ZEN AND THE TEN OX-HERDING PICTURES

By Ven. Dr.Walpola Rahula

Preface By Graeme Lyall

Dr.Rahula's article which follows was originally given as a lecture to the Buddhist Society, London, in 1975. Many followers of the Theravadin tradition have many misconceptions about the Mahayana tradition and about Zen in particular. They feel that the Mahayana tradition is almost another religion, whilst the Theravada is the only "pure" form of Buddhism. People with such a 'closed mind' can make little progress in Buddhism. Some Zen followers feel that Zen and Buddhism are two different teachings. I once heard a Zen practitioner ask the great Zen Master, Ven.Thich Nhat Hanh, what is the difference between Buddhism and Zen. He answered "none". He pointed out that Zen is based on the Satipatthana Sutta and advised all Zen practitioners to study this important Sutra so that they could understand the roots of their practice. Dr.Rahula shows that, indeed, Zen and traditional Theravada practice are essentially the same. He shows that the famous "Ten Ox-herding Pictures", which are very familiar to all Zen practitioners and attributed to the Sung dynasty Zen (Cha'an) Master Kaku-an Shi-en, have their roots in the early Buddhist Pali sources.

For those unfamiliar with the significance of these pictures, the ox is the mind - at first wild and untamed - prone to run hither and thither. The ox-herder first must lasoo the ox - but the ox continues to resist being still - wanting to do its own thing. The ox-herder must tie the ox to a tree so that being fixed to one point, it will soon submit and be calm. Once the ox is calmed and tamed, it can be ignored and the ox-herder no longer needs to pay the ox any more attention. This is a superb simile of meditation practice. Let us now see what Venerable Dr.Walpola Rahula has to say about 'Zen and the Ten Ox-herding Pictures'.

Introductory books on Zen usually contain ten or six drawings called 'Ox-herding Pictures', depicting a story of taming an unruly, wild bull. These were drawn by some Zen masters of old, notably by Kaku-an and Jitoku of the twelfth century. The bull represents the mind and the herdsman who tames the bull is the yogi, the person engaged in meditation.

It is significant that this simile of the taming of the bull goes back to very ancient times. Discussing the import of the expression 'arannagato va rukkhamulagato va sunnagaragato va', 'gone to a forest or gone to the root of a tree or gone to an empty (quiet) house (room)', occurring in the Satipatthana sutta, the Pali commentaries elaborate:

This bhikku's mind (i.e. the meditator's mind),/which was for a long time scattered among such objects as visible forms (rupadisu arammanesu) does not like to enter into the path (street) of a subject of meditation (kammatthana-vithi), but runs only into a wrong path like a chariot yoked to an untamed (unruly) bull. Just as a herdsman, who desires to break in an untamed calf grown up with all the milk it has drunk from the untamed (mother) cow, would remove it from the cow, and having fixed a big post on a side would tie the .calf to it with a rope; and then that calf of his, struggling this way and that, unable to run away, may sit down or lie down close to the post; in the same way, this bhikku (i.e. the meditator), who desires to tame the villainous mind grown up as a result of drinking for a long time of the pleasures of

sense-objects such as visible forms, and having gone to a forest or to the root of a tree or an empty house, should tie it to the post of the object of the presence of mindfulness (satipatthanarammanatthamba) by the rope of mindfulness (sati-yotta). Then the mind of his, even after it has struggled this way and that, not finding the object previously indulged in, unable to break the rope of mindfulness and to run away, sits down and lies down close to that same object (of mindfulness) by way of neighbourhood concentration and attainment concentration (upacarappanavasena).

Hence the ancients said:

Just as a man would tie to a post

A calf that should be tamed,

Even so here should one tie one's own mind

Tight to the object of mindfulness.

In this commentarial simile the herdsman fixes a post and ties the calf to it, whereas the bull in the Zen pictures is tethered to a tree.

