

D.T.  
Suzuki

# Essays in Zen Buddhism

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ON SATORI—THE REVELATION OF A  
NEW TRUTH IN ZEN BUDDHISM

I

THE essence of Zen Buddhism consists in acquiring a new viewpoint of looking at life and things generally. By this I mean that if we want to get into the inmost life of Zen, we must forgo all our ordinary habits of thinking which control our everyday life, we must try to see if there is any other way of judging things, or rather if our ordinary way is always sufficient to give us the ultimate satisfaction of our spiritual needs. If we feel dissatisfied somehow with this life, if there is something in our ordinary way of living that deprives us of freedom in its most sanctified sense, we must endeavour to find a way somewhere which gives us a sense of finality and contentment. Zen proposes to do this for us and assures us of the acquirement of a new point of view in which life assumes a fresher, deeper, and more satisfying aspect. This acquirement, however, is really and naturally the greatest mental cataclysm one can go through with in life. It is no easy task; it is a kind of fiery baptism, and one has to go through the storm, the earthquake, the overthrowing of the mountains, and the breaking in pieces of the rocks.

This acquiring of a new point of view in our dealings with life and the world is popularly called by Japanese Zen students 'satori' (*wu* in Chinese). It is really another name for Enlightenment (*amūttara-samyak-sambodhi*), which is the word used by the Buddha and his Indian followers ever since his realization under the Bodhi-tree by the River Nairāṅjana. There are several other phrases in Chinese designating this spiritual experience, each of which has a special connotation, showing tentatively how this phenomenon is interpreted. At all events there is no Zen without

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satori, which is indeed the Alpha and Omega of Zen Buddhism. Zen devoid of satori is like a sun without its light and heat. Zen may lose all its literature, all its monasteries, and all its paraphernalia; but as long as there is satori in it it will survive to eternity. I want to emphasize this most fundamental fact concerning the very life of Zen; for there are some even among the students of Zen themselves who are blind to this central fact and are apt to think when Zen has been explained away logically or psychologically, or as one of the Buddhist philosophies which can be summed up by using highly technical and conceptual Buddhist phrases, Zen is exhausted, and there remains nothing in it that makes it what it is. But my contention is, the life of Zen begins with the opening of satori (*kaï wu* in Chinese).

Satori may be defined as an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. Practically, it means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind. Or we may say that with satori our entire surroundings are viewed from quite an unexpected angle of perception. Whatever this is, the world for those who have gained a satori is no more the old world as it used to be; even with all its flowing streams and burning fires, it is never the same one again. Logically stated, all its opposites and contradictions are united and harmonized into a consistent organic whole. This is a mystery and a miracle, but according to the Zen masters such is being performed every day. Satori can thus be had only through our once personally experiencing it.

Its semblance or analogy in a more or less feeble and fragmentary way is gained when a difficult mathematical problem is solved, or when a great discovery is made, or when a sudden means of escape is realized in the midst of most desperate complications; in short, when one exclaims 'Eureka! Eureka!' But this refers only to the intellectual aspect of satori, which is therefore necessarily partial and incomplete and does not touch the very foundations of life

considered one indivisible whole. Satori as the Zen experience must be concerned with the entirety of life. For what Zen proposes to do is the revolution, and the revaluation as well, of oneself as a spiritual unity. The solving of a mathematical problem ends with the solution, it does not affect one's whole life. So with all other particular questions, practical or scientific, they do not enter the basic life-tone of the individual concerned. But the opening of satori is the remaining of life itself. When it is genuine—for there are many simulacra of it—its effects on one's moral and spiritual life are revolutionary, and they are so enhancing; purifying, as well as exacting. When a master was asked what constituted Buddhahood, he answered, 'The bottom of a pail is broken through.' From this we can see what a complete revolution is produced by this spiritual experience. The birth of a new man is really cataclysmic.

In the psychology of religion this spiritual enhancement of one's whole life is called 'conversion'. But as the term is generally used by Christian converts, it cannot be applied in its strict sense to the Buddhist experience, especially to that of the Zen followers; the term has too affective or emotional a shade to take the place of satori, which is above all noetic. The general tendency of Buddhism is, as we know, more intellectual than emotional, and its doctrine of Enlightenment distinguishes it sharply from the Christian view of salvation; Zen as one of the Mahāyāna schools naturally shares a large amount of what we may call transcendental intellectualism, which does not issue in logical dualism. When poetically or figuratively expressed, satori is 'the opening of the mind-flower', or 'the removing of the bar', or 'the brightening up of the mind-works'.

