

A comparison between the Zen Buddhist Ten Oxherding Pictures and the Theory of Positive Disintegration

In this essay I would like to interpret a series of ink drawings, called The Oxherding Pictures, from the Chinese Song dynasty (specifically from the twelfth century), in terms of the theory of positive disintegration. The artist was a Buddhist meditation teacher named, Kuo-an Shih-yuan. In addition to the paintings themselves, Kuo-an provided a prose commentary on the pictures and either he, or a disciple of his, provided verse commentaries as well. The reproductions along with translations of the prose and verse commentaries can be found in D. T. Suzuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, and at the time of this writing were available on the web at:

<http://terebess.hu/english/oxherd.html>

The reason why I thought that those who are interested in Kazimierz Dabrowski's model of personality development also would be interested in this series of pictures is that there are some striking parallels between the two. Both models describe a series of developmental stages in which there is a period of multilevel struggle and in which the ultimate goal is to actualize (or to use one of Dabrowski's terms, to dynamize) an authentic, responsible and compassionate personality ideal.

In these ten images, the dramatis personae are a youth, who represents a novice monk (or spiritual seeker) and an ox, who represents the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path, namely the Buddha nature (in Dabrowskian terms, the personality ideal). The props used in The Oxherding Pictures are a tether with which to hold on to the ox, and a whip with which to control the ox. These props represent the means by which a seeker advances in his or her spiritual journey, specifically they symbolize the practice of meditation and accompanying virtues, such as perseverance, vigilance, concentration, etc. Dabrowski likewise emphasizes the important role of meditation, or contemplation, in achieving the personality ideal:

Personality ideal acts as a force of transposition to ideal reality which one achieves only by way of true empathy, mystical contemplation and ecstasy, a reality which is free from selfishness and from temperamental egocentric actions and concerns. (Dabrowski, 1996:64)

The first of the Ten Oxherding Pictures is entitled, Searching for the Ox. In this image a youth is shown in a natural setting, his body and feet oriented to the viewer's left while his head is turned around facing the right. This youth has not yet found the direction he wants to pursue, although he knows that there is something missing, or that there is something more to life. The fact that his body faces one direction while he turns

his head in another direction is reminiscent of what Dabrowski referred to as ambivalencies.

In the second picture, entitled Seeing the Traces, the youth is shown as more focused. His body and his head are all facing in the same direction----the direction of the footprints of the ox. These footprints represent the indications of an ultimate goal that can be found in the writings of sages. Since the Oxherding Pictures are Buddhist images, the tracks of the ox are allusions to the Buddha nature in Buddhist texts. By analogy one could say that for a seeker at an advanced stage of unilevel disintegration, a first encounter with the theory of positive disintegration might be a source of inspiration to the extent that it suggests a direction to life. Thus, in the second oxherding picture a search for a hierarchy of values is suggested.

In the third picture, Seeing the Ox, the youth sees the hindquarters of a large ox and is shown running after this ox. In his meditation practice the youth has catches a momentary glimpse of his Buddha nature (or personality ideal), focuses on it, and enthusiastically pursues it. In his discussion of intuition at level III Dabrowski says that there are the

Beginnings of differentiating intuitions of lower and higher level. Beginning of attempts at concentration and meditation. Intuition is the product of hierarchization of values and of gradual detachment from ongoing involvements and preferences...Intuition ceases to be concerned with the manifestations of external reality, such as telepathy, ESP, and the like, but begins to outline the shapes of truths yet unknown to the individual. (Dabrowski, 1996:103)

With respect to the personality ideal, which can appear briefly as early as level II (unilevel disintegration), Dabrowski says,

In the transition states from one set of tendencies to another there may arise certain, usually short-lived, glimpses of the "ideal." If these glimpses become more frequent then there is a greater probability of the formation of a nucleus of an ideal. These moments...are, however, transitory and. changeable, and most often an ideal is understood in terms of imitation of another, or of flowing with one's moods and changes. (Dabrowski, 1996:93)

But by level III there is a

Transition from an imitative to an authentic ideal...Ideal becomes something essential and concrete. The realization of ideal gives meaning to one's existence. (Dabrowski, 1996:94)

In the third oxherding picture a hierarchy of values has been established, although the struggle to attain the higher level values, and suppress the lower level values, has not yet begun.

