

ZEN BOW

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RAMBLING REFLECTIONS ON ART AND ZEN

by Philip Kapleau

In the 15 years that I called Japan home, this question must have been put to me at least a hundred times: "Whatever made you abandon a flourishing business in the United States to come to Japan to discipline yourself in Zen?"

Sometimes the question seemed motivated by nothing more than simply curiosity, with no undertones of disbelief or astonishment. Occasionally it had a sly French-Foreign-Legion connotation of "Come now, fellow, nobody does what you did unless he is drowning in the despair of an unrequited love or escaping from a shrewish wife." Often the question revealed the interrogator's unabashed admiration for a foreigner who could--up to a point that is--understand and cope with such a thoroughly Japanese saturated discipline as Zen.

But most often the question had an air of sheer incredulity: "Why would any Westerner, and especially an American, want to exchange the American standard of living for the austere rigours of a Japanese Zen temple?"

Why indeed? I wasn't sure whether it was because I wanted to escape from my physical pains and mental frustrations, or to find some light in the black jungle of meaninglessness oppressing me, or because I just had to know the origin of

the appalling human suffering I had witnessed as a member of the American Occupation forces in Europe and in Japan... Each of these reasons seemed valid and true enough, but eventually I came to realize that in fact I couldn't know why, that the whole concatenation of causes and effects constituting one's karma was responsible. But this awareness came only years later, after I had probed deeply into myself through Zen.

Still, there were certain crucial events which more directly shaped the karmic pattern that was to propel me into Zen. One such circumstance was an art review in The New York Times which unexpectedly precipitated me into the most searching reflections. "In comparison with the universe," it read, "works of art are small and incomplete. It is obvious that none of them represents ultimate wisdom... Presumably there is a final order in the universe that can be discovered, understood, and obeyed. A great work of art merely proposes answers to the eternal questions, who are we, where are we, and why?"

Having prided myself on an art collection composed largely of the lithographs of Picasso, Chagall, and Rouault, which had required much effort to amass, and having always looked upon these treasures as incontrovertible proof of my elevated

tastes, superior intelligence, and undoubted wisdom, I found myself puzzled and then deeply disturbed by the ideas contained in this reviewer's article. And without quite knowing how or why it happened, I began earnestly to ask myself, "Which is more intelligent: passionately and greedily--and your true collector is nothing if not greedy--to pursue beauty, or to strive for self-understanding so as to be able to live with inner peace and dignity in a frustrating world?"

This self-inquiry marked the beginning of the end of my days as a collector, for in thinking long and hard on this there flashed into my mind one day these insights which all but severed the bonds of my attachment to art:

Every work of art represents the artist's own search for self-knowledge, for self-completion. If his painting or sculpture or composition has an element of greatness, that is to say is deeply inspired and vividly rendered, it can momentarily lift the responsive spectator beyond his mundane self into a wider and more rarified dimension of consciousness; but effect in him a genuine transformation of character and personality it cannot. Not even the artist himself, for whom the disciplined struggle to give viable form to his ideas and feelings was a fundamental and concrete experience, is so transformed. "How many artists do you know," I asked myself, "who could be called modest and humble?"

The time of these reflections, 1950, coincided with the arrival in the United States of Professor Daisetz Suzuki, whom I had met in Japan right after the war. Liberated from his long isolation of the war years, Suzuki had come to America to ignite the fuse that was later to explode into the Zen "boom," and his chief incendiary was satori--that mystical experience of mind-awakening by which the ego-self is banished and a wholly fresh vision of the world attained. At Columbia University, where he had gone to give a series of lectures on Zen philosophy, Suzuki attracted scores of avant-

garde painters, composers, psychiatrists, professors of philosophy, and lesser fry. I was among them. Another avid listener was the composer John Cage.

Cage, it will be recalled, came to Japan in the autumn of 1962. An interview which he gave a reporter of one of the English-language dailies at the time is as revealing as it is amusing. Cage was asked about one of his avant-garde compositions "played" at a concert in Woodstock, New York, in which the pianist sat down to the piano without striking a key. The audience waited in expectation of the first chords, but none came. Two, three, four minutes passed without a sound from the piano. The pianist then stood up quietly, bowed to the audience, and left the stage.

