Zen and Japanese Culture: Poetry, Tea and Bloodshed

Zen is a Japanese form of Buddhism imported from China. It is the result of the interaction of an indigenous Japanese culture and Ch'an Buddhism. Ch'an Buddhism was itself the product of an interaction between Buddhism from India and the indigenous Chinese culture, particularly Daoism. In the traditional (and perhaps mythical) account Ch'an Buddhism was introduced into China in 520 A.D by Bodhidharma and was transmitted through the generations by an unbroken succession of patriarchs. The meditational practices associated with Ch'an Buddhism were introduced into Japan as early as the seventh century, but the establishment of Zen as a separate and prominent school in Japan is often credited to Eisai who lived from 1141 to 1215. (King 27)

The terms Zen and Ch'an are derived from the Sanskrit term Dhyana, which is generally understood to connote seated meditation of the sort practiced in India for many centuries prior to the life of Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism who lived in the 6th century B.C. (This interpretation of the meaning of Zen, Ch'an and Dhyana is disputed by some. See, for example, "Critique of modern Zen" http://www.darkzen.com/teachings/critique.htm.)

Even though much of the literature of Ch'an and Zen Buddhism seems iconoclastic and appears to disparage the traditional philosophy and meditation techniques of Buddhism, both were in fact nurtured and promulgated in monastic communities where seated meditation and study of classical Buddhist texts were an important part of the daily routine.

Zen shares with all Buddhism a root conception of human life as problematic and represents a response to and solution of the basic problem. The canonical formulation of the problem is "All life is suffering." The meaning of this perception and the solution offered by Buddhism have been interpreted in a variety of ways by various schools of Buddhism. All forms

of Buddhism, however, involve the idea of a state of being ("nirvana" or "enlightenment") which can be achieved by a human being and which overcomes in some way the "suffering" which is intrinsic to existence. The single most distinguishing feature of Zen is its emphasis on practical and non-verbal methods for achieving enlightenment.

In Zen the awakening or the experience of enlightenment is often called *satori*. In general it is described as a sudden alteration in ones awareness of reality which is accompanied by a sense of liberation or serenity. It may only occur after years of strenuous effort, but it is a radical alteration based on an immediate experience which paradoxically only occurs when one no longer makes the effort to achieve it. There are differing implications as to whether the experience is subject to degrees, especially in terms of how long the effect lasts. Some texts seem to imply that the only true enlightenment is a single turning point in the life of an individual which permanently alters his being. Others seem to imply that it is a recurring experience, sometimes more intense than others. It is probably safe to assume that even within the Japanese tradition of Zen there are various interpretations which represent different experiences of "enlightenment" as well as differing techniques for achieving it. What follows is primarily based on D.T. Suzuki's interpretation of Zen, tempered somewhat by readings of John Blofeld and Shunryu Suzuki.

While Buddhism grew out of a dissatisfaction with the normal experience of human life, D.T. Suzuki's writings often seem to be addressed to Westerners who are not consciously seeking relief from suffering. There is the implicit assumption that Zen has something to offer even the most successful and satisfied individual in the West who does not know what he is missing. The history of the West is, of course, replete with voices crying in the wilderness who may or may not be offering a kind of fulfillment or satisfaction similar to that offered by Zen;

and Suzuki himself often seems to equate the truth of Zen with some universal truth found in all mystical religious traditions.

The definition of suffering in Zen seems primarily to be associated with the fear of death or loss and with the restlessness resulting from futile seeking of a solution in the wrong way. Fear of loss results from "attachment," and Zen is the realization that attachment is based on ignorance or a delusion about reality. This delusion is an inevitable aspect of human consciousness. It is rooted in the nature of conceptual thought, and it cannot be overcome simply by understanding or intellectual analysis. Conceptual thought and verbal communication can only lead an individual to the brink of the abyss where the limitations of language and concepts become apparent in some form of non-verbal awareness.

It is easy to underestimate the radical nature of this awareness. It not only involves the realization that the individual ego or sense of identity is based on a delusional sense of reality, but also results in a perspective which is non-judgmental as well as non-verbal. Non-judgmental means beyond good and evil. One way it is expressed is the total acceptance of things as they are. This can be frightening to a Western mind steeped in the ethical and legalistic Judeo-Christian or Roman traditions. Anyone aware of the horrors of war in the 20th century will hardly get a warm, fuzzy feeling from the admonition to accept things as they are. We also define a lack of continuity in ones sense of identity as a mental illness.

