

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT IS ZEN?

The 'Flower Sermon'.

Like many of the so-called new religions, Zen Buddhism proved very fashionable as it swept across the United States in the 1960's, finding a strong foothold in California, the breeding ground of many varieties of religious practice. Zen is not a new form of Buddhism, but quite an ancient variety which emerged as Indian Buddhism came to China and blended with the ideas of Taoism, an ancient Chinese religion.

Although the beginnings of Zen are reckoned to have occurred in the sixth century CE, there is a legend which links Zen with Gautama the Buddha himself. According to the story, the Buddha was once seated amidst other members of the Sangha, when a disciple came to him, offered him a golden flower, and asked him to preach the Dharma. The Buddha accepted the flower, held it up and gazed at it for some time in silence. After some time the disciple smiled: he had intuitively grasped the spiritual idea which the Buddha was trying to transmit without the use of words. It is said that the smile of the disciple, Venerable Mahakasyapa, was handed down through 28 successive patriarchs, the last of whom was an Indian Buddhist teacher by the name of Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma and the Chinese Emperor.

Bodhidharma was a very fierce character and no picture of him ever shows him smiling, despite the story of the Flower Sermon. It is said that Bodhidharma arrived in China in 520 C.E. and was invited to the capital by the emperor. The Chinese emperor regarded himself as a very keen follower of Buddhism, and said to Bodhidharma, 'I have built many temples and monasteries, I have copied the sacred books of the Buddha. I have supported the monasteries. Now, what merit have I gained?'

'None whatsoever, your majesty,' replied Bodhidharma.

'I don't understand,' rejoined the emperor. 'Explain to me the first principle of Buddhism.'

'Vast emptiness,' replied Bodhidharma.

'If everything is emptiness, then who is now standing in front of me?'

'I have absolutely no idea!' replied Bodhidharma.

These stories need a certain amount of explaining. Bodhidharma's last point is, of course, a reference to the notion that there is no self, according to Buddhist teaching. Since there is no permanent self or soul, then, strictly, there existed no Bodhidharma and no Chinese emperor. The emperor's mistake was to be concerned with personal merit rather than attaining enlightenment or, as Zen Buddhists prefer to call it, *satori*.

Both stories show the importance of going beyond the conventional trappings of religion. The emperor was taught that religious practices were insufficient for spiritual advancement. Words — our main form of communication — are insufficient to express what enlightenment means; consequently, the Buddha's 'flower sermon' was preached silently.

In the popular novel *Monkey*, the hero is a priest called Tripitaka, who makes an adventurous journey from China to India in order to collect some important scriptures. He and his companions, a monkey and a piglet, eventually find the monastery and collect the texts. They do not examine them until they are on their journey home, when Tripitaka

discovers that they have been given nothing but blank pages. When he and his party return to complain, the resident monks give this explanation:

As a matter of fact, it is such blank scrolls as these that are the true scriptures. But I quite see that the people of China are too foolish and ignorant to believe this, so there is nothing for it but to give them copies with some writing on.¹

Attitudes to Scriptures.

The principles of Zen are enshrined in the following four-line summary. No-one knows who wrote it — it may have been the famous Zen Master Rinzai (died 866 C.E.) — but most Zen Buddhists know it.

A special transmission outside the Scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Direct pointing to the heart of man;
Seeing into one's nature and being a Buddha.

There are many stories of Zen monks tearing up scriptures, or Zen Masters such as Hakuin (1685-1768) saying that scriptures' only proper use was for toilet paper. It is important, however, to realise that such stories are exaggerations to jolt the mind into realising that scriptures only form part of the path to enlightenment. As one Zen teacher once remarked, the relationship between scripture and satori is like someone pointing a finger at the moon; only a fool would believe that the finger was the object of attention, yet at times it is useful for someone's finger to point things out to us. Similarly, scriptures are needed to shed light on the path, but they are not the destination. It is sometimes said that Zen points above the scriptures, whereas the Pure Land sects operate below them.

When scriptures are compared with toilet paper, it is worth remembering that toilet paper is not useless! Zen Buddhists do use scriptures, although the principal scriptures tend to be short ones, such as the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra, thus minimising the use of words. Part of the Heart Sutra, which is short enough to engrave in its entirety on some of the rather fine calligraphers' ink-blocks, runs as follows. It is frequently chanted during meditation sittings.

So, in emptiness, no form
No feeling, thought or choice
Nor is there consciousness.
'No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind;
&No colour, sound, smell, taste, touch
Or what the mind takes hold of
Nor even act of sensing.
No ignorance or end it
!Nor all that comes of ignorance;
No withering, no death,
No end of them.
#Nor is there pain or cause of pain
Or cease in pain, or noble path
To lead from pain,
Not even wisdom to attain!

