# CRITICAL TERMS *for the* STUDY OF BUDDHISM

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*If you wear Yao's clothes, chant Yao's words, and act as Yao acted, then you are simply Yao.* —Mencius

# RITUAL

*Robert H. Sharf*

Rather than opening with a definition of *ritual*—a difficult and contentious task—let's begin by reflecting on the way the term is commonly used. Consider the following four scenarios:

1. A teenage boy comes home from school hungry. He forages through the refrigerator until he finds a slice of leftover pizza, which he quickly devours. He then runs off to play basketball with his friends at the park, as he does, weather permitting, every weekday afternoon.
2. A married couple invites the husband's business associates to a dinner party at their home. On their arrival the guests are welcomed into the living room for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. After an hour or so the couple ushers the guests into the dining room, where they are seated at an elegantly appointed table and served a multicourse meal accompanied by fine wine.

3. A Catholic priest in formal vestments celebrates the Mass in accordance with the prescribed missal. He consecrates the eucharistic host and wine before an altar adorned with incense and candles, and then invites members of the congregation to receive Holy Communion. The congregants each approach the altar and partake of a small wheat wafer.
4. A Japanese Buddhist priest in ceremonial robes stands in front of an ornate lacquer shrine. The shrine contains an image of the Buddha flanked by wooden ancestral tablets. The priest makes offerings of incense and food to the ancestors while intoning a variety of scriptural passages, prayers, and spells. The recitations are accompanied by formal hand gestures and bows.

We would not normally think of the first case—a teenage boy wolfing down leftovers and then running off to play basketball—as a ritual. It is true that the scenario incorporates certain cultural stereotypes and patterned behaviors, but the same could be said of virtually all intentional human activity: to the extent that an action is recognizably human and meaningful, it is patterned by social conventions and cultural norms. All social phenomena are routinized to at least some extent, and thus there is little heuristic value in considering convention and routine a defining attribute of ritual.

As for the third and fourth cases—the Catholic Mass and the Buddhist ancestral offering—most readers, I suspect, would consider them rituals, however one defines the term. Before investigating what makes them so, let's turn to the second case: the dinner party. Should it be considered a ritual or not?

Formal dinner parties follow elaborate and well-established protocols stipulating the proper behavior of host and guest. The time of the event, the venue, the attire of the attendees, the seating arrangement, the placement and handling of the silverware, and even the appropriate subjects of conversation are all subject to, or at least constrained by, social codes and norms. Many of these norms are prescribed in books on etiquette by authorities such as Emily Post or Amy Vanderbilt; others remain latent or are actively repressed. Analyzing a dinner party under the rubric of ritual draws attention to the more formalized and codified aspects of the event. Such a perspective is valuable insofar as it denaturalizes the dinner and reveals the symbolic codes, performative schemas, and power relations that regulate the behavior of the participants.

Be that as it may, the conventions and protocols that govern a dinner party are normally subsumed under the rubric of Etiquette or Manners rather than ritual per se. The commonplace distinction between etiquette and ritual is warranted: behavior at even the stuffiest dinner party looks relatively spontaneous in comparison with behavior at a Catholic Mass or a Buddhist ancestral offering. Within the bounds of propriety, the dinner guests enjoy a freedom of self-expression unavailable to those engaging in the Catholic or Buddhist rites; indeed, the participants at the dinner are expected to behave "naturally." (The social and semiotic codes that signal "naturalness" are among the rules that are normally repressed.) Finally, the dinner party is not normally regarded as discontinuous with daily life; the setting (dining room), attire (informal but decorous), food (fine cuisine), implements (silverware and china), modes of speech (friendly but not uncouth banter), and social function (fraternizing with colleagues) are not unique to such occasions. Accordingly, many would consider it a stretch to call the dinner party, no matter how formal or conventionalized, a ritual.

The comparison with the dinner party helps us to appreciate some of the features that mark the Catholic Mass and Buddhist ancestral offerings as rituals proper. For one thing, many aspects seem designed to set these events apart from daily life. Only ordained priests sanctioned by ecclesiastic authority can officiate at such events, and their status is made conspicuous by their vestments—ornate robes reserved for clerical use at sacramental occasions. The venue, be it church sanctuary or temple shrine, is similarly associated with ceremonial occasions; the space is distinguished by architectural and decorative cues on the one hand and by consecration procedures intended to hallow the precincts on the other. Indeed, most of the objects used in these performances—monstrance, censer, chalice, buddha image, ancestral tablets, food offerings, incense, and so on—are "purified" through formal consecrations performed prior to or in conjunction with the event.

This sense of being set apart from the affairs of mundane existence is precisely what constitutes these performances as "sacred" or "holy." In other words, the people, places, liturgies, and ceremonial objects associated with events such as the Mass or the Buddhist ancestral offerings are not intrinsically or inherently holy (whatever that might mean). Rather, holiness is a quality ascribed to them through the symbolic cues and performative strategies that set them apart. The strategies are many: the utterances of the priests, for example, may be in a foreign or classical tongue, rendering their meaning inaccessible to all but a few specialists. (The chants that accompany the ancestral offerings are typical: they consist primarily of Japanese transcriptions of classical Chinese texts and Sanskrit spells [mantra and dhāraṇī], making them incomprehensible to most Japanese.) Moreover, ritual utterances are often intoned or chanted in a manner quite unlike everyday speech or song. Finally, the ritual movements and utterances of the priests are scripted, such that the clerics' actions and utterances are more or less identical from one performance to the next. The extensive use of scripting, repetition, and highly mannered modes of speech and movement, all of which distinguish an event from the course of daily life, would appear to be central to our conception of ritual.

## INVARIANCE AND AUTHORITY

To the extent that ritual speech and action is scripted and repetitive, it would seem to be devoid of new information and thus is not communicative in the usual sense of the word. As scholars of ritual have been quick to point out, this apparent absence of new information is crucial to the authority of ritual. The liturgies of the Mass and the ancestral rites are supposed to be transmitted without alteration from one generation to the next. As a result, the actions and utterances of the Catholic or Buddhist priest are not his own—they originate from another time and place, and it is the priest's task to convey this sense of timelessness to the gathered worshippers. Indeed, ritual authority and efficacy are tied to the priest's skill in effacing his own agency so that he can serve as a conduit for the hoary tradition that speaks through him. This sense of displaced agency—of an unseen but perduring something that communicates through the ritual performance—lends ritual its affective and suasive power, and accounts in large part for the enduring authority and cogency of religious systems (Rappaport 1999).

Of course, the claim of any particular ritual tradition to be invariant—to preserve intact an ancient or primordial archetype—is largely a conceit. As ethnographers and historians have documented, even the most conservative of ritual traditions undergo constant change, whether the practitioners are aware of it or not. Ritualists and their audiences adapt to contingency, but in so doing they must be careful lest they undermine the sense of timelessness and hence the legitimacy of the performance as well as the institutions that countenance it.