All these tend to mean the clearing up of a passage which has been somehow blocked, preventing the free, unobstructed operation of a machine or a full display of the inner works. With the removal of the obstruction, a new vista opens before one, boundless in expanse and reaching the end of time. As life thus feels quite free in its activity,

which was not the case before the awakening, it now enjoys itself to the fullest extent of its possibilities, to attain which is the object of Zen discipline. This is often taken to be equivalent to 'vacuity of interest and poverty of purpose'. But according to the Zen masters the doctrine of non-achievement concerns itself with the subjective attitude of mind which goes beyond the limitations of thought. It does not deny ethical ideals, nor does it transcend them; it is simply an inner state of consciousness without reference to its objective consequences.

## II

The coming of Bodhi-dharma (Bodai-daruma in Japanese, P'u-ti Ta-mo in Chinese) to China early in the sixth century was simply to introduce this satori element into the body of Buddhism, whose advocates were then so engrossed in subtleties of philosophical discussion or in the mere literary observance of rituals and disciplinary rules. By the 'absolute transmission of the spiritual seal', which was claimed by the first patriarch, is meant the opening of satori, obtaining an eye to see into the spirit of the Buddhist teaching.

The sixth patriarch, Yenō (Hui-néng), was distinguished because of his upholding the satori aspect of dhyāna against the mere mental tranquillization of the Northern school of Zen under the leadership of Jinshu (Shén-hsiu). Baso (Ma-tsu), Ōbaku (Huang-po), Rinzai (Lin-chi), and all the other stars illuminating the early days of Zen in the T'ang dynasty were advocates of satori. Their life-activities were unceasingly directed towards the advancement of this; and as one can readily recognize, they so differed from those merely absorbed in contemplation or the practising of dhyāna so called. They were strongly against quietism, declaring its adherents to be purblind and living in the cave of darkness. Before we go on it is advisable, therefore, to

# zen buddhism



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monk replied with a statement, saying, "If so, there is no Buddha in you," the master promptly asserted, "You are right there." This evoked a further question, "Where am I right, sir?" "This is the thirtieth day of the month," replied the master.

Perhaps this is sufficient to show how freely Zen deals with those abstruse philosophical problems which have been taxing all human ingenuity ever since the dawn of intelligence. Let me conclude this part with a sample sermon delivered by Goso Hoyen (Wu-tsu Fa-yen); for a Zen master occasionally—no, quite frequently—comes down to the dualistic level of understanding and tries to deliver a speech for the edification of his pupils. But being a Zen sermon we naturally expect something unusual in it. Goso was one of the ablest Zen masters of the twelfth century. He was the teacher of Yengo (Yuan-wu), famous as the author of the *Hekiganshu*. One of his sermons runs thus:

"Yesterday I came across one topic which I thought I might communicate to you, my pupils, today. But an old man such as I am is apt to forget, and the topic has gone off altogether from my mind. I cannot just recall it." So saying, Goso remained quiet for some little time, but at last he exclaimed, "I forget, I forget, I cannot remember!" He resumed, however: "I know there is a mantram in one of the Sutras known as *The King of Good Memory*. Those who are forgetful may recite it, and the thing forgotten will come again. Well, I must try." He then recited the mantram, "Om o-lo-lok-kei svaha!" Clapping his hands and laughing heartily, he said: "I remember, I remember; this it was: When you seek the Buddha, you cannot see him: when you look for the patriarch, you cannot see him. The muskmelon is sweet even to the stems, the bitter gourd is bitter even to the roots."

He then came down from the pulpit without further remark.

##### 5. REPETITION

In one of his sermons Eckhart, referring to the mutual relationship between God and man, says: "It is as if one stood

before a high mountain and cried, 'Art thou there?' The echo comes back, 'Art thou there?' If one cries, 'Come out!' the echo answers, 'Come out!' Something like this is to be observed in the Zen masters' answers now classified under "Repetition". It may be found hard for the uninitiated to penetrate into the inner meaning of those parrot-like repetitions which sometimes sound like mimicry on the part of the master. In this case, indeed, the words themselves are mere sounds, and the inner sense is to be read in the echoing itself if anywhere. The understanding, however, must come out of one's own inner life, and what the echoing does is to give this chance of self-awakening to the earnest seekers of truth. When the mind is so tuned as to be all ready to break into a certain note, the master turns the key and it sings out its own melody, not learned from anybody else but discovered within itself.

Tosu Daido (T'ou-tzu Tai'ung), of the T'ang dynasty, who died in the year 914, answered "The Buddha" when he was questioned, "What is the Buddha?" He said "Tao" when the question was, "What is Tao?" He answered "The Dharma" to the question "What is the Dharma?"

