

Although Zen Buddhism is often thought of as the most mystical form of Buddhism in Japan, in Pure Land Buddhism too a sense of devotion which leans towards the mystical is apparent among experienced practitioners. D.T. Suzuki, the Japanese who more than any other popularised Zen in the West, actually felt that there had been as many cases of enlightenment among Pure Land Buddhists as there had been among

## Mysticisms East and West

### Studies in Mystical Experience

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edited by

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*Paterson & Parson*

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Thou art here and there, in the air, and in the earth:

Thou art anywhere; everywhere is thy mansion in the heights above and in the depths beneath.

Thou abidest in my heart; thy kingdom is built in my faith:

When I hear thy commandment and thy Promise,

Thou appearest before me; showest thyself to the eye of my mind."

Mystical devotion then is a feature of schools of Buddhism other than Zen. Nevertheless, it is Zen which is the form of Japanese Buddhism best known in the West, and to that we now turn.

### And so to Zen

The truth is, Zen is extremely elusive as far as its outward aspects are concerned: when you think you have caught a glimpse of it, it is no more there; from afar it looks so approachable, but as soon as you come near it you see it even further away from you than before.<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned already, Zen Buddhism is the form of Japanese religion which comes closest to Western concepts of mysticism. It is thought of as having meditation and contemplation at its heart, and indeed, Zen practice finds an appeal among many people in the West searching for mystical experience. As the quotation above makes clear, it is not easy to define Zen. Indeed, by its very nature it is almost beyond definition. It is certainly not something which can be grasped solely by intellectual study, but needs to be apprehended intuitively. However, before looking at the mystical aspects of Zen more deeply, it needs to be understood that in Japan, Zen Buddhism bears many similarities, and in society fulfills many similar roles, to other forms of Buddhism.

Zen was first introduced into Japan in the twelfth century at a time of religious and political crisis in Japan. The ruling aristocracy of Japan were seen to be failing, and the Buddhist clergy were morally corrupt. There was also a belief that the Final Dharma age, predicted by Buddhist teaching had begun. The monk Eisai, while studying in China, discovered that Zen Buddhism (in Chinese Chan Buddhism) had come to dominate the religious and political scene in China. Eisai saw it could have a similar role in Japan. His *Treatise on Promoting Zen for the Protection of the Country* argues why it should be adopted in Japan to replace the Tendai School which had been the main form of Buddhism up until that time. Eisai saw Zen as being the form of Buddhism which best preserved the essence of the Buddha's teaching. Significantly, he also saw it as providing moral training and discipline which he felt was lacking in contemporary Buddhist practice. In other words, for him, Zen was not simply a vehicle to encourage personal realisation of enlightenment, but something which would have an impact on the nation.

According to the Benevolent Kings Sutra, 'The Buddha has entrusted the Buddhist teaching on wisdom to all present and future

rulers of petty kingdoms; it is considered a secret treasure for protecting their countries'. The Buddhist teaching on wisdom referred to here is the teaching of the Zen school. In other words, if people within a country uphold the Buddhist rules governing moral behaviour, the various heavenly beings will protect that country.<sup>13</sup>

It is also highly significant that though the Tendai Buddhist establishment and the rather decadent court nobility in Kyoto rejected his approach, the new military government of Japan, the samurai class, adopted Zen and, together with the Zen monks, established a new pattern for the governing of the country. Other factors, notably Confucianism, also influenced samurai philosophy, which developed into their code of *Bushido*, the Way of the Warrior, but Zen remained the underlying religious influence of this code. Even after the abolition of the feudal system and the formal end of the samurai class in the middle of the nineteenth century, their ideals, including Zen, were adopted by Japan's new military classes who still sought to embody the traditions of *Bushido*.<sup>14</sup> For the samurai and their successors, Zen was as much a way of developing discipline of thought and subduing the body as a way of attaining enlightenment.

