

Zen hyakudai

One Hundred Zen Topics

PART FOUR

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The practice of Avalokitesvara

When caught on the horns of a dilemma and unable to move either forward or backward, what in creation are we to do? The Zen man tells us that unless we pass through this fundamental impasse of Zen experience, we can never receive the final nod of approval. To pass through this fundamental impasse means we must recognize it to underlie all that we experience; that is, *this* is what we must struggle to perceive, to grapple with, to understand in the midst of all we see, hear, feel and think. Thus we are told that heat and cold are things we learn on our own, not from another. Let me give a further example of what I mean.

In another story about the same Kuei-tsung,¹ a monk came to him, asking, "If you would pardon a know-nothing novice like myself asking, how is it possible for a seeker to enter the enlightened realm?" Kuei-tsung responded by deftly rapping the cauldron three times.

"You can hear that, can you not?" he asked.

"Certainly I can," came the reply.

* This is an adapted translation of *Zen hyakudai* (1943), from the *Collected Works of D. T. Suzuki* (1966), volume 15, pp. 200–207. Footnotes have been provided by the translators. We wish to thank Matsugaoka Library, Kamakura, for permission to publish it here.

¹ A Zen master of ninth-century China, mentioned in a previous installment; see *Eastern Buddhist* 13,1 (1980).

"That's odd," said Kuei-tsung, "I didn't hear a sound." He then proceeded to strike the cauldron again, one, two, three times.

"And that? Can you hear that?" he asked.

This time the monk replied warily, "No, sir, nary a sound."

The Master countered him swiftly, saying, "Odder still, then, for certainly I heard it most distinctly."

The monk did not know what to make of all this and lapsed into silence. The Master then recited a passage from the sutra:

"Through her marvelous functioning is Avalokitesvara able to rescue those caught in the world of suffering."

That is, Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva who contemplates the sphere of sound, rescues sentient beings through the medium of sound and is even said to appear to listeners when their auditory faculties are heightened; this is the so-called practice of Avalokitesvara.

There was another occasion at which Kuei-tsung sought to impress upon his fellow monks the import of the practice of Avalokitesvara. When the Master had assumed the platform, he addressed the assembly, saying: "I now wish to explain Zen to you, so I want all of you gathered here to move forward." Hearing this, the entire assembly as a body pressed forward eagerly. The Master then recited the passage: "Seekers of the Way, listening is the practice of Avalokitesvara that accommodates itself perfectly to all who are in need." The marvelous functioning of Avalokitesvara expresses itself wherever sentient beings turn their thoughts to the bodhisattva—is that not truly wonderful? This was the gist of the passage. It was in this statement that Kuei-tsung placed his wholehearted sincerity, explaining Zen quite tersely. Somewhat too tersely for some; for a monk felt compelled to ask: "Just what is this practice of Avalokitesvara?"

Now, he had just demonstrated the practice of Avalokitesvara, and yet the monk asks what that practice is—here lies the contradiction of the human mind. It is because of this contradiction, though, that we are able to be truly conscious of our own existence. Zen issues from here as well.

Kuei-tsung started snapping his fingers and asked: "Tell me, you are capable of hearing—yes? no?"

The monk replied, "Yes, I hear it all right."

Seeing that it was hopeless to go on talking, Kuei-tsung leaped up and bellowed, "What in creation brings you here in the first place!"

Then with staff aflag, he dispersed the assembly under a rain of blows. Shortly after, though, he was seen sauntering off to his quarters, enjoying a great belly laugh to himself as if nothing had happened. An observer witnessing the scene might think this Zen priest had crossed the line. Announcing his intent to explain Zen, there is no evidence of his ever making such an explanation. "Move forward!" he commanded the assembly, and so everyone did. He then recited the sutra passage. When queried as to its meaning, he began snapping his fingers, demanding, "You hear this, do you not?" When the monk said he did, the Master roared, "Dundering idiot, out, out!" He was then seen laughing to himself as he returned to his quarters. In all events, it's completely baffling, a clear case of perjury when deliberated upon by judge and jury.

