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Ascent and Descent

Zen Buddhism in Comparison with Meister Eckhart

PART ONE

UEDA SHIZUTERU

Zen

WE OUGHT TO begin with the question, "What actually is Zen?" I am not in a position myself to come up with the sort of direct answer the Zen masters give, speaking from within Zen itself. "Clouds float across the sky above, water lies in the pitcher below," says one master. "Have you already taken breakfast?" replies a second. A third straightway gives the questioner a healthy kick in the shins, while a fourth explains somewhat more intelligibly, "There is nothing at all you can call Zen."

For the purposes of the topic to be pursued in these pages we should prefer some more approachable description. Let us accordingly direct our attention to what the individual actually does on the Zen way to realize the true self. We may distinguish three aspects or components:

Zazen 坐禪: the practice of Zen through sitting in silence.

Sanzen 参禪: the practice of Zen through encounter with an other (which, in terms of training in Zen discipline, most often takes the form of dialog and confrontation with a master).

Samu 作務: active service (mostly involving work in a garden or in the fields) and *angya* 行脚 (wandering), the practice of Zen in nature.

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Why is Zen practiced in these three aspects? Because, as we shall clarify in due course, the true self with whose realization Zen is concerned functions as a dynamic correlatedness of three elements, to which these three aspects of Zen practice correspond. Hence the practice of Zen is the way *to* the true self as the way *of* the true self. That is to say, the way is not first opened up through one's practice but rather through the dynamism of the true self which is itself a dynamic movement. In this sense we speak of the way of the true self as being at the same time the way to the true self. It is, as a Zen saying has it, a question of "imitating the self."

Why speak of a "true self"? Because we find ourselves first and foremost fallen into the perversity of the ego, fettered to our own egos. Our concern is therefore to awaken from this wrongheaded egoism to our true selfhood, to cast away the shackles of the ego for the freedom of the true self, wherein the truth of the self is at the same time the truth of the self in one accord with the truth of all beings. Let us begin by clarifying the first aspect of Zen practice, *zazen*, in order later to return to the question of the true self and the perversity of the ego.

Zazen

The *za* 坐 of *zazen* means "to set oneself down" or "to sit." In this context *zen* 禅 takes on the sense of "centering" or "recollectedness," and as such is comprised of two elements: the element of detachment, composure, relaxation, stillness; and the element of seeing, beholding, perceiving. We may thus speak of Zen here as *a recollection to the point of self-forgetfulness in which the truth of the self and of being becomes present and is perceived as such*. In a word, *zazen* is Zen in and through sitting, or perhaps better, sitting as Zen and Zen as sitting.

Now what does "sitting" actually entail here? When one uses the word *za* in Japan, one always means sitting on the floor (Japanese uses another word to speak of sitting in a chair). We may further distinguish between *seiza* 静坐, sitting correctly in a tense stillness; *agura* 胡坐, sitting in a relaxed stillness; and *zazen* 坐禅, which is at the same time a tense and a relaxed sitting. Now each of these forms of sitting corresponds to a particular situation, each having its own value as a posture and its own significance. In other words, the posture one assumes in sitting both represents and effects one's posture or attitude to the world.

In zazen and as zazen, sitting is raised to the level of the original and fundamental posture of the human being. From the very outset a particular understanding and a particular estimation of sitting grounds zazen. Translated into living terms, to sit means fundamentally "to sit still and composed." It does not of itself entail sitting in prepared conditions of stillness, but *becoming* still through sitting. Sitting bestows stillness. To sit is to express rest, to be well adapted to one's place and circumstances, to be tuned to an inner harmony. It is as the resonance of this disposition of being attuned that sitting bestows stillness. Under the sway of stillness the difference between the inner and the outer, between motion and rest, is eliminated. This is what is implied by *za*, and already here there is something of Zen to be found. In Zen the stillness and composure of sitting is seen as the fundamental posture of the human being, not as merely one more posture among others, not as a mere transitional stage between standing up and lying down. For Zen Buddhism, sitting down directly implies entering into zazen. Thus zazen treats sitting as a physical expression and an achievement of the stillness of recollection and the openness of composure, as a recollecting of oneself and allowing this recollectedness to be permeated with an infinite openness. As Zen, sitting makes use of the everyday act of sitting to fill the reality of life with meaning and from there spread out in a variety of dynamic forms.

How is zazen practiced? The one who practices enters into zazen through the threefold attunement of disposition of body, breath, and spirit. *The disposition of the body* is achieved through setting the spine in a vertical position, crossing the legs, and resting the hands folded on the abdomen. In so doing, the center of gravity of the entire body is shifted to the abdomen. It is so to speak a binding together of oneself into a concrete recollectedness. This posture is also the embodiment¹ of an attitude free of every object or opposition. The eyes are kept lightly open. This is critical for Zen Buddhism. One is to direct one's gaze to the floor, but neither to see nor not to see. Zazen is not concerned with the contemplation of objects inner or outer. One finds oneself in the midst of openness without any opposition. In a wider context we may speak of this attitude as the embodiment of a posture of non-action. One does not use one's arms or legs and therefore is not doing anything, and yet at the same time

¹ The word "embodiment" is meant to express corporeal embodiment in the sense of a realization through and in one's own physical body.

one *is* doing in doing nothing. Hence zazen is not only doing nothing but also the doing of doing nothing. This latter doing first becomes explicit in coming out of zazen, while during zazen it is absorbed back into doing nothing. Here we need only point out that in the doing of doing nothing—or the action of non-action—the element of primordial doing proceeds from nothingness.

