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Mutterings to the Wall

Abstract:

This paper takes up Hadot's call for more comparative work on Buddhism and Philosophy as a Way of Life by comparing Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku's artwork *Pilgrims* with the graffiti artist Banksy's *The Street is in Play*. Beyond the striking similarities in form and apparent tongue-in-cheek criticism of graffiti, this paper explains the context of Hakuin's artwork and the text of his painting before exploring the importance of graffiti in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch. I argue that by taking up Hadot's call for more comparative work we find that Hakuin's Zen bears fruitful points of comparison with Hadot's account of philosophy as a way of life. Furthermore, a comparison of the two artworks of Banksy and Hakuin helps us better understand both figures via thematic elements of humor and socially disruptive writings.

Keywords:

Hakuin, Zen, Banksy, graffiti, Hadot, philosophy as a way of life, Spiritual Exercise, Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch

Introduction

In his book,¹ *Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined*, Steven Collins points to a significant passage from *What is Ancient Philosophy?*,² in which Pierre Hadot suggests the need for comparative studies. Hadot acknowledged inspiration from Buddhist research and admits that this led to his shift away from hostile

1) Collins, *Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined*.

2) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

assumptions of comparative philosophy to admit that there “really are thought-provoking analogies between the philosophical attitudes of antiquity and those of the Orient.”³ Collins, for his part, explained his desire to take up this comparison by putting Hadot and Foucault in conversation with Pali Buddhist writers with the added bonus that his comparative work further demonstrated the sense of humor of Buddhist monks.⁴

This paper takes up Hadot’s call for more comparative work and follows Collin in adding to Buddhism and philosophy as a way of life (hereafter PWL) by highlighting the spiritual exercise of “learning to dialogue” in Hakuin’s Rinzai Zen.⁵ I have chosen to compare Hakuin’s artwork *Pilgrims* with Banksy’s *The Street is in Play* as a vehicle for an initial entry point into Hakuin’s life and works. The reason for this is two-fold. First, in many ways, Hakuin is often best known for his artwork rather than his writings. As such, *Pilgrims* demonstrates Hakuin’s humor, his keen understanding of Chan Buddhism, his desire to revitalize Rinzai Zen from a period of stagnation, and his pluralism. Second, Banksy’s artwork contains striking similarities to Hakuin’s painting and additional works by the artist suggest a working understanding of Buddhist thought. Comparing these two artworks helps us to see both artists as offering the possibility for jarring and socially disruptive artwork to be therapeutic and transformative.

When we begin a discussion of Buddhism in history or Buddhist philosophy, it is appropriate to begin by asking “whose Buddhism?” Collins focused on Theravāda Buddhism and this paper proposes to follow his lead (that Buddhism shares significant features with Hadot’s PWL), but with Zen Master Hakuin instead of other Theravāda figures and communities. Hadot has insisted that philosophy is, “In the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions’s (in the words of Friedmann: ‘Try to get rid of your own passions’). Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation.”⁶ The parallels with Buddhism are obvious and Collins’ work is an admirable contribution to comparing PWL and Buddhism. It is my hope that turning our attention to one specific Buddhist figure will be even more informative.

This paper begins with an outline of Hadot’s PWL with emphasis on the spiritual exercise of “learning to dialogue” as therapeutic and transformative to draw comparisons between core Buddhist philosophical practices which are similarly therapeutic. Learning to dialogue can first be demonstrated generally by Buddhist skillful means and specifically in the Zen study of *kōan* (a spiritual expression based on dialogical encounters between masters and disciples that were used as pedagogical tools for religious training in Zen Buddhist traditions).⁷ Hakuin Zen will thus be shown to parallel much of what Hadot writes of ancient and Hellenistic philosophy as instances of PWL. I then analyze two artists separated by nearly three hundred years: Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) and Banksy (1974 – present). Emphasis will be placed on comparing two artworks which are similar in form and perhaps in message. As a result, Hadot’s notion of “learning to dialogue” is the spiritual exercises at stake in comparing Hakuin, Hadot, and Banksy. While Hadot also includes learning to live, learning to die, and learning to read as other types of spiritual exercises (each one well suited to Buddhist philosophy as a way of life), they are not included in this analysis partly for the sake of brevity and partly because the anonymity of Banksy risks too much speculation. Through Banksy’s graffiti and limited public messages, which should be noted are often suspect, there is some consistency in the artists’ messaging that can interpreted within reason to form

3) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 278.

4) Collins, *Theravāda Reimagined*, xxxi.

5) I believe that all four of Hadot’s spiritual exercises can be observed in Hakuin’s Rinzai Zen (especially ‘learning to die’), although for the sake of this article I will restrict myself to ‘learning to dialogue.’

6) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as PWL along with page numbers.

7) Heine and Wright, *The Kōan*, 3.

a coherent narrative. Zen Master Hakuin, like Banksy, oftentimes appears to be an unreliable narrator but, also like Banksy, Hakuin's core philosophy can be safely interpreted through his various writings and artworks. Hakuin and Banksy both require that the interlocutor must be willing to transform, "must let themselves be changed," the need for the teacher to employ psychagogy, and an experience of some form of resolution of the dialogue (whether it be the resolution of a *kōan* or a meaningful experience of the encounter with Banksy's street art).

Given the elusive nature of Banksy, who remains a largely anonymous figure, it will be necessary to spend some time on the origins of Hakuin's painting in the *Platform Sutra of Huineng* to demonstrate Hakuin's criticism of prohibition against writing on temple walls since Zen can trace crucial elements of its origins to that same practice. This background information of Hakuin's painting offers insights for better understanding Banksy's artwork which often contains Buddhist messages of impermanence in addition to the social critique offered by graffiti, revealing new ways of understanding both figures, their art, and their attempts to communicate their respective meanings.

