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Chapter I

Zen: Its Origin and its Significance

I. Zen and Tao

Like all vital traditions, the origins of the School of Zen are shrouded in myth and legend. The whole movement is alleged to have taken its start from Shakyamuni Buddha himself. Once upon a time, Shakyamuni was lecturing to a great multitude gathered on Lin-shan or Spirit Mountain. After his lecture, he picked up a flower and held it before his audience without speaking a word. Quite mystified, the whole assembly remained silent, pondering as to what Shakyamuni wished to convey by this unexpected action. Only the Venerable Kashyapa broke into an understanding smile. Shakyamuni was pleased and declared, "I have the secret of the right Dharma-Eye, the ineffably subtle insight into Nirvana which opens the door of mystic vision of the Formless Form, not depending upon words and letters, but transmitted outside of all scriptures. I hereby entrust this secret to the great Kashyapa."

It is fitting that Zen should have begun with a flower and a smile. This episode, you may say, is too beautiful to be true. Yet it is too beautiful not to be true. The life of Zen does not depend upon historical truth. Whoever has invented the story has caught the very spirit of Zen—a flower that smiles evoking a smile that flowers.

Kashyapa is said to be the First Indian Patriarch of the School of Zen. After him there came in succession twenty-seven Patriarchs, of whom Bodhidharma was the twenty-eighth and the last Patriarch of Zen in India. When he came to China, he became the First Patriarch of Zen in China. Thus, Bodhidharma may be regarded as the bridge between India and China in the history of Zen.

It is almost certain that the genealogy of Indian Patriarchs was a later make-up. There is no record in Sanskrit to show that there was an Indian School of Zen as such. Although the word "*Zen*" or "*Ch'an*" in Chinese was a transliteration of "*Dhyana*," there can be no greater difference in meaning between two terms than the Indian "*Dhyana*" and the Chinese "*Ch'an.*" Dhyana signifies a concentrated and methodical meditation, while Zen, as the founding fathers of the Chinese School understood it, has for its essence a sudden flash of insight into Reality, or a direct intuitive perception of the Self-nature. Time and again they have warned their disciples that to meditate or reflect is to miss it altogether.

The late Dr. Hu Shih went to the extent of saying, "Chinese Zennism arose not out of Indian yoga or Dhyana but as a revolt against it."[1] Perhaps it was not so much a deliberate revolt as an unconscious transformation of *Dhyana.* But whether we call it a revolt or a transformation, one thing is certain, and that is that Zen is different from *Dhyana.* In the words of Dr. Suzuki, "Zen as such did not exist in India—that is, in the form as we have it today."[2] He considers Zen as "the Chinese interpretation of the Doctrine of Enlightenment."[3] At the same time, he does not fail to add that the interpretation was a creative one, for the Chinese upholders of the Doctrine of Enlightenment did not wish to swallow Indian Buddhism undigested. "The practical imagination of the Chinese people came thus to create Zen, and developed it to the best of their abilities to suit their own religious requirements."[4]

In my view, the School of Zen derived its original impetus from the generous impulse of Mahayana Buddhism. Without this, such a vigorous and dynamic spiritual movement could not have been started even by revival of the original Taoism of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. Paradoxical as it may sound, it was the Mahayana impulse that gave rise to a real revival and development of the

1. "Development of Zen in China," in Briggs, *Anthology of Zen* 1964, p. 13.
2. Suzuki, "History of *Zen*," in *Essays in Zen Buddhism, First Series* 1949.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*

original insights of Lao and Chuang, in the form of Zen. As Thomas Merton, with his piercing insight, has truly observed, "The true inheritors of the thought and spirit of Chuang Tzu are the Chinese Zen Buddhists of the T'ang period."[5]

It is not too much to say that the fundamental insights of Zen masters are identical with those of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. The first and second chapters of the *Tao Teh Ching* constitute the metaphysical background of Zen. The relation between Zen and Chuang Tzu has been presented by Dr. Suzuki with the utmost fairness and clarity. According to Dr. Suzuki, "the most distinctively characteristic hallmark of Zen is its insistence on the awakening of *pratyatmajna*," which "is an inner perception deeply reaching the core of one's being."[6] "This," he proceeds to say, "corresponds to Chuang Tzu's 'mind-fasting' or 'mind-forgetting' or 'clear as the morning.'"[7] If this is true—and no one with an unbiased mind can think otherwise—it means that Chuang Tzu's essential insight constitutes the very core of Zen. And the only difference is that while with Chuang Tzu it remained a pure insight, it has become the "most essential discipline" in Zen. And it is in the development of this discipline that modern Japanese Zen has made its signal contribution.

