

ZEN NOTES



AN OUTLINE OF ZEN

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I am very glad to welcome you here and give you a talk on Zen. I am afraid you will find the subject a bit difficult to understand, and I must ask you to listen to what I say with some patience.

I have been asked to give an easy and plain lecture on Zen. It is, however, a matter of great difficulty to speak on Zen and to make it understandable in a short space of time.

For what we call "Zen" (禪) in a single word has quite a wide range. It covers not only the religious but also the ethical, historical, social and cultural fields. If we take up the religious aspect alone, it contains many phases, such as the content to be attained by personal experience (體驗的內容), the process of disciplinary training (修道的經過), the doctrinal aspects of Zen (教理的樣相), and so on. It is impossible to explain even one of these thoroughly in so short a time. In spite of this difficulty, I shall try to tell you about the basic concept of Zen in the hope of helping you, even if in a small degree, to the better understanding of this difficult subject.

First of all, I must point out to you that there is a great difference in character between religion in the Orient and that in the West. To be more specific, we find a great difference in character between Christianity and Buddhism (especially Zen). The English word "religion" is translated "shūkyō" (宗教) in Japanese. I am told that the word "religion" etymologically comes from a Latin word which means "to bind together" and implies that religion consists in the religation between God who is the Creator and human beings who are the created. Thus faith (信仰) becomes important in religion, because religation occurs in the correlation of those who believe and Him who is believed in. It seems, therefore, that there is a strong character of the salvation by faith and that a human being means "one that is to be saved."

The essential character of Buddhism is quite different. The Japanese word "shūkyō" (宗教) is not the same as "religion" in the West. As the word literally shows, it means the Teaching of

“ Shū.” “ Shū” (宗) means “ honke” (本家 original essence) or “ konpon” (根本 the fundamental truth). It has no sense of binding together and, therefore, in itself does not contain the element of faith (信仰). This is because “ konpon” should be the state where the correlation between the believer and the believed is overcome and transcended. In Buddhism the word “ Kiye” (帰依) is used as a term corresponding to “ faith” in the West. “ Kiye” means “ to return to the fundamental truth and trust wholeheartedly in it.” This shows that the character of self-reliance forms the main current in Buddhism, and the ultimate goal or purpose of “ shūkyō” is to reach “ gedatsu” (解脱 deliverance from worldly passions) or “ satori” (悟り spiritual awakening) rather than “ salvation.” (In this connection, I must say that in Buddhism there are certain sects which preach salvation by faith, but I shall not touch upon them here.) In a broader sense, “ salvation” and “ gedatsu” may be the same high state to be attained. What I have explained to you so far is in order to let you understand that there is a great difference in character between Christianity and Buddhism. Now I will proceed in my lecture.

To the question “ What is Zen?” I may answer that it is “ a sort of mystic personal experience which cannot be attained by thinking on the basis of ordinary, dualistic knowledge, but is affirmed

intuitively by the unitary spiritual power which exists in the innermost of the human nature.” I say this because in Zen the most valued thing is always the fact which is attained through personal experience (体験). This is the essence of Zen. The fact attained through personal experience is called “ satori” (悟り) in the ordinary Japanese word.

“ Satori” of course means the opening of one’s spiritual eye to a world of the different dimensions. It has a highly psychological character. In recent years, however, the Japanese word (証) has come to be applied to it. As it is valued in Zen to actually prove the fact by one’s own self, the word “ 証り ” which means “ to prove by one’s own practice” has come into use. Of course, the content so proved is a high mental state. This is embodied in the concrete personality of one’s living self and makes the fact gained by personal experience absolute.

Therefore, Zen is not mere thought or philosophy. Nor is it mere knowledge. For instance, when a man drinks hot water, that he thinks the water is hot is the knowledge, but it is not the fact of the hotness itself. By directly experiencing the fact, a human being forms the thought of hotness independent of the fact. The same is in Zen. We cannot correctly understand Zen if we confound the fact which is established by personal experience with the thought which is formed by such experience. In Zen, therefore, all phases

of knowledge are rejected as of secondary importance and "to taste the fundamental personal experience" is stressed.

