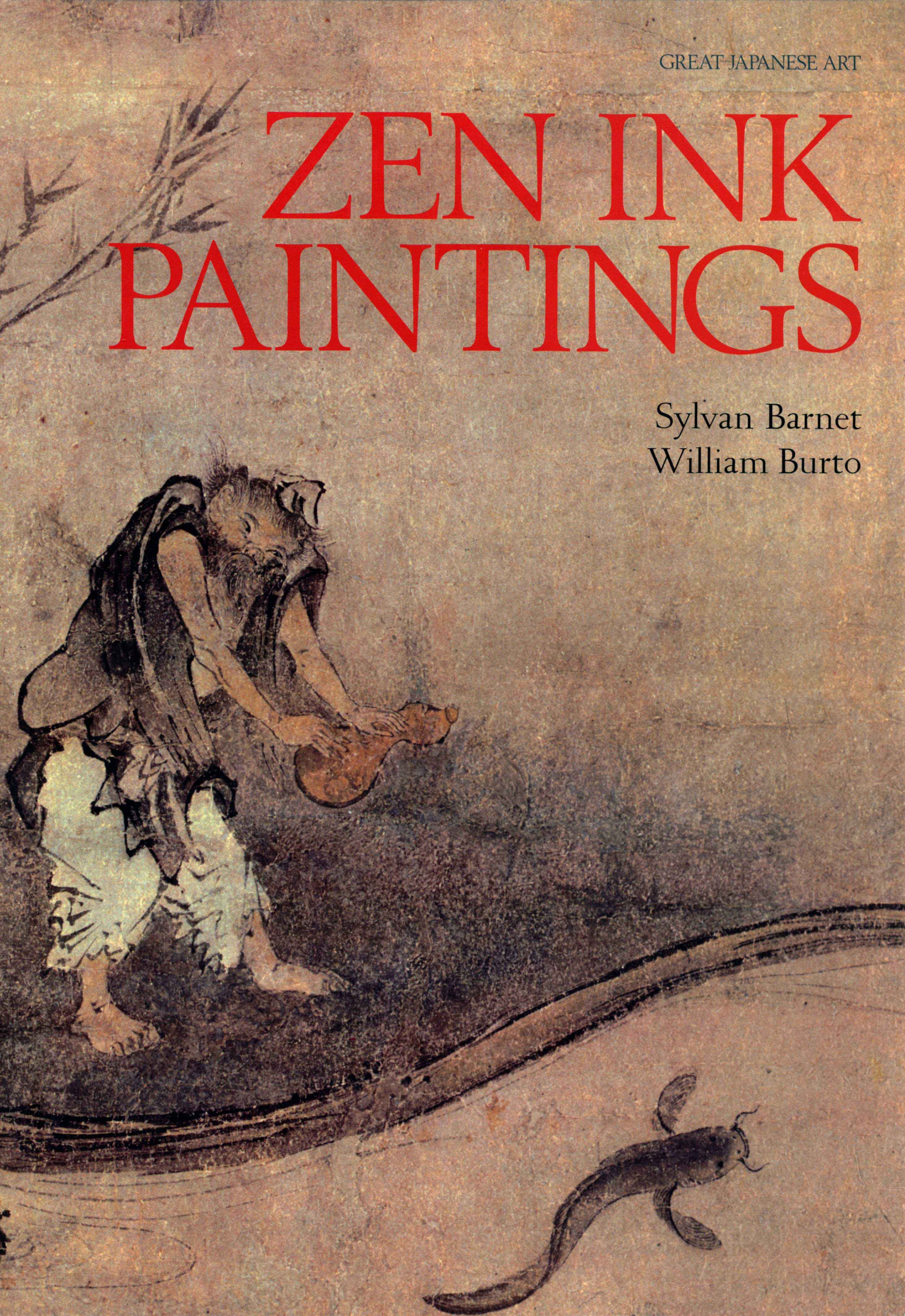
GREAT JAPANESE ART

ZEN INK PAINTINGS

Sylvan Barnet
William Burto



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KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL LTD.

