

I

What Is Zen?

# 1

**B**EFORE I proceed to write about the influence of Zen on Japanese culture, I must explain what Zen is, for it is possible that my present readers may not know anything about it. As I have already written some books on Zen, however, I will not go into a detailed presentation here.

Briefly, Zen is one of the products of the Chinese mind after its contact with Indian thought, which was introduced into China in the first century A.D. through the medium of Buddhist teachings. There were some aspects of Buddhism in the form in which it came to China that the people of the Middle Kingdom did not quite kindly cherish: for instance, its advocacy of a homeless life, its transcendentalism or world-fleeing and life-denying tendency, and so on. At the same time, its profound philosophy, its subtle dialectics and penetrating analyses and speculations, stirred Chinese thinkers, especially the Taoists.

Compared with Indians, the Chinese people are not so very philosophically-minded. They are rather practical and devoted to worldly affairs; they are attached to the earth, they are not stargazers. While the Chinese mind was profoundly stimulated by the Indian way of thinking, it never lost its touch with the plurality of things, it never neglected the practical side of our daily life. This national or racial psychological idiosyncrasy brought about the transformation of Indian Buddhism into Zen Buddhism.

One of the first things Zen accomplished in China, as soon as it had gathered its forces and was strong enough to stand

by itself, was to establish a special form of monasticism quite distinct from the older kind of monkish living. The Zen monastery became a self-governing body divided into so many departments, each of which had its own office to serve the community. A noteworthy feature of this institution was the principle of complete democracy. While the elders were naturally respected, all members were equally to engage in manual labor, such as gathering fuel, cultivating the land, and picking tea leaves. In this even the master himself joined, and while working with his brotherhood he guided them to the proper understanding of Zen.

This way of living significantly distinguished the Zen monastery from the *saṅgha* brotherhood of the earlier Buddhists of India. The Zen monks were not only democratic; they were willing to employ themselves in all the practical ways of life. They were thus economically-minded as well as politically-minded.

In metaphysics Zen absorbed much of Taoist teachings modified by Buddhist speculations. But in its practical conduct of life, it completely ignored both the Taoist transcendentalism and the Indian aloofness from productive life. When a Zen master was asked what his future life would be, he unhesitatingly answered, "Let me be a donkey or a horse and work for the villagers."

Another departure from the older pattern of monkish brotherhood, whether Christian or Buddhist or anything else, was that the Zen monks were not always engaged in offering prayers, practicing penance, or performing other so-called deeds of piety, nor in reading or reciting the canonical books, discussing their contents, or studying them under the master, individually or collectively. What the Zen monks did, besides attending to various practical affairs, both manual and menial, was to listen to the master's occasional sermons, which were short and cryptic, and to ask questions and get answers. The answers, however, were bizarre and full of incomprehensibles, and they were quite frequently accompanied by direct actions.

I will cite one of such examples—perhaps an extreme one. Though it did not take place between master and monk but between monks themselves, it will illustrate the spirit of Zen which prevailed in its earlier days, towards the end of the T'ang dynasty. A monk, coming out of the monastery that was under the leadership of Rinzai (Lin-chi, d. 867), met a party of three traveling monks belonging to another Buddhist school, and one of the three ventured to question the Zen monk: "How deep is the river of Zen?" The reference to the river arose from their encounter taking place on a bridge. The Zen monk, fresh from his own interview with Rinzai, who was noted for his direct actions, lost no time in replying. "Find out for yourself," he said, and offered to throw the questioner from the bridge. But fortunately his two friends interceded and pleaded for mercy, which saved the situation.

Zen is not necessarily against words, but it is well aware of the fact that they are always liable to detach themselves from realities and turn into conceptions. And this conceptualization is what Zen is against. The Zen monk just cited may be an extreme case, but the spirit is there. Zen insists on handling the thing itself and not an empty abstraction. It is for this reason that Zen neglects reading or reciting the sūtras<sup>1</sup> or engaging in discourse on abstract subjects. And this is a cause of Zen's appeal to men of action in the broadest sense of the term. Through their practical-mindedness, the Chinese people and also to a certain extent the Japanese have taken greatly to Zen.

