

# VIEWS AND REVIEWS

## The Theoretical Foundations of Zen Buddhism

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**T**HE APPARENT IRRATIONALITY and illogicality of Zen practices and precepts have fascinated and baffled many students of Zen. But a profound and penetrating insight into human nature underlies the paradoxical character of much of Zen. The framework that unifies the various aspects of Zen derives directly from the theoretical insights in classical Buddhist works. Zen, in an essential sense, translates these insights into practice. An understanding of the theoretical foundations of Zen can illuminate not only the profound unity and coherence of its doctrines but can also give us a fundamental understanding of their practical implications for individuals and society.

Mahayana Buddhism bases its philosophy of life on the recognition that human beings are conscious beings and that their nature and expressions are conditioned by the structure of mind. The Buddha has said that "all that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts."<sup>1</sup> Human expressions are a function of thought; human nature is conditioned by modes of knowing or forms of knowledge. The nature and expression of the human self change as modes of thought change. According to classical Mahayana Buddhism, there are two fundamental forms of knowing: *jnana* or nirvana and *vijnana*. I have discussed the forms of these two modes of thought in detail in a previous work.<sup>2</sup> A brief

<sup>1</sup> Irving Babbitt, trans., *The Dhammapada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Kurethara Bose, "The Transformation of the Self in Mahayana Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist*, 27, no. 2 (1994).

outline of this model, however, is useful for following the discussion in this essay.

Interdependent-origination (*pratityasmutpada*), according to Buddhism, is the real nature of the world. What this term means is that things are dynamic-forms in immanent relationship with one another. Nirvana corresponds to the recognition of the dynamic-relational form of things and the world. The enlightened are those who have "demonstrated the mutual interpenetration of all worlds."<sup>3</sup>

Action provides a mode of experiencing the world dynamically and relationally. Every act forms an indivisible totality in which all the participating elements are in immanent relationship with one another. In juggling, the juggler and the circling objects form a dynamic-unity in which none has an isolated identity. The circling objects are an integral part of the dynamic-form of the juggler. The human self is a dynamic, spontaneously evolving reality. It experiences the world as an active participant in its being. This dynamic-unity has to be directly felt and is beyond descriptive knowledge.

*Vijnana*, in contrast to *jnana*, corresponds to a dividing, discriminating mode of thought. In *vijnana*, things are understood in terms of their objective, qualitative features. This mode of thought can be identified with the objective conception of reality characteristic of modern science. Objective categories are static and embody no relational meaning. In this form of knowing, things are seen as substantial, isolated entities separated from one another. Objective thought categories are based upon sense perception.

The notions of God and absolute knowledge, in mystical religious traditions, also represent the dynamic-unity of all beings. Opposed to the idea of God is a dividing mode of thought in which the world is seen as populated by innumerable, independent beings.<sup>4</sup>

Dynamic transformation is the real form of the universe, and, therefore, of all things. Static conceptual categories cannot capture the dynamic-unity of things. The true form of the world is emptiness (*sunyata*), because this form is inaccessible through conceptual thought. The discriminating mind constructs a false picture of the world.

Conventional knowledge is essentially based upon objective, conceptual categories. In their daily activities and transactions, human beings rely mainly on such categories. When the mind is preoccupied with conceptual forms, it

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Cleary, trans., *Entry into the Realm of Reality, the Text: A Translation of Gandavyuha, the Final Book of Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambala, 1989), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Kurethara Bose, "Religion and Revolution," *The Journal of Religious Studies* (Patiala), 23, no. 2 (1993): 55-63.

misses the experience of the dynamic-unity of the self and the world.

In *vijnana*, the human self recognizes itself as an isolated, independent entity. It recognizes no immediate relationship between itself and the world. Buddhist philosophy traces the cause of individualistic attitudes and egocentric desires to discriminating thought. Such attitudes are the source of human suffering. "The afflictions and karmic action arise," Nagarjuna states, "from hypostatizing thought and this from the manifold of named things."<sup>5</sup> In the dynamic mode, on the contrary, the self is experienced as in relationship with other selves. The relational conception of the self brings human beings together, and is the foundation of human solidarity.<sup>6</sup>

Relatedness makes people concerned with the well-being of others. Solidarity is the basis of human goodness. Compassion and kindness are intrinsic aspects of those who have realized nirvana, the unifying conception of the self. The same idea can be found in mystical thought, in which the idea of universal love is identified with the notion of God, the unifying vision.<sup>7</sup>

The individualistic, egocentric self and the relational, egoless self are manifestations of different modes of thought. The egocentric self is annihilated in the relational understanding of nirvana.