It will contribute greatly toward the understanding of the essential nature of Zen to have a clear grasp of what Chuang Tzu meant by "mind-fasting," "mind-forgetting," and "clear as the morning." Let me give an account of them in the order signaled.

Mind-fasting. This is found in Chuang Tzu's essay "The Human World." It is presented in an imaginary conversation between Confucius and his beloved disciple Yen Hui. Yen Hui was contemplating on making a missionary trip to the State of Wei to convert its unruly Prince and to save his people writhing under his tyranny. On taking leave of Confucius, Yen Hui explained why he must go, saying, "I have heard you, master, say, 'Leave alone the well-governed states, but go to those where dis-

5. Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), p. 15.
6. Introduction to a new reprint (1959) of James Legge's *Texts of Taoism.*
7. *Ibid.*

order prevails. The place of a physician is with the sick.' My present move is motivated by your teaching. I will go in the hope of curing the ills of that state." Confucius poured cold water on the ardors of his disciple's generous soul, saying, "Alas! Your going will only land you in trouble! The practice of Tao does not admit of complexity. Complexity is the source of multiplicity; multiplicity causes confusion; confusion breeds worry and anxiety. A man weighed down by worry and anxiety can be of no help to others. The ancient men of Tao had it first in themselves before they came to find it in others. If you have no firm grasp of it in yourself, how can you bring it to bear upon the conduct of the reckless ones? Besides, do you know what dissipates virtue and what gives rise to cleverness? Virtue is dissipated by the love of name; and cleverness is born of contention. Both of them are instruments of evil; and certainly they are incapable of furnishing the ultimate norms of conduct. Granting that you have attained substantial virtue and genuine sincerity, and granting further that you do not strive for name and reputation, yet, so long as these qualities of yours have not effectively communicated themselves to the spirit and mind of men, if you force your norms of humanity and justice upon men of confirmed wickedness, this would be tantamount to exposing their evils, by the display of your own righteousness. This is to call calamity upon others. He who calls calamity upon others only provokes others to call calamity on him. I am afraid that this is what is awaiting you!"

Not to be daunted, Yen Hui said, "If I try to act rightly and remain humble inside, to use all my resources and still maintain the unity of my purpose, will this do?" This again failed to satisfy Confucius, who took exception to the glaring disparity between the inner and the outer.

Yen Hui then offered his *pièce de résistance*. "Let me then be upright within but bending without, and support my own convictions by quoting appropriate words from the ancients. Now, to be upright within is to be a friend of Heaven. A friend of Heaven knows in his heart that he is as truly a child of God as the "son of Heaven" (the King). How can a child of God be affected by the approval or disapproval of men? Such a man is

truly to be called an innocent child, a friend of Heaven. To be bending without is to be a friend of men. To bow, to kneel and to bend the body belong properly to the manners of the ministers. I will do as others do. He who acts as others do will incur no criticism. This is what I call being a friend of men. Again, to support my own convictions by quoting appropriate words from the ancients is to be a friend of the ancients. Even though their words are condemnatory of the conduct of the prince, they represent in reality time-honored truths, not my private views. This being the case, I can get away with my straightforwardness. This is what I call being a friend of the ancients. Would that do?" "Pooh!" replied Confucius, "How can it? You have too many ways and means, and too little peace of mind. You may indeed get away with it, but that's about all. As for transforming another, it is far from adequate. The trouble is that you are still taking your guidance from your own mind."

Yen Hui said, "I can proceed no farther. Can you tell me the way?" "Fast," Confucius replied, "and I will tell you the way. But even if you have the way, will it be easy to act on it? Anyone who deems it easy will incur the disapproval of the Bright Heaven." Yen Hui said, "My family being poor, I have not tasted wine or meat for several months. Is this not enough of a fast?" "It is merely liturgical fast," said Confucius, "but not the fast of mind." "What is the fast of mind?" asked Yen Hui, and Confucius answered: "Maintain the unity of your will. Cease to listen with the ear, but listen with the mind. Cease to listen with the mind but listen with the spirit. The function of the ear is limited to hearing; the function of the mind is limited to forming images and ideas. As to the spirit, it is an emptiness responsive to all things. Tao abides in emptiness; and emptiness is the fast of mind."