Distributed in the United States by Kodansha International/USA Ltd., through Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York 10022. Published by Kodansha International Ltd., 12–21 Otowa 2-chome, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112 and Kodansha International/USA Ltd., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, New York 10022 and 44 Montgomery Street, San Francisco, California 94104.
First edition, 1982 *ISBN 4–7700–1011–7 (in Japan)*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Barnet, Sylvan.
Zen ink paintings.

(Great Japanese art series)
Bibliography: p.
1. Painting, Zen—Japan. 2. Painting, Zen—China. 3. Sumie. I. Burto, William. II. Title. III. Series.
ND2071.B37 1982 775'.943927 82–80648
ISBN 0–87011–521–9 *AACR2*

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK includes thirty-two masterpieces of painting and calligraphy (treating the ox-and-oxherd scroll as one picture rather than as ten), from the first half of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth. The arrangement, however, is not chronological. Our point of departure is a Chinese triptych; it happens to be a very early work, but we begin with it less for that reason than because it provides a good introduction to certain techniques common in Zen painting and to certain thoughts fundamental to Zen. We next discuss thirteen paintings of patriarchs and other enlightened figures, starting with the Historical Buddha; the commentaries introduce the viewer to additional aspects of Zen thought, and they also seek to explain the different styles used to depict the motifs—to account, for example, for the conspicuous differences in the three representations of Bodhidharma (Japanese: Daruma) on pages 29, 31, and 35 or of Hotei on pages 49, 51, and 55. We also occasionally touch on a difficult question: what *is* a Zen painting? Is it any painting by a Zen monk? Or any painting of a Zen subject, even if it is not the work of a Zen monk? The three illustrations of Hotei include one by Kōrin that especially allows for discussion of this point.

Following the paintings of patriarchs and semi-legendary figures are three portraits of historical Zen figures, done by priests who were their contemporaries. The pictures in the next two groups (landscapes and bird-and-flower paintings) are less evidently Zen, and we therefore spend some time discussing the Zen implications in these apparently secular subjects. The last two groups consist of overtly Zen works: *Ten Oxherding Pictures* is an allegory of enlightenment, and the four pieces of calligraphy (or at least the first, second, and fourth) are explicitly Zen.

The works of art, rather than the text, are of course the heart of the book, but the first chapter provides a historical background, and the commentaries, as we have said, call attention to stylistic as well as historical matters. The commentaries thus include discussions not only of *what* the pictures mean but *how* they mean: how the lines—thick or thin, light or dark, jagged or flowing—help to embody the idea or vision set forth. Finally, a list of suggested references guides the reader to other studies.

This list is a partial record of our debts, but here we wish to offer special thanks to people who helped us while we were preparing the manuscript. John M. Rosenfield has endured our enthusiasm for many years and has on countless occasions pointed us in the right direction. Morton Berman and Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis read a first draft of the manuscript and offered invaluable suggestions. The following people generously answered our queries about puzzling matters or offered other important assistance: Stephen Addiss, Lucy Adelman, Helmut Brinker, Li-li Ch'en, Martin Collcutt, Fumiko Cranston, Michael Cunningham, Willem Dreesmann, Shen Fu, Maribeth Graybill, Iguchi Yasuhiro, Komiya Fusao, Max Loehr, Steven Owyoung, Shimizu Yoshiaki, Sugai Kaoru, Sidney Tai, Yih-jian Tai, Burton Watson, James Watt, Yabumoto Sōshirō, and Grace Chuan-ying Yen. From Michael Brase, Stephen Shaw, Suzuki Takako, and Takaya Yōko at Kodansha International we have received all the cooperation that any author could hope for. Finally, for giving us permission to reproduce paintings and calligraphy, we wish to thank the owners—temples, museums, and collectors.

Sylvan Barnet
William Burto

Editor's note: Japanese names (except those listed in the bibliography) follow the Japanese order—surname preceding given name. The illustrations on the half title and title pages are details of Mokuan's *Four Sleepers* and the poetic inscriptions on Josetsu's *Catching a Catfish with a Gourd*. The landscape on the three following pages is *Sunset in a Fishing Village* from *Eight Views of Hsiao-Hsiang*, attributed to Mu-ch'i (ink on paper; 34.4 × 113.4 cm.; Nezu Institute of Fine Art, Tokyo).