Looking at this anthropologically may help to render the meaning of zazen more intelligible. What sets humans apart from the rest of living beings is the fact that they stand erect and walk erect. In contrast to the animals who are continually bound to a particular environment, standing erect discloses to human beings an openness which we call world (*Welt*) as distinct from environment (*Umwelt*). With their hands now free and at their disposition, humans can build environments about themselves according to their own world-plan. But that is only one side of the picture. The other side must also be kept in mind: by virtue of standing erect there is opened to human beings the world in which they always first position themselves at the center of the world. Anthropocentrism and egocentrism are thus part of the picture. One's hands reach out to grab what is around one, to claim more and more as one's own. But if the sitting in Zen described above is indeed the original posture of the human being, it must also mean renouncing for the first time the anthropological privilege of standing erect. One removes oneself from the world so that the world that has been twisted through egocentrism may be restored to its openness; one rediscovers oneself in one's original and authentic openness. That openness, in which one finds oneself in and through zazen, is nothing less than a space for the dynamic of ascent and descent to take place.

The disposition of the breath occurs by breathing naturally through the nose, putting a gentle inner accent on exhaling wherein the impulse to breathe no longer arises from the chest but from the abdomen. The drawing in of breath becomes progressively thinner, longer, deeper. It is a sort of sinking into one's respiration—rest in motion, motion in rest. Exhaling means continually departing from oneself out into the infinite expanse of openness. Here already a dying takes place. Here already we may speak of a non-selfhood. Inhaling means drawing the infinite openness into oneself. Here already there is resurrection. Everything is within—an all-selfhood.

The disposition of the spirit refers to deploying the spirit in such a way that it enters into a state of complete recollection. On what is this recol-

lection centered? On nothingness—thinking nothing, willing nothing. But thinking nothing, or making nothingness the aim of thought, is not a goal one attains by setting out to achieve it. The way to thinking nothing is known in zazen as *su-soku-kan* 数息観, perceiving as breath-counting, recollecting oneself by counting one's breathing. With each exhale one counts silently to oneself from one to ten. At first blush that seems *simple* enough, as indeed it is; but as one learns through experience the practice is not really all that *easy*, because one does not come prepared for its simplicity. We have been scattered into multiplicity, while for *su-soku-kan* we must be extremely alert and present. To do something so simple purifies us from the diversity into which we have been dispersed. By counting our breath alertly and present to what is going on, we become recollected and forget ourselves. Here being alert and present is the equivalent of self-forgetfulness.

In this way the practice of zazen is a bodily anticipation of the true, selfless self: openness without opposition, rest in motion and motion in rest; alert, present, and self-forgetful; a correlatedness of emptiness and fullness. It is thus a matter of bringing to completion through one's own performance something that has been anticipated in the discipline of practice, but not in the sense of something that can be achieved through repeated practice. What really is the impetus to performance? Here we come to the key point of zazen. The driving force behind zazen and in zazen is nothing other than the basic existential question that we find Gotama the Buddha asking himself: who am I really? what is the ultimate meaning of life and death? Existentially speaking, zazen is primarily the embodiment of a total questioning of the human through this basic question with its unanswerability. In zazen the individual as such becomes an unanswerable question, or as the Zen saying puts it, "a mass of question and despair." At this point one can almost literally do nothing more. It is the terminus of all human effort and questing. Nothing further remains for one to do than to give oneself up for dead in this "can do no more." This is zazen. Without this existential questioning zazen could easily degenerate into mere practice or disciplined training, which is why Zen Buddhism again and again inquires of the one who practices: what is that authentic and primordial self that you were when you were not thinking of this or that, when you were not yet born of your parents? But here again, to repeat, zazen is also the embodiment of the answer, of the dissolution of the mass of question and despair, of the resolution as something an-

ticipated in its practice. Thus, to practice zazen means to come into the presence of the Buddha and the masters of old.

In order to safeguard zazen from slipping into mere practice, Zen Buddhism gainsays every characterization of it as a practice even as it stresses practice. It does this either through the irony of regarding the practice of zazen as useless or through the emphatic insistence that zazen as such is never anything more than the presence of the Buddha. As an illustration of the first, a master makes an ink drawing of a frog seated upon a rock and inscribes it with the words, "If one could become Buddha by practicing zazen." Typical of the latter are the sayings, "As zazen you are Buddha or you can never become Buddha," and "To be Buddha is simple, to become Buddha is impossible."