In the fourth oxherding picture (entitled Catching the Ox), the youth is shown in an active struggle with the ox, a process parallel perhaps to the multilevel struggle in level III and the beginning of level IV. The youth is holding a tether attached to the nose of the ox and in the prose commentary it is stated that, "If the oxherd wishes to see the ox completely in harmony with himself, he has surely to use the whip freely." As indicated above the tether and the whip are symbolic of Buddhist practice, particularly meditation practice, so the commentary is in effect saying that in order for the youth to integrate his personality ideal into his life, he must be diligent in his practice of meditation.

From the commentaries made on the fourth oxherding picture by contemporary Zen masters and writers on Zen Buddhism, it is clear that this picture represents a multilevel struggle in which the seeker plays an active role. In some cases these commentaries speak of the multilevel struggle within the practice of meditation itself, and most often refer to the effort the practitioner has to make to keep the mind from becoming distracted. The Reverend Eshin, associated with the organization called Buddhist Door, wrote that the fourth oxherding picture has the following meaning:

For the first time the undisciplined activities of the mind are addressed. At first it seems so difficult with old, habitual patterns of thought rising up and overwhelming us. Sometimes our mind runs wild. Sometimes it is stuck, not moving with circumstances. (Eshin, 2004)

An anonymous Korean commentary on the fourth oxherding picture says,

What exactly is this difficult time? It refers to the stage when the meditation is composed partly of the [insight], partly of distracted thoughts, and partly of sinking into dullness. At this time, these three factors seem to be competing with one another: at some times you find yourself in a state of dullness, at other times beset with distracting thoughts, and at other times concentrating on the [insight]. This is a very difficult period because now you are really fighting with the ox. (Anonymous, 2004)

Martine Batchelor, who conducts Buddhist retreats with her husband Stephen Batchelor, says of the stage represented by the fourth oxherding picture that

We feel very much like the oxherder when we start to meditate. As soon as we sit down with the aim of concentrating on the question or the breath or just being aware, our mind is flooded with thoughts, memories and plans and our body is not comfortable...Like the oxherder we have to be firm and hold on tightly. There are

many obstacles: restlessness, sleepiness, daydreaming, etc. We have to realize that for the last twenty, thirty years we have cultivated many habits which promoted distractions and when we meditate we go against all these habits. It is going to take some time before we dissolve the power of these tendencies. (Batchelor, 2004)

In this last cited passage there is a suggestion that the struggle in meditation to control the mind from distracted thoughts are rooted in general habit patterns within the personality.

Some commentaries are quite explicit about the global nature of the struggle at this stage. According to one commentator, Katsuki Sekida, there is a struggle between lower level passions and desires, such as anger, greed, and jealousy, on the one hand, and his true nature (i.e., the ox), on the other.

At this stage, his kensho [mystical insight into his true nature] has become confirmed. However, as you see in the picture, the ox is inclined to run away willfully, and the man to hold it back with all his might...in his everyday life he cannot control his mind as he wishes. Sometimes he burns with anger; sometimes he is possessed by greed, blinded by jealousy, and so on. Unworthy thoughts and ignoble actions occur as of old. He is exhausted by the struggle against his passions and desires, which seem uncontrollable. This is something he did not bargain for: in spite of having attained kensho he seems to be as mean-spirited as ever. Indeed kensho has seemingly been the cause of new afflictions. He wants to behave in a certain way but finds himself doing the opposite...However he cannot let go of the bridle [the tether or rope] and tries to keep the ox under control, even though it seems beyond him. (Sekida, 1981:226-227)

What is interesting to note here is that while there is a struggle against lower level passions, there is simultaneously a struggle to hang on to the ox (i.e., the personality ideal). Victory in the struggle against self-centred desires is achieved through becoming one with the personality ideal.

John Daido Looi, abbot of the Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York, interprets the fourth oxherding picture as a struggle between self-centredness and wisdom.