A BACKGROUND TO ZEN PAINTING

ALTHOUGH the earliest paintings in this book are some seven hundred and fifty years old, we must go back almost another eighteen hundred years, to 563 B.C., to reach the origins of Buddhism. The year 563 is traditionally assigned to the birth of Siddhārtha of the Gautama family, a family from northeast India (now Nepal). Because he belonged to the Shākya clan, Siddhārtha is called Shākyamuni, the "Wise Man of the Shākya Clan." He is also called Buddha ("the Enlightened"), or, more precisely, the Historical Buddha, the founder of the faith in historic times.

In his early years, it is said, he lived a luxurious, sheltered life, but by the age of twenty-nine, when he had become aware of sickness, old age, and death, he vowed to save not only himself but all mankind from suffering. He left his father's palace, cut off his hair, discarded his princely jewels, exchanged clothes with a beggar, and for six years embraced a severely ascetic life, hoping to perceive a reality deeper than that of material things. After concluding that asceticism was not the way to perception, however, he wandered to a site near Benares, where, at the age of thirty-five, after a period of meditation variously described as one night and as forty-nine days, he achieved enlightenment (Sanskrit: *sambodhi*; Japanese: *satori*), or, as some prefer to call it, an "awakening," an opening of the mind. This release of inner light or intuitive knowledge was not attained by self-castigation, by long fasts, or by scrupulous observation of rituals prescribed in the Vedas (the sacred literature). It was an elusive process; and "meditation," as we shall see, has been variously interpreted by later Buddhist sects.

The Buddha saw that the path to peace is the extinction of desires, the extinction of selfishness or of selfhood. The achievement of enlightenment means the attainment of *nirvāna* or release from the cycle of endless rebirth, because all physical and psychic ties to the world are broken. *Nirvāna*, which means something like "where no wind blows" or "without motion," is for Buddhism the real world, as opposed to *samsāra*, the illusory world that the unenlightened mistakenly believe is the real world. Some months after Shākyamuni became the Buddha, he revealed his doctrine in a sermon preached in the Deer Park near Benares. The gist of this sermon, later called "Setting in Motion the Wheel of Righteousness," was that all existence is suffering; suffering is caused by craving; craving proceeds from lack of self-knowledge and from misunderstanding reality. The way to eliminate craving and thus to achieve *nirvāna* is described in the Eightfold Path, which includes such teachings as: the phenomenal world is impermanent; there is no permanent self, no soul; good intentions are not enough; one must concentrate the mind on reality.

Buddhism, originally a way of conducting one's life rather than a religion, developed into two schools, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. Hīnayāna (also called Therāvada) is practiced in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia; its ideal is the holy man who, in isolation, attains enlightenment. Mahāyāna Buddhism, of which Zen is a sect, developed in northern India in the first century A.D. Speaking broadly (there are many conflicting sub-sects) it preaches salvation for all sentient creatures. It is followed in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and (in a somewhat different form) in Sikkim and Nepal. Because it sees Buddhahood as an attainable goal for all—not only for those involved in the monastic life—it greatly values the bodhisattva, one who has achieved enlightenment but who delays entering *nirvāna* in order to help others gain enlightenment.

As Mahāyāna Buddhism developed, the conception of Shākyamuni changed from a historical figure, who died in 483 B.C., to a Buddha of infinite duration, and to a deity who is accompanied by countless other Buddhas and spiritual beings of a lesser order. Over the centuries, in fact, Shākyamuni was overshadowed by such figures as the redeemer Amitābha ("Infinite Light"; Japanese: Amida), who offered salvation in paradise to those who called on him; or the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara ("Lord Who Looks Down Mercifully"; Chinese: Kuan-yin; Japanese: Kannon), whose headdress includes an image of Amida (see page 17).

