

WHAT MIGHT CHRISTIANITY HAVE TO OFFER ZEN?



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A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO a Christian seminary in Germany asked if I would talk on Zen to their students. In itself this wasn't all that unusual—there has long been an interest in Buddhist contemplative traditions among educated Christians, especially in Europe. What was unusual was the topic the seminary asked me to speak on. Generally speaking, Christians interested in Zen wish to know what Zen might have to contribute to Christian spirituality. The German seminary, however, wanted to hear what I, as an American Zen monk who was raised as a Catholic, thought Christianity could offer to practitioners of Zen. Although I was a bit unsure how to proceed at first, I ended up finding it a very rewarding subject to consider. In the present talk I'd like to expand a bit on my thoughts at that time.

Before taking up this topic, however, I think it's necessary first to consider what we mean by "Zen." Zen is by no means a single, unified tradition—even in its home territory of East Asia it has a number of variations. Back in high school when I first started reading D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and the other early writers on Asian religions, I had the impression that Zen was pretty much defined by the Japanese Rinzai style of monastic life and koan work. Later, after arriving in Japan, I gradually became aware of the separate monastic tradition of Soto Zen and its quite different view of practice. Later still I found out about Obaku Zen, which is typical Japanese Rinzai Zen in its meditation practices but which preserves a very different sixteenth-century Chinese monastic lifestyle.

I've also had the opportunity to visit Korea and Taiwan and stay briefly in Buddhist temples there. Although these temples were all of the Zen school, I was struck by the differences in monastic life and practice. In Korean Zen temples, for

example, there seems to be less emphasis on physical labor (known as *samu*) than in Japan, where *samu* occupies a major part of the monastic day. Conversely, there seems to be more time devoted to zazen, though with a more relaxed atmosphere in the meditation hall than in Japanese meditation halls. The overall ambience also seemed more fraternal in Korea—at the monastery Songguan-sa, for example, meals were characterized by cheerful socializing rather than strict etiquette and silent, fast-as-possible eating.

I was also intrigued by small lifestyle differences. In Japanese monasteries, for example, it's regarded as very important that socks never be worn in the temple buildings, even in the dead of winter. In Korea, on the other hand, the monks are *required* to wear socks even in the hottest part of summer.

In Taiwan, Zen practice seems to have turned more toward study than zazen, with notable exceptions like Dharma Drum, which has been influenced by Japanese Zen. There is also more of an emphasis on social engagement, and many of the larger temples have become permanent residential communities, similar in some ways to Christian monasteries. This is in contrast to Japan, where the monasteries are training halls, and the monks are required to leave the community after their time of training is completed.

I think all of these systems have their strong points, and I was very impressed by the sincerity of many of the monastics I met in both Korea and Taiwan. My point is not to make any value judgments, but simply to point out that there is no set, standard Zen monastic life as such. Zen practice takes different forms according to the culture it's in.

Zen itself is originally a product of the contact between Indian Buddhism and Chinese culture and spirituality, and the final result was a form of Buddhist practice quite different from that in India. Just one example of this is the emphasis on work in Chinese Zen. Whereas in Indian Buddhism the monks and nuns were forbidden from engaging in physical labor, considering it a karma-generating activity and thus a hindrance to escaping the world of samsara, in China attitudes toward work have always been quite different. There's the ideal, for example, of the retired Confucian scholar-official who spends his time tending a vegetable garden and writing poetry in his free time. In Chinese Buddhism, work therefore came to be regarded as, if anything, an ennobling activity, and an important part of bringing the fruits of meditation into the everyday world.

Just as there are Chinese expressions of Zen, Korean expressions of Zen, and Japanese expressions of Zen, there will inevitably arise distinctive Western forms of Zen, and those forms will inevitably be shaped by the predominant spiritual culture here. Christianity is certainly not the only spiritual tradition in the West, but as the predominant tradition it will inevitably influence the way that Zen develops in this country.

Before proceeding any further I'd like to emphasize a few other points.

First, when I ask "What might Christianity have to offer Zen?" I think it's important to keep in mind exactly what kind of tradition Zen is within Buddhism as a whole. The word "Zen," deriving from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, actually means "meditation," so that the Zen school of Buddhism means the meditation school of Buddhism. It's the tradition of Buddhism that primarily emphasizes the practice of meditation as a means of realizing the central goal of Buddhism, which is the resolution of the problem of human suffering.

In other words, Zen is, to put it in Christian terms, a contemplative tradition. Thus a meaningful discussion of Christianity's possible contributions to Zen must be, I think, a discussion of Christianity's possible contributions to the Zen contemplative path, rather than, say, an argument for Zen taking on more of the type of social activities that Christian groups often engage in.

