

Zen and Analytic Philosophy

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AN ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHER might wonder about the philosophical relevance of Zen. But in attempting to read a little bit about Zen, the philosopher will probably find very few studies which go straight to the sorts of questions which occupy him. For in discussing Zen, most writings focus on its religious, literary and historical aspects.¹ These studies sometimes touch upon philosophical aspects of Zen, but usually insofar as they are relevant to other aspects of Zen and not insofar as they are relevant to philosophy.

Another hindrance to Western philosophical understanding of Zen is the style in which most classic texts in Zen are written. The original source literature of Zen is filled with poetry and baffling stories (koans) written by monks whose principal aim was admittedly soteriological, rather than philosophical. Zen Buddhism certainly is a religion, since it involves ritual, soteriology, mysticism, sacred space and time, and the like. But it does attempt to answer the basic questions of analytic philosophy, particularly questions about metaphysics, questions about the ultimate reality or nature (*benxing*) of things and the mind, and questions of philosophical anthropology about the nature of the self and the good life. While Zen seems to be focussed on metaphysics, it

¹ Notable exceptions include, of course, Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985); and Steven Heine's various works on Zen and Heidegger. However, these works focus more on Continental philosophy than on its relation to analytic philosophy, which is the scientific search for answers to questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

might also have implications for ethics and for the epistemological underpinnings of Zen beliefs. Here I will attempt explain Zen with the terms of metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology. This will be an informational discussion in comparative philosophy, rather than a position for or against Zen as a position in analytic philosophy. However, I will offer some points of evaluation along the way and in the conclusion.²

Metaphysics

Zen accepts the Mahayana Buddhist position that things are “empty” of objective properties. It is commonly said in Zen texts that the fundamental nature of things is empty (*benxing kong*). Here nature is closely associated with causal characteristics. As the Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki explains, intellectual inquiry into the nature of things is mainly a search for their causal explanations.³ This is a reasonable construal of “nature.” Even in modern Western science, the nature of something is largely defined by its dispositional characteristics, its causes and its effects. However, Zen attempts to discover the fundamental nature of all things, of reality as such. This attempt to answer the broadest metaphysical question changes the nature of the inquiry. The contemporary Zen thinker Masao Abe explains that, in seeking the ultimate nature of reality, Zen asks for the *telos*, the purpose, and not for a merely brute cause of existence.⁴ This view has been considered by other philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibniz). But the metaphysical answers in Zen are unique. As Abe explains,⁵ according to Zen, the answer lies in questioner. The human mind gives significance to existence (and thus, as I will explain, there is a certain idealist element in Zen). For, since existence, *in toto*, cannot have a cause, it cannot have an objective teleological cause. Any purpose of

² The work of a philosopher is mainly to solve philosophical problems. But it is also to promote historical and cross-cultural philosophical understanding. The latter is the primary goal of this article.

³ D. T. Suzuki, “The Buddhist Conception of Reality,” in Frederick Franck, ed., *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 92–93.

⁴ Masao Abe, “God, Emptiness, and the True Self,” in Franck, *The Buddha Eye*, pp. 71–72.

⁵ Abe, in Franck, *The Buddha Eye*, p. 72.

existence is derived from the mind. A particular conceptual scheme discerns in the teleologically indeterminate world one distinct structure or another. To see the world only in terms of one's own peculiar conceptual scheme is to overlook the fact that the ultimate nature of reality is its emptiness of ultimate, mind-independent nature. An understanding of the emptiness of things is both metaphysical knowledge and a sense of a place in the world.