Suzuki himself is clear on this amoral dimension of Zen:

> Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy, no set of concepts or intellectual formulas, except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death, by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is, therefore, extremely flexible in adapting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatism. (Suzuki Zen and Japanese Culture p 63)

When he goes on to say, “Besides its direct method or reaching final faith, Zen is a religion of will-power…” (63), one begins to suspect that the same care must be exercised in interpreting his thought as is required to interpret Nietzsche.

The concept of attachment involves the Buddhist idea of “transience,” the perception that all things including ones ego or self are in a constant state of flux. It is a mistake to assume that there is some abiding substance beneath or behind the changing appearance of each thing. It is also a mistake to assume that things have an objective, independent existence. Zen recognizes the interdependence of the self and its world as well as the interdependence of all things in the world. There are suggestions that the creation of the world is the same phenomenon as the formation of concepts and the formation of individual identity or ego. The ultimate form of this awareness is a sense of every moment as unique and an experience of the ego as constantly dying and being reborn. Accepting this enables an individual to be completely present in each moment.

What exactly it means to be completely present in the moment is apparently difficult or impossible to verbalize. It is easiest to imagine as the opposite of being distracted. Everyone has moments in which anxieties or preoccupations distract ones attention from a task in which one is engaged. If a sufficiently strong distraction occurs while driving a car, it can have disastrous consequences. The goal of Zen appears to be the cessation of all distraction – in fact the cessation of all of what may be considered normal mental activity – so that ones entire being participates in the immediate moment. There is no longer the awareness of a self or observer who is distinct from the world being observed. The state may be comparable to the state athletes refer to as “being in the zone.”

Another aspect of the experience of satori is the realization that the ultimate ground of all being is present in each unique thing. To experience the true reality of any single thing is to experience the true reality of everything. This experience is associated with feelings of intense satisfaction, joy or bliss.

In order to analyze the impact of Zen on Japanese culture one must ask whether the experience of satori has consequences in the behavior of the enlightened one. While most traditional Buddhism maintains that compassion for all living or "sentient" beings is an inevitable result of enlightenment, Suzuki seems to imply that Satori is an experience which is beyond the realm of morality and beyond the kind of discrimination involved in taste or aesthetic judgment. At the same time he claims that Zen has profoundly influenced or even defined virtually all aspects of Japanese culture. There seem to be two aspects of Zen which may be most apparent in Japanese culture: the valuation of the particular or concrete and the shedding of attachment to normal aspirations or desires.

Haiku may be an example of the way in which these aspects of Zen have had an influence on Japanese poetry. Haiku is a form of poetry derived from an ancient tradition in Japan. Each poem consists of only 17 syllables divided into three sections of five-seven-five. It is descended from an older form of poetry known as *waka* which consisted of thirty-one syllables in a 5-7-5-7-7 pattern. *Waka* was also associated with a form of poetic composition known as linked verse (*renga*) and both were traditionally associated with witty word play. Linked verse was composed in a process comparable to a game where one poet would begin with a short poem and a colleague would continue by adding another short verse. The process could continue until two or more poets created a lengthy work. It can easily be imagined how a verse form of this sort could be enjoyed by sophisticated courtiers as a form of entertainment and polite social

competition, and there was a tradition of this type of poetic banter in the Japanese aristocracy for several centuries.

The tradition of Haiku, the beginnings of which are generally attributed to the poet Basho (1644-94), is much more serious. Basho himself studied Zen in his late thirties and practiced Zen meditation. His poems are generally considered to be an expression of the state of awareness achieved through Zen. While Haiku has very definite conventions, especially with regard to references to the seasons; the imagery of the poems is concrete and particular in the extreme. Even when Haiku poems were first published it was common to accompany them with a prose commentary which helped provide access to the meaning of the poem by describing the situation in which the poem was written. Often a scene or setting is described which makes sense of some of the shorthand imagery employed in the poem. Once the poem is explicated, of course, the commentary falls away; and the poem stands on its own as capturing not just a particular moment in time at a particular place but also a moment which is infused with an awareness of something much more.

D.T. Suzuki explains Haiku as a response to satori. It is an attempt to express in language a form of awareness that cannot be expressed by conceptual thought, but which moves the poet to attempt some form of verbal response. There is, of course, the suggestion that only a reader who knows what satori entails can fully appreciate such a poem. For others Haiku would seem to have a mysterious charm which lures them towards the experience. The brevity of Haiku can be seen as an inevitable result of the attempt to respond with words to a particular moment. Long-windedness only wanders away from the intensity and particularity of the moment. Haiku would seem to be the briefest possible form of expression which could still have sufficient meaning to do justice to the experience.

