

The Madman and Fool in Buddhism

by Joan Silver

"Craziness is good. Crazy people are happy, free, they have no hindrance. But since you have many attachments, you are only a little crazy. This is not crazy enough. You must become *completely* crazy. Then you will understand.¹

Such is the advice of a modern Zen Master to his Zen student. The tradition of "madness," the teacher or student who is also a "fool," is most pronounced in Zen, but is found throughout Buddhism.

When we first look at these "madmen," we observe that their actions confound the normal divisions that we make between the moral and the immoral, good and bad, the sacred and the profane. The "madmen" and "fools" seem often to be contrary beings—to knock down whatever they find standing up. They are fiercely iconoclastic. Part of this iconoclasm involves shattering the normal sorts of oppositions we set up in our speech, bringing to mind Mircea Eliade's description of the dialectic of one pair of opposites: the sacred and the profane.

In *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Eliade says that "in every religious framework there have always been profane things beside the sacred," but he goes on to insist that "the *dialectic* of Hierophanies [emphasis mine], of the manifestation of the sacred in material things . . . remains the cardinal problem of any religion."² He develops this idea more fully near the end of the book: "The dialectic of Hierophanies tends endlessly to reduce the spheres that are profane and eventually to abolish them."³

To trace the course of this dialectic in Buddhism (or to discover whether it in fact exists) would be more than I could hope to accomplish. However, we can take Eliade's dichotomy of the sacred and the profane and his characterization of their dialectic as a model for the "dialectic" of other opposites. Just as the profane disappears in the sacred, does the immoral also disappear in the moral or the "bad" in the "good"? Furthermore, if one side of an opposition ceases to be, can the other side still be said to exist? Such questions concerning the sacred and the profane, and opposition as such, will serve as a lens through which we may provisionally view these "madmen" and their actions. Let us now turn to the "madmen" themselves.

The descriptions of Buddhist "madmen" and "fools" are strikingly similar. Wŏnhyo, a seventh century monk, is perhaps the most renowned "madman" within the Korean Buddhist tradition. The authenticity of certain stories about Wŏnhyo may be in doubt, but, whatever their authenticity, they teach us something about Buddhism in general and Korean Buddhism in particular. Robert Buswell notes:

As a didactic tool, the hagiography also offered for consideration a spiritual exemplar—a model of conduct, morality and religious understanding for the entire community. . . . Hence, a study of Wŏnhyo's biographies should also give implicit indications about the character of Korean Buddhism as a whole: for, Wŏnhyo was a cultural archetype of the Korean tradition. . . .⁴

One story about Wŏnhyo is universal: he

is said to have attained his enlightenment after spending the night in a tomb (which he had taken for a cave). During the night Wŏnhyo became very thirsty. Groping around in his search for water, he found what he took to be a cup and drank from it:

Ah, how delicious! Then he bowed deeply, in gratitude to Buddha for the gift of water. The next morning, Wŏn Hyo woke up and saw beside him what he had taken for a cup. It was a shattered skull, blood-caked and with shreds of meat still stuck to the cheekbones. Strange insects crawled or floated on the surface of the filthy rain-water inside it. Wŏn Hyo looked at the skull and felt a wave of nausea. He opened his mouth. As soon as the vomit poured out, his mind opened and he understood. Last night, since he hadn't seen and hadn't thought, the water was delicious. This morning, seeing and thinking made him vomit. Ah, he said to himself, thinking makes good and bad, life and death. It creates the whole universe. It is the universal master. And without thinking, there is no universe, no Buddha, no Dharma. All is one and this one is empty.⁵

But Wŏnhyo's spiritual journey did not end here. Years later he met a Zen Master whom he asked to teach him. The master responded by taking him to the red light district of the town:

The Master said to Wŏn Hyo, "For twenty years you've kept company with kings and princes and monks. It's not good for a monk to live in heaven all the time. He must also visit hell and save the people there who are wallowing in their desires. Hell too is 'like this.' So tonight you will ride this wine straight to hell." . . . So Wŏn Hyo stayed the night, and broke more than one Precept. The next morning he took off his elegant robes

and went dancing through the streets, barefoot and in tatters. *'De-an, de-an, de-an!* The whole universe is like this! What are you?'

