

An East-West Spiritual Exchange

AN UNUSUAL HAPPENING IN THE RELIGIOUS WORLD OF 1979

JAN VAN BRAGT

“Christianity and Buddhism cannot be
compared, but they can meet.”

—A RINZAI ZEN PRIEST

THESE SCRIBBLINGS are in the nature of a report on an endeavor jointly undertaken by Buddhists and Christians. They cannot be a definitive account, because the thing is still alive, and also because, although many reactions by Japanese participants have already appeared, no evaluation on the European side is as yet available. Still, while waiting for a more complete and scientific analysis, it may be permissible to ruminate on this experience with a grain of esthetic freedom.

Let me first present an outline of the project. It was sponsored by the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, the Sophia Institute for Oriental Religions, the Hanazono Institute for Zen Culture, the Urasenke Tea Center (all on the Japanese side), and the Ostasien Institut, Bonn (on the European side), and took place during August and September, 1979. It covered four phases:

Residence of Japanese Religionists in European Monasteries. In small groups of from three to six people, thirty-nine Japanese religionists, representing all the major sects of Japanese Buddhism and even including two shinto priests, resided for about twenty days in one or two monasteries (Benedictine or Trappist), to share, as fully as possible, in the life of the monks.

* For this article I make abundant use of reports by participants in the project that appeared in the December 1979 issue of *Zen Bunka*, the organ of the Hanazono Institute for Zen Culture. Other testimonies are gleaned from various publications and, occasionally, from private correspondence. Not to burden this text with footnotes, I refrain from indicating the source of the quotations. My translations are sometimes a little free but do not, I trust, betray the authors' meaning.

VAN BRAGT

Exhibition of Zen painting and calligraphy, held at the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst in Cologne from August 17 till September 30.

Conferences on Zen and Christianity and demonstrations of Zen Ways, held in Cologne-Bonn, Paris, Amsterdam-The Hague, Brussels, and Munich.

Rome. All participants gathered in Rome for a papal audience and an evaluation session (the "Nemi meeting").

What did it all mean?

From this outline it is sufficiently apparent that the project was not a "seamless tunic," but a composite of elements of different origin and rather heterogeneous nature. Still, it never was a mere artificial patchwork. From the early planning stage, of which we cannot now relate the peripaties, a definite pattern emerged: a pattern of *exchange* between East and West on the *spiritual* level. This pattern did not form itself fortuitously but as the natural outcome, as it were, of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan up to now.

Mutual exchange. No one-way street, but a mutual giving and receiving. There is this balance, willed by the organizers, among the different parts of the project: the "pilgrimage to the holy places of Christianity" was undertaken "carrying Buddhist spiritual treasures." But this reciprocity was realized, beyond all expectations, even within each separate part of the program, as I shall try to indicate later. Indeed, if mutual understanding between East and West is a matter of urgent necessity (something which is presupposed here), this understanding can only come about where the partners meet as equals; where they can accept from each other without loss of self-respect, because they know that the other is eager to receive, in turn, the gifts they themselves have to offer. Where cultures meet, there must necessarily be differences in proficiency, but when it comes to the deepest levels of human experience, the meeting with the Absolute, man everywhere is sorely deficient. Here, the terms "superiority" or "inferiority" lose their meaning, although the word "difference" may come into its own. It must be recognized that for several centuries the West, in the arrogance of its material superiority, has rendered this kind of mutuality next to impossible. And it is not unthinkable that the East would put up a similar barrier by a feeling of Eastern superiority in things spiritual.

It can be said that, for our project, we chose two domains of spiritual praxis, or again two areas where the spiritual foundations of Eastern and Western cultures become visible, and fashioned a concrete program in both of them. These two are the monastic life and the Zen ways. Herewith I would like to leave all theory behind to have a good look at the concrete realization of the different parts of the program.

AN UNUSUAL HAPPENING

The Zen Calligraphy Exhibition in Cologne

The spirituality of the Zen tradition was shown through an exhibition of representative Zen-inspired ink paintings, and through live demonstrations of several of the Zen Ways (*ddb*). This exhibition made, of course, no claims to novelty in exhibiting the typical Far Eastern art of Chinese ink painting to a European public. Even the fact that the present exhibits were never before shown outside of Japan does not make this exhibition so very remarkable. The point of this exhibition was rather that, instead of merely showing works of art for the aesthetic appreciation of the connoisseur and the casual visitor, it aimed beyond the aesthetic level, to something which, in the minds of the artists themselves, can only be called "spirituality" or "religious experience."

