

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

The Zen of Jesus

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But let us draw the consequence of all we have said and add: a true Christian is Buddhist and Hindu, whether he knows it or not. To know it becomes increasingly more timely and more important.

Brother David Steindl-Rast

It is said that Rabbi Mendel of Kozk once remarked to one of his disciples:

If I am what I am
And you are what you are,
Then I am what I am
And you are what you are!

But if I am what you are
And you are what I am,
Then I am what I am
And you are what you are!¹

In other words, only when a person identifies non-dualistically with another does one become truly oneself. An analogous tradition is

¹ Martin Buber, *Or Haganuz: Hasidic Story* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1968), 438. This passage is translated from the Hebrew by Michael M. Caspi, Professor of Literature and Languages at University of California, Santa Cruz.

THE ZEN OF JESUS

found in the development of the Zen Buddhist tradition in China and Japan, that is that true personhood is at once no personhood at all (e.g., I am I, I am you and I am not-I). The substantial, identifiable subjective "I" is paradoxically (and mystically) a trans-subjective "I" which becomes itself by becoming the other (while still retaining itself). The authentic "I" can be identified only in an absolutely contradictory way for the "great death" or "great doubt block" is at once the "great awakening."² In this paper I will attempt to answer Christianity's fundamental question—Who is the real Jesus?—in light of Zen's view of the contradictory nature of human identity. Or, more briefly, I will discuss the Zen of Jesus.³

Jesus Through a Zen Glass

Among other well documented aspects, unique to the Gospel of John are a series of disconnected "I am" sayings in which Jesus identifies himself as follows:

¹ For a more developed explanation of Zen's understanding of human nature see Richard DeMartino's essay "The Zen Understanding of Man" in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* by D.T.Suzuki, Erich Fromm and Richard DeMartino (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

Heinrich Dumoulin, in *Christianity Meets Buddhism*, translated by John C. Maraldo (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1974), remarks that the Buddhist-Christian dialogue reaches a profound consequence, namely the relationship between the Christian's experienced faith and the Buddhist's lived "breakthrough or conversion which touches the true self" (83). Dumoulin posits that the original Indian Buddhist teaching of non-ego (*anatta*) is in Japan linked to the existential "breakthrough or awakening" in which true self gains "access to what is authentically real" (83). In Zen this non-dualistic breakthrough is called the "great death (*taishi*)". This radical or root Awakening arises from the breaking-up of the Great Doubt (including all of its perplexing constituents) which is "'im-mediately' and totally resolved." Tillich-Hisamatsu dialogues, *Eastern Buddhist* (Vol. V, No. 2, 1972), 123.

² The structure of these remarks will be a series of idiosyncratically connected adumbrations arising from what William James calls the "ontological imagination," that is the intensely convincing realization of unpicturable beings which determine our vital attitudes "as decisively as the vital attitude of lovers is determined by the habitual sense, by which each is haunted, of the other being in the world." William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), 71.

KRAMER

I am the Christ (4:26);
I am the Bread of Life (6:35);
I am the Light of the World (8:12);
I am before Abraham (8:58);
I am the Door (10:7);
I am the Good Shepherd (10:11);
I am One with the Father (10:30/38);
I am the Resurrection and the Life (11:25);
I am the Teacher and Lord (13:13);
I am the Way, the Truth, the Life (14:6);
I am in the Father and in You (14:20);
I am the True Vine (15:1).

The Johannine inclusion of the "I am" (*ego eimi*) statements, according to Bultmann, can be classified into four uses: 1) as an answer to the "Who are you?" question; 2) as an answer to the "What are you?" question; 3) as a statement of identification with another person or thing; 4) as an answer to the "Who is the one who . . . ?"⁴ But from Zen's perspective, in each of the nine instances mentioned above, Jesus figuratively identifies himself with so-called aspects of YHWH, the same YHWH who in Isaiah 43:10 says that he has chosen Israel, his servant, "that you (Israel) may know and believe me and understand that I am (*ego eimi*)."⁵ Dramatically, Jesus in John 8:28 says that when they "lift up the Son of Man, then they "will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing by myself." In these ways, Jesus identified himself as a unique expression of the God of nowhere and nothing, the Father from above whose nameless name is I AM! Thus Jesus is called the "I am of what is above (Jn. 8:23)."