Wŏnhyo's departure from the conventional life of a monk is described similarly elsewhere: "His utterances were mad and outrageous and his conduct perverted and remiss. Together with householders, he entered bars and brothels."

Wŏnhyo is the spiritual ancestor of the modern Korean monk and artist, Jung-kwang, who claims to practice "unlimited action". Jung-kwang says of "unlimited action": "If the one who practices it is dead, there is reverence; if he is alive, there is bound to be trouble."⁶ Jung-kwang, "a controversial figure, engaged in unorthodox activities of concern to the more restrained members of the Buddhist community,"⁷ has twice been expelled from the Chogyŏ Order of Buddhism. He "refers to himself as a 'mad monk'" and describes his life thus:

"Finally came the day when the difference between meditating and not meditating disappeared. Every act, every word was meditation. From that time on, I have practiced 'unlimited action.' Sometimes I sleep—sometimes not. When I am hungry I eat, and sometimes for days I eat nothing. I sometimes drink only water, and other times bottles of wine or whiskey. I have slept with a thousand women; one was hunchback and no one wanted her, but to me she was the same as the most beautiful women, and I gave her love and she became a happier person. I never hurt anyone by my actions. I am a 'Buddhist mop.' A mop is something that gets dirty itself but makes everything it touches clean. I *have* to act this way, I have to live the Buddhist doctrine that there are no distinctions, that right and wrong are projections of our mind. By living

'unlimited action' I daily teach the message of Buddhism."¹⁰

Dr. Lewis Lancaster, who has travelled with Jung-kwang and published several books of his paintings, says that "Jung-kwang's statements echo the texts of Buddhism,"¹¹ and notes the tradition which Wŏnhyo helped to establish and within which Jung-kwang acts:

Korean Buddhist history is filled with the stories of such monks and nuns, who, having achieved a high state of insight, turn away from the limiting social rules to live according to an internalized order. These individuals often exhibit extraordinary behavior, including uninhibited actions often labeled "immoral."¹²

Jung-kwang relates his life of "unlimited action" to his painting: "When I paint a picture, my brush must move without hesitation. There can be no mistakes to be corrected. Only when there is unlimited action can the brush move with force and power."¹³ Not only do Jung-kwang's actions challenge what is sacred and what is profane (or what is moral and what immoral), but his paintings "are iconoclastic, poking fun at individuals or sacred objects."¹⁴ Conrad Hyers notes that such iconoclasm is essential to Zen:

There has probably never been a religious movement more sweepingly iconoclastic than Zen. Idols of every sort are relentlessly and mercilessly smashed: not only the ego and its desires and attachments, but scripture, doctrine, tradition, meritorious works, liturgy, prayer, gods, miracles, Bodhisattvas, and even the Buddha himself. . . . before true liberation can occur, all idols must be overturned, or stood upside down.¹⁵

It must be remembered, however, that such "madmen" are not limited to Zen.

James Steinberg has researched such "crazy adepts" within the entire Eastern tradition:

The highest Enlightened Beings, live spontaneously, in the moment, and no convention binds them. . . . Because the Adepts are moved to illumine and instruct whatever is brought before them, they may appear wild. They may appear self-indulgent, seem mad with powers, or act like fools.¹⁶

The meaning of "Avadhoot" (from the Sanskrit), one name for such "madmen" notes Steinberg, is significant: "it means 'shaken off,' 'detached,' or 'naked.' It is a term used to describe one who is not shackled in any way. He or she is fully Awakened and free of any secular or even sacred attachments."¹⁷

Steinberg tells one story that illustrates especially well this freedom from sacred attachments. Dropakula of Bhutan, known as "the mad Lama," was a wanderer. On one journey he met a man carrying a painting to the Karmapa Rinpoche (the head of a certain Buddhist sect) for a blessing. Dropakula "asked to look at the painting. He opened the rolled painting on the ground and crouched on it as if he were defecating."¹⁸ Rolling the scroll back up, he pronounced it blessed. The owner of the painting was furious. When he reached his destination, however, the Karmapa, seeing that the images had been transformed, declared that the scroll had already been blessed. This story reveals a delightful confounding of the sacred and the profane. As Steinberg notes elsewhere, "Nothing is sacred to him who moves in, and is moved by, the Sacred itself."¹⁹