Zen, like many other religious traditions, is concerned with some of the crucial questions that preoccupy human beings. What are the conditions for realizing genuine freedom and inner peace? What are the conditions that bring forth human goodness and kindness? Mahayana philosophy discovers the source of human suffering in the discriminating mind and human freedom and goodness in the unifying form of knowledge. Zen practices are based upon this theoretical foundation. Zen is concerned with the realization of human freedom and goodness through the extinguishing of the objectifying mind and the actualization of the unifying knowledge.

In the dynamic perception, the world appears as a unified continuum. The world participates, is reflected, in everything. The idea of the unity of all beings is a basic theme in Zen thought. The Chinese Zen master Yuan-wu sums up the idea beautifully: "One particle of dust is raised and the great earth lies therein; one flower blooms and the universe rises with it."<sup>8</sup> The human organism is a dynamic-form in participatory unity with the world. The individual self has no isolated reality. Selflessness is the true nature of the self.

<sup>5</sup> Mervyn Sprung, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 171.

<sup>6</sup> Bose, *Religion and Revolution; Transformation of the Self*.

<sup>7</sup> Bose, *Religion and Revolution*.

<sup>8</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings from D. T. Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956), p. 24.

The human entity is a spontaneous unfolding. In spontaneous action, the self is fully immersed in itself, experiences itself as pure activity. In such action, the self experiences itself as a dynamic-form in intimate, participatory relationship with the world. The cardinal doctrine of Zen is that it is through direct, unmeditated expression the self achieves true knowledge and freedom. In such action, the individual self realizes itself as an intrinsic unfolding in freedom and in intimate relationship with the world. This is nirvana or Buddha-nature.

The relational experience of the self is lost to direct awareness when the mind relies on conceptual forms. The reliance on reason also leads to the suppression of the spontaneous expression of the self.

Unthought action is an essential condition for enlightenment. A Zen master tossed a fan to his disciples with the question, "What's this?" One disciple opened it and fanned himself, and, then, passed it on to another, who closed it and scratched himself with it.<sup>9</sup> Another master, Po-chang, pointed to a pitcher and said: "Do not call this a pitcher. What, rather, would you call it?" One of the monks kicked it, and he was made the abbot of the new monastery.<sup>10</sup> The self and the other form an indivisible unity in active interaction. Zen training is centrally concerned with realizing this unifying experience. Eugen Herrigel, recalling his training under a Zen master, describes his experience of archery: "bow, arrow, goal and the ego, all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them."<sup>11</sup> As the self merges with the act, the unifying experience comes to realization.

This experience of unity is absolute knowledge; for, it corresponds to the dynamic unity of all forms. Felt action, not sense perception, is the direct way of knowing the self and the world, in their real form. In the examples above, the disciples did not respond with verbal forms or reasoned discourse to the problem presented by the master. They acted out their understanding. In pure action, unconditioned by conceptual thought, one actualizes the unifying knowledge.

Mind and body form a unified whole in the dynamic mode. Here, the mind perceiving the world dynamically is in unison with the body experiencing the world dynamically. The mind-body unity is a central feature of Zen prac-

<sup>9</sup> Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> Chang Chung-yuan, trans., *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 86.

tices.<sup>12</sup> It is an essential aspect of those who have achieved nirvana. In unthought action, the mind and body form a unity. Huang-po: "When body and mind achieves spontaneity, the Tao is reached and the universal mind can be understood."<sup>13</sup> Body and mind, acting and knowing, being and thought are unified in the dynamic mode. In spontaneous expression, the self transcends the dualism between thought and action, mind and body, self and the other. Since the human entity is a dynamic-form only a mind perceiving the world dynamically can reflect its true identity. The wholeness of the self can be actualized only when there is mind-body unity. The dynamic body gets disconnected from the mind when the latter is preoccupied with static conceptual forms. The objective-rational mind creates a radical opposition between the body and the mind. The mind-body unity and separation are connected to different modes of knowing.<sup>14</sup>

