SILENT LAUGHTER:
THE GIFT OF THE NINE-HEADED KANNON
AT HORYU-JI

Iconography and Spiritual Odyssey

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Introduction

It is told that once Ananda, the beloved disciple of Buddha, saluted his master and said: ‘Half the holy life, O master, is friendship with the beautiful, association with the beautiful, communion with the beautiful.’ ‘Say not so, Ananda, say not so!’ the master replied. ‘It is not half of the holy life. It is the whole of the holy life.’

To approach a work of sacred art as an art critic or as an art historian or as a technician, as legitimate as those approaches are, is nevertheless to miss at a profound level what is sacred. This is no original notion. Eliade clearly stated such limitations in the study of religious traditions themselves:

A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.

Without dogmatism and equal sensitivity, Pilgrim notes that in attempting to “gain a sense of things” in the study of Buddhist art, we deal with the “scenery of Buddhism and not its path.” He asks:

How do we deal with scenery and yet remain sensitive to the truly Buddhist meaning which is ultimately a path-meaning?
How do we stand outside and watch when Buddhism says one must take up the discipline and do it?

How indeed, since art inevitably has direct impact on the sensorium of the viewer prior to any possible analytical process? This essay will attempt to grapple with this issue as it presents the peculiarities of a particular Buddhist sculpture to the reader. The approach is partly experimental, so that something of that which is sacred may perhaps be understood in a more holistic way. The Epilogue will deal with this issue directly.

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Historical context and physical description

Standing less than sixteen inches high, the sandalwood figure of the Nine-Faced Kannon (Kumen Kannon) graces the Hozoden Treasury of the Horyu-ji Temple at Nara with its delicate serenity. This sculpture, designated a National Treasure in 1955,\(^4\) came to the United States in 1981 with other works from Horyu-ji for exhibition at the Japan Society in New York.

This piece is, in fact one of only two extant, free-standing, nine-headed, two-armed (\textit{i.e.}, non-Tantric) representations of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. In his thoughtful presentation of the acquisition of the other nine-headed (bronze) sculpture by the British Museum, c 1965, Watson notes and eliminates other supposed nine-headed versions as non-verifiable. They are either not freestanding and therefore the remotest head(s) can only be surmised, or they are paintings with the same limitation.\(^5\)

The torso, arms and eight of the faces of the Kumen Kannon at Nara was carved from a single block of white sandalwood (hyakudan) sometime during the late 7th or early 8th Century (T’ang Dynasty) in China. It is variously listed as being 37.4 or 39 cm. in height. According to the Temple inventory, \textit{Horyu-ji ryuki shizaicho}, it was brought to Japan “in the third year of Yoro” (719 C. E.)\(^6\) Watson notes that another Temple tradition, edited as late as 1836 in the \textit{Ikanga koji benran}, speaks of a “nine-faced Kannon of garuwood by order of the Prince’ (Shotoku) which is, however 3.5 cm. taller than the extant figure.”\(^7\) Watson considers the possibility that the piece was actually carved by a Japanese sculptor in Nara who was copying a Chinese model. The current information about the variance in measurements in China suggests that this is not a necessary conjecture.

This writer was not able to locate reference to the damage sustained to the face of the Amida head which surmounts the crown of other heads. The ninth face was that of the Amida head at the top of the sculpture. It is a separate piece which fits into a socket and has been damaged so that the entire face of the head has been sheared off. [See Plate 1.] It is possible that this damage was sustained when the sculpture was moved by someone who did not realize that the Amida head was separate. Of course it is possible that a flaw in the wood or “checking” of the wood due to variations in humidity caused the shearing off of the face, although this writer finds it unlikely as such obviously expert choice was made in the selection of the rest of the wood and no such flaw is evident in the rest of the piece.

The figure is intricately carved in every detail, the jewels and airy strands of drapery are carved out of the solid sandalwood. The body has an almost Indian robustness as well as a

\(^{5}\) Watson, ibid. pp.223-224.
\(^{7}\) Measurements in ancient China varied from region to region and through time. The measure \textit{ch’ih} was finally set at 10 t’sun or 35.814cm. (14.1”) as late as the treaties with England and France of 1842-44 and 1858-60. David N. Keightley. “A Meassure of Man in Early China: In Search of the Neolithic Inch.” \textit{Chinese Science} 12 (1995) pp.18-40.
Plate 1. Nine-Headed Kannon, Horyu-ji
subtle grace. The almost-closed eyes of the main face appear to be staring slightly downward. the mouth is in gentle repose with only the hint of a smile. The two small faces at the front are “Bodhisattvas” with much the same expression as the main face.