CH'AN (ZEN) BUDDHISM

This brief sketch, true as far as it goes, has not brought us very close to the Chinese sect called Ch'an (the Japanese pronunciation is "Zen"), and to this we must now turn. The word Ch'an comes from the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, usually translated as "meditation," and we have seen that meditation was part of early Indian Buddhism. Something of Buddhism was known in China even before the time of Christ, though it was not officially introduced to China until late in the first century A.D. The earliest Buddhist texts in Chinese are probably from the second century A.D., but

Buddhism cannot be said to have flourished in China before the fourth century. Probably it was able to survive and gain strength because it was widely regarded as at least roughly compatible with a native belief, Taoism. Both creeds emphasize tranquillity of mind, a state of freedom from desire, and both (manifesting a feeling for nature) emphasize achieving an intuitive awareness of the underlying Way of the universe, an achievement of "oneness with all." But it should be remembered, of course, that we are speaking very broadly. Indeed, to speak of "Buddhism" is to speak broadly, for in China ten schools existed, some essentially Indian (these did not last long), and some of Chinese origin, of which Ch'an was one. We say "of Chinese origin" because although Yogic meditation was part of Shākyamuni's practice, Ch'an was so strongly influenced by Taoism that it would probably have been unrecognizable to the Historical Buddha. It was not in India but in China that "meditation," as opposed to philosophic discussion of the scriptures, became an independent school of Buddhism.

At first those Chinese Buddhists who emphasized meditation lived within other Buddhist communities, but perhaps as early as the sixth century separate meditative communities were established; and in time even these communities came to be of two sorts: those that subscribed to "gradual enlightenment," usually achieved by sitting-meditation (Japanese: *zazen*), and those that subscribed to "sudden enlightenment," which might come at any moment, while sweeping or chopping wood, for example, or noticing a master make a gesture, or feeling his stick across one's back, or pondering the cryptic question "What was your original face, before you were born?" (In Japanese these famous questions are called *kōan*, from the Chinese *kung-an*: "case," "problem.") The aim of such irrational questions is to force the disciple to break through the boundaries of reason and the bondage of consecutive thought in order to achieve intuitive knowledge. "Sudden enlightenment," however, is not necessarily obtained quickly or easily. It may come only after years of meditation, and thus conceivably it may take longer to achieve than "gradual enlightenment" by a step-by-step method. In any case, "meditation" was not limited to formal contemplation, but could refer to an unperturbed mind free from false attitudes. This view fit in well with other cultural developments in China in the eighth century—with the apparent spontaneity and romanticism of the poetry of Li Po and Tu Fu, for example. Although Ch'an declined during the middle of the ninth century when the collapsing central government could no longer foster it, it survived anti-Buddhist persecutions, made a comeback in the tenth century, and, gaining state support, was a vital force in the thirteenth century.

Although Ch'an seems not to have established itself firmly as a separate school of Buddhism until the early eighth century, tradition holds that in the early sixth century it was brought to China by an Indian monk, Bodhidharma (Japanese: Daruma), who was said to be the twenty-eighth patriarch to succeed Shākyamuni (see pages 28–35). The doctrine, according to advocates of Ch'an, had been transmitted directly from patriarch to patriarch, not through holy texts but wordlessly, in a silent "mind-to-mind transmission." Tradition (apparently first recorded in the eleventh century in China) relates how on one occasion when Shākyamuni was preaching to his disciples, he was offered a flower and asked to preach the Law. Shākyamuni silently took the flower and turned it in his fingers. Only Kāshyapa understood; he smiled, and Shākyamuni, perceiving that Kāshyapa understood the supreme teaching, said, "To you, venerable Kāshyapa, I hand over this most precious treasure." Thus the transmission went, by means of cryptic signs rather than words, from Kāshyapa down through the patriarchs to Bodhidharma; and with Bodhidharma enumeration begins anew, for he was the first Ch'an patriarch in China. To his disciple Hui-k'o Bodhidharma transmitted his experience or wisdom, or, better, he enabled Hui-k'o to release intuitive knowledge and thus to experience what Shākyamuni and each succeeding patriarch had experienced. Bodhidharma gave this second Chinese patriarch his robe as a symbol of his office; but, in words attributed to the sixth Chinese patriarch, "As for the real teaching, no symbol was necessary. It was transferred spontaneously, from mind to mind." Zen has always emphasized this wordless transmission. A famous four-line stanza, incorrectly ascribed to Bodhidharma, says:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;
No dependence on words or letters;
Direct pointing to the mind;

Seeing into one's nature, and attaining Buddhahood.