Philosophy as a Way of Life and Spiritual Exercises

Pierre Hadot's PWL is founded on the idea that philosophy as practiced by the ancient Greeks and Hellenistic philosophers has been misunderstood by contemporary academic philosophers. Ancient philosophy was not the contemporary academic pursuit that employs "technical procedures, modes of reasoning, and representations of the universe" (PWL, 50). Scholars, according to Hadot, often view ancient philosophy from a contemporary bias that leads us to "attack problems in the history of philosophy" (PWL, 51) rather than understand them within their own context of time and place. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that "almost all of Hellenistic literature, principally its philosophical productions, has disappeared" (PWL, 53). For Hadot, to understand Hellenistic philosophy, one must understand the Greek philosophy that came before it, but the two are inseparable in that we must understand Latin thought in light of Greek thought and we must rediscover Greek thought in what survives in Latin writings (PWL, 54). The works that did survive came to us because of the evolution of Platonism to Neo-Platonism absorbed and synthesized Stoicism and Aristotelianism, and survived thanks to Arab and Byzantine translators (PWL, 56).⁸ What gets lost by contemporary scholars is that among the ancient philosophers (here Hadot specifically refers to the Sceptics) "practiced an exercise demanding something rather strange, the suspension of judgment, and aiming at a goal, uninterrupted tranquility and serenity of the soul, that the common conduct of life hardly knew" (PWL 56–57).⁹ The schools of ancient philosophy represent "a form of life defined by an ideal of wisdom" (PWL, 59). Platonists, Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, and so forth, each school practiced exercises "designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom, exercises of reason," self-control, and meditation. Here, Hadot distinguished Buddhist meditation practices from ancient Greco-Roman practices in a move that was perhaps premature since he later became more accepting of the idea of comparative philosophy. Michel Hulin's description of mystical experience caused Hadot to reassess, writing that Buddhism's description of the sage "seemed to me to be close to the characteristics of the ideal of the ancient sage, for the resemblances between the two spiritual quests seem striking."¹⁰ Of central importance is the relationship between theory and practice which "must be understood from the perspective of these exercises

8) The other Schools (Epicureanism, Skepticism and Cynicism), became marginal and gradually disappeared.

9) It should be noted that this is only true of the Pyrrhonic school of skepticism, not all of PWL. Sextus Empiricus is particularly noteworthy as an exemplary figure of Pyrrhonic skepticism with his emphasis on *epochê*, 'suspension of judgment,' as a means toward *ataraxia*: tranquility or calmness of mind.

10) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 232.

of meditation” (PWL, 60). Each school contained dogmas and methodologies that were not open for discussion; energies were rather directed at *how* they were justified, not *that* they were justified (PWL, 60–61).

The study of the history of philosophy is often directed at how these thoughts changed over time in what remains of the written texts and it is in part here that Hadot lays stress on the importance of the oral tradition in ancient Greek philosophy.¹¹ “One cannot read an ancient author the way one does a contemporary author (which does not mean that contemporary authors are easier to understand than those of antiquity). In fact, the works of antiquity are produced under entirely different conditions than those of their modern counterparts” (PWL, 61). Ancient philosophy is linked to oral transmission because ancient philosophy was itself oral in character (PWL, 62). That writing was only meant to be an aid to practice but the practice itself was always oral “because only the spoken word makes the dialogue possible” (PWL, 62). For Hadot, learning how to dialogue became one of four characteristics of what he termed “spiritual exercises” that constitute philosophy as a way of life for the ancient Greeks (the other three characteristics being learning to live, learning to die, and learning to read).¹² Hadot holds up the Socratic dialogue as his primary example of spiritual exercise par excellence but notes that Platonic dialogues are meant to be read as model exercises and not transcriptions of real dialogues. Since they are not real dialogues, Hadot’s criteria for learning to dialogue become particularly important: 1) the interlocutor must be willing to transform, “must let themselves be changed,” 2) the need for psychagogy on the part of the teacher, and 3) the resolution of the dialogue is less important than the path taken.

The interlocutor in dialogue as spiritual exercise must be a willing participant who is open to change. If they are merely engaged in debate, no transformation can take place. Thus, Hadot writes,

Only he who is capable of a genuine encounter with the other is capable of an authentic encounter with himself, and the converse is equally true. Dialogue can be genuine only within the framework of presence to others and to oneself. From this perspective, every spiritual exercise is a dialogue, insofar as it is an exercise of authentic presence, to oneself and to others.¹³

In a student-teacher relationship, the interlocutor is open to the notion that the teacher has some sort of genuine wisdom to be imparted. They recognize the otherness of the teacher and seek to glimpse the wisdom they exhibit. From the point of view of the teacher, the student may need to be guided to some sort of realization and this can occur as many ways as there are interlocutors. The teacher must therefore teach to the student where they are in the moment. Psychagogy as a therapeutic method of influencing behaviors toward a life goal is a fundamental aspect of learning to dialogue and PWL itself. Hadot writes, “Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions... Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation” (PWL, 83).

Much like a patient who goes to see a doctor to cure a disease must trust their doctor and follow their instructions, a student in dialogue with a teacher must trust that they have some wisdom to impart that makes their dogma and methodology worthy of consideration. While the doctor-patient relationship ideally culminates in the resolution of the disease, the student-teacher resolution occurs “by means of dialogue with himself

11) Not primarily orality, but that in context of the very different kinds and purposes of writing and educating. The introduction to *The Inner Citadel* makes this especially clear. Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*. Many thanks to Eli Kramer for pointing me in this direction [and many others]!

12) Matthew Sharpe and Eli Kramer note that Hadot’s conception of spiritual exercises has accordingly been criticized along two broad lines which they call the categorization issue and the scope issue. For more on these issues, see Sharpe and Kramer, “Hadotian Considerations,” 165.