Attainment too is emptiness...
All Buddhas of past and present
Buddhas of future time
Using this Prajna wisdom
Come to full and perfect vision...

No Buddhist Path?

On first appearance, the statements of the Heart Sutra seem outrageous. It is saying that there are no Noble Truths, no Eightfold Path to follow, and no ignorance to escape from. How can this be, since these are surely the fundamentals of Buddhism? Yet even in its most outrageous statements, Zen is thoroughly logical. The Truths, the Path and the human condition all belong to the physical world, which lacks an enduring unchanging quality.

Once again Zen startles the enquirer with something that seems illogical, but yet enshrines some important spiritual message which lies beyond reason. To progress on the path to satori one must cleanse the mind, and, above all, meditate.

"Zen meditations (zazen sittings, as they are called) are long and silent. The popular image of a zazen meditation is of novices sitting in a square formation, with a fierce Zen Master going around with a long beating stick (a kyosaku) which is used copiously to discipline those who are not putting their whole effort into the meditation. It is true that the kyosaku is sometimes used by a meditation instructor, but it is not so much a punishment for bad meditation as a means of loosening muscles which have become stiff after sitting for an extended period in the same position. In one Zen community which I visited, the beating stick in the shrine room was merely a symbol of the Zen tradition; the shrine room was so small that no-one could possibly have wielded it in the space available.

Clapping with one hand?

There are two main types of Zen — Soto and Rinzai. In the Rinzai school, one's mental powers are stretched to their limit — and beyond — by a device known as a koan. A koan is an enigmatic question which is set by one's spiritual master. Logically, it appears to make no sense, but to dismiss it as nonsense is not in accordance with Zen practice. The most famous koan is 'You have heard the sound of two hands clapping. What is the sound of one hand clapping?' Other favourite examples are, 'What did your face look like before it was born?', and 'There is a goose in a bottle. How do you get it out?'

Another koan goes as follows. 'A man is hanging over a precipice by his teeth, which are clenched in the branch of a tree. His hands are full and his feet cannot reach the face of the precipice. A friend leans over and asks him, "What is Zen?" What answer would you make?' One novice devised the (apparently acceptable) answer of pretending to fall from a height and exclaiming, 'Ouch, that hurt!'

There is no logical answer to most of these questions. Nevertheless the novice is required to formulate a response that comes from the buddha-nature inside oneself. The Roshi (Zen Master — who can be male or female) will summon the novice from the meditation session and ask questions about the prescribed koan, to discover what progress has been made. The Roshi may respond in whatever way is appropriate to help the novice to gain enlightenment: encouraging, advising, becoming angry, ridiculing, or

even occasionally resorting to physical violence. There are tales of novices who have gone to all sorts of lengths to devise an acceptable sound of one hand clapping — shouting, kicking over a bucket, or turning on all the water-taps. It is to no avail to discover another novice whose answer was acceptable: what is conducive to enlightenment for someone else may not be so for me. I must discover my own buddha-nature and not someone else's.

A Roshi can engage the novice in a rapid exchange of cross-questioning on a koan. This technique is known as *mondo*, and the following is an example of a conversation based on the koan, 'What is the sound of the one hand?'

Master: If you've heard the sound of the one hand, prove it.

Answer: Without a word, the pupil thrusts one hand forward.

Master: It's said that if one hears the sound of the one hand, one becomes a Buddha. Well then, how will you do it?

Answer: Without a word, the pupil thrusts one hand forward.

Master: After you've become ashes, how will you hear it?

Answer: Without a word, the pupil thrusts one hand forward.

Master: What if the one hand is cut by the Suimo sword?

Answer: 'If it can, let me see you do it.' So saying, the pupil extends his hand forward.

Master: Why can't it cut the one hand?

Answer: 'Because the one hand pervades the universe.'

Master: Then show me something that contains the universe.=Answer:

Without a word, the pupil thrusts one hand forward.

Master: The before-birth-one-hand, what is it like?

Answer: Without a word, the pupil thrusts one hand forward.

Master: The Mt-Fuji-summit-one-hand, what is it like?

Answer: The pupil, shading his eyes with one hand, takes the pose of looking down from the summit of Mt Fuji and says, 'What a splendid view!' naming several places to be seen from Mt Fuji — or others would name places visible from where they happen to be.²

The koans seem funny and indeed Zen Buddhists see the humour of them. In the case of the koan, however, it is reason that is the real joke; what is being ridiculed is the notion that enlightenment can be gained simply by reasoning out a series of religious truths. There is a certain logic in this. As a Zen Buddhist once remarked, 'Zen is logical — logic isn't!'

Other examples of exchanges between Master and pupil are not so much funny, but gruesome. According to one story, a Zen Master, when asked the meaning of Zen, merely raised his right index finger. Subsequently he asked his pupil the same question. When the pupil raised his finger the Master took a knife and cut it off.