Metaphysical and philosophically anthropological ("significance of existence" or "meaning of life"-type) questions are run together in Zen philosophy. I will attempt to keep the two as separate as possible. The metaphysical reasoning in Zen runs along the following lines. According to the Zen Buddhist position, things do not have an ultimate causal role. All causal roles are relative to the subjective imputation of a conceptual scheme. And only on a local, provisional level may a thing be described as being real, since only in some local conceptual scheme may it have a nature of any sort. Again, there is no ultimately objective conceptual scheme, since the world, existence itself, is purposeless. This fact renders all things empty of inherent nature or reality, even though relative to a local conceptual scheme a particular thing may be said to be real.⁶ This is to say that a thing's nature in itself, just as it is (*zhenru*), is emptiness. Anything which is conceptually accessible, or a possible object of cognition, is real only relative to that cognition. As for the things in themselves, they are inaccessible to the intellect. To borrow an oddly non-trivial-sounding tautology from Hilary Putnam, "You can't describe the world without describing it."⁷ The nature of a thing is thus always internal to a conceptual scheme. When it comes to the objective nature of things independent of any conceptual scheme, it is inconceivable, which, according to Zen, is to say that it is empty.

The Zen way to understand things' ultimate nature is therefore to understand them through a mental state which is not formulable in descriptions, except those which deny things' reality. This state of supposedly profound metaphysical knowledge involves a nonconceptual perception of things as devoid of inherent nature. According to Zen,

⁶ This position is called the theory of Two Truths in Mahayana Buddhism.

⁷ Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

we do not reach knowledge by argument alone. Rather, we reach it by casting off conceptual mental states. For these tend to be beliefs which assume that a certain narrow conceptual scheme is absolutely true of the world (and of the significance of our lives). An early Zen text, *The Treatise on True Sudden Enlightenment*, says,

Those who completely awaken know . . . that causal connections produce events, and that temporary combinations produce events. Those who do not comprehend give rise to names and abide in words, grasp concepts and run around misguided.⁸

Here the Zen school endorses the metaphysics of the Huayan school, according to which a thing's basic nature is inconceivable, since the causal connections to other things which determine its nature are infinite. Zen also endorses the metaphysics of the Chinese Yogacara (or Idealist) schools, according to which the mind, due to its attachment to a certain conceptual scheme, clings to certain aspects of things' indeterminate and empty natures as though they were objectively real. Zen thus embraces the Yogacara view that all things are merely aspects of the mind.

This metaphysical idealism is common in the early texts (late 7th, early 8th century) which were foundational to the Zen movement. As the *Treatise on True Sudden Enlightenment* says, ". . . world is only mind."⁹ And "[Identity] is born from false mind."¹⁰ Moreover, the most important text in early Zen was the Yogacara idealist sutra, the *Lankavatara Sutra*. The Zen School held to this point of view over the centuries. For example, the 13th century Japanese monk, Dōgen, explains that the mind focuses on single characteristics, unable to see others. He gives the example of the ocean appearing round when one is at sea. Each thing actually has infinite, and thus indeterminate, qualities. Dōgen says, ". . . this ocean is not round, nor is it square—the

⁸ *Treatise on The True Sudden Enlightenment School of the Great Vehicle which Opens up Mind and Reveals Reality-Nature*, in J. C. Cleary, trans., *Zen Dawn: Early Zen Texts from Tun Huang* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), p. 105.

⁹ Cleary, *Zen Dawn*, p. 105.

¹⁰ Cleary, *Zen Dawn*, p. 108.

remaining qualities are inexhaustible.”¹¹ Hence, he concludes, “All things, ultimately unfathomable, are flowers and fruits in the sky.”¹²

Unique to the Zen school is that it adopted this idealist point of view in a way which emphasizes nonconceptual meditation and the profound and nonrational experience of enlightenment. Zen holds that it is not enough to believe that idealism is true. An unusual mental state is necessary, in order to grasp this basic metaphysical fact of things’ inherently empty natures at a profound level. The indeterminate, infinitely multifarious nature of things must be perceived, in order for metaphysical knowledge to obtain. This mental state was called by the legendary 7th century Zen monk, Huineng, nonthinking or no-thought (*wunian*).¹³ In this nondoxastic mental state one just sees the indescribable nature of one’s own mind and of the world in a radically different way from normal categories.