Where, then, does the story fall in place? If there were an angle through which we could make sense of it all, well, I'm afraid it would not be Zen. But if there were no real point to the story, then that curious religion known as Zen would have long ago vanished under the sands of time. An ancient worthy once said, "A Buddha is what he is by virtue of his Awakening." That one word—Awakening—is what puts the eye on the dragon.²

Zen's transcendental feeling of freeness and kambun literature

A while ago, I published a book called *The World of the Absolute* (1941), copies of which I sent out to some people I knew. One of them was a bright, upcoming scholar, who said of it, "When I read your book, I could feel the sense of serenity pervading the world you described." What he said in the sequel to his review I cannot recall. Was it "Oh, how I envy you!" or "Now, really, is that good enough?" or "Such a splendid work of world-transcending freeness!"? Whatever his response, my own intention in writing the work was to draw people's attention to that serene world; for the more oppressive our situation, the more important it becomes to tread in some way the path to that transcendent world. It is not even necessary to tread the path, so long as we can get a glimpse of it. Without it, people cannot live as human beings. It is not whether one is alive or not; it is a question, rather,

² An allusion to the well-known story of the artist who painted a dragon so real that it flew off when he made the final touch, painting in the eye of the dragon.

of whether one is attuned to a sense of being alive. For more than merely existing, I find it essential to have a sense of being alive. Seen in this light, it may well be that in Zen we find a religion of transcendence like no other. While Zen is located in the realm of worldly concerns, of what to wear and how to eat, at the same time it dwells in the realm of absolute freeness, of mountain, cloud, sea and moon. Generally speaking, the religious life is of this transcendent character, wherein the emotions and passions that ordinary people experience are sublimated.

The vagabond Buddhist poets, Han-shan and Shih-te of seventh-century China, and Ryōkan (1758–1831) and Bashō (1643–1694) of Japan, were men of eccentric ways who knew nothing of the world of social convention, who would have refused any dealings with the world. They would no doubt have been lumped together with the many things commonly regarded as nonessentials, such as the alcove (*tokonoma*) in the Japanese house, or the eyebrows over each person's eyes, or the stars in the heavens above, or the family crest on formal wear (*haori*). Yet we cannot simply declare them superfluous and do away with them out of hand; that is, they exist not in the negative sense of filling a pre-existing need; they possess, rather, a greater, affirmative function. Unless we are in tune with that function, the horizons of the serene world they point to do not present themselves; in which case, whatever our poet monks have to say, wherever they begin to say it, simply does not click. In this case those who hail from different dimensions are bound to fail in their dealings with one another. Zen's transcendent character is truly to be found in its penetrating knowledge of the world as such. But this knowledge, it must be remembered, is not a relative knowledge, but an absolute one, the absolute knowledge of *prajñā*-intuition.

I would contend that the ultimate expression of Zen's character is to be found in *kambun*, that is, in Chinese.³ As a product of the soil of Chinese culture, Zen is inextricably bound up with Chinese literature. We Japanese are familiar with works written in Chinese through the

³ The primacy of *kambun* literature in Zen studies was also emphasized by D. T. Suzuki's teacher, Zen master Shaku Sōen (1860–1919). It was no doubt from training under Sōen that the importance of the Chinese Zen *kōan* literature was impressed upon Suzuki at an early age.

early Japanese classics, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. Like the proverbial shrimp that snaps into the air only to land back where it started, so too are we Japanese unable to distance ourselves psychologically (in the broad meaning of the term) from the feeling of always being in a *kambun* culture; nor is there any real reason for us to want to do so, for are we not one of the peoples of Asia? To put ourselves at a remove from *kambun* would be to abandon the world of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, which would be a form of cultural suicide. It goes without saying that it is important for the Japanese people in general, even down to the lowly public servant, to come into contact with the spirit of Asian culture; how much more so is it that the leaders charged with the education of the younger generations make the conscious decision not to abandon *kambun* studies, if they wish to impart an appreciation of this world-class culture to future generations. No matter how much those like Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801)⁴ ridicule *kambun* studies, it would be disastrous to let such narrow-minded views rule the day.