This can be understood from the words of Daruma Daishi (達摩大師 Dharma), founder of Zen, who said "Furyu Monji 不立文字 Kyōgai Betsuden 教外別伝" (this means that enlightenment to truth is to be attained by one's own mind and there is no need of written words and letters). Another founder of the Zen sect also said, "In Zen silence is good and talk is not."

I suppose you have heard the deeply significant story how Yui-ma Koji (維摩居士 Vimalakirti Gshapati), in his famous talks on faith with Monju Bosatsu (文殊菩薩 Bodhisattva Monju), finally sat straight in silence not uttering a single word, and showed the ultimate state of mind he had reached.

That the ultimate goal of faith can be attained through personal experience and not by knowledge or thought is not, of course, limited to Zen. I read some time ago about the famous theologian Barth. When someone asked him whether Christ is really able to save us, he answered, "You are not yet saved." What is to be attained is by personal experience, there is no other way but to experience it by one's own self in order to get the true understanding of it.

Next comes the question, "What then is the content to be experienced?" This is a matter which is still more difficult to explain.

There was a famous Zen priest

called Hōyen Zenji (法演禪師) in the Sung period in China. While he was training in search of enlightenment, he heard a priest answer him, "Zen is just like knowing the coldness or warmth which a man knows by himself." Thereupon, Hōyen asked back, "The coldness or warmth are what I know. What is self-knowing?" The priest could not answer to this and it is recorded that he, with deep regret, dashed himself against this iron wall of darkness.

My master, the late Rev. Mukai Kono (河野霧海老師) was the Chief Abbot of Nanzenji Temple. While in his noviciate, he devoted himself for several years to sit in meditation so fervently that all his colleagues were struck with admiration. At last he succeeded in reaching the state of overcoming all distinctions and consciousness. He had reached the high state, "He walks, but he does not know he is walking. He sees, but he does not see" (行いて行くことを知らず、見て見ることを知らず). One day, while walking in the compound of the temple where he was studying, he did not see there was a pond on his way. He kept on walking into the pond, just as if he was striding on the solid earth. He returned to his consciousness by a loud cry of other people, and found himself standing in the pond with the lower half of his body soaked in water. On the border of the pond, his colleagues were extending a bamboo rod yelling to him to grasp it in order to be dragged out of

the water..." To such an extent I had myself sat and meditated," were the words of my master.

In Zen, the absolute state to be reached by personal experience is called "munen" (無念 void of all ideas and thoughts), or "musō" (無相 void of all shapes), or "mu" (無 void), or "kū" (空 emptiness). If we take these as expressions, these may be regarded as the contents of the thought. But each of these is not a mere thought, and, as I have already stated, it is important to pass through the actually proved fact which has become completely void of all ideas and thoughts, completely void of shapes, completely void, by wholeheartedly devoting one's body and soul. This is the reason why I say that the Zen experience is more than thought.

Although Zen is thus a matter of personal experience, as it is a fact which is presented in the human mind, it is only natural that laymen should want to hear about it and priests take pains to talk about it. In this way it is quite an irony that a large literature is left today for Zen which maintains that words and letters are unnecessary. Likewise, I believe, it shows the reason for holding the lecture meeting here today.

In presenting the question, "What is Zen?" there are, I think, three methods adopted from of old.

First the direct method of presentation. This is the method of presenting one's own Zen-experience directly and without hesitation, regardless of the person

with whom he is confronted, and eliminating all compromises.

For instance, according to the questions and answers recorded on the first page of "Rinzai-Roku" (臨濟錄), it is written that "When a disciple put a question to his master Rinzai Zenji (臨濟禪師) 'What is the essence of Buddhism?', the master uttered not a single word, but gave him just one thundering roar (一聲). Thereupon the disciple, who had the ability to grasp something out of the roar, silently made reverence to the master to express his thanks." As is seen from the question and answer, there was no mention of conception, but can't we feel there was something sufficiently understandable between the master and his disciple?"

Another Zen master, in reply to the same question, "What is the essence of Buddhism?", silently raised the fan which he had been holding in his hand. When the questioner replied that he could not understand, it is written, the master threw the fan before the questioner.

Still another Zen master, it is written, when asked the same question by his disciple, in silence gave him a blow with the priest's staff he had in his hand.