To put this in more concrete terms, the Cologne exhibition aimed at:

1. showing how Zen spirituality embodies itself in writing and painting;
2. enabling an evaluation, by comparison, of the differences in spiritual development of the various painters (recurrent themes—the Daruma figure, the circle, Mount Fuji—were displayed alongside one another to that end);
3. showing how the quality of the calligraphy rises as the Zen insight deepens with spiritual training. For this purpose, clearly dated paintings by the same artist, Tesshū (1836–1888) were exhibited in a chronological order.

Was the message this exhibition tried to convey understood by the European visitors? This is, of course, hard to judge. But, already in the planning stage, Ōmori Sōgen, an eminent Zen *rōshi* of the Rinzai sect, remarked on the high degree of discernment some Westerners show in their evaluation of sumie art. Professor Terayama Katsujō, a calligrapher and a fervent practitioner of the "way of Zen through brush and sword," wrote that the attendance figures and number of catalogues sold were "the highest for any exhibition since the museum's founding. . . . It is a fact that there was something extraordinary in the popularity this exhibition enjoyed with the Germans, but the officials at the museum and those in the neighboring Japan Cultural Center as well declared that they could not explain it."

Let me add that, during the time of the exhibition, live demonstrations of calligraphy were regularly given in the museum, at first by Professor Terayama and a German disciple of his, Wolfgang Höhn, and later by two Japanese disciples.

Demonstrations of the Zen Ways in European centers

There can be no doubt that, of all the participants in the whole project, the artists-demonstrators of this group had taken upon themselves the most strenu-

VAN BRAGT

ous task. The strong concentration they had to bring to each of their many performances was certainly not facilitated by the great amount of traveling by car, train and airplane, and by the necessity to prepare, each time in a new setting, the scene of their demonstrations.

It is only natural that the leader and "star-performer" of this group was Ōmori Sōgen Rōshi, while Father Kadowaki Kakichi acted as a kind of impresario. But, from all reports it appears that none of the other members fell behind in total dedication to his performance or even in response from the public. But the words I am using—performance, public, etc.—are misleading, since they evoke the atmosphere of an art performance, to which the audience spontaneously reacts by applause. In the case of these demonstrations, the response of the audience was, indeed, completely different. Here is how Tea master Chisaka Shūgaku felt it: "The interest in the tea ceremony here in Cologne was far greater than I had expected. While I was preparing the tea, I felt—fast as a physical pain—the many fervent eyes riveted on me. The fervor with which the audience sought, through Zen, 'the heart of Japan' moved me deeply. And what amazed me most was that young people in their twenties formed the majority of the audience. Even after the demonstrations were finished, these people kept a profound silence, and there was nothing of the commotion or outburst of emotion commonly seen after a performance. I was deeply impressed by these figures returning home in silence as if they wanted to conserve forever in their hearts the depth of the experience which they had tasted."

No wonder that in the Königstein meeting—which was held September 19–21 as a first period of reflection—the question was formulated: "What is it in these demonstrations that distinguishes them from other performances, and inhibits people from clapping their hands?" Tentatively, the answer was given that art is not the right category for the Zen ways. While art can be said to consist of inspiration and technique, in the Zen ways there is something more. The everyday of human existence is transformed here into religion, so that the feeling of reverence, this point of connection with the transcendent, is most strongly evoked. And precisely this does not permit of any boisterous response.

The demonstration tour started in the framework of the Zen calligraphy exhibition in Cologne. It was an auspicious beginning. The hall of the Japan Cultural Center, with a seating capacity of 300 people, was filled every time by an overflowing crowd of up to 700 people.

Another highlight for the people in this group was apparently their stay in Holland. Not only because here they found an audience prepared for a deep grasp of their message by a regular practice of zazen—that was also the case in Paris and, up to a point, in other places. The reason lay rather in the following two points. First, here they had the occasion of demonstrating in a Christian church or, as Suhara Kōun expresses it, before the crucifix. It is hard to say

AN UNUSUAL HAPPENING

what happened there exactly, but it cannot be doubted that this circumstance made a deep impression on several of them and brought, as it were, a new dimension of fullness to their Zen way. After these demonstrations, archery master Suhara Kōun was told by the others that when he made his bows before and after shooting (*makiwarasharei*) they were considerably deeper than the regular forty-five degrees. He could only answer that he had not been aware of it, but that before the crucifix he felt excess of reverence which "pulled his breast toward the floor." And secondly, they lodged this time, not in an impersonal hotel, but in "De Tiltenberg," a retreat and meeting house run by a group of dedicated Catholic women. This atmosphere of human warmth and religious silence must have seemed an oasis after fifteen days of hustling around. In their "Gastfrau," Mimi Maréchal (who since her stay in Japan has herself practiced zazen very diligently) they found an extraordinary degree of understanding.