But in the Zen tradition the centering question always is this: Who is the "I" who says "I am"? This challenge bypasses the *what* and the *how* of ordinary questioning in which the questioner is not questioned, in which the questioner's ideological finitude is simply assumed. And Zen's answer is always "no one!", a no one which reflects Zen's view of non-dualistic self-actualization in a world determined by dualistic consciousness. For instance, Buddha taught the paradoxical equation: "Not-I" equals "I." When Buddha was asked—Are you an angel? A

⁴ Quoted by Ray Brown in *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 1X11 (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 534.

THE ZEN OF JESUS

holy man? An inspired philosopher? A man?—he answered: “I am not. I am Awake!” But who is this “I” who is not-I? In later Buddhist history, when the Indian Buddhist patriarch Bodhidharma was asked by the Chinese Emperor Wu “Who now stands before me?” Bodhidharma answered: “I do not know!” When Bodhidharma responded in this way to Emperor Wu’s question, the “I” who spoke was simultaneously not speaking. Still later when Tung-shan crossed a body of water and saw for the first time his “real face” he reflected:

I meet him wherever I go.
He is the same as me.
Yet I am not he!
Only if you understand this
Will you identify with what you are.⁵

In light of Zen’s identity of the no-self self, the not-I I, what about Jesus? Who is the I who says “I am the Way”?

Zen’s response to this question asserts that the Jesus-I, his incarnational “I,” is non-dualistically “not-I.” St. Paul writes that although Jesus was in the form of God, he “did not deem equality with God something to be grasped. Rather Jesus emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6-8). This *kenotic* self-emptying, the perfecting of Jesus’ humanity, is connatural with the death of his I-consciousness. So Zen’s answer to the question “Who speaks when Jesus speaks?” is, ultimately, no one, or in Zen-Christian terms the God of nowhere and nothing.

A key to understanding this invisible not-I/I of Jesus can be found in the following story told by the Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast. It happened that a group of Jesuit scholars were gathered around a famous Japanese Zen Roshi engaged in some inter-religious dialogue when the Roshi asked one of the brothers to relate something that

⁵ Chang Chung-Yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch’an Buddhism* (New York: Vintage Press, 1971), 49. The question is often raised: What keeps a person from understanding or recognizing what they are? Zen’s response points to the business of one’s mind, a business which prevents true self awakening. In 1957, Paul Tillich candidly asked Hisamatsu Shin’ichi how one could find calmness in the stream of life’s business. Hisamatsu answered that one must simply maintain *calmness of mind*. A full record of this important dialogue can be found in *The Eastern Buddhist* (Vol. IV, No. 2; Vol. V, No. 2; Vol. VI, No. 2).

Jesus said as he hung on the cross. The scholar had no trouble in picking out the words: My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." The Roshi listened very politely and then shook his head: "No, no, that's not what he said!" The Jesuit, looking a bit uncomfortable, replied, "Yes Roshi, it's right here in holy scripture—'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'." The Zen Roshi again shook his head. "No, that isn't what he said." Again there was an uncomfortable silence and then after a long while of thoughtful reflection the old Roshi looked up and spread his arms out, and threw his head way back. His eyes were piercing, and with a look of utter anguish he cried out like a lion: "MY, GOD, MY, GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME!" Then he gracefully moved his hands back in front of him and resumed perfect control and peaceful gaze. "That, is what he said."⁶ Or we could say that is the way he did not say what was said!

Koan & Parable

In his study of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki suggests that to understand the enlightenment-experience of Buddha, one should identify and concentrate upon what the Buddha taught and what he felt.⁷ The same could be said of Jesus with this one addition (true of Buddha as well), that it is necessary to understand the manner in which Jesus spoke to understand what he said. The question becomes: How did Jesus as not-I speak the unspeakable?

In the Gospel of Matthew we read that Jesus "never spoke except in parables," and in Mark, by inference, that to understand one parable, any parable, is to understand all parables. When the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke with a parabolic tongue, He replied: "It has been granted to you to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven; but to

⁶ Brother David Steindl-Rast, Benedictine monk of the Immaculate Heart Hermitage, Big Sur, Calif., in a letter dated May 15, 1982. A strikingly similar intention is expressed, philosophically, by Hisamatsu in response to the following question: "How is Jesus as the Christ 'possible'?" He asserts: "It is no other than 'jiji-muge' (the non-obstruction between particular and particular) that accounts for the 'self that is Not-of-form' realizing itself without destroying individuality." Quoted in the Hisamatsu-Tillich Dialogues, *The Eastern Buddhist* (VI, No. 2, 1973), 100.

⁷ D.T. Suzuki, *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 228.

THE ZEN OF JESUS

those others it has not been granted" (Matt. 13:11). Why? Because of the difference between those to whom the secret of the Kingdom has been granted, and those to whom it has not? Granted what?