## 2

ZEN is discipline in enlightenment. Enlightenment means emancipation. And emancipation is no less than freedom. We talk very much these days about all kinds of freedom, political, economic, and otherwise, but these freedoms are not at all real.

<sup>1</sup> Collections of sermons given by the Buddha.

As long as they are on the plane of relativity, the freedoms or liberties we glibly talk about are far from being such. The real freedom is the outcome of enlightenment. When a man realizes this, in whatever situation he may find himself he is always free in his inner life, for that pursues its own line of action. Zen is the religion of *jiyū* (*tzū-yu*), "self-reliance," and *jizai* (*tzū-tsai*), "self-being."

Enlightenment occupies the central point of teaching in all schools of Buddhism, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, "self-power" and "other-power," the Holy Path and the Pure Land, because the Buddha's teachings all start from his enlightenment experience, about 2,500 years ago in the northern part of India. Every Buddhist is, therefore, expected to receive enlightenment either in this world or in one of his future lives. Without enlightenment, either already realized or to be realized somehow and sometime and somewhere, there will be no Buddhism. Zen is no exception. In fact, it is Zen that makes most of enlightenment, or *satori* (*wu* in Chinese).

To realize *satori*, Zen opens for us two ways in general: verbal and actional.

First, Zen verbalism is quite characteristic of Zen, though it is so completely differentiated from the philosophy of linguistics or dialectics that it may not be correct to apply the term "verbalism" to Zen at all. But, as we all know, we human beings cannot live without language, for we are so made that we can sustain our existence only in group life. Love is the essence of humanity, love needs something to bestow itself upon; human beings must live together in order to lead a life of mutual love. Love to be articulate requires a means of communication, which is language. Inasmuch as Zen is one of the most significant human experiences, one must resort to language to express it to others as well as to oneself. But Zen verbalism has its own features, which violate all the rules of the science of linguistics. In Zen, experience and expression are one. Zen verbalism expresses the most concrete experience.

To give examples: A Zen master produces his staff before his congregation and declares: "You do not call it a staff. What would you call it?" Someone comes out of the audience, takes the master's staff away from him, breaks it into two, and throws it down. All this is the outcome of the master's illogical announcement.

Another master, holding up his staff, says: "If you have one, I give you mine; if you have none, I will take it away from you." There is no rationalism in this.

Still another master once gave this sermon: "When you know what this staff is, you know all, you have finished the study of Zen." Without further remark he left the hall.

This is what I call Zen verbalism. The philosophy of Zen comes out of it. The philosophy, however, is not concerned to elucidate all these verbal "riddles" but to reach the mind itself, which, as it were, exudes or secretes them as naturally, as inevitably, as the clouds rise from the mountain peaks. What concerns us here is not the substance thus exuded or secreted, that is, words or language, but a "something" hovering around there, though we cannot exactly locate it and say "Here!" To call it the mind is far from the fact of experience; it is an unnamable "X." It is no abstraction; it is concrete enough, and direct, as the eye sees that the sun is, but it is not to be subsumed in the categories of linguistics. As soon as we try to do this, it disappears. The Buddhists, therefore, call it the "unattainable," the "ungraspable."

It is for this reason that a staff is a staff and at the same time not a staff, or that a staff is a staff just because it is not a staff. The word is not to be detached from the thing or the fact or the experience.

The Zen masters have the saying, "Examine the living words and not the dead ones." The dead ones are those that no longer pass directly and concretely and intimately on to the experience. They are conceptualized, they are cut off from the living roots. They have ceased, then, to stir up my being from within, from

itself. They are no more what the masters would call "the one word" which when understood leads immediately to the understanding of hundreds of thousands of other words or statements given by the Zen masters. Zen verbalism deals with these "living words."