Because the authority of ritual rests on maintaining the fiction if not the fact of continuity and invariance, some scholars have argued that ritual is inherently conservative; it serves to maintain, legitimize, and reproduce the dominant social and political order by reference to an unchanging and/or transcendent source (see especially Bloch 1974). In other words, ritual legitimizes local norms and values by casting them as an integral part of the natural order of things. At the same time, ritual represses or channels antisocial impulses such as violence and selfishness that threaten the reigning polity. Ritual naturalizes what are ultimately arbitrary forms of life, but in order to do this effectively the constructed and coercive nature of ritual must remain concealed from view.

There would appear to be an element of systematic deception, coercion, or false consciousness involved in ritual. But to some scholars, such accusations place too much emphasis on cognition. The real work of ritual, they would argue, lies in its ability to mold not the mind so much as the body. Participation in a living ritual tradition reaches beyond the vagaries of the intellect to one's somatic being; ritual habituation indelibly inscribes the self with a set of perceptual orientations, affective dispositions, and autonomic responses that are, in effect, precognitive.

## MAGIC, SCIENCE, AND PERFORMANCE

Whether the social goals of ritual are effected through molding conscious belief or shaping unconscious dispositions, ritual seems to evoke a world of mysterious and invisible forces, wherein a simple wafer is transformed into divine flesh, or incense and uncooked rice is consumed by beings long deceased. As a result, ritual often appears to modern, secularized individuals as little more than magic and superstition that betray a fundamental ignorance concerning the laws of nature. In this view ritual is not only coercive but also irrational and benighted.

This is an issue among many anthropologists and scholars of religion; some insist that ritual specialists are perfectly aware of the difference between "instrumental" versus ritual action—between plowing, seeding, and irrigating a field on the one hand, and making a sacrifice to the gods in exchange for a good harvest on the other. Accordingly, some have argued that ritual is not so much bad science as it is myth, theology, or social ideology; it is a symbol system that gives form to and propagates religious ideology and communal values. Ritual action is not intended to alter the natural world as such, but rather to alter our cognitive and affective relationship to that world—our social and psychological being. The real import of a rain dance, then, might not be to bring rain so much as to express and channel collective distress while reaffirming entrenched social hierarchies and corporate norms.

Thus far I have been presenting, in a very simplified form, a précis of a large and sophisticated body of theory about ritual that has developed over the last century. There has never been much in the way of scholarly consensus; debates have raged over the relationship between ritual and myth, ritual and belief, ritual and science, ritual and rationality, and so on. In the last decade, however, scholars have begun to take stock of the field as a whole, turning their critical gaze upon the category Ritual itself. They note, for example, that in order to apply the term *ritual* to a particular form of stylized, rule-governed behavior or action, we must be able to distinguish said action, at least theoretically, from thought, belief, or intention. But at the same time, for scholars to say something meaningful about ritual—to interpret ritual—they seem obliged to imbue ritual actions with significance. There seems to be no choice but to view ritual as some sort of arcane code that could be deciphered by those with the requisite contextual and theoretical expertise. Ritual action always ends up looking like a "text" that encodes primal myths, kinship systems, social hierarchies, normative dispositions and attitudes, or what have you. The astute scholar can then use ritual as a window to the deeply embedded social systems, collective representations, and even the inner psychic life of foreign cultures.

Catherine Bell has undertaken the most penetrating analysis of the logic of ritual studies to date, focusing on the constitutive role of the thought/action dichotomy. Bell argues that this dichotomy does not emerge from the ethnographic record per se, but rather from the deep-seated assumptions of occidental scholars. According to Bell, "ritual is first differentiated as a discrete object of analysis by means of various dichotomies that are loosely analogous to thought and action; then ritual is subsequently elaborated as the very means by which these dichotomous categories, neither of which could exist without the other, are reintegrated" (Bell 1992, 21). Ritual, in short, is construed as the social mechanism to manage the disjunction, endemic to all human societies, between the ideal world (ideology, thought) and the actual lived world (action). At the same time, ritual serves to bridge the gap between the native ritualist and the outside observer, with the native assuming the role of unthinking actor, and the ethnographer the role of discerning but passive observer. So the prevailing model of ritual may be the result of simple transference: in trying to understand the rituals of others—to bridge the gap between our thinking and their actions—theorists were led to the conclusion that ritual serves to integrate their thinking with their actions.

In response to these and other quandaries, some contemporary scholars—Catherine Bell, Pierre Bourdieu, Ronald Grimes, Richard Schechner, Stanley Tambiah, and Victor Turner, among them—have advocated a performative approach to ritual, in contrast with the interpretative approach associated with earlier anthropological writers (in other words, just about everyone from James George Frazer, Émile Durkheim, and Bronislaw Malinowski to Claude Lévi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz). According to proponents of a performative model, the first question to ask of a ritual event or happening is not "what does it mean?" but rather, "how do the participants come to do what they do?" There is simply no a priori reason to believe that rituals stand in need of interpretation, and thus ritual should not be reduced to something—to anything—other than itself. To approach ritual as a text is tantamount to reducing music to its score, or territory to its map.

While the significance or logic of ritual might, according to this view, be immanent in the event itself, it does not follow that it can be discerned by just anyone. Just as exposure to and training in music is necessary to appreciate musical performance, the appreciation of ritual entails the acquisition of what Bell calls the "ritualized body"—a body "invested with a 'sense' of ritual" (Bell 1992, 98)—or what Bourdieu calls "practical mastery," a skill acquired through early habituation and/or prolonged practice (Bourdieu 1990, 90–91). A performative approach to ritual would then focus on the social institutions and practical training though which ritual mastery is acquired. (Ritual studies morphed into performance studies in part through the collaboration between anthropologists and professional dramatists such as Richard Schechner.) This perspective has considerable intellectual appeal, as it circumvents many of the hermeneutic conundrums attendant upon the textualization of ritual action. It is ethically appealing as well, since it makes the ritual specialist, and not the "objective" ethnographer or theorist, the ultimate source of ritual authority.

Advocates of a performative approach also claim that it resists essentialism or universalism—that it avoids treating ritual as a transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon that exhibits a common underlying morphology and structure, or serves a common social function, wherever and whenever it is found. Scholars have less incentive to argue over the definitive and universal attributes of ritual, with the result that they are less interested in the search for a common definition. Ritual begins to look less like a text and more like music—difficult to describe in words yet readily recognizable. Of course there are bound to be gray areas—phenomena that resist easy classification—but the process of classification is ultimately stipulative rather than descriptive.