Referring to Seiichi Mizuno’s description, Watson notes that on this piece the two heads on the right are said to be “benevolently smiling while the two on the left are angry and that at the back is a great smiling face.”

The character and placement of the smaller faces is in fact somewhat contrary to iconographic rules which require that (for the eleven-headed figures):

…the three front faces should be tranquil ones of Bodhisattvas, the three on the left should glare angrily, and the three on the right should resemble Bodhisattvas but with protruding tusks, and the one at the back should be laughing loudly and malevolently. The head at the pinnacle of course, is that of Amida Buddha.

This version of the iconographic regulations might profitably be compared to Watson’s version from the Chinese of c. 570:

“The Kuan Shih Yin must be made of white sandalwood, the body one ch’ih three ts’un high, with eleven faces. The three faces turned to the front to be made as Bodhisattva faces; the left-hand row consists of faces in ferocious aspect, the faces in the right-hand row are Bodhisattva faces with canine teeth projecting upwards. At the back is a great smiling face, and on top a Buddha’s face. All the faces, turned to front and back, are furnished with haloes. All the eleven heads wear flower crowns (hua Kuan) and in each of these is an Amitabha Buddha. In his left hand the Kuan Yin holds a water-vase, from the mouth of which issues a lotus. The right hand, open and entwined with a string of beads, is in the abhaya [“fear not”] mudra. The body is carved with chains of jewels and is majestic to behold.

Note the variation in the accounts of the canon: the face at the back which “laughs loudly and malevolently” may have been a “great smiling face” in the scripture.

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In practice there are quite a number of variations on the placement of smaller heads and their expressions. Like other Kannon figures, the main face of this piece has a small image of Amitabha (Amida), Avalokitesvara’s spiritual father, in its crown. The other small heads also each have an Amitabha figure in their crowns, indicating that each of them is to be identified as a Kannon.

The right hand grasps the neck of a flask containing the nectar of enlightenment (amrta). The left hand holds a *mala* of 54 beads. The feet are firmly planted on a lotus pedestal, the petals of which curl fairly tightly. The details of the drapery, which assist in the confirmation of its dating and origin have been adequately described by Watson.

**The meaning of the nine heads**

In an iconographic tradition of such detail, it is most peculiar that there should be an exception of such rare beauty as the Kumen Kannon at Horyu-ji unless the artist had a particular notion in mind. Watson cites two comments by Waley and Matsumoto Eiichi respectively that perhaps nine heads are “doing duty for eleven?” and that the piece might have lost two of its heads.” The latter of these comments is hardly convincing as there is no other visible damage. Another simple possibility is that nine is divisible into 108, the number of manifestations attributed to Avalokitesvara. (This is, incidentally, the number of transgressions with which we begin each day according to Chinese Buddhist thought.) It is, in fact quite common for such practices to arise, as evidenced by the *mala* of 54 rather than the traditional 108 beads held by the Kannon figure.

However, the most probable explanation involves some specific linking of the number nine with attributes of Avalokitesvara or the Bodhisattva’s role. In fact, during the T’ang, Wright observes:

> In the thought and writings of all the schools there are emphases, modes of expression, and interpretations which have no Indian analogue. For example, Indian abstractions almost invariably came to be expressed in concrete images. We find “perfection” rendered as *yuan*, “round”; “essence” explained as *yen-ma*, “the eye” or *yen-ching*, “the pupil of the eye”; “one’s true nature” referred to as *pen lai mien mu*, “original face and eyes.” A complex of abstractions was likely to be explained diagrammatically; a chain sequence of abstract propositions was often reduced to a series of more or less concrete metaphors. Few of the innovations in Chinese Buddhist thought in this

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13 Private communication by Chinese Buddhist nun at a conference for Buddhist women at Barnard College, NYC, 1992.
period of independent growth were systematic extensions of Indian ideas. Rather they were reinterpretations, restatements of these ideas through typically Chinese modes of thought and expression.\textsuperscript{14}

We have then to consider some of the possible routes which Chinese artists might have chosen to express Buddhist notions. At the same time we might consider the influence of Taoist notions in the T’ang, as the two religions asserted themselves and vied for the major role during that period.

