

Letting Go

Buddhist and Christian Models

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I. Getting to the Subject; A Personal Note

When I was nineteen I discovered the works of Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki. My search for what I would now define as the mystical element in the Christian tradition was given great impetus by this discovery. In these writings I found a clarity which had been lacking in much of the so-called theology I had been given to read.

What intrigued me most in those early readings was their emphasis on the direct perception of reality. I had a suspicion that we were meant, through religion, to reach a consciousness in which a spiritual reality was perceived below the ordinary reality that appeared to us. Watts and Suzuki both helped me to see that the world of illusion could be cut through as one moved below discursive logic, below the discrimination and analysis which were both rooted in the dualistic pitting of one thing against another. As you penetrated beyond this dualism, the world became clear and bright and real, because you saw without moral prejudice and non-judgementally by means of an intuitive vision.

This path resembled the way I had experienced the words of Christ in the parables and sermons of the Gospel. In line with a new understanding, I began to see the preaching of Jesus as koan practice meant to bring the hearer to new insight and understanding.

At the age of twenty, then, I believed that to be Christian was to be an ordinary person, only you saw the world in a special way, called by the theologians *sub specie aeternitatis*, "from the viewpoint of eternity." This vision enabled you to see what Gerard Manley Hopkins

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had called "the inscape of things," and it offered the promise of seeing what was really real rather than what social convention proclaimed to be reality. In an age that seemed to focus on having rather than being, I was one who was focused on being, more interested in the processes than in the products.

The vision that Watts and Suzuki offered me was one in which existence and purpose are fused in the moment of recognition. The daffodils that blossom in spring have no other purpose than to exist; their existence is their purpose. They need no other justification for their being.

I translated this insight into my Christian framework and concluded that Watts and Suzuki were talking about eternity, but not as a continuity of self-aware life after physical death, rather as a quality of awareness and perception that was available here and now. This made sense of many of Jesus's saying in the gospel. The scripture opened up in a new way once I understood that "eternal life" referred to a quality of existence now.

The writings of Suzuki and Watts presented me with a naturalness I hadn't known before: the clutter of the mind gave way to a spontaneous appreciation and awareness of reality, and the very way you became aware carried with it an aesthetic that needed neither justification nor explanation. As I cognitively appreciated this new awareness, I linked it with Luther's emphasis on justification by grace through faith. The connection seemed so obvious. Zen offered an opportunity to escape the trap of the ego which constantly referred all things back to the self and, thus, to one's prejudices which had been instilled by the social construct of reality. Luther spoke of sin as being *incurvatus in se*, "curved in upon oneself," release from which was an act of grace known in freedom from existential guilt. Both traditions taught that life was to be *lived*, in a spirit of humility and love.

II. Presenting the Problem

Existence is not the problem. Existence is rather pure grace. The problem is alienation from existence, which comes from being turned in upon the self. We experience a restlessness which comes from the loss of connectedness with the ground of our existence. Trapped within the confines of ego, we suffer the consequences in both an alienating sep-

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aration from others and a maddening preoccupation with fulfilling all the desires which only serve to further drive a wedge between ego and being. We cling to status and abhor process. Process means change and the vicissitudes of change are chaos, decay and death. It is precisely death which the ego protests from within its narcissistic circle of logic, and the blessed rage for order of which Stevens wrote so eloquently may be nothing more than panic in the face of chaos.

How is one to overcome this loss of connectedness in order to experience life as a wholeness embracing self and not-self? I find Fromm helpful when he says

. . . basically there are only two answers. One is to overcome separateness and to find unity by *regression* to the sense of unity which existed before awareness ever arose, that is, before man was born. The other answer is to be *fully born*, to develop one's awareness, one's reason, one's capacity to love, to such a point that one transcends one's own egocentric involvement, and arrives at a new harmony, at a new oneness with the world.¹

Regression is not really possible, though many have tried to find a return to a golden age before the dawn of consciousness. Well-being is not attainable through such moves because one winds up locked within narcissism. One may attempt to solve the problem, e.g., by ingesting the world but this attempt is self-referential and thus can never be satisfied. The narcissist is the perennial adolescent who forces the world to conform to his view of it. If the world will not conform he slinks away powerless. The desire is to control the world, in order that the self can impose its vision on the world and thus pretend *omniscience* and *omnipotence*. This is not a relational model of connection. It is a model of dominance which reduces the other to a thing, when the task of existence is to learn to live in process with others who are experiencing themselves as process in a universe of change.

The other path to wholeness locates us in a community in which grace is known as acceptance. Fromm uses "well-being" to mean the process of being fully born, of becoming what one potentially is. The

¹ Erich Fromm, D. T. Suzuki and Richard De Martino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, New York: Harper & Row, 1960, p. 87.

