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THE ZEN CLOWN IKKYU: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF A SYMBOL OF DISORDER

Taking into consideration the rigorous discipline, strict monastc regulations, and arduous daily schedule of a Zen Buddhist monk, it would appear to be self-contradictory to assert that a monk could achieve enlightenment and then faithfully patronize local brothels. It would also appear to be self-contradictory to drink tea in a monastery and *sake* at a local wineshop, to carry a human skull on a long bamboo pole through the streets and to wander the mountainous terrain of Japan in solitude, and to become head of a leading temple in the twilight years of one's life and, during the same period, to become involved in an illicit love affair. These apparent contradictions characterize the life of Ikkyū Sōjun (1394–1481), a monk and poet of the Rinzai sect. Ikkyū's behaviour was often bizarre, obscene, and outrageous even for an ordinary individual, let alone a zen monk. His appearance, humorous antics, obscene behaviour, and unusual literary compositions closely resemble the nature of a clown.

After studying the life and works of Ikkyū, I am convinced that he was a fifteenth-century Japanese clown figure. And to compare Ikkyū to a clown enhances our understanding of this fascinating religious figure. By viewing Ikkyū as a clown figure, this paper will shed light not only on the historical figure but also on a Japanese folk hero. In order to comprehend the historical person and the folk hero, this paper will utilize biographical material, the later, popular Tokugawa tales, and his poetry. By following this procedure, this paper will not be concerned with an accurate account of the historical Ikkyū but rather the popular hero and clown figure of folk imagination, although it appears that the popular image of the Zen poet is grounded in the historical person. Ikkyū is a complex figure, and, if he is viewed from a western perspective, it can be stated that he is a cross between the Shakespearean Falstaff, Cervantes' fool who is wise – Don Quixote –, George Burns and the bodiless grin of the Cheshire Cat of Lewis Carroll's

classic. I think that it will be shown in relation to Ikkyū that, as Henry Miller writes, "A clown is a poet in action . . ."[1]

Throughout this paper comparisons will be made with Jesus and native American Indians. The purpose of drawing parallels with representatives of other cultures is to indicate similar patterns of the clown, to open some potentially fruitful areas of thought and research, and to broaden our horizons and understanding of the clown figure, who cannot be simply confined to the circus arena. Finally, I want to broaden some of the insights of Conrad Hyers[2] and R.H. Blyth[3] who have written about humour in Zen Buddhism.

Self-Contradictory Nature

After joining the Rinzai sect at an early age, Ikkyū finally attained full enlightenment (*satori*) when he heard the cry of a crow, while floating aimlessly in a boat. However, it appears that he left the monastic order for a period of six or seven years, got married and fathered a son.[4] Returning to a monastic fold, he became famous for a wild, bizarre type of Zen. Although an enlightened monk, he also patronized the brothels and wineshops of Kyoto. He composed poems critical of the lechery and beastly behaviour of ordinary people, while engaging in sex and wine himself. In his poems he observes, "Man's realm is everywhere become a kingdom of beasts," or he laments, "How depressing, a nation lost to lechery."[5] In some of his poems he writes about enlightenment and the delusions of the world, typical Buddhist themes. Yet he also writes poems about erotic themes. Thus, Ikkyū's life and work are full of contradictory events, actions and ideas, features reminiscent of a clown.

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1. Quoted by Samuel Miller, "The Clown in Contemporary Art," *Theology Today*, 24, 3 (October 1967): 324.
2. Conrad Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973); "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred" and "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*, ed. M. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).
3. R. H. Blyth points to the vital connection between Zen and humour in *Oriental Humour* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1959), pp. 87–97.
4. James H. Sanford, *Zen-Man Ikkyū* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981, Studies in World Religions 2), p. 32.
5. Ibid., p. 132.

The most significant and prominent feature of the clown is self-contradiction. Zucker asserts, "He is crude and mean, but also gentle and magnanimous; clumsy and inept, but simultaneously, incredibly agile and endowed with astonishing skills; ugly and repulsive, yet not without elegance and attractive charm."[6] The clown's behaviour is undignified, unreasonable and sometimes even idiotic. The clown does not fit into the patterns and structures of the world nor conventional society.[7] According to social norms, the clown's behaviour, appearance, dress, speech and logic are all wrong.