Watson notes that in one scripture “the Bodhisattva declared that he can assume a multitude of aspects with 1,2,3,5,7,9,11 or even 100, 1000, or myriad heads.”\textsuperscript{15} This is of course perfectly consistent with the very nature of the Bodhisattva whose compassion multiplied his eyes and ears that the sufferings of the world might be responded to. Although possible that the artist chose the number 9 out of this list arbitrarily, it is unlikely. A work such as this was of such significance that it would be carefully planned to make a complex as well as profound statement. It is not unlikely that the nine faces were meant to engender a number of associations for the viewer rather than only one.

Several writers have suggested that the number nine refers to the Nine Realms: the realm of desire, the four realms of form, and the four formless realms. “The Sutra on Visualizing the Buddha Amitayus” emphasizes “the bodhisattva’s promise of a death-bed escort to Paradise.”\textsuperscript{16} This suggests that perhaps the nine faces are meant to represent the nine degrees of welcome, scaled to nine degree of merit.

Given the T’ang penchant for astrology, it may be more profitable to ask if these nine faces might not correspond to the Nine Luminaries: Aditya the Sun, Soma the Moon, Angaraka or Mars, Budha or Mercury, Brhaspati or Jupiter, Sukra or Venus, Sanaiscara or Saturn, Rahu the spirit that causes eclipses, and Ketu a comet. The Sun is associated with Kuan-yin and Venus with Amitabha. Such an association focuses on the quality of light which so pervades the description of Amitabha in the sutras and has some consistency with the Taoist sensibility of the time in question, as we shall see. Typical of T’ang astrological treatises is an extant manuscript, \textit{Kuyu Hiryaku}, which is a Twelfth Century copy of a work probably dating as far back as the late 600’s in the tradition of the Buddhist master and astrologer, I-hsing.\textsuperscript{17} This work is just prior to the time in which the Kumen Kannon was sculpted. Included in the introduction in the Spencer manuscript of the \textit{Kuyu Hiryaku} is advice to the reader to pray to the “White-Robed Avalokitesvara” in overcoming difficult astrological configurations.

\textsuperscript{15} Nanjiio 446: \textit{Ta Fo ting shou leng yen ching}. Referred to in Watson, \textit{ibid.} p. 223.
There is, of course, no reason why these nine faces might not be thought of as eight plus Amitabha. This opens for us a whole new realm of speculation: the eight savours of the Buddha’s nirvana, for example. Perhaps more persuasive are the powers of personality:

Eight great powers of personality or sovereign independence as one of the four qualities of nirvana [are] powers of self-manifolding, infinite expansion, levitation and transportation, manifesting countless forms permanently in one and the same place, use of one physical organ in place of another, obtaining all things as if nothing, expounding a stanza through countless kalpas, ability to traverse the solid as space.\(^{18}\)

Such powers are perfectly consistent with Avalokitesvara’s character as described in the Lotus Sutra. The Bodhisattva appears to each in the exact form necessary to effect salvation.\(^{19}\)

There is yet another possibility if we continue to think that we may be looking at eight-plus-one and we reflect on the Taoist sensibility that coexisted with the rise of Buddhism. First of all, the Taoist mythos included the notion of immortals which Chuang-tzu called *shen-jen* or “divine men.” These immortals, also called *Hsien-jen*, were beings:

... so fully identified with the universal life, with its diversity and fantastic character, that they could transform themselves at will and appear and disappear, and multiply themselves... the Taoist who succeeded in the “great accomplishment” [through the technique of immortality] ... would rise to the heavens in full light at midday. At this degree, the Taoist immortal transmutes himself into a being of light, brilliant as the sun.\(^{20}\)

The Taoist adept

gradually sheds the constitutive elements of his social self. Thereafter, he loses awareness of his body and his sense perceptions are no longer differentiated—he hears with his eyes and sees with his ears. Finally the adept’s entire being communes with the totality. According to Chuang-tzu, he has the internal impression of flying off and moving about freely in space but externally the individual in a state of ecstasy resembles a piece of dead wood.\(^{21}\)

The resemblance to the description of the powers of the Bodhisattva are obvious. Note also the idea that this marvelous being externally might resemble lifeless wood [such as a sculpture].