This emphasis on a transmission outside the scriptures, with its potential rejection of holy texts and images, is discussed in the comment on a picture of a patriarch tearing up a sutra (page 36). The emphasis on "direct pointing to the mind" is also at the heart both of portrait paintings of teachers who have helped their disciples respond to intuitive knowledge (pages 57, 61, and 63), and of certificates given by masters to disciples (pages 86–87). It should be mentioned, however, that the Ch'an insistence on "direct pointing" and on a wordless doctrine does not in fact mean that words play no part—though it is true that gestures, grimaces, and blows with a stick have often accomplished more than words in communicating the vision of an inexpressible Buddha-reality, a world of non-duality, or Void. Zen has engendered an enormous number of treatises, not simply in modern times but even during its early development in China. And the reading of sutras (sacred texts) has always played a regular part in Zen monastic life. Indeed, Bodhidharma is said to have transmitted to his successor not only an understanding or awareness of the Buddha-nature, and the robe symbolizing it, but also a Chinese translation of the *Lankāvatāra Sutra*, a Sanskrit work of the first century A.D. As one can see from the following passages, this text provides a philosophic basis for Zen:

> Things are understood in their true essence when intellect reaches its limit, and its processes . . . are transcended by a higher faculty. Intuition is such a faculty, linking the intellectual mind with the universal mind.

And:

> Some think they can achieve the goal of tranquillity by suppressing mental activity. This is a mistake. . . . The goal of tranquillity is reached not by suppressing all mental activity but by freeing oneself from discriminations and attachments.

ZEN IN JAPAN

The date when Buddhism—though not the Zen sect—arrived in Japan is conventionally given as A.D. 538 or A.D. 552, when a king in Korea sent an image of the Buddha to Japan, accompanied by a message that said in part: "This doctrine is among all doctrines the most excellent, but it is hard to explain and hard to comprehend." Plague broke out, the image was blamed and was thrown into a moat by imperial decree, but some twenty years later another emperor gave Buddhism a second chance, and, despite opposition, the religion became established as a state cult early in the seventh century. Meditation played a part in early Japanese Buddhism, but it did not give rise to a separate sect. A few Japanese monks who visited China (Dōshō in the seventh century, Saichō in the eighth, and Ennin in the ninth) learned something about Ch'an, but in Japan meditation was chiefly incorporated in the Shingon and Tendai sects, which emphasized ritual gestures (*mudrā*) and magical utterances (*mantra*) as well as meditation. Zen, with its more austere atmosphere of meditation, did not become independent in Japan until Eisai built, between 1191 and 1194, Shōfuku-ji, an imposing temple in northern Kyushu. In 1202 the shogun appointed Eisai to head a new temple, Kennin-ji, in Kyoto; Kennin-ji had a meditation hall, but initially it also included places for the rites of Tendai and Shingon. In short, although Zen had established a beachhead at the start of the thirteenth century, it did not become securely established as an independent sect until the end of the century. (Eisai, incidentally, had gone to China in 1168 to study T'ien-t'ai [Japanese: Tendai], not Ch'an, but he encountered the Lin-ch'i school of Ch'an, a school which emphasized "sudden enlightenment." On his second visit to China, between 1187 and 1191, he seriously studied Ch'an and was given the seal of direct transmission. He is thus the founder of the Lin-ch'i school in Japan, where it is called Rinzai.)