The unifying experience of the world, nirvana, is accessible only to the self expressing itself spontaneously. The spontaneous self is the authentic self. It expresses itself truly. For Zen, spontaneity is "marvelous activity." Zen practices and doctrines are directed toward fully actualizing one's authentic being in its wholeness. One should express oneself naturally, without premeditation; this is central to Zen teaching. The Zen disciple who used the fan to scratch himself and the other who kicked the pitcher acted without thought. According to Yun-men: "In walking, just walk. In sitting just sit. Above all, don't wobble."<sup>15</sup> Sleep when tired and eat when hungry is Po-chang's celebrated definition of the Zen path to enlightenment.

The natural self is the true self, and it is really free. It experiences the world as an intimate part of its being. Natural expression is the basis of both unity and freedom. Zen elevates what is natural to what is sublime. Those who live close to nature, such as the fishermen and woodcutters, are closer to the truth. Zen emphasizes the authentic expression of our being, and equates this with ultimate knowledge and freedom.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, trans. Nagatomo Shigenori, ed. Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Watts, p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> The mind-body unity is central to yoga and meditation, techniques for realizing enlightenment. We may also note here that in traditional Indian and Chinese medicine mind and body form a unified whole. In modern Western medicine based on the objective view of the world, on the contrary, body and mind are considered as distinct domains.

<sup>15</sup> Watts, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> Many recent psychotherapeutic methods have stressed the spontaneous expression of the self. These approaches to restoring psychic wholeness and well-being try to create environments in which individuals can express themselves without inhibitions.

It is in everyday activities that one expresses and actualizes one's being and identity. Even the most ordinary and mundane activities can be the realization of freedom and the unifying knowledge if expressed naturally, without the conditioning ideas of goals or results. Pang-yun once declared: "In the carrying of water and the chopping of wood—therein lies the Tao."<sup>17</sup> Ordinary daily activities of people can be the realization of Buddha-nature. For life to be a joyous actualization of our intrinsic identity, every act should be an expression in freedom.<sup>18</sup> This is true creativity. A Zen master once exclaimed:

How wondrous this, how mysterious!  
I carry fuel, I draw water.<sup>19</sup>

The natural self realizes the essential unity of all beings. Since, the unifying experience is the basis of human solidarity, when people are true to their natural identity there will be love and compassion. Just as relatedness, goodness and kindness are our original nature. What is natural is pure and simple and the ground of human goodness. Those who have realized enlightenment feel a deep concern for the welfare of all beings. They exemplify friendliness and kindness. Life realizes its intrinsic meaning and purpose when the concern for the well-being of others becomes a natural, necessary expression of the individual self. Both freedom and compassion are intrinsic aspects of the natural self.

Very similar ideas can be found in Taoism. Tao represents the unity of all beings as well as their spontaneous evolution, in other words, the dynamic-relational form of all things. Natural action, *wu-wei*, is a central notion in Taoist philosophy.<sup>20</sup> It is the path to Tao, true knowledge and unity. "In uncarved simplicity," Chuang Tzu points out, "people attain their true nature."<sup>21</sup> The original solidarity of people is realized when life is given its natural freedom. "Things in their original nature . . . are joined together without glue and hold together without cords."<sup>22</sup> Since relatedness is an intrinsic

<sup>17</sup> Chang Chung-yuan, p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> In Zen painting, every brush stroke of the artist takes on an irreducible significance. A painting is not merely a representation of reality but the artist's very being unfolding in its truth.

<sup>19</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and the Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> David Loy, "Wei-wu-wei: Nondual Action," *Philosophy East and West*, 35, no. 1 (1985), 73-86; Herrlee Creel, *What is Taoism? and Other Studies in Chinese Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> Frederic L. Bender, "Taoism and Western Anarchism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 10 (1983), 5-26.

aspect of the self benevolence and righteousness are inborn qualities of human beings. For peace and harmony to actualize things should be left to their natural ways. "Harmony and order," Chuang Tzu points out, "emerged from inborn basis of human fellowship and goodness."<sup>23</sup> Writers have noted the influence of Taoism on Zen.