In the Taoist mythic tradition there are amongst other immortals certain notable ones: the Eight Immortals or Pa Hsien. These are listed variously but usually include:

1. Li T’ieh-kuai, an ascetic in his spiritual wandering acquired the body of a lame beggar with an iron staff who carries a gourd filled with the elixir of immortality and associates with the poor and needy and sells drugs to cure all ills
2. Chung-li Ch’uan, a mountain recluse with a tassel of horse-hair in one hand and the peach of immortality in the other
3. Lu Tung-pin who was given a magic sword by a fire-dragon and also carries a horse-hair fly-switch
4. Lan Ts’ai-ho who is depicted as a youth with a flute and a basket of fruit—he wears the clothes of a woman and speaks with the voice of a man
5. Chang Kuo who is riding a white donkey, often backwards, holding a phoenix feather
6. Han Hsiang who wished to make wine without using any grain and to cause flowers to bloom instantaneously
7. Ts’ao Kuo-chiu who gave away all his money to the poor and who said that his heart was in Heaven
8. Ho Hsien-ku, a woman who gained immortality by eating the powder of mother-of-pearl and who holds a lotus-flower.

Again the qualities of some of these immortals suggest the powers of the bodhisattva. The gourd of Li T’ieh-kuai containing the elixir of immortality is the equivalent of the vase of amrta—his iron staff actually resembles the sword of Manjusri, another “attendant” of Amitabha. The lotus is held by Ho Hsien-ku and Avalokitesvara alike. Lan Ts’ai-ho has an androgynous quality which is suggestive of the transformation that Avalokitesvara undergoes in Chinese tradition to become Kuan-yin. The horse-hair switch carried by two of these Immortals is suggestive of the Hayagriva form of Avalokitesvara. Causing flowers to bloom spontaneously is another phenomenon associated with the Buddhas.

Even more significant than any simple attempt to play upon the associations of the viewers who would have been as thoroughly familiar with the popular Taoist tradition as with the Buddhist are Taoist methods of contemplation. The most important of these methods:

was that of shoi-i (“preserving the One” or “meditating on the One”) . . . Although the One is identified with the Tao, hsu (“emptiness”) and wu (“nonbeing”), it is at the same time understood as the cosmos, the mother, the matrix, the primordial breath, and the origin of all beings . . . The One was represented by

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anthropomorphic images used in visualization. The Tiai-p’ing ching alludes to a process of concentrating on the “light of the One” (shou i-ning). . . . in most cases... the One is visualized. . . in the form of three divinities. . . by visualization the adept causes the three to descend into his own body ...The related practice of “preserving the nine” consists of concentration on the “nine palaces” in the head that are the abode of the divinities of the chin-t’ien (“nine heavens”). . . these nine divinities are derived from the original triad, the numbers nine and three representing the totality of the One.  

This practice has an obvious confluence with Buddhist doctrine of non-differentiation and may indeed have been a bridge for some Taoists to the world of Buddhist thought. It may also explain why the nine-headed form of Kannon was not retained in a Japanese Buddhist tradition which would not have the familiarity with Taoist practice. Practices somewhat similar to the Taoist are still to be found in the highly sophisticated and psychologically persuasive Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

The laughing face

Of samvega or aesthetic shock, Coomaraswamy writes:

. . . samvega is a state of shock, agitation, fear, awe, wonder or delight induced by some physically or mentally poignant experience. It is a state of feeling, but always more than a merely physical reaction. The “shock” is essentially one of realization of the implications [i.e. tenor] of what are strictly speaking only the aesthetic surfaces of phenomena that may be liked or disliked as such. The complete experience transcends the condition of “irritability.”

The silent laughter echoes through the dark hall, its presence calls the viewer to awaken. Who laughs? Who is silent? Who awakens? The laughter is silent, the face, carved to be seen, is hidden in darkness, the viewer may not even glimpse the most profound of the sculptor’s intents.

The figure of the Nine-Faced Kannon graces the darkened gallery of the Japan Society with its delicate serenity. Thus does a spiritual odyssey begin.

Perhaps the laughing face on the Bodhisattva’s crown is the key to salvation. That which is considered last is first, that which is behind is before, that which is neglected is paramount.