The two commentaries where this simile occurs are the Pali translations made by Buddhaghosa Thera in the fifth century A.C. of the original Sinhala Commentaries which go back to the third century B.C. The Ancients (porana), anonymous great masters, referred to in the passage quoted above (and in numerous other places in the Pali Commentaries), may belong to an even earlier date than the Sinhala Commentaries themselves, i.e. earlier than the third century B.C. In this passage the last verse, attributed to these Ancients, contains in miniature the simile of the calf. Thus the story of the taming of the bull can perhaps be traced back to a period even earlier than the third century B.C.

The Ancients had in four short lines compared tersely and concisely the training of the mind to the taming of the calf. The commentators enlarged on it with more details and explanations. Zen masters developed and elaborated the same idea, depicting through the medium of beautiful drawings the fascinating story of the gradual training, purification and perfection of the mind. Behind this development there seems to have been a common Buddhist tradition. Both the Theravada and the Mahayana seemed to have followed a common commentarial tradition.

In the 'Ox-herding Pictures' the ox is black at the beginning, but in the course of its taming and training it gradually becomes white, until finally it is completely white. The underlying idea is that the mind, which is naturally pure, is polluted by extraneous impurities and that it could and should be cleansed through discipline and meditation.

There are in the Anguttara-nikaya two very important and essential suttas which serve as index to the concept of the black ox gradually becoming white. One sutta says: Pabhassaram idam bhikkave cittam, tan ca kho agantukehi upakkiesehi upakkilittham. (Bhikkhus, the mind is luminous and it is defiled by adventitious defilements.) The other says: Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam, tan ca kho agantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttam. (Bhikkhus, this mind is luminous, and it is freed from adventitious defilements.) Further, these two suttas state that

there is no cultivation of the mind (citta-bhavana) for the uninstructed ordinary man who does not understand this exactly as it is, but that the cultivation of the mind is possible for the instructed noble disciple who understands this exactly as it is.

It is instructive to note here that there is a striking agreement between this concept of citta in the two suttas above and the Mahayana doctrine of the tathagatagarbha. Citta is qualified by the Pali word pabhassara. The Lankavatara-sutra (a Mahayana sutra of a later date than the Anguttara-nikaya and which has greatly influenced Zen), qualifies tathagatagarbha by the corresponding Sanskrit word prabhasvara (luminous). It says that the tathatagarbha is prakrtiprabhasvara (luminous by nature) and prakrtiparisuddha (pure by nature), but it appears impure 'because it is defiled by adventitious defilements' (agantuklesopaklistataya). (Cf. the Pali expression in the two suttas above: agantukehi upakkilesehi upakkilittham.) In the Lankavatara-sutra the term tathagatagarbha is used as a synonym for alayavijnana. Now alayavijnana is another term for citta. So the Lankavatara-sutra statement that the tathatagarbha is 'luminous by nature' and 'pure by nature' and that it is 'defiled by adventitious defilements' is tantamount to saying that citta (mind) is 'luminous by nature' and 'pure by nature', and that it is 'defiled by adventitious defilements'. It is obvious then that the concept of the 'Ox-herding Pictures' is derived from Pali and Sanskrit sutras as well as from the ancient commentaries and that it was later elaborated into a set of graphic drawings.

The fundamental principle of Zen is evidently based on Satipatthana (Skt. Smrtyupasthana) common to both Theravada and Mahayana systems. The main purpose of zazen in Zen is the same as that of anapanasati in Satipatthana. In anapanasati one sits cross-legged and concentrates one's mind on breathing in and out. At the first stage of its development in jhana (Skt. dhyana), passionate desires and some impure thoughts are dispelled and feelings of joy and happiness remain along with certain mental activities. In the second stage, all intellectual activities are suppressed, tranquillity and one-pointedness of mind developed, and the feelings of joy and happiness still remain. In the third stage, the feeling of joy, which is an active sensation, disappears too, while the disposition of happiness still remains in addition to mindful equanimity. In the fourth stage, all sensations such as happiness and unhappiness, joy and sorrow disappear, only pure equanimity and awareness remaining. Thus in the end the mind becomes completely free from any kind of thought or sensation or sentiment. Similarly, the principle of zazen is to sit cross-legged and concentrate one's mind and to empty it till it becomes completely free from any kind of thought or sensation or sentiment.