When asked if this was music Cage replied "Yes. Some in the audience were naturally displeased, but I might say it took me two years to compose this piece. It consists of three movements. The first requires the pianist to sit down at the piano and open and shut the instrument. The second and third movements demand the same."

"But," queried the reporter, "can it be called music where there is no sound?"

"There were sounds," replied Cage. "In the first movement the rustling of the leaves outside could be heard. Rain began to fall in the second movement. The sound of the falling rain was beautiful. During the third movement the audience began to laugh and talk and move about."

"What is the meaning of that piece?" asked the reporter.

"Please listen carefully," began Cage in all seriousness. "Everyone is impressed with the beauty of Mozart's music. To those who appreciate the music of Mozart, the sounds of a motor-car are only noisy and not pretty. This limits the world of music. My desire is to educate people's ears so that the noise of automobiles and the noise of machines in fac-

tories will be heard as beautiful music."

"Is it not correct to say that your avant-garde pieces are without harmony, rhythm, or melody?"

"That is not true," replied Cage.
"They are all there. The only difference is that I think of all kinds of noises as being harmony. I recognize a melody in unconnected sounds, and there is rhythm in irregular sounds. It is the same as the Zen teaching that every day is a good day. To my way of thinking, every kind of noise is music. Rhythm must be given a broader meaning than just regular sounds. If one wants to hear regular sounds, one need only place his hand over his heart."

Now how does all this fit into Zen? When Cage had the pianist sit down at the piano without laying a hand on the keys, very likely he had in mind the familiar incident of the Zen master who came before his assembly of monks, thrust out his short stick before them, and then wordlessly stepped down, signalling the end of his "lecture." Or he may have been thinking of the even more famous occasion of the Buddha Shak-yamuni's holding up a flower before his disciples and silently twirling it in his hand, smiling all the while. Maha Kashyapa alone among the monks understood the significance of this and smiled back.

It is important that the soundlessness of Cage's compositions and the silence of the Buddha and the Zen master be distinguished one from the other. Cage's silence, if he has been quoted correctly, has as its aim rousing his audience to an awareness of sounds which normally escape their notice and teaching them how to experience them as beautiful. The Buddha and the Zen master, for their part, sought not to entrance their audience with sound but to completely free them from the snare of language so that they might perceive Truth directly. By their pregnant silence both dramatized the fact that ultimate

Truth is more than anything which can be said about it. But more than this, each was trying to awaken his disciples to the understanding that the entire cosmos is no less than this stick or this flower.

As one method among many of bringing their students to the realization of silence as the womb of all things, Zen masters have always employed "the sounds of the world." The most ordinary sounds, such as the falling of rain or the chirping of the cicada, have traditionally been utilized by Zen masters as a fruitful means of concentration in zazen--the basic intuitive meditation in Zen. In his letters to his disciple-correspondents Bassui, a great Japanese Zen master of the fourteenth century, urged them, whenever they heard a sound, to inquire of themselves, "What is it that is hearing this sound?"

The Surangama Sutra, one of the profoundest of the Mahayana sutras, contains an account by the Bodhisattva Kan-zeon (later corrupted to Kannon) of how he attained perfect enlightenment through concentration on the "true-nature of sound." In fact, the name Kan-zeon means a "hearer of the sounds of the world."

It is obvious, then, that in Zen the goal is never sound for its own sake, which is to say the discovery of its infinitely varied rhythms and beauty, as appears to be the case with Cage's compositions, but rather as an expedient device for bringing the disciple's mind to a state where he hears without his ears the source of all sound--in other words, the "silence which was ere the word was spoken."

Cage says that he feels every noise is music and this, he believes, is similar to Zen's "Every day is a good day." But were he to present his understanding of this statement to a Zen master, he would discover a new sound--the summary clang of the master's dismissal bell informing him that his interpretation is

unacceptable. On the basis of Cage's statement about sound we can only assume that his understanding of "Every day is a good day" is a simple opening of one's awareness to every circumstance and event in the same way that one must be open to new sounds.

