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ON SOME BUDDHIST IMAGES  
AT THE HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS

GUSTAV ECKE  
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*To the Memory of Paul Hensel*  
*Late Professor of Philosophy at the University of Erlangen*

In Buddhism, so Karl Jaspers has it, 'a source is flowing we Westerners have not tapped. To what extent can we understand what we are not, and what we do not practice? We have to renounce all quick and easy ways of coming close to it'. For Edward Conze, on the other hand, Buddhism is alive, ever 'part of that common heritage and wisdom, by which man succeeded in overcoming this world'. Those who are thoroughly disillusioned, Conze goes on, 'may find in Buddhism new hope, in the heroism and quiet refinement of those who are steeped in it, in the transcending sublimity of its subtle thought, in the splendour of its art'.

Buddhist art, at its summit self-evident, as potent as it can be subtle and sublime, discloses a truth that will not be mistaken, provided the approach to it is not that of the 'quick and easy ways'. A great image, as that of Plate One, reveals the sway of incorporeal energies, in features that are at once human and transmundane.

Yet it is not only representations of the Buddha that testify, but images, too, of those who have been 'steeped' in the Buddhist truth, man and creature alike. The torso of a pottery horse, Plate Six, the charger of a Toba grandee, displays the mourning of a noble animal, recalling for us the battle horses of Achilles as they weep over the body of Patroclus. The Buddhist will think of Kanthaka, Siddhartha's mount, of its mortal grief after the master had renounced the world. The swell of the neck, enhanced to bursting, agrees with the pathos of a head that seems frozen in despair.

As to Buddhist humanity, one remembers Christian equivalents, Saints and Disciples at the Cathedral of Chartres, for instance. They are

figures of lordly make, recalling the warriors of Clovis. But their faces are now set aflame with a fire that is not of battle, their bodies are writhing with a new force. The spirituality of Buddhism, like that of Christianity, has led to the growth of a *character indelebilis* in its own right, apparent beyond scriptures and school divisions. The cast of the face remains, the expression has changed. The features of a Graeco-Indian gentleman from Hadda, Plate Five, are imbued with a sublimity that transcends. They are Hellenic, to be sure, but different both from the *kalokagathia* of Phidias and the passion of Skopas. The grace of this countenance is a premonition of Leonardo's smile. More examples could be adduced, illustrating a transformation through the sway of a faith, the impact of a faith throughout the ages. A comparison of the monumental Chinese head, Plate One, of its stony power, of the recondite luminosity of its eyes, with the expression of the Hadda head on the one hand, and the morbid grace of a Chinese maiden carved in the tenth century on the other, Plate Four, indicates the scope of Buddhist inspiration. Fundamental remains the transfiguration of the Buddha.

Our examples speak for themselves, with qualities not easy to comprehend and difficult to verbalize. *Multa verba non satiant animam*, to quote Thomas à Kempis, whom Conze summons as a witness. Words aplenty do not feed the soul, as does the great image.

The Chinese head of Plate One recalls the Gupta style, with a force of volume that is uncouth, with a glow that can not be extinguished. Instinct with a power beyond Greece and Rome, the head shares in the tellurian strength of the Yaksha, from whose Maurya image the national Indian school of archaeology derives the representation of the Buddha in human form. The skull, egg-like, as typical of Northern Ch'i, foretells Brancusi, energies under control, 'form', not 'shape', to speak in terms of Coleridge. The eyes, unfathomable, betray the essence of Nirvana.

The age of Positivism saw in the Buddha a kind of benevolent 'neuter', hence the admiration of the Gandhāra greenstone carvings. It was a

simple Chinese stonecutter of the sixth century who conjured in his image the energies that 'laid' the demon of the killer elephant, as illustrated in the tondo of the Amaravatī fence. In Sonnet No. Ninety-four, Shakespeare suggests his notion of a superman, 'unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow', one of those 'who have the power to hurt and will do none, who, moving others, are themselves as stone'. They rightly, so Shakespeare concludes, 'do inherit heaven's graces, and husband nature's riches from expense, they are the lords and owners of their faces, others but stewards of their excellence'. An Ajanta mural represents the Buddha, towering, born to rule and yet begging. Eight feet tall, as tradition has him, he lowers his head before two humble children, indescribably gentle, calm as the 'inner stillness of the sea'.