Besides the self-contradictory features of Ikkyū already noted, we also find that Jesus is apparently mean when he curses a fig tree which withers and dies (Mk. 11:13–14), when he rebukes his mother who had come to see him (Mk. 3:31–35; Lk. 8:19–21), and when he casts demons into a swine herd which are drowned in a lake (Mk. 5:11–13; Lk. 8:32–33). Yet Jesus is loving, gentle, forgiving and magnanimous.

The self-contradictory nature of clown figures is also evident among native American Indian tribes. For example, Sioux heyoka – someone who has had a vision of a Thunder Being – rides backwards, on his horse, wears his boots on the wrong feet, often walks backwards, wears heavy clothing in the summer and goes naked in the winter, answers yes when he/she means no, and appears with a red painted body streaked with black lightning and one side of the head shaved and the other left with long hair, carrying crooked bows and arrows.[8] The Čapakobam of the Mexican Mayo Indians wear masks which give them a hairy appearance with pointed ears, a long pointed nose, and they carry wooden knives and swords.[9] Some Hopi clowns smear their faces a dirty white, blacken their eyes, wear overalls and a blanket, and a necklace of oranges on a string.[10] Covered with white paint

6. Wolfgang M. Zucker, "The Clown as the Lord of Disorder," *Theology Today* 24,3 (October 1967): 308.
7. Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit*, p. 55.
8. John G. Neihart, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), pp. 159–163.
9. N. Ross Crumrine, "Capakoba, The Mayo Easter Ceremonial Impersonator: Explanations of Ritual Clowing," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 8,1 (Spring 1969): 3.
10. Mischa Titiev, *The Hopi Indians of Old Oraibi: Change and Continuity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 222.

and mostly naked, an Apache clown wears a mask of scraped rawhide moccasins, and a gee string.[11] Indian clowns, besides making people laugh with their antics and appearance, are also known for their violence and mean behaviour.

Zen masters are known for their violent and irrational treatment of students. Probably the most famous was Lin-chi's practice and advocacy of beating students.[12] Ikkyū's second master – Kasō Sōdon– mistreated him when he asked to be admitted to the master's monastery by having others throw slop water on the waiting student in an effort to test Ikkyū's resolve and determination.[13] Sengai, a nineteenth-century Zen master, painted Tai-ki, an insulted and sensitive musical genius, smashing his lute because he continually refused an invitation from a king to play for the amusement of whimsical royalty.[14]

Just as the violence of Zen masters appears irrational, Jesus is sometimes unreasonable; he bids others to drop everything and follow him (Mk. 8:34); and he tells people to love their enemies and be perfect like God (Mt. 5:44;48). And from the perspective of Jewish authorities, it is idiotic, unreasonable, and undignified to associate with criminals, prostitutes and other malicious sinners, the type of people with whom Ikkyū also associated. The self-contradictory nature of the clown is not without significance. It manifests and is an expression of the absurdity and paradoxical nature of human existence.

Contempt For Status

During Ikkyū's tumultuous lifetime individuals used their wealth and influence to purchase religious and political positions of power.[15] Thus,

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11. Morris Edward Opler, *An Apache Life-Way* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 105. Although referring to jokes, Mary Douglas' point has relevance to the antics of Indian clowns: "It represents a temporary suspension of the social structure, or rather it makes a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another" in "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man* 3 (1968): 372.
12. For a more detailed discussion of this form of teaching and other unusual methods, see Carl Olson, "Beatings, Shouts and Finger Raising: A Study of Zen Language," *Journal of Religious Studies*, 10/2 (Fall 1983): 45-50.
13. Sanford, p. 13.
14. Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Sengai: The Zen Master* (Greenwich, Ct: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971), p. 96.
15. Martin Collcutt, *Five Mountains: The Rinzai Zen Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, Harvard East Asian Monographs 85), pp. 234-35.

people were concerned with status and fame. A Tokugawa tale informs us that Ikkyū roamed the streets of Sakai brandishing a long sword. The elegant hilt and scabbard of the weapon gave it a realistic appearance to the city folk, who frequently stopped the monk to inform him about the impropriety of someone in Ikkyū's position carrying such a weapon. Drawing out his genuine looking sword, Ikkyū demonstrated to those who accosted him that the blade was merely wooden.[16] Thus Ikkyū was demonstrating that things are not what they appear to be on the surface, and he was also manifesting his contempt for military status. Ikkyū's sword is a symbolic weapon of humour used to sever the ugly head of pride and pretension. It also cuts down the ladders that individuals use to climb higher than others in the social realm. His sword reminds others that they are rooted in the tangible, contingent, and imperfect things of the world. Ikkyū's function is to be an icon of human actuality.[17] His sword is a weapon of awakening others to a realization of their situation and true nature.