But Zen goes much deeper than this. Every day is a good day only when we so single-mindedly absorb ourselves in the task of the moment that scarcely a random thought rears its head; when we are free of the mental static that hinders our being in tune with our daily tasks; when, in other words, we live without for one moment regretting the past, despising the present, or hoping in the future. Each day is then more than a good day--each day is a Day is a DAY.

Cage, of course, is only one of a number of avant-garde artists who have sought to give fresh impetus and direction to contemporary art by evoking, wittingly or unwittingly, principles common to Zen. Among painters there may be mentioned the Frenchman Georges Mathieu, surely one of the more articulate expositors of the significance of contemporary art. Writing in the magazine Paris Review in 1958, he observed:

"Our whole culture has allowed itself to be permeated, since the end of the Middle Ages, by Hellenic thought patterns which aimed at bringing the cosmos down to human proportions and limited the means of access to the understanding of the universe to those provided by reason and the senses. Our Western pictorial art was thus founded on notions of perfection deriving from handicrafts in so far as they were premeditated and came into being according to patterns... The latest liberation to date...is a liberation from the canons of beauty, from notions of harmony and composition, from the golden rule, and so on... In a series of lectures given in 1954-55, Sir Herbert Read...showed that ideas are nothing more than meditations on intuitions revealed first of all by the artist, who expresses them visually... We

do not even know if man and the cosmos constitute a contradictory duality... Beyond pantheism, God and gods, man--after turning towards himself--today finds himself no longer faced even with his own development but with nothingness. And works of art are no longer anything but marks, traces of these changes of direction in the itinerary of world thought..."

Let us now examine the parallels between Zen and the spirit of contemporary art as revealed in these excerpts. Mathieu's contention that, since the Middle Ages, Western man's "means of access to an understanding of the universe has been limited to those provided by reason and the senses" can be counterpointed against Zen's basic teaching that for realization of the truth of the indivisibility of man and the universe a deeper stratum of consciousness than the rational mind must be called forth. Zen koan, for example, are simply unique devices for cornering the discursive mind and checking the flow of random, irrelevant thoughts. Every koan compels us to face and accept the inherent limitations of the reasoning mind as an instrument for self-awakening. Koan, in short, are a slap in the face of logic and conceptual thought. "It is useless to try to reach Zen enlightenment," notes contemporary Zen master Hakuun Yasutani, "through philosophy or theories of one kind or another. One can never come to satori-enlightenment riding on the back of a concept."

In the light of these strictures against the all-powerfulness of the rational mind, it would be easy to fall into the serious error of supposing that Zen condemns the intellect. To say, however that the analytic powers of man's brain are not equal to the task of abolishing for him the oppressive sense of self-and-other which his discriminating mind creates for him is not to deny that, for all other purposes of dealing with his environment, man's power of reason is not only a standing marvel but unquestionably indispensable.

Mathieu's assertion that "the latest liberation...is a liberation from the canons of beauty, from notions of harmony and composition, from the golden rule, and so on," could easily be equated with the Zen doctrine that to reach the highest state of consciousness (i.e., Buddhahood) one must liberate one's mind from attachment to every moral or philosophical preconception, however lofty, and renounce adherence to every religious belief or dogma, including even ideas of Zen itself.

The quotation from Sir Herbert Read, i.e., that the ideas which follow the plastic image are "nothing more than meditations on intuitions," is, I would say, peculiarly congenial to Zen. For Zen, all philosophizing is empty unless it grows out of genuine spiritual experience and the intuitions which flow from such experience. Buddhist scripture, Buddhist doctrine, and Buddhist philosophy are in fact no more than intellectual formulations which emerge from zazen meditation and satori. Contrariwise, zazen is the dynamic expression of the truth of Buddhist doctrine and philosophy.

Where Zen and Mathieu part company is in these two statements (if my understanding of them is correct): "We do not even know if man and the cosmos constitute a contradictory duality," and "Beyond pantheism, God and gods, man--after turning towards himself--today finds himself no longer faced even with his own development but nothingness."