13) *Ibid.*, 91.

or with others, as well as by writing, to ‘carry on his reflections in due order’ and finally to arrive at a complete transformation of his representation of the world, his inner climate, and his outer behavior” (PWL, 85–86). This is the characteristic of learning to dialogue as spiritual exercise as it contributes to PWL.

Hakuin Zen and Spiritual Exercises

Scholars of Buddhist philosophy will find in Hadot’s writings a familiar resonance with many Buddhist principles and practices. To begin with, Buddhism has often been approached as a religion, as a philosophy, and as a way of life due in part to the relative stress placed on the extent that Buddhism may or may not be considered “religious.” It has undoubtedly been characterized as therapeutic insofar as the four noble truths are understood as diagnostic. Suffering has origins in one’s orientation toward things in the world that lead one to develop unhealthy attachments. These attachments are unhealthy insofar as our attachments presuppose satisfaction, but Buddhist views of reality teach that all things are fundamentally impermanent and thus attachment to impermanent things will result in loss and inevitable suffering. What is needed is a recognition of the impermanence of all things and a psychological reorientation that accepts this fundamental truth. The result, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, is not a detached vulgar stoicism but rather equanimity: “a deep vision of reality arises in us, and the capacity of being there, enjoying life in the present moment, liberates us from all impulses and brings us real happiness.”¹⁴ In short, Buddhism, like Hadot’s articulation of ancient Greek philosophy, is therapeutic in teaching how to live in such a way as to bring about happiness or contentment.

Buddhism is similarly based on dialogue as understood in Hadot’s articulation of spiritual exercises. In addition to Steven Collins, Matthew Kapstein¹⁵ and David Fiordalis¹⁶ have been making a strong case for Buddhism as PWL. Within the Brahminical tradition, most religious practices occurred in a student-teacher relationship. The Buddha Gautama is recorded as having studied with two prominent religious figures and finally four monastics before attaining enlightenment under the bodhi tree. The parable of the poisoned arrow is often used as an example of Buddhist skillful means or *upaya* (teaching to students where they are, so as to achieve the most efficacious desired results: progress on the path of release from suffering). In the parable of the poisoned arrow, the dimension of the interlocutor prevents the student, Malunkyaputta, from attaining concrete practical growth because Malunkyaputta found it difficult to let go of his theoretical questions in favor of the Buddha’s teaching. Malunkyaputta was a student of the Brahminical traditions and thus found it difficult to let go of the presuppositions within that tradition which necessitated certain beliefs in the concept of self or *atman*. His interrogation of the Buddha thus demanded that the Buddha address his questions, none of which the Buddhadharma (Buddhist teachings) ever promise to answer.

Why have I left that undeclared? Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the spiritual life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment... . And what have I declared? “This is suffering” – I have declared. “This is the origin of suffering” – I have declared. “This is the cessation of suffering” – I have declared. “This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering” – I have declared. Why have I declared that? Because it is beneficial... it leads to ... enlightenment. That is why I have declared it.¹⁷

14) Hanh, *The Buddha’s Teaching*, 35.

15) Kapstein, “Spiritual Exercise”; and “Stoics and Bodhisatvas.”

16) Fiordalis, *Buddhist Spiritual Practices*.

17) Bodhi, *Buddha’s Words*, 233.

Within, the parable, the Buddha helps Malunkyaputta overcome metaphysical questions and guides the student toward view that promises to transform suffering.

Like other forms of Buddhism, Rinzai Zen is practiced within a Buddhist community or *sangha* (one of the three jewels that is the heart of Buddhist practice: The Buddha, the *dharma* and the *sangha*). Within a Buddhist *sangha*, student life may be strictly regimented to aid in the pursuit of spiritual liberation. Life in a Zen Buddhist temple typically included practices outlined in the Buddhist precepts of proper conduct within the community and dictated many daily functions ranging from what time monks would wake up, go to sleep, meditate, eat, study, attend lectures, and so forth. Although other schools like Soto Zen also utilize *kōan*, the Rinzai Zen lineage is most often characterized by its employment of *kōan* for guiding students toward enlightenment through *kenshō* (an enlightenment experience that literally translates as “seeing into one’s own nature”). In Hakuin’s experience, one experiences lesser and greater *kenshō* moments until finally achieving a final enlightenment experience. *Kōan* practice during Hakuin’s time took place within a Buddhist temple under the guidance of a Zen master who would meet with the student in private.

It is convenient that Hadot refers to the transformation of self through dialogue as “combat, amicable but real” given that the Rinzai Zen tradition of *kōan* practice is also known as *dharma* combat. A *kōan* would be assigned and the student would mull over the meaning of the *kōan*, returning to have their progress assessed by their teacher. Only when the teacher believed that some insight had been achieved would they assign another *kōan*, repeating the process until they had learned all the master could impart upon the student. Victor Hori outlines how scholars, in an attempt to understand what a *kōan* does, have conceptualized this pedagogical tool. He notes and dismisses the long-held notion of the *kōan* as riddle or paradox to be solved. Other trends in *kōan* interpretation include the tendency to see the *kōan* as a language game;¹⁸ Zen experience as a concept manufactured involved with some other cultural politics, the *kōan* as “scriptural exegesis”;¹⁹ the belief that *kōans* enhance spontaneity,²⁰ and his own argument that confronting the *kōan* is a religious experience meant to awaken wisdom and selfless compassion.²¹ Hori’s interpretation keys into Hadot’s account of learning to dialogue as spiritual exercise. The parallels include the student-teacher dynamic and the utilization of skillful means to guide the student toward a transformation of his representation of the world, inner psyche, and outer behavior.