The analogy with music is worth pursuing. For ritual is also like music in that it does not exist "out there" in the objective world, nor "inside" the minds of the participants, but somewhere in between. Musical proficiency involves the peculiar feat of hearing sounds as music—as something other than noise—and this entails recognizing sounds as intentional acts. Similarly, ritual accomplishment entails experiencing action as ritual. Yet it seems to elude the capacity of language to articulate exactly what is involved in this experiencing-as. We may talk of musical phenomena as exhibiting "structure," as leading "up" or "down," as "harmonious" or "dissonant," as creating "tension" or "release," and so on, but these are mere metaphors—metaphors of space, of movement, of animation. In the end, music resists any and all attempts to translate its content into another medium for the simple reason that in music, as in the visual arts, form and content are inseparable (Scruton 1997).

Ritual, it seems, is more like music than like language insofar as it is impossible to extract content from form. Moreover, as with music, anyone conversant in a tradition of ritual practice is able to discern the difference between an accomplished performance and a mediocre one. Yet it is often difficult to articulate precisely wherein the difference lies. (One might speak of an adroit musical performance being more "expressive" than a stilted rendition of the same piece, yet one flounders when it comes to saying what exactly is being expressed.) To understand ritual competence, like musical competence, one must focus not on ritual as a text or code, but rather on the institutions and social processes that engender proficiency. We may speak of "rules" or "syntax" governing ritual—just as some have spoken of "rules" governing music—but such rules are not conventions per se. They are, to adapt a phrase from Roger Scruton, post-facto generalizations from a tradition of ritual practice (Scruton 1997, 210).

If ritual, like music, is a phenomenon in which form and content are one—an activity that can be located neither in the outer "objective" world nor in the "glassy essence" of the mind—then a ritual event is rendered a singularity that cannot be translated into another medium. Accordingly, some scholars have called for a "nonrepresentational" approach to ritual—an approach that resists the reduction of ritual to either its discursive content or its social function. Indeed, ritual has become fashionable of late in the field of religion in part because of its promise to get us closer to things-in-themselves. Ritual becomes a domain of human experience and cultural production that offers a respite from hermeneutic anxiety.

It is one thing to critique representational models of ritual; it is another to articulate precisely what a nonrepresentational approach might look like. The form/content, inner/outer schemas are so deeply ingrained that it is difficult to think outside of them. Many have tried: scholars speak of "the social nature of thought" (Geertz 1973), "thinking with things" (Lévi-Strauss), "distributed agency" (Gell 1998), the "illocutionary force of performatives" (Rappaport 1999, drawing from J. L. Austin 1975), and so on, in order to unsettle the commonplace that inner meaning can be separated from outer form. The problem, however, is that such notions are parasitic upon, and thus ultimately reaffirm, the very dichotomies they try to resolve. Moreover, while performative and nonrepresentational approaches aim to overcome the parochialisms and limitations of Western enlightenment thought, they remain allied with the modernist project insofar as they transform ontological issues into questions of epistemology. In the words of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The problem remains framed in terms of knowledge even though the answer could be taken to imply that knowledge, let alone the cogito, has little to do with it. Anthropologists persist in thinking that in order to explain a non-Western ontology we must derive it from (or reduce it to) an epistemology" (de Castro 1999, S79). And therein lies the rub, since many native ritualists, *pace* their academic defenders, will claim that their performances are in fact instrumental—that ritual changes not just our view of the world but the world itself.

The so-called performative approaches to ritual offered to date, despite the avowed intentions of their proponents, turn out to be predicated on the very dichotomies they have tried to avoid: distinctions between thought and action, the subjective and the objective, private and public, and inner and outer. Is it possible to articulate an approach that escapes these problematic moieties? One place to look may be in the existential logic of play.

## THE WORK OF PLAY

Gregory Bateson was led to reflect on the nature of play while observing young monkeys in a San Francisco zoo. The monkeys at play were doing the same sorts of things monkeys do when they are fighting, yet it was somehow clear to them, as it was to Bateson, that the activity was indeed recreation and not combat. The monkeys' behavior must contain, reasoned Bateson, cues that allowed them to interpret their actions as play. Logically, such cues are metalinguistic in that they are signs or signals that comment on the status of other signs or signals. These metalinguistic signals, most of which remain implicit, serve to "frame" the activity: they place it within a context that says, "'These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote.' The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson 1972, 179–80). This sort of framing is essential to all human communication, since the interpretation of any message entails the ability to distinguish the signifier from the thing signified—to understand, for example, that a map is not the territory it represents. "A message, of whatever kind, does not consist of those objects which it denotes (the word 'cat' cannot scratch us)" (ibid., 180). Frames tell us which signals are to count and which are to be ignored, and they define the context and establish the premises that are used to evaluate them.

Several decades before Bateson's encounter with his monkeys, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky was led to ponder similar issues while observing young children at his institute in Moscow. Vygotsky was interested in the acquisition of speech and the process by which childhood soliloquizing came to be internalized as thought. He believed that Piaget's theory of childhood development was fundamentally flawed in that it presupposed precisely what was most in need of explanation, namely, the appearance of the inner self, or cogito. Vygotsky's developmental theory gave pride of place to the role of early soliloquizing, or "egocentric speech," that allows the child to become an object to herself and exert control over her actions.

Vygotsky believed that children acquire speech and language through appropriating the responses of others to their own involuntary behavior. The gesture of pointing—one of the earliest communicative acts mastered by the child—can be used to illustrate the process. An infant naturally extends his hand toward an interesting object in an attempt to grasp it. Should the object be beyond the child's reach, his hands remain poised in the air in the direction of the object. The mother responds to the child's action, placing the object into the child's hand. "Only later, when the child can link his unsuccessful grasping movement to the objective situation as a whole, does he begin to understand this movement as pointing" (Vygotsky 1978, 56). Thus, it is the reaction of others that allows the child to apprehend his own unmediated behavior as a meaningful signal directed not at an object but at another being. Note that at this stage, the child makes no distinction between the action and the sign—the meaning is a natural property of the action. In the child's act of pointing, form and content are as of yet inseparable.

The acquisition of speech, according to Vygotsky, should be understood in the same way. Through the response of others the child comes to regard his own vocalizations as meaningful. But in the early stages of speech acquisition, in which one learns to associate a name with a thing, the child regards the name as intrinsic to the object. Vygotsky's observations led him to conclude that "*it is impossible for very young children to separate the field of meaning from the visual field* because there is such intimate fusion between meaning and what is seen" (Vygotsky 1978, 97; original emphasis). The verbal "sign" cannot be separated or abstracted from the thing signified; the object's name is simply the recognition of the object as figure against a background.