A symbol of the Buddha is the lion, not the rampant one of a coat of arms, but the lion of inner strength. In the Honolulu collection the lion image appears in bas relief on one side of the throne-like socle on which a Buddha is seated Western style, an early seventh century creation. On the opposite side of the seat, probably unique in Buddhist iconography, appears the motif of a slain tiger, thrown backwards, mortally, in the midst of feline attack. Could it be that this 'killing' represents the 'extinction' of man's impure instincts, of his 'power to hurt'? Man's valour, however, his self-conquest, his noble vitality is symbolized in the lion. Hence also the name 'Precious Hall of the Great Hero' for the main hall of worship in a Chinese Buddha temple. Gentleness, however, is a complement of the Buddha's strength, an aspect of the Buddhist smile.

Before Enlightenment, as an ascetic, the future Buddha had gone through all the agonies of spiritual frustration, the symbol of which are his physical pains. In Flaubert's 'Temptation of St. Anthony' he says to the Christian Saint:

'I, too, had done outstanding things – not eating more a day than one single grain of rice, and the grains of rice at that time were not bigger than today.'

My hair fell out. My body turned black. My eyes, deep in their sockets, resembled stars seen at the bottom of a well.

For six years I did not stir, at the mercy of flies, lions, snakes. The fires of the sun, torrents, snow, lightening, hail, tempests, all that I accepted without shielding myself, not even with my hand. Travellers passing by believed me dead, and threw lumps of earth at me from the distance.'

Yet asceticism in the Brahman tradition, pain alone, no matter how trans-human, does not lead to Enlightenment. This is the meaning of Liang K'ai's famous scroll painting, showing Śākyamuni Leaving the Wilderness, frustrated, in distress. Akin to it is the figure of Plate Two, a document of Ming Buddhism, of its unabated sublimity. There exist other Chinese representations of Śākyamuni as an ascetic, while it is this tiny Fukien bronze that reeks tragedy, called forth more gently than in the formidable Gandhāra versions, but with equal awareness and equal strength. The prerequisite of Enlightenment is a mind that excludes the 'quick and easy' ways, an endowment that is almost terrifying in its unconditioned purity. Paul Demiéville calls it the 'absolutism' of a soul.

Sudden Enlightenment is the very essence of Buddhist teaching, to quote the Rev. D.T. Suzuki. 'All the schools of Buddhism owe their origin to the Buddha's Enlightenment, which was no other than 'sudden'''. The late Professor Hu Shih quoted Shen-hui preaching on Hui-neng, in terms which can not be misunderstood, once the primordial irrationality of the experience has been accepted which, à propos, Hu Shih, the rationalist, did not. His translation, though, is to the point:

'The great teachers of the Ch'an school, through six generations, have all taught "the sword must pierce directly through", directly pointing to the realization of ones own nature. All those who want to learn the Way must achieve Sudden Enlightenment. It is like childbirth, which is a sudden affair.'

[ment.

There can be no doubt that by Hui-neng this conversion had been thought of as being of convulsive vehemence, akin in character to that which changed Saulus into Paulus, the shocking impact of which Caravaggio so well understood. A Chinese document suggesting the corresponding Ch'an experience survives in a bas-relief of 629, an ink drawing translated into carving. On Plate Eleven it is illustrated in the negative, so as to bring out its character more clearly. Represented is the Arhat Vakula in a state of spasm, in the moment, we suggest, of Sudden Enlightenment. If this holds true, the relief would give an idea of what was known to be the instant of the 'piercing sword' in the heroic days of Ch'an Buddhism. No image we know of comes near to this capture of a surreal experience, with the exception of Mu-ch'i's Arhat Vanavasi, and Yen Hui's Taoist Immortal in the moment of 'ek-stasy'. In the following I revert to my early interpretation of the Honolulu relief.

