

Zen and the Art of What?

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If technology has proved to be the main creative export of the West, the East for its part generates a countersurge of an intangible sort. Asiatic religion, philosophy and art have never been so warmly welcomed in America, for example, as they are right now. Among these, the creative complex known as Zen makes itself felt from Maine to California and back again. Why so? What is the attraction of Zen? Hundreds of thousands of hands reach out, clutching for this exotic plant. Fear, is one reason. Better reasons exist, but it may be well to begin here with man's obsessive fears of the moment, and leave the great creative factors for later on.

The worst evil of ancient society, namely slavery, baffled the hard and brilliant consciousness common to Greece and Rome. Today, the headlong mind of modern man surrounds us with yet another steel wall. Will we be ground into dust by the insensate, hydrophobic, oil-swilling armies of the night which our own intellects have spawned? The question is open, because humanity keeps augmenting and sharing out around the world an awesome war-upon-ourselves kit. Machines we can barely control, meanwhile, and ourselves hardly at all. All this is under hot debate, and although not hopeful the talk has opened up new lines of thought in East and West alike.

Zen is no refuge, no more so than Christianity, today. It too must turn right inside-out, or die. Europe is real, but Christendom a mist. Japan is real; Zenland does not exist. Yet still one must begin with history. Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism, between them, gave rise to Zen. However, this partly religious and partly philosophical movement was to find its widest acceptance in Japan. The story of its success is curious, and inextricably bound up with Japanese aesthetics. Are such things exportable? No, perhaps. But art itself goes where it wills, transparent, easy like the wind. Art is the handmaid of religion. On that point most devout people and proper ecclesiastics would agree. But ancient

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Chinese Taoism held that on the contrary the arts provide eyes, ears, and tongue to spiritual forces which would otherwise remain blind, deaf, and dumb. Japanese Zen inherited Taoism's reverence for the arts, and from this developed a distinctive new corpus of creative effort. Historically this may seem peripheral to the present crisis. Philosophically, not so. The so-called "martial arts" are the most characteristic perhaps (and certainly the most startling) Zen accomplishments on the list. Back in the 13th century, it seems, Zen missionaries found themselves compelled to come to terms with the continual warfare which then wracked feudal Japan. For samurai the arts of sword and bow were essential, and never mind the old Buddhist injunctions against taking life at all. So Zen men set to and taught the military elite how to wield weapons with cold philosophic poise and, yes, grace also.

The long-run result was to create a warrior-code and an ideal of knighthood having much in common with European "chivalry" of the same period. But in Japan the vestiges of this are still promulgated unabashedly. The use of the old weapons, mere toys though they may seem today, is still taught and reverently rehearsed in Zen temples throughout the land. There is an ungentle, if not actually fierce, element in Japanese Zen difficult to dismiss. Its opposite is there too, however. It is strange, yet impressive all the same, to see a Zen swordsman turn about in a quiet hour and demonstrate the peaceful "art of tea."

Quiet communion amongst equals is, or it ought to be, the keynote of this intensely Japanese art. It calls for *wabi* in particular, a word which appears to connote both "holy poverty" and "human-heartedness." Hence the tea-utensils used are generally imitations of rough peasant-ware which was imported centuries ago from Korea. The catch is that today the original teabowls (peasant rice-bowls) are considered priceless, while close imitations of them sell for millions of yen. Conspicuous consumption in spectacularly severe style, one must admit, tends to characterize the art of tea at present. *Wabi* seems quite dried out of it. The hundred or more gestures deemed proper to tea-making and tea-sipping are now entirely programmed.

Much the same kind of programming extends to Zen flower-arrangement, ink-painting, calligraphy, musical performance, and Noh drama, all of which exhibit the strengths and weaknesses consistent with a virtually changeless repertoire. In the case of most modern arts, conception tends to outrun performance. With the traditional arts of Zen things work just the other way around. Conceptions are given, set, unoriginal by-and-large, yet performed at

a professional level by amateurs and in truly masterly fashion by professionals. There is unstinting reverence accorded to the masterpieces of the past; and these are widely but not slavishly imitated—with no sense of shame.

Why not? Simply because, as with Zen swordsmanship, archery, and tea, the whole point is in the performance itself. In the doing, that is to say, not the product. Zen teaching tends to take people more or less as they are—soldiers, innkeepers, entertainers, or whatnot—and suggest ways to sharpen up. The idea being that any person's path may be correct for him, providing that he pursues it with sensitivity and skill.

