

The art of Buddhism

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(Translated into English by Carlo Geneletti)

By the way of introduction..

There are very few people with the kind of personal commitment to Buddhism and the vast background in art history that are needed to understand Buddhist art. I regret to say that I am not among those few. I have been studying and practicing Buddhism for many years, but I began exploring how Buddhism has expressed itself in art only two-three years ago. I was – and still am -- afraid that I would be unable to do justice to this vast theme. Buddhist art encompasses twenty-five centuries of history in much of the world, in countries as far apart as Afghanistan and Japan. How can one have the presumption to master it?

However, last year, my Christian brother, father Carlo de Filippi, asked me to take up this challenge, and, recklessly, I accepted. It is now time to keep my word.

Perhaps I should conclude this brief preface with a warning. I will look at Buddhist art not as a historian, but as a Buddhist. Style here will be examined as a tool for religious expression only. I will search for the ways through which Buddhist art was able – when it was – to transmit the message of the Buddha silent and clear.

This approach is of course not new. Painting, carving, and writing, in prose and rhyme, are acts complete in themselves but they are vehicles for meaning at the same time. It does not matter what kind of meaning is being transmitted. Meaning can belong to the sphere of the profane but also to that of the sacred and the transcendental. Art speaks to the spirit and the spirit is nourished by the perception “of things not seen”¹. Art can be a bridge between the invisible and the spirit, between understanding and the incomprehensible.

Early Buddhism

Buddha’s message is as fertile and luxuriant as life and it is as multifarious and diverse as the cultures within which it grew. To be able to transmit it effectively, early Buddhism wove together form and content in a truly original way. Nowhere is this clearer than in the five hundred and forty-seven stories contained in the *Jātaka*, [Stories of the] *Birth* [of

¹ “ Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. Hebrew 11,1



Buddha],² which were completed around the third century b.C. and count therefore among the earliest examples of Buddhist art.³

The form of storytelling is particularly suited to Buddha's teaching. It is both vital and vibrant and it involves the listener actively in some kind of complicity. The stories, told, memorized and told again over and over spring from the same essential source but are never identical. No story is repeated exactly, with the same words and the same intonation, as another. Each story weaves its way from its creator through the voice of the storyteller to the heart of those who listen. By being recited, the stories of the *Jātaka* were never dead word.

Also, oral transmission encourages the listeners to participate. One must fill in the gaps in the story with one's own fantasy, one's own memory of earlier listenings, and bring every word heard back to one's own personal experience. The message is not standardized. It is intimately individual. Think of what happens to us any time we hear about the lilies of the field and of the fowls of the air⁴. Thanks to the art of the evangelist, behind the hidden meaning we perceive the unique and gratuitous splendor that springs from life.

In addition, these stories, taken together, hammer home a clear message. They paint in full colors the image of the Universal Community, one of the critical concepts of Buddhism, and the subject of many of his sermons. The stories contained in the *Jātaka* tell in plain language the lives of hundreds of manifestations of Buddha, as he appeared in the shape of a king, a woman, a merchant, a pariah, or even an animal, an elephant or an antelope. The Community, or Communion, symbolized by the variety and richness of the forms of life offered by India's bountiful nature in its vegetable, animal, human and superhuman worlds, was the idealized subject of Buddhist art long before the Buddha was represented in human form, and stories bring this wealth up very clearly.

These are then the two deep wells, the two most important sources of inspiration of Indian Buddhist art: the ideal Community, which is constituted by the whole cosmos, and the invisible presence of Buddha's spirit in every life, be it real or imaginary, as the only vehicle or the only way of salvation for all.

While the first instances of representation of the Universal Community were in storytelling, and those which followed soon after were in plastic arts, the type of message

² It is an indicator of their vitality that one should find them in very far-flung lands, and centuries later than when they were composed. Herodotus had read at least some of them, and they contain an early version of Solomon's verdict (*Jātaka* 546). We find echoes of them in Aesop's fables, in La Fontaine's Fables and in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Many of the tales told in the *Jātakas* found their way in the *Mahābhārata*, in the *Panchatantra* and in the *Rāmāyana*. Even the *Lotus Sūtra*, a fundamental Buddhist text whose first draft was completed by the first century b.C., said that one of the ways Buddha taught his disciples was through the *Jātaka*.