Zen did not prosper in Japan before the Kamakura period (1192–1333) for two probable reasons: other Buddhist sects, such as Tendai, were entrenched, and contact with China was minimal from the end of the ninth century, when diplomatic missions to China ceased, to the middle of the twelfth century. But in the late twelfth century and especially in the thirteenth, a significant number of Japanese monks visited China; many, like Eisai, were of the Tendai sect, and although they did not go to study Ch'an, they encountered it and were impressed. Moreover, in the second half of the thirteenth century China was ruled by the Mongols, and although the Mongols supported Ch'an Buddhism, some Chinese monks, believing that Buddhism had seriously declined

and had survived persecution only by making serious compromises, gladly accepted Japanese invitations to emigrate. The first great Chinese master to leave was Lan-ch'i Tao-lung (1213–78), who went to Japan in 1246 and spent the rest of his life there. (For his portrait, see page 57.) His presence and that of other Chinese who followed him, as well as the Mongol support of Ch'an, stimulated Japanese monks in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries to visit China, sometimes for as long as ten or fifteen years. For this period there are records of visits to China by more than two hundred Japanese monks, and the actual number of visitors was probably larger. By 1400 direct contact between China and Japan had greatly diminished, but Japanese Zen was then so firmly established that it no longer needed help from the mainland.

SECULAR SUPPORT OF ZEN

This account has thus far neglected the secular support of Zen in Japan, but obviously Zen could not have taken hold without the aid of the shogunate, that is, without the aid of the military government in Kamakura, the source of real power even though the emperor lived in Kyoto. (In 1338 a new military government moved its headquarters from Kamakura to a part of Kyoto known as Muromachi, and this area has given its name to a period, variously defined as 1338–1573 and as 1392–1573.) The shogunate supported Zen by such means as grants of land, exemption from some taxes, direct gifts, and invitations to Chinese priests to come to Japan. Most of the patrons of Zen were samurai—which is not to say that all samurai practiced Zen, or that the imperial house ignored it. Still, one might ask why warriors were especially attracted to Zen rather than to the competing Buddhist sects. First, the austerity and self-reliance of Zen monks must have been attractive to military men. Then, Zen's indifference to death appealed to them. Thus the equanimity that Hōjō Tokimune (shogun from 1268 to 1284) exhibited in the face of the Mongol attempts at invasion is widely credited in part to his study of Zen under Lan-ch'i Tao-lung. In any case, we cannot doubt that Tokimune identified himself with Zen: a few hours before he died he put on the robe of a Zen monk. Furthermore, Zen's emphasis on experience rather than on recondite learning must have appealed to men of action, men of will (to oversimplify) rather than of intellect. The warrior apparently saw in Zen a manly code that compared favorably with what seemed to him the passivity (Amidism required the believer only to call on Amida for salvation) and the decadent estheticism of other cults.

This is not to say that Zen was uncultured; on the contrary, Zen focused great interest on Chinese poetry and painting. But even on this account Zen must have appealed to the warriors of Kamakura and of Kyoto, for it provided the high culture they needed in order to feel equal to the enfeebled but cultivated court. Finally, Zen monks, for all their piety and their learning, were wise in the ways of the world, and especially in the political ways of China; thus in the later fourteenth century, when Japan was trading with China, the Zen monks' knowledge of Chinese bureaucratic methods proved to be a business asset.

THE GOZAN MOVEMENT

At least a few words must be said about the artistic-literary movement that flourished in Zen monasteries in Kamakura and Kyoto. This secular culture may in the long run have weakened Zen as a religion, but we can scarcely regret the ink painting, the calligraphy, the temples, and the gardens that it produced. This movement, called *gozan bungaku* or the "Literature of the Five Mountains," developed early in the fourteenth century and reached its height later in that century and early in the fifteenth, encouraged by two shoguns, Yoshimitsu (ruled 1368–94) and Yoshimochi (ruled 1394–1423). Behind it was the fact that in China in the Southern Sung period (1127–1279) the leading Ch'an monasteries were ranked in a three-tier system, with five chief monasteries—designated Five Mountains—in the highest tier. The next tier had ten monasteries, and the lowest had thirty-five or so, but not a great deal is really known about the workings of the Chinese system. The Japanese borrowed, and altered, the idea: there were Five Mountains, or five great monasteries, in Kamakura, and another Five Mountains in Kyoto. Beneath them were about forty other monasteries, and beneath these were some two hundred more. And at the top of the whole system, above even the two sets of Five Mountains, was Nanzen-ji in Kyoto. All were of the Rinzai school (though not all important Rinzai temples were part of the system, and the status of some temples

changed from time to time), and it is fair to say not only that the *gozan* monasteries were the chief cultural centers of the period, but also that their achievements have not been excelled in later ages in Japan. (See page 61 for a portrait of Musō, a central figure in the *gozan* movement.)

