

## NOTES

### WILHELM GUNDERT, 1880-1971

Professor Gundert passed from this world on August 3rd, 1971 at the advanced age of ninety-one. On the card that notified friends of his death, his German translation of a well-known Zen poem was printed:

Der höchste Weg is nicht schwer,  
Nur abhold wählerischer Wahl.  
Dort, wo man weder hasst noch liebt,  
Ist Klarheit, offen, wolkenlos.

(The Perfect Way is not hard,  
Only averse to choosing.  
There, where one neither hates nor loves,  
Is clarity, open and cloudless.)

Nothing is more befitting his way of life in his ripe old age, and it is just possible that he himself had chosen them for this occasion. During the first half of 1971 I visited him about three times. Although I naturally found him older than when I had met him some ten years earlier, he seemed already to have attained a state of childlikeness in the truest sense of the term, a child of innocence just sprung up from Paradise. He told me then: "Ich lebe im Augenblick." (I live in the moment.) That "moment" was in direct communion with eternity, and he was shrouded in an otherworldly clarity and stillness. He was a child on a free passage leading to both Heaven and Earth. He told me he had lost his ability to remember things, and, indeed, I observed that he had little memory of things of a year, month, or even a single day before. Yet strangely enough—yes, very strangely enough—his memory became instantly clear whenever he sat down at his desk and set to work translating the *Bi-yän-lu* (J. *Hekiganroku*). Even though this time in his later years became gradually more limited, it was as if the clarity of his whole life, of the whole world, had converged at this one point. "Die Arbeit erhält mich," he said, and sure enough, it was this translation work that sustained him, that was in fact his day-to-day life itself. He was the embodiment of the global phenomenon of Western and Eastern spiritual encounter.

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

Professor Gundert was born in Stuttgart in 1880. He was instructed early in his childhood in New Testament Greek as well as in the *Rig Veda's* Sanskrit verses by his grandfather, who had worked as a missionary for some twenty years in the Malabar region of India. From the beginning of his life, Professor Gundert's mind was opened to the East. After studying theology and philosophy as a candidate for the Christian ministry at Tübingen and Halle, he came to Japan on missionary work and became acquainted with Uchimura Kanzō. In 1910, having gained a working knowledge of Japanese, he began missionary activities among farming communities in Niigata prefecture along the Japan Sea. At the same time, this area being a stronghold of the Jōdo Shin sect, he was led to a study of Buddhism. From about 1915 onwards he devoted himself to the study of Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese in Kumamoto, Mito, and Tokyo. He left the ministry, and thenceforward his whole life was centered around his studies of Japanese culture and religion.

He returned to Germany in 1920, and remained for two years, studying under Professor Florenz at the University of Hamburg, and finally receiving a doctorate for his thesis: *Der Shintoismus im japanischen Nō-Drama*. In 1927 he was appointed director of the newly established Japanisch-Deutsche Kulturinstitut in Tokyo. From 1934 until 1945 he was in charge of lectures in Japanology as professor at Hamburg University. At present most of the lectures in Japanology at German universities are being given by his former students.

Nineteen thirty-five saw the appearance of one of his main works: *Japanische Religionsgeschichte*. At war's end, having reached mandatory retirement age, he retired to Neu-Ulm, a beautiful city on the banks of the Danube. There he resolved to devote the remaining years of his life to the translation of the *Bi-yän-lu*. It was for him an occasion to acknowledge a co-destiny with the turning of an epoch, and also a time to set his resolve upon a new phase of activity, that would contribute on a most basic level to the construction of a new world. He saw a fatal and fundamental lack in the West of something akin to Zen Buddhism, and for this reason he took up the task of transplanting one of the finest of the Zen classics to Western soil for the benefit of this coming world culture. Thus began a daily routine, the German translation of the one hundred "Cases" of the *Bi-yän-lu*, a work better known in the English-speaking world as "The Blue Cliff Records." In 1960 the first volume appeared, composed of Cases one through thirty, followed in 1967 by a second, containing Cases thirty-one

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through fifty (*Bi-yän-lu, Niederschrift von der Smaragdenen Felswand*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München). This illustrious undertaking, a work of truly world-wide significance, could well be compared to Arthur Waley's English translation of *Genji Monogatari* in the field of literature. The Japanese government in 1969 invested him with the Second Order of Merit of the Sacred Treasure, and in 1970 the Japan Academy elected him an honorary member. He continued his translation until the last days of his life.