A middle-American author named Robert Persig has lately come along to challenge this Japanese view of what Zen ought to do for people. His *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* has gripped millions of American readers. It may even point the way to a further—Western this time—development of Zen thinking. Something relatively individualistic, and even (at the risk of heresy) egotistical it may prove to be. Look at a freight train, Persig suggests. The long serpentine procession of loaded box-cars represents what he calls “classic knowledge” meaning the vast body of precedents which exist for action now. The locomotive's leading edge, however, is “romantic knowledge” meaning spontaneous appreciation of ever-unfolding possibilities. Be a romantic, Persig urges; ride up front. The train track is the Way, the great Tao, though Persig calls it “Quality.” He seems more deeply aware of Taoist thinking than of Zen *per se*. Dare to live fully in the moment, dare to seek and you will not be sorry. This is the main message of Persig's book. But the beautifully braided plot mingles moral, intellectual, and intensely personal themes at will. It is very free-wheeling, and no mean contribution to modern imagination.

Although Persig used to make his living by writing technical manuals, he considers all such tracts harmful insofar as they reinforce one's sense of separateness from the machine. Invariably they omit what ought to be a prime ingredient: the mechanic's own peace of mind. Lacking that, Persig explains, a person may further damage the very machine he means to repair. The reason being that no one can feel his own way gently and sensitively, nor anticipate reverses, nor welcome frustration when it comes, except in a state of calm.

Relax, and things do keep on happening. Positives may become negatives, yes, but the reverse is also true. Brain a poet with half a brick, and he might just fight back. But the creative way would be to turn even that into a haiku. Words may be sharp and heavy too, or feather-soft; the poet has power to choose. Polish your sword, and learn to resemble that weapon. Such was the

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austere advice of old-time Zen masters. Keep your motorcycle in good repair, Persig for his part suggests, never forgetting the fact that "the cycle you are really working on is yourself." Machines, streets, buildings, even print, are all projections of human intellect, after all. But if the motorcycle is really the man, then what about the nuclear bomb? Such questions can cause one's own head to threaten to explode. Thoughts are things, out there anyhow. Relaxing may be dangerous, if fantasy comes true....

Consider *The Thinker*, that brooding bronze masterpiece by Auguste Rodin. The figure hunches on a rock, tense, motionless and yet remorselessly pursuing some obscure line of inquiry within. What will be the result of such brow-furrowed cogitation? A scientific theorem? An invention of some sort? At any rate one senses that the piece was intended to celebrate the primacy of Reason (with a capital "R") over everything else. Thought, in short, of a sharply anti-fantastic sort; a Western ideal, dimming out at present. When Henry Adams commissioned Homer St. Gaudens to sculpt the Adams Memorial at Rock Creek Park in Washington, he meant that statue to represent a very different ideal. Namely, "the intellectual acceptance of the inevitable." Accordingly, St. Gaudens created a figure which would seem to represent a substitute quarterback, with a blanket pulled up over his head, warming the bench in the rain on a Saturday afternoon. His team is losing, and he knows that he himself will not be called upon to play.

Tradition holds that Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, carved marble for a living in his young manhood. He was even credited with a statue or two on the Acropolis. Be that as it may, Socrates did practice and also recommend to his friends a kind of self-sculpture. The marble you are actually hammering away at, he said in effect, is you. As for the fine white dust which stings your eyes and sifts into your shoes, that too is you, or your loss. But, what sort of figure should you strive to become? Ought you to cultivate concentration and stooped intensity like Rodin's *Thinker*, or strive for the rather wistful dignity evinced by St. Gaudens' figure? Icy sharp inquiry, or passive acceptance, which is the best way? Neither, according to Zen. There is a middle way, to be found through meditation. The monumental Buddha at Kamakura will do, perhaps, as an image for this. Plainly at peace in its mountainous way, the image is not coldly so, nor passively. It too has thoughts, blooming like wildflowers from the rockface, doubtless, but what they are no one can guess.

Of all the many arts which have been associated with Zen, meditation is the most apposite—if not actually needful—one today. Besides, it travels best.

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Proper guidance must come with it, of course. But, given that, most people who make the effort do seem to gain something from the painful and severe practice of zazen ("just sitting"). The evidence is that slowly, imperceptibly at first, they change. Self-sculpture, it turns out, is just what zazen is all about. And this can best be done, apparently, in a condition of absolute stuckness. Sitting and hitting, this becomes. Hurt from without and hammered from within; one yearns to give up the whole thing.