Hakuin was known for turning his paintings into visual *kōan* such that any viewer who is willing to engage with the deeper meaning behind one of his paintings would be invited to dharma combat. Following in the tradition of Zen masters who came before him, Hakuin’s *Zenga* (Zen art) often communicated Buddhist teachings. These teachings included visual representations of his sound of one hand *kōan* and famously were conveyed in humorous fashion such as his tongue in cheek painting *Pilgrims*. It is therefore understood among scholars of Hakuin artwork that the practice of creating *Zenga* constitutes one of many practices typical of accomplished Zen masters. This artwork frequently parallels much of what Hadot describes as dialogue with oneself, as well as by writing. Such scrolls would be employed by Hakuin as pedagogical tools to encourage students in their practice of the Buddhadharma whether in the form of Hakuin’s dragon staff certificates²² or his calligraphy of the kanji for *death* 死 as an object for concentration during meditation. Hakuin’s paintings were also funny, bawdy, and even Rabelaisian at times, as well as critical of institutional Buddhism and of government practices. In those ways, his work has something in common with Banksy’s graffiti. Before turning our attention to

18) Sellman. “The Koan: A Language Game.”; Wright. “Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience.”

19) Sharf. “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism.”

20) Gallwey. *The Inner Game of Tennis*; Sudnow. *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct*.

21) Hori, “Rinzai Koan Practice,” 118.

22) For more on the use of dragon staff certificates, see Seo, *The Sound of One Hand*, 128–35.

Hakuin's painting *Pilgrims*, it will be helpful to understand the events surrounding Banksy's graffiti *The Street is in Play* that inspired this comparative project in addition to briefly touching on some more germane aspects of Hakuin's personality before turning to a comparison of the two artworks directly.

Two Artists: Banksy and Zen Master Hakuin

In October of 2013 the graffiti artist known as Banksy unveiled his *Better Out than In* street artwork in New York, a 31-day residency in which he revealed clues to a new artwork every day via Twitter that resulted in followers trying to locate the work in something that could be described as a scavenger hunt-type event. Every day during the month of October, Banksy would reveal through his website a new work by posting an image, although no directions were given on where the images were taken. The result was a month-long scavenger hunt of sorts with New Yorkers using social media to help them locate Banksy's latest work. While the title of his so-called residency was a reference to Paul Cézanne, Banksy's first piece unveiled on October 1, 2013, *The Street is in Play*, I argue, contains striking similarities in style if not in attitude from a little-known artwork by Zen Master Hakuin titled *Pilgrims*. This of course begs the question of influence: was Banksy familiar with the artwork by Zen Master Hakuin? Is the Banksy street art an homage to Hakuin's work? Unfortunately, these questions will remain unanswered. Due to the secretive and elusive nature of Banksy coupled with his subversive commentaries of his own works, any statement offered by Banksy will remain suspect.²³ Followers of Banksy's works are aware of the performative nature of his public statements: even overt references to works that inspire Banksy are often dismissed by the artist as misdirected attempts to find meaning in the wrong places.

Rinzai Zen, like Sōtō Zen, is characterized by its deeply personal approach to pursuing enlightenment experiences that results in that which "cannot be communicated in words or letters."²⁴ The practice of undergoing introspective meditation, often guided by a qualified teacher, is in sharp contrast to *nembutsu* recitations of Pure Land or Nichiren Buddhist sects with their reliance on "other-power" (*tariki*, the practice of chanting to Amida Buddha in Pure Land traditions or to the Lotus Sutra in Nichiren traditions); Zen rejects this approach and remains a practice of "self-power" (*jiriki*, the practice of attaining enlightenment through meditative practices such as meditation on the pillow or through meditation on a *kōan*). Zen religious practices also detour from standard Buddhist monastic rituals. While Zen primarily emphasizes seated meditation as a means to gain insight into one's true nature (*kenshō*), Zen likewise employs a number of practices that make it contrast sharply with other traditions: striking (*keisaku*), shouting (*katsu*), *dharma* combat (*issatsu*), and often the jarring words used in lectures; calling the body lumps of red flesh,²⁵ monks as large sacks of rice,²⁶ and Linji's famous "shit-stick" (*kanshiketsu*).²⁷

With Hakuin Ekaku as a later Zen master of the Edo Period (1683–1867), we see a continuation of some of these practices. Hakuin was described by his disciple Torei as moving like a bull.²⁸ Hakuin, Torei explains, was both intimidating and compassionate. "The extreme sharpness of his Zen activity made it difficult to approach

23) I reached out to Banksy through his website, and I received no reply.

24) Case 6 of the *Mumonkan* reads: "Once long ago when the World Honored One was at Vulture Peak to give a talk, he simply held a flower up before the assembly. All were silent and did not know what to do, except for venerable Kashyapa who smiled. The World honored One said, 'I have the all pervading True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, exquisite teaching of formless form, The Subtle Dharma Gate. It is not dependent on letters and is transmitted outside the scriptures. I now hand it on to Maha Kasho.'" Low and Huikai, *Commentaries on the Mumonkan*, 64.

25) Watson, *Teachings of Master Lin-chi*, 13.

26) Waddell, *Teachings of Hakuin*, 15.

27) Watson, *Teachings of Master Lin-chi*, 13.

28) Waddell, *Hakuin's Precious Mirror Cave*, 284.

him. Virtually tireless, he brought the same degree of care and compassion to whatever he did.”²⁹ Hakuin’s life story is more personal than many Buddhist masters who came before him. He writes in his spiritual autobiography that he pursued Buddhism out of a fear of going to hell and thus his disciple Torei’s answer, for the salvation of his fellow beings, “brought a laugh from Hakuin. ‘A much better reason than mine,’ he said.”³⁰ Admissions such as these coupled with his many writings, letters, artworks, and calligraphy present a portrait of a Zen Master who is more like us than not. Steven Collins writes that any analysis “should see Buddhists as human beings first and Buddhists second.”³¹ Through Hakuin’s works, we have a more intimate understanding of the inner life of a Zen Master. His paintings number over a thousand, although he is perhaps best known for his humorous artworks. Collins continues: “Can’t monks and courtiers laugh and be moved like the rest of us? Don’t Buddhists enjoy self-deprecating humor? Aren’t the capacity to laugh at self-deprecating humor and to be moved by the artistry of tragedy themselves part of wisdom? I think so.”³² Hakuin Ekaku certainly exhibits these characteristics.