The career that I have outlined above characterizes the calibre of his Japan studies: that is, he saw Japanese culture as being based upon Japanese religion. This feature in his accomplishments distinguishes his approach from that of contemporary Western Japanologists at large. It is generally accepted that Japan's religious thought or the artistic spirit as manifested in the Noh or in poetry is the most basic and at the same time the most abstruse aspect of Japanese culture. Quite recently, however, general interest and understanding of this aspect has been steadily growing, until this tendency is now conversely affecting the Japanese themselves, and causing them to re-examine their own cultural heritage. In view of this, it may rightly be said that Dr. Gundert's work has had deep meaning in world spiritual history, opening up a deep channel of spiritual and cultural interchange between Japan and the West. This is well exemplified by his German translation of the *Bi-yän-lu*. This work is renowned as one of the most difficult in all of Zen literature, even for those already possessed of some knowledge of Zen. It was this work, of such an intractable nature, that Dr. Gundert dared to take upon himself to translate all alone. Undoubtedly it was an extremely difficult task, even for one with all the wealth of experience gained from the study of Japan and Buddhism that included a period of twenty-five years in Japan. The intensive concentration required to translate even one or two lines of it sometimes lasted days or weeks. His cousin, the celebrated writer Hermann Hesse, sent him constant and warm encouragement, yet the one who inspired him most in his task was the late Suzuki Daisetz. Dr. Gundert tells that when he accompanied Dr. Suzuki on one of the latter's trips while visiting Germany, he noticed Dr. Suzuki always carried with him an old Japanese edition of the *Bi-yän-lu*. When the trip ended and the two of them parted at Stuttgart, which was Dr. Gundert's home, Dr. Suzuki inscribed his copy and put it into Dr. Gundert's hand. Dr. Gundert said later that this gesture gave him the decisive encouragement he needed to take up the translation of the work. That

two-volume Japanese edition given by Dr. Suzuki was henceforward always on his desk, giving him daily encouragement.

In the course of his translation work, an encounter between Christianity and Buddhism in a most profound sense took place. As he himself described it:

What brought me to an intimate understanding of this difficult classic of Zen was, in the long run, my own inherent spiritual heritage, that is, Christianity. My parents were pious Christians. My own convictions underwent a variety of changes with the passage of time during the decades of my life. Sometimes, I even felt that my faith had fallen. I found that I was obliged to part with traditional dogmas in many respects. In light of my former views, I may indeed have appeared to have fallen down in my conviction. Such a route, however, finally led me to a point where it is possible for me to see in a fresh light the unfathomable mystery of God as described in the Bible. And, indeed, it was this light that opened my eyes to Buddhism, especially to the inscrutable mysteries of Zen.

Each of the Cases of Dr. Gundert's translations of the *Bi-yān-lu* has a section entitled "*Zum Verständnis des Beispiels*" ("For the Understanding of the Case"). Here we find Gundert Sensei's views of Zen Buddhism scattered over ground formed from his rarefied Christian religious experience, thus making them unique and unprecedented introductions to Zen Buddhism. They reveal at the same time his understanding of Christianity highly influenced by Zen. Through Dr. Gundert, Christians may come into contact with the Buddhist truth, and Buddhists may encounter the Christian truth.

Dr. Gundert passed away while still engaged in the translation of the *Bi-yān-lu*. This is characteristic of the man, who offered himself as an eternal bridge of mutual understanding between Christianity and Buddhism by placing his entire being between the West and the East.

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