

Zen

The best known form of Buddhism* in the West, popularized especially in America during the first half of this century by the writings of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. Zen became even more visible after the

Second World War with extensive cultural contact between Japan and America. Zen centres were established in major urban areas throughout the United States. California proved to be especially hospitable to teachers of Zen thought and practice. Literary figures associated with the 'Beat Generation' and the 'San Francisco Renaissance', e.g., Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, became involved in Zen. Snyder spent several years in Japan studying and practising Zen. Zen meditation centres have since been established in the mountains of California, Colorado, New York, New England and elsewhere. Zen has also attracted considerable interest among Christians, especially Roman Catholic religious orders. Thomas Merton*, the famous Trappist monk, spoke and wrote appreciatively of Zen. What is Zen, and why have thoughtful Christians been attracted by it?

1. *Practice.* Zen is, foremostly, a practice. The word is the Japanese rendering of *ch'an*, the Chinese word for *dhyāna* (Sanskrit), meaning a meditative state of consciousness. In the broadest sense, then, Zen is not a sect or a school of Buddhism, but a way to understanding, insight and enlightenment (Japanese: *satori*), the key to which is meditation.

Monastic training focuses on meditation not primarily as a means of controlling the mind, but as a way of coming to know the truth of the true nature of things. Forms of meditation vary, but all involve long periods of sitting quietly and concentratedly in a meditation hall under the direction of an accomplished master. (Japanese: *roshi*). Included among the subjects for meditation may be an enigmatic or paradoxical mind-twister (Japanese: *koan*) such as 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' or 'Does the dog have Buddha nature?' These *koans* have been collected and commented upon (e.g., the *Mumokan*, the *Heikiganroku*), although originally they were simply sayings which grew out of stories about famous Chinese and Japanese Zen masters. In fact, these narratives may be thought of as constituting the core of the Zen textual tradition rather than those Indian Buddhist texts which are also highly regarded in Zen, e.g., the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. Authority in Zen, therefore, does not rest in scripture or an institution but in persons of transforming vision. The history of

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the tradition, from this perspective, becomes the history of the lives of the Zen masters, saints or patriarchs. The heart of Zen training lies in the relationship between these accomplished beings and their students. They impart a wordless wisdom not limited to a sacred text, a skilful means derived from their own insight into the nature of reality. How does Zen understand the human condition and the nature of reality?

2. *Teaching.* Zen, like other forms of Buddhism, can be said to be about overcoming the basically unsatisfactory (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*) character of mundane existence. Why is life plagued with dissatisfaction? Basically, because of our proclivity for making life into something it is not; for attributing to it stability and permanence when in reality life continually changes; for isolating ourselves as subjects from objects to which we attribute a singular independence when, in fact, existence has a much more interdependent character. Furthermore, and more importantly, life has a subtle or sacred nature to it not readily discernible to common sense experience. The true nature of things cannot be learned out of books, nor can it be taught in any conventional sense. Such knowledge is discovered, an intuition (Sanskrit: *prajñā*) of a shared depth of experience, a universal reality (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) which everything in the world expresses in its own particularity or uniqueness. A tree is not merely a tree, any more than a mountain is merely a mountain or a person merely a person. Being attached to an outer form one misses a deeper, hidden meaning, a meaning discovered in an awareness of the ultimate interconnectedness of all things. To be myself I must realize my own Void (*śūnya*) nature, that ultimately in the Void I discover both myself and the uni-

verse. With this realization I become a means of grace or compassion (Sanskrit: *karuṇā*). In the language of the Zen tradition, I become a *bodhisattva*, a saint or fully realized human being.

3. *History.* India gave birth to Buddhism, including much that we consider to be a part of Zen. Yet, Zen as a distinctive tradition was nurtured and developed in China, Korea and Japan. Zen attributes the founding of the tradition to Bodhidharma who reputedly came from India to China about AD 520. Legends of his life and other patriarchal figures express many characteristics of Zen, as well as relate its historical development in narrative form. For example, Bodhidharma is said to have approached the Emperor Wu of Liang, a pious supporter of Buddhism, admonishing him that all his religious good works were of no spiritual benefit. Bodhidharma then departed for north China where he meditated in intense concentration for ten years. Hui-k'o (486-593?), the second patriarch of Zen, proved his sincerity and dedication to Bodhidharma by cutting off his left arm; Hui-Neng (637-713), the sixth patriarch, became famous for his teaching of no-mind (Chinese: *wu-hsin*); Hakuin Zenji, the eighteenth-century reformer of Zen in Japan systematized *koan* training. In this manner the lineage of great teachers tells the story of Zen, a tradition rooted in transformative experience transmitted from 'mind to mind'.

Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, 1960; Thomas Hoover, *Zen Culture*, 1978; Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 1968; Nancy Wilson Ross, *The World of Zen*, 1960; D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 1949.

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ZEN BUDDHISM

Author: Daisetz T. Suzuki (1870-1966)

Type of work: Metaphysics, ethics

First published: 1956 (Selections by editor William Barrett from works published during the years 1949-1955)

Principal Ideas Advanced

Zen is a way of life, of seeing and knowing by looking into one's own nature.

The truth comes through active meditation, and enlightenment is sudden and intuitive.

Zen does not rely on the intellect, the scripture, or the written word, but on a direct pointing at the soul of man, a seeing into one's own nature as making Buddhahood possible.

Zen masters make the moment of enlightenment (satori) possible by referring directly to some natural and commonplace matter; the immediate recognition of the unity of being follows.

The chief characteristics of satori are irrationality, intuitive insight, authoritativeness, affirmation, a sense of the Beyond, an impersonal tone, a feeling of exaltation, and momentariness.

The methods of Zen are paradox, going beyond the opposites, contradiction, affirmation, repetition, exclamation, silence, or direct action (such as a blow, or pointing.)

Zen Buddhism shares with other philosophies and faiths which stress intuition and awareness the ironic condition of desiring to communicate what cannot be communicated. Like the theologies of the Middle Ages, it urges an understanding of true being by a kind of direct insight into one's own being, but it disdains any intellectual or formalistic methods of achieving that insight. The profession of conviction, then, is largely negative; the emphasis, insofar as discourse is concerned, is not on what can be said but on that concerning which we must be silent. A Zen master is not a lecturer; he is a director, or pointer, one who turns the attention of the disciple to some natural fact which, properly apprehended, reveals everything. Of those who have made the effort to explain Zen Buddhism, no one has been more successful than the Japanese philosopher and professor, Daisetz T. Suzuki, whose *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1949, 1950, 1953), *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (1949), and *Studies in Zen* (1955) provide the selections collected and edited by William Barrett under the title, *Zen Buddhism*. As an introduction to Suzuki's work and

to Zen Buddhism, this volume is admirably suited; it deals with the meaning of Zen Buddhism, its historical background, its techniques, its philosophy, and its relation to Japanese culture.

According to the legendary account of Zen, given by Suzuki, Zen originated in India, and the first to practice the Zen method was Sakyamuni himself, the Buddha. He is reputed to have held a bouquet of flowers before his disciples without saying a word. Only the venerable Mahakasyapa understood the "silent but eloquent teaching on the part of the Enlightened One." Consequently, Mahakasyapa inherited the spiritual treasure of Buddhism.

According to historical accounts, however, Zen Buddhism originated in China in A.D. 520 with the arrival of Bodhi-Dharma from India (the twenty-eighth in the line of patriarchs of Zen, according to the orthodox followers). The message brought by Bodhi-Dharma became the four-phrase summation of the Zen principles:

"A special transmission outside the scriptures;

"No dependence upon words and letters;