Questions such as these and others about the purpose of Jesus' parables take on a different interpretative content when treated as *koans*.⁸ Parables are brief teaching stories which invite the hearer to *enter* the meaning of the story through its concrete images, to *enter* its significance by listening for truths the structure of which is deeper than logic. Like *koans*, a parable is a public secret aimed at frustrating one's intellectual process by driving it head-on into a truth hidden within the unspeakable nature of language. Like *koans*, parables cannot be understood by ordinary reasoning, but require a deeper response. For example, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a person who scatters seed on the land: "He goes to bed at night and gets up in the morning, and the seed sprouts and grows; how, he does not know" (Mark 4:26-27). At the surface level the hearer is invited to become like the sower who, in time of sowing, just sows, trustingly, and who in time of harvest, reaps the full-grown corn. At the same time Jesus invites hearers to allow the word-seed to fall into the richest soil of the heart, there to take root and grow abundantly.

In Zen's viewpoint, however, beneath this level the reader is asked to *become* the parable itself, that is, to so thoroughly enter into a non-dualistic experience with the language of sowing and harvesting, knowing and not-knowing, that a radical reversal of consciousness-and-cosmology occurs. In a Zen sense, to understand the parable one must pass through the space which separates the reader from the parable's purpose, be pulled into language right at the point at which language transcends itself, where there is no I. Literary critic George Steiner has written that at its frontiers, language "borders on three other modes of

¹ This particular connection between Zen and Christianity has been enunciated in several books. J.K. Kadowaki's *Zen and the Bible* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), outlines a scriptural hermeneutic in which one is asked to read the parables of Jesus as if they were koans which needed a "single-minded concentration (121)." Dom Aelred Graham, in *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967), writes that "... the purpose of the koan is not unlike that of the New Testament parables (133)," and William Johnston, in *Christian Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), writes that koans open a new approach to Christian scripture, and that we might well "... use the scriptures as koan (64)."

statement—light, music, and silence—which gives proof of a transcendent presence in the fabric of the world.”⁹ Light is a cognitive limit, the other side of which is intuitive insight or awakened, inner sight; music is a structural limit, the other side of which is the vibrational resonancy of an inward melody. But when language passes into silence, nothing more is seen or heard for at that point there is no identifiable seer or hearer left.

In the process, as the hearer/reader enters into the intentionality of the linguistic patterns (i.e., the parables), the transcending mysteries toward which the images and symbols point become more deeply presenced. As Emmanuel Levinas notes in his conversation with Philippe Nemo: “When in the presence of the other, I say ‘Here I am!’, this ‘Here I am!’ is the place through which the infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen . . . ‘Here I am!’ testifies to the Infinite . . . The exteriority of the Infinite somehow becomes ‘interiority’ in the sincerity of the testimony.”¹⁰ In the case of Jesus, his “(Here) I am” presenced God in finite language by virtue of the self-surpassing nature of his testimony and the power of his divinely generated authority empty of all I-attestation.

To hear the parables of Jesus as *koans*, is to view Jesus as a Zen master whose speech is the spontaneous expression of his no-self awakening. Both Jesus’ use of parables, and a Canaanite woman’s utter faith are illustrated in a remarkable incident which occurred in the non-Jewish district of Tyre and Sidon (north of Galilee). It happened that when Jesus withdrew to that region, a Phoenician woman addressed him as “Lord, Son of David,” and begged for healing for her daughter. Like a Zen master Jesus at first gave her no response, only silence. But she did not consider his silence an obstacle. When his disciples, who were embarrassed by the woman’s pleading, entreated him to get rid of her, he replied: “My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24).

But this did not stop her for again she approached Jesus and begged him for help. He responded with some of the strangest words that

⁹ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 39.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversation with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburg: Duquesne U. Press, 1982), 105, 109.

THE ZEN OF JESUS

Jesus spoke anywhere in the Gospels: "It is not right to take the food of sons and daughters (of Israel) and throw it to the dogs" (Matt. 15:26). In this *koan*-like riddle, it would seem at first that Jesus was telling her that his mission was only for the Jews, not for non-Jewish dogs. Still she did not falter. Instead, she *turned* the parable's metaphor *back* into itself. "How true," she responded, but "even the dogs eat the leavings that fall from their master's tables" (Matt. 15:27). Entering into the metaphor of the parable, she spontaneously turned it to her advantage. As a mother she knew that her children always came first, but she also knew their eating habits and how pet dogs kept their floors clean. As he would later address his mother at Cana and at the foot of the cross (in John), Jesus replied: "Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass!" (Matt. 15:28).