Clearly these spiritual "madmen" are teachers. Hyers has characterized this sort of teaching as "Zen Midwifery":

The master functions as a midwife of truth in the true Socratic sense. . . . The master does not and cannot teach the

Truth in the sense of indoctrinations; for the Truth to be realised—an inward, intuitive, non-discursive truth—cannot be dispensed in this way. It cannot, in fact, be dispensed in any way.²⁰

We remember the first “transmission” that is said to be the beginning of the Zen line in Buddhism. The Buddha once sat, ready to preach to the assembled people. He sat for a long time in silence. Then, he held up a flower. Mahakasyapa smiled. To him the Buddha transmitted his Dharma. The first moment of Zen was wordless. No “truth” was “dispensed.”

John Martinek, in his fascinating study, “Language and Mysticism: The ‘Holy Madman,’” speaks of Zen’s outright hostility to words: “The student was always warned to shun words as ‘perils to his life.’”²¹ Martinek examines the teaching methods of certain Tibetan “Holy Madmen.” Their communication is highly contradictory and confusing. According to Martinek, the Buddhist “teacher,” when asked to describe the “mystic state,” encounters a dilemma: “If he doesn’t talk he violates, or abandons, the questioner, and if he does talk he violates the goal (the mystic state).”²² So the question must be thrown back to the questioner; the questioner must also be presented with a dilemma—really the same dilemma which he or she presented to the Master. How can we “say” what cannot be “said”? How can we “know” what cannot be “known”? Thus, the apparently “mad” or “foolish” actions of the Buddhist teacher. “Sanity,” with the concomitant distinctions we comfortably make in speech, is not the teaching of Buddhism.

The Third Zen Patriarch wrote:

The Great Way is not difficult if you do not make distinctions.

Form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ

from form; whatever is form is emptiness, whatever is emptiness that is form.²⁴

Briefly stated, form refers to things as being materially in the world, and emptiness to the “true nature” of ourselves and “things”—being without self and separate reality. Form is the manifestation of things; emptiness is their essence. Edward Conze points out that the statements from the *Heart Sutra* are a logical contradiction: “‘Emptiness’ [as referring to our own ‘realization’ of emptiness] is a state which results from complete self-denial, and from the renunciation of all things,” but here “all things” are identified with this very “emptiness.” Thus he says that “The identity of Yes and No is the secret of emptiness.”²⁵ Such an identity, however, is antithetical to the nature of speech—opposites are essential to language: “yes,” “no”; “is,” “is not”; “good,” “bad”; “form,” and “emptiness.” But the Third Zen Patriarch has told us that the Oppositions contained in speech are not in the nature of things, and the *Heart Sutra* annuls such distinctions. In light of this, Conze introduces the notion of a “‘dialectical’ conception of emptiness”: “The emptiness which is envisaged here is not empty of that which it excludes, but it includes it, is identical with it, is full of it. It is therefore a ‘Full Emptiness’.”²⁶

Conze comments that the identity of form and emptiness stated above is the same as “the identity of Nirvana and Samsara.”²⁷ Nirvana and Samsara are another pair of opposites which must be annulled. Wonhyo himself wrote, “It becomes clear to all who are initiated into the truth that this world and the world yonder are the same, the befouled land and the pure land all spring from One mind, and life or death and Nirvana are not two.”²⁸ No attachment is acceptable in Buddhism, not even one to that which is at first said to be the “truth,” i.e., emptiness. If we look to “enlightenment” as something to be attained, we will be creating an “other,” making a distinction that will not help us.

Wŏnhyo, like the other "madmen" we have seen, chose to live very much in the world, not to stand apart as a "monk." One who does this, and who does not accept other ordinary distinctions that are made in the world (who sees, as Conze said, "that the identity of Yes and No is the secret of emptiness"), will be considered eccentric or foolish, if not "mad."