### 3

THE SECOND disciplinary approach to the experience of enlightenment is actional. In a sense, verbalism is also actional as long as it is concrete and personal. But in the actional what we call "the body," according to our sense testimony, is involved. When Rinzai was asked what the essence of Buddhist teaching was, he came right down from his seat and, taking hold of the questioner by the front of his robe, slapped his face, and let him go. The questioner stood there, stupefied. The bystanders remarked, "Why don't you bow?" This woke him from his reverie; and when he was about to make a bow to the master, he had his *satori*.<sup>2</sup>

When Baso (Ma-tsu, d. 788) took a walk with Hyakujō (Pai-chang), one of his attendant monks, he noticed the wild geese flying. He asked, "Where are they flying?" Hyakujō answered, "They are already flown away." Baso turned around and, taking hold of Hyakujō's nose, gave it a twist. Hyakujō cried, "It hurts, O Master!" "Who says they are flown away?" was the master's retort.<sup>3</sup> This made Hyakujō realize that the master was not talking at all about the conceptualized geese disappearing far away in the clouds. The master's purpose was to call Hyakujō's attention to the living goose that moves along with Hyakujō himself, not outside but within his person.

This person is Rinzai's "true man in all nakedness going

<sup>2</sup> *The Sayings of Rinzai*.

<sup>3</sup> The *Hekigan-shū* ("Blue Rock Collection"), case 53. For a fuller explanation of this book, see p. 399 n.

in and out through your senses." I wonder if this is symbolized in that "third man" who is often referred to by some modern writers as walking "beside you" or "on the other side of you" or "behind you."<sup>4</sup>

We may say this is a practical lesson, teaching by action, learning by doing. There is something like it in the actional approach to enlightenment. But a direct action in Zen has another meaning. There is a deeper purpose which consists in awakening in the disciple's mind a certain consciousness that is attuned to the pulsation of Reality. The following story is in a somewhat different vein; it simply illustrates how important it is to grasp a trick by going through a practical situation oneself without any outside aid. It exemplifies the pedagogic methodology of Zen's spirit of "self-reliance." This is in perfect accord with the teaching of the Buddha and other masters: "Do not rely on others, nor on the reading of the sūtras and śāstras.<sup>5</sup> Be your own lamp."

Goso Hōyen (Wu-tsu Fa-yen, d. 1104), of the Sung dynasty, tells us the following to illustrate the Zen spirit that goes beyond intellect, logic, and verbalism:

"If people ask me what Zen is like, I will say that it is like

<sup>4</sup> In *The Waste Land* (V, 359-65), T. S. Eliot gives this description of the anguish of the apostles after Calvary:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
—But who is that on the other side of you?*

Eliot remarks in his notes that these lines were suggested by the account of an Antarctic expedition: "The explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was *one more member* than could actually be counted." (*Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 48, 54.)

The idea of a third person is significant. Can we take it for the hallucinatory projection of Rinzai's "true man," which assumes an objective form when one's physical strength reaches the point of exhaustion? This, however, seems to be a somewhat wild suggestion.

<sup>5</sup> The philosophical discourses.



learning the art of burglary. The son of a burglar saw his father growing older and thought, 'If he is unable to carry on his profession, who will be the breadwinner of the family, except myself? I must learn the trade.' He intimated the idea to his father, who approved of it.

"One night the father took the son to a big house, broke through the fence, entered the house, and, opening one of the large chests, told the son to go in and pick out the clothing. As soon as the son got into it, the father dropped the lid and securely applied the lock. The father now came out to the courtyard and loudly knocked at the door, waking up the whole family; then he quietly slipped away by the hole in the fence. The residents got excited and lighted candles, but they found that the burglar had already gone.

"The son, who had remained all the time securely confined in the chest, thought of his cruel father. He was greatly mortified, then a fine idea flashed upon him. He made a noise like the gnawing of a rat. The family told the maid to take a candle and examine the chest. When the lid was unlocked, out came the prisoner, who blew out the light, pushed away the maid, and fled. The people ran after him. Noticing a well by the road, he picked up a large stone and threw it into the water. The pursuers all gathered around the well trying to find the burglar drowning himself in the dark hole.