Although he was not unusually ugly nor deformed, had no fat paunch nor the hump of a Quasimodo, Ikkyū chose to don dung-spattered cow blankets,[18] instead of wearing appropriate clerical robes, which was an indication of his contempt for the corrupt Zen of his times. A wealthy, powerful, lay patron presented Ikkyū with a hermitage which the poet humorously named Katsuro-an, Hermitage of the Blind Donkey,[19] a reference to Lin-chi's lament concerning the transmission of his teachings to students who were blind donkeys. Since it was common practice for Zen masters to sell seals or confirmations of enlightenment at this period of Zen history, Ikkyū initially refused the seal of enlightenment given to him by his master Kasō and eventually tore it to pieces.[20] Thus Ikkyū was disdainful of social and religious symbols of fame and status.

Contempt for all status is another feature of the clown's nature. The clown, for example, lampoons the wealthy businessman by wearing a stiff hat, carrying a useless flexible cane, and attaché case. Zucker's obser-

16. Sanford, p. 38.
17. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 91.
18. Sanford, p. 28.
19. Ibid., p. 55.
20. Sonja Arntzen, *Ikkyū Sōjun: A Zen Monk and His Poetry* (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington State College, 1973), p. 20.

vation about clowns adequately illuminates Ikkyū's actions and attitude, as he writes, "He stands outside of rank and order, because he debunks both."[21] Just as Ikkyū, the Zen clown, disregards all status symbols, Jesus wanders about the countryside teaching (Lk. 9:58) and refuses the devil's offer of worldly kingship (Lk.4:5–7). Jesus preaches that the first shall be last. It is impossible for the rich person, an individual of status, to get into heaven. As Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk.10.25).

Like Jesus, Zen masters, like Ikkyū, have demonstrated their disdain for status or worldly rank, preferring the seclusion of the countryside or monastery. The total disregard for worldly status is best illustrated by a contest that took place between two monks trying to determine who could identify himself with the lowest thing in the scale of human values:

> Chao-chou began: 'I am an ass.'
> Wen-yuan: 'I am the ass's' buttocks.'
> Chao-chou: 'I am the ass's faeces.'
> Wen-yuan: 'I am a worm in the faeces.'
> Chao-chou, unable to think of a rejoinder, asked: 'What are you doing there?
> Replied Wen-yuan, 'I am spending my summer vacation.'
> Chao-chou conceded defeat. [22]

In a similar vain Ikkyū wrote in one of his poems, "Crazy-cloud knows the smell of his own shit."[23] Just as Zen masters have lived apart from society, Jesus did not fit into the rank and order of society. Others could not decide if Jesus was a rabbi, a prophet, a political figure, or a messiah.

One finds the same contempt for status among north American Indian clowns. Pueblo and Hopi clowns, for instance, burlesque the Kachina dances by dancing out of time and rhythm, and stumbling around and grimacing.[24] Or a Pueblo clown might set a doll on the ground to venerate it as a saint.[25] A Zuñi clown, on the other hand, speaks Spanish or

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21. Zucker, p. 309.
22. John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (Taipei: United Publishing Center, 1975), p. 137.
23. Sanford, p. 288.
24. Titiev, p. 255.
25. Elsie Clews Parsons and Ralph L. Beals, "The Sacred Clowns of the Pueblo and Mayo-Yaqui Indians," *American Anthropologist*, 36, 4 (October–December 1934): 491.

English before the gods which is strictly prohibited for ordinary people. A modern convenience provides a Zuñi clown an opportunity to imitate a telephone conversation with the gods, although the gods are not supposed to speak to humans. Besides sacred rites, saints, or gods, Zuñi clowns are also reported to lampoon shamans by wearing a bear-paw on his left hand, a wolf snout on his nose and acting wild.[26] The Pueblo, Hopi, and Zuñi Indian clowns break down the boundaries between the sacred and profane, superior and inferior, powerful and impotent, and divine and human.