Figure 1. *The Street is in Play*, October 01, 2013 (photo: <https://www.instagram.com/banksy/>).

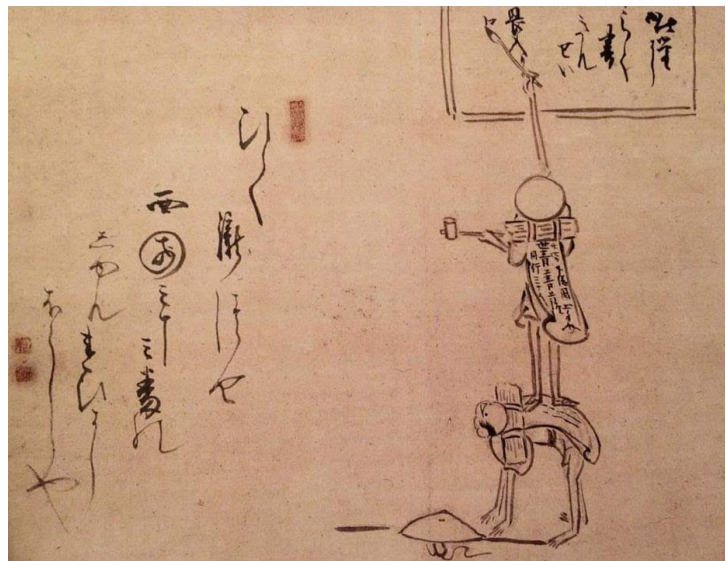


Figure 2. *Pilgrims*, eighteenth century (photo: Katshuhiro Yoshizawa).

Two Art Works: A Comparison

Let us now pause and go back to look at Banksy’s work *The Street is in Play*. Banksy’s graffiti uses a stencil to create two street urchins, both boys. A sign above depicts a can of spray paint in a red circle with a line through it and the text “graffiti is a crime.” One boy bends over at the hip, elbows braced on his thighs for support, providing a step up for his compatriot to reach up. The other boy stands on his friend’s back and reaches out with his right arm into the sign to obtain the can of spray paint. This work also included a phone number which we will come back to later. When dialed, this number played an artist’s audio guide typical of Banksy’s sarcastic sense of humor.

Compare this with Hakuin’s work *Pilgrims*. Hakuin uses ink and brush on paper to create two pilgrims. A sign above reads “No writing on the walls of the monastery.” One pilgrim rests on all fours, knees and

29) Ibid., 235.

30) Waddell, *Wild Ivy*, xxii.

31) Collins, *Theravāda Reimagined*, 16.

32) Ibid.

palms on the ground, and provides a step up for his companion. The other pilgrim stands on his friends back and writes with his right hand a rejoinder on the sign. Stephen Addiss translates this as “I beg your pardon”³³ whereas Kazuaki Tanahashi translates this as “Certainly sir.”³⁴ While both of these translations offer a humorous interpretation, they are unsatisfying translations of the characters the pilgrim is writing: 畏入り. Katsuhiro Yoshizawa’s interpretation makes the most sense. Yoshizawa suggests that rather than reading these as two different sentences, we should read the Pilgrim’s graffiti as adding to the previous inscriptions giving us: 此堂にらく書きんぜい畏入り候. This changes the sentence meaning in translation to “‘In this Hall graffiti is forbidden, and so with great humility it is’ (i.e., that I offer up my words).”³⁵

Yoshizawa adds:

At first glance, this picture reminds one of that famous image by the surrealist painter René Magritte (1898–1967), wherein under a picture of a pipe it is written: “This is not a pipe.” Likewise, a graffiti that reads “In this Hall graffiti is forbidden” bears some resemblance to the paradox of self-reference associated in the West with the phrase “A man from Crete said ‘All Cretans are liars.’”

The pilgrims writing graffiti to the effect of “graffiti forbidden here” thus find themselves in “the world wherein self-reference becomes self-denial.”³⁶

Among the obvious similarities, *Pilgrims* and *The Street is in Play* share this self-referential quality that elicits a humorous effect on the viewer which is familiar to both Bansky and Hakuin. Hakuin’s painting has deeper significance with the suggestion “that I offer up my words” points to the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. In the section that follows, it is necessary to treat that subject at some length for the purpose of comparison. I argue that the message of Hakuin’s painting draws from the mind-verses written on the temple walls as described in *The Platform Sutra* in which Huineng offers up his words in response to Shenxiu.

The Platform Sutra and Hakuin’s Praise of Huineng

Hakuin’s painting of the pilgrims writing on the temple walls in opposition to the explicit directives posted on the sign goes beyond mere subversive irony. Hakuin’s message of defiance is further a reference to Huineng and Shenxiu’s writings on the temple walls. In *The Platform Sutra*, the Fifth Patriarch directed his students: “Each of you write a verse and bring it to me. I will read your verses, and if there is one who is awakened to the cardinal meaning, I will give him the robe and the Dharma and make him the Sixth Patriarch. Hurry, hurry!”³⁷

The other monks, believing Shenxiu would receive the robe and the *Dharma*, agreed to submit no writing (or mind-verse) but Shenxiu was conflicted. He wanted the Master to assess his insight, but he did not want to appear to be competing for the mantle of Sixth Patriarch. In the end, he decided he would write his verse on the wall of the southern corridor in secret. If he had earned the robe and the Dharma, he would come forward and admit his work, but if he failed, he would give up.³⁸ Under cover of darkness, Shenxiu wrote his verse without being seen:

33) Addiss, *The Sound of One Hand*, 143.