Huineng is said to have witnessed two monks arguing over whether it is the flag or the wind that moves. Settling the matter, he is supposed to have said, “It is the mind that moves.” This apparently illogical koan is probably meant to indicate something like the position developed by the 4th century A.D. Yogacara monk Vasubhandu. In his “Thirty Verses” (*Trimsika-karika*) Vasubhandu suggests that there is a constant shaping of experience by the mind. This shaping is “pure” or “mere” perception. It is very similar to the subconscious contribution which our brains make to perception and which contemporary cognitive psychologists study. When the human mind, with its complex and often emotionally charged conceptual schemes, makes various discriminations in this pure perception, there then seem to be a self and the objects of the self’s conceptual scheme. These are “mere consciousness” (*weishi*) and are not independently real. When the mind lets go of conceptual schemes, the self and objects cease to appear as objects independent of the mind. At this level of unadulterated, pure perception, one notices the fundamentally empty nature of things (including oneself),

¹¹ Dōgen, “Genjōkōan,” in J. C. Cleary, trans., *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1986), p. 34.

¹² Dōgen, “Kuge,” in Cleary, *Shōbōgenzō*, p. 72.

¹³ Philip B. Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 137.

which has always been evident in the act of perception. It is as though Zen Buddhists claim that, after years of meditation, we can become conscious of the experience-shaping neurological states studied by cognitive psychology! As Dōgen says,

Life is like when one rides in a boat: though in this boat one works the sail, the rudder, and the pole, the boat carries one, and one is naught without the boat. Riding the boat, one even causes the boat to be a boat. One should meditate on this precise point. At this very moment, the boat is the world—even the sky, the water, and the shore all have become circumstances of the boat, unlike circumstances which are not the boat. For this reason life is our causing to live; it is life's causing us to be ourselves. When riding in a boat, the mind and body, object and subject are all the working of the boat; the whole earth and all of space are both workings of the boat. We that are life, life that is we, are the same way.¹⁴

The idea here is that there is nothing of any determinate nature outside of our conceptual schemes. We are always contributing our own conceptual scheme to our perception of our environment. Enlightenment is the state of catching ourselves in the act and thereby seeing the real nature of things. Since enlightenment is therefore a mental state that is always potentially conscious, Zen monks emphasize that it is a simple shift in view, like a gestalt shift, only more profound.

As we have seen, in Zen, nature is identified with causal role. However, since there can be no purpose of being itself, according to the mechanistic assumptions upon which the intellect bases itself, the intellect is thus set up for inevitable disappointment. It must discover that being itself is not the sort of thing for which there could be an objective, extra-mental purpose.¹⁵ The explanation of reality itself, why it is and why it is in the way that it is, is not accessible to such inquiry, since there is nothing outside of reality to explain it. This is the Zen interpretation of the First Noble Truth of Buddhism that "life is dejection (suffering)." Our system of values is not reflected in the nature of

¹⁴ Dōgen, "Zenki," in Cleary, *Shōbōgenzō*, pp. 45–46.

¹⁵ In Zen training this inevitable disappointment is supposed to be extremely frustrating, but it is also supposed to mark the imminence of a breakthrough to enlightenment.

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things. Things, as they are separate from the mind, are indifferent to those values. And yet the turning point of enlightenment is supposedly available in this despairing thought. For there are no things separate from the mind. The notion that mind is a separate thing from the world is itself just another nonobjective conceptual scheme.