As we have been saying, then, zazen is both the embodiment of human existence as a question *and likewise* the embodiment of its final resolution. The "and likewise" here points to a fundamental conversion, a conversion from *Existenz* as question to *Ek-sistenz* as answer.² Though we still want to ask precisely when this conversion takes place, there is no answer forthcoming. Zazen does not follow a program. It is enough for those who practice zazen that there are examples of real conversion and awakening in the history of Zen Buddhism. Zen therefore provides direction in the form of examples rather than focus primarily on doctrines or theories. It happens like this: in zazen SOMETHING suddenly clicks into place or strikes like a bolt of thunder, SOMETHING unspeakable and incomprehensible yet clear and forceful, SOMETHING that one might otherwise take in its everyday, objective sense as part of the outside world, such as the song of a bird or the beat of a drum, or SOMETHING that one must otherwise comprehend in religious terms as the experience of grace. In the immediate presence of this SOMETHING, experience leaves no room for interpretation. This SOMETHING breaks through the I-am-I, and does so, as it is said, "in ten directions at once." This breakthrough reverberates often in poetry or sayings articulated in self-evident form, as in the following words of the Japanese master Daitō (1283–1337): "Once the gate of clouds has been walked through, the path of life leads to the east, to the west, to the south, to the north. In the repose of the evening and in the wanderings of the morning there is neither host nor guest, only a clean

² This term borrowed from Heidegger, refers to a being-outside-of-oneself or a finding-oneself-in-infinite-openness.

breeze blowing at the traveller's feet." Or again, we have the saying of the Chinese master Gensha (835–908): "The world in its totality, open infinitely in ten directions, is a single clear, transparent pearl, a pearl that rolls out of itself. The body of the true self as a whole is nothing other than this pearl." Reports of experiences of awakening give others who practice zazen certitude and proof, serving them as images of orientation, as signs that point and invite to awakening to the truth.

The True Self

Let us now consider how this solitary transparent pearl rolls out of it itself, and how this rolling expresses an event of the truth of the self, which we shall here take up at greater length. To illustrate the dynamic of the true self we may draw attention to three pictures from a small classic Zen text, *The Ox and His Herdsman*.³ The three pictures in question form a unity depicting the fulfillment of the way to becoming a self. Together they give us a self-portrait of the self in triptych, displaying the disclosure of the truth of the self.



The first picture is really not a picture at all but only an empty circle containing nothing. It deals with absolute nothingness, neither being nor non-being. It gives the impression at first of being an infinite negation. "Holy, worldly, both vanished without trace," reads the accompanying text. Here we have a radical neither/nor, a fundamental and total negation of every form of duality. In order to achieve a breakthrough to the true

³ The three pictures treated here represent stages 8, 9, and 10 of the Oxherding Pictures. Quotations are taken from the English translation of H. M. Trevor, made from the German text prepared by Tsujimura and Buchner: *The Ox and His Herdsman* (Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1969).

self that corresponds to its unconditioned selflessness, one must leap once and for all into pure nothingness. As the Zen saying has it, one must "die the Great Death." At the same time this means that the self free of all form first discloses itself as the formless, or as formlessness itself, untouchable, unspeakable, unanalyzable. Hence the empty circle.

In this absolute nothingness with its desubstantializing dynamic, the fundamental turnabout occurs as a "dying and becoming" or as a "death and resurrection" wherein the formless takes on concrete form.

This brings us to the second picture which depicts a tree in bloom alongside a river, and nothing more. The text reads, "Boundlessly flows the river, just as it flows. Red blooms the flower, just as it blooms." Here, on the human way of the self, it is not some outer, objective landscape that is being expressed, but neither is it a metaphorical landscape depicting some state of the individual's soul. It is rather a representation of the selfless self. In the absolute nothingness of the first picture the subject-object dualism was broken through; and so here, in the resurrection from nothingness, the tree in bloom alongside a river is nothing other than the being of the human being. A tree in bloom, just as it blooms, embodies the selflessness of the true human being in a non-objective manner. The blooming of the tree, the flowing of the river, are just what they are in an altogether straightforward manner, and at the same time are the locus of the selfless freedom of the self.

On the basis of the reality of this embodiment in nature that confirms the selflessness of the self, there now comes into view in the third picture the selfless "self." Because of selflessness, the "in between" of the I-Thou now becomes the arena of the self. We see there an old man and a youth meeting on a road. It is not just any two people, but an old man *and* a youth meant to represent the selfless self-unfolding of the old man. Through absolute nothingness the self is cut open selflessly and becomes a double-self. Whatever concerns the other becomes the proper concern of the self in its selflessness. Thus we see the old man turning to the youth and asking, "How is it going with you?" or "Where are you coming from?" or "What is your name?" or "Do you see this flower?"—to take a few examples from the history of Zen Buddhism. All of these are simple, everyday questions, but for the one who is being questioned they have the effect of asking whether one really and truly knows where one actually comes from, whether one really does see the flowers "just as they bloom" of themselves. The old man puts his question in the simplest manner so

that in the other there awakens the question about himself, about his true self: who am I really? The in-between of the two serves the one as a selfless inner arena, and the other as a locus for the existential question about the self.