Buddhist tradition calls it attaining to full wakefulness or "mindfulness."² In this mindful state is our creative potential, which comes from seeing the world as it is while accepting and claiming that world as our own. But this is a world beyond manipulation and distortion imposed on it by self-centeredness, by the "hungry ghost" referred to by 17th century Zen master Bankei. In this mindful state we may be creative and not destructive; we may enhance life and not destroy it.

Fromm's definition of well-being is of interest for the topic of *Gelassenheit* in Zen and Christian mode:

Well-being is the state of having arrived at a full development of reason: reason not in the sense of a merely intellectual judgment, but in that of grasping truth by "letting things be" (to use Heidegger's term)³ as they are, Well-being is possible only to the degree to which one has overcome one's narcissism; to the degree to which one is open, responsive, sensitive, awake, empty (in the Zen sense).⁴

The "letting things be" of Heidegger is the word *Gelassenheit*, which is the German title for the work we know in English as *A Discourse on Thinking*. Heidegger uses the term to mean that truth which is revealed to the thinker when thinking ceases to be a grasping (*greifen*) after reality and when perception is allowed to precede, rather than follow, reflection. The term has fallen out of use in contemporary German, but has long history in the Rhineland mystics (Eckhart, Suso, Tauler); it comes through the Reformation *via* Luther and then bends into the pietist and the anabaptist tradition (Amish, Brethren, Mennonites and Hutterites). The term is anglicized in such words as "detachment," "renunciation," and "resignation." It has recently been translated as "nonchalance" to try to salvage it, but the French term does not come into English with ease.⁵ In an essay for the American Academy of Religion's spirituality seminar in 1986, I found the concept

² cf. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, rev. ed., Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1989.

³ cf. Martin Heidegger, *A Discourse on Thinking*, New York: Harper, 1956, *passim*.

⁴ Fromm *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁵ Hoffman, Bengt, trans., *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, New York: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 121; cf. also Hoffman, Bengt, *Luther and The Mystics*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Press. 1976.

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at the heart of the thought of Gerhard Tersteegen, an 18th century German reformed writer and spiritual director.⁶ At the Buddhist-Christian conference at the Pacific School at Religion at Berkeley, I gave a lecture comparing the thought of Bankei, previously mentioned, and Tersteegen. The concept of *Gelassenheit* kept recurring and its connection to Buddhist understandings of the awakened person was clear, but undefined. It will be the burden of this paper to attempt some definition.

Fromm poses one *caveat* that is of interest:

What is common to Jewish-Christian and Zen Buddhist thinking is the awareness that I must give up my "will" (in the sense of my desire to force, direct, strangle the world outside of me and within me) in order to be completely open, responsive, awake, alive.

. . .as far as popular interpretation and experience is concerned, this formulation means that instead of making decisions himself, man leaves the decisions to an omniscient, omnipotent father, who watches over him and knows what is good for him. It is clear that in this experience man does not become open and responsive, but obedient and submissive. To follow God's will in the sense of true surrender of egoism is best done if there is no concept of God.⁷

Meister Eckhart's well-known maxim is that we should abandon God for the sake of God, a notion that often recurs among those who stress the mystical approach to faith. *Gelassenheit* is more than a letting go of the will, as we shall see.

III. Getting to *Gelassenheit*

We never turn back to primal consciousness that was ours before our awareness of the "I" which stands against all "thou's" and "its." We cannot unlearn what we know to return to a Rousseauian noble savagery. The way of Christ and the way of Buddha both reject that

⁶ Rochelle, Jay C, "Wherever You Are, Pray and Remain Recollected in the Presence," *Covenant Quarterly* Feb. 1988.

⁷ Fromm *op. cit.*, pp. 94ff.

possibility, the former through the teaching of original sin in the Fall, the latter through such teachings as *samsara* and *karma*.⁸ Both ways recognize the ambivalence of the descent into knowledge. On one hand we could not be human without the gift of knowledge; on the other hand knowledge means objectification: the separation of subject and object and the subsequent attempt of subject to dominate object. Domination begins with reducing the object to a *thing*. Since perception is a mirror, however, the net result is that we turn ourselves into things. Our very striving for knowledge diminishes us much as it sustains us. The net result is a sense of hollowness which T. S. Eliot named for the twentieth century in the poems of *The Waste Land*. The hollowness is there because no amount of striving can bring fulfillment. Fulfillment eludes us because the separation between us and the world remains; thus no amount of attainment of things, no amount of having, can fill in the loss of being which comes through the egoistic insulation of the self its environs.

Major religions assume that it is only in some merger or union with one's environment that the proper place of humanity is found. This place is actually a process, not a static attainment which can then become objectified once more. The phrase "kingdom of God" in Greek is a verbal noun, e.g., and might be better translated as "ruling" or "reigning," the point being that the biblical metaphor invites us to see merger or union with the divine as a process. Similarly, *Nirvana* is better understood as a perception rather than a place. In both cases, a certain relationship to the phenomena of our existence is intended by the metaphors that describe reality. The relationship is one of creative mutual awareness. We realize that we are changed by the perceptions that we have; as Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy put it, *respondeo etsi mutabor*, "I will respond even though I will be changed."⁹

The English critical thinker Owen Barfield tells us that the original Greek of *phenomena* refers to events which exist solely neither in

⁸ On the problem from Buddhist perspective, consult Bruce Matthews, *Craving and Salvation*, Waterloo Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983, pp. 34-36, 89-108; see also Kanamatsu Kenryo, *Naturalness*, Los Angeles: The White Path Society, 1956, which approaches the problem from the Pure Land perspective; cf. pp. 26-34.