At this, Yen Hui was enlightened, as we may infer from what he remarked: "The only obstacle which keeps me from practicing the fast of mind lies in my self. As soon as I come to practice it, I realize that there has never been myself at all. Is this what you mean by emptiness?" "Exactly," said Confucius, "that is all there is to it! I can tell you that you are now prepared to enter into any circle without being infected by its name. Where you

find a receptive ear, sing your song. Otherwise, keep your mouth shut. Let there be one single dwelling place for your spirit, and that is wherever the necessity of circumstances leads you. In this way, you will not be far from your goal. It is easy to walk without leaving a trace; the hard thing is to walk without touching the ground at all. A missionary of man can easily resort to human devices and tricks; but a missionary of Heaven can have no use for such artificial means. You have heard of flying with wings; but you have not heard of flying without wings. You have heard of knowing through knowledge; but you have not heard of knowing through unknowing. Ponder the effect of emptiness. An empty room invites brightness and attracts all kinds of felicitous influences to dwell therein. Nay more, it will radiate its light and happiness all around. Thus, while remaining still, it moves like a galloping horse. Indeed, if you can turn your ear and eye inwards and cast out all discriminating knowledge of the mind, even spiritual beings will make their home in you, not to mention men. All things thus undergo a transforming influence."

Confirmed in forgetting. The original phrase "*tso-wang*" has been translated by Legge as "I sit and forget everything," by Giles and Lin Yutang as "I can forget myself while sitting," by Fung Yu-lan as "I forget everything," and by Suzuki as "mind-forgetting." I feel sure that the word "*tso*" in this context must not be taken literally, but rather figuratively. It means, to my mind, "being seated or steeped in forgetting." The forgetting is universal in scope. You forget yourself and you forget everything. But it is not only while you are sitting that you forget yourself and everything, but at all times and under all circumstances.

As usual, Chuang Tzu presented his teaching in the form of a story: Once Yen Hui said to Confucius, "I am making progress." "In what way?" "I have forgotten humanity and justice," said Yen Hui. "Very well," said Confucius, "but that is not enough." Another day, Yen Hui reported that he had forgotten the rites and music. This again failed to impress Confucius. A third day, he reported that he "was steeped in forgetting." This time, Confucius was excited and asked him what he meant. Yen Hui replied, "I have dropped the body and the limbs and dis-

carded intelligence and consciousness. Freed from the body and knowledge, I have become one with the Infinite. This is what I mean by being steeped in forgetting." Confucius said, "To be one with the Infinite is to have no more preferences. To be thoroughly transformed is to have no more fixations. In this you have gone ahead of me. Let me follow in your steps."

Clear as the morning. This phrase is found in a remarkable story that Chuang Tzu told about the method of a Taoist master training his chosen pupil. Somebody once said to the Taoist master Nü Yü, "You, Sir, are advanced in years, and yet you still have the complexion of a child. What can be the secret?" "Well," said Nü Yü, "I have been instructed in Tao." "Can I learn to attain Tao?" asked the other. "Oh no," said the master, "You are not the man for it. In the case of Pu-liang I, he had the potentiality of Sagehood, but was not acquainted with the Way of Sagehood. In my own case I know the Way of Sagehood, but I do not have the potentiality of Sagehood. So I was desirous of teaching him the Way in the hope that his potentiality might develop into actuality. But do not imagine that the task of imparting the Way even to a potential Sage was an easy one. Even in his case, I had to wait and watch for the proper time to start the instruction. After three days of training, he became detached from the world. This accomplished, I watched, and guided him for seven days before he was detached from things sensual and material. Then again I had to watch and guide him for nine more days before he was detached from the clinging to life. Only when one has been detached from the clinging to life can one be as clear as the morning. When one is as clear as the morning, one is capable of seeing the Unique One. Seeing the Unique One, one transcends the past and present. To transcend the past and present is to enter the realm of no-death and no-birth, of the one who dispenses death and life to all things while He himself does not die nor is ever born. When a man is in this state, he becomes infinitely adaptable to external things, accepting all and welcoming all, equal to all tasks, whether in tearing down or in building up. This is what is called 'Peace in the midst of trials and sufferings.' How can one maintain peace in the midst of trials and sufferings? Because it is precisely through

these that peace is perfected."

I have reproduced these three passages in detail because they contain so many seed-thoughts of Zen. This is not to deny that the Zen masters were Buddhists; but the point is that their predilection for the insights of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu conditioned their choice of similar Buddhist ideas for their special attention and development.

