

WHAT IS ZEN?

1

Is Zen a system of philosophy, as most of the Buddhist teachings are, highly intellectual and profoundly metaphysical?

As I stated somewhere else, we find in Zen all the philosophy of the East crystallised, but this ought not to be taken as meaning that Zen is a philosophy in its ordinary application of the term. For Zen is decidedly not a system founded upon logic and analysis. If anything, it is the antipode of logic and the dualistic method of thinking.

There may be an intellectual element in Zen, as Zen is the whole mind, and the mind is not a composite thing to be divided into so many faculties, leaving nothing behind after the dissection. Zen has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual analysis. Nor has it any set doctrines which are imposed upon its followers. In this respect, Zen is quite chaotic, if you choose to say so. Probably the Zen followers may have one or another set of doctrine, but they have this on their own account, and for their own benefit, they do not owe the fact to Zen. Therefore, there are no sacred books or dogmatic tenets in Zen, nor are there any symbolic formulae through which an access might be gained into the signification of Zen. If I am asked what then Zen teaches, I would say that Zen teaches nothing. Whatever teachings there are in Zen, they come out of one's own mind. We teach ourselves. Zen merely points the way. Unless this pointing is teaching, there is certainly nothing in Zen purposely set up as its cardinal doctrines or as its fundamental philosophy.

Zen claims to be Buddhism, but all the Buddhist teachings as propounded in its sūtras and śāstras, are treated by Zen as mere waste paper whose utility consists in wiping out the dirt of intellect and nothing more. Do not imagine, therefore, that Zen is nihilism. All nihilism is self-destructive, it

ends nowhere. Negation is sound as method. The highest truth is in affirmation. When it is said that Zen has no philosophy, that it denies all doctrinal authority, that it casts aside all its so-called sacred literature as rubbish, we must not forget that Zen is holding up in this very act of negation something quite positive and eternally affirmative. This will be clearer later on.

2

Is Zen a religion? It is not a religion in the sense as the term is popularly understood. For there is in Zen no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode where the dead are destined to, and last of all, no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else. Zen is free from all these dogmatic and "religious" encumbrances.

When I say that there is no God in Zen, the pious reader may be shocked; but this does not mean that Zen denies the existence of God. Neither denial nor affirmation concerns Zen. When a thing is denied, the very denial involves something not denied. The same can be said of affirmation. This is inevitable in logic. And Zen wants to rise above logic, Zen wants to find a higher affirmation where there are no antitheses. Therefore, in Zen God is neither denied nor insisted on, only that there is no such God in Zen as has been conceived by the Jewish or Christian minds. For the same reason that Zen is not a philosophy, it is not a religion.

As to all those images of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and Devas and what not that one comes across in the Zen temple, they are so many pieces of wood or stone or metal, they are like the camellias, azalias, or stone-lanterns in my garden. Make obeisance to the camellia now in full bloom, and worship it as you like, Zen would say, and there is much religion here as bowing to the various Buddhist gods, or as sprinkling holy water, or as participating in the Lord's Supper.

All those pious deeds considered meritorious or sanctifying by most of the so-called religiously-minded people are artificialities in the eye of Zen. It boldly declares that "the immaculate mendicants do not enter Nirvana, and the precept-violating monks do not go to hell." This is, to ordinary minds, the contradiction of the common laws of moral life. But here lies the truth and life of Zen. Zen is the spirit of a man. It believes in his inner purity and goodness. Whatever is superadded or violently taken away, injures the completeness of the spirit. Zen is, therefore, emphatically against all religious conventionalism.

Its irreligion, however, is merely apparent. Those who are truly religious will be surprised to find that after all there is so much of religion in the barbarous declaration of Zen. But to say that Zen is a religion as Christianity, or Mahommedanism is, will be a mistake. To make my point clearer I quote the following: When Śākyamuni was born, it is said that he lifted one arm toward the heavens and pointed to the earth with the other, exclaiming, "Above the heavens and below the heavens, I only am the Honoured One!" On this Ummon (Wun-men), founder of the Ummon School of Zen, comments, "If I saw him do this at the moment, I would kill him with one blow and throw the corpse into the maws of hungry dogs." What unbelievers would ever think of saying such words of inhumanity over a spiritual leader! Yet, one of the Zen masters following Ummon says, "Indeed, this is the way Ummon desires to serve the world, sacrificing everything he has, body and mind! How grateful he must have felt for the love of Buddha!"