The term kensho, frequently used in Zen writings, literally means seeing the nature of the self. But [as Kuo-an says,] "Still, its will is forceful and its body spirited." That's the ego. We see into the nature of the ego, but it doesn't die easily. It is programmed to reappear, to constantly reassert itself....

[But] With the original breakthrough, wisdom begins to function...Wisdom is the direct appreciation of the oneness of the universe and the self. But that functioning of wisdom is very inconsistent. It runs hot and cold.

Frequently our actions are not in accord with our clarity. We know what we should be doing, we know what is right, but that is not what we do. Often, in fact, we do exactly the opposite...This is a tremendous and all-pervasive struggle, the stage of the journey when we are beginning to transform habits developed over a lifetime to accord with our emerging understanding. (Loori, 2002:29-30)

Loori makes the interesting point that lower level passions can survive in a different guise. For example, the desire to possess other's material goods can change into jealousy with regard to the moral and spiritual attainments of others.

At the very same time when we have seen the futility of our ingrained habit patterns, they continue to propagate themselves...Instead of coveting our neighbor's new car...we begrudge their progress on the spiritual path...But coveting is coveting.... (Loori, 2002:30)

And even when there is some success in the multilevel struggle, the root of lower level values, i.e., pride, persists in asserting itself.

After the initial breakthrough, there also appears the tendency to get inflated with our insight...This is one of the worst possible delusions...To even give rise to the thought that there is a distinction between ordinary beings and Buddhas, a gap between our ordinary mind and our enlightened mind, is a defilement.... (Loori, 2002:30)

Loori also notes that partial multilevel disintegration has to become more global and this is done by allowing the illumination of the ideal permeate one's being and by letting go of previous conditioning.

Despite insight, despite realization of the nature of reality, conditioning is still present. We have a breakthrough. For a moment there is clarity, for a moment the light of our mind shines. Then very quickly, it clouds over, because our conditioning is fathomless...From this point on, our spiritual journey is about letting go of our conditioning in view of our clarity; it is about actualizing our insight. (Loori, 2002:32)

Loori's commentary is consistent with Dabrowski's description of intuition at level IV.

Development and deepening of intuition is closely related to the increasing distance from lower levels of reality...perception is multilevel and

multidimensional having its source in the highest level which organizes...all the lower levels of reality. Intuition is...developed through detachment from the needs of a lower level and through closer binding with the personality ideal. Meditation and contemplation contribute to the growth of intuition. (1996:103)

The comments of the Chinese Ch'an (Zen) master, Master Sheng-yen, nicely summarize the points made by the interpreters cited above.

The practitioner catches the ox and tries to control it with a rope...He perceives his own Buddha-nature, but still experiences vexations caused by greed, anger, dislike and resentment...the practitioner is careful not to give rise to vexations...Still, he experiences vexations and must use appropriate methods and views, such as meditation and the understanding of causes and conditions, in order to deal with these problems. The methods and views of Ch'an comprise the ox-controlling rope. (Sheng-yen 1992)

Dabrowski's comments on the gradient of reflection at higher levels of personality development mirror the comments made by the Zen teachers in general and Sheng-yen in particular.

The process of inner psychic transformation started with the aid of meditation and contemplation is carried on in a more essential all-inclusive manner. Reflection becomes a systematic practice of deep calm concentration. It ceases to be an analytical argument but begins to depend more and more on the operation of intuition. (1996: 69-70)

The remaining oxherding pictures represent various stages following the momentous multilevel struggle depicted in the second, third and fourth images. In the fifth oxherding picture, Herding the Ox, we see the youth waking along, holding the tether (but not tautly) and the ox meekly following behind him. At this stage the seeker has achieved a tentative accord with his personality ideal, but he must remain vigilant, as the prose commentary states, "Do not let the nose-string loose, hold it tight, and allow no vacillation." In the picture entitled, Coming Home on the Ox's Back, the sixth oxherding picture, the youth is shown riding on the back of the ox, no longer holding the tether. Instead both hands hold a flute which the youth is playing. The struggle is truly over, and the seeker and his personality ideal are one. This unity is even more graphically displayed in the seventh oxherding picture, The Ox Forgotten, Leaving the Man Alone. Here we see the youth serenely contemplating nature as the moon arises in the background—the ox has disappeared, as it is now one with the youth. The eighth oxherding picture (called The Ox and the Man both Gone out of Sight) is what is called an enso—a circle created by a single broad brush stroke. In this painting, even the experience of being a peaceful person integrated with one's personality ideal is transcended.. This image symbolizes the complete annihilation of self-centredness. The