To sum up, we might say that these three pictures depict a threefold manifestation of the selfless self which on each occasion is completely present in its own way. The self, the selfless self, for its part is only fully real insofar as it can realize itself in each facet of the threefold transformation in a completely different manner. It is a question of a movement that consists in drawing with *Existenz* an invisible circle of nothingness-nature-communication. It is present not only in the de-becoming into nothingness that leaves not a trace behind—as, for instance, in the selfless blooming together of the flowers—but also in the encounter with an other in which one sees one's other self in the other. This movement brings to actuality for the first time the true, selfless self, and to that extent can still be objectified in the manner of these pictures. But the dynamic as such that is involved here is not an object that lends itself to being depicted or fixed. Once again we come back to absolute nothingness, for when Buddhism speaks of absolute nothingness it is just this composite dynamic complex that it has in mind.

In contrast to the so-called mandala drawings, Zen pictures are typically as simple and unadorned as those we have just seen. For Zen Buddhism it is the simplest that is always the most original, the unconditioned. In addition to simplicity, Zen drawings have another important distinctive trait: they contain, as an essential element, the dissolution of the pictorial into an imagelessness that surpasses depicting. "The infinite openness in all ten directions is a single, clear, transparent pearl." Within the image as a whole, the image of the universe becomes transparent as a pearl. On the one hand the pearl is dissolved into infinite openness, and on the other infinite openness is concretized in the image of the pearl. The transparent pearl in which and as which the infinite openness is crystallized, at the same time absorbs its own depictability into its own transparency and thus eliminates it. In the pictorial correlatedness of nothingness-nature-communication, the second and third pictures are once again dissolved into the first picture of absolute nothingness, while that first picture in turn is embodied in the other two. A Zen picture is, through its very character as a picture, a dynamic image for this movement of drawing and un-drawing, of depicting and un-depicting. In this way the Zen

picture mediates the dynamic from the invisible to the visible, and from the visible to the invisible. The importance of this dynamic character of the Zen picture is apparent when one considers the danger inherent in the power of an image because of its pictorial nature. The power of an image consists in its making seen what is unseen, which makes all the greater the danger that the image might imprison and constrict, as happens when we confuse the symbolized with the symbol.

Let us now turn to a formal description of the selfless self in terms of its structure, in order more sharply to define the contours of its essential nature. The true self functions as the selfless self—selflessly—not only ethically but structurally as well. This selfless self should not be taken as a substance but only as a dynamic movement that proceeds out of itself and then back again to itself. In this movement self-identity is indeed contained as an essential element, but only in tension with another element, namely the negation of self-identity for the sake of selflessness. Self-identity and its negation are correlated to one another, and this leads to the movement of the self away from itself and back again to itself.⁴ This process is to be seen in the example of freedom insofar as freedom belongs to the essence of the self. We speak of freedom *from* something and also freedom *for* or *towards* something. The “from” and “towards” of freedom signals an existential dynamic at work, according to which the most original freedom of the self as self is the freedom from itself and towards itself. Hence the movement out of itself and back again to itself. If this dynamic is somehow interfered with, the self becomes sick with the sickness of *Existenz*, which shows up in a number of different forms. First is the sickness of the self-enclosed self wherein one is no longer able to go out of oneself; second is the sickness of the wayward self that cannot find its way back to itself; and third is the sickness of self-entanglement in which the dynamic process does not take place in openness but remains imprisoned within the walls of the ego.

Kōjō and Kōge: Ascent and Descent

The true self is the selfless self, and as such entails a dynamic movement

⁴ See S. Ueda, “Emptiness and Fullness: *Śūnyatā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Eastern Buddhist* XV, 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 9–37.

out of itself and back again to itself. The self departs itself selflessly into infinite openness, *ek-statically*, and returns to itself from openness, taking this openness into itself, *en-statically*. Infinite openness belongs to the selfless self in its selflessness, and the selfless self for its part belongs to infinite openness as the arena of its movement from and towards itself, just as in Heidegger Dasein is seen as a pure being-in-the-world. Infinite openness works in this regard as the extreme disclosure of the world; it *is* disclosure itself. The arena of Dasein in which the self at any given moment locates itself concretely is open to all sorts of variations—family, community, a certain company, and so forth. But if the self is to be opened up to the world that grounds it at any given point, this can only happen at a fundamental level if the self opens up to openness in the first place. The self has to be cut open by means of infinite openness. Otherwise, for example, there is no question of a father becoming a true father, but only remaining an egoistic father within his family. Insofar as he is related to his fatherhood within the family egocentrically, his relationship to his family is not an open one.

The dynamic movement in infinite openness we speak of here, then, is not a mere idling within oneself but an encounter with the other and with nature that takes place within the dynamic corresponding to that encounter. In every encounter the movement from and towards reappears. In the fundamental process of moving out of oneself and back towards oneself there is also realized a freedom from the other and towards the other, from nature and towards nature. The correlatedness we saw in the three pictures above showed the same thing. In this regard freedom from means negation and freedom towards means affirmation. The movement out of oneself points to an extreme self-negation and the movement back to oneself points to the most immediate self-affirmation. Seen in this total context, negation is spoken of in Zen terminology as the way of ascent and affirmation as the way of descent. The word “way” is not normally used in the texts, but only the grammatically indefinite terms *kōjō* 向上⁵ and *kōge* 向下, which we are translating here as ascent and descent respectively. This motif is central to Zen Buddhism and understandably runs throughout the whole of Zen writings: on the one hand, a No that expands