⁹ Rosenstock-Huessy, Eugen, *The Origin of Speech*, Norwich VT: Argo Books, 1981, covers the theories behind this concept.

themselves nor in the perceiver's arrangement of them.¹⁰ They exist in the middle, it being no accident that *phenomenon* is a middle voice participle; that is to say we truly see phenomena only by participation. He uses the term "original participation" to mean very much what Christians might intend by "Kingdom of God" and the Buddhist by *Nirvana*. The concept of participation helps us see the unity between perceiver and perceived and gives us further insight that the things "out there," so to speak, do not merely lie in wait for our interpretation. Our own process of interpreting only occurs in relation to the things we perceive. We are as much shaped by the environment as the environment is by us, to put it simply.

The question that confronts us is, "what blocks our participation?" What are the blocks to our perception that prevent us from that well-being, that wholeness of which Fromm spoke?

We have determined that the chief block is this *incurvatus*, this turning in of the self upon itself. This means we are unavailable to receive the world except on egocentric terms. These terms include the demand that outward reality conform to our predetermined understanding of what it is. This understanding is rooted not in any affective connection with the world, but solely in intellection about the world. We thus live in an illusion, thinking we are in touch with the world when we are really only in touch with our reasoning about the world. We reduce the experience to words and think thereby to have captured it. The result is the suffering of both person and world; Camus said somewhere, "to name a thing inaccurately is to bring immeasurable unhappiness into the world." The inaccuracy of naming begins as we force things to be as we want them to be, based on our desire or greed or fear.

The end sought by Christian faith is to receive the world in thanksgiving. The highest ritual of the Christian church is called *eucharist*, or thanksgiving. We receive the world and we offer it to God. The root meaning of sacrifice is that we receive the natural world, refine its gifts for human consumption, and then offer the product in a spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude. In the ritual of the eucharist, the world is named—to go back to Camus—as God's creation of which we are a

¹⁰ Barfield, Owen, *Saving the Appearances; A Study in Idolatry*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, n. d.

self-conscious and aware part. Eucharist at the same time reminds us that our processes of manufacture can only be offered if they are carried out in a spirit of stewardship and domination.

The means to this end of thanksgiving is manifold and is liturgically interrelated with the eucharist as the core symbol. The purpose of the means—prayer, ritual, proclamation, study, common service, and the like—is to enable us to lose our lives in order that we might find them.¹¹ So a letting go is necessary so that we might be properly related to God, self and others. What Fromm says of Zen life may be said of the Christ life: “The attitude towards the past is one of gratitude, towards the present, one of service, and towards the future, one of responsibility.”¹² In order for this attitude to become natural, you must let go. You must let go of clinging to past hurts for gratitude to arise; you must let go of self-centeredness in the present for service to occur; you must let go of control and manipulation in order that responsibility may occur in future.

When we are *gelassen*, that participation of which Barfield spoke comes to life as the harmful conceptualizations and distorted perceptions of the ego turned in upon itself are let loose. The result is a sense of personal freedom in relation to the world. The subject-object dichotomy is overcome or, better, let go and another unified field of cognition takes its place.

A Zen angle on letting go is the Japanese aesthetic idea of *raku-hitsu*, “first stroke.” When a calligrapher stands or sits before a blank sheet of paper, first stroke is of primary importance. If you hesitate because of materials, if you think you will make a lot of money or become successful and famous with this piece of calligraphy, first stroke is ruined. Only as you are poised at the slender balance point between discipline and freedom will first stroke land with precision and authenticity and with the authority of mindfulness. When one is here-now, concentrated in the moment, ready to act and yet unimpeded by rehearsal of the past or prediction of the future, first stroke demonstrates presence. Distractions are let go; the moment demands your presence and you emerge as Lin-chi’s “one true man without a title on the mass of red-coloured flesh; he comes out and goes in

¹¹ Matthew 10:39

¹² Fromm *op. cit.*, p. 121

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through your sense gates. If you have not yet borne witness to him, look, look!"¹³ To be thus centered Suzuki calls conative or creative knowing.¹⁴ Old Bankei, 17th century sage, called it living in the Unborn (Mind).¹⁵ It is to find naturalness, on which hear the Pure Land thinker:

the naturalness (*jinen*) which Shinran preached is nothing less than this emancipation of the self: a holy freedom through the melting of our self-power (*jiriki*) in the other power (*tariki*), through the surrender of our self-will (*hakarai*) to the Eternal Will. . .¹⁶

So already we are seeing connections, crossovers in thought between Christianity and Buddhism in this matter of *Gelassenheit*. We now turn to an historical consideration of the word.