34) Tanahashi, *Penetrating Laughter*, 39.

35) Yoshizawa, “‘Pointing Straight’ to ‘Pointing Round,’” 64.

36) *Ibid*, 65.

37) Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 128.

38) It is unclear if Shenxiu meant that he would give up trying to learn the Dharma and leave the temple or if he meant that he would not seek the patriarchy.

The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.³⁹

The next day, Shenxiu's mind-verse was discovered by the Fifth Patriarch. Pleased, he ordered the graffiti to remain and had his students recite the words: "You should all recite this verse so that you will be able to see into your own natures. With this practice you will not fall into the three evil ways."⁴⁰

The story continues when Huineng, a low-level initiate, hears an acolyte reciting the verse and inquires about the recitation. The disciple takes Huineng to the south corridor and, as Huineng was illiterate, reads the writing to him. Huineng understood and responded with a verse of his own. "I made a verse and asked someone who was able to write to put it on the wall of the west corridor, so that I might offer my own original mind... My verse said:

Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?"⁴¹

It is important to note that the third line changes in later works becoming the famous: "From the beginning not one thing," which is the version Hakuin references in his calligraphy mentioned later in this paper.⁴²

The story continues with the Fifth Patriarch Hongren recognizing Huineng's mind-verse as an understanding of one's original nature but publicly stating that it was "still not complete understanding."⁴³ Hongren later calls Huineng into the hall in secret, leads Huineng to a sudden enlightenment through the teaching of the Diamond Sutra, and then makes Huineng the Sixth Patriarch, passing to him the robe as proof. Concerned that people would harm Huineng, Hongren tells him to leave for the south and, after three years, begin teaching the *Dharma*.

The story of Huineng being awarded the title of Sixth Patriarch is tied up with the practice of wall writing. Hongren does not direct his students to write their mind-verse on the wall, that was Shenxiu's doing, torn between the expectations of his peers on the one hand and wanting Hongren to evaluate his progress on the other hand. Under cover of night, Shenxiu writes on the wall of the temple his verse which is praised by his peers and Hongren (with his directive that the students should recite the verse) while simultaneously stated to be incomplete. Huineng replicates the practice of wall writing through his intermediary, also under cover of night with help from the acolyte.

39) Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 130.

40) Ibid, 130.

41) Ibid, 132.

42) Stephen Addiss translates Huineng's verse as:

Satori is not a tree

The Mirror has no stand.

Originally, there was not one thing.

So where would the dust settle?

– Yoshiko Seo and Addiss, *The Sound of One Hand*, 108.

43) Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 133.

Hakuin, like most Zen masters, was familiar with the story of the Sixth Patriarch. Later in life, Hakuin painted hundreds of works of art in a variety of styles as well as calligraphy. His artwork for Huineng includes *The Sixth Patriarch's Rice Mill*.



Figure 3. The Sixth Patriarch's Rice Mill, eighteenth century, Shinwa-an Collection (photo: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Sixth_Patriarch%27s_Rice_Mill.jpg)

While Hakuin painted many figures from the Zen lineage, his painting of the Sixth Patriarch as a rice mill is quite common as Audrey Yoshiko Seo explains:

Images of the sixth patriarch did not seem to catch on as readily (at least there seems to be fewer extant examples). Later, professional artists such as those of the Kanō School developed an interest in Zen figures from China. Thus, by the early seventh century, the depiction of Hui-neng in Japan was well established, at least among professional painters. However, such Zen figures by monk-artists were less common until depictions of the Sixth Patriarch took on a new format in the hands of Zen-related Japanese artists. Gradually, an artistic approach emerged in which the patriarch is represented merely by a simplified image of a rice mill.⁴⁴

What Hakuin adds to this artwork of note is the calligraphy above the rice mill. The text reads:

Ôtsu Naraya ni kitari ya koso
Fumi mo narauta yo karausu o.
Coming to Nara-ya in the village of Ôtsu,
You learn to tread the mill.⁴⁵

Seo explains this reference as a pun made by Hakuin to an old lullaby.

44) Seo, *The Sound of One Hand*, 106.

45) *Ibid.*

The reference to Ōtsu is curious. The Nara-ya was a brothel frequented by the numerous travelers who passed through the village of Ōtsu along the Tōkaidō road. The lines have been identified as an old lullaby, in which Hakuin has made a pun on the word *fumi*, which can mean “to tread” (as on the mill), or “to write.” The word *karasu* can mean “rice mill” or slightly altered as *karauso* a “lie or untruth.” So the second line can read, “You learn to tread the rice mill” or “You learn to write and tell lies.”⁴⁶

Assuming Seo is correct, Hakuin’s painting of Huineng is both symbolic in the form of the rice mill while also implicitly stating;

Coming to Nara-ya in the village of Otsu,
You learn to write and tell lies.

To write and tell lies in this case is also a reference to *upaya* (Japanese: *hōben*) or skillful means. We begin to see here that Hakuin is familiar with Huineng in the tradition of depicting the Sixth Patriarch as a rice mill and Hakuin goes one step further in making the word for rice mill evoke a “lie or untruth” or *upaya*. Given that Zen is known for not being expressed in word or letters, Hakuin is using the painting as a medium to communicate his unique teaching. We see this further in Hakuin’s calligraphy.