³ For the record, more than half of these stories were produced in the world of Hindū asceticism, but were modified in the course of the centuries and through innumerable retelling, have become vehicles for the message of the Buddha, the *bodhisattva* par excellence.

⁴ "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? 6:27 Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? 6:28 And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin." Matthew, 6; 26,28

they conveyed did not change that much. Soon after the funerary monuments, which are the earliest extant examples of Buddhist statuary art, there appeared the stone bas-reliefs representing dozens of living forms: elephants, peacocks, tigers, monkeys, gods, and kings with their followings. In the midst of this teeming life, an empty space, or a sign was usually included, to underline the fact that it was impossible to constrain the formless into a physical shape.

Later, this shape began to be reproduced, and in the shape of a Greek God. The masonry walls of the first monasteries that were built in the North and Northwest of India provided the wide surfaces needed for the first paintings. The influence of Hellenism⁵ on Buddhist visual arts became apparent in this period, between the second and third century b.C. It was as a result of this influence, that the Buddha, “the light of the world that dispels the darkness of illusion” began to be shown in the midst of the assembly of monks, dressed up in the traditional Indian garb but looking like Apollo.

It must be kept in mind, however, that the statues of the Buddha were not the portraits of Mr. Śākyamuni Gautama. They represented the Dharma embodied in the human form. Therefore, they were not statues (or paintings) like all others. Their proportions, their expressions, the features of their faces, and the emotions they sought to instigate in the viewers expressed, when they were successful, the transcendence by which they had been inspired. In fact, there and then, artist and religious devotee, art and religion began to overlap.

Mahāyāna and the Lotus Sūtra

The relation between faith and artistic inspiration, between religious experience and symbolic communication that had remained subtle and implicit in early Buddhism, deepened, was clarified and was made explicit by the development of Mahāyāna⁶. The Buddhism of the Great Communion or the Great Vehicle placed great emphasis on the essential unity of all lives and all phenomena, and, as a result, underlined the critical role played by friendly benevolence and mutual cooperation in men’s efforts towards salvation. The impossibility of describing reality as a whole, “from the outside”, coupled with the limits of verbal expression when it addresses matters of the spirit, inspired a very specific form of literature, one of the best – but by no means the only – example of which is the Lotus Sūtra, or Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra⁷.

⁵ Alexander the Great conquered Bactriana (Uzbekistan and Northern Afghanistan), Sogdiana (Southern Afghanistan and South-Western Pakistan) and Northwest India in 326, and left behind a cultural mix. It has often been stated that the first images of Buddha were only Hellenistic. However, statues found in Southern India in a different style, suggest that there were two different schools of Buddhist art. It may be added that this latter school in turn influenced Buddhist art in Thailand, Burma, China, Korea and Japan. See M. Anesaki, *Buddhist art in its relation to Buddhist ideals*. Houghton Mifflin and Co. Boston and New York, 1915, page 12.

⁶ The new Buddhism, as mahāyāna has also been called, started in earnest after the second century b.C.

⁷ Literally: the sutra of the white lotus of the good law.

Let's look at this Sūtra. The first important novelty represented by this sūtra as compared to earlier texts, was that it was composed in a hybrid Sanskrit, when all earlier sūtra were written in Pāli or, more probably, in *māghadī*, the ancient language of Bihār.

In addition to the use of a new language and, perhaps, a new alphabet, this sūtra, like most of those belonging to the Mahāyāna tradition, differs from the Buddhist literature of earlier times for the wide use of a type of language called “intentional”⁸. This language is very special in that it aims to keep itself at a distance from the contextual substance that it purports to communicate. The reason is that it intends to transmit meanings that cannot be conveyed by words or concepts. The sūtra describes it in these words: “teaching beyond doctrine and thinking”.