IV. *Gelassenheit*: The Meaning in the History

Gelassenheit may be tentatively defined as "detachment." The word is connected to *Abgeschiedenheit*, a term found in Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328) and Tauler (1300–61). This latter means a solitariness or seclusion in contemporary German; for the medieval mystics it meant a sense of composure and peacefulness that came with *Gelassenheit*. There may be some connection between the German term and the Greek notion of *apatheia*, especially since that figures large in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius who was so instrumental in laying the groundwork for western mysticism. Together the terms imply a resignation against the things of the world in order that spiritual enlightenment might emerge beyond greed and avarice.

Tauler brings new meaning to the idea of *Gelassenheit*. He uses it in regard to letting go the human volitional aspect, or the will as we would call it.¹⁷ Whereas in Eckhart detachment meant the abandonment of

¹³ Suzuki, D. T., *Living by Zen*, London: Rider, 1950, p. 23.

¹⁴ Fromm *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ cf. Waddell, Norman, trans., *The Unborn*, Berkeley: North Point Press, 1985.

¹⁷ Sermons on Christmas and Trinity, pp. 35–40 and 103–108 respectively, in Shradý, Maria, trans., *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, New York: Paulist Press, 1985. See also pp. 32f. of the introduction to the volume by Josef Schmidt.

material possessions and ultimately the abandonment of desire,¹⁸ Tauler upholds the idea of the abandonment of self-will.

Theologia Germanica continues the emphasis on the relinquishment of the will. This book influenced the Reformation through Luther who supported several printings of it and said of it, "next to the Bible and St. Augustine, no other book has come to my attention from which I have learned—and desire to learn—more concerning God, Christ, man, and what all things are."¹⁹ We find the stress on letting go especially in chapters 21–28 (pp. 88–100 in the Hoffman text), where we find the three forms of renunciation affirmed by Tauler: first, renunciation of attachment to things, second, to images; and third, to self-will. The will is to be relinquished in the spirit of poverty. Movement through the three forms of renunciation clears the ground for God's entry to the soul. From Eckhart through Tauler there is emphasis on the *Grund*, the place of human receptivity to God. A shift occurs from Tauler to Luther, in which the *natural* connection of God to the soul through this *Seelengrund* is denied. Tauler is the hinge for the shift, even though he still ascribes a natural connection,²⁰ because his is not a mysticism rooted in incarnation so much as it is a mysticism rooted in the cross and resurrection of Christ—which becomes the model for perfect *Gelassenheit*.²¹ Thus one moves to the theme of suffering (*Leiden*) as companion to detachment,²² which connects the cross of Christ to the life of the individual believer both in Tauler, *Theologia Germanica*, and Luther. The themes continue after the period of orthodoxy, during which pre-reformation sources were viewed dimly, in the work of Johann Arndt entitled *True Christianity*,²³ which was a foundation stone for American colonial Lutheranism. The terminology changes, for Arndt, "repentance" takes on much of the flavor of detachment as it will pass on through

¹⁸ cf. Eckhart, "On Detachment," pp. 285–292 in E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, New York: Paulist, 1981; also his sermon "On Spiritual Poverty," on the first beatitude.

¹⁹ Hoffman, *Theologia*, p. 54.

²⁰ cf. Ozment, Steven, *Homo Spiritualis*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969, pp. 13–26.

²¹ Shradly, *op. cit.*, pp. xv, 50–54 and 163–169.

²² cf. Kieckhefer, Richard, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and their Religious Milieu*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 70f.

²³ Arndt, Johann, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb, New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

the Pietist tradition of Spener and Francke. But the *Theologia* is present in Arndt in similarities of content, style, form of literature, and in precise quotation.²⁴ Arndt was the bridge for Lutherans that Tersteegen was for the reformed: both of them redeemed the catholic mystical tradition for protestants.

Important for an interreligious consideration of *Gelassenheit* in relation to Buddhism is the dialectical nature of the term. One finds instances where it means total passivity but these are in the burnt-out tailings of pietism²⁵ and in the quietistic tradition attributed to Mme. Guyon.²⁶ But these traditions have long been seen as aberrations, and the true concept (whose corollaries might profitably be researched also in the English tradition of Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich and others²⁷) involves a notion of active passivity. Here again in terms of Japanese aesthetic theory, one could compare this to the term *fū-ryū*, which means roughly controlled spontaneity and whose models in nature are the grain in wood or jade and the flow of watercourses.²⁸ To be *gelassen*, to be actively passive, requires a delicate transcendence of the balance between the opposites of willfulness and lassitude.