The Arhat is shown squatting on a mat that is tilted at an angle of fortyfive degrees. The right knee, concealed by the gown, touches the mat, while the left knee is kept upright, the foot adjusted to the tilting. In the left hand the Arhat holds a kind of rosary, while the right one is half hidden in the gown. The trunk is seen frontally, level with the picture plane, the head in profile, enclosed in a broad halo. The Arhat's eyes are wide open, if not lid-less, like those of Bodhidharma in later representations. Spellbound they stare at the rosary. The Arhat's mouth is gaping, caught in the moment of the shock. The body, in sudden contraction, seems to be checked in the midst of a spiral turn. The right foot, perpendicular, points downwards, its toes fiercely splayed, a typical pre-Buddhist motif surviving to this day on the Chinese stage. No portion of the complex design has been excluded from the circuit of an almost super-human spiritual energy.

With this compositional interpretation corresponds the structure of the design. Isolated in space, fenced off in rhythmic silhouette, disciplined by an uncompromising configurative will, appears a complex of



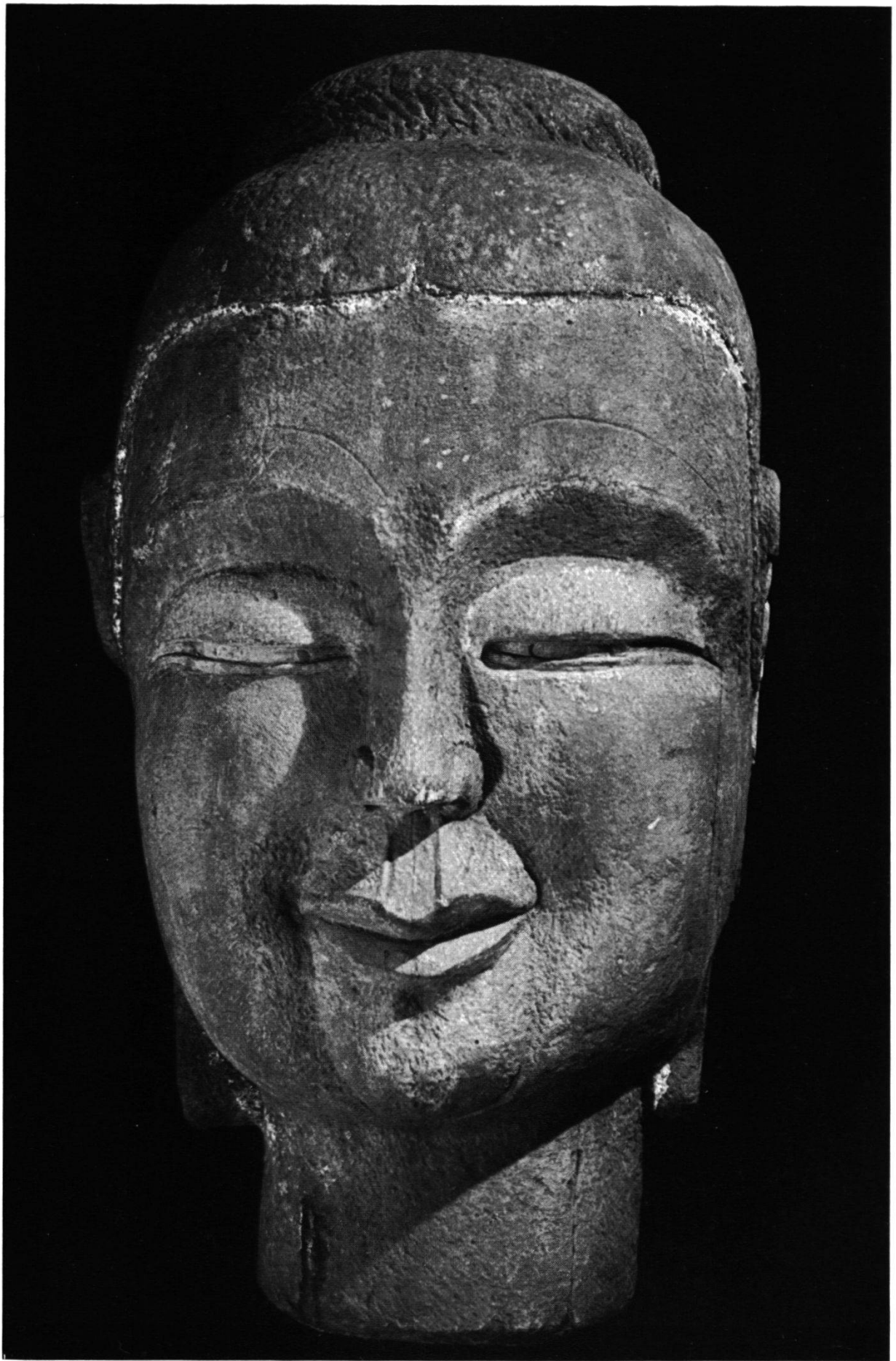


Plate 1

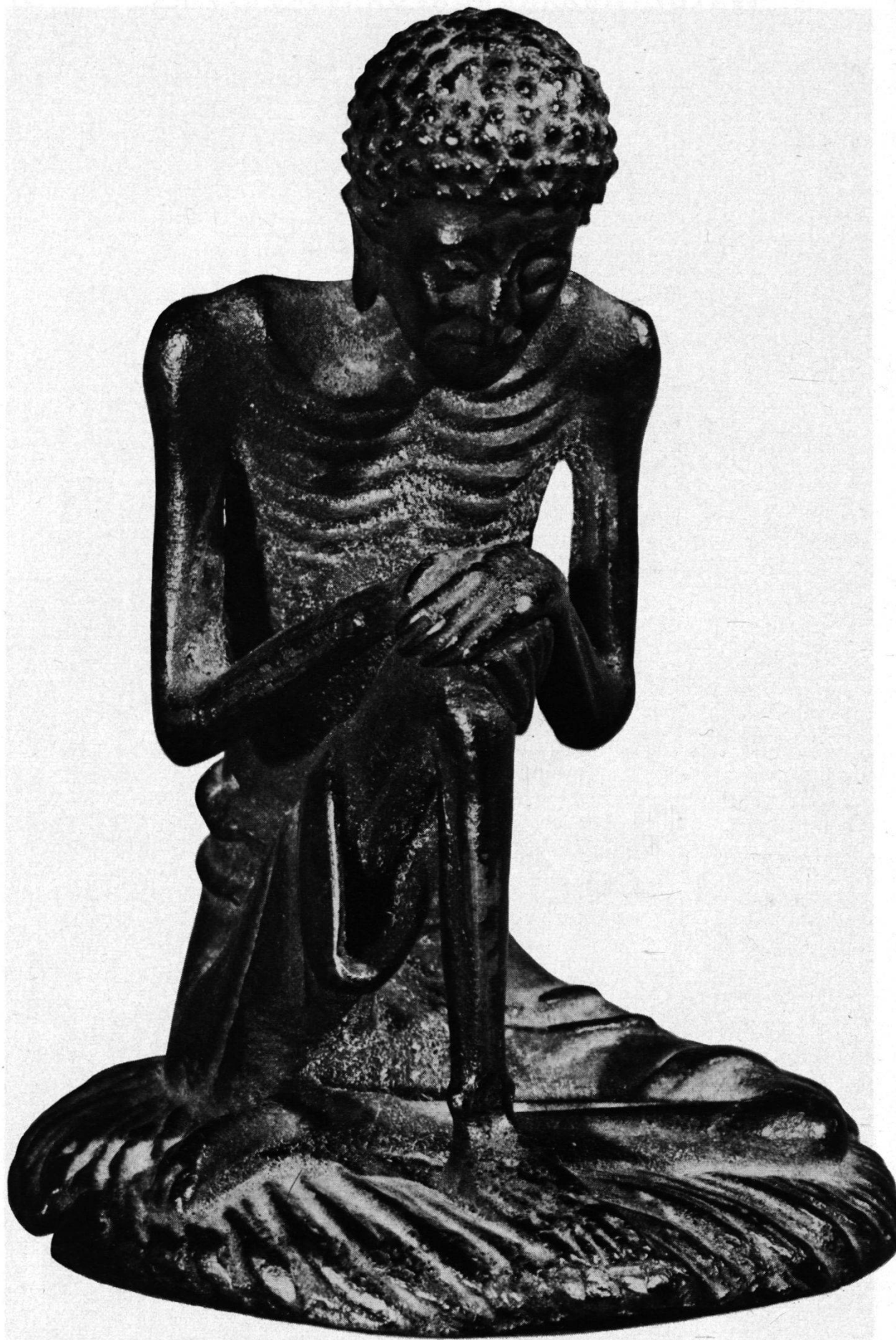


Plate 2





Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5