Language is with the Zen masters a kind of exclamation or ejaculation as directly coming out of their inner spiritual experience. No meaning is to be sought in the expression itself, but within ourselves, in our own minds, which are awakened to the same experience. Therefore when we understand the language of the Zen masters, it is the understanding of ourselves and not the sense of the language which reflects ideas and not the experienced feelings themselves. Thus it is impossible to make those understand Zen who have not had any Zen experience yet, just as it is impossible for the people to realize the sweetness of honey who have never tasted it before. With such people, "sweet" honey will ever remain as an idea altogether devoid of sense; that is, the word has no life with them. Hogen Mon-yeki (Fa-yen Wen-i), the founder of the Hogen branch of Zen Buddhism, flourished early in the tenth century. He asked one of his disciples, "What do you understand by this: Let the difference be even a tenth of an inch, and it will

grow as wide as heaven and earth?" The disciple said, "Let the difference be even a tenth of an inch, and it will grow as wide as heaven and earth." Hogen, however, told him that such an answer will never do. Said the disciple, "I cannot do otherwise; how do you understand?" The master at once replied, "Let the difference be even a tenth of an inch and it will grow as wide as heaven and earth."

Hogen was a great master of repetitions, and there is another interesting instance. After trying to understand the ultimate truth of Zen under fifty-four masters, Tokusho (Te-shao, 907-971) finally came to Hogen; but tired of making special efforts to master Zen, he simply fell in with the rest of the monks there. One day when the master ascended the platform, a monk asked, "What is one drop of water dripping from the source of So<sup>5</sup> (Ts'ao)?" Said the master, "That is one drop of water dripping from the source of So." The monk failed to make anything out of the repetition and stood as if lost; while Tokusho, who happened to be by him, had for the first time his spiritual eye opened to the inner meaning of Zen, and all the doubts he had been cherishing secretly down in his heart were thoroughly dissolved. He was altogether another man after that.

To conceive the truth as something external which is to be perceived by a perceiving subject is dualistic and appeals to the intellect for its understanding, but according to Zen we are living right in the truth, by the truth, from which we cannot be separated. Says Gensha (Hsuan-sha), "We are here as if immersed in water head and shoulders underneath the great ocean, and yet how piteously we are extending our hands for water!" Therefore, when he was asked by a monk, "What is my self?" he at once replied, "What would you do with a self?" When this is intellectually analysed, he means that when we begin to talk about self we immediately and inevitably establish the dualism of self and not-self, thus falling into the errors of intellectualism. We are in the water—this is the fact, and let

<sup>5</sup> That is, Ts'ao-ch'i, where the sixth patriarch of Zen used to reside. It is the birthplace of Chinese Zen Buddhism.

us remain so. Zen would say, for when we begin to beg for water we put ourselves in an external relation to it and what has hitherto been our own will be taken away from us.

While Gensha on a certain occasion was treating an army officer called Wei to tea, the latter asked, "What does it mean when they say that in spite of our having it every day we do not know it?" Gensha without answering the question took up a piece of cake and offered it to him. After eating the cake the officer asked the master again, who then remarked, "Only we do not know it even when we are using it every day." This is evidently an object lesson. Another time a monk came to him and wanted to know how to enter upon the path of truth. Gensha asked, "Do you hear the murmuring of the stream?" "Yes, I do," said the monk. "There is a way to enter."

## 6. EXCLAMATION

The Zen masters frequently make an exclamatory utterance<sup>6</sup> in response to questions, instead of giving an intelligible answer. When words are used, if at all intelligible we may feel that we can somehow find a clue to get at the meaning, but when an inarticulate utterance is given we are quite at a loss how to deal with it, unless we are fortified with some previous knowledge such as I have at some length attempted to give to my readers.

Of all the Zen masters who used to give exclamatory utterance, the most noted ones are Ummon and Rinzai, the former for his "Kwan!" and the latter for his "Kwats!"

Rinzai distinguishes four kinds of "Kwats!" The first, according to him, is like the sacred sword of Vajraraaja; the second is like the golden-haired lion squatting on the ground; the third is like the sounding rod or the grass used as a decoy; and the fourth is the one that does not at all function as a "Kwats!" Rinzai once asked his disciple, Rakho (Le-p'i), "One man has been using a stick and another resorting to the 'Kwats!' Which of them do you think is the more intimate to the truth?"

<sup>6</sup> Does this not remind us of an old mystic who defined God as an unutterable sign?