How then does the child learn to distinguish meaning from the perceptual field? This is where play comes in, for play is precisely the arena in which names are first disaggregated from their "natural" referents. "In play thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things: a piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick becomes a horse. Action according to rules begins to be determined by ideas and not by objects themselves. This is such a reversal of the child's relation to the real, immediate, concrete situation that it is hard to underestimate its full significance" (Vygotsky 1978, 97). Play is the domain in which the young child discovers, through continuous experimentation, that an object's sign can be displaced onto something else, turning a "stick," for example, into a "horse." For the toddler, play is not a retreat from the "real" world of human society; it is, rather, the child's first foray into it.

At this early stage the child cannot use just anything to be a horse; it must be a stick, and this is what makes a child's activity "play" as opposed to "symbolism." The stick, in other words, is not a sign for a horse, since it never ceases to a stick; it is, rather, the meaning of the stick that changes. The stick is now regarded as if it were a horse, thereby serving a conceptual displacement. There is, in other words, still a fusion of form and content; the child still requires a real object that can be apprehended as a horse. Thus one difference between a child's play and the thought of an adult is precisely that mature thought is not constrained by materiality in this way.

> When the stick becomes the pivot for detaching the meanings of "horse" from a real horse, the child makes one object influence another semantically. He cannot detach meaning from an object, or a word from an object, except by finding a pivot in something else. Transfer of meanings is facilitated by the fact that the child accepts a word as the property of a thing; he sees not the word but the thing it designates. For a child, the word "horse" applied to the stick means "there is a horse," because mentally he sees the object standing behind the word. A vital transitional stage toward operating with meanings occurs when a child first acts with meanings as with objects (as when he acts with the stick as though it were a horse). Later he carries out these acts consciously. This change is seen, too, in the fact that before a child has acquired grammatical and written language, he knows how to do things but does not know that he knows. He does not master these activities voluntarily. In play a child spontaneously makes use of his ability to separate meaning from an object without knowing he is doing it. (Vygotsky 1978, 98–99)

Play is thus the situation in which a child first comes to an implicit understanding of the logic of signs; through play the child will come to see that the word *horse* is not the natural property of a particular object in the world, but rather a category of which a particular object may be an instance. Play affords the child his first insight into the relationship between signifier and signified, between map and territory.

A child's play can and often does involve playing at reality. Two children, for example, might make up a game in which one plays the role of the mother and the other the role of the child. The second child is playing at what is in fact the case. Yet we recognize that there is a difference, since the child normally behaves without thinking of herself as a child, yet now she consciously seeks to display herself as a child, constituting herself as an instance of what she already is. It is here that we see the beginnings of the objectification of the self, an objectification necessary to navigate the social terrain.

The apperception of the "self" is thus a by-product of this dialectical process. The interior self emerges as the child's egocentric speech is turned inward; instead of appealing to others the child begins to address himself. "Language thus takes on an *intrapersonal function* in addition to its *interpersonal use*. When children develop a method of behavior for guiding themselves that had previously been used in relation to another person, when they organize their own activities according to a social form of behavior, they succeed in applying a social attitude to themselves" (Vygotsky 1978, 27; original emphasis). Thus Vygotsky's account of the emergence of the self does not presuppose the prior existence of an "intentional subject"—a cogito—that stands apart from, beholds, and acts upon the extended physical world. Rather than being predicated on an ontological divide between mind and body, inside and outside, subject and object, Vygotsky's analysis renders the phenomenal self an emergent property that arises in the course of social interaction.

It is, therefore, not a coincidence that Bateson should deduce the metalogic of semiotic systems through observing monkeys at play. Play is precisely that activity in which we learn to distinguish action from meaning, form from content. Bateson writes that "play marks a step forward in the evolution of communication—the crucial step in the discovery of map-territory relations. In primary process, map and territory are equated; in secondary process, they can be discriminated. In play, they are both equated and discriminated" (Bateson 1972, 185). Bateson's analysis of play is the phylogenetic counterpart to Vygotsky's ontogenetic theory.

Play is the domain in which one learns to manipulate latent metalinguistic cues in order to construct an *as-if* world. But at the same time, according to Bateson, the metalinguistic frames discerned in play must be present in all social intercourse that involves the use of signs. The *as-if* quality of play is accordingly, as the sociologist Erving Goffman repeatedly points out, an aspect of all socialized human interaction (Goffman 1959, 1967, 1974). Socialization involves apprehending oneself under extrinsic categories—as Man, Woman, Adult, Child, Father, Daughter, Teacher, Student, Attractive, Neurotic, or whatever. But one of the rules governing "normal" social intercourse—its frame, as it were—is that one does not attend to the constituted and thus arbitrary nature of such categories. One does not believe in or acquiesce to the social order any more than one believes in grammar. It is simply the implicit frame without which social intercourse would be impossible.

Ritual might then be viewed as a special form of adult play. It entails the manipulation of metalinguistic framing rules that govern signs and meanings such that a given object or action does not denote what it would normally denote. In doing so, religious rituals may blur the map-territory relation. Bateson comments, "In the dim region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap, human beings have evolved the 'metaphor that is meant,' the flag which men will die to save, and the sacrament that is felt to be more than 'an outward and visible sign, given unto us.' Here we can recognize an attempt to deny the difference between map and territory, and to get back to the absolute innocence of communication by means of pure mood-signs" (Bateson 1972, 183). Confounding the map-territory relationship results in paradox, since the metalinguistic cues that say "this is more than a sign, this is real" are themselves only intelligible as signs within a ritual frame. In the felicitous diction of Jonathan Z. Smith, ritual entails a "self-conscious category mistake."

In ritual, as in play, it is not the "symbolism" of the object that is altered but rather the apprehension of or orientation to the object itself. One partakes of the wafer *as if* it were the flesh of Christ; one hears the voice of the shaman *as if* it were the voice of an ancestor; one worships the stone icon *as if* it were the body of a god; one enters the ritual sanctuary *as if* one were entering a buddha land; one sits in *zazen* (seated meditation) *as if* one were an enlightened buddha. One does not believe that the wafer is flesh, nor that the icon is buddha; belief has little to do with it. One simply proceeds as if it were the case. And this is precisely the position of those Catholic theologians who insist that the eucharistic wafer is transformed substantially, and not symbolically, into the flesh of Christ. This transubstantiation of the Host requires an elaborate set of ritual cues, one of which is that the wafer continue to look and taste like a wafer. (Surreptitiously substituting a bit of meat for the wafer would likely disrupt rather than enhance the ritual effect.) Just as the stick is required for the play horse, the wafer is required for the ritual flesh.