Enough echoes reach us from Europe to enable us to say that these demonstrations of the Zen Ways made a tremendous impact, the repercussions of which still seem to grow rather than to die out. At the same time, a real "exchange" has certainly taken place. The demonstrators all testify that they were carried along by the expectations of the European audiences, to the point of confiding to one another: "It's enough to get scared."

The Residence in European Contemplative Monasteries

"When we arrived at the monastery, we were given "the key of heaven," a rather small key with a triangular hole in it. Without this key, it is impossible to get inside the walls of the monastery. Women are, of course, not permitted to enter and, in general, entrance is not allowed to outsiders. And we, people of another faith, were given a free pass! It must certainly be the first time in the monastery's history."

A SŌTŌ ZEN PRIEST

We come at last to the center piece of the whole "spiritual exchange" program, and there is no better gateway to that story than the amazement before the taking down of the no-entry sign at these jealously guarded gates. Our question will of course be, "What happened inside those walls?" But several of the participants must feel that half the answer is already given in the above words.

Indeed, nearly all of the Japanese participants commented on the extraordinary human warmth of the welcome given them by the Catholic monks. One even writes: "The loving care the monks showed us during the entire period of our stay is about the strongest concern I ever experienced in my whole life." And many saw in it the perfect realization of Saint Benedict's rule "to treat each guest as if he were Christ himself." Nevertheless, the really amazing event does not

lie there; it lies in the fact that they, members of another religion, were recognized and welcomed, not as guests but as full-fledged religionists and, be it only temporary, members of the monastic community. It may be significant that this point was brought to the fore in the most forceful way by a participant who had the dubious fortune of living for three weeks in the only monastery that showed only a strict minimum of the above human concern for its guests. He writes: "The monks of our monastery lead a terribly busy life. They had no time to talk with us Buddhists, or to bestow on us any special service. The only thing they could do they did: to show us their lives without hiding or embellishing a thing. To welcome us as members of their community to the deepest recesses of the monastery, and to show us the back as well as the front of things, that in itself was ten times more meaningful than to try to make us understand things through formal dialogues. These monks had understood that in their spiritual wisdom . . ."

What then made these monasteries make this "leap in the dark?" I do not find a better word for it than faith: faith-expectation towards the Spirit who blows wherever He wants; faith-obedience to Vatican II, which had called for an openness to other faiths . . . and maybe a grain of that youthful spirit of adventure which is never completely absent from enduring institutions. It must be added that the decision in favor of the "Japanese guests" did not necessarily meet with the enthusiastic consent of the whole community. Thus, to cite only one example, the abbot of a monastery found it advisable to tell his visitors, right from the beginning, that several monks of the community were opposed to their coming and might possibly show that opposition. However, in the same chronicle could be written that, as the days of the visit went by, that bulwark of opposition melted like snow, to make place for the most cordial relationships. Something had happened . . . But before turning to the events of that visit, we should have a look at the visitors. By every standard, it was a motley group, with a rich diversity in age, religious affiliation, "monastic" experience, clothing . . . and motivation.

The scene is now set but, apart from a few indications, the question has not been answered yet, "What, if anything, happened there? And can that something lay claim to the name of 'spiritual exchange'?" Knowing quite well that these things are hard to gauge, I still feel confident in saying: "Yes, indeed, something happened, something in the nature of a spiritual exchange." But if you ask me to pin it down further, I do not feel confident at all. Let me simply try to give a few pointers. Certainly it seems to me that, in this experiment, people of vastly different backgrounds were able to meet as human beings on a level of their deepest aspirations, beyond all differences of race and dogma. This fraternal meeting, moreover, was not experienced as something made possible by a mutual "putting into brackets" of the respective religious commitment.

AN UNUSUAL HAPPENING

On the contrary, on both sides, the feeling was strong that this meeting could only happen on the strength of their respective spiritual training (experienced as a common bond and horizon), and could reach such human depth only because it happened in the religious sphere and in a mutual recognition of the authenticity of one another's religiosity. It could even be said that the meeting was lived by both sides as a mutual religious commitment. And precisely here lies, I would feel, the central happening of these three weeks.

