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Replies to Mr. Christmas Humphreys

Robert Aitken¹:

Christmas Humphreys has delivered of some thoughtful observations on the subject of Zen for the West, beginning with the admission that he is dependent largely upon translations and interpretations for his knowledge.² There's the rub, not only for Mr. Humphreys, but for all of us.

Translations of original texts are few, and of uneven quality. After more than 70 years of Western exposure to Zen, we still do not have a translation of any of the standard commentaries on the *Mumonkan*. The *Rinzairoku* and the *Shōbōgenzō* are available only in bits and pieces. The *Hekiganroku* has been translated once,³ but it needs redoing.

Shorter pieces, notably the *Hannya Shingyō* in Leggett's *The Tiger's Cave*,⁴ have received better treatment. But it is a thin list at best, when we compare it with almost any other field of Asian thought.

And, as Mr. Humphreys indicates, there is a serious problem of communication with those few *rōshi* who concern themselves with Western students. All in all, it is no wonder, really, that we in the United States and Europe disgrace ourselves with shaky extrapolations and ordination cults.

Yet if the scholars and the *rōshi* have failed Western Buddhists to some extent, we in the West may also be guilty of errors of our own. For example, though Mr. Humphreys himself leads in "Zen meditation," he declares that it is better not to send a monk who does not have "Roshi rank" as a missionary to the West, since such a monk will lack spiritual authority to supervise *kōan* study "or its Soto equivalent." Surely this is

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² Mr. Humphreys' article "Some Observations on Zen Buddhism for the West" was published in the Sept., 1966, Vol. I, No. 2, issue of *The Eastern Buddhist*.

³ *The Blue Cliff Records: The Hekiganroku*. Translated and Edited with a Commentary by R.D.M. Shaw, D.D. Michael Joseph, London, 1961.

⁴ *The Tiger's Cave: Translations of Japanese Zen Buddhist Texts*. Rider and Company, London, 1964.

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altogether too arbitrary.

Where would we be without Nyogen Senzaki, a monk who never presumed to be a *rōshi*? There would be no Bosatsuikai in Los Angeles, no Koko An in Honolulu, no Zen Studies Society in its present form in New York, no history of trips to this country and England by Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi and Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi. Even unrelated groups would be weaker without his indirect influence and his books.

A mere monk "could teach the beginner how to sit, and to meditate on the breath, but he could do no more," Mr. Humphreys tells us. Indeed, what more is there? *Zazen* is a *samadhi* process, and if a monk can truly teach *samadhi*, what need is there for a *rōshi*? All the *kōan* in the Rinzai system, or the *shikan taza* (pure sitting) of Soto, are logical next steps in *samadhi* after *kenshō*. If there is no master teacher, we must make do with our own resources and seek help from a graduated student. It is foolish to neglect the opportunity for help from such an experienced student, if he is available.

Our director at Koko An today, Mr. Katsuki Sekida, is a layman, without even the rank of monk, yet he is presenting Zen in lectures, in articles and in his own life style which bear great utility for the Western student. He sits with us as our elder brother in the Dharma, without even acting as our *jikijitsu*. He is our true teacher, and we don't care a fig about his paper credentials.

I agree with Mr. Humphreys that study must accompany *zazen*, and this study can best be structured around a formal class. Certain books, carefully used, can supplement the instruction. But the basis of teaching must be the *hows* and the *whys* of *samadhi*. Such a class would be just as important for modern Japan as it is for the West, I should think. Japan today is part of international culture, grounded upon utility, and its past where "only *zazen* teaches *zazen*" is surely over and done with.

Because there is little writing on *samadhi* in English, it is natural that we should presume that it bears a relatively minor role in the training. It is natural that our eye should be upon the experience, and that we should equate this experience to those of Western Quakers and Catholics, or those of Eastern mystics of one sort or another. Yet as D.T. Suzuki himself indicated very clearly in his "Early Memories," the *zazen* process is directed toward absolute *samadhi*, and *satori* is simply the experience of emerging from that state, when we can say with him, "I see. This is it."¹

¹ *The Middle Way*, 1964.

Anything short of absolute *samadhi* as our purpose will limit our potential to something quite superficial. It is true that motive is a key element, in Japan or in England, and this must be clarified pretty well at the outset, but our practice itself cannot be a matter of reflection on such elements, unless it is to be confined to a level of psychological self-correction.

Mr. Humphreys indicates that there is a certain risk in doing *zazen*. Surely this risk is only for people who are already psychotic,¹ who are not able to handle the pressure of their fantasy in a quiet time, or whose fantasy interacts with atmosphere of religious dedication in a pathological manner. Their latent schizophrenia breaks to the surface and they become ill. This happens occasionally even in Japanese monasteries under good teachers. As Paul Wienpahl says, *zazen* is for healthy people, sick people should first consult a doctor.²

There is really no risk for the ordinary student. He may sit there and not accomplish anything, wasting valuable time, but he is not making himself sick. No matter what the pressure of religious dedication around him, he is just breathing out his reserve air volume slowly, counting each out-breath from one to ten, from one to ten again. How can he go wrong?