3

Zen is not to be confounded with a form of meditation, as "New Thought" people or Christian Scientists or Hindu Sannyasins meditate. Dhyāna, as it is understood by Zen, does not correspond to their meditation or contemplation.

A man may meditate on a religious or philosophical subject while disciplining himself in Zen, but that is only incidental; the essence of Zen is not at all there. Zen purposes to discipline the mind itself, to make it its own master, through an insight into its proper nature. This getting into the real nature of one's own mind or soul is the fundamental object of Zen Buddhism. Zen is, therefore, more than meditation or dhyāna in its ordinary application. The discipline of Zen consists in opening one's mental eye in order to look into the very reason of existence.

To meditate a man has to fix his thought on something, for instance, on the oneness of God, or his infinite love, or on the impermanence of things. But these are very things Zen desires to avoid. If there is anything Zen emphasises, it is freedom, freedom from all unnaturalness. Now meditation is something artificially put on, it does not belong to the native activity of the mind. What do the fowl in the air meditate? What do the fish in water meditate? They fly; they swim. Is that not enough? Who wants to fix his thought on the unity of God and man? or on the nothingness of this life? Who wants to be arrested in his daily manifestations of life-activity by such meditations as the goodness of a divine being or the ever-lasting fire of hell?

4

We may say that Christianity is monotheistic and Vedantism pantheistic; but we cannot make a similar assertion about Zen. For Zen is neither monotheistic nor pantheistic. Zen defies all such designations. Hence there is no object in Zen to fix one's thought on. Zen is a wafting cloud in the sky. No screw fastens it, no string holds it. It floats away as it lists. No amount of meditation will keep Zen in one fixed groove. Meditation is no Zen. Neither pantheism nor monotheism affords Zen with its subjects of concentration.

If Zen is monotheistic, it may tell its followers to

meditate on the oneness of things where all differences and inequalities, enveloped in the all-illuminating brightness of the divine light, are obliterated. But Zen would say, "After all things are reduced to oneness, where would that one be reduced?" Zen wants to have one's mind free and unobstructed; even the idea of oneness is a stumbling-block and a strangling snare which threatens the original freedom of the spirit.

Will Zen then concentrate itself on the idea that a dog is God or that this one pound of flax is divine? If so, Zen must feel fire cold and ice hot, because fire is ice and ice is fire. But when it freezes we shiver; and everybody shuns the blazing furnace; for the feeling is all in all and asserts itself in spite of all our theorisation. Zen in fact does not want us to be more than the flesh and bones. It refuses to deny the reality of matter and the individuality of things.

Whatever meditation Zen may propose then will be to take things as they are, to consider snow white and the raven black. When we speak of a meditation, we generally understand its abstract character; that is, meditation is known to be the concentration of the mind on some highly generalised proposition which is in the nature of things not always closely and directly connected with concrete affairs of life. Zen perceives or feels, and does not abstract or meditate. Zen penetrates and is finally lost in the immersion. Meditation, on the other hand, is outspokenly dualistic, and consequently inevitably superficial. One critic (Lloyd—*Wheat Among the Tares*, p. 53) regards Zen as "the Buddhist counterpart of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola." Lloyd shows an almost unbalanced inclination to find Christian analogies for things Buddhistic, and this is also one of such instances. Those who have gone carefully through what I have already stated about Zen, will at once see how wide of the mark his comparison is. Even superficially there is not a shadow of similitude between the exercises of Zen and those proposed by the founder of the Society

of Jesus. The contemplations and prayers of St. Ignatius are, from the Zen point of view, merely so many fabrications of the imagination elaborately woven for the benefit of the pious-minded. It is like piling up tiles after tiles over one's head. It may be, however, interesting to note that the Spiritual Exercises in some way resemble those meditations of Hinayāna Buddhism, such as the Five Mind-quieting Ways, or the Nine Thoughts on Impurity, or Six or Ten Subjects of Thought.