⁵ *Kōjō* was originally an everyday word during the Tang Period signifying: above, further, next, etc.

ever wider and wider into every possible shape and form, and on the other a countermanding Here-and-Now. As an example of negation, we may cite the case of a Zen student who so binds himself to the image of the universe as a pearl referred to above that he gets trapped there, whereupon his master tells him, "Smash your pearl." To show affirmation, the master grabs ahold of that same student bodily and tells him, "The pearl of totality, it's here!" Zen is fundamentally a matter of performance, which is why it has few images and few theories. Zen Buddhism offers us instead countless concrete illustrations of performance in all sorts of shapes and forms. (One should not on this account neglect to remember that this simplicity also leaves room in the spectrum between radical negation and immediate affirmation for the development of metaphysics and ethics. Only it is characteristic of Zen that such developments can always be dissolved again through the dynamic of ascent and descent just referred to. We cannot, however, go any further into this problem within the scope of the present essay.)

The characteristic features of ascent and descent for Zen may be summarized in three points. First, Zen deals with the dynamic of ascent and descent *as a dynamic* and not with any representational terminus of the process. Whenever an image of the terminus is presented, the movement of the dynamic is liable to get stuck in the images and halt there. At such points the process must be set on its way again to advance unimpeded (ascent) and come still closer (descent).

Secondly, this means that it is not only a question of the dynamic as such but also of the actual opening up of the arena in which this dynamic moves, namely, infinite openness. Thus it is a question of letting oneself be opened up *by* infinite openness and *for* infinite openness. Infinite openness belongs to the true, selfless self in its selflessness, and that in a manner that infinite openness as it were cuts the self open. If this is the case, then the selfless self is in the highest degree both dynamic and non-dynamic. That is to say, as the arena of the dynamic process, infinite openness does not move itself. Hence the movement of ascent and the movement of descent are at the same time a non-movement.

Thirdly, all of this is not mere matter for speculation but has to do with the existential self-confirmation of the self. Zazen in this regard is directed to infinite openness and sanzen, as we shall see, to the dynamic of ascent and descent.

In speaking of the true self we referred to the selfless self as a movement

out of itself and back again to itself, a dynamic of from and towards. In virtue of this identity one may say, "I am I," and thus effect a great journey out of oneself and back to oneself again. "A nobleman went into a far country to receive kingly power and then return" (Luke 19: 12). For Meister Eckhart this constitutes the nobility of human nature.⁶ With a slight alteration we might read: a certain one set out to attain nothingness in infinite openness—which is only a way of objectifying the great journey out of oneself and back again to oneself. What it means is this: I am I precisely because I am not I—which represents the journey from oneself and towards oneself as a clarification of the self.

The Closed Ego

The true self was represented above in terms of a dynamic movement out of oneself and back again towards oneself. A false development of this "from oneself towards oneself," however, can result in each of the movements of the self getting its "self" stuck in the other. Identity with oneself becomes a clinging to oneself, thus giving rise to an ego closed up in itself. The same words, "I am I" are spoken, but the basis for speaking them has shifted from a dynamic of selflessness to an "I am I because I-am-I." The ego closed up in itself, the I-am-I, represents the fundamental perversion of the selfless self, and as such gives us the fundamental statement of the ego-assertiveness of the I. The genuine, selfless "I am I" is turned upside down, perverted into an I-am-I in which the original openness is closed off.

Buddhism sees this I-am-I, this self-substantializing clinging to the self, as the basis of human misery, which affects not only human beings—but all beings. This I-am-I effects a triple poisoning of the ego—blindness, hatred, and greed—in which the ego is at the same time the perpetrator and the victim of the damage. It is an existential self-poisoning.

Blindness towards oneself. Here the ego opens itself up only halfway in the direction of the selfless "I am I," and so gets trapped in the I-am-I in such a way that the ego represents itself to itself and then comprehends its identity in terms of that representation. The half-opened ego is caught in the passionate grip of the represented ego and inclines towards it.

⁶ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, Band V (W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1968), pp. 109ff.

It is a self-gripping that leads to the self-closure. The represented ego is the actualization of a self-love, of one's "beloved ego." Narcissism is thus always a part of ego-consciousness. In lieu of true clarity with regard to the self there is only an apparent clarity that turns out at bottom to be a blindness towards the self, as it was with Narcissus who admired the beauty of his own image reflected in the water and fell infatuated with it. Consciousness gets thoroughly clouded over, disturbed, and darkened because of such ego-consciousness.

Hatred. As a result of the I-am-I of the beloved ego, the arena between the I and other turns into a battleground. Hatred of the other is part of the I-am-I, even though the I-am-I try to masquerade itself under various forms of compromise for the sake of conviviality. As a poison of the ego hatred works more or less in covert fashion, though often enough it breaks out in acute and open fashion, and shows up not only between ego and ego but also between one group and other, one state and another, one people and another, and, as history tells us, between one religion and other—in short anywhere that the I-am-I spreads over into a collective consciousness.

