

Zen and Psychology

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IF THE aim of psychological studies lies in the discovery of the Self, or subjectum,¹ Zen is just the place for them.

Zen does not advocate an analytical method to reach the subjectum, for it knows that this method has always an object for a further analysis and can never achieve the end. As long as psychology refuses to part company with analysis, it will never come to the Self. The Self will always be an elusive object for psychology. Psychology may use the analytical method until it comes to an aporia, but as soon as psychology realizes that it has come to an aporia it must abandon analysis.

The Self must be grasped as it is. When it divides itself it ceases to be itself, for then there is the seer and there is that which is seen. However much this process is repeated, it is like a man's pursuing his own shadow; the faster he runs after it the faster it flies away from him.

If this is the case, can the Self ever be caught? Some philosophers say that there is no such thing as the Self; this is because they have followed the analytical method and found the Self always beyond the reach of their intellection. Their Self is associated with a feeling or sensation or perception or something else, and not the Self all by itself. So they think the Self is a delusion and non-existent.

The early Buddhists denied the existence of an ego-substance, which they called *ātman*, and on this denial they built up their world-view, stating that

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¹ In the sense of "that which lies underneath, but itself not existing on anything." I understand that some of the medieval philosophers used the term.

as there is no ego there is nothing which is worth while craving for. When one is free from attachments one becomes independent and master of oneself. The Buddhists, therefore, thought this getting rid of egocentric ideas was the highest aim of their life, for trouble of all kinds was the outcome of egoism. They thus rigorously applied the analytical method to the establishment of the *anatta* doctrine, the theory of non-ego.

The early Buddhists' conception of ego was a crude one. They thought it was something like one of the objects we see about us, an entity which can be objectively perceived, something which can be an object of sense. Therefore, they were told to analyze what they took for an ego-substance. When they found that there was after all nothing which could be held as an indivisible substance, they were persuaded that an ego is "but a way of counting, a term, appellation, convenient designation, mere name," and that in the absolute sense there is no ego to be found anywhere within this body which we cherish as the abode of our dear self.

What those early Buddhists really found to be but a name was no more than an objectified, thought-out, analyzable self: it was not a living Self, or what may be termed "consciousness-in-general," or a synthesizing principle or transcendental apperception, whereby all the psychical activities are unified and endowed with meaning. This Self is never subject to dissection, for it is this Self that undertakes the dissection. The dissecting knife cannot dissect itself, as the eye cannot see itself.

What Zen tries to catch is the Self which has not divided itself yet into subject and object and therefore cannot be subjected to any form of analysis. This Self is the basis of all our psychological activities. It is because of this Self that we think, feel, will, imagine, and perform all sorts of work. This cannot be made a subject of psychological study as long as psychology is a science.

This is the self Zen aspires to take hold of; therefore, it must not be identified with the Unconscious, for this latter still belongs to the plane of consciousness. The Self of Zen cannot fall into categories of psychology. It works through our consciousness, no doubt. Or we can say that consciousness is the instrument with which the Self makes itself known to us. The Self is not conditioned by consciousness, but the Self conditions itself by means of consciousness. To reach the Self it is necessary to transcend consciousness.

Introspection is not the way to reach the Self, for that still belongs to the

realm of psychology. There is the one who strives to see, though he does not know exactly what is that object which he wants to see. As long as there is any trace of dualism the Self refuses to reveal itself.

Zen philosophers sometimes call the Self "the primal man who is even before his parents gave him birth." It is evident that this man is no biological or psychological man, and so is the Self of Zen study not a psychological self. It belongs to another order of existence, and no wonder that it eludes the ordinary methodology applicable to scientific objects.

What is generally known as self in possession of consciousness is not the Self which is the object of Zen study. The self of our everyday experience is the product of thought, our own intellectual creation, which is erroneously taken by us all as a real concrete Self. The intellectually-created self is an abstraction and it is quite logical that it cannot be located anywhere in our consciousness; it is a non-entity. The Buddhists were quite right when they declared it to be a nihil.

While the psychological self is non-existent, we cannot deny the existence of something behind it which makes us, however falsely, take it for the real one. The later Buddhists, therefore, came to reassert the existence of the *ātman*. As they, both earlier and later Buddhists, use the same term, there is a confusion of thought. In point of fact, the later *ātman* does not belong to the same category of thought as the former. The earlier *ātman* is denied by both schools of Buddhists. Denying, however, the *ātman* as upheld by the later Buddhist schools is a self-contradiction, because one cannot deny such *ātman* without denying oneself. Denial itself involves the negation of its own standpoint.

The Self of Zen study may be called the metaphysical Self, and even when it cannot be reached by analysis or introspection we cannot pronounce it to be non-existent.