ninth oxherding picture is Returning to the Source, in which we see a blossoming branch of a cherry tree—but no ox and no youth. This image symbolizes the totally transformed consciousness of the youth. Finally in the tenth oxherding picture, In Town with Helping Hands, we see the “youth” who has become a bald, bearded, pot-bellied, and disheveled old man encountering (and implicitly advising) another person (represented as a youth) in search of his personality ideal.

In view of Dabrowski’s objections to what he understood as the ultimate goal of Buddhism, I feel it would be helpful to clarify the Buddhist position, and compare it with the views of Dabrowski. To do this I will summarize the Buddhist understanding of the person as given in an analysis, by Sallie B. King (1989), of an ancient Chinese Buddhist text entitled the *Buddha Nature Treatise*. Dabrowski felt that Buddhism adopted as its ultimate goal a form of monism—i.e., that Buddhist enlightenment consisted of a complete annihilation of the individual personality. I have described Dabrowski’s view of Buddhist enlightenment, the dependence of this view on inadequate sources and the reasons why I think Dabrowski was mistaken, in a presentation given at the Fifth International Conference on the Theory of Positive Disintegration at Fort Lauderdale in 2002. (This paper is available in the Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference and therefore on the CD of Dabrowski’s works.)

In King’s reading, the *Buddha Nature Treatise* distinguishes first between the ontological and the existential dimensions of the human persons. According to King,

There are two main points to the *Buddha Nature Treatise's* understanding of the ontological nature of a human person: first, a person is not an entity of any kind, but consists of actions; and second, a person does not exist in contradistinction to a world, but is...conceived as inseparable from that world.... (King, 1989)

However the focus of the *Buddha Nature Treatise*, and correspondingly of King’s analysis, is on the existential dimension, which is divided into two stages or modes: before and after a process of spiritual transformation (i.e., multilevel disintegration). This process of spiritual (and personality) transformation, referred to by King as conversion, is one in which the person is changed from a deluded into an awakened being. Before conversion the person is deluded; after conversion the person is awakened. How does this relate to the synthesis between universal qualities versus individual qualities—the preservation of which Dabrowski believes is essential? To begin with the *Buddha Nature Treatise* identifies the Buddha nature (the Buddhist personality ideal) as a universal which is present in both deluded and awakened existential modes of personality.

In whichever existential mode a person finds him- or herself, a human being is always identifiable with the Buddha nature...If the Buddha nature is the essential nature of a human being, then there is, on this level and in this context, a universal sameness shared by humanity at the core of our identity. We are all intrinsically

enlightened and compassionate beings...To the extent that this hidden reality is not yet manifest, though, the sameness which it implies is all the greater. We can speak of it only as wisdom and compassion and cannot specify its character further; active manifestation is required for that. (King, 1989)

The difference between the presence of the Buddha nature in the two modes is as follows. In the deluded mode, the personality ideal is hidden; in the awakened mode the personality ideal is manifest, or to use Dabrowski's term, dynamized.

What about individual traits in the two modes? In the deluded mode, individual traits are determined, according to the *Buddha Nature Treatise*, by the unique configurations of what in Buddhism are called kleśa, or defiling passions, such as greed, sloth, anger, and jealousy. As King puts it:

...what does distinguish us one from another is our individual karma and kleśa [or defilements], the past history and defilements which together are responsible for the creation and constitution of our bodies as well as what we...call our various personalities. To the extent that a person exists in the deluded existential mode, that person's individual character traits, beliefs, habits, tendencies, values, mannerisms, and so forth simply are kleśa [defilements].... (King, 1989)

These defilements are precisely what constitutes the driving force of primary integration, and even for the most part, the multiplicity of wills in unilevel disintegration. These are not the individual features of personality that Dabrowski sees as enduring.