As a way of expression, intentional language is similar to that used in parables – at least in those parables which work through metaphor and paradox. Like these parables, intentional language tries to stamp directly into readers' and listeners' minds meanings that are different from the literal meanings of the words it employs. To give an example, pay attention to what happens to us when we read: “Let the dead bury their dead”. It is clear that this sentence does not mean that those who officiate or participate in a burial ceremony are actually dead, or that this ceremony is wrong in some ways and should be called off. On the contrary. This sentence raises another idea in the minds of the readers; it contrasts those who give in to the inducements of this world with those who have converted and turn towards the life of the spirit, a life which is so free from the world that there is “nowhere to lay their heads on”⁹. This contrast is expressed by the verbal trick of calling “dead” the former, alive as they may be from world's point of view.

In the highest expressions of this art, form and content overlap. Those who read these sūtras are affected – and sometimes turned off – by the rhythm and timing of story-telling, the abundance of details, the endless repetitions, the meticulous and painstaking lists of the bystanders and participants in the assembly, of the types of tree, bushes and herbs -- drenched by the only, tasteless, water of the teaching – that constitute the material out of which these sūtras¹⁰ are made. However, we would be wrong to assume that this is all fluff and “form” and ignore it. If the only thing we try to do is grasp the concept that we believe this form is there to convey, entire sections of the sūtra vanish into thin air. They melt away like snow in the sun. If I were to put this idea in a somewhat stark language I would say that since Buddha's teaching does not consist in an idea, or in a concept or in a particular doctrine, the writing that conveys it must also shed all ideas, concepts and doctrines. Which explains, in my eyes at least, the “fluff”.

To say it in another way: the entire body of Buddha's teaching aims at starting a process; not any process, to be sure. A specific process in a specific way. But a process nonetheless. Therefore, since the sūtras are tools with which he pursues this aim, they too must contribute to start that process, or to keep it alive, consolidate and strengthen it.

⁸ In Sanskrit, *saṅdhābhāṣa*.

⁹ Matthew 8,20

¹⁰ In particular, the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* or *Vimalakīrti nirdeśa sūtra*.

In these sūtras therefore, we would look in vain for the information, or the concepts that we are accustomed to finding in the sapiential texts of our culture. They are there very seldom. What we must do is to read carefully, and perceive attentively what is happening to us as we read. Which is what we do - or should do— when we look admiringly at a statue or a painting. The perception of their meaning should not be veiled by arbitrary rational activity. When I think about music, I cease to listen to it.

The Lotus Sūtra stands out in the Buddhist literature of all times for its purest idealism coupled with its highest artistic achievement. A good part of the Buddhists aesthetics that developed in the course of the centuries took their cue from or was inspired by this text, and particularly by its novel and daring use of the intentional language embedded in parables and hyperboles. Buddha's eternal and cosmic dimension is represented through a series of special effects that dissolve time and space in the crowded presence of every kind of living being, vegetable, animal and supernatural. Attending Buddha's assembly, we see the mythical figures of the Hindū culture: spirits, deities and ghosts. They are shoulder to shoulder with princesses, curious bystanders and great kings with their trains of thousands of pages and servants accompanied by elephants adorned with multicolored canopies. Then, nearer the center of the scene appear the great disciples and the most famous bodhisattvas. And the whole pack swishes through thousands of galaxies and numberless universes over periods of time of such an extension that hundreds of billion years are like the batting of an eyelid compared to them.

The imagination becomes so dazzled that the divine dimension implicitly attributed to Buddha in this vast *mise en scène* becomes an unimportant detail. The immensity of the phenomenal world represents the eternal and infinite, and, therefore, the divine. It stands for and suggests, *something beyond*. The text conveys this sense of awe with a subtle humor; never overwhelming like a scent, more like a light fragrance.

Tantrism

There is only another tradition in Buddhist art that differs significantly from that which has just been described: tantric art. Its critical difference is that it replaces free allusion with a rigorously codified and symbolic language.

Since the sixth century a.D., tantrism¹¹ spread to Buddhism from the Hindū religious traditions, particularly from Shivaism and Vishnuism. As is known, tantrism is a set of religious practices whose main aim is to give power to the spirit, the mind and the body. Initially, this approach influenced the most popular forms of Buddhism only. The poor and uneducated felt it could help them improve their lives and protect them against wars, famines, diseases and death. From tantrism they sought good health, rapid recovery from illness, plentiful harvests, and safety against physical harm.