The relational experience of the self is masked by the discriminating mind, which generates an isolating, individualizing view of the self. The rational mind programs people to calculate every aspect before they act and compels them to impose all sorts of constraints on their actions and expressions. When one bases one's actions on some predetermined goals, one ends up suppressing the intrinsic spontaneity and the unifying awareness of the self. One should act without any thought of ultimate outcomes to realize the original unity of the self and the world.<sup>24</sup> In archery, the inner experience of the unity of the self, bow, arrow and the target is actualized when one forgets about hitting the target.<sup>25</sup> When hitting the target becomes the primary aim, the experience of dynamic-unity vanishes from awareness. Objective reason compels people to suppress their intrinsic identity, forces them toward the artificial. Inner conflicts and anxieties arise when the self is unable to express its authentic being in freedom.

The natural unity and goodness of people are impaired when they rely on the rational intellect to organize their lifeworld. The stress on the natural in Zen is a pedagogic device to free men from the grip of the rational, calculating mind and the individualistic attitudes deriving from it.

True awakening is the unimpeded, unconditioned realization of our authentic being. Nirvana is the self actualizing itself in its inborn spontaneity and in unity with all beings. Buddha-nature is our inborn nature in its primordial simplicity and purity. According to Dogen, "all sentient beings are from the very beginning the Buddhas."<sup>26</sup> Truth is within each of us; everyone is a Buddha. God, the unifying knowledge, the mystics say, is in everything. Every being embodies the idea of God.

There is no Buddha to seek and no nirvana to attain. There is nothing extraordinary about it; it is our ordinary nature. Drinking tea, drawing water, cutting firewood, etc., all can exemplify nirvana, if done without the con-

<sup>23</sup> Watson, p. 171.

<sup>24</sup> Acting without regard to the results of one's action is an important theme in *Bhagavadgita*. Krishna tells Arjuna: "Let not the fruits of action [be] thy motive." (S. Radhakrishnan, trans., *The Bhagavadgita*, London: Unwin 1948, p. 119).

<sup>25</sup> Herrigel, pp. 39-48.

<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, trans. Paul Peachy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 266.

ditioning intervention of conceptual categories.

Nirvana, as Lin-chi points out, is "right before you at this very moment."<sup>27</sup> Our natural self is the awakened self. It is utterly wrongheaded to seek enlightenment outside ourselves. Ma-tsu compared seeking Buddha-nature to "riding an ox in search of the ox."<sup>28</sup>

Buddha-nature, unifying knowledge, is realized spontaneously, without effort. No arduous and sophisticated techniques of training are required to realize truth. As Lin-chi says, "to achieve Buddhahood there is no need for cultivation. Just carry on ordinary tasks without any attachment. Release your bowels and water, wear your clothes, eat your meals."<sup>29</sup> However, since there is a very strong tendency in people to rationalize and analyze, the natural expression of the self is not easy to realize. Arduous training is often required to overcome the influence of the objectifying intellect.

As the unifying experience is accessible only to the spontaneously unfolding self, awakening to true knowledge is something that the self has to achieve by itself. No one can make you act naturally. The original self has to be realized by yourself, without relying on anything or anybody. Immersing in sutras or arduous training, in the ultimate analysis, is useless for realizing the truth. There are no instructions, it is said, in Zen. The spontaneous self grasps the phenomenal world dynamically and relationally. The self alone can achieve this unity of itself and the world. Zen texts and teachings can only point toward the path to truth.

Our attachment to conceptual knowledge makes us think that truth and, therefore, freedom are to be found in some profound, solidified ideas, texts, or wise teachings. Such an attitude makes us mistakenly regard truth as something to be sought outside us. This forces us to suppress the spontaneous self, which, indeed, is the source of relatedness and goodness. All efforts to achieve nirvana lead to the loss of spontaneity, the ground of true knowledge. When we seek truth outside, we lose it. "To seek the Buddha," Lin-chi declared, "is to lose the Buddha."<sup>30</sup>

The discriminating mind denies us the unifying experience. All intellectual efforts to acquire and refine our understanding lead us away from the truth. Those who are highly sophisticated in analytical knowledge are far away from the truth. Hence, the Zen emphasis on no-mind, no-thought, and no-effort.