The metaphysical Self casts its reflection on our ordinary consciousness and we confuse this with self-consciousness. But consciousness and self-consciousness are not interchangeable terms. Consciousness is always relative and cannot be conscious of itself. In this we deceive ourselves. In consciousness there is always a bifurcation of subject and object, for without this bifurcation consciousness is impossible.

Self-consciousness in its strict sense means self-identity in which there is no

dichotomy, no division of seer and seen. Where there is no discrimination, no differentiation, there is one unbroken continuum, that is, self-identity, and where there is self-identity there cannot be any form of consciousness in its popular sense. If we still think there is a kind of consciousness here, it cannot be of the ordinary pattern of consciousness; it is a consciousness in which there is no subject conscious of its object. The conscious subject itself is its object; here we have self-consciousness in its pure form. We thus can see that this self-consciousness is not a thing to be reached by intellection but by the will in its most fundamental sense. It is the will that brings about self-identity.

Self-identity achieved means realization of selflessness. Paradoxically speaking, *ātman* attained is *ātman* denied; self realized is self lost.

The Self is always wanting to identify itself by becoming conscious of itself. It works on the plane of our ordinary consciousness, it works through the consciousness, it works behind the consciousness. But the latter is slow to read the message—no, it misreads it; it gives the wrong interpretation to the “still small voice.” The result is the suffocation of the Self, and this suffocation reflects itself on the surface of consciousness as the feeling of fear, anguish, uncertainty, vexation, etc.

Modern men are, without realizing it, all materialists, firm believers in the objective reality of a material world, and think that anything that is not material is unreal and has no claim for existence. By “matter” they mean something that can be measured, weighed, and expressed one way or another. This way of understanding reality has made modern men objective, centrifugal; they are found running away all the time from themselves, seeking satisfaction in sense-stimulation, trying to accomplish something in order to show the results. Modern men are thus seen to be always engaged in producing or achieving something palpable, something that can be measured by the senses. They have no soul, no center, no consciousness of an integrating whole within themselves. They have forgotten their Self.

The old school of psychology had a soul, a kind of ego-substance, and this made us enjoy an inner life. However mistaken this conception of a soul may have been, it opened to us a world within ourselves which saved us from becoming the thrall of a material world. We have this soul no more, because it has now become a mere bundle of feelings, ideas, images, and other fleeting

events. This is all very well as far as it goes. Science and analysis have done their work, which seems to be satisfactory enough to the human intellect. But somehow we long for a soul, if not in its old pattern, then in some way. If there is nothing but a constant flow of sensations, impressions, imaginations, and other miscellaneous things, the mind lacks something on which to hang itself. It has no moorings. And is this not what causes in us the feeling of insecurity, leading to all forms of mental maladjustment? If the old soul is impossible to have now, can we not have a substitute for it? "Substitute" is not the proper term. I should have said a new conception of the soul which does not conflict with science—I mean science as understood in its legitimate setting.

A new conception of soul is what I have called the Self, and this Self is really what advocates of the old soul have been seeking and what modern man has not yet discovered. Science has done away with the old soul, but it is not science that can give us the Self, which is something altogether beyond its grasp. It also transcends the reach of philosophical comprehension, because it cannot be brought under the scrutiny of intellection.

Materialism has reduced consciousness into the functions of the brain, and the brain is a physicochemical mechanism which can go on without being interfered with by consciousness, for consciousness is merely an epiphenomenon. Behaviorism, the study of conditioned reflex, and similar studies make it possible to survey the human mind objectively or scientifically. As long as self-consciousness stands in the way of scientific investigation, the scientists will go on ignoring it altogether, for this is their customary procedure. They start with certain hypotheses in the study of their subjects and try to carry them through as consistently as they can, avoiding such objects as do not fall conveniently within their ken. For these reasons, the study of the Self and self-consciousness is relegated to the obscurest corners, not only by the scientists but by most of us.

But the outcome of all this is that we modern men are constantly tormented with a sense of uneasiness, and the worst thing is that we do not realize where the cause or causes lie. This is indeed the price we are all paying for intellectualization of life. The old soul is forever gone, which is not a bad thing, but a new one has not been installed. Science does not give it to us, nor does philosophy. Until we get it somehow we shall never feel at ease with ourselves and with the world at large.

However high our standard of living may be, however democratic our political organization may be, and however militarily strongly defended our nation may be, we can never be free from fear and the sense of insecurity, because all these structures belong to the superficialities of our existence. Those who have not yet come to the presence of the Self, "the primal man" of Zen, can never expect to enjoy an absolute security.

What, then, is the Self? And how can we take hold of it? How can we become conscious of it? How can we achieve self-consciousness?

The Self, let us note, ought not to be confused with the old concept of a soul. The soul was conceived as something that could be objectively identified, and this was found empty as a result of analysis. The Self is not subject to analysis. The Self is not to be intellectually treated, for it is something fundamental from which the intellect starts. It is what conditions intellection, and therefore it transcends intellect. To bring the Self to its own consciousness, something more than intellect is needed.