Another text that speaks to the issue of form and emptiness, the pure and the impure, is the *Platform Scripture* of Hui-neng, the Sixth Zen Patriarch. The story is told that the Fifth Patriarch called his disciples together and asked them to write verses showing their understanding of "how to escape from the bitter sea of birth and death."³⁸ The head monk was the only one who dared to write a verse:

The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.³⁹

Hui-neng, an uneducated rice-pounder in the monastery, composed a response:

Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?

Just as "form is emptiness and emptiness is form," the pure and the impure are coincidental; there is no impurity to be done away with. Hui-neng will not allow an opposition to be set up with respect to our "Original Mind"; it is, as it is, "pure," with no opposing impurity to trouble it. Later Hui-neng says "If you activate your mind to view purity without realizing that your own nature is originally pure, delusions of purity will be produced."⁴⁰ Delusions of purity produce delusion of impurity. Language is confounded by this—according to the logic of speech, if pure exists, impure must exist too. Hui-neng's insight is that the

impure does not exist. He says that those people who think that purity *is* something, that it "has a form," will "end up being bound by purity."⁴¹ Purity, like anything else, can be confining; in one's "Buddha nature" one is confined by nothing.

These reflections on "dust" and "purity" can help us to understand Jung-kwang's description of himself as a "Buddhist mop." He describes himself as getting dirty, but leaving all that he touches clean. If Jung-kwang has realized his "already clean and pure" mind, he can see the "purity" of all else and can share this vision with others. Similarly, Hui-neng tells us that just as there is no "stain" in our original nature, so "the very passions are themselves enlightenment."⁴² We are reminded of the lives of Wŏnhyo and Jung-kwang. They live their "enlightenment" in the midst of the passions. Hui-neng asks us not to be attached to the emptiness that can be contrasted with the life of the passions and the things of the world:

Do not sit with a mind fixed on emptiness. If you do this you will fall into a neutral kind of emptiness. Emptiness includes the sun the moon, the stars, and planets, the great earth, mountains and rivers, all trees and grasses, bad men and good men, bad things and good things, heaven and hell; they are all in the midst of emptiness. The emptiness of human nature is also like this.⁴³

Wŏnhyo says of emptiness in his commentaries on the *Awakening Faith in Mahayana*: "But this emptiness is also to be emptied; . . . Such emptiness does not have the nature of emptiness; therefore, it can create something."⁴⁴ This emptiness *contains* existence.

In Hui-neng's catalogue of all that exists within emptiness are "bad men and good men, bad things and good things." Good and bad are a pair of opposites, a distinction

created by our thinking; in themselves they are empty, illusory. We have noted that some of the actions of the "madmen" and "fools" are actions that might be considered "immoral." Holy "madmen" are free of ideas of right and wrong. They recognize, as Jung-kwang said, that "right and wrong are projections of our mind," and act only to open the minds of those they meet. This is Jung-kwang's "unlimited action." The truth can be seen only beyond distinctions; all oppositions must be shattered.

Zen (or Buddhism) is not "moral"; it is not set up in opposition to the passions. For to be "moral" is to reject something "immoral." We must see fully, and to see fully is to see beyond good and evil. We are "in the midst" of good and evil and yet we are free, for good and evil are both "empty." Zen Master Sengai wrote the following poem:

Amidst the reeds [good and evil]
Runs
The pure spring water.³⁶

The "absolute," to which we belong and who we really are, "the pure spring water," is not "stained" by its intimate involvement with "phenomena," "the reeds of good and evil," among which are our passions.

Hyers points out that Zen must not get caught up in dualities while overcoming them.³⁷ Dropakula was thus giving a profound teaching to the man who sought to have his painting "blessed." This man, thinking that there was something sacred and that it could be "defiled" by the profane, became so angry that, as he ran away from Dropakula, "he called loudly, 'I would beat you to death if you were not a so-called "mad lama"!' "³⁸ Dropakula's action showed that the man had an "attachment" to the sacred, to what he thought was pure, whereas "Zen [or Buddhism] resists the temptation to be attached to anything, however consequential or sacred."³⁹ As Zen Master Kuei-shan noted,