To attach merit and value to ideas and teachings is to keep one's self within

<sup>27</sup> Watts, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> Watts, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> Chang Chung-yuan, p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> Irmgard Schlogel, *The Zen Teaching of Rinzai* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1976), p. 61.

the prison house of objective thought. The dependence on conceptual ideas, however profound, makes one seek within them, in their meaning, and not within one's own self solutions to one's personal dilemmas. Such reliance holds one in a way of thinking that should be completely abandoned. In Zen, it is said, there is "no dependence upon words and letters."<sup>31</sup> Buddhist texts and teachings are like a finger pointing to the moon; they should not be mistaken for the moon itself. One has to experience oneself and the world spontaneously, keeping at bay the calculating, reasoning intellect. Zen is the direct realization of one's authentic being and natural goodness.

The repudiation of Buddhist scriptures and teachings in Zen is directed to make people give up the tendency to rely on external sources of knowledge. Further, sacred texts and methods of teaching necessarily have to rely on conceptual forms, which distort our understanding of our being, to communicate their insights. Zen masters are relentless in their effort to deny any value to sacred sources of wisdom. Pang-yun once said: "The entire sutra from the beginning to end/Is nothing but deceitful."<sup>32</sup> There are no profound sources of wisdom. Hakuin compared sacred scriptures to mere paper "good for wiping shit."<sup>33</sup> In Zen, even the authority of the enlightened Buddha is often denied without hesitation. The Zen master Tan-hsia T'ien-jun set light to an image of Buddha in front of his disciples to indicate that one should consider no one as above or a source of truth.<sup>34</sup> Everyone is an embodiment of wisdom. One's own authentic being appears as inferior when one regards something as superior. This compels individuals to deny their intrinsic identity, which is already in nirvana.

The objective intellect qualifies and differentiates, judges and discriminates. Distinctions such as high and low, good and bad emerge logically from it. This leads to the denial of the inherent fullness and truth of each and every human being.

In the dynamic mode, no conceptual distinctions are possible. An unequivocal affirmation of the equality of all beings is inherent in the Buddhist notions of emptiness and suchness (*tathata*). All beings are equal in emptiness, because their dynamic-form cannot be defined by qualifying concepts, which are static. Emptiness, like Brahman or Tao, symbolizes an undifferentiated state of the absolute equality of all beings.<sup>35</sup> Suchness is the nature of things and the

<sup>31</sup> Dumoulin, p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Chang Chung-yuan, p. 176.

<sup>33</sup> P. B. Yampolsky, trans., *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 114.

<sup>34</sup> Dumoulin, p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> Bose, *Religion and Revolution*.

world. It means that things, as they are, are beyond all qualifications and are true in themselves. There is nothing good, nothing bad, nothing superior, nothing inferior. All are different, yet all are equally true. In *prajna* (true apprehension), every being is recognized in its suchness, as an unqualified, unconditioned being. A line in a Zen poem reads:

In the landscape of spring  
there is neither high nor low.<sup>36</sup>

At the most fundamental level, there is no difference between the enlightened one and the most ordinary of creatures. This philosophy is the most emphatic affirmation of the dignity of every man and woman. Its implications for individual and social life are indeed radical and revolutionary.

By emphasizing the suchness and emptiness of all things Buddhism discourages the perennial human tendency to qualify and differentiate. These terms are useful devices to help people overcome the dividing conception of the world and actualize the unifying vision. The affirmation of the equality of all being is at the same time the repudiation of the discriminating intellect. Distinctions such as high and low keep us within this mode of knowing, which should be abandoned in order to achieve our true human identity.

We should not regard anyone as higher or better. If we do that we become afraid of our natural identity. We have to overcome this fear. When we feel inferior, we deny our full dignity as human beings. We feel inadequate and insufficient. We lose our original freedom. By telling everyone that he/she is equal to the Buddha himself, Buddhism attempts to remove the sense of inadequacy and anxiety that haunts most human beings. To overcome the sense of insufficiency one has to break through the conceptual mind, the qualifying, judging, differentiating tendency.

Many aspects of Zen teachings become clear when we examine actual situations of intimacy and solidarity. Such environments are characterized by the natural expression of the self; the unqualified, unconditional acceptance of the other, indifference to rational analysis and so on. They offer conditions in which individuals can realize their authentic identity, wholeness and freedom. In intimate relationships, the ego-shell is broken through, the self and the other flow into one another. Nirvana is this experience in its universal form.