"In the meantime he went safely back to his father's house. He blamed his father deeply for his narrow escape. Said the father, 'Be not offended, my son. Just tell me how you got out of it.' When the son told him all about his adventures, the father remarked, 'There you are, you have learned the art.'"<sup>6</sup>

The idea of the story is to demonstrate the futility of verbal instruction and conceptual presentation as far as the experience of enlightenment is concerned. *Satori* must be the outgrowth of one's inner life and not a verbal implantation brought from the outside.

<sup>6</sup> *The Sayings of Goso Hōyen.*

## 4

THERE is a famous saying given by one of the earlier masters of the T'ang dynasty, which declares that the Tao is no more than one's everyday-life experience. When the master was asked what he meant by this, he replied, "When you are hungry you eat, when you are thirsty you drink, when you meet a friend you greet him."

This, some may think, is no more than animal instinct or social usage, and there is nothing that may be called moral, much less spiritual, in it. If we call it the Tao, some may think, what a cheap thing the Tao is after all!

Those who have not penetrated into the depths of our consciousness, including both the conscious and the unconscious, are liable to hold such a mistaken notion as the one just cited. But we must remember that, if the Tao is something highly abstract transcending our daily experiences, it will have nothing to do with the actualities of life. Life as we live it is not concerned with generalization. If it were, the intellect would be everything, and the philosopher would be the wisest man. But, as Kierkegaard points out, the philosopher builds a fine palace, but he is doomed not to live in it—he has a shed for himself next door to what he constructed for others, including himself, to look at.

Mencius says, "The Tao is near and people seek it far away." This means that the Tao is our everyday life itself. And, indeed, it is due to this fact that the Tao is so hard to grasp, so elusive to point out. How elusive! How ungraspable! "The Tao that can at all be predicated is not the Tao of always-so-ness (*Ch'ang tao*)."

The Tao is really very much more than mere animal instinct and social usage, though those elements are also included in it. It is something deeply imbedded in every one of us, indeed in all beings sentient and nonsentient, and it requires something altogether different from the so-called scientific analysis. It

defies our intellectual pursuit because of being too concrete, too familiar, hence beyond definability. It is there confronting us, no doubt, but not obtrusively and threateningly, like Mount Everest to the mountain-climbers.

“What is Zen?” (This is tantamount to asking, “What is Tao?”)

“I do not understand,” was one master’s answer.

“What is Zen?”

“The silk fan gives me enough of a cooling breeze,” was another master’s answer.

“What is Zen?”

“Zen,” was still another’s response.

Perhaps Lao-tzū’s description may be more approachable for most of us than those of the Zen masters:

*The Tao is something vague and undefinable;  
How undefinable! How vague!  
Yet in it there is a form.  
How vague! How undefinable!  
Yet in it there is a thing.  
How obscure! How deep!  
Yet in it there is a substance.  
The substance is genuine  
And in it sincerity.  
From of old until now  
Its name never departs,  
Whereby it inspects all things.<sup>7</sup>  
How do I know all things in their suchness?  
It is because of this.<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> When the name does not depart, as we usually make it do, from the substance to which it is undetachably fixed, the name is the substance and the substance the name. There is a perfect identity. And thereby as soon as the “name” is pronounced, the substance, that is, the All, is “inspected,” not in its abstraction, but in its “sincerity” and concreteness.

<sup>8</sup> *Tao Tê Ching*, Ch. XXI. (When no translator’s name is specified, the translations from the Chinese or the Japanese texts throughout this book are the author’s.)

The object of Zen training consists in making us realize that Zen is our daily experience and that it is not something put in from the outside. Tennō Dōgo (T'ien-huang Tao-wu, 748–807) illustrates the point most eloquently in his treatment of a novice monk, while an unknown Japanese swordmaster demonstrates it in the more threatening manner characteristic of his profession. Tennō Dōgo's story runs as follows:

Dōgo had a disciple called Sōshin (Ch'ung-hsin). When Sōshin was taken in as a novice, it was perhaps natural of him to expect lessons in Zen from his teacher the way a schoolboy is taught at school. But Dōgo gave him no special lessons on the subject, and this bewildered and disappointed Sōshin. One day he said to the master, "It is some time since I came here, but not a word has been given me regarding the essence of the Zen teaching." Dōgo replied, "Since your arrival I have ever been giving you lessons on the matter of Zen discipline."