The Crucifixion/Resurrection Koan

Looking at the New Testament itself as a *koan*, we can say that its challenge is the seeming paradox of death and resurrection. Does it make sense to say that the person who is God-incarnate is also the person who is forsaken by God and who is left totally alone to die? Moreover, what sense does it make to say that the person who was crucified on Good Friday is the same person who was resurrected on Easter? And if neither of these in and of themselves make sense, than what possible sense can be made of the *Zen-Christian koan*: The crucifixion is the resurrection?

No sense at all! Yet *that*, exactly, is the Zen point. To say that the crucifixion is the resurrection is to say that death is life, that not-I is I, that if you meet Jesus kill him.¹¹ This illogical, irrational assertion cannot be understood cognitively but must be intuitively apprehended. That is, a fundamental shift in conscious orientation must occur for one to understand this *koan* in its various forms, a shift from "knowing" to "being known." But the real question for the disciples was

¹¹ This phrase, suggested by the Zen phrase—"If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha!"—is the Zen way of saying "become the Christ-nature!" That is, to meet the historic Jesus is to meet Jesus outside the self and therefore to be dualistically related only. In Zen, if I meet the Buddha, I meet him as an idea, or a projection of the mind which needs to be cut off and transformed so that I can become Buddha.

this: How could they understand the one who was to understand the crucified/resurrected I?

Zen indicates that a clue can be found in Jesus' own language, which reveals what can be known and conceals what cannot. Before his death Jesus remarked to the disciples:

"Within a short time you will lose sight of me, but soon after that you shall see me again."¹²

The disciples were frustrated by this because they wanted to know how this could be! On another occasion when he taught this way in Capernaum, many of his followers said: "This is scandalous language! How could anyone accept it?" (John 6:60). Like the illogical logic of the Zen *koan*, Jesus often makes no sense, at least at first. But then he intimated to his disciples that while he had been speaking in parables, the time was coming when he would no longer speak this way.

"At last you are speaking plainly," his disciples exclaimed, "without talking in veiled language! We are convinced that you know everything."¹³

But the disciples' understanding of "plainly" was incomplete. It is clear that they understood the first part of Jesus' statement ("In a short time you will no longer see me") to mean that he will be returning to the Father. The second part however ("A short time later you will see me again") remained unclear. While on one level Jesus referred to his physical, post-resurrection appearances (at the tomb, on the road to Emmaus, in Galilee and in Jerusalem), on a still deeper level he was referring to his appearance/presence in the believer's inner awareness or spiritual vision, or as the author of Second Peter writes, the believer's ability "to share the divine nature" (1:4). It is not until Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit that the disciples could experientially understand that the crucified Christ was and is the resurrected Christ, and that they (the believers) had entered into the reality of that event.

¹² John 16:16.

¹³ John 15:29-31.

THE ZEN OF JESUS

It is Not-I

In light of this Zen-Christian *koan* then, we again ask what it means to speak of the not-I of Jesus. In what way is Jesus one with God, the One before whom there are no gods, the One who cannot be seen face to face, the One who appears as fire, as wind, as light? And if God is beyond all distinctions and forms, how was Jesus "in" the Father? To put this question another way, in what sense is the source of Jesus' authority and personal power the compassion of God?

Answers to questions such as these lead in two, complementary and mutually dependent directions: to a union through emptiness with the father and, secondly, to a union through fullness with his disciples. Just before his final week on earth Jesus prays:

That all may be one as you,
Father, are in me, and I in you;
I pray that they may be (one) in us,
that the world may believe that you sent me.¹⁴

By comparing the indwelling unity between himself and the disciples to his mutual indwelling with the Father, Jesus indicates that the disciples also are in the Father. It is in and through the indwelling presence of God that Jesus and the disciples share oneness, or better stated, not-twoness. Jesus continues:

I have given them the glory you gave me
that they may be one, as we are one,
I living in them, you living in me—
that their unity may be complete.
So shall the world know that you send me,
and that you loved them as you loved me.¹⁵

Jesus speaks here in two ways. He is united with God ("may they be one in us"), and at the same time he is distinct from God ("so that the world may believe it was you who sent me"). The fulcrum of meaning

¹⁴ John 17:21.