In ordinary or relative consciousness there is a perception, there is a subject and an object between which a relationship takes place that we interpret as perception or judgment. But in self-consciousness there is something more than perception. Besides its noetic quality there is a conative element, there is an act of will. Self-consciousness is the will.

Being the will itself in its fundamental sense, self-consciousness knows of no subject that is conscious of itself. In fact, when the Self is conscious of itself it knows that self-consciousness is something impossible. This may sound absurd, altogether self-contradicting, but for the Self to be conscious of itself means really not to be conscious of itself. For self-consciousness is not a kind of consciousness in which there is a conscious subject apart from the object of consciousness. In self-consciousness, the subject and the object are one. Even to say "one" is not accurate, not to the point. When we say "one" this "one" is thought of in contradistinction to that which is not "one." For an affirmation always implies a negation. In the Self affirmation and negation are synthesized, and this synthesis is an act of the will. The will is prior to the intellect, the intellect starts from the will. Therefore, it is not by intellection that we can reach the Self—that the Self comes to its own consciousness.

The Self always wants to become conscious of itself; the Self is no Self unless there is a self-consciousness. But this self-consciousness cannot take place on

the relative plane of ordinary consciousness, for the latter is the outcome of rationalization and whatever self we are conscious of is an abstraction and not a concrete experience.

The Bergsonian concept of reality as movement, or *élan vital*, applies to the Self of Zen study. While the Self is apt to be regarded as a statical abstraction, the Zen understanding of it is dynamical, as it identifies it with the will which is absolute freedom. Zen considers Bergson has not gone deep enough when he says that his *élan vital* never repeats itself, always moving forward. In this, Bergson puts too much emphasis upon movement and time, and seems to forget that there is something that never moves in the midst of movement, something that is in time and yet transcends it. And this something is the Self itself.

When Zen says that the Self is beyond intellection it does not mean that it is against intellection, or is anti-rationalistic. What it means is that the Self is super-intellectual and at the same time intellectual; that is, it creates intellect in order to assert itself. The Self, therefore, is both super-natural and natural, both irrational and rational, both transcendent and immanent, because the Self is absolute freedom, the absolute will, from which both reason and un-reason issue.

To become conscious of the Self is thus the most fundamental experience of a human being, and all our intellectual efforts to solve the problem of reality come to an end when we have self-consciousness in its highest sense. The function of the intellect is to realize that it can never solve all the questions it can raise, that there is another order of things to which, to scale, the intellect has to give itself up. Intellection has its limits. It is good for generalization, for abstraction, for spatialization; it also differentiates, discriminates, and analyzes. But it can never give us an empirically concrete experience. It is utterly unable to make us grasp the final reality, the absolutely free Self, which creates and is not created.

The Self is a psychological term and always associated with an individual existence, and when I speak about its being creative and not being created, you may think we are entering into a metaphysical or ontological discussion, away from psychology. But the fact is that all final problems of science are metaphysical problems and cannot find their solution unless they are so treated. So with the problem of the Self. We have to deal after all with it metaphysically in order to make it yield a final solution. The Self in reality extends beyond

psychology. It is, so to speak, continuous with Godhead or the greater Self or the cosmic Self or the acosmic Self. If analytical psychology tries to solve every problem it may raise it must come to cosmic consciousness or cosmic unconsciousness or acosmic consciousness.

In Jacques de Marquette's *Introduction to Comparative Mysticism*, he says that "God is the abode of the universe, but the universe is not the abode of God" (p. 112). Zen would demand, Where, then, is the abode of God?

For the Self to become conscious of itself it must reflect on what constitutes its foundation, it must be merged into what is greater and deeper than itself, and it must realize that it is imbedded in the bottomless abyss, the "unground" of Jacob Boehme, or the no-abode of Vimalakirti, where the Self ("primal man") finds itself established.

When the Self rests itself in the groundless ground or in the abode of no-abode, it knows what it is and where it is.

Self-consciousness is an immediate perception of the Self itself; it is becoming conscious of itself as it actually is, as it flows on without stopping. Here there is yet no differentiation of subject and object, of seer and the seen. Reflection means to stand outside the flow of consciousness itself and to observe it. When this takes place the Self is no more itself, the Self is negated, the Self creates a second self to be cognizant of itself. Without this dichotomy, reflection is impossible. In the act of self-consciousness the first self is identical with the second self, the thinking self is no other than the self thought, the self reflected upon. Self-consciousness is self-identification, it is the realization of self-identity, it is pure apperception as Kant would say.