5

Zen too frequently "means mind-murder and the emptiness of idle reverie." This is the statement of Griffis, author of *Religions of Japan* (p. 255). By "mind-murder" he means perhaps that Zen kills the activities of the mind by making one's thought fix on one thing, or by inducing it to sleep. Mr. Reischauer in his *Studies of Buddhism in Japan* (p. 118) almost endorses this view of Griffis by asserting that Zen is "mystical self-intoxication." Does he mean that Zen is intoxicated in the "Greater Self" so called, as Spinoza was intoxicated in God? Though Mr. Reischauer is not quite clear as to the meaning of "intoxication", he may think Zen is unduly absorbed in the thought of the "Greater Self" as the last reality in this world of particulars. It is wonderful to see how superficial some of the analytical observers of Zen are. The truth is: Zen is so elusive as far as its outward aspect is concerned. Unless one devotes some years of earnest study to the understanding of some of its primary principles, one cannot expect to have even a generally fair grasp of it. "The way to ascend to God is to descend into oneself" is Hugo's word. "If thou wishest to search out the deep things of God, search out the depths of thine own spirit,"—this comes from Richard of St. Victor. And Zen declares, though somewhat in a different spirit, "Nothing really exists throughout the triple world, and where do you seek the mind (or spirit = *Shin*)? The four elements are all

empty in their ultimate nature, and where could the Buddha's abode be?—But lo! the truth is unfolding itself right before your eye. This is all there is to it and nothing more!" A minute's hesitation, and Zen is irrevocably lost. All the Buddhas of the past, present, and future may try to make you catch it once more and yet it is a thousand miles away. "Mind-murder" and "Self-intoxication," Zen in fact has no time to bother itself with such nonsenses.

6

By "Self-intoxication" or "Mind-murdering" the critics may mean one's mind being hypnotised to a state of unconsciousness. When this obtains, they imagine that the favorite Buddhist doctrine of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) is realised where the subject is not conscious of the objective world nor of himself, being lost in one vast emptiness, whatever this is. This hypothesis again does not hit Zen. It is true that there are some such expressions in Zen as will suggest this kind of interpretation. But to understand Zen we must go another step beyond. The "vast emptiness" must be traversed. The subject must be awakened from a state of unconsciousness if he is buried alive in it. Zen is encountered when "self-intoxicated" turns into the "self-awakened." If the mind is ever to be murdered, it is Zen that will resuscitate it. As long as one remains murdered and lifeless, there is no Zen. "Be born again," the Zen master would exclaim, "Be awakened from a dream, rise from death if you can, O ye drunkards! Don't try to see Zen with your blurred eyes. Your hands are too unsteady to take hold of Zen. And remember I am not indulging in figures of speech."

I may multiply such questions and criticisms if necessary. But the above, I hope, have sufficiently prepared the reader's mind for the following positive statements concerning Zen.

The basic idea of Zen is to come in touch with the inner workings of the mind, and to do this in the directest possible

way without resorting to anything external and superadded. Therefore, everything having a semblance of authority is rejected. An absolute faith is placed in one's own being. Whatever authority there may be in Zen comes from within. This is true in the strictest sense of the word. Even the reasoning faculty is not considered absolute. On the contrary, it hinders the mind from coming in direct communion with itself. The intellect serves its mission when it works as an intermediary, and Zen has nothing to do with an intermediary except when it desires to communicate itself to others. For this reason, all the scriptures are merely tentative and provisional, there is in them no finality. The central fact of life as it is lived is what Zen aims to grasp, and this in the most direct and most vital manner. Zen professes itself to be the spirit of Buddhism, but in fact it is the spirit of all religions and philosophies. For when Zen is understood thoroughly, absolute peace of mind is attained, and a man lives as he ought to live. What more may we hope?

7

Some say that inasmuch as Zen is admitted to be mysticism it cannot claim to be unique in the history of religion. Perhaps so. But Zen is a mysticism of its own order. It is mystical in the sense that the sun shines, that God loves, that the flower blooms, or that I hear at this moment somebody beating a drum in the street. If these are mystical facts, Zen is brimful of them. When a Zen master was asked what Zen was, he answered, "Your everyday thought." Is this not plain enough, and most straightforward? It has nothing to do with the sectarian spirit. Christians as well as Buddhists can practise Zen just as big fish and small are both contentedly living in the ocean. Zen is the ocean, Zen is the air, Zen is the mountains, Zen is thunder and lightning, the spring flower, summer heat, and winter snow; nay, more than that, Zen is the man. What-

ever formalities, conventionalisms, and superadditions Zen may appear to have, its central fact lives; and the special merit of Zen lies in this, that we are still able to see into this ultimate fact without being biased against anything.