The subject matter of Haiku can also be viewed in terms of the influence of Zen. Haiku as a poetic tradition embraces in addition to the natural world all of the most mundane aspects of human existence. Compared to most poetic traditions it can be "non-judgmental" in a way comparable almost to the poetry of Charles Bukowski:

> Fleas, lice,
> The horse pissing
> Near my pillow. (Suzuki Zen and Japanese Culture 237)

One of the persistent motifs in discussions of Zen is the notion that what satori puts one in touch with is not some transcendental or divine realm, but the real world in which one lives here and now. It can be construed as the realization that this world (including all its fleas, lice and horse piss) is divine. The miracle and mystery of creation is an on-going event in which one can participate.

What Zen can not account for in Haiku is its rigid formalism and the conventions associated with the use of certain images or phrases. It is also naïve to think of Haiku as a spontaneous utterance emanating from the experience of satori. There may be a moment of inspiration, but Haiku was composed with considerable deliberate effort. Basho's own accounts include discussions of how he struggled to find the right words or even discussed with others which phrase might best serve a particular poem.

> When dusk came, we sought a night's lodging in a humble house. After lighting a lamp, I took out my pen and closed my eyes, trying to remember the sights I had seen and the poems I had composed during the day. When the priest saw me tapping my head and bending over a small piece of paper, he must have thought I was suffering from the weariness of traveling, for he began to five me an account of his youthful pilgrimage, parables from sacred *sutras*, and stories of the miracles he had witnessed. Alas, I was not able to compose a single poem because of this interruption. (Basho 92)

Basho's own creative activity has many seemingly un-Zenlike characteristics. He may have studied Zen, and he may have shed many attachments to home and family when he took to

the road on his pilgrimages; but he was a very ambitious and self-conscious artist. "Basho" was, after all, a pen name; and the persona of the narrator of the travel journals is very much an artistic creation. It is no accident that the individual (or "ego" as Suzuki might want to call it) known as "Basho" is known to us four hundred years later on the other side of the globe. In many ways he seems to have been a poet in the same way that a traditional European or American poet is a poet. He was consumed by a desire to write, and he wanted his work to be appreciated.

> In this mortal frame of mine which is made of a hundred bones and nine orifices there is something, and this something is called a wind-swept spirit for lack of a better name, for it is much like a thin drapery that is torn and swept away at the slightest stir of the wind. This something in me took to writing poetry years ago, merely to amuse itself at first, but finally making it its lifelong business. It must be admitted, however, that there were times when it sank into such dejection that it was almost ready to drop its pursuit, or again times when it was so puffed up with pride that it exulted in vain victories over the others. Indeed, ever since it began to write poetry, it has never found peace with itself, always wavering between doubts of one kind or another. At one time it wanted to gain security by entering the service of a court, and at another it wished to measure the depth of its ignorance by trying to be a scholar, but it was prevented from either because of its unquenchable love of poetry. The fact is it knows no other art than the art of writing poetry, and therefore, it hangs on to it more or less blindly. (Basho 71)

This passage from "The Records of a Travel-worn Satchel" was written several years after Basho studied Zen and began practicing meditation. It does not sound as though he has attained the serenity of nirvana which one senses in the writings of Buddhist monks. The irony with which he describes his own artistic nature and ambitions may be due to a perspective on his ego acquired through meditation, but he has hardly been liberated from the desire which drives him on his journey through life. In Zen terms one might argue that it was his nature to be a poet just as it is a frog's nature to be a frog and that Basho was simply being what he was. The reader can then ponder whether Charles Bukowski or John Milton was equally being himself in a Zenlike manner.

The issue, of course, is not whether Basho's life is exemplary of Zen but whether his poetry reflects the influence of Zen. It is impossible to sort out how much Zen Buddhism influenced Japanese poetry and how much the Japanese poetic sensibility influenced the development of Zen from its Chinese counterpart. Haiku is a uniquely Japanese form of poetry, but it is also very similar to many aspects of traditional Chinese poetry. It is Haiku's extreme formal conventions more than the subject matter or its underlying mystical meaning that make it unique. While Haiku's spare aesthetic seems to have parallels in the aesthetics associated with Japanese temples, it is difficult to see how the practice of Zen would result in the development of a rigid 17-syllable form for poetic expression. The appreciation of the beauty of such a form seems to have little to do with the insights afforded by Zen meditation, however much Zen may awaken one to the mysteries of language.