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23 Bell, Ibid., p. 300.
The path of enlightenment is sorely difficult, one’s understanding is clouded by pre-suppositions, attachments, certainties, rigidities of thought and spirit. This is, in fact, an adequate description of the human condition. Faced with a maelstrom of choices and relevant information, we struggle to come to some clarity. In the process we cling to our old ways of understanding, of being. Such ways, we suppose, will serve us to traverse unfamiliar territory.

But we are only partly correct. To the extent that prior experience prejudices our apprehension, we are at a philosophical and personal disadvantage. What is needed is a tool or perhaps an intervention which will tumble all our sureties into confusion and thence into new understanding. Tears are one such tool, laughter is another. Both are helpless, spontaneous. Laughter has the additional force of active challenge.

Laughter respects no pre-conceptions—it plays with them.
Laughter ignores certainties—it rejoices in their confounding.
Laughter releases our grip, looses our attachments, often despite our wills.

In some traditions, ritual clowns precipitate the special gifts of laughter’

Almost by accident, almost by design, the clowns reveal to the Hopis crucial incongruities, which they then integrate] As in William James’ (1958) definition of religion, they offer a feeling of disquiet, followed by its resolution. Through the craziness of their performances, they reveal.25

Campbell refers to Black Elk in his discussion of the “reconciliation of consciousness with the monstrous thing that is life—which lives on death, terminates in death, and begins with the curiously dreamlike event of a birth...”:

You have noticed. . . that the truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face, laughing or weeping... . When people are already in despair, maybe the laughing face is better for them; and when they feel too good and are too sure of being safe, maybe the weeping face is better for them to see. And so I think that is what the heyoka ceremony [the Comic Mask] is for.26

Laughter has a specific ability to confer fearlessness in the face of danger. This is, in fact one of the abilities attributed to the Bodhisattva in the Lotus Sutra.

One is reminded of one of the names of Siva, Attahasa, “The Loudly Laughing One” — mentioned in the Linga Purana (1. 24. 94-95). Siegel notes that:

The god inspires awe to the extent that his being represents a resolution

and assimilation of paradoxes; he inspires laughter to the degree that the paradoxes are self-contradictions.  

It is precisely Siva who is venerated with Avalokitesvara in Nepal anal some of whose attributes have been absorbed by the Bodhisattva.

**Philosophical Implications**

What is the Void? What is Form? What ambiguities confound us? How are we to perceive everyday reality?

The Bodhisattva himself tells us in the Heart Sutra:

> Avalokita, the holy Lord and Bodhisattva, was moving in the deep course of wisdom, which has gone beyond. He looked down from on high, he beheld but five heaps, and he saw that in their own being they were empty... Here, O Sariputra, form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness.

Form is Void, Void is Form. The laughing mouth gapes as a sign of the Void, of Emptiness. The sound which issues forth is formless, chaotic. What is known is called into question, what is assured is ridiculed, what is certain is of diminished or no import. And yet the sound which is laughter already has attributes by its injection into the world of form, the world in which sound becomes syllable and repeatable. Laughter is a sword, dividing the ignorant from ignorance, a thunderbolt in the murkiness of this world, bringing its lightning flash of clarity. As such it is, strangely and not strangely, a diamond sceptre of method, the most supremely rigorous, a most relentless means to enlightenment. As the Hopi clowns know, it is most essential at those moments of supreme ritual import. And yet, just at the moment when one understands how laughter works, one is baffled again, for laughter is nothing if not spontaneous. One is tumbled back into the Void, but still not understanding—thinking “empty”—“Form” still beyond understanding; thinking “Form”—“Void” still beyond understanding.

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Laughter as skilful means

The Bodhisattva has at immediate disposal an infinite number of skilful means, or *Upaya*. In his thorough and engaging treatment, Pye notes:

> By the very nature of the case such methods give rise to an appearance of inconsistency which is perplexing enough until their true intention is recognized. In order to benefit from the 'tactful methods' or skilful means of the Buddha it is necessary not only to make use of them as they are first presented but also to discern in them that *toward which they tend* In any given case there will be a crisis point at which the provisional character of the method is about to become apparent. The crisis involves an initial perplexity with regard to that which has hitherto been assumed, and this perplexity in turn issues either in a successful transcending of the device or in a haughty refusal to make further progress.  