Buddhists deny every effort to achieve anything lofty, because every effort to achieve something higher denies what is naturally in us, the inherent truth of our being. They reject the very idea of merit, since it presupposes the discriminating, differentiating intellect. It is instructive to quote here the alleged

<sup>36</sup> Watts, p. 145.

exchange between Bodhidharma, the Indian founder of Zen in China, and the mythical Chinese Emperor Wu:

- The Emperor: Since my enthronement, I have built many monasteries, copied many holy writings, and invested many priests and nuns. How great is the merit due to me?
- Bodhidharma: No merit at all.
- The Emperor: What is the Noble Truth in its highest sense?
- Bodhidharma: It is empty, no nobility whatsoever.<sup>37</sup>

Genuine nobility and purity are achieved by being true to oneself and by not trying to be anything else. As soon as one tries to achieve merit, one loses merit; as soon as one seeks the Buddha, one loses the Buddha. The truly noble are those who have overcome all discriminations, upon which the idea of merit depends. For, they have realized that unity is the fundamental essence of humanity and to achieve genuine solidarity the tendency to qualify and differentiate, conceptual thought, has to be discarded.

In contrast, modern competitive societies, so powerfully influenced by objective-reason, create in everyone a compelling need to achieve excellence of one sort or another. The conceptual mind qualifies and differentiates individuals. The idea of merit introduces distinctions among people, differentiates them hierarchically using various criteria, and makes them feel inadequate. It is the sense of inferiority that compels people to seek "higher" goals. The ambitious are driven by the sense of insufficiency. The sense of lack vanishes when one is able to accept one's authentic being fully, when one is able to act naturally.

Many of the distinguishing features of industrial society—individualism, egocentric attitudes, competition, fragmentation of environments of unity such as the family, problems of intimacy and self-identity, alienation and loneliness, rationalization and depersonalization—can be traced to the dividing logic of the objective mind. This lends support to Buddhist conclusions about the structure and impact of the objective mode of thought on human beings.

It is the analytical intellect that generates the separating, individualizing understanding of things. It covers up the unifying experience of our being. The immediate experience of the immanent participation of the self and the world comes to awareness only when the dividing mode of thought is discarded. Zen masters constantly goad their disciples to cast off their tendency to rely on ob-

<sup>37</sup> Hsueh-li Cheng, "Zen and San-Lun Madhyamika Thought: Exploring the Theoretical Foundations of Zen Teachings and Practices," *Religious Studies*, 15, no. 3 (1979), 343-363.

jective reason through all means available. They resort to striking paradoxes, negations, and contradictions, for which there are no intellectual solutions, for this purpose. Often, the master's answer to questions from disciples seeking the ultimate truth appears utterly illogical. Zen monads (questions and answers) for instance, often give the impression of two insane minds in confrontation. Here is an example:

Monk: "What is the Buddha?"

Master: "A stick of dry dung."<sup>38</sup>

Zen masters have given different answers to the same question. One said: "The cat is climbing up the post"; a third answered: "Three measures of flax." The question presupposes the analytical, discursive intellect. A conventional answer can be formulated only within this framework. Any such answer affirms the analytical orientation of the questioner's mind.

Within the conventional perspective the question is a most reasonable one to raise, for what the questioner, a seeker after truth, is most concerned with is Buddha-nature, ultimate knowledge. But the master's shocking and (apparently) illogical reply makes the question and the implicit framework within which it is posed, highly problematic. The response challenges the analytical framework within which the mind and the question are rooted. To the rational mind the answer sounds outrageous. The shocking answer is designed to shake its faith in intellectual analysis. The master's response brings the disciple's mind to an excruciating impasse and forces it to look elsewhere, outside logical analysis, for solutions. Zen masters challenge disciples to do away with intellection. Their paradoxical responses force the questioner to search for a different perspective. Buddha-nature is within each of us, and it presupposes a mode of knowing that is anti-conceptual. Analytical thought has to be completely broken through to actualize the unifying vision, *bodhi*. As soon as the conditioning conceptual envelope is lifted, the spontaneous self in relationship with all beings comes to full realization.