The point of these seemingly strange religious practices is often hard to explain in words, for one is meant to grasp the meaning intuitively. Whether stories like this are literally true is not the real point: it is the spiritual truth which is important. One obvious meaning is that enlightenment cannot be expressed verbally. Another point is that nothing should stand between the religious seeker and *satori*, not even the pointing of a finger.

The koan about the man on the precipice illustrates that if his hands are full of worries, desires or intellectual theories and he is holding on to these, he will never experience what Zen is about: these things must not intervene between the seeker and the experience.

‘Sudden’ and ‘gradual’ enlightenment.

The school of Zen which was founded by Rinzai has stressed the importance of koans and codified them, listing some 1700. It is probably because the koan has intrigued westerners that we hear much more about Rinzai Zen than about Soto. Yet the two schools are roughly equally represented, and if anything Soto dominates slightly in the west.

In Soto Zen, the role of the koan is played down. Followers of Soto Zen often criticize the Rinzai school for using artificial means which produce sudden flashes of enlightenment which do not last. After the follower has solved a koan, they contend, that person may be no further on, and indeed may have feelings of achievement which instil ideas of the importance of the ‘self’ — something which, as we have seen, is contrary to the entire teaching of Buddhism. The follower of the Soto path does not need to be given his or her puzzle to solve, for we are all already born with a koan. Life itself is a puzzle to which we must find a solution. Why have we been born at all? What is the purpose of human existence? Why is human existence unsatisfactory, and how can we eliminate unsatisfactoriness? To solve the koan of human existence, Soto Zen prescribes a more gradual path, consisting almost exclusively of meditation (zazen).

Both types of Zen agree that meditation is supremely important. The usual practice is breathing meditation, similar to the kind described in Chapter Five. At various points in the year, Zen Buddhists practice sesshin — a meditation retreat in which the amount of meditation builds up as the period progresses. At the beginning of the period (usually about a week) there will be two or three sittings of around half an hour each, building up to a total of five hours in the day as the retreat nears its end.

The goal of ‘no goal’.

In contrast with many other Buddhist traditions, meditation in Zen is normally combined with normal physical activities. The meditative life is accompanied by physical labour, such as tilling the soil to grow vegetables or preparing the food in the kitchen. Satori is to be discovered in everyday tasks and not in some special ‘other-worldly’ religious experience.

Since enlightenment is found in this world, any human activity, performed appropriately, can be a moment of satori, whether it is meditating, driving one’s car or going about one’s daily employment. Books have been written about the relationship between Zen and areas as diverse as archery, flower arranging and social work. Robert Pirsig’s book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* became a best-seller in the mid-seventies and was celebrated for the famous quotation:

The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower.³

Zen stresses that the follower of the path should be one with whatever he or she is doing, fully involved with one’s whole true being. One Zen teacher, when asked to summarise

Zen, said, 'When you are hungry, eat; when you are thirsty, drink; when you are tired, sleep.' If this seems a banal statement instead of a profound religious ideal, the teachings of Zen cause seekers to enquire whether they really experience a oneness with nature which allows us to eat when they are hungry, drink when they are thirsty and sleep when they are tired. Those who have routine, clock-governed jobs are more likely to eat because it is one o'clock and go to sleep because they have to get up early next morning.

'Because satori is 'this-worldly' rather than 'other-worldly', Zen Buddhists sometimes say cryptically that the goal is 'no goal'. What they mean is that on enlightenment one does not receive some spectacular supernatural revelation or become transported to some celestial realm. It is this world that is seen as it really is. Insofar as it is possible to describe satori, a Zen Buddhist will affirm that it is a state of rest, silence and certainty, in which one sees things clearly, with emotion and passion ebbed away; it is a feeling of oneness with the universe, in which distinctions between self and others, self and the world are broken down.

The Tea Ceremony

One celebrated practice in which Zen is combined with everyday things is the Japanese tea ceremony — an event which has captured the imagination and interest of westerners. The ceremony originated in China, which is famed for its tea, and brought to Japan in the twelfth century by a Japanese monk called Eisai who visited China. The ceremony is still carried out and every April there is a large two-day ceremony — the Great Tea-Offering Ceremony at Saidai-ji.

Many books have been written on the subject of serving tea and there are even several schools of thought about the appropriate way to practise the ceremony. Amongst the most celebrated writings are the Ch'a Ching (the colloquial word 'char' in English comes from the Chinese ch'a, meaning 'tea'), and Eisai's large two-volume work entitled Kissa-yojoki (Notes on the Curative Effects of Tea).