That there is a danger of moral laxity was seen by all our authors and they opposed groups they thought exhibited such a perverse understanding of *Gelassenheit*. Luther sought to hold *Gelassenheit* in a corporate setting where responsibility could be served a spiritual pride avoided. He held the concept to be part of the natural order which leads us to the feet of Christ and on into a life of discipleship.²⁹

²⁴ I am indebted to LSTC graduate student Roy Hammerling, who has worked out the precise relationship in an unpublished paper, "Johann Arndt's *Wahre Christentum* and *Theologia Deutsch*," May 1988.

²⁵ cf. Stoeffler, Ernst, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971, esp. the concluding sections.

²⁶ cf. Holmes, Urban T., *A Handbook to Christian Spirituality*, New York: Seabury, 1977, *ad. loc.*

²⁷ A masterful introduction is Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality*, London: SPCK 1963; cf. also John Moorman, *Anglican Spirituality*, London: SPCK 1985 reprint.

²⁸ cf. Watts, Alan, *Uncarved Block, Unbleached Silk*, San Francisco, 1971.

²⁹ cf. Luther, Martin, "Treatise on Christian Liberty," in *Three Treatise*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959, and the preface to Romans. An excellent commentary on the Treatise is Eberhard Juengel, *The Freedom of A Christian*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989.

Among the anabaptists *Gelassenheit* became a major concept to develop a Christian life in which faith and ethics were embraced as a totality under the theme of discipleship.³⁰ Among anabaptists Jesus as model of the godly life was as important as the dogmatic tenet of Christ the savior.³¹

Contemporary anabaptists hold to the principle, though I have been informed by an anabaptist scholar that the *term* is not used among the Amish, and is used chiefly by Hutterites today.³² Anabaptist writers, however, shifted the concept in its final direction by emphasizing *Gelassenheit* as akin to the self-emptying love known in the N. T. as *agape*. This reading is noticeable in the works of Hans Denk and Michael Sattler, early anabaptist leaders of the 16th century.³³ Here we see that the sufferings of the believer, on analogy with the suffering of Christ, become in the end not the way of humiliation but of victory. Consequently, the nonviolent way of peace and harmony is uplifted as the true way to find the divine heart in this earthly life, and *Gelassenheit* is at the center of the method of peacemaking.

Anabaptists pushed nonviolence into a form of separatism. Members were forbidden to engage in magistracy in the secular world and for this Lutherans—who were seeking another avenue of rapprochement with the world through their two-kingdoms theory—condemned them.³⁴ Menno Simons, a great anabaptist thinker and organizer, wrote a treatise on *Gelassenheit* entitled “The Cross of Christ,” in which themes of martyrdom, suffering and discipleship are

³⁰ Article by R. Friedmann in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, Scottdale PA: Herald Press, 1956, pp. 448f.; and *RGG II*, Tübingen: J C B Mohr, 1910, cols. 1225-1228.

³¹ cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, pp. 46-62; 105-122; 135-147.

³² Letter of a 2 March 89 from Dr. John A. Hostetler, director of Center for Anabaptist and pietist Studies, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown PA. But see Cronk, Sandra, *Gelassenheit*, Ph. D. thesis for the University of Chicago, 1972, who maintains that the concept is central to the Amish.

³³ cf. Klassen, Walter, *Anabaptism in Outline*, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1981, for sources. See also Eberhard Arnold, *The Early Anabaptists*, Rifton NY: Plough Publishing Co., 1984, 2nd ed. rev. The best work on Sattler is John Howard Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1973.

³⁴ cf. Augsburg Confession Article xvi; Apology Article xvi in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959.

exalted; the way of peace is clear in his writing. Though it will mean hardship the disciple follows Jesus as much as he believes in Christ, into nonviolent love for the world.

The Hutterites made *Gelassenheit* a practical component in developing a life of total communitarianism.³⁵ They reasoned that the central sins of the ego, greed and avarice, could be overcome only in a setting which denied private ownership and detachment became the key toward that end. But now, whereas *Gelassenheit* could be interpreted individualistically, the Hutterites wrapped the concept in a wholly communal setting. *Gelassenheit* as "yielding absolutely to the will of God with a dedicated heart, forsaking all selfishness and self-will"³⁶ cried out for a setting in which the principle of submission would not be abused by raw power. So the Hutterites took the concept to a communal conclusion and made the subtle but crucial distinction between childlike and servile obedience.³⁷ Servile obedience was eschewed since all were freed by Christ (see Luther's treatise on Christian Liberty, also) but in the framework of a community of trust and mutual "revolutionary subordination"³⁸ childlike obedience could emerge in the sense of controlled spontaneity.³⁹

Thus we see that the concept moves from detachment from earthly goods in Eckhart to the clear note of detachment from self will in Tauler and then through Luther into its final phase as a ground for Christian communitarianism. (We might remark that all anabaptism wrestles in one way or another with the issue of the community of goods; the Amish stand midway between the Mennonites and the Hutterites on this matter.)