8

As I said before, what makes Zen unique as it is practised in Japan, is its systematic training of the mind. If Zen is mysticism, mysticism has been too erratic a product and apart from one's ordinary life. This, Zen has revolutionised. What was up in the heavens, Zen has brought down on earth. With the development of Zen, mysticism has ceased to be mystical; it is no more the spasmodic product of an abnormally endowed mind. For Zen reveals itself in the most uninteresting and uneventful life of a plain man of the street, recognising the fact of living in the midst of life as it is lived. Zen systematically trains the mind to see this, opens one's eye to the greatest mystery as it is daily and hourly performed, enlarges one's heart to embrace eternity of time and infinity of space in its every movement, and makes one live in the world as if walking in the garden of Eden. All these spiritual feats are done without resorting to any set doctrines, but by appealing in the directest way to the truth of one's being, and there is a system in all this.

Whatever it may be, Zen is practical and commonplace and most living. An ancient master, wishing to show what Zen is, lifted one of his fingers, another kicked a ball, and a third slapped the face of the questioner. The manner in which Zen is demonstrated is always original. I take this creative originality as a foundation of Zen's claim to uniqueness. And in the freshness of this creative originality Zen has its own reason to be.

9

The following quotation from a letter of Yengo may

answer to a certain extent the question asked in the beginning of this chapter, "What is Zen?" "It is presented right to your face, and at the very moment the whole thing is handed over to you. For an intelligent fellow, one word suffices to convince him in the truth of it, but even then error has already crept in. Much more so when this is committed to paper and ink, or given up to wordy demonstration or to logical quibble; it recedes then farther away from you. The great truth of Zen, however, is possessed by everybody. Look into your own being, and seek it not through others. Your own mind is above all forms, it is free and quiet and sufficient, it eternally stamps itself in your six senses and your four elements. In its light all is absorbed. Hush the dualism of subject and object, forget both, transcend the intellect, sever yourself from the understanding, and directly penetrate deep into the identity of Buddha-mind; for outside of this there are no realities. Therefore then Dharma came from the West to this land, he simply declared, 'Directly pointing to one's own soul, my doctrine is unique, and is not hampered by the canonical teachings; it is the absolute transmission of the true seal. Zen has nothing to do with letters and words. It only requests to grasp the point directly and therein find your peaceful abode. When the mind is disturbed, the understanding is stirred, things are recognised, notions are entertained, ghostly spirits are conjured, and prejudices are unheld, Zen will then forever be lost in the maze.'

"Says Shekiso, 'Stop all your hankerings; let the mould grow over your lips; make yourself like unto one perfect piece of immaculate silk; let your one thought be eternity; let yourself be like dead ashes, cold and lifeless; again let yourself be like an old censer in a deserted village-shrine!' Putting your simple faith in this, discipline yourself accordingly, let your body and mind be turned into an inanimate object of nature like a stone or a piece of wood. When a state of perfect unawareness and motionlessness is obtained,

all the signs of life depart, and also every trace of limitation vanishes. Not a single idea is disturbed in your consciousness when, lo! all of a sudden you come to realise the light abounding in full gladness. It is like coming across a light in the thick of darkness, it is like having treasure in poverty. The four elements and the five aggregates are no more felt as burdens; so light, so easy, so free you are. [Your very existence has been delivered from all limitation.] You feel in body and mind so open, so light, and transparent. You gain an illuminating insight into the very nature of things which now appears to you as so many hallucinatory flowers having no graspable realities. And here is manifested the unsophisticated self (literally, original face) of your being, here is shown all bare the original landscape of your birthplace.

“There is but one straight passage open and unobstructed through and through. This is where you surrender all, your body, your life, and all that you claim to be belonging to your inmost self. This is where you gain peace, ease, non-doing, and inexpressible delight. All the sūtras, all the śāstras are no more than commentaries of this; all the sages, ancient as well as modern, have been exhausting their ingenuity and imagination to no other purpose than to point the way to this. It is like unlocking the door of a treasury. When the entrance is once gained, every object coming into your sight is yours, every opportunity that presents itself is available for your use; for are they not, however multitudinous, all possessions obtainable within the original being of your self? Every treasure there is but awaiting your pleasure and utilisation. This is what is meant by ‘once gained, eternally gained, even unto the end of time.’ Yet there is nothing gained, what you gain is really no gain. and yet there is something truly gained in this.”

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