It is self control, as it is the subduing of such pernicious passions as anger, jealousy, hatred, and the like, and the awakening of noble emotions such as sympathy, mercy, generosity and what not.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its long period of influence over the samurai class, Zen found far fewer followers among other groups in society, and is actually one of the smaller Buddhist schools. It is Pure Land Buddhism, referred to above, with its doctrine of calling on Amida Buddha for salvation, which is the largest Buddhist school in Japan. It may be that Zen's rather austere teaching and its emphasis on relying on one's own efforts to attain enlightenment lessened its popularity. Nevertheless, in present-day Japan, Zen Buddhism fulfils a wider role than simply providing a pattern by which enlightenment can be obtained. In many ways, Zen temples perform similar functions in society as do other temples, notably in providing funeral services, and dealing with all the rituals surrounding death and the care of the ancestors. Indeed, only about ten percent of Zen temples in Japan have a meditation hall. While Zen priests are expected to have completed a course of meditation training and to have attained enlightenment, the purpose of this is to qualify them to help others through carrying out their priestly functions: 'Zen monasticism was and continues to be a highly ritualised tradition that emphasises public performance and physical deportment at least as much as "inner experience"'.<sup>16</sup>

It is significant, however, that meditation plays a relatively small part in the overall activity of Zen temples. In tracts which they produce to encourage lay participation in Buddhism, little mention is made of meditation, with far more emphasis being placed on the right observance of rituals and customs, particularly those related to ancestors. Ian Reader provides a translation of the *Shinko jukun*, the 'Ten Articles of Faith', a kind of summary of the life of a Zen adherent, which illustrates this. The first article is this:

Let us always clean the family Buddhist altar (butsudan) every morning, and, by making a gesture of worship (*gassho*) and venerating them, let us give thanks to our ancestors.<sup>18</sup>

Of the ten articles, only the last refers to meditation,<sup>19</sup> which is to be carried out on Enlightenment Day, celebrated on 8 December in Japan, but even here it is seen as a ritual way of remembering Buddha, rather than as a means of seeking enlightenment. Another tract, *Jinsei no yasuragi* or *Peace of Mind in Human Life*, stresses the attainment of peace of mind through calm observation of a worshipping gesture, and through thankful remembrance of one's ancestors.<sup>20</sup> The emphasis has shifted away from the idea of enlightenment as a realisation that there is no distinction between oneself and the Buddha-mind to a sense of peace and tranquillity in the midst of a busy life.

In recent years there does appear to have been a small increase in the number of Japanese interested in the meditation practices of Zen, especially among those who have moved to the cities and thus have no established links with a particular Buddhist school. In some areas Zen temples are opening new meditation halls, in an attempt to appeal to those who are seeking a form of spirituality or religious expression which goes beyond the formal or ritualistic approach of much contemporary Buddhism and Shinto. These are the kind of people who might otherwise be drawn to the new religious movements, and Zen temples hope that by attracting them now, they will affiliate to the temple when they come to need their services for funerals and ancestral rites.

Having set Zen Buddhism in its Japanese context, it is time to look more closely at its practice.

## Zen in Practice

Zen is both way and goal, both practical technique and mystical experience, both detachment from life and involvement in life, both intellectually

demanding and, once grasped, absurdly simple. It sees itself both as a philosophy for all, which need not be linked to any religion, yet at the same time, as we have seen above, it sits within the wider world of Japanese Buddhism. The acceptance of paradox is at its heart.