Above all, I question the need for a theme of meditation "with more meat on the bone" than *koan*. Mr. Humphreys does not illustrate this term with examples, but it suggests a method that is excessively cerebral, and not *zazen* at all. In *zazen*, as Mumon tells us, we must block up the line of our thoughts.³

The diligent student of *zazen* will soon find better physical and mental health by his daily exercise of vigorous breath-counting or *mū*-breathing. His improved sleep and his sharpened concentration at work and study will be strong indications of still more significant results to follow. These symptoms of the process encourage him on the deeper *samadhi*, until one day, something happens. This is the story of *kenshō*, East or West, a bare-boned discipline of non-thinking.

After *kenshō*, the Japanese student will work on *koan* under a teacher to polish each aspect of this experience. The Western student can polish his experience by *shikan taxa* if he does not have a teacher, and work on *koan* from the Mumonkan privately.

The entire matter on Zen for the West is exceedingly subtle and dif-

¹ *The Matter of Zen: A Brief Account of Zazen*. New York University Press, 1964, p. 109.

² *Mumonkan*. Dai Issoku.

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ficult. We must be grateful to Mr. Humphreys for raising some important questions. But we must not lose sight of Zen itself, East and West, as a *samadhi* process, for this is what links the man beneath the Bodhi Tree with all of his successors.

Jack Austin¹:

I have read Mr. Humphreys' Observation in the November issue of your Journal, and they seem to call for a reply. Whilst agreeing with the opening statements about Eastern and Western Buddhist having differing backgrounds and divergent tendencies, it is difficult to allow his sweeping generalisations to pass unanswered by at least one of the Western Buddhists on whose behalf he allows himself to write.

He says, "... in the actual search for Zen (Prajna) the means is itself the end, and scholastic views and conclusions are largely irrelevant." We are not searching for Zen, but for enlightenment by means of Zen, but that is by the way. Are his own conclusions any more relevant than more scholarly ones?

We are told that Roshis have visited the London Buddhist Society, but that few knew English and "on our part in spite of a wide knowledge of Zen Buddhism, both in theory and attempted practice, as also of Judo, Kendo and other Japanese 'ways,' we found it very difficult to communicate at depth with the mind of our guest." This difficulty argues a narrower knowledge of Zen than is claimed, for Zen does not depend only on language. Maybe the ability to listen in silence was lacking on this side.

It is quite true, as Mr. Humphreys says, that few students will be able to train in Japan, but it is less true that a Japanese monk will not be a help over here. Why not? "The Zen monk could teach the beginner how to sit, and to meditate on the breath, but he could do no more." What evidence is there upon which to base such a dogmatic statement? How can Mr. Humphreys know that a Japanese monk could "do no more"? This presumes a knowledge of all Japanese monks and of all English Buddhists and potential English Buddhists, which is presumption indeed.

He goes on to assert, "... nor would the western practitioner lightly accept the guidance, in inadequate English, of such a mere fellow seeker from Japan." Is Mr. Humphreys the judge of the spiritual awareness of every monk who might come here, and has he asked those seeking guidance whether they would be prepared to accept a teacher whose English is less

¹ Buddhist priest, Zen Missionary, London.

than standard? I fear not. He is, again, taking it upon himself to speak for everybody, but there are many who will think otherwise.

Our self-appointed spokesman continues by stating that people over here "have been the subject of experiences which seemed, by classical analogy in many a Zen scripture, to be genuine and of value, and this before they had ever heard of Zen Buddhism." If this indeed were the case, why bother with Zen at all? If you can get results as good without all the bother of learning Zen, then it is a waste of time to do so. But who is there here to judge this attainment in the absence of a Zen master?

All of us in Buddhist circles in the West hope for progress in our spiritual lives, but many of us are willing to learn from Japanese teachers, perfect in English or otherwise. Members of Hannyakai, for example, are inviting Zen teachers over to train them in Za-Zen. We feel that Western Buddhism will emerge only when sufficient Buddhists here are trained properly, and have achieved a considerable degree of spiritual development. Mr. Humphreys says that his remarks may be "a more prostitution of the Zen tradition as preserved in Japan." We hope he will forgive us if we seek not a prostitution but the real thing.

We, many of us in Buddhism here, say not "We know better than you Japanese." On the contrary, we wish to learn from Japanese Buddhists, especially Zen masters and teachers, and we implore them to teach us, out of compassion, and from the rich storehouse of their long tradition. If their English be halting, we will patiently listen. It is not language we seek, but what lies beyond words. As the *Lankavatāra Sūtra* says:

Words are not the highest reality,
 nor is what is expressed in words the highest reality . . .
 the highest reality is to be attained by the inner
 self realisation of noble wisdom . . .

It is this that members of Hannyakai seek, as the name implies. We ask your help, Japanese Buddhists.