The second point when I ask, "What might Christianity have to offer Zen?" is that the issue is, more specifically, "What might Christianity have to offer Zen *in the West*?" This is a rather different issue from what Christianity might have to offer Zen in Asia. I was once asked why, although there is significant interest in Zen among many Western Christians, it seems to be a one-way street, with little corresponding interest in Christianity among Asian Zen Buddhists. I've noticed the same thing, and I believe it's related to what exactly it is in Zen that interests Christians.

In many ways the original meditation practices of Zen and Christianity are very similar. Both involve emptying of the mind of images, in the understanding that limited human thought can never grasp the reality of the Absolute and that it is only through a process of emptying (*kenosis* in Christianity) that we can come into accord with the Absolute.

In Western Christianity, however, this tradition of "emptying" prayer was largely lost during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, whereas in Zen it has always remained. Zen meditation has also been deepened by the Asian understanding of the role that the body—posture, breathing, and physical relaxation, for example—can play in the practice of meditation. This aspect of Buddhist meditation has been of particular interest to the Christian contemplatives I know.

Thus Christian contemplatives are interested in Zen in large part because they see in its meditation a way to recover their own very similar, but now lost, contemplative practices. The influence of Zen, in other words, has been on the level of technique.

When it comes to doctrine and ritual, however, there are qualitative differences between Zen and Christianity. Scholars in the respective religions may study these differences with interest, but little mutual influence is possible without changing the basic thought structure of the religions. Both Asian Buddhism and Western

Christianity have their own traditions of ritual and doctrine that have served them well over the millennia, so, despite the congenial dialogue between the two traditions, influences at this level have been limited.

But when it comes to Western Zen, as opposed to Asian Zen, I think the situation is rather different. By Western Zen I mean the Zen practiced in the West by people who identify themselves primarily as Buddhist, in contrast to people who still strongly identify with Christianity but find Zen meditation to be a helpful part of their religious life.

Westerners who identify themselves primarily as Buddhists are generally interested not only in the meditative practices, but are also quite interested in Buddhist thought, and often look to Buddhist concepts to give structure to their religious lives. At the same time, though, many have had Christian upbringings or have at least been influenced by the Christian concepts that are part of Western culture. Often these Christian influences have been rejected at some point in their lives, but the imprint remains.

My own story is pretty much in this mold. I was raised as a Roman Catholic, with communion, confession, Sunday mass, and weekly religious instruction from the nuns. But later came the usual adolescent questions about relationships, careers, and the meaning of life. At the time Christianity didn't seem to offer me any path to that meaning, since I saw it as requiring faith in Christian beliefs, and it was precisely this kind of faith that I didn't have. What I did have was a lot of doubts, and not much idea of how to resolve them.

When I first read about Zen in high school, it seemed to offer a way out of this. For one thing it provided a clear-cut method of practice, something that I could actually do with my body and mind and that promised an experiential understanding of what religion is all about beyond just an acceptance of beliefs. And Zen actually welcomed the sort of questioning and doubt that I had. The proverbial "crisis of faith" is welcomed in Zen, with the attitude of, "If you doubt and question, then by all means doubt and question, but go all the way with doubting and questioning and see what finally remains at the end."

It was with these things in mind that I went to Japan and began my Zen practice. As the years passed my ideas about the practice changed, of course, and many things that I had thought of as uniquely Zen seemed more like Buddhist expressions of insights found in all of the contemplative traditions.

I started reading books on Christian contemplative prayer and the Christian mystics, and was introduced by a Zen master to a German Jesuit priest named Father Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, who lived from 1898 to 1990 and was practitioner of Zen meditation. He had lived in Hiroshima before WWII and was a survivor of the atom bomb attack on that city. Fr. Lassalle started Zen practice in order to better understand Japanese culture. At least that's the way he justified his interest in Zen

to his Church superiors—I suspect his interest in Buddhist practice actually went deeper than that.

I was very impressed by Fr. Lassalle, who struck me as an utterly unpretentious man with a very natural sense of grounded spirituality. It is largely owing to his influence that Christians in Europe started practicing Zen meditation, and that the Vatican accepted the notion of Zen retreats being held in Catholic monasteries.

All of this prompted in me a lot of thought on the subject of my talk today, the possible contributions of Christianity to Zen. As I just mentioned, I believe these contributions are not a matter of Christianity offering Zen something that Zen entirely lacks, but are rather a different approach to expressing the truths that are already common to both traditions.