Later on, tantrism began influencing the higher forms of Buddhism too. Hence the power released by tantric practices was no longer sought in order to satisfy material needs. Instead, it was channeled towards contributing to greater cooperation and mutual love among all living beings on the path to the salvation that frees from pain and suffering. In

¹¹ This term derives from Sanskrit *tantra*, which means web.

doing this, Tantrism flowed into Mahāyāna Buddhism and became *Vajrayāna Buddhism*, the diamond and lightning vehicle.¹²

Like all forms of Buddhism, tantrism moved through space. From the 11th century onwards, it took roots particularly in Tibet and Nepal. Before this, however, thanks to the translations into Chinese of the main tantras, completed already by the end of the 8th century, *Vajrayāna* spread throughout China and, from there, in the course of the 9th century, into Japan, where it was called *Shingon*, True Word, or *Mikkyō*, Secret Doctrine. In China, this school, called *Zhenyan* disappeared in 845, the year of the great persecution of Buddhism (and Christianity). In Japan, on the contrary, it grew and prospered and is alive even today.

The creation and visualization of the *maṇḍala*¹³ are important tantric practices. The following quote from Kukai, the Japanese monk who brought tantric/vajrayāna Buddhism from China to Japan conveys the idea that plastic arts are irreplaceable tools in the process of transmission:

“The secret teachings of esoteric Buddhism are so profound that they can be contained in no written word. Only painting can reveal them”.¹⁴

The realization of, and through, the *maṇḍalas* requires knowing their meanings, and not only their precise composition. This meaning, in turn, is expressed through the artist’s inspiration. The *maṇḍala* can be made up of thousands¹⁵ of symbolic figures, each of which can be created in one of five different colors. They are meant to represent the texture of the cosmos in its deepest aspects. Each figure can “appear” in four different ways: in human form; as a gesture or a typical action; as a symbolic attribute – it could be a flower, a book, or a bud; and in the form of syllables-seeds written in Sanskrit.

Yet once completed, the *maṇḍala* is sometimes destroyed. The “destruction of the mandala” is a critical element in the practices for initiation into Vajirajāna Buddhism. When the myriad figures made of sand are stirred and muddled up, their contours disappear. There remains only a simple heap of monochrome sand.

Nothing remains unchanged. Everything that is born dies. If you try to catch beauty and hold it still, you are poisoning life; you are taking the path that leads to suffering and pain. The narrow path of freedom from pain requires that you “*open up your spirit’s hands wide*”¹⁶ without holding onto and without possessing anything.

¹² In Sanskrit, *vajra* means both diamond and lightning.

¹³ According to the *Monnier Williams* dictionary, *maṇḍala* means circle. However, *maṇḍa* literally, means “the foam formed while cooking rice”. Therefore, it means content and essence. And *la* means the form which surrounds it. *Maṇḍala* can therefore be translated as “the circle which surrounds the essence” or “the essence of enlightenment in its manifest perfection”.

¹⁴ P. Cornu, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du Bouddhisme*, Édition du Seuil, Paris 2001.

¹⁵ This is true in particular for the two basic *maṇḍala* of the Shingon school: the *Garbahdhātu maṇḍala*, which symbolizes the unitary whole of the myriad forms appearing in the universe in all eternity, including mental forms; and the *Vajradhātu maṇḍala*, which represents the essential nature, or Buddha nature, that suffuse every being.

¹⁶ Quoted from Uchiyama Kōshō rōshi, former abbot of Antaiji.

The harmony of the parts, their unspeakable beauty, the precision and the symmetric balance of these compositions make it a unique form of art, and, at the same time, the graphic expression of the worldview of what, for the lack of a better term, I would call cosmo-theist idealism. In this worldview, infinitely graceful and deeply serene figures coexist with beings of awesome power. The Shingon school teaches: “Taste the serene dignity of the Mahāvairocana¹⁷ because the deepest part of your heart is in communion with him. Fear the severe expression of the irate face of the Motionless¹⁸ because something in your life and in your mind can be pierced by his steely sword”.

Another typical practice of Vajrayāna Buddhism – but of almost all Buddhist traditions as well, including Theravāda Buddhism -- is the recitation of *mantra*¹⁹.