Of course, it will be possible to draw explanations and reasons out of these questions and answers. But however cleverly these might be explained or reasoned, we must realize that these explanations or reasons cannot in any way add or lessen the high state of mind which these Zen masters attained

by their own experiences and possessed within themselves.

Second, the indirect method of presentation. In contrast to the direct method which cannot be understood without a high degree of intuition and profound experience, and which is, therefore, a presentation of the first importance, the indirect method can be said of secondary importance. The indirect method can be subdivided into symbolical and conceptual methods.

The symbolical method may be called, in other words, the artistic method. This tries to give the idea of the content of "satori" which was reached through one's own experience by means of symbols. As you know, a symbol is different from a realistic picture. The latter, even if it depicts the objective fact faithfully, is nothing more than a skeleton or a conception. It lacks the very life which forms the content. On the other hand, a symbol has the characteristic of representing vividly the inner life, even if the form of presentation is something entirely different. In particular, we may say that with regard to abstract content there is no other way than to represent it by symbols.

For these reasons, the inner life of Zen is often represented by poems and paintings. For instance, there is a poem by Kanzan (寒山), a Chinese priest of the Tang period.

重巖我卜居 鳥道絕人迹
庭際何所在 白雲抱幽石

I have fixed my abode where massive rocks lie in piles,
Birds may find their way here but it is completely cut off from human traces.

What do I see in my garden?
Only white clouds enveloping a solitary rock.

We see on the surface of these letters the description of a lonely scene of a quiet life in the mountains, but the supermundane and tranquil state therein expressed must be taken to show the state of mind which Kanzan himself had attained. We may say that Kanzan lived in such a spiritually awakened state in his inner life.

Daitō Kokushi (大燈國師), founder of the Daitokuji (大德寺) Zen-temple in Kyoto, represented his state of mind when he attained enlightenment in the following poem:

一回透過雲關了
南北東西活路通
夕処朝遊沒賓主
脚頭脚尾起清風

Having penetrated through the cloud-barrier once and for all, The way is open in all directions, Day in, day out, I am free from the distinction of host or guest, With a fresh breeze-rising at each of my steps.

Daily life without the cumbersome distinction of host or guest, daily movements that produce refreshing breezes, are these not the pure state of mind which Daitō Kokushi had attained?

Zen priests often draw a circle with one stroke of the brush. The empty circle of course symbolizes the spiritual world. A Zen priest thought that even this drawing of an empty circle was an impurity, and added an inscription, "Never a ring on a circle!" (一円相に輪があればこそ). He thus tried to show the transcending character of truth. Is there any other way to symbolize so cleverly the idea of "One is equal to All (一切)"?

Besides the above, there are also "suiboku-ga" (水墨画 paintings in India ink) used for the same purpose, and painted in an unconventional stroke. These paintings, although done in utter disregard of color and form and in some cases seeming outrageously absurd, give hints of something which transcends colors and forms, and creates a special field of art called "Zen-ga" (禅画 Zen-painting). Another example is the famous rock-garden of Ryōanji Temple (龍安寺) in Kyoto, which, as you are already well aware, has a deep significance without saying a word.

Next we come to the conceptual method. This has recourse to explanations and interpretations which are most commonly given. It is the method of explaining intellectually, through intellectual syntheses and analyses, with regard to the question "What is Zen?". This is the most convenient method for the purpose of understanding the contents and the structure of Zen as general knowledge. As such,

however, it is not Zen itself. With regard to the original meaning of Zen, it has the defect of seeing only the superficial outline of Zen, and therefore it may be said the farthest from the truth. None the less, if knowledge is the first step to seeking the truth for human beings, I think this method is not meaningless.

Now, I would like to change the course of my lecture and tell you something about the inner side of Zen.

Human beings and animals are alike living things. The reason why human beings differ from animals is that the former have the power to think, even though they are weak living things--so weak that they are sometimes compared to reeds, and are called "thinking reeds." The possession of the thinking power means that a human being lives discerning and criticizing amid worldly knowledge, and, in so doing, feels in himself diverse oppositions, contradictions, and oppressions, and agonizes in deep suffering. Whereupon he is led to seek the peace of mind free from the deep suffering which is inherent to human beings. This we may call his spiritual aspiration.