From the time Zen entered Japan until the Edo period (Tokugawa era, 1600–1868)—nay, even unto the present day—Zen monks have enjoyed Chinese poetry immensely, taking great pleasure in the critical annotations and poetic comments that go with them, a pastime that served to take the edge off the typically hard life of monastic training. As Zen pervaded every facet of Japanese culture, it adapted itself to the ways peculiar to the Japanese people. Though Zen was influenced to a marked degree by its new surroundings, what would be designated as Zen literature proper remained unchanged in its basic framework in *kambun* literature. Here is a Zen passage:

There is nothing in the triple world; Where can mind be found?
 The white clouds form a canopy,
 The flowing spring makes a lute—
 One tune, two tunes; no one understands,
 When the rain has passed the autumn water is deep
 in the evening pond.

⁴ A strong advocate of national studies (*kokugaku*) over Chinese studies, Motoori Norinaga rejected foreign philosophical systems such as Confucianism and Buddhism in favor of native Japanese ones.

三界無法 何處求心 白雲為蓋 流泉作琴 一曲兩曲無人會 雨過夜塘秋水深⁵

It is impossible to adequately render the full range of nuances conveyed by the original Chinese when translating into a Western language or even into Japanese—so much has been condensed into that one string of *kanji* that it virtually defies analysis. A straight reading⁶ of the first phrase would be, *Sangai muhō*, literally, “Three worlds, no dharma.” These words say virtually all there is to say about Zen, about Buddhism, about life, about all that is. In them we encounter a striking statement pointing directly to ultimate truth—so much so that all that follows, from “Where can mind be found?” on, is reduced to mere echoes of those first stirring words.

So beguiling are the charms of *kanji* that the Chinese are said to go to great lengths to compose verse, even to the point of exerting a baneful effect on the culture as a whole. Calligraphy is not only a kind of writing, but also a kind of painting. As such, not only is the semantic content of the *kanji* important, but also the aesthetic form it takes. The inscription of poetry is not simply a matter of the content of the words, but the expression of that content in the shape of the written characters; here we must pay attention to the manner in which the characters were inscribed when the verse was set down on paper. The verse that follows is not necessarily Zen in content, but through it we can get a sense of whither lies the Absolute. I would be the first to admit that saying “whither lies” is exceedingly vague in meaning, that a more precise definition is needed here, but since this is not an academic paper, I have purposely left it vague. In fact we might even say that where we find that “vagueness” we come into contact with one aspect of the Asian outlook on life. If the term “vagueness” does not suit your tastes, then perhaps some other term, such as haziness, obscureness, mysteriousness or nebulousness, might do as well.

⁵ P'an-shan's (Banzan) statement followed by Hsueh-tou Ch'ung-hsien's (Setchō Jikken, 980–1052) verse appears in *Pi-yen lu* 碧巖錄 (*Hekiganroku*; 1128), Case 37. The translation given here is from Thomas and J. C. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 276. This passage is compiled in *Zenrin kushū* (1688).

⁶ A “straight reading” here means that the lexical elements have not been recast into the syntax of Japanese or English, but have been retained in the order they were found in the original Chinese.

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Ten years atop a cushion, the site of myriad dreams,
Before that half night's awakening
To the mind detached from things.