People throughout the world are, I think, basically similar in their spiritual needs, for forgiveness, for devotion, for transcendence, and the world religions have responded to these similar needs in accordance with the cultures they developed in. For this reason I think that the way in which Christianity, or Judaism, or even the modern Western “religion” of science, have expressed or dealt with these basic spiritual needs can make them more accessible or inspiring for Western Zen practitioners.

This can be the case for quite fundamental issues, such as meaning of grace or the significance of suffering—I’ll discuss these later—but it can also be simply a matter of how a certain concept is expressed. For example, as in Mindfulness, Zen places great emphasis on being in the present moment, “right here, right now.” There is a Japanese word for it, *narikiru*, meaning to become one with what you do. I’ve never really heard an explanation for this, though—Zen doesn’t like to explain much, and the teaching of “right here, right now” can remain rather ambiguous, another thing to do without really knowing why.

Contemplative Christianity has the same teaching, but puts it into more concrete terms that in my experience often resonate more deeply with Westerners. In contemplative Catholic orders they speak of a concept known as the sacrament of the present moment, a sacrament being something that brings us closer to God. Baptism is a sacrament, for example.

My Christian monastic friends tell me that the present moment is called a sacrament because it is only in the present moment that the divine can manifest in our lives. The past is a creation of our memory; the future is merely our past experience projected onto what hasn’t happened yet. So in Catholic monasticism being “right here, right now” is regarded as a way to give the divine the maximum opportunity to manifest in our lives.

Another issue where contemplative Christianity might have something to offer Zen in the West is in the validation of purely contemplative practice. Of course, as the meditation school of Buddhism, Zen hardly needs to have the practice of meditation validated. This is as true of Zen in the West as it is of Zen in Asia. However,

I do sense a certain shift in the center of gravity in Westerner Zen toward more of an emphasis on action in the world, as opposed to the single-minded focus on contemplative practice seen in Asia, at least during a Zen monk's years in training.

Now I hasten to add that I don't wish to criticize Engaged Buddhism or any of the other movements that seek to get Buddhism more involved in the problems of the world. Certainly Zen practitioners with a vocation for such activity are doing very important work, and I think everyone recognizes that this is a very significant development in Western Buddhism.

But what concerns me is what seems to be—when it goes too far—a certain prioritizing of social action over meditative practice. For example, I know an American Buddhist teacher who has taught meditation tirelessly for decades and even encourages anyone who has done a retreat with him to call him up at any time of the day or night if they're really suffering and need help. In fact, he says, he likes the 3 AM calls the best, since these calls usually involve the most significant and interesting problems. Yet I have heard him criticized because he's not doing soup-kitchen type social work.

I'm sure this teacher would never himself claim that what he's doing is any more important than soup-kitchen work, but I think it's important to recognize that it's not *less* important either. He's helping suffering people, and in a capacity that very few people are capable of.

The reason I mention this in the context of a lecture on Zen and Christianity is that many people feel that this impetus in Western Zen toward more social activism is rooted in the Christian stress on the importance of good works, like caring for the sick, visiting those in prison, and so on. Thus it's important to remember that Christianity, though it does indeed place great value on good works, equally values prayer and contemplation (here I referring specifically to those Christian traditions that have contemplative traditions—the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches; the situation is, of course, more complex when it comes to Protestantism).

On the one hand you have clergymen who are constantly involved in activity and are sometimes rather averse to contemplation. I remember once I was doing a retreat at a Catholic contemplative monastery on Big Sur, and as I worked in the garden had a chance to speak briefly to another retreatant, a Catholic priest from one of the active orders. He told me that his order required all of its priests to attend a ten-day meditation retreat once every year. I commented that he must find this a welcome break from all the busy-ness and stress of his usual schedule. He replied, "Are you kidding. It's the hardest ten days of my entire year. The inactivity drives me nuts!"

On the other hand, you have groups like the Carthusians, who in their communities live basically as silent hermits. They each have a small house, with a room that serves as a workshop and another room where the monk prays, eats,

and sleeps. The house also has a large garden that the monk may use as he wishes. The monks live in a community, but have no contact with the other monks except during chapel services and during weekly walks that they take in the mountains, during which they're allowed to talk.

Their lives are basically devoted entirely to prayer and meditation, with no provision for activity in the world. Yet the Carthusian vocation is highly regarded in the Catholic Church. The reason is that in the Catholic Church the prayer of any individual monastic is thought to affect not only that particular individual but to infuse every member of the body of the Church. The practice of the monastic is, in other words, a deeply valuable form of action in the world.