Zen would deny that man and the cosmos are a contradictory duality. The Mind which is the essence of man is not other than universal self-consciousness, and man's heart-beat is the universe's heart-beat. Man does not stand in opposition to the universe--he is a silhouette of it. This, the innermost teaching of Buddhism, is the very substance of Zen. Shakyamuni Buddha's deathless pronouncement, "Throughout heaven and earth I am the most honoured One" is the supreme statement of the ultimate truth that each separate one of us is the whole.

Zen would likewise repudiate the notion that man is faced with nothingness if by "nothingness" is meant merely a negativity of disintegrating structures. It is a fundamental doctrine of Buddhism that every thing is constantly arising, disappearing, and newly reappearing according to causes and conditions. Thus no object has an enduring, independent existence, being subject to infinite transformation grounded in Emptiness. This Emptiness, however, is not a powerless cipher which could give rise to pessimism or despair. On the contrary, the Buddhist Void is alive, dynamic, creative--the very matrix of all phenomena. Is Mathieu's "nothingness" the same as Buddhism's Void? It would seem not.

This ambiguity of language is startlingly illustrated by the following two quotations, both of which seem to be saying the same thing but which in fact are diametrically opposite in meaning. In his Fox in the Attic (quoted by Eric Fromm in The Heart of Man) Richard Hughes, speaking of Hitler, writes: "He considered himself the universe's unique sentient centre, the sole authentic incarnate will it contained or had ever contained... Hitler existed alone. 'I am, none else beside me.'..." How chillingly like the Buddha's words, "Throughout heaven and earth I am the most honoured One!" Yet the first is the statement of a megalomaniac with delusions of grandeur, while the second is an affirmation of the deepest spiritual truth of Oneness.

The paradox of man is that even as his life is vanity and illusion, at the same time he has the power to re-create heaven and earth with the turning of a thought. From this inscrutable creator spring song, ingenuity, and anguish. Every painting and work of music, consequential and inconsequential, in the end amounts to nothing, yet to him who created it and him who enjoys it, it is a something pulsating with life.

Before concluding these reflections I should like to observe that after some

15 years of trying to live by the Buddha's formula of the middle way--and occasionally succeeding--I now find beauty where formerly I least expected it: in a gnarled tree, a broken dish, a scowling face, or even an angry word. I find beauty in

a drawing by my young daughter as in a painting by Wols. Cage is surely right: no sound is without its beauty. Yet silence is the inexpressible wonder of all ...and a slow movement of Mozart--could anything be more enchanting than that?

--from the 1967 annual THIS IS JAPAN, Tokyo

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JULY AND AUGUST SESSHINS

The 5-day sesshin in July and the 7-day sesshin in August at the Gratwick Place in Pavilion, New York filled the zendo to its capacity of thirty-two seats. The July sesshin was full three weeks before it began and the August booked fully a month and a half in advance, proving that the longer 7-day sesshins are more popular with members than the shorter ones. At the conclusion of the August sesshin some participants even asked if the August sesshin next year couldn't be extended to ten days instead of the usual seven!

Both sesshins attracted members from every section of the United States: from California, Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, Illinois, Florida, Georgia, the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York, as well as from Toronto and Montreal in Canada. One participant studying at the graduate school of the University of Rochester is a native of Madras, India.

Because of the rigors of a 7-day sesshin, it is normally limited to those with previous sesshin experience, but a new member from California and one from Arizona, having persuaded Philip Kapleau of their ardor and sincerity, were permitted to attend despite the fact that this was their first sesshin.

For those who are enchanted by statistics it must be mentioned that at the July sesshin attendance was evenly divided between those over thirty and those under, while at the August sesshin twenty persons were under thirty and twelve over. The one-week sesshin attracted seventeen men and fifteen women, the 5-day sesshin twenty-one men and only eleven women.

The Gratwick Place is ideal for summer sesshin. The zendo is cool and airy, and an open meadow, a hidden water garden and a lily pond provide an atmosphere of beauty and serenity. During both sesshins this serenity was heightened by the melodious chirping of myriad birds which inhabit the surrounding grounds, reminding one of the mynah birds in Huxley's Island which flew about crying "Attention! Attention!" The birds plus the occasional pitter patter of rain on the gables of the zendo and its steady drip drip from the shutters made concentration much easier, for such natural sounds when listened to with a pure mind, i.e., one free of evaluations and judgments, can be most advantageously utilized to empty the mind of idle speculations and wandering thoughts.