³⁵ cf. Peter Riedemann, *Confession of Faith*, Rifton: Plough, 1971, pp. 38f., 129f., 139-187; also Ehrenpreis, Andreas and Claus Felbinger, *Brotherly Community the Highest Command of Love*, Rifton: Plough, 1978, pp. 13-45 and 59-65.

³⁶ Friedmann, Robert, "The Hutterian Brethren and the Community of Goods," in Herschberger, ed., *The Recovery of The Anabaptist Vision*, Scottdale: Herald, 1962, p. 86

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁸ The term comes from John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, pp. 163-192.

³⁹ A contemporary and highly successful example of Hutterite community is the Community of Brothers (Bruderhof), on which cf. Benjamin Zeblocki, *The Joyful Community*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1971, a sociological study, and Eggers, Ulrich, *Community for Life*, Scottdale: Harald, 1989, by a German Christian journalist.

To end this section, however, we need to hear an eloquent expression of the contemporary anabaptist understanding:

To sit in a roomful of people with whom you share this relinquishment, this *Gelassenheit*, this initiation into the defeat of the Cross which is God's victory, this yielding up of even the "natural" right of self-preservation, this fellowship rejected in principle by the wise and powerful of "this world"; to sense the blending of your thoughts and prayers and voice with those of others who would give their lives for you; to think of God in the presence of the brother who has vigorously called you to account, and the family that will surround you physically as well as ideally, as a matter of course, should you experience disaster—this is to feel (alas, sometimes to take for granted) a powerful deliverance.⁴⁰

V. To What, Then, Shall We Compare *Gelassenheit*?

Enlightenment is like waking from a dream. In this instant the things of Buddha-world and the things of this-world, all good and evil, are like a dream of yesterday. Only the Buddha of primal nature appears.

Bassui (1327–1387)

Zen philosopher Nishitani defines *tathata* as "that which occurs when there is a total emptying both of self and appearances, not a clinging to nothingness as object; a non-attachment in which everything is, here and now, just at it is in its original reality."⁴¹ *Tathata* (usually translated "such-ness") relates to *sunyata*, emptiness, as the convex of a line is to its concave, as we may expect from a philosophy which is rooted in what we in the West, following Nicolas of Cusa, call the "coincidence of opposites." Thus we also hear from Nishitani that "by the self-awareness of reality I mean both our becoming aware of

⁴⁰ Ruth, John L., *A Quiet and Peaceable Life*, Intercourse PA: Good Books, 1985, p. 37.

⁴¹ Nishitani, Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, pp. 32ff.

reality and, at the same time, the reality realizing itself in our awareness"⁴².

The West has peered into the void and concluded, with our dualistic logic, that nothingness is negative. Nishitani tries to show us how to avoid nihilism by recognizing that absolute nothingness is the same as absolute suchness, a truth hitherto propagated in the West chiefly through mystics of the *via negativa*. For this reason, early studies like Suzuki's *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, found their comparative models in the West in Eckhart, the prince of the *via negativa*.⁴³

Nishitani says this of nothingness: "that a thing is created *ex nihilo* means that this Nihil is more immanent in that thing than the very being of that thing is 'immanent' in the thing itself."⁴⁴ thus, absolute immanence=absolute nothingness or, in ordinary Buddhist jargon, from=emptiness. A Christian might say that God is the power to be *ex nihilo*; and that God is personally impersonal while impersonally personal because we experience God simultaneously as absolute transcendence and absolute immanence. Nishitani's try at this difficult truth is "God's reality must be conceived of on a horizon where there is neither within nor without."⁴⁵

For those in the West who have no philosophical framework with which to confront the problem of nothingness, meaning is drained from existence and only the abyss remains. But we could find a bridge in Eckhart and Tauler's concept of the *creatio ex nihilo*. Here the *nihilum* is the ground from which all things come forth and to which they return. The *Seelengrund* is that human contact point with the cycle wherein beginning is always becoming ending and vice versa, the crossing point of the Möbius strip of the soul, if you will. The *nihilum* is experienced but is simultaneously revealed as divine love. What this

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Suzuki, D. T., *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, New York: Harper and Row, 1957. cf. also "Conversations with D. T. Suzuki," Pt. II, in *The Eastern Buddhist* xxi. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 82-100; on pp. 96f. Suzuki refers to the *coincidentia oppositorum* as a recognition that, in enlightenment, we don't so much *unite* with something as we realize we *are* something. This is like the distinction between being and having mentioned in our text.

⁴⁴ *op. cit.*, 39

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 41

means in terms of psychic well-being is that intersubjectivity is the process of our fulfillment: when we go out of ourselves into the Divine, when we lose the self we are at once fulfilled as self, yet beyond the demands and confines of egotistical self-centeredness. To use Barfield's concept, we become phenomena, which are the median between perceiver and perceived. This is as Nishitani finds it to be: "in the Tendai school of Buddhism, man comes into being as the 'middle' between 'illusion' and 'emptiness,'" ⁴⁶ For Nishitani, the true self is without rank or label and thus nothing; but the self nonetheless acts and moves and thinks in time and space and is thus appearance, or phenomenon. Both visions of the self are true without contradiction; we know the truth when we dwell in the tension and the coincidence between the two. A human person is thus a medium of perception in each moment of existence who is capable of meaningful movement in time and space.