"What kind of lesson could it have been?"

"When you bring me a cup of tea in the morning, I take it; when you serve me a meal, I accept it; when you bow to me, I return it with a nod. How else do you expect to be taught in the mental discipline of Zen?"

Sōshin hung his head for a while, pondering the puzzling words of the master. The master said, "If you want to see, see right at once. When you begin to think, you miss the point."

The swordsman's story is this:

When a disciple came to a master<sup>9</sup> to be disciplined in the art of swordplay, the master, who was in retirement in his mountain hut, agreed to undertake the task. The pupil was made to help him gather kindling, draw water from the nearby spring, split wood, make fires, cook rice, sweep the rooms and the

<sup>9</sup> Was he Tsukahara Bokuden (1490–1572), who flourished during the Ashikaga era? I do not remember where I read the story, and at present I have no means of confirming it.

garden, and generally look after his household. There was no regular or technical teaching in the art. After some time the young man became dissatisfied, for he had not come to work as servant to the old gentleman, but to learn the art of swordsmanship. So one day he approached the master and asked him to teach him. The master agreed.

The result was that the young man could not do any piece of work with any feeling of safety. For when he began to cook rice early in the morning, the master would appear and strike him from behind with a stick. When he was in the midst of his sweeping, he would be feeling the same sort of blow from somewhere, some unknown direction. He had no peace of mind, he had to be always on the *qui vive*. Some years passed before he could successfully dodge the blow from wherever it might come. But the master was not quite satisfied with him yet.

One day the master was found cooking his own vegetables over an open fire. The pupil took it into his head to avail himself of this opportunity. Taking up his big stick, he let it fall over the head of the master, who was then stooping over the cooking pan to stir its contents. But the pupil's stick was caught by the master with the cover of the pan. This opened the pupil's mind to the secrets of the art, which had hitherto been kept from him and to which he had so far been a stranger. He then, for the first time, appreciated the unparalleled kindness of the master.

The secrets of perfect swordsmanship consist in creating a certain frame or structure of mentality which is made always ready to respond instantly, that is, im-mediately, to what comes from the outside. While technical training is of great importance, it is after all something artificially, consciously, calculatingly added and acquired. Unless the mind that avails itself of the technical skill somehow attunes itself to a state of the utmost fluidity or mobility, anything acquired or superimposed lacks spontaneity of natural growth. This state prevails when the mind is awakened to a *satori*. What the swordsman aimed at was to

make the disciple attain to this realization. It cannot be taught by any system specifically designed for the purpose, it must simply grow from within. The master's system was really no system in the proper sense. But there was a "natural" method in his apparent craziness, and he succeeded in awakening in his young disciple's mind something that touched off the mechanism needed for the mastery of swordsmanship.

Dōgo the Zen master did not have to be attacking his disciple all the time with a stick. The swordsman's object was more definite and limited to the area of the sword, whereas Dōgo wanted to teach by getting to the source of being from which everything making up our daily experience ensues. Therefore, when Sōshin began to reflect on the remark Dōgo made to him, Dōgo told him: "No reflecting whatever. When you want to see, see immediately. As soon as you tarry [that is, as soon as an intellectual interpretation or mediation takes place], the whole thing goes awry." This means that, in the study of Zen, conceptualization must go, for as long as we tarry at this level we can never reach the area where Zen has its life. The door of enlightenment-experience opens by itself as one finally faces the deadlock of intellectualization.

The slipperiness or elusiveness of the truth or reality or, shall I say, God, when one tries to get hold of it or him by means of concepts or intellection, is like trying to catch a catfish with a gourd. This is aptly illustrated by Josetsu, a Japanese painter of the fifteenth century. The picture of his which is reproduced among our illustrations is a well-known one; as we notice, the upper part of it is filled with poems composed by renowned Zen masters of the day.