¹⁵ John 17:22-23. Apocalyptic expectations notwithstanding, to the extent that the believer becomes not-two with Jesus, the believer too can say "before Abraham was I am" because in some sense believers too were loved "before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24).

in this passage is that God is *in* Jesus as Jesus is *in* God, just as the disciple too is *in* Christ *in* God. According to Johannine thought those who participate in Christ are said to be brought to completion through a perfect unity in the world with God's *agape*. Prior to this, however, Jesus had taught his disciples that to follow him, they had to deny "self" (*psyche*).¹⁶ Here Jesus asks his disciples to deny everything that human reason identifies as one's personality, everything that is dualistically separated from no-self-identity, in order to follow him. This is not to suggest that the disciple *is* Christ, or *is* God, but rather that she or he *participates* in a not-two, not-one relationship with Jesus.

By viewing Jesus in Zen's light, two relationships become immediately clearer: the not-I of Jesus is the "I" of God incarnate and, *also*, is the true I of the disciple. The apostle Paul repeatedly asserts that it is not "I" (Paul), but Christ who is the true Paul. He writes that just as Jesus died to himself he, Paul, had to die to his self-reflecting, self-inflated notions to be truly reborn. And just as Jesus had to experience utter aloneness to experience the depths of the human condition, Paul too had to experience abject aloneness to realize his inseparable unity with Christ. Out of this experience, Zen would say, a non-dualistic relation to Jesus awakens.

In fact, according to Buddhist philosopher Nishitani Keiji, Christianity's central paradox or *koan* is Paul's self-denying assertion: "It is no longer I who lives but Christ in me" and that "I have been crucified with Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). That is, while Paul is Paul yet, as Paul says, he has been baptized into the death of Christ Jesus "so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life" (Romans 6:3-4). Christ, who empties himself of divinity yet who is one with the Father, is also one with Paul. Nishitani writes that "Paul's death in himself and Christ's life in him took place simultaneously," and that here Christ "is not a mere 'image' but life, because it is an utterance of self-giving love that silently

¹⁶ This saying—that "if a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self"—appears in varied forms in all of the Gospels: Mark 8:35, Matthew 10:38 and 16:25, Luke 9:24 and 17:33, and John 12:25. *Psyche* means not just "soul" or "ego," for Jesus was not trained in such body-soul dualisms, but rather the word *psyche* would be closest to the Hebrew word *nepesh*, life-spirit, breath.

and genuinely exhales realness of the love realized in it."¹⁷ Jesus-in-God lived life toward death in order to overcome death; Paul-in-Christ died to this life in order to overcome numinologically the separation existing on a phenomenological level between Christ and himself.

Buddha & Mary

A fitting conclusion to these Zen-Jesus adumbrations is found in a conversation between the Buddhist Professor Emeritus of Kyoto University Nishitani Keiji, and Donald W. Mitchell, formerly a Buddhist, now a Christian and a professor at Purdue University. Professor Mitchell begins by speaking of "being Mary," and then draws a praxis-oriented comparison which asks if "being Mary" is achieved by what Nishitani calls "making oneself empty," that is, through "lived nothingness"?

M. In our spirituality we speak of "being Mary" in that we try to empty ourselves of ego so that Jesus may be born in us. So we too see ourselves in our true state of human living as being a "womb" of the spiritual life. But for us, this self-emptying life also reflects the life of God.

N. Yes. I think that we express the same idea in other words. As Buddhists, we understand what you describe as the essence of ourselves, of each one of us. In this way, we go beyond the Buddha or Buddhism to find true Buddhism in the concrete historical world.¹⁸

To this Professor Mitchell responds by mentioning the importance of suffering in personal and communal growth. For Christians, Mitchell suggests, suffering is transformed through Jesus' death on the

¹⁷ Keiji Nishitani, "Ontology and Utterance," an unpublished paper delivered to the Fourth International Consultation on Hermeneutics at Syracuse University, October 2, 1970.

¹⁸ Keiji Nishitani, "Compassionate Endurance: Mary and the Buddha," Buddhist-Christian Colloquium in Japan in the "*Secretariatus pro non Christianis*" Bulletin, 1986, XXI/3, 296. Nishitani writes: "Today we need a new interpretation of church, in both Christianity and Buddhism. We need a broader foundation that includes other religions, that makes a place where all religions can enter in communication in a way that they did not have in the past."

cross “into love and building unity in the world.” Nishitani responds that in a similar way the essence of Buddhism is to overcome suffering, and to attain to “true immortality.” For Buddhists, it is through Great Compassion that one endures and transforms suffering into love, as Mary did through her sorrow. For Christians, it is through Jesus’ death on the cross that the mystery of suffering is linked with true compassion. This unconditional love is the Zen of Jesus: not mere emotion or pleasure, not a remembrance, but as vital as death itself, fully empty of self-attainment, genuine compassion flowing in each direction, great emptiness.