The next Christian concept that I believe has something to offer Western followers of Buddhism is the concept of grace. Grace in the Christian sense is, of course, a divine act from above, a freely given gift of God offered to people independently of their own effort. At first it might seem that Buddhism, as a nontheistic religion, would have no place for the concept of grace. Who or what, after all, would be doing the giving? And Zen, as a tradition usually regarded as espousing "self-power," would in particular seem to regard grace as unnecessary.

And, in fact, there is in Zen a real tendency to ignore this aspect of spirituality. Many Zen writings quite clearly encourage attempts to force the experience of enlightenment through effort and strain. This often leads Zen practitioners, both Western *and* Japanese, to misconstrue meditation as a matter of forcefully suppressing thought to generate extraordinary states of mind. I've seen that far too many times this results in burnout, frustration, and eventual abandonment of meditation. I myself wasted countless hours in the monastery doing precisely this type of meditation.

So I think that an openness to Christianity's message on the role of grace in the spiritual life might help Western practitioners of Zen not only avoid such dangers, but also see that the concept of grace is in many ways quite in line with Zen spirituality. For example, there are passages in Zen writings that definitely point to what can only be identified as the concept of grace. One is a famous passage in the "Shōji" chapter of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*:

Just letting go of body and mind and forgetting them both, throw yourself into the house of Buddha. When you allow yourself to be acted upon from the side of the Buddha, then, with no strength needed and no thought expended, you are freed from birth-and-death and become a buddha.

Another example is a short poem that the great twentieth-century Zen master, Yamada Mumon Rōshi, wrote after his first spiritual awakening. In Japanese this reads: *Ōi naru mono ni idakare aru koto, kesa fuku kaze no suzushisa ni shiru*

(“That I am embraced by something vast, I know by the coolness of this morning’s breeze”).

Yamada Mumon’s successor, Harada Shōdō Rōshi, often says that the practice of Zen is all about what he calls *makaseru*, learning to surrender or entrust. Far from being “self-power” in the sense of the self powering itself to enlightenment, Zen can better be regarded, I believe, as the active practice of learning to let go.

Although the notion of being “acted upon by the side of the Buddha”—basically the concept of grace—is not often spoken of in Zen, particularly Rinzai Zen, it is in fact implied by the fundamental Mahayana teaching that enlightenment is possible only because we are in essence already enlightened through our inherent possession of buddha-nature.

In his essay, “Is There Room for ‘Grace’ in Buddhism?” the great Buddhist scholar Marco Pallis argues persuasively that buddha-nature is a dynamic presence always moving toward manifestation in sentient beings:

The key to the problem lies in a property of transcendence itself: given the incommensurable gap... between Enlightenment and the seeker after enlightenment—ignorant by definition—it is self-evident to anyone who thinks at all ... that such a seeking on the part of a human being with his necessarily imperfect vision and limited powers does not really make sense when taken at its face value alone; Enlightenment (or God for that matter) cannot possibly be situated at the passive pole in relation to Man’s endeavor.... intrinsically Enlightenment is the active factor in our situation and... it is man who, for all his apparent initiative and effort, represents the passive term of the supreme adequation. Meister Eckhart puts this whole question into proper perspective when he says that “in the course of nature it is really the higher which is ever more ready to pour out its power into the lower than the lower is ready to receive it...” for, as he goes on to say, “there is no dearth of God with us; what dearth there is wholly ours who make not ready to receive his grace.” Where [Eckhart] said “God” you have but to say “Enlightenment” and the result will be a Buddhist statement in form as well as content.

This is the action of grace—the Unconditioned striving to manifest itself in the limited, conditioned mind. A greater emphasis in Zen on the concept of grace, of being “acted upon by the side of the Buddha,” might help clarify that zazen is a practice, not of forcing the mind into extraordinary states, but of doing our part to allow our intrinsic buddha-nature to manifest itself. As I’ve heard the process described by Christian contemplatives, meditation is the art of learning to get out of God’s way.

This reminds me of the problem I had as a young Catholic with the notion of faith. The Zen writer Alan Watts had something interesting to say about faith as opposed to belief:

Belief, as I use the word here, is the insistence that the truth is what one would 'lief,' or wish it to be.... Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconditions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go.

In this sense, I think, Zen meditation can be seen as training in faith.

I believe that the concept of grace can also help in dealing with an aspect of suffering that often arises in the course of spiritual practice. It is here, I think, that Christianity has much to offer Westerners practicing Zen.

Several times people have come to me after a Zen retreat and said something to the effect of, "I can't understand it. I've been doing zazen for years now, yet after every retreat I find myself feeling depressed for a couple of weeks."