Ritual recreates the situation of early childhood play in all its enthralling seriousness and intensity. Through ritual we rediscover a world wherein a stick is a horse, a wafer is divine flesh, a stone image is a god. In ritual the form/content, subject/object, and self/other dichotomies are intentionally confounded, creating a transitional world (to borrow a notion from the psychoanalyst D. E. Winnicott) that is neither inside the "mind" nor outside in the "objective world." Insofar as this is accomplished through manipulation of the metalinguistic cues implicit in all social exchange, and insofar as the emergence of the social self is coincidental to the acquisition of precisely such metalinguistic cues, ritual exposes the transitional nature—the betwixt-and-betweenness—of social reality. The world created in ritual is, according to this analysis, no more "empty" than the world of everyday life. The world of everyday life is no more "real" than the world that emerges in ritual.

And this brings us, at long last, to the question of Buddhist ritual.

## BUDDHIST *DARŚAN*

Historians of Buddhism now appreciate that the differences between medieval Indian Buddhism and the non-Buddhist traditions arrayed under the rubric of Hinduism are not as pronounced as was once thought. While there are pointed differences in doctrine, these are foregrounded in part because of conspicuous similarities at the level of practice. Buddhist ritual, both monastic and lay, bears a family resemblance to Hindu *darśan*, wherein the supplicant ritually invokes the presence of a deity, and both supplicant and deity behold one another. *Darśan*, for both Buddhists and Hindus, involved the use of consecrated images that served as the locus of the deity, the focus of veneration, and as a source of the rite's efficacy. The image was viewed not merely as a representation of the deity but as its animate corporeal embodiment (*mūrti*). As such, icons of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other supernal beings have been central to Buddhist practice throughout history, and virtually all rites of whatever size and significance are performed in their presence. (Note that, according to tradition, Buddhism was introduced to China, Korea, and Japan via the transmission of sacred icons, and one early and uncontroversial Chinese name for Buddhism was *xiangjiao*, or the "religion of images" [Sharf 2001a].)

The structure of Buddhist invocation rituals harkens back to ancient Vedic prototypes. Initial preparations involve the purification of the practitioner (recalling Vedic *dīkṣā* rites), the sanctuary, and the ritual implements employed during the rite. Thereupon sacred formulae, often mantra, are used to invoke the presence of one or more buddhas, bodhisattvas, and/or other divine beings. With the deity rendered present in the sanctuary, offerings are made through formalized gesture and utterance. The practitioner then makes solicitations to garner the deity's grace (*adhiṣṭhāna*), merit, wisdom, salvation, rebirth in a heaven or pure land, and so on. The underlying narrative structure of Buddhist worship is not unlike that of sacrifice: one conjures the presence of a divinity to whom one makes sacramental offerings in exchange for a preternatural boon.

At the same time, Mahāyāna doctrine holds that the buddha being invoked is none other than the truth that eternally dwells within the practitioner, that notions such as merit, grace, wisdom, and salvation are "skillful means" (*upāya*) empty of any abiding reality, and that the buddha land or pure land is already attained. According to traditional exegesis, Buddhist ritual practice is intended to elicit precisely the understanding that all form is empty—that all theories or views about the world, including Buddhist ones, are contingent. The recognition of this "truth"—namely, that all truth is relative—is precisely the boon bestowed by the buddhas. This fundamental Mahāyāna tenet can be found reiterated again and again in the discursive content of the chants, hymns, and scriptural recitations that comprise Mahāyāna liturgy.

It would seem that Mahāyāna rituals both affirm and confute, often at one and the same time, the reality of the deities that take center stage in the practice. This two-edged structure is readily apparent in the highly elaborated rituals associated with Buddhist tantra. On the one hand, the underlying sacrificial structure of the rite is foregrounded: the god is welcomed into the sanctuary as an "honored guest" by the practitioner, and then feted in an elaborately staged feast involving a complex sequence of offerings. In exchange for this treatment, the practitioner or "host" seeks *siddhi*—thaumaturgical powers and mastery over unseen forces. On the other hand, the liturgy culminates in a deconstruction of the central deity of the rite. In Japanese Esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*), this occurs in a sequence known as the "contemplation of the syllable wheel" (*jirinkan*), in which the liturgy leads the practitioner through a dissection of the core mantra of the deity. The practitioner is instructed to break the deity's mantra down into its constituent syllables and to contemplate the root meaning of each syllable in turn. However, the liturgy explicitly states that since the significance of the syllables can be grasped only in the context of the aggregate, the meaning of the syllables in isolation is "unobtainable" (Sanskrit *anupalabdhi*; Japanese *fukatoku*). And since the individual syllables cannot be grasped, the same is true of the mantric utterance as a whole. The analysis of the mantra thus has the effect of emptying it of its illocutionary significance. Moreover, since the mantra is held to be cosubstantial with the deity—much as the eucharistic wafer is cosubstantial with the flesh of Christ—the syllable-wheel contemplation constitutes the emptying or deconstruction of the deity itself. Yet ironically, the liturgical recitations and visualizations that comprise the syllable-wheel contemplation are said to constitute the final stage in the realization of the "three mysteries" (*sammitsu*, that is, the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha). It is in this ritual sequence that the supplicant is said to realize the identity of his or her own mind and the mind of the Buddha (Sharf 2001b).

The apprehension of the emptiness or constructed nature of the deities being worshipped does not mitigate the contingent reality of said beings, nor does it compromise the transformative power of their grace. Historical and ethnographical evidence indicates that those involved in the performance of such rites, whatever their education or social status, approached the deities as potent spiritual beings with apotropaic and salvific powers. According to traditional exegesis, such deities are no more and no less real than any other phenomenon. At the same time, liberation would not be possible without their compassion and grace.

The logic of Mahāyāna ritual thus implies that the Buddha being invoked (content) is coextensive with the understanding that the Buddha is constituted through ritual performance (form)—the "territory," in this view, is none other than the "map." But this does not compromise the salvific power of the Buddha. It should now be clear why the Chinese phrase "to see the Buddha" (*jianfo*, that is, *darśan*) was used for "final liberation"—to see the Buddha is to realize the constructed, relational, and empty nature of all reality. Commenting on the saying that "a painted rice cake does not satisfy hunger," the Japanese Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253) remarked, "All Buddhas are painted Buddhas; all painted Buddhas are Buddhas. . . . Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting. . . . Since this is so, the only way to satisfy hunger is with a painted rice cake" (*Shōbōgenzō*, *Gabyō*).

## ZEN ENLIGHTENMENT

The abstract doctrinal analysis of Mahāyāna liturgy presented above may strike some students of Buddhism as somewhat impertinent if not wrongheaded. Many moderns have come to believe that the summum bonum of the Buddhist path is not the appreciation of the significance of Buddhist ritual or doctrine, however profound such an understanding may be, but rather the personal and transformative experience of awakening. According to this view, the heart of Buddhist *bhāvanā*, or "practice," is not ritual but *dhyāna*, commonly rendered into English as "meditation." Insofar as ritual is understood to refer to outward scripted and stylized activity, ritual would appear to be the very antithesis of meditation.