A very significant point always emphasised as characteristic in Zen discipline is that one should live in the act, live in the moment itself, without worrying and disturbing oneself with thoughts of the past and future. A distinguished Zen teacher, questioned as to how he disciplined himself in the truth, simply said: 'When I am hungry I eat; when tired I sleep.' The questioner remarked that this was what everybody did and asked whether they could be considered as practising the discipline as he did. The teacher replied: 'No; because when they eat they do not eat, but are thinking of various other things thereby allowing themselves to be disturbed; when they sleep they do not sleep, but dream of a thousand and one things. This is why they are not like myself.'

This is precisely what one section of the Satipatthana Sutta called sampajana-pabha (mindfulness with clear comprehension) teaches. According to it, whether you walk, stand, sit, lie down or sleep, whether you stretch or bend your limbs, whether you look round, whether you put on your clothes, whether you talk or keep silence, whether you or drink, even when you answer the calls of nature - in all these and other activities - you should be fully aware and mindful of the act you perform at that moment. That is to say: you should live in the moment itself, in the present action, and should not be disturbed uselessly by thoughts about the past and the future. (It should be remembered that in addition to this, the Satipatthana Sutta deals with many other forms of meditation constituting a complete system based on mindfulness.) Elsewhere, the Buddha when asked why his disciples were so radiant, he replied: 'They do not repent the past, nor do they brood over the future. They live in the present. Therefore they are radiant. By brooding over the future and repenting the past, fools dry up like green reeds cut down (in the sun).'

The origin of Zen is related in a delightful little story of apocryphal tradition. One day, while preaching to the assembly on the Vulture Peak (Grdhrakuta), the Buddha held up a golden lotus flower. None in the assembly understood the meaning of his act except Maha-Kasyapa, the great elder, who looked at the Buddha and smiled. Then the Buddha said: 'I have the True Dharma Eye, marvellous mind of Nirvana. This now I transmit to you, Maha-Kasyapa.' Thus Maha-Kasyapa was considered to be the first in the line of the Indian patriarchs of Zen. The whole episode is of doubtful origin. However this may be, the very idea that the realisation of truth can be transmitted and handed down in pupilary succession like an oral tradition of teaching and that a custodian of Truth can be appointed in a line of hierarchy is absolutely repugnant to the spirit of the Buddha's teaching. A patriarch of a sect or a line or an order may certainly be appointed, but this belongs to the domain of institutional organised religion, and not to the realm of Truth. One should be extremely careful not to confuse the realm of Truth with the institutional side of a religion or a system.

It is popularly believed that Zen is different from all other systems of Buddhism. This erroneous impression probably has been created by later developments in China and Japan. Japanese Zen comes from Chinese Ch'an, which is derived from the Sanskrit 'dhyana' (Pali 'jhana'), meaning 'meditation'. This was introduced from India to China about the sixth century A.C., probably by Bodhidharma. But in China, and later in Japan, its practice went through such tremendous transformations, almost beyond recognition, on account of the character and culture of those countries that it is now generally regarded as Chinese, or almost Japanese. Nevertheless, the spirit of the original Buddhism from India still remains as the life of Zen. Its fundamental tenets are all based on the teachings and ideas found in the original Canonical texts.

Some important axioms, considered particularly Zen, are quite in keeping with the original Theravada teaching and tradition. For instance, Zen maintains that the attainment of satori (enlightenment or awakening) lies outside the scriptures and that it is impossible to attain the satori experience by mere study of sutras on a scholastic level and that one should not be attached to the letter of the Law. This does not mean at all that one should not study sutras or texts. Almost all Zen masters were, and are well-versed in their texts. As Dr.D.T.Suzuki humorously observed: 'Zen claims to be "a specific transmission outside the scripture and to

be altogether independent of verbalism", but it is Zen masters who are most talkative and most addicted to writings of all sorts.