The practice of reciting a particular type of *mantra*, the *dhāraṇī*, also called “long *mantra*” is particularly relevant for the issue at hand. *Dhāraṇī* are in Sanskrit, and they tend to be very long. What is interesting, however, is that, for *dhāraṇī*, the meaning of the words is less important and inspiring than the sounds and the music produced. For all intents and purposes, they are exercises in magic. The concentration needed to pronounce all the long, short and medium syllables in their right length, in their right order and with the right tone generates a very peculiar sense of estrangement. Reciting it, one is likely to hear oneself and the other participants pronounce these words and see one’s hands holding the book with the *dhāraṇī* as if from afar, as if from outside oneself. The effect is very moving. Hearing, even from afar, a group of monks reciting a *dhāraṇī* is an unforgettable experience. A friend of mine, who is very sane and not easy to deceive, told me he took part in a meeting on the shores of the Ganges, where a few thousand people practiced *dhāraṇī* and, several times he felt he was being lifted up from the ground by the vibrations produced by the voices reciting all round him.

Buddhist rituals

There is another form of art I would like to mention, where execution, fruition and form completely overlap, as they do in the *dhāraṇī*. It is the daily conduct of rites in all Buddhist traditions. As is known, they are not public ceremonies. Indeed, they are not exhibitions in the normal sense of this word. However, these ceremonies are a form of performing art in which sound, action and form are tightly interwoven. They are choreographies in which every gesture and every sound is carefully studied, measured, and performed with perfect timing by a group of meticulously trained persons. Within the

¹⁷ In Japanese, *Dainichinyorai*, the Buddha Great Sun or Great Light.

¹⁸ In Japanese *Fudō*, the terrifying aspect of Mahāvairocana.

¹⁹ The word *mantra* means “tool for thought” of *mati*, “thought”, and the verb *man*, which means “to think”, “to believe”, “to imagine”, “to suppose”. From this root comes the word *manas*, “intellect”. Its etymological origin is the same of the Latin for “mind”, “comment”, “memento”. It is also found in Nordic (English and German) words. Man, for instance, is “he who thinks”. Since the suffix *tra* means “protection”, “cover”, some translate *mantra* as “protection of the mind”. E. Conze (see: *Buddhist Wisdom Books*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1975), defines *mantra* this way: “The mantra are verbal formulae that produce miracles if pronounced”.

wide parameters of the unchangeable rules of each rituals, there is interpretation, and this brings the ritual back to life.

If one must classify these performances, one would say that they belong in the theater. It is total theater. Moment by moment, every gesture, every sound (bell, voice, drum, kettledrum, cymbal) merge with style, rhythm and the smell of incense, to form a living, and therefore, moving, *maṇḍala*, that transforms itself, lives and changes under our own eyes, ears and noses. If and when these moments of artistic religiosity become show and exhibition, they die. The purpose for which they are re-enacted dies with them.

A few thoughts on emptiness, religion and art

I believe that emptiness is a critical dimension of inspiration for Buddhist art. To explain why let me remind that emptiness is not nothing and can either describe an absence or constitute the inner quality of fullness, or both.

In the 5th century b.C., this ambivalent nature of emptiness was underscored by the great Indian grammarian Pāṇini. Using formulae to describe the morphology, syntax and phonetics of Sanskrit, Pāṇini noted that the words “without prefix” convey a meaning that is different from what it would be if the prefix were there and concluded that this absence had a value. It was the birthday of zero, not as “nothing”, but as the value of emptiness.

Five hundred years later, Nāgārjuna, founded the first Buddhist philosophical school, identified with unthought emptiness, *śūnya* in Sanskrit, the Middle Way that Buddha had taught in Vārāṇasi in his first sermon. Parenthetically, in the 7th century, this very word, *śūnya*, with the circular sign that represented it came to the West under the Arab word *sifr* where it changed its name into *zephirum* first and into *zero* afterwards and finally.

It was essentially thanks to Nāgārjuna’s school, called *Mādhyamika*, or the Middle Way that Buddhism avoided the risk of assimilation when, in his long travel towards the East, it met the great Chinese culture in the 1st century a.D.. Buddhism could have easily melted into the sea that had, or thought to have, fathomed the deepest recesses of the human soul. However, Sakyamuni’s offer was too original and innovative to allow itself to be closed in and smothered by old religious forms. So, in the 4th century, it freed itself from the fetters of syncretism. As a result, when, in the 6th century, Bodhidharma, brought to China from India the living and unmediated form of the Way, found the ground already prepared by the Middle Way proposed by Nāgārjuna, with its deep awareness of the emptiness and impermanence of every form of life and every phenomenon.