It is immediately evident that this description of the form and function of “skilful means” would appropriately include humor and the experience of laughter. Interestingly enough, Pye reminds us that “…the eleven-faced Avalokitesvara...is sometimes said to represent the “eleven faces of *upaya* and the true face representing Absolute Truth.”

Note here that it is all eleven faces which are in fact the one face of Truth. Not only does the Bodhisattva possess skilful means but any wooden or other representation may be thought to display them as well. The experience of this writer is perhaps itself witness to the skilful means of this representation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The initial intrigue of the laughing face faded into an academic concern for some explanation of the nine-headed form. This puzzlement over *form* was to become so consuming as to occasion a trip to the British Museum to find the other extant nine-headed version—alas, a relatively poor attempt at a copy of the sandalwood piece. The shift in focus was not unlike the shift in the meaning of the Japanese word for “skilful means,” *hoben*. Currently, even Buddhists may understand the term to mean “expediency.”

A study of later Tibetan iconography was fascinating and yet not immediately helpful despite the appearance of a definitely wrathful face amongst the eleven of the Tibetan canon, and the provocative suggestion that: “…[the] miracle of inner transformation breaks even the sword of the Judge of the Dead (Yama)…and he reveals himself as the Great Compassionate One: *Avalokitesvara.*

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This transformative vision may appear peculiar and yet, as Whitmont notes:

The confrontation of one’s own evil can be a...death-like experience; but like death it points beyond the personal meaning of existence... It is not until we have been truly shocked into seeing ourselves as we really are, instead of as we wish or, hopefully assume we are, that we can take the first step... 34

For the Tibetan adept, the confrontation and purgation of terror are essential:

These confrontations are a source of renewal, and a doorway to a new productive impulse which comes to the adept’s aid with a constructive view of the situation. They help to obliterate distinctions between the objects of attraction and revulsion and stress that all extremes, the individual’s conscious and unconscious with all its contradictions, the ostensibly positive and negative aspects of existence, form an inseparable unity. 35

The original attention had been lost. It had been the laughing face, not the peculiarities of iconography which had snared this viewer. But there are no mistakes, the excursion and exploration were worthwhile. Nevertheless, it was with relief that, years later the writer reclaimed the original project: to encounter the laughing face of the Kumen Kannon.

A personal journey

Entering the dimly lit hall one is surprised by laughter. Heard and not heard. Felt. Sensed. It enters the mind first. Through the eyes. A laughing face of sandalwood. A face in the crown of the Nine-Headed Kannon. A face both acknowledged—prescribed—by iconography, and yet full of ambiguity. A face to be seen only if one chooses to circumambulate the whole small exquisite piece.

Why laughter? Why laughter? The problem sends the mind reeling into the realm of justification—a hall of imperfect mirrors, fun-house mirrors which distort. Now one is a grotesque giant, now some other unfamiliar vision. The laughter echoes in the mind. There are no easy answers. Try something simple and safe the mind says—why are there only nine heads when the iconographic norm is ten or eleven? Why indeed. A good problem for a scholar to fasten upon. One finds only one other nine-faced kannon to be documented and

35 Mookerjee. Ibid. p. 191.
extant. Happily it has been preserved and resides in the vaults of the British Museum. The answer is near. I go to see it.

Strange things happen on the journey. I have been given a child’s seat on the airplane--one with no legroom. Perhaps the child’s seat is a good omen—I can become a beginner again. I pace during the whole flight, impatient. Walking, so improbably, 3000 miles at 35,000 feet. But it seems that the British Museum has lost the piece. It is not anywhere in the catalog. I persist. The curator of the Asian Collection is kind, takes time away from preparing a major exhibit. He dimly remembers—it is an inferior piece. We rummage. I meet the Museum’s cats—civil servants all. Hunters and protectors of treasures told and untold. I wonder. Weren’t cats the only creatures who refused to listen to the Buddha’s teaching? That might have been a clue, a warning had I been ready to receive it.
Plate 2. Nine-Headed Bonze Kannon, British Museum
The statue is found. [Plate 2] An inferior bronze—hardly the touted twin of the Horyu-ji sandalwood piece. But I have persevered, have found, and am still baffled. Are these nine-heads some conflation of the Taoist Immortals plus Amitabha? Do they represent stages on the path to enlightenment—or barriers? Are they merely ten heads minus one?