Self-consciousness as we ordinarily understand it may be called psychological in contradistinction to the kind of consciousness here described, which we may designate as metaphysical self-consciousness, a consciousness of inner "ought to." This is at the basis of consciousness, whereby it is possible for it to realize its own transcendental unity. The possibility of the Self dividing itself into a reflecting self and a self reflected upon, or into a thinking self and a self thought, lies in the fact of metaphysical or transcendental self-consciousness. The Self which thus gives meaning to all forms of consciousness can never be brought out to the surface of consciousness and caught by the method of bifurcation; it is at the end of an infinite process of objectification. It can never

be known by means of reflection, which is the same thing as intellection or rationalization or analytical discrimination.

That the Self is beyond reflection can be demonstrated in this way: When the Self is conceived spatially, as it were, it can be likened to a straight line which is infinitely divisible. However closely analytically the Self may be examined or reflected upon, it will never yield itself to this way of introspection, for the reflecting Self itself forever retrogresses and never becomes the object of reflection.

If the Self is temporally conceived, what is reflected upon is the memory of the Self in the past and not the Self of this present moment which does this reflection or inspection. The mirror which is supposed to reflect that Self does not reflect it as it actually is, or rather, acts at the moment of reflection. It is an old self, it is a self as it was before the reflection was made. The real one belongs to the present, is doing this business of reflection, and is therefore the actor himself. This actor does not expose himself for reflection or inspection or introspection. The moment he does this he is no more himself, he goes outside himself, he ceases to be the actor, turning himself into an inspector. As long as he is actually engaged in the work, he cannot be an onlooker. What is regarded as the Self by the scientist or psychologist is a memory-image of the Self as he was a moment ago. Memory is not an actuality itself. What we all aspire to take hold of is the Self as it actually is, or rather, acts, and not the one that was.

When the flow of consciousness is stopped for inspection, it ceases to be a flowing stream and is but a stagnant pool of water. To know the flow itself, it is absolutely necessary that we plunge into it. Knowing is acting, acting is knowing. This kind of knowing or this kind of acting becomes possible by an act of intuition or metaphysical self-consciousness or by pure experience. We are apt to regard this feat of self-transcendence as an impossible deed. That will be quite right as long as we are tied down to the level of relativity, to the dichotomy of psychological introspection. But we must realize that unless we perform a Copernican revolution in the field of consciousness we can never interview the actual Self, the "primal man," as he works out this panorama of life.

We have done away with the old conception of the Self, the *ātman*. Buddha was right, so were his earlier followers in denying the existence of the *ātman*.

But we must now, with the later Buddhist philosophers, endeavour to rescue the *ātman* that is deeply buried behind the thick heavy curtain of relativity. Until we do this, we shall always be ill at ease. Modern men are said to be in search of a soul, and this soul must be the kind of Self I have described above.

The reason why modern men want a soul is that they want to be perfectly free. One can never be free, absolutely free, until one has a soul, and this not in the old-fashioned style, but modelled in the way I have already mentioned. The old-styled soul binds us instead of freeing us. The modern way of thinking has done away with it and to that extent we have become free; but in the meantime we have created another binding "soul" which now confronts us in the shape of mechanization or materialization. Matter or machine is supposed to be soulless, but this soulless thing now is a menace to our modern life. Because it is soulless it has no human feeling and will crush anything that stands in its way in a most heartless, ruthless, altogether inhuman way, as we have seen in recent wars, and we are in fact made to feel its threats every time we scan our daily newspaper. As long as we are, however, under the sway of the analytical method of reaching the Self, we can never expect to rise above the thralldom of modern life.

Another threat that upsets our right understanding of the Self, which is absolutely free and by which we are inwardly urged to seek freedom under all conditions, is the socialization or communalization or totalistic view of modern life. There was a failure to locate an individual soul within, so we began to seek it in a group of individuals, in a society or community. Here we discover a shortcoming inherent in the Western mind. It is ever bent on seeking what it really needs outside and not within itself. The old soul it discarded was in a way outside itself, because it conceived the soul in a dualistic form. While it has found such a soul untenable, it still keeps on looking outwardly instead of digging the real one out of the depths of consciousness. Western people do not seem to realize that what makes them persistently seek freedom, free will, or individual liberty lies within themselves, is their own Self, not the self dualistically conceived and analytically sought out.

In conclusion, let me show you one example of the way Zen would handle this kind of question.

A monk came to a Zen master of the T'ang dynasty and asked: "It is said that it is of far more merit to make offerings to one selfless ascetic than to do

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the same to hundreds of thousands of Buddhas. Now, what is the fault with the Buddhas and what are the virtues of a selfless ascetic?"

"The selfless ascetic" here referred to is the Self which constitutes the reason of Buddhahood. The question raised by the monk is how to come to the realization of the Self as it actually is.

The master answered:

"One mass of white clouds blocks the entrance to the valley,

And so many birds returning for their night-rest know not where to find their nests."