The tea ceremony is another Japanese cultural phenomenon which is said to have been influenced by Zen. A tea ceremony is a highly ritualized form of social interaction which developed in Japan after tea was popularized in the Kamakura era (1185-1338). Eisai, who is credited with the introduction of Zen into Japan, is also credited with the popularization of tea. Although tea may have been known in Japan prior to Eisai's travels in China, he is said to have brought back tea seeds which he cultivated at a monastery and to have presented a book on tea along with some tea to the Shogun. Tea was thought to have medicinal properties, and the Shogun was ill at the time.

Eisai's book does not describe the tea ceremony, but there is little doubt that he saw or participated in tea ceremonies in monasteries in China. Serving tea was a way of entertaining visitors at monasteries, and it is easy to imagine that the ambiance in which tea was served in a Chinese Buddhist monastery had many similarities to the ceremony which became virtually

codified in Japan by the 16th century. Takuan, a Zen Master who lived from 1573 to 1645, wrote a brief essay on *cha-no-yu* (the art of tea) in which he gives a wonderful account of how the monastic ritual had often degenerated into something resembling a 16th century version of what we might call "trendiness" and "oneupsmanship."

> The principle of *cha-no-you* is the spirit of harmonious blending of Heaven and Earth and provides the means of establishing universal peace. People of the present time have turned it into a mere occasion for meeting friends, talking of worldly affairs, and indulging in palatable food and drink; besides, they are proud of their elegantly furnished tearooms, where, surrounded by rare objects of art, they would serve tea in a most accomplished manner, and deride those who are not so skillful as themselves. This is, however, far from being the original intention of *cha-no-yu*. (D.T. Suzuki 276)

Like the communal organization of a Buddhist monastery, the social interaction in a tea ceremony is intended to be a microcosm of the social dimension of a life in harmony with the Way. When they enter the tea house, participants are supposed to leave behind not only many of their worldly concerns but also their sense of social hierarchy or status. Even though the host enjoys a privileged position, the host is also the servant and beneficiary of the guests. There is an attitude of mutual respect and gratitude. The setting of the tea house and the rituals associated with the arrival of the guests and the entry into the tea house are all designed to encourage a mood of calm and an appreciation not only of nature but of the common humanity shared by the participants. It enables the guests to take a time out from their day to day lives, and it has a potential function comparable to the function of meditation or religious services. The experience provides the participants with a perspective on their normal everyday activities and attitudes which may infuse their everyday lives with a different way of being.

The rigid codification of every aspect of the tea ceremony which developed in the 16th century may be viewed as comparable to the elaborate philosophical systems which were a part of Mahayana Buddhism. What is being preserved and communicated in the tea ceremony is an

experience which does not lend itself to direct expression in words. The way to approach that experience is initially by going through the motions. The specifications for the proper way to brew and serve the tea are modeled on the way in which a tea master naturally brews and serves tea; but it is obviously not the superficial performance that matters. A ritual is a learned form of behavior which has an effect on the person performing the ritual. Ultimately performance of the ritual attunes the performer to the real "meaning" of the ritual, and the behavior begins to flow naturally from a non-verbal understanding or attunement. In an analogous way the intricacies of Buddhist thought and the study of *koans* lead the mind to a point where it sees the ultimate irrelevance of all such concepts and disciplines of the mind.

The aesthetic dimension of the tea ceremony appears at first simply to stem from a highly refined and sophisticated sensibility to subtlety and nuance that is often characteristic of a certain type of aristocratic leisure class. The ability to appreciate what is going on in a tea ceremony may seem like the ability to appreciate fully a wine tasting event or an elaborately orchestrated meal at a world-class restaurant. It is certainly possible to admire and appreciate the austere aesthetic sensibility associated with many aspects of Japanese culture without partaking in the awareness cultivated by Zen meditation. The type of garden setting for a tea house is not all that different from certain types of Romantic gardens appreciated in England. It can be viewed as having a similar picturesque quality or as embodying a Romantic sense of the natural world, which may or may not incline one to pursue an experience of *satori*. Nonetheless the real point of the tea ceremony is not an aesthetic experience. It is an experience of being totally present in a shared moment, undistracted by worldly concerns yet still very much in the world of human interaction.