In essence, Zen aims at the realisation that there is no distinction between one's mind and what appears to be the external world. Everything is a manifestation of one's own mind. More than that, even the sense of one's existence as distinct mind is ultimately illusion. Everything is one, everything is no-thing, everything is 'Emptiness'. This Emptiness is sometimes described by the Japanese word *Mu*. At the simple level it is used as a straightforward negative, but in Zen terms it carries a deeper meaning. Suzuki speaks of this Emptiness as something 'transcending all forms of mutual relationship, of subject and object, birth and death, God and the world, something and nothing, yes and no, affirmation and negation.'<sup>21</sup> In order to grasp this, it is of course necessary to move beyond what Zen sees as the confines of logic, and not just the confines of logic, but the confines of awareness of distinction. It is here that the practice of Zen meditation comes in. Zen understands that in order for this realisation to be attained, in other words, for enlightenment to be grasped, there needs to be a breaking down of the resistance of material logic. Zen training aims to do this and thus may almost be seen as a system to lead the mind to enlightenment.<sup>22</sup>

A key element within Zen is the practice of *zazen*, seated meditation. During *zazen*, participants sit cross-legged in what is known as the lotus position, with both feet resting on the opposite thighs, or the half lotus, with one foot resting on the opposite thigh and the other tucked underneath the opposite thigh. Sometimes the traditional Japanese kneeling position, where both feet are tucked underneath the backs of one's legs, is adopted. Slightly cupped, one hand rests lightly on the other. There are patterns of breathing which are taught to accompany this posture. During these periods of meditation, which often last for about ninety minutes, there is silence in the meditation hall, broken only by the occasional sharp crack of the *kyosaku*, the stick wielded by the instructor. It is sometimes jokingly said that the use of this stick is to waken those who may be nodding off during the meditation, but in fact it is used to try to jolt the mind into enlightenment. (It should be emphasised here that Zen instructors do not use the *kyosaku* willy-nilly, but will only resort to it when they feel that its use is appropriate to the particular student's stage of training.) There are stories of those seeking who have experienced enlightenment after being struck on the head by their teacher, or when their teacher suddenly and unexpectedly shouted at them.

Nor does enlightenment only occur during *zazen*. Students experience it in any number of situations. Zen training is more than meditation. Those who attend residential sessions will also engage in physical labour at the monastery or centre where training is taken place. There will be lectures from the Zen master who is instructing them, and also times of personal instruction, and it may be that during these some word or phrase will suddenly trigger off the experience of enlightenment. There are two main schools within Zen, one known as Rinzai and one known as Soto. Soto emphasises silent meditation, but within Rinzai Zen *koan* are also used to break down the barrier which material logic presents to achieving enlightenment. These *koan* are phrases or short sayings which are presented to the student for him or her to 'solve'. They include, for example, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' and 'What is the smell of the colour blue?'

While this may all sound strange, illogical or simply meaningless verbal games, particularly to Western rationalists, there is no doubt that those who have attained enlightenment experience it as a powerful emotional release. Philip Kapleau, in his *The Three Pillars of Zen*, records a number of testimonies of those who have become enlightened.

All at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant, heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared. Instantaneously, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up inside me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed loudly and wildly. 'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! There's no reasoning here, no reasoning at all. Ha, ha, ha, ha.' The empty sky split in two, then opened its enormous mouth and began to laugh uproariously: 'ha, ha, ha.' Later, one of the members of my family told me that my laughter sounded inhuman.<sup>23</sup>

Abruptly the pains disappear, there's only Mu! Each and everything is Mu. 'Oh, it's this!' I exclaimed, reeling in astonishment, my mind a total emptiness ... All is freshness and purity itself. Every single object is dancing vividly, inviting me to look.<sup>24</sup>

Rarely, if ever, is enlightenment achieved without struggle and effort. Not only is there the mental effort involved in 'letting go' of the sense of distinction between things which Zen sees as illusion, but there is also physical effort, and sometimes emotional effort as well, necessary to realise enlightenment. This process is illustrated in a series of pictures known as the Ten Oxherding Pictures,<sup>25</sup> which date from the thirteenth century.

## The Ten Oxherding Pictures

The first picture is entitled 'Seeking the Ox', and portrays a man who has turned his back on the ox and, as if he has lost it, goes on his way to look for it, and finds himself confronted by a number of different roads. The significant point about the picture is that the man should have no need to look for the ox in the first place. In the same way, there should be no need to look for what the ox represents, the true nature, the Buddha nature, since all people have it. However, since people are unaware of it and live in a world of confusing choices, they need to seek.