In Western philosophy, various thinkers (Leibniz, Heidegger) have asked why there is anything at all. But the Zen school would agree with the admonition of the 7th century Huayan monk Fazang, who says that, in philosophers, "emptiness sticks in the mind, always becomes a field of conditions. Though reality abides right before our eyes, it is turned into a realm of names and characterizations."¹⁶ Answering the question of the purpose of reality is closely associated with our own need for a sense of purpose and affirmation of our lives. The Buddhist's confrontation with the lack of a purpose which is both conceptually accessible and ultimately satisfactory forces him to reach a visceral¹⁷ and nonintellectual affirmation of human life. This has to do with how one feels about the opportunity to be conscious. If the lack of an external, objective or absolute purpose is not to throw one into dejection, one must reach a level of joy in the face of merely being, a bliss so profound that it outweighs the ultimate futility of ordinary human endeavors. This involves seeing one's own nature as identified with an inconceivably creative and dynamic cause of all things as they are ordinarily perceived. This cause, according to Zen Buddhism is the very fact that things are empty, since things' lack of determinate nature enables them to appear in the variety of ways in which they do. But exactly why this explanation is satisfactory supposedly can be understood only by the enlightened.

Associated with this realization is the answer to the question, What is ultimate reality (*zhenru*)? Ultimate reality is emptiness, or "mind only." These are the same, since the mind is the source of the various

¹⁶ Fazang, "Cultivation of Contemplation of the Inner Meaning of the Hua-yen: The Ending of Delusion and Return to the Source," in J. C. Cleary, trans., *Entry into the Inconceivable* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983), p. 150.

¹⁷ As a bizarre aside, I note that Japanese Zen monks have long emphasized the abdomen (*hara*) as the locus of the enlightenment experience, while contemporary biologists have called the intestines a "second brain" since they contain an extremely complex brain-like neural system. See Sandra Blakeslee, "Complex and hidden brain in the gut makes stomach aches and butterflies," *New York Times*, January 23, 1996.

properties of things. Ultimate reality is just the causal chain itself. The ordinary mind in its deluded state can perceive only pieces of this chain. The mind tends to lose sight of their finitude and to reify them as if they were ultimate goals upon which the possibility of ultimate happiness or ultimate dejection hinges. When the mind rids itself of concepts, it supposedly sees the whole causal chain, as it were, in its indescribably and infinitely rich properties. Hence, the Buddhist dictum: Nirvana is samsara; ultimate bliss is not distinct from ultimate dejection. The nature of ultimate reality may make individual conceptual schemes and projects seem like insignificant grains of sand. And yet, according to Zen, the realization that one's own ultimate identity is void is the same as the realization that one's own fundamental reality is not distinguishable from being itself.

Here is where we seem to slide from fundamental metaphysics to questions about the meaning of life and the nature of the self, questions of philosophical anthropology. This may be a point of philosophical criticism of Zen metaphysics. Zen seems to be starting with a nihilistic, relativistic, or idealistic premise and then offering a psychology of adjustment to this putative fact. Thus it would seem to be a religious psychology rather than a metaphysical position. While there is something to this criticism, I will suggest later that it misses the mark.

In sum, Zen claims that things under their ordinary descriptions are fabrications of the mind, and that the actual nature of things is understood only in a special nonconceptual mental state. Of course, ever since Hume and Kant blew the whistle, whenever bold metaphysical claims are made, epistemological questions arise. With Zen we want to know how to evaluate a claim to conceptually empty but supposedly momentous metaphysical knowledge, when that claim stipulates that it can have no argumentative support or even any content. The epistemological aspects of the metaphysical stance taken in Zen Buddhism will come up later. First, I will discuss moral aspects of Zen.

Ethics

Zen Buddhism was lambasted by Neo-Confucians of the Tang and Song Dynasties for its supposed antipathy toward morality. Zen Buddhists recommended abandoning one's filial and familial duties in order to attain private salvation. Zen did not involve itself in social ills, but

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rather proclaimed their emptiness, along with the emptiness of moral values in general.

I will not attempt to rehabilitate Zen here. However, I would like to point out the possible ways in which Zen might be able to dispute the claim that it is at best irrelevant to ethics. The relevance of Zen for ethics may be described with the following line of inference. Consider the following propositions.

p: Absolutism about nonmoral values is true (i.e., any nonmoral value is an absolute value not relative to any conceptual scheme).

q: Nihilism about all conceivable purposes is true.

r: Conflicts between alternative value schemes ought to be treated as insoluble.