If a stranger from a far land stares too fixedly at a figure which baffles his understanding, something horrible may happen in his imagination alone. He witnesses the figure's robes tatter, fade, and rot away altogether. Next, the flesh also dissolves; the ligaments loosen; the vertebrae come rattling down. If the stranger then turns away to concentrate his mind upon the native mores and thought-processes, he may dream of cockatoos plumed with furious argument and brooding upon eggs of polished stone. He suffers acute mental distress, and the reason is clear enough. At that point, he had best give up in fact, or else break through and "kill the Buddha!"

Any given religion, any self-consistent logic, rests upon myriad assumptions concerning which participants must agree. Neither religion nor philosophy transcends my-culture consciousness, as a general rule. Hence the student who travels far from home in search of enlightenment may enter darkness instead. He finds himself lacking even a visa-permit of the mind, let alone his heart's passport. Then he must try to transcend religion and logic alike, or else turn again, back out, pack up and go home to his own cloud. Even so profoundly cultivated a scholar as Daisetz Suzuki (who was Rinzai Zen's most effective missionary to the West) suffered from culture-shock in America and Europe. Witness his uncomprehending acid comments upon Christianity. (Not that he was unsympathetic to Western religion, either. Suzuki, after all, married a Christian girl.) The case of Robert Persig's experience in India is similar. He earnestly undertook studies at Benares Hindu University, until one day his Professor assured him that the American atom-bombing of Hiroshima never happened at all "except in the world of illusion." Persig knew better than that, or so he thought; and he quit in disgust.

For a person at peace with himself, however, the moment of greatest difficulty is potentially the most creative.

Cogito, ergo sum! "I think, therefore I am," Descartes triumphantly proclaimed. But what if thought itself proves to be nothing but the continuous electro-chemical meshing of genetically programmed and environmentally conditioned

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reflexes, or, in other words, the still small ghostly clash of automatic gears? Western behaviorists maintain just that. So, disconcertingly enough, do Zen philosophers. Nonetheless, the ends of Zen meditation are by no means the same as those of behaviorist conditioning. Complacent normalcy is the mark of the brainwashed man. Alert independence, on the contrary, characterizes the longtime zazen practitioner. But at first Zen meditation does make a person painfully aware of his own machine-like nature. An insatiable mill of stimulus and response keeps on spinning inside himself. The first order of business must be to halt this.

At the start of a symphony concert, when the conductor raps warningly upon the podium with his baton, he is acknowledging the primacy of silence. Without silence, no music. Similarly, without stillness there can be no dance. And, lacking empty space, no solid sculpture. For creative work and play, the qualities of silence, emptiness, and stillness are prerequisite. For work upon one's own nature, the same is true. Hence the first aim in zazen is to defuse the busy, static-charged intellect so that one's nonmechanical self may come into existence like sculpture from the stone. And if self-sculptors make especially sensitive technicians, as Robert Persig has suggested, zazen may some day lend a quality of mercy to industrial life itself. Most of the world's ills, Blaise Pascal surmised, are caused by man's apparent inability to sit still in a room doing nothing. Why so? Because man is not a problem solver so much as he is a problem maker. Rodin's *Thinker* is dreaming up new difficulties. St. Gaudens' Adams Memorial figure is not dispelling old ones. But the Kamakura Buddha works and plays at simply being in relation to all things, centered, creatively at one.

Certain it is that meditation does deepen one's sense of being related in a cousinly way, even to machines.

The question is, can a person feel a sense of oneness with all the world and at the same time know himself? His normal powers of rational discourse are blocked, frustrated, when he does zazen. The neatly darting portion of his mind—the part which needs to make sense to itself and others—goes on holiday for the time being. Something with a longer rhythm, darker, more ambiguous, a thin-air figure, appears. Cosmos or anthropos? Suchness, or selfhood, which is it?

Both, in every case, perhaps. But this fundamental question, like the one concerning human survival as a whole, remains open. Meditation meanwhile continues to reign supreme over the other arts of Zen, and keeps on gaining

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new adherents in the West. The Japanese Zen swordsman, archer, tea-master, flower-arranger, ink-painter, calligrapher, musician, and actor all alike have continued to profit from the one great paradox which stands revealed in zazen practice. More and more Western artists, in varying fields, also make use of this. Writers included, yes.