It must not be assumed that Indian clowns, Ikkyū and Jesus are revolutionaries, although one could call them rebels in the sense that they despise and would destroy, if they could, the social order. Jesus asserts the absurdity of fasting (Mk.2:18–22); he defends his disciples for violating the sabbath, and he himself heals on the sabbath (Mk.3:1–6). The old order must make way for the new one. The new wine, for example, is available but fresh skins are needed because the old cannot determine the new (Mk.2:22). The new time ushered in with Jesus is a time for joy, a time for wine, and a time for the forgiveness of sins (Mk.2:23–28). For Ikkyū, it is a time for Crazy-cloud *(kyōun)*, a name that he applies to himself in numerous poems. Crazy-cloud is the madcap clown who lampoons those of religious and social status, by means of comic imitation and vitriolic poems. Crazy-cloud sees hope for a revival of pure Zen, a wild version which he embodies, in the present moment and in himself, the lone surviving transmitter of a lost tradition.

Since the clown does not adhere to the structure of social ranks and does not acknowledge the symbols of society, it is not surprising that members of society feel no sympathy or solidarity with his/her plight, but only manifest contemptuous hostility towards the calling into question of society's norms and values. Zucker writes, "The clown does not find sympathy because he really is not a sympathetic figure."[27] Ikkyū and Jesus are mocked and jeered by others. And Indian audiences howl with approval when the clown takes a beating.

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26. Barbara Tedlock, "The Clown's Way," in *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Denis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. 108.

27. Zucker, p. 310.

The Imposter

After a memorial service was held at a local temple, three laymen in the crowd stayed to view a painting of five hundred *arhats* (enlightened beings). A member of the group asked a priest to tell them the names of all the *arhats*. Since the priest knew only three of the names, he retreated to the abbot's quarters without responding to the layman's question. Ikkyū learned of the problem and acknowledged that he also did not know the names of all the *arhats*. Thinking that the question of the layman was nonsensical, Ikkyū returned to the hall and recited some hundred names to the satisfaction of the layman, who complimented Ikkyū on his outstanding memory.[28] This story from the Tokugawa tales illustrates Ikkyū assuming the role of an imposter with a prodigious reserve of knowledge about Buddhist tradition. The incident cited earlier pertaining to Ikkyū's carrying a fake sword of a samurai warrior is another example of his appearing to be what he is not.

Like a clown, Ikkyū is an imposter who arrogates human dignity and status. Since the clown is not human, that which is funny and ridiculous is also frightening and obscene.[29] Just as Jesus satirizes existing authority by riding into Jerusalem replete with regal pageantry, Ikkyū impersonates a religious leader when he agrees to participate in an eye-opening ceremony for a newly completed *bodhisattva* statue for a local community. After a warm welcome from the people, Ikkyū executed the ceremony by urinating on the statue to the disbelief and outrage of those who had invited him.[30] In another examples Ikkyū performs a funeral for a dead cat and reverentially bows towards the sexual parts of a naked woman while crossing a stream.[31] There are stories about his being totally inebriated but not without command of his sharp wit. He admits in his poems to racing from wineshop to brothel. Ikkyū's licentious behavior does not end with his attaining the abbotship of Daitokuji in his advanced years, because he enters an illicit affair at age seventy-seven with Mori, a blind singer forty years old. Thus Ikkyū is not only impersonating a monk or abbot, but he is also impersonating an ordinary mortal being. He is not truly a Buddhist monk nor an ordinary human being despite his proclivities for indulging his senses in the pleasures of phenomenal existence. Due to

28. Sanford, pp. 266–67.
29. Zucker, p. 311.
30. Sanford, pp. 291–95.
31. Ibid., pp. 268–71, 283.

his previous enlightenment experience, his body and mind have fallen away, unlike ordinary mortals. Thus he is both and neither. In fact, he transcends both categories – monk and ordinary mortal – by virtue of his enlightened state of being and his ability to see into the nature of all things. In other words, it is his ability to see all things as empty (*śunyata*) of self-being (*svabhava*). Only a total imposter could compose poems about enlightenment experience and fornication.