Besides, Chuang Tzu's ideas of the "True Man" and Self-discovery have exerted a profound influence on all the Zen masters. This influence is particularly evident in the doctrines of Lin Chi and his house.

One of the profoundest insights of Chuang Tzu is "only the True Man can have true knowledge." The emphasis is on *being* rather than *knowing*. It will be seen that this is one of the distinctive features of Zen. *Be* and you will *know*. Instead of "Cogito, ergo sum," Zen says, "Sum, ergo cogito."

II. The Vital Relevance of Zen to the Modern Age

In his remarkable article, "It's What's Bugging Them," William C. McFadden reports a recent three-day conference on student stress in college experience.[8] I am especially struck by this:

> When the causes of stress had been exhaustively set down, one student could still remark: "It's all those things—and none of those things. It's something else." A second readily agreed, "All I know is that something is bugging me." A third demanded to know what this something was. It sounded like a void, or a nothing; but then how do you talk about it?
> Someone identified the missing factor as truth, and another, as beauty, but both suggestions were quickly rejected. The "something" was much more vague and undefined. A fellow named Mike expressed it best at the end of a stirring speech: "The heart needs more room to breathe!"

The writer's comments on this are no less striking:

8. In April issue of *America* (1966), pp. 502-503.

> The restless heart has been with man for a long time. The philosopher seeks some absolute; mortal man yearns for immortality; temporal man seeks to be grounded in the eternal; finite man longs for the infinite.
> But precisely because this absolute is infinite, it must be vague and ill-defined, a "something" that seems a void, a nothing. The infinite that is clearly defined ceases thereby to be infinite.

The writer was not thinking of Taoism and Zen. But he has brought up a vital point in the spiritual situation of the contemporary age, which makes me understand why Taoism and Zen exercise such an irresistible attraction upon the minds of the young generation in the West. It is in the Taoist paradoxes and enigmas of Zen that they hope to find that "something" which is bugging them. Their spirit feels ill at ease with the neatly-defined concepts and dogmas of their traditional religion. The traditional theology appears too much to them like a book on geometry. It has laid too much emphasis upon the communicable aspect of things spiritual, while neglecting, almost completely, that which is *incommunicable*.[9] This is where Taoism and Zen come in.

They do not try to communicate the incommunicable, but they have a way of evoking it, thereby broadening your mental horizons and creating more room for the heart to breathe.

One of the most characteristic traits of the Chinese spirit is its predilection for the suggestive and evocative as against a well-rounded and systematic exposition of ideas. The most charming poems in Chinese are those quatrains, of which it may be said that "the words have stopped, but the sense goes on without end." Realizing that what is expressible in words, colors and sounds must always fall short of Reality, the Chinese spirit finds its home in what is beyond words, colors and sounds. It uses words to evoke the Indefinable, sounds to evoke Silence, and colors to evoke the formless Void. It uses all the material things to evoke the Spirit.

In a review of Herbert Giles' translation of Chinese poems,

9. Cf. Jacques Maritain on St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross, in his *Degrees of Knowledge*.

Lytton Strachey has brought out the differences between Greek and Chinese art and poetry. "Greek art is, in every sense of the word, the most finished in the world; it is for ever seeking to express completely and finally. Thus the most exquisite of the lyrics in the Greek Anthology are, fundamentally, epigrams ... Different, indeed, is the effect of the Chinese lyric. It is the very converse of the epigram; it aims at producing an impression which, so far from being final must be merely the prelude to a long series of visions and of feelings. It hints at wonders; and the revelation it at last gives us is never a complete one, it is clothed in the indefinability of our subtlest thoughts."

Take, for instance, a lovely quatrain of twenty words by Li P'o:

> A fair girl draws the blind aside
> And sadly sits with drooping head;
> I see the burning tears glide,
> But know not why those tears are shed.

Commenting on this poem, Strachey wrote: "The blind is drawn aside for a moment and we catch a glimpse of a vision which starts us off on a mysterious voyage down the widening river of imagination. Many of these poems partake of the nature of the *chose vue*; but they are not photographic records of the isolated facts; they are delicate pastel drawings of some intimately seized experience."

This is the style of Chinese poetry, painting and art of living. And this is also the style of Zen. It is in this sense that Zen is truly one of the most typical flowers of the Chinese spirit.