Greed. The I-am-I is an identity with oneself lacking in all content. In order to fill itself up and provide itself with ostensible importance, this empty ego requires its own attributes and possessions. The I is therefore transformed into a *mine* which grows stronger and stronger in that the ego is only capable of confirming itself with self-certitude as one who owns possessions. The nature that the ego-individual encounters becomes the ego's "own" world, and the things of nature become objects in the ego's property. The fundamental form of its connection with things is "having": the ego reckons itself as having its being, and is therefore intent in increasing its greediness in order to consolidate its hold on its being and enlarge it. What it does not yet have the ego wants to have, and what it already has it does not want to let go of. Thus it is with greed as a poison of the ego.

In relation to itself the I is blind to itself, in relation to others it is hateful, and in relation to nature it is greedy to possess. Out of this triple self-poisoning of the I-am-I originates suffering. Here we have one of Buddhism's pivotal insights. It means that the fundamental form of human misery is to be seen in the ego blinded to itself, hateful towards others, and battling over possessions. By imagining another world free

of all suffering and practicing asceticism and worship as a way to reach that other world, the ego seeks to free itself from suffering. But such attempts to the ego to secure its own salvation remain within the sphere of influence of the I-am-I, and only draw the ego over into religion while the roots of suffering remain buried beneath the I-am-I as such. The ego-individual needs to pass through a fundamental death for the sake of the true self, as well as for the sake of the other and of nature. The I-am-I cannot free itself *from* the other and nature, let alone free itself *for* the other and nature.

The whole process therefore revolves about the dissolution of the I-am-I, and this is where zazen is of service. Openness free of all opposition dissolves hatred towards the other; being alert and present breaks through the illusion of the ego and dissolves blindness towards oneself; being empty dissolves greed. Thus is the Zen saying confirmed: letting go brings superabundance.

Now the I-am-I must be broken through again and again, ever anew, for there is an imprisonment in "oneself" inherent in each movement out of oneself and back again to oneself. It matters not how long and how often one practices zazen. What matters is that zazen becomes a basic attitude towards life.

We have been speaking of the true self in its Buddhist sense, that is, as a selfless self. One may wonder why nothing has been said of the Buddha, indeed whether anything essential to Buddhism can be asserted without speaking of the Buddha. Actually to treat the selfless self and treat the Buddha are fundamentally and originally one and the same thing. Because of its selflessness the selfless self can, in a basic and original sense, be spoken of as the Awakened One, the Buddha. One who has awakened to the truth of the self is in accord with the truth of being. Is this also the case, though, with the saving Buddha and the cosmic Buddha that we encounter in the historical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism? So long as the self has not yet truly realized its selflessness, the Buddha appears to such a self as its own fundamental ground and the wellspring of its being, albeit as an absolute other in its infinite greatness. The self here reaches its selflessness in the form of a total surrender to the saving Buddha (as in Amida Buddhism) or in the form of a mystical union with the cosmic Buddha (as in esoteric Shingon Buddhism). Whatever form it takes, however, Buddhism is ultimately concerned with the selfless self.

Again, one who has died is spoken of in popular parlance as having become a Buddha—in Japanese, *hotoke*—not so much because of any relation to “ancestor worship” but rather because of the selflessness that is central to the truth of the self. In virtue of its being-no-more, the being of the dead one becomes greater, purer, more intense, with the result that it can take on a higher significance for those who have been left behind. This is what grants death its strong symbolic power in religion, why it can become a symbol of detachment for Meister Eckhart and also for Zen Buddhism. “They are right who live as if they were no longer living,” says Eckhart. “First die, then you can come to me,” the Zen master tells his student.

Sanzen and Mondō

Let us now pass from zazen to a second aspect of Zen practice, sanzen. Here we are concerned with Zen in encounter and communication with others, which shows up in practice as training through dialogue and confrontation with a master.

The departure from zazen is also part of zazen. Going in and coming out belong together. The departure from zazen begins in the movement of getting up from zazen, which by no means implies that one gives up doing zazen but rather that zazen itself stands up on its feet and sets itself in motion.

In getting up from zazen something new is achieved. To stand up means inevitably coming into confrontation with an other. It means a meeting of one vis-à-vis an other, and this relationship can be effected with another human, with a tree, or whatever. But what the other that is now encountered is, and what it appears encountered as, is connected with the very depths of zazen. What in other circumstances might appear to be only a tree can, for one who has arisen from the depths of zazen, at the moment of encounter become a crystallized concretization of the entire universe.

Relations to others are of course part of being human, but here, for one who has gotten up from zazen, relating becomes something different because of the groundless depths of zazen, the ungrounded deep. The relationship to the other no longer operates in a context of subject and object, yet neither is it entirely the “I and Thou” that Martin Buber speaks of, although the I-Thou relationship is an essential element in it.