Comparing the imposter motif in Ikkyū with native American Indians, one finds numerous examples of the clown impersonating human beings. The Indian clowns seem to have a penchant for arrogating human dignity in rather obscene ways. A male Hopi clown, for example, is reported to have dressed like a woman and, while sitting in the central plaza with a wash basin, the clown began to wash her legs, spreading them to reveal a huge false vulva.[32] Hopi clowns do not simply appropriate female sexuality, but they also are known to wear a large, false penis and to fake vigorous copulation with a female clown. Thus, the clown arrogates a very personal human action and sole, natural means for humans to propagate their species. Sexually obscene examples are found among other Indian tribes, like the Tewa, of whom Alexander Stephen reports seeing a clown snatch off the breech cloth of another clown and drag the unfortunate victim by the penis.[33] A fake reenactment of sexual intercourse is reported of two Pueblo clowns, who simulated intercourse with a woman at different locations on her body, while a third clown heightened the unreality of the scene by masturbating in the center of the plaza.[34] An Arapaho clown is more inventive because he uses a phallic-like root by which he pretends to magically paralyze the woman of his desires.[35] The Black Dancers of the war ceremony among the Navaho grab people, undress them, and rub them with dung or a piece of sheep-skin smeared with impure menstrual blood.[36]

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32. Alexander Stephen, *Hopi Journal*, ed. Elsie Clews Parsons Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology 25, vol. 1, p. 386.
33. Ibid., p. 491.
34. Charles Lange, *Cochiti* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968) p. 304. See also Crumrine, p. 6.
35. Alfred Kroeber, *The Arapaho*, Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History 18 (1902–1907), p. 192.
36. Gladys Reichard, *Navaho Religion* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1963), p. 183. Indian clowns also play much less obscene roles. Laura Makarius discusses the magical power of clowns and medicine in "Ritual Clowns and Symbolical Behaviour," *Diogenes*, 69 (1970): 44–73.

Taboo Breaker and Victim

Because he/she is an imposter, the clown accepts the twofold role of breaking all taboos and receiving all punishment for it. The clown agrees to be utterly grotesque so that others can despise him/her, insult him/her, and torment him/her to their heart's delight.[37] For instance, John the Baptist's appearance and behavior are grotesque; he wears camel's hair and a leather girdle, and he eats locusts and honey. The Baptist initiates Jesus into the clown profession. Before his death, Jesus is dressed like a mock king, wearing a crown of thorns and given a cross for a throne. Jesus is also mocked about his boast of destroying and rebuilding the temple in three days (Mk.15:29f). In short, Jesus is a fool's king, as indicated by the sign over his head on the cross which lampoons his claim (Mk. 15:26). Paul urges Christians to be "fools for Christ's sake" (1. Cor. 4:10) and later Christian saints followed his earnest exhortation. The underground man of Dostoevsky's work proclaims, ". . . it takes a fool to become anything."[38]

For breaking religious and social taboos, Ikkyū must also receive punishment. He is mocked and criticized for parading through the streets of Kyoto with a human skull that he secured to the end of a long bamboo pole and offering people best wishes for the new year.[39] An outraged group of people chased Ikkyū when he had completed urinating on the *bodhisattva* statue. According to a Tokugawa tale, Ikkyū is tormented by a seven foot tall goblin while on a pilgrimage to a Shinto shrine. Emerging from the shadows, the goblin demanded to know the nature of Buddhism. Ikkyū replied that it was something within one's heart. The goblin responded by asserting that he would cut out Ikkyū's heart and have a look. As the goblin took out a sharp blade and placed it against his heart, the quick

37. Zucker, p. 310.

38. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, ed. Robert G. Durgy and trans. Serge Shishkoff (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), p. 5. For a discussion of the holy fool in Christianity see Alexander Y. Syrkin, "On the Behaviour of the 'Fool for Christ's Sake,'" *History of Religions*, 22, 2 (November 1982): 150-171. For excellent essays on fools and mad beings in Hinduism see Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "Cynics and Pāśupatas: The Seeking of Dishonour," *Harvard Theological Review*, 55 (1962): 291-298 and David Kinsley, "'Through the Looking Glass': Divine Madness in the Hindu Religious Tradition," *History of Religions*, 13, 4 (May 1974): 270-305.

39. Sanford, p. 39.

witted Ikkyū recited a well known poem. Upon hearing the poem, the goblin vanished from view.[40]

In comparison with Jesus and Ikkyū, Indian clowns receive their punishment by consuming foul and unusual items. Sticks, refuse, live puppies, and stones are eaten by Zuñi clowns.[41] At the Horned Water Serpent Dance, Hopi clowns reportedly drank three gallons of well aged, foul smelling urine, rubbing their bellies after each drink and shouting "very sweet."[42] And Pueblo clowns eat and drink dirt, excrement, urine, live mice, sticks and stones.[43] These foul morsels are the clowns' reward from a society that despises them and wants to punish them for their transgressing social norms and values.

