BOOK REVIEWS

THE MIND OF CLOVER: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics. Robert Aitken. North Point Press, San Francisco, 1985, pp. 199. ISBN 0-86547-158-4

I must confess at the outset to having some misgivings about my qualifications for reviewing *The Mind of Clover* and responding to the questions it raises. The book is concerned with ethics, in particular, the Zen interpretation of the Buddhist precepts, a subject with which most Japanese Zen students like myself are unfamiliar. Such a statement may come as a surprise to Westerners who live within societies fundamentally based on ethical values. But as Robert Aitken points out, for Japanese Zen students, study of the so-called Ten Grave Precepts in a traditional monastery setting is undertaken by only a very few mature students who have reached the final stage of their practice after long years of training. In Rinzai monasteries, koan exercise on the precepts is approached as a matter of great importance, one which requires the utmost care.

In themselves, the Ten Grave Precepts are simple and easy enough to understand. Aitken translates them: Not Killing, Not Stealing, Not Misusing Sex, Not Lying, Not Giving or Taking Drugs, Not Discussing Faults of Others, Not Praising Yourself, Not Sparing Dharma Assets, Not Indulging in Anger, and Not Defaming the Three Treasures. Every Buddhist monk or nun when being ordained makes an oral vow before a master to uphold these precepts. But to really uphold them and to embody them with one's entire being is a different matter. The difficulty of Zen study is the difficulty of making these precepts become your daily life itself while remaining totally free of them.

Robert Aitken devotes over half of *The Mind of Clover* to explaining the precepts one by one from his deep understanding of Zen spirituality. But as such the precepts are still on the level of words and letters. They may be easily misunderstood by readers inexperienced in zazen meditation. Zen teaches that the precepts cannot be truly kept until the wisdom of satori is truly acquired. Any Zen explication of the Buddhist precepts must proceed from the deep mind of satori. In eschewing bondages of any kind Zen seems to be unconcerned with ethics, and it can therefore be very dangerous if misunderstood

and misused. If it often gives the appearance of ignoring ethical problems, that is only because of the overriding importance it places on realizing *prajna* wisdom, which is the source of Buddhist compassion (*maitri* or *karuna* in Sanskrit; *jihi* in Japanese), a deep religious concern with all other beings, including not only man but animals and plants as well.

What I am trying to say may be better illustrated by an incident which took place in a small Japanese temple in the Meiji period (1868–1911). A Zen master by the name of Kasan was on his way back to his temple with his monks after a begging tour. The party had reached the slope leading to the temple when they encountered an old man trying to draw a heavy cart up the hill. One of the monks, a young man who had recently joined the temple, ran and helped him. When they were back inside the temple, Kasan called the monk to his chambers. He gave him a severe scolding and then threw him out of the gate. But the monk did not leave. He stayed before the gate for three full nights, begging the master to accept him again as a disciple. Seeing how earnest he was to continue his Zen study, the master finally relented and allowed him to return. That young monk later went on to become a great master himself.

For over thirty years I have been repeating this story to Christian acquaintances, but none of them has ever shown any understanding of master Kasan's attitude. When I told the late D. T. Suzuki about the reaction I had encountered, he answered with tears of sadness in his eyes that he could not believe they could fail to understand the master's deep compassion. I think that I am able to understand now Kasan's deep kindness to the monk in allowing him to return so that he could concentrate on the study of his self, free of the distractions of the surrounding world. I am equally convinced, however, that had the young monk been a mature student and had failed to help the old man with his cart, the master would have sent him out of the temple for good.

Once when the great Zen layman P'ang-yun stumbled and fell, his daughter Ling-chao ran up and threw herself down beside him to help. P'ang praised her for her filial devotion. This is what Zen calls compassion. Charity, helping others without any deep empathetic commitment, is fashionable nowadays, but I do not think that charity of this sort helps others so deeply or fundamentally. And yet to put this deep Zen compassion into practice in daily life, where we are in special need of others' help, is extremely difficult. Herein may lie the reason why Zen masters have traditionally given the opportunity to study the Zen interpretation of the Ten Grave Precepts only to students whom they have recognized as being truly awakened.

As a way or technique of living in the daily world, Zen offers us the possibility of a life free from bondages. But human society is ruled by ethical standards. From the standpoint of Zen, man must be free even from social ethics.

To discover how this can be done and who can do it is the object of the Zen quest.

Society today, with free sex, abortion, murder, war, pollution of the environment, discrimination of various kinds, seems almost oblivious to human ethics. Robert Aitken's book is a laudable effort to call readers' attention to the social problems we face today and to show a way of rectifying them through Zen-type ethics. In this sense, it has a significance that most books on Zen do not have. Ninety-nine per cent of the literature that appears on Zen in Japan today ignores these social aspects and concentrates only on the aspect of mind. The mind Aitken talks of is a "mind of clover," nurtured in the soil of the earth. Japanese Zennists like to use the image of the lotus flower rising in purity out of the mud. The idea of a plant such as clover has never occurred to us.

I only hope that Aitken's beautiful image of clover will prove apt. I have been saddened in recent years to hear reports about scandals in Zen centers in the West. Something must be wrong within the communities themselves. If such goings-on are allowed to take place in the name of Zen, we cannot have much hope for the future of Zen in its new home. I noticed that Aitken dwells on the merit of male and female Zen students living and practicing together in Western Zen centers, a situation which he says results in a deepened understanding of the other sex. It may be that I am wrong and simply behind the times, but I feel obliged as a Japanese student of Zen to say that I personally find it hard to believe that true Zen practice is possible under such circumstances.

On this note I will stop my irresponsible criticism of others, lest I be charged with breaking the sixth of the Grave Precepts.

NISHIMURA ESHIN

A ZEN LIFE: D. T. Suzuki Remembered. Edited by Abe Masao with photographs by Francis Haar. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1986; pp. *xix* + 250. ISBN 0-8348-0213-9

This fine volume fulfills a long overdue need: an evaluation and tribute to the life and spiritual task undertaken by D. T. Suzuki. As Abe Masao states in his editor's introduction, the deepest significance of Suzuki's achievement lies not in his extensive research into Buddhist-related fields and the resultant voluminous publications, but in the fact that his research, writing and lectur-