The Western civilization, on the other hand, is predominantly a product of the Greek spirit. By this time, it has been developed to a saturating point, so that the profounder spirits in the West have begun to feel what it lacks, just at a time when the more progressive elements in the East have begun to sense its strength. Hence the paradox that Zen seems to be of a greater impact on the western than on the oriental intellectuals, whose greatest ambition is to catch up with the West in its scientific civilization. However, the fact that the spirit of Zen has begun to permeate the vanguards of western thinkers is bound to affect

the East in the long run. Humanity is one, and it is moving beyond East and West. It is only by moving beyond that the East and the West will be vitally synthesized. If I may venture on a prediction in such unpredictable matters, this vital synthesis will probably be attained first in the West. But once attained, it will spread to the whole world.

It is well for the East to remember that even on the natural plane, the philosophy of Chuang Tzu, a main source of Zen, has, as Alan Watts so keenly perceives, an "astonishing relevance to modern man's predicament." Watts sees much in common between Chuang Tzu and Teilhard de Chardin in their vision of the universe as an organic whole. This vision is "far more consistent with 20th century science than Newton's essentially mechanical model of the universe as an interaction of atomic 'billiard balls.' "[10]

On the other hand, the West should remember that Zen is not something entirely without reason or rhyme, for certainly there is method in its madness. No one has put it better than Thomas Merton:

> The fashion of Zen in certain western circles fits into the rather confused pattern of spiritual revolution and renewal. It represents a certain understandable dissatisfaction with conventional spiritual patterns and with ethical and religious formalism. It is a symptom of western man's desperate need to recover spontaneity and depth in a world which his technological skill has made rigid, artificial, and spiritually void. But in its association with the need to recover authentic sense experience, western Zen has become identified with a spirit of improvisation and experimentation, with a sort of moral anarchy that forgets how much tough discipline and what severe traditional mores are presupposed by the Zen of China and Japan. So also with Chuang Tzu. He might easily be read today as one preaching a gospel of license and uncontrol. Chuang himself would be the first to say that you cannot tell people to do whatever they want when they don't even know what they want in the first place! Then also, we must realize that while there is a certain skeptical and down-to-earth quality

10. Watts' Review of Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu,* in the New York Times-Book Review, Sunday, April 17, 1966.

> in Chuang Tzu's critique of Confucianism, Chuang Tzu's philosophy is essentially religious and mystical. It belongs in the context of a society in which every aspect of life was seen in relation to the sacred.[11]

It is with the hope of showing the true face of Zen that the present book has been written. I have confined myself to the treatment of the giants of Zen in the T'ang Period, because it was they who created the School of Zen by dint of their original insights and powerful personalities.

It was in the hands of the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng that the School of Zen took form. A succession of men of spiritual genius like Huai-jang, Ch'ing-yüan, Ma-tsu, Shih-t'ou, Pai-chang, Nan-ch'üan, Chao-chou, Yüeh-shan, and Huang-po, developed it into full maturity, and prepared it for the rich and refreshing ramification into the Five Houses of Zen. Actually the five branches are homogeneous in their origin and in their aim. They were all derived from Hui-neng, and rooted in the Taoism of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, although each in its own way and measure. The House of Kuei-yang laid stress upon the distinction between the potential and the actual, between the conceptual and experiential ("faith stage" and "personality stage"), and between letter and spirit. Kuei-shan saw eye-to-eye with Chuang Tzu that when Truth is attained words should be thrown overboard.

The House of Ts'ao-tung depicted the process of Self-realization in terms of progressive self-loss. The House of Lin-chi focused its attention on the "True Man of No Title" who is none other than everybody's true Self. The House of Yün-men soared directly to the indefinable *Ne Plus Ultra*,[12] and then showed the way of returning to the world of things, the realm of relativity. Finally, the House of Fa-yen started from the fundamental insight of Chuang Tzu that "Heaven-and-earth and I spring from the same root, and all things are one with me."

11. Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 16.

12. In his Introduction to Suzuki, *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism*, Dr. C. G. Jung writes: "Zen is one of the most wonderful blossoms of the Chinese spirit, which was readily impregnated by the immense thought-world of Buddhism."

Zen may therefore be regarded as the fullest development of Taoism by wedding it to the congenial Buddhist insights and the powerful Buddhist impulse of apostolic zeal. If Buddhism is the father, Taoism is the mother of this prodigious child. But there can be no denying that the child looks more like the mother than the father.

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