Even though it might be historically correct to interpret the obscene behavior of the Indian clowns as a war trait,[44] this observation misses the essence of their antics. Dirt, symbolic of all the foul things eaten by Indian clowns, offends against social order; it represents, as Mary Douglas asserts,[45] disorder, matter out of place, and danger. If order implies restriction, the disorder of the Indian clown represents danger and power. The insights of Douglas help to partly explain why Indian clowns are considered both humorous and frightening by observers.

The clown must pay for his/her transgressions by assuming the role of victim. Rising from the dirt of the village or the sawdust of the circus arena and gathering oneself together, the clown rises again to face the crowd. The clown might be trampled under foot, disgraced, mocked, and defeated, but the victory of society is short lived. The clown – victim of society – returns again and again. Refusing to succumb or admit to final defeat, the clown indefatigably returns the victor to lampoon the foolishness of society. Thus, the cycle of becoming the victim of society and victor over the vengeance of society begins anew. Throughout the revo-

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40. Ibid., pp. 259–60.
41. Frank Hamilton Cushing, *Zuñi Breadstuff,* Indian Notes and Monographs, Heye Foundation 8, 1920, p. 621.
42. Stephen, p. 328.
43. Louis A. Hieb, "Meaning and Mismeaning: Toward an Understanding of the Ritual Clown," in *New Perspectives of the Pueblos,* ed. Alfonso Ortiz (Albuquerque, N.M: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), p. 184. See also Crumrine, p. 7.
44. Parsons and Beals, p. 497.
45. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), pp. 94–113.

lutions of this unending cycle, society is the benefactor because it is renewed and reinvigorated.

Symbol of Disorder

Wearing a hide or cotton mask, shabby clothes, feathered and painted, attached leg rattles and a berry necklace, the Pueblo clown often speak in a high pitched or falsetto voice.[46] During the Midwinter Ceremony, the Iroquois clown wears a false face, rags, or very short skirts and out-size bras and girdles.[47] Carrying a crooked bow and misshapen arrows and wearing a ragged suit, the Navajo clown impersonates a dull-witted, decrepit, short-sighted, old man.[48] Reference was previously made to Ikkyū's unusual appearance for a Zen monk. His unusual appearance is confirmed by a *chinso*, portrait of Ikkyū painted by Boksai, a disciple and biographer, which presents the master with a growth of beard and unshaven skull, which is unseemly for a Zen priest.[49] In early Christian art Jesus is depicted as a crucified human figure with the head of an ass.[50] This artistic expression illustrates the comic absurdity of the early Christian position: the claim that God became man in historical time and place. The nineteenth-century Danish religious thinker Soren Kierkegaard agreed by calling the cross-event the absolute paradox.[51] The ill-fitting rags, baggy, sagging pants, and battered hats common to circus clowns and the odd attire of Indian figures and Ikkyū are visual marks that the clown is a bum and a disorderly figure.[52] In fact, the clown is a symbol of disorder.

The disorderliness of the clown indicates that he/she stands outside of order and censure. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, and Ikkyū's goal is beyond the dichotomy of order and disorder. The clown's disorderliness is not merely misbehaviour; it is also an expression of contempt for

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46. Parsons and Beals, p. 496.
47. Elizabeth Tooker, *The Iroquois Ceremonial of Midwinter* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1970), p. 53.
48. Hieb, p. 183.
49. Donald Keene, "The Portrait of Ikkyū," *Archives of Asian Art*, 20 (1966-67): 58.
50. Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay of Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 140. Cox devotes chapter 10 of his work to a discussion of Christ as the harlequin.
51. S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).
52. Zucker, p. 308.

and principle opposition to all order.[53] Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God which he compared to a mustard seed (Mk. 4:31) and a wedding-feast (Mt. 22:1–10). It is something close at hand (Mk. 1:14) and for the poor (Lk. 6.20; Mt. 5:3). However, one must receive it like a child or one cannot enter it (Mk. 10:15). The ethical distinction between good and evil is transcended by Ikkyū, who composes poems about enlightenment and his own penis, the latter is humorously entitled "The Root." He remains a monk but allegedly fathers an illegitimate child, satisfies his thirst at local wineshops, and patronizes brothels. Jesus and Ikkyū, functioning as clowns, reduce to absurdity all presumptuous claims that any human order can ever be absolute. Speaking about the foolishness of the cross-event, Paul writes, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20).