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INK PAINTING IN JAPAN

The cultural achievement of the *gozan* monasteries that particularly concerns us is *suibokuga* (literally "water-ink-paintings"). In Japan before the mid-thirteenth century, there was nothing that resembled the ink paintings illustrated in this book. Most of the earliest Japanese Buddhist paintings, from the late seventh century, opulently depict in blue, red, yellow, green, and (later) gold and silver, idealized deities in formal poses and ceremonial dress. These deities are unmarked by the burden of mortality. Lines of uniform thickness, called "iron-wire lines" (Japanese: *tessen*), are used, providing boundaries but not suggesting volume. If there is a setting, it is often an elegantly wrought paradise. These complex, detailed, finely executed pictures reveal a carefully articulated, supremely precious, spiritual world. Even the ink paintings that were produced before the age of Zen painting—a handful are as old as the eighth century—were, with a very few exceptions, done with uniform (or almost uniform) brushstrokes and none used ink washes. In the West we might regard them as drawings rather than as paintings. Moreover, many of these early ink paintings were made as preliminary studies for elaborate colored paintings, or as objects of instruction (monks would learn to identify the hundreds of deities from collections of these drawings), rather than as objects for esthetic contemplation. But in the later thirteenth century and in the early fourteenth, Japanese monks returning from Ch'an monasteries brought back swiftly executed ink paintings done with lines of varying thickness, with dots and dabs, with washes, and even with splashes of ink, and a new mode of Japanese painting was born. (Ink painting had flourished in China for centuries—probably from the eighth century—and was not limited to Ch'an artists or to Ch'an subjects; but in the thirteenth century it seems to have been especially favored by Ch'an monks, and because it was brought from China to Japan by Zen monks, it was initially associated in Japan with Zen.) Compared with earlier Japanese Buddhist paintings (a sumptuous mandala, or cosmic diagram, for instance, with hundreds of figures in ceremonial attire), these works are strikingly simple, even minimal: a single bird on a roughly sketched branch, perhaps, or a single figure in a monk's robe. They also seem highly personal, at least in comparison with traditional Buddhist painting which, by and large, sought to perpetuate a centuries-old style. A case in point is Liang K'ai's portrait of the poet Li Po, on which it is worth dwelling for a moment.

The painter was not a Ch'an monk, and the subject was not in any way religious, but ink paintings in this fluid, cursive, "abbreviated" style (Chinese: *chien-pio*; Japanese: *genpitsu*) were especially associated with Ch'an and then with Zen painters. Liang K'ai gives us not an optically convincing image of a man but an evocation of the spirit of Li Po, a swift revelation of the essence. There is no concern here with a setting that would help to fix the subject's status or character—a table, perhaps, at which he is composing, or a cup of wine from which he derives inspiration, or an audience attending a recitation, or even a pine branch above him to suggest the wanderer. There is only the tiniest hint of the ground; Li Po seems almost to float in uninterrupted space, or, rather, spacelessness, a figure of infinite time and place. Broad, casual lines describe the somewhat baggy, nondescript garment, contrasting with the sharp lines that define the face with its high forehead and piercing eye. The figure, in profile, pays no attention to the viewer, but moves in its own world, a world of the mind. Twenty or so lines, rapidly brushed and not always connected, capture the lyricism, the spontaneity, and the carefree, independent spirit for which Li Po (no less than Ch'an monks) was famous.

An inventory of the possessions of a temple in 1363 lists several Chinese ink paintings, and another inventory, of the shogunal collection in the late fifteenth century, lists almost a hundred Chinese paintings, attributing some to painters whose work is represented in this book, among them Mu-ch'i (pages 4–6, 16–18, and 77) and Liang K'ai. That some or even all of the attributions in the inventories may be wrong is irrelevant; the point is that Chinese works were collected and eagerly studied, probably at first in temples and later in the collections of powerful warriors who

Liang K'ai, *The Poet Li Po*. Early 13th century. Ink on paper. 81.1 × 30.5 cm. Tokyo National Museum.