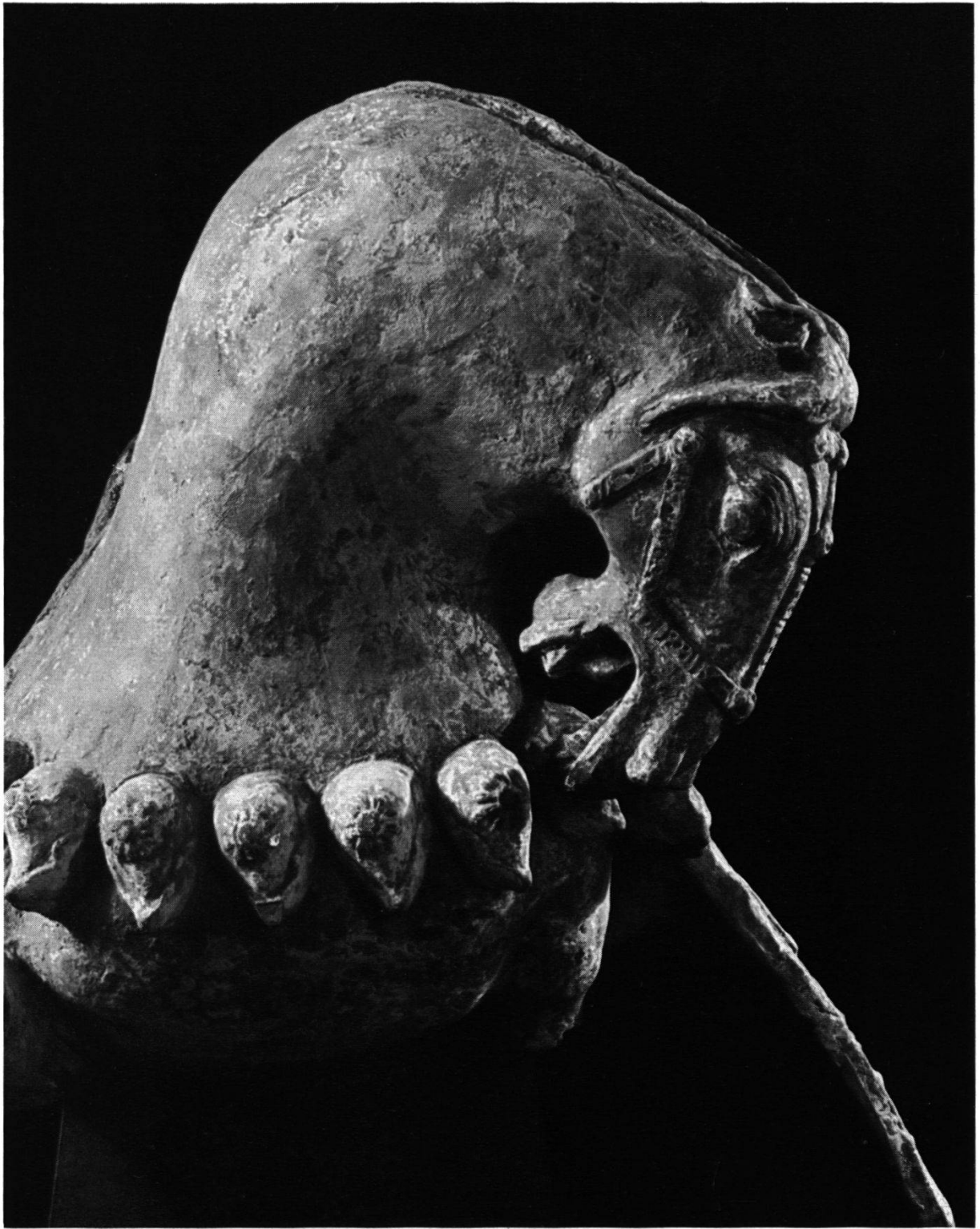


Plate 6



contrasting axes and intersecting diagonals, arrested in their torsion around the perpendicular massif of the trunk. The latter is topped by a flattened sphere which, off-axis, enhanced by a broad-rimmed circle, agrees with the roundish drapery which conceals the geometry of the design. So as to throw the complex towards the beholder, it has been set on the slope, while, in bold counteraction, the trunk, the splay-bracketed knees, the globe of the head, all that is volume, protrusion, torsion, spatial oscillation, has been forced back into the picture plane. This functional device had been perfected at the apogee of T'ang, but already forgotten towards the end of the dynasty. It is a demonstration *ad oculos* of the eternal tension between the solid and the plane, as captured in a daring and most complex contrivance, daring also in the service of a most uncommon experience.

Early Christian art represented Christ as Orpheus, taming with his lyre man's passions, wild beasts that have now settled peacefully around the divine singer. On the way to deliverance, as taught by the Buddhist doctrine, transformation will be experienced. At the back of the Buddha throne already referred to, between the watching lion and the dying tiger, the *t'ao-t'ieh* appears, the ancient glutton motif of Shang in its T'ang adaptation – a re-emergence after two thousand years. One might assume that it now serves as a symbol that suggests man's pre-Buddhist nature, his unredeemed wrath and greed. 