Of course, if it is true that a man is changed by every meaningful encounter with a fellow man, we must go further and ask: How were the partners changed and enriched? In a very tentative endeavor to define that change, we could speak of a "widening of consciousness," and say that the religious consciousness of the partners had taken on a new dimension, precisely in that practiced recognition of the other. One of the (Catholic) mentors-interpreters formulates this beautifully: "Praying side by side with a Buddhist, and bowing together before the crucified Christ, gave me a new approach to the Father of all men." In other words, if each of the partners could heretofore practice his own religiosity in splendid isolation, after this experience each will have to live his religion "in the presence of the other"; or, as the same mentor suggests, "in a growing awareness of a broader community of faith, which embraces all honest seekers of what we call God."

To round off this report, I would like to record the main impressions and questionings which this exchange program provoked in the participants, but here again it must be understood that this report can only be partial and provisional. Very little can be said as yet about the European side, since their impressions have not been communicated yet. Speaking from my own observations, I would say that the European monks felt themselves being questioned first and foremost by the "spirituality of the body" of their guests. While it struck the Japanese that "the postures of the monks in the choir were rather sloppy," or that "during their meditation, the monks gave the impression of being immersed in sadness," the Europeans were impressed not only by the *zazen* posture—a meditation not determined by any object but first of all by a bodily attitude—but, more generally, by the unbelievable "amount" of spirituality and reverence the Japanese knew how to convey in their bodily behavior. The reflection was made a few times that the liturgy in the monasteries would be helped more by a course in tea ceremony (*sadō*), for instance, than by any amount of "spiritual theory."

The impressions of the Japanese participants are much more documented already. I shall pick up a few of them, rather at random, to end with those that could lead to serious questionings on both sides. Evidently not a few of the Japanese pilgrims had expected something rather forbiddingly dark and cold in its unworldliness. To their surprise, they found something full of "*ningenmi*"

(the human touch), "austerity in warmth," "a life wherein one can smile," "people whose greatest pleasure seems to lie in making somebody happy." While one of the first impressions of the travelers, on arriving at their destination, was that of being landed in an old folks' home (they were used after all to training halls full of trainees in their twenties and thirties), the most diverse elements soon made them experience the monastic life as surprisingly alive, bright (*akarui*), anchored in the region, and responsive to modern times: modern architecture (in some places), the stream of pilgrims come to share the monastic life for a few days, the contacts with youth, up-to-date equipment for the work, and so forth. Herewith the following considerations are often associated. One, how is it possible that this life is inspired and regulated by a rule (the *Regula Benedicti*) that is 1500 years old? And, two, Christianity in Europe must be more alive than we had been led to believe. That in the monastic life the individuality of each monk is respected, and that the abbot shares in the most humble jobs with all the brothers, are two more points often remarked upon. We must hurry, however, to come to the more central points.

The Christian monastic life certainly struck the Japanese visitors as an authentic spiritual life. Many comment on the depth and the quality of the silence in these precincts, and on the pacifying rhythm of that always identical routine of prayer, work, and reflection. "Six o'clock. The birds start chirping and soon there is the sound of crows flapping their wings like pigeons do. That signals the end of the meditation period. In the three weeks we passed in the monastery, there was not the slightest deviation from that routine. It is as if the orderliness of the life according to the rule of Saint Benedict affects even the birds that live here." And twice I heard a nearly identical remark from Zen people: "The days of this life bring me to the same kind of concentration and serenity as a *sesshin*." In this context, it is only natural that the divine office and its Gregorian chant—in its intimate combination of the religious and the aesthetic—came in for much admiration. Strangely enough, it is precisely in this same office that several Japanese monks experienced their first sense of estrangement. In these psalms God is continually asked for benefits and forgiveness of sins. Is this an adult form of prayer, or does it not rather betray the attitude of an irresponsible and naughty child? This became one of the six questions formulated by the Japanese, to which Benedictine representatives tried to give an answer in the "Nemi meeting." We do not have the space to report that answer here. So, let me only remark that several of the Japanese participants, while having that objection, were at the same time sensitive to the high degree of humility and the depth of reverence before the Absolute, which that same attitude of prayer implies.