After leading a long and strenuous life of seeking after truth, if he has the good fortune to satisfy the spiritual aspiration which is to be likened to a thirst of soul, this state of mind he has thus attained is "gedatsu" or "satori."

To attain "satori," therefore, it is necessary for him to

go through the most severe ordeals, which will enable him to overcome all worldly matters, all this is human and terrestrial.

In Zen, such an ideal state of inner mind is termed "mushin" (無心), "musō" (無相), "muichibutsu" (無一物), "mu" (無), "kū" (空) or "shinnyo" (真如). The term "nirvana" (涅槃) in Sanskrit means the same in its content. Moreover, the overcoming of all worldly matters must not be a mere thought, but must be attained by personal experience as a fact in a living personality, as was seen in the example of my master of which I have already given.

However, it is a matter of deep significance that this change of one hundred and eighty degrees in the evaluation in the inner mind was realized thus in a living personality. This is because, while he had overcome all worldly matters, the place his personality lives in is the reality of this world. In other words, although living in this world, he lives a super-life transcending all worldly matters. That is to say, he has become the absolute master who has attained the state that he can use at will all worldly things, but is not worried by them any more. His daily life has become "In walking, stopping, sitting and lying--I have always a fresh breeze. This is my training-place (行住坐

臥是丸清風是丸道場)." What Rinzai Zenji, founder of the Rinzai-Zen sect, said, "Nothing in the world is to be

disliked (嫌う底の法なし)" shows that he lived in such a state of mind as I have above explained.

Here I must say that the high state of mind in Zen has the adversely limiting meaning in that, while denying the realities of life to the utmost, makes the best use of realities. Hence we may find the reason why it is said that "Buddhism is the indivisible teaching." It follows, therefore, that "satori" at its bottom has an inner meaning, so that a new personality is born in a new world.

There is recorded in a Zen book an episode which took place a long time ago in China, when a novice came to see Shō Zenji (省禪師), a Zen master who lived at Sekken (葉県), and, wishing to study under him, asked the master, "I have come to be in my noviciate for the first time. From where shall I enter into the study of Zen?" The master, thereupon, asked him in return, "Canst thou hear the sound of that mountain stream?" The novice answered, "Yes, I hear it." The master told him, "Then enter from there."

Coming from Shō Zenji who lived in the high state of "satori," it may be said that the strange and common instruction he gave was the most natural and true one.

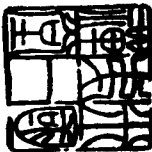
As I have not sufficient time, I shall terminate my lecture here on Zen although I have given only an outline of it, with a few words. It seems to me that Zen as a "shūkyō" tends to be too intellectual in its character, and,

as a consequence, lacks something in the development of the sentimental elements in human character. Needless to say, the person who attains "satori" by overcoming all secondary matters in this world such as the distinctions of self and others or have and have-not, must possess within himself, as a matter of course, the power to act according to both the Supreme Wisdom (大智) and the Great Mercy (大悲). In Buddhism the Supreme Wisdom is represented by the Bodhisattva Monju (文珠菩薩) and the Great Mercy by the Bodhisattva Fukun (普賢菩薩), and it is expounded that the genuine "myōchi" (妙智 i.e. "satori") is the sublation (aufhebung) of these two. It seems, however, that in Zen a great importance is placed on the Supreme Wisdom in the field of philosophy, and leaves something to be desired in the development and practice of mercy in the field of ethics.

This, I think, is a point which Zen students of today should give thought to with regard to Zen in its connection with actual life. I thank you.

This article is a translation of the lecture given by the Reverend Zenkei Shibayama, Chief Abbot of the Nanzenji Temple, Kyoto, at a Cultural Lecture Meeting of the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai (Society for International Cultural Relations). It is an exact copy minus illustrations of K.B. S. Bulletin No. 42, May-June 1960, and is printed with the permission of the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai. A paragraph of Mrs. Sasaki's LETTER FROM KYOTO issued with ZN Vol. II, No. 6 describes Rev. Shibayama's seating as Kanchō. You may recall that Miura Roshi was the head monk there in 1932 when Mrs. Sasaki sat for the Rohatsu described in ZN Vol. VII, No. 1.

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