Now consider the following inference, which is implicit in Zen philosophy.

P if p then q

P2 if q then r

C Therefore, if p, then r.

Here "nihilism" in q is meant in the Nietzschean sense. This is the view that any purpose or system of value must be absolute. In other words, rather than being created by oneself, any real value must be uniquely and antecedently real, since only in that way can it really bestow significance on one's otherwise purposeless life. This is nihilistic, because it entails acceptance of the notion that there is no purpose, significance or worth to be had outside of an absolute conceptual scheme. For if it turns out, as Zen holds, that all value schemes are empty of objective reality, then, given that p, there is no worth in the world whatsoever. This is to say that, if one clings to some scheme of nonmoral values,¹⁸ then one is a nihilist in the Nietzschean sense of someone who must cling to an absolute scheme of nonmoral values, or else despair. If one is a nihilist, then one is prepared to treat as insoluble all those moral conflicts which arise with others who subscribe to alternative nonmoral values. This is to believe that one ought to fight for one's

¹⁸ By "nonmoral values" I mean goods other than moral goods. For instance, happiness and beauty are nonmoral values, while the wrongness of murder and the rightness of returning stolen property are moral values.

way of life and impose it upon others. For on this view, to believe that one's own way of life (one's nonmoral values) is a mere choice, rather than the uniquely absolute nonmoral values, is to despair. With this much at stake, sometimes moral values are nihilistically overlooked by those who cling to nonmoral values. Hence, conclusion C: absolutism about nonmoral values entails that moral conflicts between people of differing ways of life should be treated as insoluble.

Now r is clearly unacceptable to any philosopher in a culturally pluralistic society. It spells the end of rational resolution of conflicts in and amongst societies. Zen undermines r by holding that p is false, albeit by claiming that a real understanding of the significance of "p is false" may be had only through meditative discipline. Denying that p and accepting nonabsolutism about nonmoral values may seem to absolutists to be equivalent to nihilism. After all, if nothing is inherently valuable, despair seems warranted. But Zen, in arguing for C, claims just the contrary. Nonabsolutism (plus a disciplined mental clarity) is the way out of the despair of interminable social conflict. Recall that according to the Zen position, the intellect cannot reach enlightenment, because it cannot in principle discover any absolutely true conceptual or valuational scheme. It is here that a nonintellectual insight steps in. As Suzuki says,

When the intellect comes to an impasse—to which it will surely come one day if it works honestly—it sees itself reflected in the mirror of faith, which is its homecoming. The intellect thus finally arrives at the great affirmation.¹⁹

The solution to the metaphysical problem supposedly brings with it profound psychological solace. Again we see Zen bringing together the concern we have for the "meaning of life" and the concern we have to answer basic metaphysical questions. Also, we see here the close relation to be drawn between the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical claims entailed by Zen Buddhism.

In Zen, one comes to have a realization at a visceral level—and not merely the superficially verbal level—that our nonmoral values are not absolute. One no longer "clings" to them, i.e., no longer takes their being absolute and subject-independent to be necessary for one's happi-

¹⁹ Suzuki, in Franck, *The Buddha Eye*, p. 95.

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ness. This means that one ought to have a set of desires without treating any of them or even the whole set, as absolutely indispensable. That is why Zen enlightenment is a gut realization, more than a verbal acceptance of the fact that there are no absolute purposes. Fazang even argues that enlightenment about emptiness requires one to be moral. For immorality entails egoism, which is one form of ignorance and stain obscuring our view of reality.²⁰

Now, is this psychology, instead of philosophy? Not entirely. First, it is a pluralistic antidote to conflict. It is a normative social stance. Second, it promotes shared experiences, in an affirmation of life and being itself, upon which partisans of all types should agree. It gives insight into the legitimacy of others' endeavors, since one sees that being itself is value-neutral, open to human improvisation. These points are conducive to philosophical values (truth, respect for people, democracy, etc.).