In English, the term *meditation* denotes a contemplative discipline leading to inner spiritual transformation. Meditation is regarded as a technology intended to free the practitioner from his or her prior cognitive conditioning; the ultimate goal of meditation is the immediate perception of, or unity with, unmediated reality. This would seem to be in marked contrast with ritual, which, as we have seen, is considered a means to instill and reaffirm, rather than transcend, prevailing social norms and attitudes. When one turns to descriptions of Buddhist "meditation" found in traditional *dhyāna* manuals, however, one discovers that terms such as *dhyāna*, *yoga*, *śamatha* (concentration), *vipaśyanā* (liberative insight), and *samādhi* (absorption) refer not simply to states of mind but to highly formalized procedures in which all aspects of a practitioner's physical regimen, behavior, and deportment are prescribed in exacting detail. And while there are literally dozens of indigenous Asian terms for different varieties of Buddhist ceremonies and rites, and many more terms referring to stages on the path, there is no precise Asian Buddhist analogue to our distinction between ritual and meditation. From the perspective of Buddhist epistemology, the distinction itself is suspect: traditional Buddhist exegesis holds that all cognition, including exalted "meditative states of consciousness," is mediated and contingent, since consciousness of any sort arises in codependence with its object. The inner/outer, subject/object dichotomies that underlie our distinction between ritual and meditation might seem to be confuted by indigenous analysis of Buddhist practice.

Take, for example, the Chinese school most famed for its emphasis on meditation, namely the Chan school (Japanese Zen). The term *Chan* is derived, in fact, from the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term *dhyāna*, and according to some popular modern accounts this "meditation school" was vociferous in its rejection of ritual in favor of rigorous contemplative practice leading to enlightenment. Scholars now appreciate that this view of Chan is historically and doctrinally misleading: Chan practice, like Mahāyāna monastic practice throughout Asia, was highly ritualized and involved the veneration and contemplation of sacred realia including consecrated icons (Faure 1991, 1993; Foulk 1993; Sharf 1995b). This has led to somewhat of an impasse in the explication of Chan and Zen: some continue to insist on the reality of a Chan enlightenment experience that transcends contingent institutional and ritual forms, while others view "enlightenment" as a rhetorical tool wielded in service of institutional legitimacy and power. We are thus presented with a choice: we can approach enlightenment as a subjective event occasioned through meditation and thus impervious to positivist critique, or we can adopt a behaviorist perspective, in which enlightenment is reduced to mere discourse and ritual posturing. In the end, both positions remain wedded to the very distinctions they attempt to resolve—the dichotomies of inner versus outer, subjective versus objective, form versus content. I will suggest below that Chan enlightenment is constituted in and through Chan ritual—itself a form of Buddhist *darśan*—but that this is not tantamount to a behaviorist reduction. An approach to enlightenment under the rubric of Play turns out to be commensurate with indigenous Mahāyāna and Chan exegesis.

While the communal ritual of a Song dynasty (960–1279) Chan monastery was in many respects similar to that of monasteries associated with non-Chan lineages, Chan was unusual in the elevated spiritual status and ritual role accorded to the abbot. The abbot of a Chan monastery was more than a mere senior monk, spiritual friend (Sanskrit *kalyāṇamitra*; Chinese *shanzhishi*), or religious teacher (Sanskrit *ācārya*; Chinese *asheli*). He was regarded as a fully enlightened incarnate buddha. But the abbot's enlightenment was not some nebulous quality abiding in the inner recesses of his mind; it was constituted through complex communal ritual procedures, procedures that instantiated fundamental Mahāyāna doctrines concerning the constructed nature of all phenomena, the identity of form and emptiness, and the original enlightenment of all sentient beings.

The Chan abbot was charged with assuming the role of buddha in both public ceremonies and in private but highly formalized interviews with his disciples. In both cases he literally took the place of a consecrated buddha icon and accepted the offerings and worship of the supplicant(s). Participants in such rites approached the abbot as if they were coming face-to-face with a living buddha. The icon of wood, stone, or metal has been replaced with a living icon of flesh and blood (Foulk and Sharf 1993–94).

One of the earliest statements to this effect is found in the *Regulations for Chan Practice* (*Chanmen guishi*), a "proto-Chan monastic code" appended to the biography of Baizhang (749–814) found in the *Jingde Era Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Jingde chuandeng lu*).

> Those endowed with insight into the Way and possessing virtue worthy of respect are called "Elders" [*zhanglao*, a term used specifically for the abbot], just as was true in India of those senior disciples such as Subhūti who were accomplished in the Way. As [the abbot] is the master of instruction, he occupies the small room called the "ten-foot square." This is the same as Vimalakīrti's room, not a private

> chamber. Not setting up a Buddha hall but only erecting a dharma hall shows that the Buddhas and patriarchs confer upon the current generation [abbot] the position of "honored one." (*Taishō* no. 2067: 51.251a6–9; see Collcutt 1981, 197; Foulk 1993, 157–58)

In Chinese Buddhist monasteries the Buddha hall was a large structure at the center of the complex that enshrined the central buddha icons. The consecrated icons, known as the "honored ones" (*zun*), served as the central objects of worship both for monks and visiting laypersons. Thus the use of the term *honored one* for the abbot and the statement that the Chan dharma hall came to replace the Buddha hall is most suggestive. As Griffith Foulk has pointed out, this text is the only piece of evidence that indicates that Chan monasteries did away with a Buddha hall and substituted a dharma hall; there is considerable evidence that Buddha halls continued to play an important role in Chan establishments (Foulk 1993). The dubious historical claims of the *Regulations for Chan Practice* need not concern us here. What is significant is that this early Chan document draws an explicit connection between the function of the abbot, occupying the role of "honored one" in the dharma hall, and the function of the icon, enshrined as "honored one" in the Buddha hall.

The abbot of a medieval Chan monastery had numerous administrative responsibilities, which included overseeing a large bureaucratic institution that supported hundreds and sometimes thousands of monks, lobbying government officials, hosting influential patrons, raising funds, and so on. But if we confine our attention to the explicitly religious functions of the abbot, they can be grouped into two categories: (1) providing religious instruction to monks in personal interviews, and (2) delivering formal talks in ceremonies attended by the entire assembly.