## 5

WE NOW can state a few things about Zen in a more or less summary way:

(1) Zen discipline consists in attaining enlightenment (or *satori*, in Japanese).

(2) *Satori* finds a meaning hitherto hidden in our daily concrete particular experiences, such as eating, drinking, or business of all kinds.

(3) The meaning thus revealed is not something added from the outside. It is in being itself, in becoming itself, in living itself. This is called, in Japanese, a life of *kono-mama* or *sono-mama*.<sup>10</sup> *Kono-* or *sono-mama* means the "isness" of a thing, Reality in its isness.

(4) Some may say, "There cannot be any meaning in mere isness." But this is not the view held by Zen, for according to it, isness is the meaning. When I see into it I see it as clearly as I see myself reflected in a mirror.

(5) This is what made Hō Kōji (P'ang Chū-shih), a lay disciple of the eighth century, declare:

*How wondrous this, how mysterious!*

*I carry fuel, I draw water.*

The fuel-carrying or the water-drawing itself, apart from its utilitarianism, is full of meaning; hence its "wonder," its "mystery."

(6) Zen does not, therefore, indulge in abstraction or in conceptualization. In its verbalism it may sometimes appear that Zen does this a great deal. But this is an error most commonly entertained by those who do not at all know Zen.

(7) *Satori* is emancipation, moral, spiritual, as well as intel-

<sup>10</sup> *Kono* is "this," *sono* "that," and *mama* means "as-it-is-ness." *Kono-mama* or *sono-mama* thus corresponds to the Sanskrit *tathatā*, "suchness," and to the Chinese *chih-mo* or *shih-mo*.

lectual. When I am in my isness, thoroughly purged of all intellectual sediments, I have my freedom in its primary sense.

(8) When the mind, now abiding in its isness—which, to use Zen verbalism, is not isness—and thus free from intellectual complexities and moralistic attachments of every description, surveys the world of the senses in all its multiplicities, it discovers in it all sorts of values hitherto hidden from sight. Here opens to the artist a world full of wonders and miracles.

(9) The artist's world is one of free creation, and this can come only from intuitions directly and immediately rising from the isness of things; unhampered by senses and intellect. He creates forms and sounds out of formlessness and soundlessness. To this extent, the artist's world coincides with that of Zen.

(10) What differentiates Zen from the arts is this: While the artists have to resort to the canvas and brush or mechanical instruments or some other mediums to express themselves, Zen has no need of things external, except "the body" in which the Zen-man is so to speak embodied. From the absolute point of view this is not quite correct; I say it only in concession to the worldly way of saying things. What Zen does is to delineate itself on the infinite canvas of time and space the way the flying wild geese cast their shadow on the water below without any idea of doing so, while the water reflects the geese just as naturally and unintentionally.

(11) The Zen-man is an artist to the extent that, as the sculptor chisels out a great figure deeply buried in a mass of inert matter, the Zen-man transforms his own life into a work of creation, which exists, as Christians might say, in the mind of God.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> After writing the above I feel somewhat uneasy lest my readers may not be able to comprehend what Zen means to us of modern time. Everything of life nowadays shows the tendency to turn into a complete routine of mechanization, leaving nothing that will demonstrate the dignity and destiny of human existence. Hence the two extracts from the *Hekigan-shū* ("Blue Rock Collection") and an abstract of the *Yuima Kyō* ("Vimalakīrti Sūtra"), which make up the first part of the appendices. Those who wish to pursue the study of Zen Buddhism further are advised to consult the works of the present author on the subject. See the bibliography.



With this preliminary, I wish to treat in the following pages the part Zen Buddhism has played in the molding of Japanese culture and character, especially as exhibited in the arts generally, and particularly in the development of Bushido ("the way of the warrior"), in the study and propagation of Confucianism and general education, in the rise of the art of tea, and also in the composition of a form of poetry known as *haiku*; while incidentally some other points will be touched upon.