From the Buddhist perspective, these defilements are not ultimately real, or enduring, and therefore cannot be the basis of true personality.

We therefore have a situation in which persons in the deluded existential mode can only be differentiated one from another by virtue of the kleśa which constitute their personalities and have constructed their bodies, but the kleśa themselves are unreal and therefore cannot serve as any real basis of differentiation. The kleśa, therefore, have no value in constituting a person's identity. In the existential mode of delusion, then, a person can truthfully be identified with the universally identical Buddha nature but cannot truthfully be identified with the distinctive kleśa which constitute that person's individuality.

...Within the purview of Buddha nature thought, the person in the deluded existential mode is ahistorical and lacking in individuality. History and individuality are comprised by the kleśa which constitute a person's personality; since these are simply negligible, so are history and individuality as pertaining to persons in the deluded existential mode. (King, 1989)

The Buddha Nature Treatise makes the additional point that true autonomy does not exist in the deluded mode, except inasmuch as one conforms to the impulse derived from one's Buddha nature, which impels one toward the freedom of Buddhahood.

...autonomy and freedom are largely, though not entirely, negligible for the deluded person. Most of the deluded person's actions are driven by karma and as such identifiable with the realm of kleśa and utterly lacking in real freedom. However, there is one important exception to this statement. Buddha nature ...[impels] one towards Buddhahood. The drive to spiritual freedom impelled by the Buddha nature is an act of authentic freedom. Buddha nature... [having] nothing to do with the realm of karma and kleśa, can serve as the basis of acts of real freedom.... (King, 1989)

A similar position is found in Dabrowski's definition of autonomy. Autonomy, he says, is

Freedom from lower level drives and behavior and from the influence of the external environment (which does not negate responsiveness to its needs). Autonomy is a function of identification with the highest levels, in particular with personality ideal. (1996:42)

In other words according to both the *Buddha Nature Treatise* and Kazimierz Dabrowski, the more one identifies with (and is responsive to the urges of) the personality ideal, the greater is one's autonomy, understood in both cases to be freedom from the influence of the defiling passions.

King's conclusion regarding the view of the *Buddha Nature Treatise* on the deluded mode of the existential dimension of the human person is as follows:

...as presented in the *Buddha Nature Treatise*, the person (or human being) in the deluded existential mode is not a person as we ordinarily use the term in the popular Western sense. There is no real historicality or individuality accruing to the "person" and precious little freedom. What we consider to be the basis of individual personhood is written off as unreal. What is real is the universal sameness of Buddha nature; in this sameness, individual personhood, as we ordinarily use the term, cannot be found. Thus, before "conversion" and while in the existential mode of delusion, a person is not a person. (King, 1989)

This view is not so very different from Dabrowski's idea that true personality (along with autonomy) is not a given, but is something which is acquired through a process of personality development from primary integration toward secondary integration.

So much for the view expressed in the *Buddha Nature Treatise* about the deluded mode, but what about the awakened mode, subsequent to a process of personality transformation or conversion? To begin with, the universal aspect is the Buddha nature (or personality ideal), although now the Buddha nature is manifest (dynamized). And it is precisely in this manifestation or dynamization that true individual traits emerge.

What, then, of the person after "conversion," the "pure" or enlightened person? Again we must begin by stating that the person is the Buddha nature. Thus, also in the existential mode of enlightenment there apparently is this degree of universal sameness. But how far, in this mode, does this sameness extend? The fact that we are all the Buddha nature means that we are all characterized by clear seeing and altruistic behavior. But persons in the enlightened existential mode, unlike persons in the deluded mode, have made this Buddha nature manifest in real acts of clarity and altruism. This manifestation in action, therefore, brings the Buddha nature into the realm of particularity and individuality....Hence, once the Buddha nature moves into the realm of manifestation, it is no longer appropriate to speak of universal sameness, since the Buddha nature is no more than those particular acts of clarity and altruism and no entity of any kind. (King, 1989)

King concludes her analysis of the view of the human person found in the *Buddha Nature Treatise* as follows:

Thus, history and individuality, which were lacking in the deluded existential mode, enter the constitution of the person now, in the enlightened existential mode. The particular behaviors, mannerisms, and even the personality of the person now possess reality and value. Moreover, the actions of the person now possess complete autonomy and freedom....