"Pray and work" is often said to be Saint Benedict's motto, and the work as practiced by the monks drew at least the same amount of comment and ques-

tioning as the prayer. And, as so often happens in the interreligious dialogue, the questions—coming as they did out of the blue sky of a completely different frame of reference—did not always find a ready answer. We must again limit ourselves to the essentials: What role does work play in the monastic spirituality, and what is its relationship to prayer? As to the first point, the Benedictine principle of self-support of the monastery and its concrete implementation were a great source of wonderment for the Japanese monks with their essentially mendicant tradition. For the rhythm it brings to the life of the monk, it is often compared to the *samu* in the Zen hall, and it is also remarked that the work makes the monastery take roots in its regional environment and opens avenues of social service. On the other hand, some Japanese monks had the impression they could observe here a fissure in the armour of Christian spirituality. Is not, after all, prayer as a “spiritual activity” more highly valued than work, than bodily activity? Is not this one of the points wherein Western spirituality shows its dualism, its lack of *shinjin-ichinyo* (body and mind at one)? This question also was brought up in Nemi, and the Benedictine respondent fully conceded that Western anthropology, especially in modern times, certainly did not favor that unity, and that he expected much from Buddhist influence on that point. Interestingly enough, the spiritual reading during the silent meals became the symbol of that lingering dualism. While fully agreeing with that diagnosis, I cannot hide my impression that many Japanese participants rather found in the monastic practice a far greater unity of body and mind than Western theory led them to expect.

I cannot go into a further question which also intrigued the visitors: is there any social commitment, service to the world, in that secluded monastic life? I shall only use it as an introduction to a characteristic of Christian monasticism which undoubtedly made the most decisive impression on many a Japanese participant, namely the fact that the monks essentially take up that way of life *for life*. While the Bodhisattva ideal shows an *ōsō-gensō* rhythm, and Zen insists that enlightenment obtained on the mountain must prove itself in the return to the market-place, how do these monks, who stay forever on their sacred mountain, prove their love and contribute to human society? This objection—which often enough is formulated within Christianity itself—could not but come up among Japanese Buddhists. The fact is, however, that before that life-long commitment the Japanese reaction was one of practically undivided admiration which, in some of the participants, turned into an explicit questioning of the Japanese Buddhist practice. “The Zendo has become a short-distance competitive race, a school to obtain a diploma.” “This state of affairs, wherein one lives one’s whole life in community, without possessions, in great silence, and unmarried, reminds us of the ideal life of the samgha in Sakyamuni’s time. It is sad to see that in Japanese Buddhism this samgha life has become only a

AN UNUSUAL HAPPENING

passage in one's life, and this passage tends to become shorter and shorter. . . . If we do not renovate our *shukke* and return to the original form of the *samgha* . . . our Buddhism will become an irrelevant superfluity in these present times." Or again, "If the Zen halls can bring renewal to Japanese Buddhism, it will not be because Zen people leave these halls to work in the world but, on the contrary, because out of society many people enter these Zen halls." My admiration for the openness and honesty revealed in these questionings is unlimited, and I can only hope that a parallel thing is happening in Europe. For, to me they signify two things: one, that Buddhism is alive in Japan and, two, that something really happened during that quiet European September.

The Roman Finale

It was fitting that the Spiritual Exchange Program ended in Rome, the "honzan" of Catholicism. However, I have the impression that this pilgrimage to Rome became a highlight of their Christian experience for only a very small number of the group. The Roman fiesta in its massive setting could not compete with the sober serenity of the monastery.

Suffice it to mention two salient points. At the occasion of the visit to the Roman Secretariat for non-Christians, the total receipts of the sale of sumie paintings by Ōmori Sōgen Rōshi in the different exhibition sites were handed to the director of the Secretariat, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, for the benefit of the charitable works of Mother Teresa. A splendid ecumenical gesture.

And then there was the papal audience on the evening of September 26. No special audience could be procured because Pope John-Paul II was too busy preparing for his imminent trip to Ireland and the United States. But, as it turned out, that general audience—on the gigantic St. Peter's Square filled with people of all nationalities and a sea of umbrellas under the occasional showers—proved to be a bonus. Our group was given the place of honor right under the papal throne and, after the allocution and benediction, the Pope came straight to us, to talk with Yamada Mumon Rōshi and to shake hands with everyone of us. In the words especially addressed to us from the dais, the Pope had called our endeavor "a truly epoch-making event in the history of the interreligious dialogue," and expressed his joy "that the interreligious dialogue is moving on this basic spiritual level." And now, while standing in our midst, he encouraged us by saying very emphatically: "This kind of experience must continue."

The many Catholics in the audience before whom we passed on our way out and who applauded these Buddhist monks and wanted to shake hands with them, seemed to share that opinion.