The ceremony began as a religious ritual, where Zen monks solemnly drank tea out of a common cup in front of an image of Bodhidharma. Tea, being a stimulant, also aided the practice of meditation, preventing monks from becoming drowsy during the long zazen sessions. According to a legend, Bodhidharma himself found his eyelids closing during meditation, and in his usual ruthless manner cut them off, whereupon they turned into tea leaves!

The tea ceremony has now become secularised, and Bodhidharma's image has been replaced by flowers and a decorative scroll. But some underlying religious ideas can still be seen. The 'tea room', normally separate from one's house, is made of bamboo, suggesting simplicity, naturalness and impermanence. (It is common for a tea-house to be pulled down after the tea master's death, rather than to be allowed to endure for a second generation.) The highly formalised ritual is enacted because this is the way one's ancestors practised it.

Since the tea-room is small (normally around ten feet square), the maximum number of guests at any time is five. On arrival the guest waits in the waiting arbour, and, when summoned by the host, proceeds along some stepping stones to a 'crawling entrance' — a small door through which he or she must crawl before reaching the tea room. Guests then remove sandals. A few small cakes are served and eaten while the host prepares the tea on a brazier, stirring with a whisk to create a froth.

The formalities demand that the guest spends time admiring the utensils in a strictly determined order. Even the subjects of conversation are governed by rules: for example, when the utensils are passed round, the chief guest must ask who the craftsmen were, which tea masters approved of them, and so on.

The formalities involved may seem contrary to the spirit of spontaneity which Zen engenders. In origin, partaking of tea was a simple informal activity, and it was only in the sixteenth century CE that over a hundred rules were formulated about the appropriate etiquette. Be that as it may, the ceremony still represents the Zen insistence on greatness in simple things. There is no great achievement in tea-drinking, and the utensils are not chosen for any great beauty: indeed equipment is normally selected because of its age rather than its elegance, showing respect for ancient customs and the ancestors who practised them. Highly valuable kettles, ladles or drinking bowls could easily generate the selfish desire which the Buddhist wishes to eliminate. The whole character of the tea ceremony should instil feelings of non-attachment and inner peace.

'Square Zen' and 'Beat Zen'

The notion that Zen can be combined with everyday activities has sometimes been interpreted to mean that 'anything goes' as a possible means for attaining satori, whether it is meditating in front of a buddha-image, drinking tea, riding a motor-cycle, walking, hitch-hiking, drinking to excess or having an orgy! Zen became interpreted in this way by some westerners when it spread across the United States in the late 1950s. This was the era of the 'beatniks' and many of them found an outlet in Zen for combining their non-conformity with their religious searchings.

Books on Zen began to be produced in abundance around that time, and the 'beat generation' tended to learn about Buddhism through the written word rather than by disciplined study under a Zen Roshi. Their form of Zen came to be known as 'Beat Zen', in contrast with the 'Square Zen' of the more serious students who studied under accredited Japanese teachers.

'Beat Zen' attracted some well-known American intellectuals, including poets Gary Snyder and Alan Ginsberg, novelist Jack Kerouac and composer John Cage. In the spirit of Zen, Cage attempted to jolt musical audiences out of their accepted traditional conventions: he achieved fame (or notoriety) by 'performing' at one of his concerts his own 'composition' entitled '4 minutes 33 seconds', at which he sat in complete silence in front of a piano for precisely that length of time. If this was music, it certainly transcended sound!

Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums* was a more direct expression of Beat Zen and a fair proportion of it is believed to be autobiographical. Kerouac describes a group of beatniks who travel the States by hiding amongst the cargo of freight-trains. They experience something of a oneness with nature, often sleeping rough in the open. Their life-style consists of smoking cannabis, drinking alcohol to excess when they can afford it, and having casual sexual relationships with partners whom they call 'bodhisattvas'.

Although traditional Zen teachers would not condone the permissiveness of 'Beat Zen', it is easy to see how Zen came to be interpreted in this way. Zen Buddhists undertake to observe Buddhist precepts, but reject slavish conformity, since this can prevent the discovery of one's own buddha-nature. However, finding a middle path

between total conformity and complete outlandishness is no easy task for the follower of the Zen path.

One final postscript about Zen may be of interest. Zen Masters are reknown for the tricks they play on each other, in attempts to trap another Roshi into putting into words the experience of satori which has 'no dependence on words or letters'. 'What do you teach about Zen here?' asked one Master to a Japanese Roshi. To reply in words would be to fall into the trap: the Roshi merely lifted his fan and threw it at his questioner.

In the course of writing this book, a Zen priest agreed to read an earlier version of this chapter. As he handed me back the manuscript, he said, 'When you described the "flower sermon", you didn't say what the Buddha passed on to the disciple when he smiled.' I checked what I had written: it seemed clear enough. Then I realised that this was a trap to see if I would put into words the Buddha's sermon of silence. He laughed. 'What I want to know,' he said, 'is — have you found it yet?'

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