Hakuin’s calligraphy contains another reference to Huineng. The calligraphy reads “*hon rai mu ichi butsu*” or “originally, not one thing,” the variation in the third line referenced earlier. The line itself is in contrast with Shenxiu’s understanding of buddha nature: one school of thought posits that Buddha nature is developed gradually whereas the other, in this case Huineng, posits the theory of original enlightenment (*hongaku-ron*). In Hakuin Zen, one realizes one’s inherent Buddha nature through practice which leads to sudden *kenshō* (“seeing one’s original nature”). As a recollection, one has “forgotten” one’s original nature but “remembers” it through Zen practices that awaken us to our original enlightenment. Hakuin’s painting, *Pilgrims*, reminds us that we have forgotten our roots, that writing on the wall of a Buddhist temple was originally how the Sixth Patriarch was discovered and that the prohibition against graffiti at the Buddhist temple is wrong headed.

Hakuin and Banksy

Read through the tradition of Hakuin’s Buddhist art, Banksy’s art can be understood by Hakuin’s use of painting in both form and message. In terms of form, Hakuin utilizes a variety of styles in his painting but this artwork, *Pilgrims*, utilizes Toba-e 烏羽絵 style, based on the 12th century artwork of Toba Sōjō (1053–1140). Toba-e style, employing stick figure-like characters, was often used for an audience of low social status, and frequently used for humorous effect. Therefore, when we see Hakuin using Toba-e style in his artworks, we can immediately recognize his intent to target a low social status audience with humorous intent.⁴⁷



Figure 4. Mu Ichi Butsu, seventeenth-eighteenth century, Eisei Bunko Foundation Collection (photo: Seo and Addiss 2010, 110)

46) Ibid.

47) Similar examples can be found in Tanahashi’s book *Penetrating Laughter*. See especially: “Taro-roots,” 37; “Snake,” 46; and “One-Eyed Bogey,” 50; just to name a few.

Graffiti or street art is generally not considered fine art; it is often shunned by that community. For example, in the film *Banksy Does New York*, then Art Critic for the *New York Observer* Andrew Russeth states,

We didn't write a ton about it. I think almost, probably almost nothing. Just because we think of our audience as kind of the traditional, I guess contemporary, fine art world which Banksy has kind of like, made a point of avoiding and the contemporary art world has for the most part kind of avoided him. I just think a lot of Banksy, a lot of street art is just so kitschy, so silly, so, in a way, just dumb. Um... it's just art that kind of like, hits you over the head with its message, its point. And you know, I think, I'm at least interested in stuff that has some nuance, some subtlety, like, makes you feel weird and think weird things, and Banksy is just the worst, lowest common denominator art.⁴⁸

Banksy's street art however takes the everyday audience as his viewer (even if his artwork does frequently sell to the wealthiest members of society). Rather than creating art for a gallery, graffiti street art reaches a larger audience. "So if you put your art at a stoplight you're already getting better numbers than Rembrandt."⁴⁹ Banksy's "residency" in New York, titled *Better Out Than In*, takes its name from Paul Cézanne who wrote to Emile Zola, "none of the pictures painted indoors, in the studio, will ever be as good as things done outdoors."⁵⁰ This is further reflected in his artist statement which accompanied his final piece.

Banksy asserts that outside is where art should live, amongst us. And rather than street art being a fad, maybe it's the last thousand years of art history that's a blip, when art came inside in service of the church and institutions. But art's rightful place is on the cave walls of our communities where it can act as a public service, provoke debate, voice concerns, forge identities.

The world we live in today is run – visually at least – by traffic signs, billboards and planning committees. Is that it? Don't we want to live in a world made of art, not just decorated by it?⁵¹

Similarly, John Dewey cautions us to not relegate art to a separate realm when he writes, "When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals."⁵² For Dewey, art enhances the process of everyday life and adds to the process of inquiry and meaning making which is transformative. Dewey writes that "such things were enhancements of the process of everyday life"⁵³ and Banksy's street art is meant for people from everyday life. His graffiti is often coupled with a message, often unstated, left for the audience to decipher on their own, but many times the message is intentionally not subtle. Banksy employs criticism, speaking truth to power, but also sometimes caustic cultural critique which may target his viewing audience: Banksy's 2015 art show *Dismaland Bemusement Park*, was both a send up of Walt Disney World but also a criticism of a culture that celebrates and revels in it. Keith Moser writes that Banksy laments "how utopian

48) Moukarbel, *Banksy Does New York*.

49) Hamilton, "Village Voice Exclusive."

50) Barskaia and Georgievskaya, *Paul Cézanne*, 23.

51) Young, "Banksy's New York."

52) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 2.

53) *Ibid.*, 5.

images depicting consumerist, neoliberal fantasies substitute for reality in the modern world.”⁵⁴ It is no surprise that Banksy’s first artwork in his New York residency was *The Street is in Play* which includes a sign prohibiting graffiti while subverting the message by having the child reach for the spray paint inside the sign itself; the entire concept of graffiti as art remains contentious and Banksy was the subject of New York’s mayor and police force during his entire residency. If Hakuin’s painting chastises temple Buddhism for forgetting the wall writing of Huineng, Banksy is chastising society for thinking art can only exist in galleries or space where the author is given express permission. It should be noted that Banksy does not seem to infringe on other people’s work⁵⁵ and “the fleeting nature of Banksy’s art is part of its appeal.”⁵⁶

Street art is public, unprotected like so many pieces sequestered within an art gallery. As is so often the case, many of Banksy’s artworks are tagged over by other graffiti writers, painted over by property owners, or removed by those who hope to sell an original Banksy for hundreds of thousands of dollars.⁵⁷ The impermanent nature of street art echoes the Tibetan Buddhist sand mandala which are created over several days only to be erased not long after as a visual representation of the Buddhist doctrine of importance. We see this overtly represented in his October 14th work *What we do in life echoes in Eternity* as well as in his audio guide that accompanies *The Street Is In Play* in which he states that it is probably been painted over already.