However, the cultural ground where the new school -- called Chan in China and Zen in Japan -- took its first steps and grew to adulthood, was steeped in Confucianism and Taoism. The a-religious essentiality of Zen resonated with the misanthropic naturalism of Taoism. Given over to reading the book of nature, Taoism supported and followed the course of nature without harming anyone. Therefore, in the 8th century, the first Chan monks who tried to express the ineffable they perceived in their daily lives, through painting and rhyming, borrowed the forms and the ambience of the idealized life of the Tao hermits and added to them, in a manner of speaking, the sense of the emptiness and

transience of life. In the new aesthetic canon that emerged from this contamination, the Taoist hermits, the mythical *sennin*²⁰, and nature were taken as the models.

Many of the artists who created these paintings in China ink and the poets who wrote comments on them were Chan monks. Having steadfastly practiced *zazen*²¹ for many – even thirty or forty – years, they had dropped away body and mind and were living their most inner life, without interference from mental constructions. They had a direct and lucid experience of true life and of the infinite potentiality of emptiness. Their art derived from this religious experience, and therefore did not contain “sacred” or “devotional” images. Sanctity and devotion were the language spoken by very humble subjects– a stone or a grass tuft –as if lost in a vast empty space, like the mysterious beginning of life in the immensity of the cosmos.

Sometimes, the figures represented in these paintings were still Indian in origin: the most famous bodhisattva or Bodhidharma himself. But they were completely metamorphosed. Their traits were apparently coarse, their beards and hair unkempt and their sullen, almost angry countenance expressed stability, strength and mystery. Other times we see cheerful vagabonds jeering at the moon or heaping up dead leaves with twig brooms. The dragon, which is a symbol for the living mystery, can be glimpsed through the edges of fog banks or while it peeps from the dark bottom of a cave.

Since the 13th century, this simple and straight art made its appearance in Japan. As it had been in China, the finest artists were Chan – Zen in Japanese – monks. Their style was characterized by the essentiality and the absolute individuality of the stroke. Their subjects, essentially drawn from nature, clearly gave off a subtle sense of poignancy and melancholy at time fleeting away: a petal falling off from the corolla, the outline of a far away mountain becoming indistinct, a bird’s flight more intuited than seen. The most delicate and sensitive streak of Japanese culture understood and reproduced this sense and these images unerringly.

From the 15th century onwards, aesthetic refinement has permeated the Japanese intellectual elites and has contributed to the birth of those methods for personal realization that are based on the beauty of the gestures and the harmony of forms. This has given rise to a sort of lay religiosity, in that it has religious origins, but it expresses them according to secular aesthetic canons. The art of serving tea, *Ikebana*²², calligraphy, *Nō* theatre, architecture and interior decoration are the visible expressions of the penetration in Japan of the aesthetics born of Buddhism. But it is important to underline that this aesthetics was critically different from that of the period immediately preceding it -- that is before the 13th to 15th century -- in its religious significance.

The absence of clear religious symbols and of images taken from the pantheon of a religion, ceased to belong to a form of art that prefers to suggest than to say explicitly, to

²⁰ The word here in Japanese because it is better known in this language. The Chinese equivalent, in Pinyin transliteration, is *xian*.

²¹ In Chinese, *zuochan*, the practice brought to China by Bodhidharma, which consists simply in sitting facing the wall, motionless and in silence.

²² Literally: “life-flower”.

imply the divine without bringing it on stage. Little by little, this changed, slowly but unfalteringly. The sparrow, the flower, the portrait of the ascetic, became the true subject of art. Religious figures, bodhisattvas and gods came back again, but as subjects of a sort of Mannerism. It may be beautiful; but, without the inexpressible something that created it, it does not move us any longer. The fertilization of lay aesthetic sensitivity through the art born of Buddhism had a very positive impact on Japanese society as a whole, but this was the beginning of the end of art of Zen as a religious expression.

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