The abbot met monks individually in a procedure called "Entering the Chamber" (*rushi*). The resident monks would enter the abbot's quarters one at a time, following an elaborate protocol that included prostrations to the abbot and offering of incense. After the initial formalities, the student takes a position with hands folded reverently at the southwest corner of the abbot's seat. The student then speaks his mind such that he "completely exposes himself." He must avoid any mention of mundane troubles and be as brief as possible out of concern for those waiting in line behind him. The abbot may or may not choose to respond or engage in conversation. The student then withdraws with hands still folded, makes a final set of prostrations, and leaves the room again following a carefully prescribed procedure (Kagamishima et al. 1972, 66–69; Yifa 2002, 132–34). Foulk interprets the interview as "a ritual re-enactment of the encounters between Chan masters and disciples that were contained in the flame histories. The brevity of the flame history anecdotes and the way in which they depict the expression of sacred truths in a few short words were written into the ritual procedures" (Foulk 1993, 181). The procedures mandate that the student enter the room as if entering the room of a living buddha, making prostrations, offering incense, and re-enacting the intimate mind-to-mind transmission of the early patriarchs. If the goal of Buddhist practice was to "see the Buddha," then this was realized every time the student engaged in this elaborately choreographed audience with the abbot.

The second category of monastic rites in which the abbot takes center stage is the formal public lecture delivered in a procedure called "Ascending the [Dharma] Hall" (*shangtang*). We saw above that the dharma hall was considered a feature unique to Chan institutions, replacing the normally ubiquitous Buddha hall. A "*dhyāna* chair" (*chanyi*), the ceremonial "throne" of the abbot, was installed on a raised dais in the rear center of the dharma hall facing south, precisely where one would normally expect to find the Buddha icon enshrined on a central altar. The Ascending the Hall ritual was a complex performance in which the abbot ascended the altar, assumed the physical posture of a buddha image, and spoke with the authority of an enlightened patriarch.

The Ascending the Hall ceremony may have been performed daily at some monasteries in the Northern Song, but by the Southern Song it was scheduled approximately every five days (Collcutt 1983, 180–81; Yifa 2002, 266–67n1). The earliest explicit mention of the rite is in the *Regulations for Chan Practice*.

> The entire monastic assembly convened in the morning and gathered again in the evening. The Abbot would enter the hall and ascend his seat. The stewards and the assembly of disciples listened while standing in file at the sides. Questions and answers between "guest" [i.e., interlocutors from the assembly] and "host" [i.e., the Abbot] bore on essential matters of doctrine and showed how to abide in accord with the teachings. (*Taishō* no. 2076: 51.251a15–17; trans. Foulk 1987, 349 with changes)

A more detailed depiction is found at the beginning of fascicle 2 of the *Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries* (*Chanyuan qinggui*), compiled in 1103, which reads as follows:

> On days when the Abbot is to ascend [his seat in the dharma] hall for a morning convocation, following the morning meal no one may absent themselves from the convocation. After waking at the light of day, the Chief Seat leads the assembly in sitting [meditation] in the [monks] hall. Upon hearing the first round on the drum, the Chief Seat and the entire monastic assembly enter into the dharma hall and line up single file along the sides in order of rank. The position closest to the dharma seat is deemed most senior. The Chief Seat, Secretary, Library Prefect, Guest Prefect, and Bath Prefect take their places in front of the assembly, forming a single row in order of rank, and remain standing there. The remaining

Prefects remain back with the assembly. Should there be retired abbots present, they proceed together to the two positions on either side of the Chief Seat and remain standing there facing south, with their bodies turned slightly toward the front. At the second round on the drum, the four Stewards [i.e., the Comptroller, Rector, Cook and Superintendent] join the assembly, proceeding in order of rank. Approaching the bowing mats by the entrance to the dharma hall on the south side, they stand facing the dharma seat with the Comptroller to the east.

When the novices hear the first round on the drum, they line up in order of rank in front of the administration hall. They then wait for the second round on the drum, whereupon they follow the Stewards in joining the assembly. They then bow to the dharma seat and to the assembly, and then pass over to the eastern side and take their positions facing west. The position to the north is deemed the senior position. (All novices attending the assembly must wear shoes and socks.) At the third round on the drum the acolytes inform the Abbot that it is time for his appearance. The entire assembly bows in unison, and the Abbot ascends the [dharma] seat and stands in front of the dhyāna chair. First, the acolytes bow. (At this time the acolyte carrying the incense ascends the dharma seat on the east side, not too far, and stands to the side facing west.) Then the Chief Seat and the assembly turn their bodies to face the dharma seat, bow, and return to stand in their places. The Stewards then move forward, bow, and stand facing the Chief Seat and the others. [The position closest to the] dharma-seat is deemed the senior one. Thereupon the *śrāmaṇera*s and novices turn their bodies to face the dharma seat, bow, and return to stand in their places. . . . The Guest Prefect then leads the patrons to their place in front of the Stewards [i.e., closer to the dharma seat]. All the above Stewards, along with the assembly, remain lined up in ranks with their bodies turned toward the side and listen [to the Abbot's sermon]. The Abbot then descends from the seat, and the entire assembly bows in unison.

The Chief Seat exits and, [once the monks have gathered in the monks hall], makes a tour of the hall. The assembly of monks remains standing until the Abbot enters the [monks] hall. Then the Stewards make a tour of the hall. If there is tea in the temple, everyone approaches their positions [in front of the platform] and takes their seat, with the Stewards remaining outside the entrance. When the tea is finished, the Abbot rises and the bell to leave the hall is struck. If there are no snacks or tea, the Stewards make a tour of the hall and then depart. [While everyone] waits respectfully, the Abbot bows and retires. Alternatively, following three strikes on the bell the Abbot ascends [the platform] in the hall. Everyone is then released from the assembly, just as ordinarily occurs in the morning, and following the assembly there are no further rounds of the hall.

Once the Abbot has ascended his seat [during the Ascending the Hall ceremony] everyone must be in attendance with the exception of the Assembly-Hall Prefect and the Monks-Hall Monitor. The temple shall punish those who contravene this rule, [and thus this offence] certainly should be avoided. If some unavoidable or urgent business arises and there is no intent to show disrespect, then one may join the service a little late. But if the Abbot has already taken his seat, then one must not enter, and one should avoid catching the Abbot's eye. When the whole assembly is convened don't wear a hat or a hood. (The same holds for the Abbot.) If you hear someone saying something funny, don't disturb the hall by

> laughing out loud or breaking into a smile. One must cultivate an attentive and serious demeanor and solemnly listen to the profound voice [of the Abbot]. (Kagamishima et al. 1972, 71–75; sections in parentheses are interlinear notes in the text; cf. Yifa 2002, 135–36)

One is immediately struck by the degree of ritualization seen in the ceremony. Clearly it was more than a simple lecture by the abbot or an opportunity for the congregants to ask questions. Ascending the Hall was an elaborately choreographed event in which the monastic community and visiting patrons came face-to-face with a living buddha. The detailed ceremonial protocol and the semblance of invariance were required to frame the event as a meeting with a living icon; the rite is clearly modeled on the public invocation rites performed in the Buddha hall, except that veneration is now directed toward a flesh-and-blood abbot. The abbot's "script," wherein he lectures the audience and responds to their queries, was, as we will see below, modeled on the patriarchal transmissions depicted in Chan lineage texts, which in turn evoke Indian scriptural prototypes.