The clown is constantly defeated, tricked, humiliated, and stepped-upon. Satan attempts to trick Jesus in the temptation story (Lk. 4:5–7). Jesus is rejected by his own people (Mk. 6:1–6), and at his arrest his disciples forsake him and flee (Mk. 14:50). Jesus is betrayed by a self-chosen disciple. Judas' kiss of betrayal and the iconoclastic spirit which it embodies is also evident in Zen. In a famous death poem Ikkyū writes, "In the end I take a crap as offering to Brahma."[54] Ikkyū criticizes high ranking monks: "Idly boasting of the virtuous knowledge that transcends the world." He continues his poem by comparing these false monks with a prostitute: "The young girl in the brothel wears golden vestments."[55] For Ikkyū, the prostitute is more fit to wear the golden vestments of high office than the false Buddhist officials.

Unwilling to fit into the social order, unable to take demands of society seriously and representing disorder, Ikkyū is an undignified, marginal, contemptuous being. His outlandish antics call into question the presuppositions and accepted values of ordinary people. As a symbol of disorder, Ikkyū represents the chaos of absolute freedom. Unbound by social structures, by his own mind and body and by monastic regulations, he is free to be a clown.

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53. Ibid., p. 313.

54. Sanford, p. 191.

55. Arntzen, p. 115.

Zen Clown, Bondage and Liberation

In his book on the element of play in culture Huizinga remarks that humour can be placed in the category of non-seriousness.[56] Actually, the opposite is true because seriousness is the ground of the comic. Without the precondition of seriousness, humor would be reduced to cynical contempt which potentially leads to despair.[57]

To be in a condition of despair or to be unable to laugh is to be in a state of bondage. The Zen artist Sengai with a keen sense of humour painted a puppy tied to a stake.[58] The puppy, a metaphor for humans, is yelping because he does not like being tied to the stake and wants to be free. On the other hand, Ikkyū uses somewhat different images to depict the bound condition of humans. In a poem entitled "Puppets" Ikkyū writes:

> Whole men appear on the stage;
> Some as kings, others as common peasants.
> We forget the strings, right in front of us.
> Dummies; talking about 'the original man.'[59]

Not only are humans ignorant, foolish and morally imperfect, they are also puppets, victims of social mores and manners who have lost their freedom. Humans are also like frogs: "They are pitiable, those at the bottom of wells, calling themselves great."[60] Ikkyū burlesques the folly and finitude of beings caught in their own limitations and captive to the mercy of unremitting, unseen, impersonal forces of karma. Moreover, beings are products of their own delusions; "so deep we cannot fathom their delusiveness."[61]

In order to assist others towards liberation, Ikkyū's comic behavior functions as a visual *koan* for others to discern or solve. Like a *koan*, Ikkyū's behaviour is paradoxical and absurd which tends to destroy our common sense understanding of the world. By playing the role of a clown, Ikkyū's antics point towards freedom, but one must concentrate

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56. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 6.
57. Hyers, "Comic Profanation," p. 24.
58. Suzuki, p. 118.
59. Sanford, p. 150.
60. Arntzen, p. 87.
61. Sanford, p. 150.

on the clown *koan* with all one's energy and finally resolve it by an intuitive insight. When following this procedure it is permissable to laugh at the cavorting, gaiety, and insouciance of Ikkyū, which is true both before and after enlightenment. "Real Zen means never to stop laughing."[62]

Humour, like that personified by the clown, is an interlude within our lives, representing a pause which enables us to see the incongruities of life. Human existence is full of realized hopes and disappointments, of triumphs and frustrations, of rationality, and irrationality, of periods of peace and violence, of certainties and contingencies. The individual who can respond with laughter to the incongruities of human existence demonstrates his/her wisdom and insight into the true nature of the way things are in truth. This is not to imply that humour is something objective, nor merely an emotion,[63] nor something stupid. Holmer accurately states that, "One has to be in the game of life: then laughter is not stupid. It is stupidity within the game at which one can smile."[64] This statement can be applied to Ikkyū who was immersed in the game of life, although the laughter of the Zen poet is both within existence and transcends it.