Roughly put it comes to this: I and Thou, on the ungrounded depths

of neither-I-nor-Thou of zazen, are penetrated by this neither-I-nor-Thou so that the "in between" of I and Thou becomes an ungrounded groundlessness of those depths. For Buber the ground that sustains the "I and Thou" is the Eternal Thou of which each particular Thou is an extension. "Every particular Thou is a glimpse into the Eternal Thou." Without that relationship to the Eternal Thou, which of its essence is incapable of becoming an "it," the particular Thou is transformed from an *I* into an *it*. In other words, so forceful is the I in propelling itself onesidedly from the I that it can objectify everything it comes into contact with, can constitute everything as an object. The I has to be stopped and pushed back from this onesidedness through the encounter with a powerful Other so that space can be made for the opposition of an I-Thou relationship. This powerful Other is for Buber the Eternal Thou, and his concern is with the overcoming of onesided egocentrism. For Zen Buddhism the ground that sustains the "I and Thou" is the ungrounded depth that is opened up beneath the "in between" through zazen. Here, too, it is a question of overcoming egocentrism in its onesidedness, though in another form. Instead of being directed immediately to the one encountered, one first sinks selflessly into the nothingness of the ungrounded groundlessness of the "in between," in order then, arisen from the depths of nothingness, resurrected, to enter into the vis-à-vis of the I-Thou. In this way both reciprocal self-sufficiency as well as reciprocal dependency—the basic twofold condition of the I-Thou, of dialog—are brought to their highest potential. On the one hand I am self-sufficient even so far as to include the nothingness of my partner, insofar as the other is embraced by me in my selflessness; on the other hand, I am dependent on my partner even so far as my nothingness, as the partner is so dependent on me. But this is a subject all its own and we cannot go further into it here.

In the present context what is important is that confrontation with the other occurs upon arising from zazen. There the selfless self is practiced as a reciprocal confrontation. This is sanzen: to act out the dynamic of the I-Thou permeated by the neither-I-nor-Thou together with one's master so that the selfless self can verify itself in a corresponding dynamic.

But now how is such an encounter to become an occasion for practice? Precisely because the encounter itself already entails a mutual questioning and answering. In the confrontation and ungrounded "in between," the I-Thou is not a situation of stillness but a continually new event that is performed by the two partners in ever more concrete manner and needs

to be verified. In each case the encounter is an event from self to self, an event in which the self is brought into question and located in the correlatedness of selflessness and selfhood. Fundamentally the encounter is a mutual questioning: who are you really? In Zen Buddhism the encounter is performed expressly as a question-and-answer. For example, a monk once came to master Hui-neng to practice Zen with him. The monk greeted his master with a bow at which point the master asked, "Who are you really that comes to me in this manner?" The question has the instant effect of bringing the monk's relationship to himself into question and throwing him into an essential uncertainty. Only after three years of probing the ground of the self through zazen and sanzen did he awaken to his self and bring his own reply to the master: "Even a single word about the self misses the true self."

This question-answer event that is carried out expressly as an encounter is what Zen refers to as *mondō* 問答, literally "question and answer." It is Zen Buddhism in the midst of life, a free, unique, lived event between one living being and other. It is primarily in the actual examples of *mondō* rather than in the form of teachings that the true concerns of Zen Buddhism are represented. The principal writings of Zen Buddhism are largely made up of collection of such examples, as we see for instance in the *Bi-yān-lu* (Blue Cliff Records). The doctrinal writings of Mahāyāna (sūtras and tracts) do in fact form the philosophical and religious foundations of Zen Buddhism, but the practice of Zen based on those writings is concerned with breaking through the doctrinal level in order to open up to the level of living actualization. Thus the way a topic is treated in *mondō* will be completely different from the way it is treated doctrinally. For example, we read in the doctrinal writings, "Prajñāpāramitā (consummate wisdom) is the wisdom beyond every dualism." But in *mondō*, the same theme is pursued in altogether distinct manner, as the following example should illustrate. A master is working in the garden with his broom when another master happens by and inquires of him, "What is prajñāpāramitā?" The first master throws his broom to one side, breaks out in laughter, and hastens off to his room. Thereupon the second master also breaks out in laughter and departs. Here the difference of type and level between doctrinal formulas and *mondō* experiences becomes clear. The same emphasis on the event-quality of encounter and dialog is also present in other contexts, for instance in narrative literature where the

narration passes over into dialog at the critical and climactic points.

This is the practice of Zen that occurs in and as *mondō*. In terms of what actually happens we may describe it as follows: A master gives his student a Zen task. Most commonly this means presenting the student with some classical question-and-answer story chosen from the annals of Zen literature. A good illustration is the dialog that took place between the great master Tung-shan of China's T'ang Period and an unnamed monk. Asked by the monk, "What is the Buddha?", Tung-shan replied, "Three pounds of hemp."⁷ According to the transmission the setting for the dialog was that the master was at the very point of weighing hemp when the monk came up to him with the question about the Buddha. The master's reply flowed directly out of the work he was absorbed in meditatively at the moment. What is the Buddha?—Three pounds of hemp. The crude disjunction between question and answer is apparent. "Three pounds of hemp" is what Zen Buddhism describes as a *sudden*, unmediated event. But to try to deduce from the *mondō* some statement of doctrine or other, such as "The Buddha is something ordinary and everyday like three pounds of hemp," would be completely to miss the quality of event that it portrays. From the viewpoint of the doctrinal statement, the presentation of the topic in the form of a *mondō* would be of no consequence. Here the doctrinal proposition is leaped over by means of what takes place in the "in between," by an event that brings about a lived actualization in the immediacy of the present. Such an event cannot be presented in doctrinal formulas.