"When all feelings of saintly and profane have been wiped out, there will be exposed the body of true eternity." "⁴⁰ We recall the tenth picture in the ox-herding sequence, where, as Jon Carter Covell observes, we see "the enlightened one mingling with people in the world in a casual way. He is totally free, and thus doesn't distinguish between the sacred and the secular."⁴¹

What we find in Buddhism, then, is the "dialectic" of Hierophanies and of all oppositions at its end: if there is no longer anything "profane"; neither is there anything "sacred." By going beyond this opposition we find what is truly sacred; we cannot name it, but those who know it are free to "play" with (or without) words in order to help others find it. And as the dialectic is complete, we are asked to go beyond all opposition—even the opposition created by no opposition. "Emptiness" is not the end of the journey. We must come to live comfortably in the world as it is. The "madmen" and "fools" do this. They live in the world participating in the life that has death as its opposite, yet asking us to go beyond this opposition to every moment of their lives. Their eccentric behavior is necessary because we are asleep to what is really so. We think that the Karmapa can bless our scroll; we take seriously the distinctions and oppositions that our thinking creates. We may want even to kill if we think these distinctions are violated. Therefore we need to be shocked—challenged to see what might be beyond these distinctions.

The "fool" or "madman" in Buddhism reminds us of our essential foolishness: "Verily it maketh one smile/ To hear of a fish in water athirst."⁴²

FOOTNOTES:

1. Seung Sahn, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York:

Grove Press, 1976), p. 36.

2. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1963), p. 12, p. 29.

3. Eliade, p. 459.

4. Robert Buswell, "The Biographies of the Korean Monk, Wonhyo (617-686): A Study in Buddhist Hagiography," (TS), forthcoming in *Biography as a Genre in Korean History*, ed. John Jamieson and Peter H. Lee (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 5-6.

5. Seung Sahn, pp. 60-1.

6. Seung Sahn, pp. 62-3.

7. Buswell, p. 10.

8. Jung-kwang, *The Mad Monk: Paintings of Unlimited Action*, introd. Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Lancaster-Miller Publishers, 1979), p. 11.

9. Jung-kwang, p. 3.

10. Jung-kwang, p. c., p. 6.

11. Jung-kwang, p. 6.

12. Jung-kwang, p. 6.

13. Jung-kwang, p. 10.

14. Jung-kwang, p. 11.

15. Conrad M. Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 103.

16. James Steinberg, "Avadhoots, Mad Lamas, and Fools," *The Laughing Man*, III, No. 1 (1982), p. 88.

17. Steinberg, "Avadhoots," p. 90.

18. Steinberg, "Avadhoots," p. 97.

19. James Steinberg and George Feuerstein, "Crazy Adepts," *The Laughing Man*, III, No. 3 (1982), p. 90.

20. Hyers, p. 136.

21. John Martinek, "Language and Mysticism: The 'Holy Madman,'" M.A.

Thesis, Graduate Theological Union, 1976, p. 55.

22. Martinek, p. 50.

23. Seung Sahn, p. 12.

24. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1985), p. 81.

25. Conze, p. 84.

26. Conze, pp. 84-5.

27. Conze, p. 82.

28. Hong Jung-shik, *Buddhist Culture in Korea* (Seoul: International Cultural Foundation, 1974), p. 25.

29. Hui-neng, *The Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. Philip Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 128.

30. Hui-neng, p. 130.

31. Hui-neng, p. 139.

32. Hui-neng, pp. 139-40.

33. Hui-neng, p. 146.

34. Hui-neng, p. 146.

35. Sung-bae Park, *Wonhyo's Commentaries on 'The Awakening of Faith in Mahayana'*, Dissertation. University of California at Berkeley 1979, pp. 184-5.

36. Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Sengai: The Zen Master* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphics Society, Ltd., 1971), p. 114; the bracketed words are Suzuki's interpolation.

37. Hyers, p. 31

38. Steinberg, "Avadhoots," p. 97.

39. Hyers, p. 20.

40. Hyers, p. 70.

41. Jon Carter Covell and Sobin Yamada, *Unraveling Zen's Red Thread: Ikkyu's Controversial Way*, (Elizabeth, New Jersey: Hollym International Corp., 1980), p. 49.

42. Hyers, p. 138.