It's as though the thinking is that since the starting point of Buddhism is about resolving the problem of suffering, then if you begin your Buddhist practice with x amount of suffering, after a year you should have x amount of suffering minus one year's worth of meditation, and after two years of practice you should have x amount of suffering minus two years' worth of meditation, and so on. Yet what often ends up happening is that once the initial enthusiasm for the practice wears off an even greater sense of suffering and meaninglessness sets in.

To some extent such suffering is only natural, particularly when people are just beginning their meditation practice. Ordinary we invest a good bit of time and resources to distracting ourselves from the worries and sorrows of everyday life, but this approach no longer works when, with meditation, we set aside the distractions and start observing the mind as it is. This, of course, makes us more clearly aware of the sufferings that have always been there, and this is to be encouraged. If we wish to attain genuine transformative growth we have to work with the reality of our minds, not our illusions about who we are.

There is, however, a deeper, more existential form of suffering that emerges with longer practice, known sometimes in Christianity as the Dark Night of the Soul. When this occurs in Zen, the practitioner is often told to just keep sitting and rely on the meditative technique. "Just sitting" may be a productive approach for a certain type of strong-willed personality, but for many people such suffering is very confusing and leaves them feeling that their practice has failed. Many quit their training as a result.

Perhaps it is precisely because the techniques of meditation have been so highly developed in Zen that Zen hasn't had to examine more closely the nature of the

deeper suffering that can arise during practice. The techniques alone are, indeed, often enough to get a person through the rough spots if he or she has a natural affinity for the practice.

Conversely, Christianity, perhaps precisely because its methods of meditation are not as developed as those in Buddhism, has examined the psychology of this suffering and recognized its importance in the purification of the mind. Saint John of the Cross, one of the greatest Christian writers on the path of prayer, likens the purification process to fire burning wood, which starts off with a lot of smoke and crackling. Similarly, the purification process starts with much discomfort for the spirit. But, just as wood finally turns to brightly glowing coals, the purified spirit is peaceful and luminous with the light of God. Saint John lays out a clear map of this process, which informs the practitioner of what to expect on the path of purification and sensitizes him or her to the benefits it brings.

Another Christian mystic, the author of the text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, describes the significance of suffering in a way that brings to mind the Mahayana concept of buddha-nature as a dynamic presence that seeks to manifest itself in sentient beings.

The Cloud of Unknowing says that the deepest form of spiritual suffering is the self's consciousness of its own existence. As Buddhism and modern psychology tell us, the ego-self is basically a thought-construct, and thought, being based on past experience, is always conditioned and thus has no access to that which is unconditioned. As the Cloud of Unknowing puts it, "God can well be loved, but God cannot be thought. By love God can be grasped and held, but by thought, neither grasped nor held." Thus in all of the mystical traditions thought is identified as the cause of the subtlest and most profound form of unease or dissatisfaction. That thought, with which we ordinarily identify so closely, cannot approach God is the source of the suffering that is closest to the essence of our spirit, yet, Christian mystical theology tells us, it is this suffering that finally drives us to transcend the limits of thought.

A number of long-time Zen practitioners who I have lent Christian texts on prayer to have mentioned to me how much these texts helped them make sense of the frustration and confusion they were experiencing with the meditation practice. "To be forewarned is to be forearmed," and this is as true in spiritual practice as in anything else. The insights of Christianity on the Dark Night of the Soul would be, I think, a valuable addition to the body of knowledge every serious Zen student should possess.

The final point I would like to make does not really concern doctrine or technique, but is rather more of a matter of description. Buddhism speaks of the goal of the path of practice as nirvana or buddhahood, but Buddhism, always wary of

conceptualization, doesn't really try to describe what such a state might actually be like.

Christian mystics, however, despite all their talk about the suffering involved in contemplation, seem more willing to take a stab at describing the joy related to union with the divine. Meister Eckhart has a description of it that reminds me of the Buddhist notion of "the Samadhi of play." Eckhart says:

I have often said that there is something in the soul that is so closely related to God that it is one [with God] and not just united.... Now all things are alike in God and are God himself. Here in this sameness God finds it so pleasant that he lets his nature and his being flow in this sameness in himself. It is just as enjoyable for him as when someone lets a horse run loose on a meadow that is completely level and smooth. Such is the horse's nature that it pours itself out with all its might in running about the meadow. This it would find delightful; such is its nature. So, too, does God find delight and satisfaction where he finds sameness. He finds it a joy to pour his nature and his being completely into the sameness, for he is this sameness himself.

And perhaps on this upbeat note I should bring this talk to an end. Thank you for listening.