That the realisation of Truth (Nirvana) cannot be attained by mere study of the Dhamma without practice, is a fundamental tenet of Theravada. But a knowledge of the Dhamma (pariyatti) is a necessary help. However, this knowledge alone will not do. It should be put into practice in life (patipatti). As the Dhammapada (vv.19,20) says, a person who knows a great deal of the texts but does not put his knowledge into practice is like a man who counts another's cows. Another person may know only a little, but he practices this and enjoys the results. If a person studied the texts without applying his knowledge for spiritual attainments, it was, according to the Theravada tradition, considered better for him to sleep than waste his time in study. The Dhamma (the teaching) is compared by the Buddha to a raft (boat) (Kullupama), for the purpose of crossing over to the other shore, and not to be got hold of with attachment (nittharantthaya no gahanatthaya). If you just sit on the raft holding fast to it without rowing it properly, you will never get to the other shore. Once you have crossed, you should not carry the raft, or the boat, on your back because it was helpful to you, but leave it there for the benefit of others. You should not, however, despise it and burn it after you have crossed. A scholarly monk named T'okusan (782-865), a specialist on the Diamond Sutra, is said to have burnt the sutra and all his notes, apparently in contempt, after he had his 'sudden awakening'. But this is an extravagant, overbearing and unnecessary exhibition of an enthusiast lacking in calm and balance rather than the reaction of a man of 'awakening'. His long study of the sutra was no doubt partly conducive to his so-called 'sudden-awakening'.

Another axiom in Zen is that it aims at pointing to one's mind; in other words, it aims at direct experience. This is exactly what is conveyed by the Pali word sacchikaroti which means 'to see with one's own eyes', 'to experience directly'. So also the Dhamma (Truth) 'should be realised by the wise individually, within themselves' (paccattam veditabbo vinnuhi).

The most important axiom in Zen is the attainment of Buddhahood by directly seeing into one's own nature. This seeing into 'one's own Nature' of 'Reality' or 'Truth' is denoted in Pali texts by such expressions as nanadassana (seeing with wisdom), cakkhum udapadi (eye was born (opened)), panna udapadi (wisdom arose), aloko udapadi (light s, whet look round, whether you put on your clothes, whether you talk or keep sce, whether you eat or drink, even when you answer the calls of nature all these and other activities - you should be fully aware and mindful of the act you perform at that moment. That is to say: you should live in moment itself, in the present action, and should not be disturbed useless by thoughts about the past and the future. (It should be remembered tin addition to this, the Satipatthana Sutta awake). Anybody who has realised Truth (Nirvana) could be called 'Buddha' in this sense, according to the Theravada tradition too. The Upasakajanalankara, a Pali treatise dealing with ethics of the lay Buddhist, written in the twelfth century by a Thera named Ananda in the Theravada tradition of the Mahavihara in Anuradhapura, states that, when a disciple attains enlightenment (savaka-bodhi), he becomes a Savaka-Buddha (Disciple Buddha). In the Theragatha even the term sambodhi (full enlightenment) is employed with regard to the attainment of arahantship of a thera. The Commentary says that the term sambodhi here means arahatta (arahantship). Even a Samasambuddha is an arahant - araham sammasambuddho. The Theravada and the Mahayana both agree that as regards vimutti or

vimukti (emancipation, liberation), ie. with reference to arahantship, liberation from defilements, there is no difference between a Sammasambuddha (Skt. Samyaksambuddha), Paccekabuddha (Skt. Pratyekabuddha) and a savaka (Skt. sravaka) who is liberated (ie. arahant). A Sammasambuddha is superior to a Paccekabuddha and a liberated disciple in the sphere of knowledge and with regard to innumerable other qualities, capacities and abilities. Although even a disciple who has realised Nirvana, who has attained arahantship, can be called 'Buddha', the Theravada, perhaps out of modesty, does not usually use the expression so generously and liberally as Zen employs the term with regard to anybody who is supposed to have attained satori.