The second picture is entitled 'Finding the Tracks'. This represents the first tentative steps towards enlightenment, the understanding that everything is an expression of the Self. As yet, however, he has not yet begun to experience this.

The next picture is entitled 'First Glimpse of the Ox', the animal seen partially through trees. The seeker comes to some understanding of enlightenment, beginning to grasp his true nature.

The fourth picture, 'Catching the Ox', portrays the man wrestling with the ox to tame it. The seeker has experienced something of enlightenment, though he still struggles with the illusion of distinction between things. As has been noted above, there is often a degree of physical discomfort endured while undergoing Zen training.

The fifth picture is called 'Taming the Ox'. The man leads the ox home, guiding it with a bridle. The seeker has achieved enlightenment, and is becoming increasingly the master of the thoughts which perpetuate the delusion of 'otherness'. After the initial experience of enlightenment, continued practice and instruction are necessary in order to hold on to that realisation.

In the next picture, 'Riding the Ox Home', the man has now tamed the ox so that it will take him home as he sits astride it playing his flute. The seeker has now attained mastery to the extent that he is now undisturbed by any circumstances or thoughts, since he realises that they are all illusion.

The seventh picture is entitled 'Ox forgotten, Self alone', and depicts the man sitting in his hut. Now that the ox is found, tamed and brought home, there is no need for seeking. This represents the stage where the seeker realises that his search for enlightenment as to the true nature of things, and that even the experience of enlightenment itself, is only a stage on the journey.

The eighth picture, 'Both Ox and Self forgotten' is simply a picture of a circle. The seeker is now beyond any sense of pride or accomplishment

in achieving enlightenment. All is one, yet at the same time all is Empty. Yet this is not the end of the quest.

Then comes the ninth picture, 'Returning to the Source' which is a picture of a scene in nature. The seeker, who has now found and moved beyond what he sought, can observe the passing of time and the change of seasons with complete calm and detachment. Even enlightenment no longer has any attraction. The person has now realised the purpose of his experiences.

The last picture in the series, 'Entering the Marketplace with Helping Hands', depicts the man going out into the world, free from attachment, simply himself, and therefore able to act to help others in need. This could be said to be the goal of Zen, although to talk of achieving a goal is, in Zen terms, an indication that one has not yet achieved it, since one is still attached to the desire to achieve. Whatever words we use, however, the point is that the practice of Zen and the realisation of ultimate enlightenment does not lead to a withdrawal from everyday life, as in many mystical traditions. Rather, it results in people who are able to live naturally in the world, doing whatever they do as those who are completely free of all attachments.

In some senses Zen is clearly different from some of the other expressions of the mystical within Japanese religion which we have observed. It places emphasis on enlightenment coming from within oneself, because of course there is no 'other'. It is sometimes rather disdainful of other forms of Buddhism which rely on external spiritual sources for help. It is also disdainful of the experiences, visions and sensory experiences which often accompany the progress towards enlightenment. It sees these as inevitable side effects of the meditation process, but of no value in themselves. They may even be negative experiences, in that there is the temptation to become caught up in these *makyo*, as they are known, rather than to continue the search for enlightenment.

Yet in one sense Zen is similar to the patterns we have already observed within other traditions in Japan. The aim of Zen is not the achievement of enlightenment as a goal in itself. As the last of the oxherding pictures makes clear, the ultimate achievement is the ability to live in the mundane world with both complete detachment and total involvement. It is the ability to do this that makes Zen practitioners able to help their fellow beings. Zen is not seen to endow spiritual or magical powers, but in the sense that it is not an end itself but the means to the end of helping others, just as, for example, the *yamabushi* and Shugendo practitioners do, so Zen bears important similarities to other forms of religious practice in Japan.