'Through the mists of ancient Chinese religion we can glimpse a humanity bent under the burden imposed by infernal powers', so Germain Bazin. Quoting Grousset, Bazin holds that the symbols of ancient Chinese animism reveal 'the omnipresence of a mystery always on the point of dissolving into terror'. Although the styles changed, although Confucius established standards of reason and order, an undertow of demonism continued throughout the art and life of early China, until Buddhism, finally, showed at least a way to liberation: after the extinction of earthly vitality, with its fetters of birth and ever recurring re-birth, a final vitality beyond passion and despair, beyond life and death: *Das Eigentliche Weltfreie Sein*, as Karl



Jaspers calls it, an absolute, a world-free existence. It is this transcendental vitality that appears as glow in the Buddha's eyes, inextinguishable, a spirituality beyond scripture and word, beyond knowledge and imagination – NIRVĀNA.

## LIST OF PLATES

Photographs by Raymond Sato, Staff Photographer, Honolulu Academy of Arts.

Plate 1. Head of the Buddha, Chinese, limestone, style of Northern Ch'i, A.D. 550–557, height 33 inches. (Gift of Mr. Wook Moon, Honolulu.)

Plate 2. The Future Buddha as an ascetic, Chinese, Fukien-type bronze, Ming, ca. 1600, height ca. 3 inches. (From the Korakuji at Kumamoto-ken, destroyed by fire in 1945.)

Plate 3. Vakula, fifth of the Sixteen Arhats, Chinese, limestone, T'ang, dated A.D. 629, height 17 ½ inches. (From a temple called Chen-hai Szu, probably in Chekiang province.)

Plate 4. Buddhist girl attendant, Chinese, part of a group, carved and formerly lacquered wood, probably of the Five Dynasties, tenth century, height 8 inches. (On loan from Mrs. Theodore A. Cooke, Honolulu.)

Plate 5. Head of a gentleman, Graeco-Indian, Hadda type, stucco, third to fourth century A.D., height 7 inches.

Plate 6. Torso of a horse, Chinese, unglazed terracotta, mould-made, funerary ware, Northern Wei, first quarter of the sixth century A.D., one of a pair, height ca. 14 ¼ inches. (Gift of Mr. Wook Moon, Honolulu.)

We take this occasion to thank Mr. Wook Moon for his two uncommon gifts, and Mr. Raymond Sato for his outstanding contribution as a photographer.

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SIRÉN, Osvald, *Chinese Painting*. New York, 1956, vol. III, Plates 326, 327, Liang K'ai 'Śākyamuni Leaving his Mountain Retreat'; vol. III, Plate 335, Mu-ch'i, 'An Arhat in Meditation'; vol. VI, Plate 9, Yen Hui, 'The Taoist Immortal Li T'ieh-kui'.