Zen puts much emphasis on the sudden attainment of satori as its particular distinction and relates stories to illustrate the point. For example, the Zen Master Reiun, after thirty years of hard discipline and training, experienced his satori (awakening or enlightenment), when he saw a common peach flower in bloom. Master Kyogen, after a long and arduous search, had his satori when he heard the sound of a stone hitting a bamboo. A Zen Master named Mumon spent six years of hard discipline and meditation with the famous koan 'Mu' (nothingness) without any result. One day he heard the beating of the drum announcing meal-time, and all of a sudden he had satori.

Examples of this kind of 'sudden' awakening or 'sudden' attainment of arahantship are not lacking also in Pali Commentaries. An acrobat named Uggasena attained arahantship standing, perilously balanced, on the top of a bamboo pole in the course of performing risky acrobatics when he heard from the Buddha an utterance almost like a Zen koan:

Let go in front;

Let go behind;

Let go in the middle,

Gone beyond existence,

With a mind freed everywhere,

Thou comest not again to birth and decay.

A thera named Usabha, who was living in a cave in a forest at the foot of a mountain, was one morning overwhelmed by the glorious beauty of the forest and the mountains (vanaramaneyyakam pabbataramaneyyakam) and attained arahantship. Mahanama Thera, living on a mountain, was thoroughly disgusted with his life because he was not successful in getting rid of such impure thoughts as lust, and at the moment when he was about to commit suicide by jumping from the top of a rock, he attained arahantship.

Prince Vitasoka, a younger brother of Emperor Asoka of India (third century B.C.), was a pupil of Giridatta Thera and was well-versed in the Dhamma. One day he took the mirror from his barber while the latter was trimming his beard, saw his face in it and attained a stage of sotapatti (stream entrance), as he was seated in that very seat. Later he became a bhikkhu under his teacher Giridatta Thera and became an arahant in due course.

Bhagu Thera, in order to overcome his drowsiness, went out of his room, and when he was getting into the cloister for meditation (cankama, walk) he fell down, and there and then he became an arahant. Similarly, a theri (nun) of advanced age, named Dhamma, on her way back from alms-begging fell down on the ground. Suddenly and unexpectedly her mind was emancipated.

Siha Theri, the sister of General Siha, did not, even after seven years of hard striving in meditation, achieve her peace of mind. Thoroughly disappointed and depressed with her inability to realise the liberation of mind from defilements, she decided to commit suicide by hanging herself. tying a rope to the branch of a tree, she put the noose around her neck. Suddenly she was awakened to Truth and became an arahant.

Patacara Theri, who had already realised the stage of sotapatti, was endeavouring to attain to higher stages. One day she was washing her feet with water from a pot. The water flowed a little and sank and disappeared in the dry ground. Again she poured water on her feet, and this time it went a bit further and disappeared. The third time water flowed still further and vanished in the ground. Seeing this, she was utterly absorbed in the thought of impermanence, how aggregates appear and disappear. While she was lost in this thought, she saw the Buddha speaking to her: 'One day's life of a person who perceives the rise and fall (of conditioned things) is better than that of a person who lives one hundred years without perceiving it.' There and then Patacara attained arahantship. Although the attainment of awakening or enlightenment or emancipation, related in these Theravada and Zen stories, seems to be 'sudden', it is, in fact, not really so. In these and many other examples, the so-called 'sudden' awakening occurs only after a long and hard discipline, training, striving and practice, if not in this life, perhaps in some previous lives according to Buddhist teaching and belief. It is 'sudden' only in the sense that it cannot be predicted or scheduled and decided that, after so many weeks or months or years of discipline and meditation, enlightenment will occur on such and such a date at such and such a time. It occurs at a moment most unexpected, in a manner never anticipated, sometimes almost dramatically. But this moment arrives as a result of a long and hard training and striving. Zen teachers themselves admit 'that not everyone can be expected to have the training required for attainment of the exquisite moment of satori'.

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