Zen monads translate into practice the original insights of classical Buddhism. Nagarjuna, in his seminal work, *Mulamadhayamikakarika*, analyzes many basic conceptual categories, such as self, other, cause, effect, birth, death, time, space, etc., to show the inherent contradictions and ambiguities in them.<sup>39</sup> Such categories are generated by the fragmenting, objectifying perception of the world, and they do not correspond to the dynamic, interconnected form of things. Nagarjuna's thorough dialectical demolition of conceptual

<sup>38</sup> Garma C. C. Chang, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> David J. Kalupahana, trans., *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

forms is aimed at destroying our faith in objective reason and, thereby, liberate us from its misleading influence. This is also the aim of Zen monads.

The monk who kicked the pitcher and the master who compared nirvana to eating when hungry, Bodhidharma who denied any value to individual merit and the Zen master who compared Buddha to dirt, were trying to transmit to others a profound insight into the conditions that determine the nature of individual behavior and social life. There is a fundamental link between the structure of mind and the nature of human existence, suffering and salvation. Human suffering derives from the conception of life that the analytical, rational mind gives rise to. The egocentric values that the discriminating mind generates produce conflicts within the self and discord among people. This conception has to be confronted, challenged, and repudiated all the time, by all means. Zen masters have responded with shouts, kicks, beating, etc., to expressions indicating the grip of the analytical intellect. Human freedom and goodness, on the other hand, derives from the relational conception of the self and the world. Zen precepts and practices are intended to overcome the objective-rational mind and to realize the relational apprehension of the world. Once we recognize the fundamental principles underlying Zen doctrines we realize the profound understanding underlying the irrationality and illogicality that characterizes much of Zen.

The relational conception of the world and the self has profound ramifications for individual and social life. It is primary for the actualization of a society based upon communality and concern for others. Buddhist thought, I have shown, is centrally concerned with the realization of human solidarity.<sup>40</sup> Zen is concerned with life here on this earth. The idea of nirvana is meant to transform the world of *samsara*.

The idea that the unifying knowledge is the ground of human goodness and freedom is also the pivotal idea in mystical religious traditions.<sup>41</sup> Many different paths are available for realizing this knowledge. In the Upanisads, the notion of the Supreme God, Brahman, which represents the dynamic-unity of all beings, is used to liberate human beings from the influence of the discriminating mind. In Taoism, Tao embodies the dynamic-unity of all beings and natural action is stressed as the path to the realization Tao. In Islamic and Christian mysticism, the notion of God is equated with the ideas of unity and love to make people recognize the relatedness of all beings as the truth.

Bondage and suffering, on the contrary, derive from the isolating apprehension of the self. "Whoever perceives anything like manyness here," according

<sup>40</sup> Bose, *Transformation of the Self*.

<sup>41</sup> Bose, *Religion and Revolution*.

to *Katha Upanisad*, “goes from death to death.”<sup>42</sup> Overcoming the dividing mode of thought is basic to the realization of true knowledge and freedom. “Break through multiplicity,” states Meister Eckhart, “God will break through him.”<sup>43</sup> Hindu and Islamic mystical doctrines of salvation are also based on the same fundamental principle.

The dynamic-relational understanding of reality, embedded in the notion of interdependent-origination, explains many of the fundamental principles and practices in Zen and classical Buddhism.<sup>44</sup> Religious forms and practices, in general, I have shown, reflect this mode of thought.<sup>45</sup> If this mode of thought is a real aspect of the human mind, it will have profound implications for an understanding of human behavior and for transforming social and individual life.

<sup>42</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, trans. and ed., *The Principal Upanisads* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), p. 634.

<sup>43</sup> M. O’C. Walshe, trans., *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons & Treatises*, vol. 1 (London: Watkins, 1979), p. 136.

<sup>44</sup> Bose, *Transformation of the Self*.

<sup>45</sup> Bose, *A Theory of Religious Thought* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1991); *Transformation of the Self; Religion and Revolution*; “Water, Fire and Serpents: The Structure of Mind and the Nature of Symbols,” *The Journal of Religious Studies* (in press); “Time, Mind and the Human Construction of Reality,” *The Journal of Religious Studies* (accepted).