

Zen Meditation Western Style

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DURING A STAY at Count Dürckheim's Zen Center at Todtmoos-Rütte in West Germany the Japanese roshi Seki Yūhō said: "Zen came originally from India to China and became Chinese. From China it crossed to Japan to become Japanese Zen. Now that it has travelled to Europe it is up to you to transform it into a European, a German Zen." Dürckheim reflected on this and concluded that zazen itself is bound to undergo mutations in being transferred from an Oriental, Buddhist context to a Western, still more or less Christian, or rather a radically outward-directed post-Christian society, characterized by extroversion, rationalism and achievement, by Erich Fromm's "have-attitude."

This acquisitive attitude to life at the expense of emotional and spiritual values acquires a highly individualized approach to the training in objectless meditation, taking into account the all too underdeveloped, neglected and ignored aspects of inner life, an approach that beyond adaptation demands certain modifications. In this brief essay I hope to elucidate some of the methodological modifications in training which seem inevitable, the required adaptations in the style of meditation, and the creative adaptability demanded from those who act as guides in objectless meditation in our Western context; may I be forgiven for unavoidable redundancies in what follows.

Japanese Zen masters who come to Europe to give *sesshins* try their best to be accommodating, but their adaptations are usually helpful only to quite advanced students, of whom there are relatively few. The great majority of those who show an interest in Zen are totally unfamiliar with meditation as such, and with objectless meditation in particular. The religious matrix of Buddhism which has traditionally stressed a meditative approach to Truth/Reality is lacking in the West.

Only in Roman Catholicism has meditation found its place, be it mostly in the sense of pious concentration on scriptural texts and hallowed imagery. Objectless meditation is therefore suspect of being a threat to orthodoxy rather than a desirable innovative stimulant to religious observance. A complete ignorance of what the Zen spirit might mean causes many who are estranged from traditional forms of Christianity to imagine it to be some exotic symbol system which might serve as an alternative to their former church-bound religiosity. Others have outlandish conceptions of Zen as some mystical system, or expect dramatic experiences, visions, paranormal and occult phenomena, or hope to find in Zen a possible escape from the distasteful and meaningless routines of everyday life.

Those who decide to give it a try soon find out that all meditation points inward, and that this untried inward glance is not without risk. Dürckheim goes so far as to state that meditation which does not bring about a certain degree of inner crisis is useless and barren. It is therefore of utmost importance that he who acts as a guide to the beginning meditator first of all dispels all such illusions and is able to give adequate and sufficient information insofar as this is useful at each particular stage of the initiate's development, and in full awareness of all the detours, traps and escape-maneuvers along the way. He must be competent to apply the brakes or to give encouragement where needed. He has an enormous responsibility, and hence needs a degree of skill which can only be acquired by his own long and intense meditative experience.

In the European context his role is quite different from that of the traditional roshi or guru, in that he must be the guide rather than the authoritarian master, which from the very start requires a radical turn-about in habitual attitudes and automatisms. The activation of intuitive perception namely makes it necessary to let go temporarily of habitual modes of awareness, limited to the external and object-bound, and of that exclusively discursive thinking which Western civilization takes for granted. The all-pervading, constantly stimulated "drive to acquire," so typical of our contemporary consumer society, which stunts emotive and spiritual maturation, must be neutralized. The severe tensions and conflicts caused by this life style, repressed in everyday life, rise to the surface in meditation and may block any intuitive perception of the Reality of Being.

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The guide must be able to handle these difficulties and help the meditator to liberate himself from his compulsions. Once more: his competence can only be based on his own intensive and extensive meditative experience, his maturity and his capacity for empathy. Resisting the temptation to play the psychiatrist or psychotherapist, he must guide the meditator to work through his emotional roadblocks instead of sidestepping these. Since these problems are highly individual and varied, the guide's intensely personal commitment is essential.

The training in objectless meditation, to such a great extent based on bodily aspects like correct sitting, correct walking (*kinhin*), correct breathing and the tonus of the hara, reveals the somatic defects of the Western way of life: awareness of the body has traditionally been weak in Western culture, especially in its relation to spiritual life. The body was seen as a burden, as a necessary evil. Hence distorted spines, tension in knees, jaws, abdominal musculature and shoulders as well as poor breathing are common. Their correction requires patient and sympathetic personal attention: rehabilitation rather than mere correction is needed to eliminate these impediments to meditation.

Finally, there is the important question of the return to the everyday world, to the "ten thousand things," as the meditator is apt to develop a tendency to withdrawal from normal life. The Western emphasis on the transformation of the external while neglecting the inner world, has resulted in T. S. Eliot's "Hollow Man." We still have to learn to share Werner Karl Heisenberg's "Matter is spirit which manifests itself as matter," for in reality the inner and outer world are interrelated to the point of being one. Discursive perception and intuitive perception are complementary in the sense that discursive perception should serve intuitive perception of the Real, in order to attain a balanced approach to life.

We must be aware of being creatures, beings, and able to live this awareness in order that everyday life may be taken seriously as being full of Meaning. The great figures of the West have seen this, from Meister Eckhart and Theresa of Avila, to Thomas Merton, Mother Theresa, Dag Hammarskjöld in our time.

In practical terms: objectless meditation sets itself the task of initiating those who entrust themselves to our guidance into a way of life in which one can remain in touch with one's spiritual intuition instead of being a passive object in the stream of circumstances, and so to

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strike a balance between meditation and personal action, and perhaps even to influence one's environment positively against all the enormous odds.

In short: important as it is to be faithful to the essence of Japanese Zen practice, certain adaptations and modifications in style have proven to be necessary in training Westerners in objectless meditation: a more individually oriented, hence time consuming approach on the part of the meditation leader is required.