I can and do spend years baffled—uneasy years. I delve into Tibetan Buddhism hoping for clues of an oblique nature. There one finds eleven-headed figures of Avalokitesvara with a wrathful rather than mirthful face in the crown. Same thing? Different? One’s mind is intrigued by the forms. Visual forms. Ritual forms. I spend years—hearing occasionally Tara’s sweet tinkling laughter—being vaguely troubled by it—reminded of another laughter, almost forgotten. The laughter of the head at the back of the crown of the Nine-Headed Kannon’s crown.

Two experiences intervene in this malaise of perseveration on form. A memory. A visual memory of the Amitabha head atop the Nine-Headed Kannon’s “proper” head. It has no face anymore. It was sculpted as a separate piece and fitted into a socket. Someone in some century perhaps did not realize this. Attempted to move the piece and the Amitabha fell and split. Now the Amitabha is faceless. And perfect. Can one put a face on a Buddha without it becoming one face and not another? The smoothness of the Bodhisattva’s figure is counterpointed by the rough ridges of the split Amitabha face. The sculptor’s creation is completed by destruction. Everything is impermanent. The Buddha’s message is transmitted.

The second experience is a meeting with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. There are probably 200 people in line—shuffling, talking, joking, waiting. There are two “great” presences here. Oscar Arias and the Dalai Lama. Arias is first, the man of peace. He takes both my hands. We stand close, as Latins do. I say, “You are an inspiration.” He says nothing, this man who has met hundreds this day. His eyes fill with tears. His hands are strong and gentle. I move on.

His Holiness is next, the incarnate Avalokitesvara. We salute each other. He takes both my hands in his, We look into each other’s eyes. Simultaneously we laugh. And laugh and laugh. We salute each other. I move on.

It is two decades years since I have seen the Nine-Headed Kannon. I knew something at that moment of laughter. It flutters around my consciousness. I know and don’t know. I allow distractions. What is this laughter? Why laughter when the Buddha once said there is no reason to laugh with all the sorrow in the world?

The Chinese had a different sensibility. Knew that the drunkard who mistakes a pile of leaves for a bed knew something unrealized by the rest of us. Already their consciousness had expanded. (What fools we mortals be! East and West!)

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So what now? Back to the Bodhisattva’s tools—skilful means. Laughter must be one of the skilful means. Laughter as derision of ignorance. Laughter as that which acknowledges a shared truth. Laughter which turns topsy-turvy our understanding of things and makes us expand our consciousness whether we think we are ready for it or not.

So what is laughter? Cross-cultural studies are interesting. But what is laughter in this context? A sound without form? A formless form? (So strange that in contemporary telecommunications it is customary to render laughter as “ha-ha”—an inadequacy unsettling in its rigidity.)

So laughter is a formless form—a sound erupting continually but never exactly the same—like the water of a fountain. Here as soundless sound. Ignorance/Understanding. Accusation/Affirmation. Derision/Compassion. Confusion/Redemption.

So why skilful means? Look then—just see the pattern. In 1981 this author saw/heard the laughter. By 1990 this writer has been captured as surely as by the lasso. These years of study, of inquiry of meditation. Important, confusing, poignant. All resonating with silent laughter in darkness and mystery.

I remember Kabir:

The Sacred Books of the East are nothing but words. I looked through their covers one day sideways. Kabir talks only about what he has lived through. If you have not lived through something, it is not true.37

There is no turning back. No unknowing. Truth beckons. Stumbling, I follow. In gratitude.

Epilogue

The purpose of this paper may seem obscure from an academic viewpoint, as it is a mixture of subjective impressions and scholarly investigation. What I have wished to do is to offer a perhaps insoluble academic puzzle, the attempts at its solution and a glimpse of why someone might choose to spend over twenty years trying to resolve it.

In a sense this paper is not just about a personal entry into the profound realms of Buddhist thought but an invitation to a discourse long absent from academia: what motivates us to study what we study? We have a sense now that those motivations will in part shape what we will find, but there still is not a general readiness for such discourse in the academy.

This writer has become convinced that such discourse is essential to the development of methodology for successful multidisciplinary collaboration in the postmodern academic world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