We must emphasize this remarkable point: "conversion" and enlightened behavior not only do not rob a person of individuality, but in fact constitute its very possibility for the first time. (King, 1989)

To me the conception of the Buddha nature that is found in the *Buddha Nature Treatise* appears to be rather similar to Dabrowski's description of the personality ideal in secondary integration:

Secondary integration as the highest level of development is also called here the level of personality. By personality we mean a self-aware, self-chosen, and self-affirmed structure whose one dominant factor is personality ideal...Through the synthesis and organization carried out in level IV, all dynamisms operate in harmony. They become more unified with the DDC [disposing and directing center] established at a high level and inspired by the personality ideal. Out of all

the developmental distillation, personality ideal remains as the only dynamism recognizable in the fifth level. (1996:42)

Note also that in the above quoted passage, Dabrowski defines personality as that which is achieved, in the same way that the Buddha Nature Treatise does.

Similarly in the glossary of *Psychoneurosis is Not an Illness*, dabrowski defines personality as,

A self-aware, self-chosen, self-affirmed, and self-determined unity of essential individual psychic qualities. Personality as defined here appears at the level of secondary-integration... (1972:301)

Hence, when Dabrowski refers to the importance of preserving individual traits, he is not referring to lower level structures that are generally understood when psychologists speak of “personality,” but rather a level of being in which the only recognizable dynamism is the personality ideal, or in Buddhist terms, the Buddha nature. The features of lower level “personality” have no value for Dabrowski whatsoever. He states unambiguously that, “The instinct of partial death is the inner drive which compels the individual to let die or to actively destroy his lower levels -- that which is less himself” (1996: 89).

According to Sallie King’s analysis of the *Buddha Nature Treatise*, at the highest level of personality (the level of enlightenment), there is both a universal and an individual dimension. I will repeat here a quote given above:

...in the existential mode of enlightenment there apparently is this degree of universal sameness. But how far, in this mode, does this sameness extend? The fact that we are all the Buddha nature means that we are all characterized by clear seeing and altruistic behavior. But persons in the enlightened existential mode, unlike persons in the deluded mode, have made this Buddha nature manifest in real acts of clarity and altruism. This manifestation in action, therefore, brings the Buddha nature into the realm of particularity and individuality. (King, 1989)

I find this statement of both the universal and individual nature of personality in the enlightened state, to be consistent with Dabrowski’s description of awareness at the level of secondary integration:

Strong increase of awareness through systematic meditation and contemplation. Resolution of the distinctness of one's awareness and of one's unity with others. Self-awareness and awareness are in the service of highest empathy as well as one's independence, i.e. one's individual essence. (1996: 106)

From the above remarks I draw the following conclusions:

- (1) The Buddhist view of the Buddha nature and its role in shaping true personality is entirely consistent with Dabrowski's notion of the personality ideal and its role in personality development.
- (2) The Ten Oxherding Pictures and the commentarial tradition that surrounds them, (only one of the models of psycho-spiritual development found in Buddhism), is parallel to Dabrowski's model of positive disintegration.
- (3) Like the advanced personalities they seek to promote, various religious models have individual qualities as well as universal ones, and these can add to the sum total of our understanding of personality development.
- (4) Throughout Dabrowski's published works can be found numerous references to the value of the practice of meditation and contemplation, but practically nothing on how to excel at this important means of development. The study of parallel systems of development in which the various means of growth, such as meditation, are explored in great detail could further enhance our understanding of the process of realizing personality in the sense meant by Dabrowski. In fact, in *Personality-shaping through positive disintegration*, Dabrowski specifically recommends this,

The fundamental quality shaped by the everyday effort of the individual aiming at personality is the ability to meditate. We have referred to it repeatedly. It has its origin in a form of reflection, a predisposition for deep meditation...***The individual may avail himself of the many works of various schools dealing with spiritual life in order to deepen this capacity for meditation.*** (1967:166) [my emphasis]

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