,"

"A monk asked the master Jõshu, Does a dog also have the Buddha nature? Jõshu answered, *Mu.*"

In this last *koan*, incidentally, the beginner is told that *mu* does not have its usual meaning of No. What then does it mean?

What is the right way of tackling these enigmatic problems? There is nothing in them which can be 'solved' by any of the ordinary processes of thinking. They present, to use a Zen phrase, a silver mountain and an iron wall. How is one supposed to deal with them?

The traditional method of guidance used by masters of the Rinzai line is to give the beginner no positive help or hint at all. In the session

of private instruction which is the pivot of Rinzai teaching, the master will demand, "Show me *mu*!" The student, whose first reaction to the enigma is usually to find symbolic meanings, hazards an answer: *mu* means emptiness, *mu* means enlightenment. To this the master simply says No, and rings the bell which is the signal for the monk to retire. Time and again, week in and week out, the same thing happens. No, no, no, out - is all the help the monk receives from the master. All avenues down which his ordinary mind can escape are thus blocked. His intellect is immobilised by a silver mountain.

At this point those of weaker will generally give up. The task seems not only hopeless but absurd. Distractions crowd into the mind, *mu* becomes nonsense. They leave the monastery. But the reaction of people with some spiritual aspiration is quite different. In them at this point the very impasse in which they find themselves produces a fierce energy and determination to penetrate into the meaning of *mu*. At last they begin to tackle the *koan* in the right way, which is not to think *about* it at all, but to concentrate fiercely and one-pointedly on one word of it. With the *mu koan*, the only one of which I have any personal experience, it is of course on *mu* that one must concentrate, a word without a meaning. This particular kind of concentration is known in Japanese as *san*, and means something like boring into or penetrating. I need not dwell on the difficulty of achieving even this stage of the *koan* discipline. Only those who have sat down and tried to focus their mind one-pointedly on a word with no meaning can have the slightest conception of the obstacles - the distracting thoughts and feelings which continually attack one's pillar of concentration, the odd hallucinations, the plausible excuses which the ego invents for leaving the discipline altogether. To overcome these onslaughts it is essential to rouse a source of energy inside one. And this is the point of some aspects of the discipline of a Zen monastery difficult to understand in the west. The reason why, for example, a senior monk patrols the meditation hall with a big stick over his shoulder, and hits ceremonially but rather hard on the shoulders anyone whom he may see growing sleepy or slack, is to help one to build up this intense energy, to exert oneself beyond one's normal capacity. The student thus finds himself in a position where he is driven relentlessly from behind, and massively repulsed from the front. The proper reaction is to become wholly absorbed in *mu*, just as a lover is wholly absorbed in his beloved and can turn his thoughts to nothing else. "When you walk only *mu* walks", as one of my Zen teachers used to say. "When you speak it is *mu* that speaks, when you eat it is *mu* that eats . . . And then, when you have reached the point where your seeing, hearing, thinking, are nothing but *mu*, suddenly you directly perceive *mu*."

It is from this state of absorption, that is to say, of loss of all feeling of 'I', that the truth suddenly bursts upon one. Here is the first intimation of the 'sudden enlightenment' which has always characterised Zen experience. The whole process is guided, of course, by the

Zen master, who from his own fund of enlightened experience is able to see exactly what is happening with the student. Thus it is that in so many of the classical Zen stories it is related, bafflingly for those unacquainted with Zen practice, that the master suddenly kicks the student or shouts at him or hits him with a stick - on which the student is immediately enlightened. Because it is by just such behaviour on the part of the master *at this critical moment* that the student's mind can be jarred or shocked into making the final leap.

Sometimes again it may be a word or a phrase which ignites the spark, a phrase which the student may have heard many times before from the master, but because his mind is now ripe assumes a new and startling significance. It is essential to understand however that these stories tell only the last dramatic moment of a much longer tale of hard, boring and difficult toil. It was only because the student's mind was ripe at the time that these means proved effective in breaking through the barrier. To expect at the beginning of the journey, while the mind is still green and hard, that dotty or unexpected behaviour will produce enlightenment, is of course futile. At the door of this misapprehension can be laid most of the rubbish that was talked some ten years ago by Beat enthusiasts for Zen.

With this flash of insight the meaning of the *koan* becomes luminously clear. So clear that the student should be able to answer correctly all the probing questions - show me *mu* on a mountain, cut *mu* in half - by which the master seeks to verify the genuineness of his realisation. The *koan* has thus functioned as a helpful device to enable one to pass through the iron wall, and to look back and see that it never really existed.

III

At first sight these two methods, the Shingon symbol and the Zen *koan*, seem wide apart. But their differences are more subtle than might first appear. Both the *koan* and the mantra are, after all, words used in a manner other than that of rational language. They are both sounds without sense, designed to guide the mind across the barrier. But they are different. How?

In the first place the *koan* is utterly unintelligible. It presents no face at all even remotely recognisable by our ordinary mind. Hence we are not tempted to treat it as a mystery beyond our powers, to accept it as an article of faith, stowing it away in a drawer of the mind without examination. It is too everyday, too down to earth; a dog, a tree, a face, a finger are after all the subjects of most *koans*. There clings to the *koan* no aura of numinousness, nothing that tempts us to bow our head as before a mysterium tremendum.

But with the icon or the mantra on the other hand, this possibility exists. The symbol of the Buddha in itself tends to appear sacred.

Thus we are tempted to accept it for its surface appearance, unaware that its chief significance lies in conducting the mind to other levels. It does not present the same impenetrable wall as does the *koan*, and hence does not generate the same syndrome of energy. It accomplishes its transforming work gently, without any enormous gathering of force. The Shingon disciple does not look for *sudden* enlightenment; for him there is no sudden flash, no sudden collapse of the iron wall, only a gradual transformation.

The *koan* is thus not a symbol in the sense we found it used in the Shingon method. The *koans* are the records of 'happenings' in the course of ordinary living, the response of an enlightened person to an ordinary question or situation. Though to the ordinary mind it appears as an insoluble riddle, 'penetrate' it in the right way and it will help to produce the very state from which the remark was made. In other words, wherever the enlightened world 'shows through' into our own in a way our rational minds find baffling, there lies a potential *koan*.