Zen humour is a prelude to enlightenment as well as a manifestation of it. To be able to laugh puts one on the path to enlightenment. And the enlightenment experience itself often triggers laughter. Thus, humour is a necessary ingredient for freedom and a by-product of the liberation achieved by the monk. A condition of total freedom allows one to laugh at oneself, others and the world. Grounded in the seriousness of suffering, ignorance and death, Ikkyū's sense of the comic enables him to laugh at these grim facts of life and places him beyond their binding power. Ikkyū's appreciation for the comic and his profound sense of humour indicates that he does not take himself too seriously; he can see himself for what he is – enlightened being, poet, wine drinker, and chaser of whores – and can recognize his ludicrous and absurd behavior for what it is.

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62. R. H. Blyth, *Zen and Zen Classics*, Vol. II (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1964), p. 93.

63. Oscar Mandel over emphasizes the emotional aspect of humour in "What's So Funny: The Nature of the Comic," *The Antioch Review*, 30 (Spring 1970): 74, 78.

64. Paul Holmer, "Something About What Makes It Funny," *Soundings* 62, 2 (Summer 1974): 170.

If Blyth is correct when he asserts that the great defect of humanity is precisely a deficiency of humor,[65] the clown, then, helps us recover our humanity.[66] Ikkyū's bizarre antics reminds us that we are deeply rooted in the world. Humans are contingent, imperfect, benighted beings tied to the tangible things of the world. Thus the purpose of Ikkyū's clowning is to awaken us to our humanity and to a recognition of our true status, which can function as a lever to shift our center of gravity and enable us to recognize our innate Buddha-nature. Although often beaten and defeated, the clown arises victorious and triumphs over the world's obstacles.[67] By assuming the role of a clown, Ikkyū vividly demonstrates his commitment to his fellow beings and brings them a visual message of hope.

The actions of Ikkyū, like those of a clown, are excessive. The Zen clown overdoes it, neglecting any rule of moderation. Ikkyū's New Year's skull is a bizarre type of feast of fools where excessiveness reigns supreme. In his prose work entitled *Skeletons*, Ikkyū writes, "Beneath the skin of the person we fondle today, there, too, is a skeleton propping the flesh up."[68] If one could see beneath the flesh, one would recognize that one is an empty skeleton living among other skeletons playing behind the temple. Thus, Ikkyū's clowning actions are not superficial because he recognizes the tragedy of life.

The excessive behaviour of the Zen clown and the laughter that it evokes are dangerous to the established order. Laughter breaks down boundaries and helps us put the events of our lives into a different and often more lucid perspective. In the hagiographic *Chronicle of Ikkyū* by Bokusai,[69] the biographer of Ikkyū, there is a story about the master's visit to the home of a parishioner where he found an old cow and composed a poem as a joke which he hung on the tip of the bovine's horn. The poem was a ruse about the cow's identity as a monk in its previous life. The cow died that evening. The following day its owner teased Ikkyū that he had eulogized the animal to death. Ikkyū responded with just a smile. Since Ikkyū's body and mind had

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65. Blyth, *Oriental Humour*, p. 201.
66. See Scott, pp. 91, 103 and Miller, p. 327.
67. Nelvin Vos, *The Drama of Comedy: Victim and Victor* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 23.
68. Sanford, p. 204.
69. Ibid., pp. 90-91.

fallen away with his enlightenment, it is not difficult to imagine a smile like that of the Cheshire Cat of Alice's wonderland. To be able to laugh at life and death demonstrates one's freedom and potential danger to a static society.

Clowns are not mere entertainers who perform to provide comic relief to the solemnity and formality of religious ritual, interpersonal relationships, human-divine relations, or the quest for liberation. Should the success of the clown's performance be measured by the extent of the laughter that he/she provokes? Rather than using the amount of laughter provoked, it would be wiser to evaluate the clown according to the successfulness of his/her teaching methods. Does the clown successfully teach us about the foolishness of ourselves and our society? The clown presents us an upside down picture of ourselves and our society, and to be able to comprehend the clown we must stand on our heads to view the portrait. When our folly is exposed publicly and properly comprehended by us, we can hopefully get back on the right track.