For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with this type of Zen practice, a sesshin is a period of serious zazen in absolute silence. All participants eat, sleep and do zazen under the same roof. The discipline is rigid and the practice intense. The attempt to gain control of the mind and concentrate on a particular spiritual problem goes on continuously not only during quiet sitting but during manual work, chanting and other activities, including sleep.

At the close of zazen at 9:30 each evening during both sesshins this summer many took their sitting cushions and mats into the meadow or water gardens, in the moonlight, to continue their sitting by themselves far into the night. Others continued to do zazen in the zendo on special benches or husk cushions to help ease the tiredness of their legs.

A strict sesshin is the most advantageous time to come to Self-realization since there is made available to each one the collective strength and mind power of all the participants, and no doubt this accounts for the popularity of sesshins. The result is a supernormal "leap," a mobilization of every vestige of unused energies.

So far as we know, the Zen Meditation Center of Rochester is the only Zen center in the United States which has a bona fide sesshin each month.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Move to New Quarters. On August 1 the Center moved into larger quarters at 7 Arnold Park, Rochester, N.Y. 14607 (same telephone number, (716) 473-9180). Details about the new building the Center has acquired will appear in the next issue of ZEN BOW.

September Schedule at 7 Arnold Park. September is the normal vacation month for Philip Kapleau and the monastics. Because of the redecorating of the Center's new building, however, Philip Kapleau will be at the Center for the first two weeks of the month. During this time he will conduct sittings for members according to the regular schedule, subject only to work problems that may arise in connection with the redecorating.

Friday Night Introductory Lecture Series. The regular series for the fall will not begin on October 4 as planned since the Center staff will be busy with the redecorating of 7 Arnold Park. Those interested in attending such a series, however, should write or call the Center and leave their names and addresses. Since the series will be given on an invitational basis in October, these people will be notified of the dates of the lectures and sittings accompanying them.

October Sesshin. If it is possible to hold a sesshin in October at 7 Arnold Park, advance notice will be sent as usual to all members.

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One's circumstances are a reflection of one's mind. It's like an echo, which reverberates according to the sound of our voice. Instead of trying to change our environment when we are unhappy, we

need to change ourselves, since our environment is the reflection of ourselves ... There is nothing beyond one's consciousness; to think otherwise is to live in a dream world.

BY ZEN MASTER PO SHAN

When working on Zen, the important thing is to generate the "doubt-sensation." What is this doubt-sensation? For instance: Where did I come from before my birth, and where shall I go after my death? Since one does not know the answer to either question, a strong feeling of "doubt" arises in the mind. Stick this "doubt-mass" onto your forehead (and keep it there) all the time until you can neither drive it away nor put it down, even if you want to. Then suddenly you will discover that the doubt-mass has been crushed, that you have broken it into pieces. The Masters of old said:

The greater the doubt, the greater the awakening;
The smaller the doubt, the smaller the awakening.
No doubt, no awakening.

When working on Zen, the worst thing is to become attached to quietness, because this will unknowingly cause you to be engrossed in dead stillness. Then you will develop an inordinate fondness for quietness and at the same time an aversion to activity of any kind. Once those who have lived amidst the noise and restlessness of worldly affairs experience the joy of quietness, they become captivated by its honey-sweet taste, craving it like an exhausted traveler who seeks a peaceful den in which to slumber. How can people with such an attitude retain their awareness?

When working on Zen, one does not see the sky when he lifts his head, nor the earth when he lowers it. To him a mountain is not a mountain and water is not water. While walking or sitting he is not aware of doing so. Though among a hundred thousand people, he sees no one. Without and within his body and mind nothing exists but the burden of his doubt-sensation. This feeling can be described as "turning the whole world into a muddy vortex."

A Zen adept should resolutely vow that he will never stop working until this doubt-mass is broken up. This is a crucial point.

What does this "turning the whole world into a muddy vortex" mean? It refers to the great Truth, which from the very no-beginning-time has existed latent and idle--it has never been brought forth.

--From THE PRACTICE OF ZEN
By Chang Chen-Chi.