Figure 5. *What we do in life echoes in Eternity*, October 14, 2013 (photo: <https://www.instagram.com/banksy/>).

54) Moser, “Disneyfication of the Modern World.”

55) “While someone thought it was smart to add red noses to Banksy’s reindeers in Birmingham, Banksy built a new Dismaland as a parody of Disneyland, put up modified masterpieces on the walls of major museums around the world, and shredded his own work, *Girl with Balloon*, at an auction to sell the piece. His practice of graffiti is not meant to intrude on public spaces, rather he is questioning why commercials and advertisements are legal just because they are paid for.” See also Zhang, “The Artful Transformation.”

56) Hamilton, “Village Voice Exclusive.”

57) One such artwork from *Better Out Than In* was auctioned off for \$615,000 with proceeds going toward services for homelessness and AIDS management services. See Chung, “Banksy Bucks.”

Hello, and welcome to lower Manhattan. Before you, you will see a spray art by the artist Banksy [sic]. Or maybe not. It's probably been painted over by now. If, however, you can still make it out, you're looking at a type of picture called "graffiti," from the Latin "graffito," which means "graffiti," with an "O." The children in this case represent youth, and the sign represents, well, signs.

Now let us pause for a moment to consider the deeper meaning of this work. Okay, that's long enough.

This piece is typical of Banksy's output, relying as it does on life-sized characters viewed at a level perspective in monochrome. This, in fact, is achieved by spraying automotive spray paint through an intricately-cut shape in a piece of cardboard. Or to give it its proper term: cheating.

What exactly is the artist trying to say here? Is this a response to the primal urge? To take the tools of our oppression and turn them into mere playthings? Or perhaps it is a postmodern comment on how the signifiers of objects have become as real as the objects themselves.

Are you kidding me? Who writes this stuff? Anyway, you decide. Really, please do. I have no idea.⁵⁸

Banksy was justified to recognize the impermanence of his artwork. *The Street is in Play* was vandalized within a few hours and soon thereafter painted over entirely. In this audio guide, we are given a glimpse into the mind of Banksy as a figure who resists prolonged introspection of the meaning of the work, who is self-deprecating, referring to his own work as "cheating," someone who lashes out against oppression, and is familiar with art theory and yet seems to reject such philosophizing. Here again, we see such self-deprecating humor in Hakuin's works.

In his art and his writings, Hakuin often referred to himself as a "worn-out old shavepate" and even added to one of his paintings "not bad for an eighty-three-year-old man without his eyeglasses!"⁵⁹ And while Hakuin did not shun philosophizing, he did often encourage his students to spend less time on pointless theorizing and more time on "the great matter of life and death."⁶⁰

When Hakuin did speak out against the powers that be, he often spoke out against unfair practices against the common people, especially over-taxation. Yoshizawa observes that the theme of over-taxation shows up in Hakuin's writings *Moxa*, *Goose Grass*, *Horse Thistles*, and *Mutterings to the Wall*.⁶¹ Hakuin's painting *Bird and Fish* bears the final inscription "it's like that with the tax rate too" is added casually, "would have been a matter of grave concern to sharp-eyed government officials"⁶² who would have recalled peasant uprisings. Yoshizawa adds, "we find Hakuin in *Snake Strawberries* and other works boldly leveling barrage after barrage of far more trenchant charges at a variety of social ills without any sense of timidity or hesitation whatever."⁶³ In Banksy's audio guide and Hakuin's self-description, we observe what Hadot refers to as the Socratic mask of irony: "a feigned self-deprecation, which consists primarily in passing oneself off as someone completely ordinary and superficial" (PWL, 152). Banksy minimizes his fame in describing his technique as "cheating" despite taking New Yorkers on a month long scavenger hunt. Hakuin minimizes his wisdom as the mutterings of a "worn-out old shavepate" while chastising the political elite for over-taxation. False modesties to the contrary, Hakuin and Banksy both offer up social commentary somewhat occluded by the veil their artwork affords.

58) Feldman, "Banksy in New York."

59) Seo, *The Sound of One Hand*, 42–45.

60) Hakuin sometimes referred to this as "the great matter of post-satori practice." See Waddell, *Hakuin's Precious Mirror Cave*, 53.

61) Yoshizawa, *Art of Zen Master Hakuin*, 45–52.

62) *Ibid.*, 52.

63) *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Hadot's initial impulse to distinguish ancient Greek meditation from Buddhist meditation was fair although he went too far, but thankfully he was able to course correct. Hadot was right to reassess his hostile stance of comparative philosophy noting that analogies between ancient Greek and Asian thought "do perhaps give us a better understanding of all that can be involved in philosophical attitudes which illuminate one another in this way. The means that enable us to achieve inner peace and communion with other human beings, or with the universe, are not unlimited."⁶⁴ In this essay, I have sought to address the similarities in Hadot's spiritual exercise of learning how to dialogue with Buddhist dialogue often understood as skillful means as well as the *kōan* practiced exemplified in Zen master Hakuin's Rinzai Zen. There are without doubt further opportunities for comparison with the spiritual exercises of learning to live, learning to die, and learning how to read that are at present beyond the scope of this essay. Furthermore, in comparing Hakuin's *Pilgrims* with Banksy's *The Street is in Play*, we can see how Hakuin helps us understand Banksy insofar as both figures challenge preconceived, establishment assumptions about what graffiti can do, from pedagogical/soteriological tools to socially disruptive writing on the wall that speaks truth to power. Conversely, Banksy helps us understand Hakuin's artwork by showing us that far from being stoic and detached world renouncers (a charge that gets leveled against Buddhism constantly throughout history), Buddhist practitioners often have a keen sense of humor. To reiterate Stephen Collins, we should see Buddhists "as human beings first and Buddhists second."⁶⁵

64) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 278.

65) Collins, *Theravāda Reimagined*, 16.

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