十年枕上塵中夢 半夜燈前物外心⁷

Since I am ignorant of the sound patterns of Chinese speech, I cannot begin to appreciate the charming meter in which this verse is no doubt set. I do know, however, that when this verse is put into Japanese syntax, it requires the inclusion of certain grammatical features, such as the preposition "of" or "from" as in "the site of myriad dreams" or "the mind detached from things." While this merely introduces the possessive case to the phrases, it causes a subtle shift in the nuance of this string of *kanji* that alters how we engage the poem conceptually and affectively. In Chinese literature, especially in the composition of Chinese verse, a tremendous effort must be made to select and effectively organize just the right combination of *kanji* (that is, those that most richly suggest the topic being treated) within the dictates of grammar. One must then distribute the selected *kanji* over the breadth of a blank sheet of paper in an aesthetic manner, adding to it, as is suitable to the theme, craggy mountains here, a flowing stream there, offset by some trees or grasses or people as needed. Thus, bringing together one's intuition, experience and feeling, one sets down on paper these various elements of the painted scroll. In the process of its composition the Japanese haiku closely resembles Chinese verse. It requires the genius of the haiku poet to select and arrange the precise lexical items. And it requires all of the reader's skills (which also are a special gift) to perceive the relationship binding the elements of the haiku, with the reader sometimes experiencing the poem at a more profound level than the poet himself. The attraction of Zen literature springs from these sources.

One of the wonderful features of calligraphic art is that it can be appreciated directly, without any need for explanation. Zen's wonderful

⁷ *Ten years atop a cushion*. From the *Lu-shan wai chi* 廬山外集 (*Rozan geshū*; 1324) 1.17:1. Lu-shan is a mountain in northern Kiangsi province that has been associated with Buddhist activity from as early as the fifth century. The *Lu-shan wai chi* was later printed in Japan in 1663. This particular citation is also included in *Zenrin kushū*.

principle can also be pointed to directly and can be described forthwith, with no need to resort to logic or analysis. When we start to interpret the written text, each of the *kanji* is forced to take on a grammatical function, of subject, predicate, copula and so on. Zen is concerned only with the expression of the Subject, that is, with the expression of the ultimate truth by which we come to know the actual Subject at hand. From this perspective *kanji* are very Zen-like; by this I mean, the character of *kanji* is such that they can always be seen as expressions of the ultimate truth.

Yün-men's (Ummon, 864–949) wielding the staff is a statement of ultimate truth. (In Zen, this is called an *ikku*, “a verse of singular character.”) Here, grammar does not operate. It distorts the original statement when we start to insert all sorts of grammatical elements; that is, it is not correct to say “*as* the staff “ or “*of* the staff ,” or “*through* the staff,” or “*by* the staff.” It is just the staff, as indicated by the string of *kanji*. Indeed, here, with wielding of the staff, Yün-men's sermon comes to a close. Then he announces he will descend the platform to return to his quarters, leaving the staff behind. Yuan-wu's (Engō, 1063–1135) comment (*agyō*) on the staff is: “A sword that takes life, a sword that gives life.” A staff that can transform itself equally well into a life-taking sword or a life-giving one cannot be fixed at one end of the spectrum or the other; it cannot be found in the world of *as*, *of*, *through* or *by*. The seer can use it in whichever way he or she wishes. This dimension of “whichever” depends on where the seer stands. Yuan-wu's comment, “A sword that takes life, a sword that gives life,” is striking, but he does not give a clue as to the relation between the two phrases. Are we to count them numerically, as one and two? Is one two, two one? Is it one *and* two, or one *or* two? The staff, the sword that takes life, the sword that gives life—how are we to negotiate these as three separate notions? That, dear reader, is left entirely up to you.

To have the matter brusquely tossed in our faces, with the words, “That's up to you,” is, on the one hand, extremely annoying and, on the other, ushers in a newfound sense of freedom. The rationalist will find this obfuscation of matters most unwelcome, but that's because he is always trying to grasp things with a mind of scientific objectivity. But once we distance ourselves from that mode of thinking to activate our own creative thoughts on the matter, then suddenly it all becomes most

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intriguing. We are reacting mechanically when we say, "Is that all there is to it?" and refuse to accept the matter as given. Nor does Zen operate on quietistic principles. In this regard, a string of Chinese characters inscribed as calligraphy can play an important role in "catching us" and bringing us to this active awareness. And so it is not without reason that Zen developed on the Asian continent.

TRANSLATED BY SATŌ TAIRA AND W. S. YOKOYAMA