Meaningful existence occurs when we have deep knowledge that *sunyata=tathata*. This truth is found through *samadhi* ('setting'—usually translated as meditation).⁴⁷ In this experience the mind is collected at one point of focus, moves beyond self-consciousness and forgets ego. Suzuki's well-known term for the flash of insight which accompanies *samadhi* is *satori*. *Samadhi* is the mode of being of something which has settled into its own position, when it is what it is, nothing more and nothing less. When we are unsettled, we do not perceive from our center but from the periphery of our consciousness. Forms are seen from that outward point of ego but they appear as if in a mirror. To see only the form is to see 'illusion' and to continue the cycle of meaningless existence because there is no relationship between perceiver and perceived. To see inside the form is to penetrate below the level of multiplicity and differentiation, and this can only occur as we are in relation to our own center. When we are 'settled,' we have an awareness of our own emptiness which enables us to see the emptiness of all created forms. But to see emptiness is simultaneously

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72

⁴⁷ For use in a Buddhist scripture, cf. Asvaghosa, *The Awakening of Faith*, trans. Yoshito S. Hakeda, New York: Columbia University Press, 1967, pp. 95-100. It should be noted that this method of meditation is the antithesis to the vipasyana method, which follows the path of discernment. These two correlate to the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* in the West (see Asvaghosa, p. 95 bottom).

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to see the co-dependent origination⁴⁸ of all things from the ground of being.

Having arrived where *tathata=sunyata*, so to speak, we discover that everywhere is the center seen from within itself. Each self is a form of the center precisely in its uniqueness. To be is to be unique. When we see this, Nishitani would say "we take leave of the essential self-attachment that lurks in the essence of self-consciousness which catches us in trying to grasp the self."⁴⁹

The paper corollary to *Gelassenheit* in Buddhism would then be *samadhi*, where there is "no dependence on words or letters," i. e. where images and forms are not clung to but released.⁵⁰ Where we give up the notion that things and images are controlled by our perception of them, we see the interdependence of perceiver and perceived,⁵¹ and we settle into a serenity and peace that comes with connectedness to the process of being.

This understanding of *samadhi* correlates with *Gelassenheit* as the threefold relinquishment of dependence on things, images, and the self-will.⁵² It would not correlate with the later development of *Gelassenheit* as a factor in anabaptist communitarian theology, nor with any idea of *Gelassenheit* as total passivity. In Taoism, the Chinese philosophical antecedent of Zen, this condition of being *gelassen* is known as *wu-wei*, which is often translated "non-interference,"⁵³ but means that letting-go which is characteristic of both *Gelassenheit* and *samadhi*.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ The phrase in Sanskrit is *pratitya-samutpada* and it is very early Buddhist, but used extensively in connection with *sunyata* by Nagarjuna, 2nd c. CE sage. See Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1967, pp. 58-67, 166-69, 234f. On pp. 37f. is a discussion of the relationship of co-dependent origination to emptiness.

⁴⁹ Nishitani, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁵⁰ Watts, Alan, *The Spirit of Zen*, New York: Grove, 1958, p. 50.

⁵¹ Powell, Robert, *Zen and Reality*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961; this is essentially his definition of mindfulness on pp. 47-50.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 13f., for a Zen statement.

⁵³ Central to various art forms; cf. Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in The Art of Archery*, New York: Pantheon, 1953; also Watts, *Spirit*, pp. 52-54, 58.

⁵⁴ In Indian Buddhism, *samatabhavana* is the term for the cultivation of tranquillity and thus embraces the process as well as the content we would find in *Gelassenheit*. See Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Pro-*

Our difficulty, you will remember from the end of part II, is the concept of God. if God is conceived as a Being who, regardless of verbal gymnastics, remains over-against humanity in a dualistic mode, then clearly the correlations we have drawn will be diminished.

The line from Eckhart to Luther can lead to a revised concept of God that would overcome duality not only within God but between God and humanity. Clearly, Eckhart's concept of God as *das Nichts* or "Nothing," correlates to *sunyata* in Buddhism. Luther's shift to a concept of *deus absconditus* who is at one and the same time *deus revelatus* provides us with a dialectical approach to God, but may not yet overcome the dualism between God and humanity. But then, that is the purpose of the Christ-event for Luther.

Still, the *Gelassenheit* of Tauler, Suso and the *Theologia Germanica* is essentially a mental process and this correlates to the Buddhist concept of *samadhi*, which is also a mental process of the cessation of images.