What is the Buddha?—Three pounds of hemp. Calling to mind this timeworn example, the master next asks his student, "What is the point of the three pounds of hemp?" The task for the student consists in giving the master an answer of his own making. Then master and student engage in a brief dialog in which as a rule the master strictly rejects the student, who then returns to *zazen*. The student later gets up from *zazen* with a new response, and the process is repeated once again and until such time as the student has really found something to say to the example in the

⁷ Martin Buber, *Die Schriften über das dialogische Prinzip* (Lambert Schneider, Heidelberg, 1954), p. 76 (the beginning of the section on "I and Thou").

⁸ See *Bi-yān-lu*, *Niederschrift von der smaragdenen Felswand*, explained and interpreted by Wilhelm Gundert (Carl Hanser, Munich, 1960), Vol. I, pp. 239–40.

service of his own awakening. Then the master gives another example to work on. Through this going back and forth between sanzen and zazen the correlatedness of discussion and solitary reflection, of speech and silence, is being performed. This correlatedness is a critical element in genuine Zen dialog, since without solitary reflection the reciprocity of discussion easily deteriorates into a purely formal reciprocity lacking all quality as an event. Genuine *dialog* requires both *solitary* reflection as well as the *repetition* of the dialog.

In sanzen the *mondō* is thus involved twice, first as the original question and answer transmitted from the history of Zen, and secondly as the medium of practice for master and student occasioned by that original question and answer. In order to enter properly into the original *mondō*, the student must appropriate history and make it present, that is, one must experience oneself immediately as questioned and questioner respectively. The standpoint of the student is not that of a third party looking at things from the outside, putting question and answer together to form an objective statement of doctrine, and thereby supposing the example to have been understood. What is essential is that one set oneself squarely in the "in between" of the event of the original *mondō*. Thus as a medium of practice for master and student, the *mondō* is intended to transport the original *mondō* of the old masters into the present and reconstruct it in its full vitality. What that means in practice may be seen from another example. A monk once asked Chao-chou, "What is the meaning of the Bodhidharma's coming to China?" to which Chao-chou replied, "The oak tree in the garden."⁹ One of Chao-chou's disciples took this original *mondō* into the present when another asked him, "I have heard it said that your master answered the question about the meaning of the Bodhidharma's coming from India to China by saying, 'The oak tree in the garden.' Is that so?" The disciple replied, "Do not make a fool of my master. He never said such a thing." Such is the freedom of the disciple that he can take his master's words, "The oak tree in the garden," in his own completely original way in bringing them to the present.

The core of the *mondō*, the correlatedness of negation and affirmation, is brought out concretely in a story that makes immediate both its quality of event and its dynamic interplay of reciprocity. Two masters were

⁹ See *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, translated with commentaries by K. Sekida (Weatherhill, New York), p. 110.

sitting opposite one another drinking tea. (For Zen, any setting can become a suitable occasion for *mondō*.) Forthwith master A remarks, "The All is present in full measure in a cup of tea" (1). At that point master B tips over master A's cup and the tea spills out. Master B then turns to master A and asks, "Now where is the All?" (2). Master A replies simply, "Oh, what a shame, and such good tea!" (3). And thereupon both laugh (4).

1. Here we have the introduction of the doctrine of All-is-One into a concrete, everyday situation. While this way of adaptation already gives us some hint of Zen, the words form a thesis that remains on the level of doctrine. This should not, however, be taken to mean that master A is stuck on the level of doctrine, since his words confront master B and prompt him to give response by taking a stance to the thesis, and thus to disclose something of himself.

2. Master B tips over the teacup of master A. The apparently coarse and unexpected behavior serves to break through the level of doctrine at a single stroke. It is a total negation achieved *on the way of ascent*, as a result of which the level of conversation on the topic is shifted from the formulation of a thesis to the occurrence of an event. From this standpoint of event, then, master B takes master A to task for his beautiful thesis, "Now where is the All?"

3. Master A replies, "Oh, what a shame, and such good tea!" Here we have a complete reversal of the unaccustomed that had broken into the customary, a reversal achieved *on the way of descent*. The cup has fallen over and the tea spilled out. Undiverted by the intervening question that explains the crude behavior of master B, yet without clinging to his own thesis, master A only replies, "What a shame!" He draws himself out of the discussion on the All-is-One and out of the disturbing deed back into the immediate presence of the everyday. The event of the moment is taken in completely and without remainder through this "What a shame!"

4. Then the two masters laugh together. This laugh in chorus is the conclusion. The dynamic correlatedness of infinite negation and the immediate here-and-now present transforms the seriousness of the mutual questioning into a sharing in a game of truth. The play of truth that takes place in the confrontation of one individual with another thus answers the question and wipes it away. The two laugh and in their laughter the *mondō* is resolved.

In conclusion to this first part a modern Zen question may be adduced

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from the context of the current encounter between Christianity and Buddhism, in order to clarify the direction in which the Zen question moves.

D. T. Suzuki asks: "It is written in the Bible, 'God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.' *Who* saw that happen? [Who was the eye-witness?]"

TRANSLATED BY JAMES W. HEISIG