The description of the Ascending the Hall rite found in the *Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries* is rich in "indexical" information bearing on the status of each of the participants. The instructions are primarily concerned with staging: each member of the audience is told exactly when to enter and where to stand in accordance with his rank, following the principle that the higher one's rank, the closer one is to the abbot. The one exception to this rule involves the acolytes: that they are positioned next to the abbot does not reflect their personal status within the monastic organization so much as it stamps them as part of the abbot's personal regalia. The staging should not be viewed as a secondary or accidental aspect of the rite; the status of abbot as "honored one" (*zun*), enlightened patriarch, and living buddha is constituted and manifest precisely through such indices.

The detailed information concerning the choreography of the rite stands in stark contrast with the silence, at least in the *Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries*, with respect to the nature of the sermon itself. The early monastic codes do not, in general, provide any indication of what the abbot was to say either publicly in the dharma hall or privately in formal interviews. Tradition holds that the abbot's speech in both venues was regarded as the spontaneous, unaffected utterance of a fully enlightened buddha. But again, the speech of the abbot is signified as "spontaneous" only by virtue of the ritual frame.

The "discourse records" (*yulu*) of eminent Chan abbots do contain hundreds if not thousands of examples of sermons delivered from the dharma seat. And there is little evidence of spontaneity; while the abbot may well have spoken extemporaneously, the ceremonial context obliged him to deliver a talk that was recognizably "Channish," in other words, that followed the rhetorical models laid down in the discourse records of his predecessors. Chan sermons constitute a well-defined genre governed by conventions bearing on content, rhetorical form, and style. The conventions included (1) the frequent and stylized use of dialectical negation drawing on models in Mādhyamika and *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) texts; (2) a marked predilection to interpret any assertion, scriptural or otherwise, as pointing to "true mind" or "buddha-nature"; (3) repetitions of standard Chan injunctions; (4) the use of dramatic elocutionary and physical gestures, including shouts, claps, cuffs, and so on. In short, this was not spontaneous utterance in any literal sense but rather a complex form of oratory that denoted spontaneous utterance. Which is not to say that it isn't "enlightened speech." As the *Heart Sūtra* says, "form is precisely emptiness." Or, as Dōgen put it, "all painted Buddhas are Buddhas. . . . Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting."

It was no easy thing to deliver such a talk; a candidate for the abbacy had to master a considerable body of canonical literature and internalize the complex rhetorical logic of Buddhist dialectic. Documents such as the *Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries* reveal that the study of scriptures, including the discourse records of past patriarchs, formed an important part of the monastic curriculum (Foulk 1993, 187). In addition to the study of texts, the monk assimilated Chan discourse through regular exposure to the abbot's example at Ascending the Hall and Entering the Chamber ceremonies. During the latter event, the student was provided the opportunity to hone his or her own rhetorical skills in repartee with the master. These private formal exchanges were explicitly modeled on a literary genre known as "public cases" (*gongan*; Japanese *kōan*)—laconic and often witty exchanges between famous masters of old and their disciples. Such exchanges functioned as model scripts for the enactment of mind-to-mind transmission that took place regularly in the abbot's chamber, and reinforced the sense of Chan as a continuous tradition extending back to Śākyamuni himself.

Years of rigorous training and rehearsal were necessary to master the repertoire before one could do a flawless rendering of enlightened discourse. And the performance must indeed be impeccable lest the metalinguistic frame be ruptured. Thus the goal of Chan monastic practice cannot be reduced to some private "inner transformation" or "mystical experience." It lies rather in the practical mastery of buddhahood—the ability to execute, day in and day out, a compelling rendition of liberated action and speech, and to pass that mastery on to one's disciples.

From this perspective, Chan enlightenment does not entail, in any literal sense, the elimination of passion, fear, doubt, and desire from one's karmic storehouse. The Chan tradition itself would seem to concur: the literature is filled with tales of masters who brazenly express their love of life, their aversion to death, their moments of doubt and melancholy. Such attitudes are, in the end, simply irrelevant to the process of "ritual transduction" wherein one is transformed into a buddha (see Rappaport 1999, 103).

In arguing that enlightenment is constituted in ritual performance, I do not intend to accuse Chan of bad faith. The Ascending the Hall ceremony is not a sham or a lifeless substitute for the "real thing" but rather a recognition and affirmation that form and content are inseparable. From a Chan perspective, the transformation of the abbot into a living buddha through the manipulation of metalinguistic framing rules is consonant with the appreciation of the intrinsic emptiness of all dependently arisen things. There is, in the end, no fixed or final referent to which terms like *abbot*, *buddha*, or *enlightenment* can obtain—a Buddhist truism that is repeated ad nauseam in the abbot's formal sermons. Chan monastic life may be play, but without such play there would be no transmission of the dharma.

## CONCLUSION

I have offered a view of Buddhist enlightenment that renders it a form of *darśan*—enlightenment consists in coming face-to-face with the Buddha. This buddha is neither a mental projection nor something that is ontologically other but rather exists in the betwixt-and-between space of play. Insofar as the ritual constitution of buddhahood in play can be said to have discursive content, it is precisely that all social forms of life are play. Absolute truth is the paradoxical understanding that all truths are contingent.

The approach to the logic of ritual framing explored above is not intended to constitute a universal theory of ritual; nor do I intend to aver to the authority of Buddhism in support of such an approach. Rather, I have sought to formulate a perspective on ritual that is intellectually cogent in its own right and at the same time is commensurate with indigenous Buddhist exegesis. The analysis offered here is in the spirit of other calls for a performative theory of ritual in that it seeks to overcome the intellectual limitations and cultural parochialism that attended earlier "interpretative" models. As such, it seeks to circumvent problematic dichotomies such as thought and action, subject and object, ideal and actual in order to expose the underlying logic of world construction from whence such dichotomies emerge. Finally, the model of ritual as play does not distinguish between elite and lay understandings of, or participation in, ritual. While elite Buddhist monks may possess a sophisticated philosophical appreciation of ritual unavailable to the unlettered masses, the essential effects of ritual are in no way predicated upon such an understanding. Ritual retains its magical power to alter the world through the modification of metalinguistic framing cues whether one is an illiterate peasant making an offering before a simple stone buddha, an ascetic engaged in a complex monastic invocation procedure, or an enlightened Chan master ascending the dharma seat.

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