Although the current religious meaning of *Gelassenheit* is almost exclusively tied up with the relinquishment of the will, it is demonstrable that the term originally had more to do with the cessation of images and the eschewing of trust in possessions. From the writings of Henry Suso (1300–61) we see the inclusion of will into the field of *Gelassenheit* begins from ethical and not from theological considerations, but it quickly takes on religious overtones, as e. g. when Suso says "free as the will is, it is only truly free when it no longer needs to will. (In the Christian we see that). . . his will has become free, so that he does not perform more than one work, which is himself from the point of view of union, and which he does outside time."⁵⁵ Here Suso has put the *gelassen* will within a mystical framework but seems to have done so by removing us from history. But he recoups his loss when he says "abandoned into the Nothing, we see no difference between the *gelassen* self and God, not according to our Essence, but according to our perceptions."⁵⁶ The freedom of such a Christian is clear: "the reason why he has no bonds in because he does from self-abandonment (*Gelassenheit*)

blem, LaSalle IL; Open Court, 1986, pp. 24–26: cf. also Asvaghosa, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ Suso, Henry, *The Book of Eternal Wisdom and the Little Book of Truth*, London, 1958, p. 198.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

what the crowd does from compulsion,"⁵⁷ and hence Suso gives us, in a few words, a portrait of Christian spontaneity and naturalness that is worthy of the Buddhist as we see from this passage from the Pure Land perspective:

. . .the Nembutsu is not merely to utter Amida's name and to recollect his Great Compassion. It is the losing of our self-will in the Will of Amida. It is coming to out existential limits and jumping over the abyss which opens before us. . . . All the fetters of life which hedged us in on all sides fall away, . . . Joy reigns when all work becomes the path to the union with Amida; when our self-offering grows more and more intense. Then there is freedom.⁵⁸

VI. Of What Earthly Good Is All This?

These issues are of crucial importance for common people, not only for specialists, because they concern not only personal well-being but the health of our culture and our world.

The ruination of the natural world is directly related to the psychological health of the human race since our practices follow from our perceptions. Language is an indicator of perceptions whether in a person or in a society. When we refer to processes as things, we indicate our separation from these processes and this is a sign of illness. The ecological nightmare with which we currently live is a result of the syndrome of *incurvatus* that results in greed and avarice when the natural interrelationships are lost.

Perception may be ontologically prior to thought in human development, but when the perception is submerged by our thinking about the perception, the image which had both exterior shape and interior meaning or value, is reduced to a thing or concept. "A thing is a think," as Alan Watts used to say, and a think is about something which has been objectified.

In time, we have nothing left but thought and thus we hear such absurdities as "there is no meaning 'out there' " as if they were true

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵⁸ Kanamatsu, *op. cit.*, p. 87 and 93.

statements when in fact they are the ramblings of a mind turned in upon itself and suffocating. The environment looks like flatland because things, so-called, possess no inscape. There is no ghost in the machine, and since our perception-thought is a reflection of our inner world, this means we have been reduced to things.

Christianity has not been uniformly understood as a Way toward primal vision, where things again become images with exterior and interior scapes, but it may be so understood if one approaches the faith by way of the German mystics and the early Reformation spirituality of Luther. The key here is the relinquishment of images which have become calcified into thought and thus reduced to things which, in turn, become idols. *Gelassenheit* turns us toward the renewal and cleansing of perception that offers us the naturalness Bankei proclaimed:

You are primarily Buddhas; you are not going to be Buddhas for the first time. There is not one iota of a thing to be called error in your Unborn Mind. . . . If you have the least desire to be better than you actually are, if you hurry up to the slightest degree in search something, you are already going against the Unborn.⁵⁹

Ultimately this means that we must be ready to give up all images of God in the hope that whatever reality they carry will be disclosed to us in the process of living rather than in dogma. The concept God is necessary as a clue toward the reality the name represents, but it is like the famous "finger pointing at the moon." When the moon is seen the finger must not be confused with it; only the reality remains to be perceived in silent gratitude.

Luther's understanding of justification by grace through faith is not far from the Buddhist understanding that "nothing is to be done" to gain liberation. As Powell expresses it,

this thing we are talking about is not to be possessed by a few initiates, by the privileged in wealth or in learning—it is open to everyone. It does not require concentration, effort, will power, disciplines of any sort. It exists here and now, it requires only one thing to see it; openness, freedom—the

⁵⁹ Quoted in Suzuki, *Living by Zen*, pp. 177f.

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freedom to be open and not tethered by any ideas, concepts, etc. . . . It is only when we stop thinking and let go, that we can start seeing, discovering.⁶⁰

Regardless of what quarter this truth comes from, it is essential that we state it publicly and often the healing of our cultural malaise. That this practice of *Gelassenheit* matches the mindful concentration of Buddhism and, in particular, Zen, only shows that both traditions share common insight about the nature of human reasoning, its flawed character, the consequences in human and environmental destruction, and the remedy.

For the life of the world both approaches need to be offered within each tradition by those who know the truth from the inside, below the level of myth and symbol, yet who are keen enough to know that the way to the reality will always be, for most people, through the ritual and the symbol.

⁶⁰ Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 20f.