Any society experiences divisions over nonmoral values. They inhibit efforts to resolve conflicts of moral values. For they are sometimes zealously championed at the expense of moral values. An appreciation of mere being is a normative stance regarding how those conflicts should, in general, be handled. One might object that many people who have not experienced Zen enlightenment are pluralists about nonmoral values and attempt to solve moral conflicts in a pluralistic way. They have reached an acceptance of the nonabsoluteness of nonmoral values on intellectual grounds and do not seem to need a visceral Zen enlightenment. This objection might show that Zen is more psychology than philosophy. A Zen Buddhist might respond that without the radically transformative enlightenment about the inherent worth of being, pluralism reduces to a lifeless sort of relativism in which others' ways of life are not actually affirmed but merely despairingly tolerated. One might object that it is precisely people whose nonmoral values leave a sour taste in our mouths, people whose existence we cannot enthusiastically affirm whom morality requires us to tolerate and respect. The Zen thinker might reply that, if the enthusiastically affirmative nature of respect for others is stripped away, then there is more resentment than respect left in one's morality. However, I will not pursue these matters further here.

²⁰ Fazang, in Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable*, p. 159.

Epistemology

Zen claims that an insight into the basic nature of things is possible, just as a gestalt shift is an immediately available, but often difficult to obtain, change in perception. To see one's conceptual schemes as nonultimate is a difficult mental trick. The point here is that one needs to achieve this new way of seeing, since it is not enough to believe that things are empty. An experiential understanding of emptiness is needed, in order for this belief to be given content. The richer content is possible only after meditation, since it is ineffable and cannot be communicated.

However, private justification is deeply problematic. We usually count as knowers only those who can provide reasons for their beliefs. Some philosophers of religion assert that it is possible for someone simply to see, without being able to give reasons, that the suffering in the world is logically reconcilable with the perfect goodness of an all-powerful and all-knowing god. Thus, the argument from evil against the existence of God is supposed to have a defeater in the private, basic knowledge and testimony of religious experiences. This may be a plausible defense of the epistemic status of religious experience. After all, mutes, unable to communicate their private knowledge, can have private, incommunicable justification.²¹ The problem is that here philosophy ends, and religion begins. For when we are asked to accept a position for which no evidence may be demanded, we do not have any reason to believe that position or to hold our own evidence against that position to be suspect.²²

By the same token, Zen, too, takes away what it gives. The philosophy in Zen is primarily metaphysical. But we are lead ultimately to the necessity of a religious experience, and here Zen parts hands with

²¹ Zenkei Shibayama makes this point in *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (New York: American Library, 1975).

²² Other philosophers might disagree. (See Ralph W. Clark, "The evidential value of religious experience," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 1984: 189-202.) This issue is, of course, well-treated in the literature and lies beyond the scope of this paper. See Evan Fales, "Mystical experience as evidence," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 40 (1996): 19-46; and William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

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philosophy. However, we should not break the link too quickly. Rather than taking a leap of faith away from philosophy, Zen offers a metaphysical argument in support of the necessity of the enlightenment experience to metaphysical knowledge. As Dōgen says,

Just because [the teachings of the Buddha and Zen adepts] are not rationally understood by you, that doesn't mean you shouldn't study the road of rational understanding of the Buddhas and Zen adepts. Even if it should be ultimately without rational understanding, the rational understanding you are voicing now cannot reach it. . . . [The notion that Zen is totally without rational guidance or understanding is a] false idea of [the concept of] "no rational understanding." Who taught you this? Even if there is no teacher of natural reality, this is the heretical view. . . .²³

Zen gives arguments about why and how an enlightenment experience opens the door to metaphysical knowledge. This is one reason why we should not, as far as epistemology is concerned, classify Zen strictly as a religion. Another reason why we should not do so is that Zen purports, albeit in a mystical way, to be empirically based. Zen promises a mere gestalt-shift-type experience which, while in a sense radical, is in another important sense not radical, since not otherworldly or associated with any transcendence of the world which we ordinarily perceive.

Recall the argument intended to show that an enlightenment of the Zen type is necessary to fundamental metaphysical knowledge. There we were told that the fundamental nature of reality can be accessed only by a mind free from conceptual discriminations, since the fundamental nature of reality, as shared by all things, is empty of any determinate set of properties. Zen argues that the mind must understand its own nature as identical with the fundamental nature of all things, since it is the subject in dependence upon which things are made to have misleadingly determinate-seeming and absolute-seeming properties. These are the philosophical arguments. On the other hand, Zen embodies the unavoidably nonphilosophical, nonconceptual enlightenment experience. It is supposed to have significance, and yet it is not formulable in concepts or language. Therefore, the enlightenment ex-

²³ Dōgen, "Sansuikyō," in Cleary, *Shōbōgenzō*, pp. 92-93.

perience cannot be considered public evidence, the kind of evidence to which philosophy must limit itself.

Conclusion

I cannot give a complete evaluation of Zen philosophy here. However, the following observations should be made. We have seen that, according to Zen, the most important work in metaphysics cannot be undertaken by philosophical reasoning. The 20th century Japanese monk Kobori Sōhaku Nanrei says,

Remember that "rose" is merely a name we give to an unfathomable substance according to our conceptual usage. . . . Whenever that which is anonymous is brought into the light of intellection, its original nature and substance is metamorphized and takes on quite a different character.²⁴

We have always been using concepts, and this habit is said to require years of meditation in order to be broken. However, the enlightenment experience is supposed to be a profound insight into the basic nature of everything. If one can manage to stop clinging to conceptual schemes, one is supposed to be able to see that, as Kobori says, "There is only chaos, the undifferentiated fact that ever renews its flowing."²⁵

In a sense, Zen thinkers offer this up as an empirical claim. Huineng supposedly held that the matter was analogous to the direct knowledge of how hot or cold a glass of water is while one is sipping it, as compared with the ignorance of someone who has not touched it. However, one might become suspicious when a mystical sect is made out to be empiricistic. The problem is this. Whether knowledge can be had through a private, ineffable insight is not necessarily a strongly empirical claim. The putatively empirical claim, K, is, "If you look and see for yourself, you'll see that Zen enlightenment is knowledge." Yet K itself may rather be a matter for general epistemological deliberation of the ordinary philosophical sort, rather than for having a look see in the strongly empirical sense. This is to say that K might be logically false, given our concepts of epistemic justification and knowledge. We

²⁴ Sōhaku Nanrei Kobori, "A Dialogue: A Discussion between One and Zero," in Franck, *The Buddha Eye*, p. 141.

²⁵ Kobori, in Franck, *The Buddha Eye*, p. 142.

might be able to determine on independent epistemological grounds and without "taking a look," that taking a look might not, in principle, suffice to validate Zen enlightenment or K. Whether K is logically false cannot be settled here. But I think that ordinary epistemological deliberation would find that the concept of being justified without the ability to present that justification in concepts to someone, even to oneself, is as close to a logical contradiction as anything is. This would cast serious doubt upon the notion that Zen metaphysics is empirically verifiable.

Nevertheless, while the claim to knowledge in Zen would not fare well in philosophical debate, it is still a philosophical claim which is part of a philosophical position. And it is quite an interesting position, in which the necessity of mystical insight to philosophical understanding is supported by a philosophical argument. It is an epistemological argument in favor of a claim to which epistemology is not supposed to be friendly. The argument fails, I think. However, it represents a way in which Zen involves itself deeply with philosophy and yet, perennially and in quite a fascinating manner, brings up idiosyncratic restrictions on the role which philosophy should play in thought.