Another form of human interaction in Japanese culture which is said to have been influenced by Zen is sword fighting. Takuan Soho, the tea master commented on the degradation of the tea ceremony, was also a Zen monk, poet, painter, calligrapher, and gardener who left six volumes of writings. Among those writings are two letters addressed to a samurai swordsman. One was clearly addressed to Yagyu Munenori, a legendary master of swordsmanship, who also wrote one of the classic Zen treatises on sword fighting called *The Life Giving Sword*. There can be no doubt that Zen influenced Japanese swordsmanship. In fact the identification of Zen with samurai swordsmanship is so strong that one scholar, David R. Loy, has written a paper entitled "Is Zen Buddhism?" The issue for him is how one can claim an unbroken lineage from the blissful Buddha achieving nirvana and teaching compassion for all sentient beings to the deadly skill of a samurai warrior.

There are other associations of Zen with militarism, as in the case of Shaku Soen, one of D.T. Suzuki's teachers. Soen actively supported the Russo-Japanese war and refused an invitation from Tolstoy to join in an appeal for peace. He visited the front instead to "inspire our valiant soldiers with the ennobling thoughts of the Buddha." (Loy) Instances of this sort remind one of similar instances of church leaders in the West being swept up in nationalistic conflicts and are easier to dismiss as a perversion of the spirit of the religion than the tie that seems to exist between Zen and the "art of the sword."

The relevance of Zen to swordsmanship can be seen as comparable to the relevance of Zen to calligraphy and painting. There is much discussion about the way in which ink from a brush flows onto and into the paper used for calligraphy or painting. Because the ink will spread if the brush is held in one place too long, skillful calligraphy and painting requires that there be no hesitation in the brush strokes. Hesitation in artistic expression can be overcome by

immersing the conscious mind completely in the act of painting. Zen meditation apparently teaches one to do this. By realizing the illusory nature of one's ego, one is able to shed all the mental baggage that produces distraction or doubt or hesitation and simply respond to the moment. For the artist this means that once the proper state has been achieved, the brush moves appropriately across the paper so that the ink is applied in a swift decisive stroke.

Presumably the same "technique" can be applied to swordsmanship. The main theme of Takuan Soho's letter to Munenori is that being in a state of "No-Thought-No-Mind" allows the swordsman to respond to the ever-changing moment of his encounter with the opponent without any interference from his own ego. The years of discipline and training are so ingrained in his body that he does not need to think about what to do.

> The ignorance and afflictions of the beginning, abiding place and the immovable wisdom that comes later become one. The function of the intellect disappears, and one ends in a state of No-Mind-No-Thought. If one reaches the deepest point, arms, legs, and body remember what to do, but the mind does not enter into this at all. (Takuan 24)

This is clearly related to the state described by highly trained athletes in moments of peak performance. Some Westerners regard the achievement of this as the essence of Zen, which is why we have books about the relevance of Zen to the corporate boardroom as well as the basketball court. There can be no doubt that there are meditational techniques which increase the likelihood that one will be able to "forget oneself" in moments of intense participation in an activity and that forgetting oneself in this way can result in superior performance. The ability to achieve this level of performance is always tied to thorough training and presumably to a certain amount of innate talent. The question is whether such meditational techniques are the heart of Zen and whether the performance enhancement is a natural outcome of the mystical or religious awareness associated with Buddhism. Certainly the desire to achieve enhanced performance in a

particular activity, be it professional basketball or samurai combat, runs counter to the implications of Zen teachings. Even if the enhanced performance only results when the warrior or athlete has "forgotten" his desire, it still seems to go against the grain of the teachings to hold up enhanced performance as evidence of enlightenment or the fruit of "right mindedness."

D.T. Suzuki and other commentators engage in curiously "dualistic" or even moralistic thought when attempting to explain the connection between Zen and swordsmanship. One line of thought is that the Zen warrior does not kill his opponent, but rather that the opponent kills himself in attacking the Zen warrior. This does not explain what happens if two Zen warriors confront each other nor does it account for the very notion of a Zen warrior. A Zen monk is a lot less likely to be attacked by a swordsman than a Zen warrior. The answer to this argument is that there is evil in the world and that the Zen warrior is working to rid the world of evil. This is of course dualistic and moralistic thinking of the most extreme sort.

There is another line of thought which emphasizes the way in which the swordsman is always confronting death and that he of all people needs to come to terms with death. Zen offers a way to deal with the certainty of one's own death, and there can be little doubt that overcoming a fear of death will free a swordsman to focus his attention on the matter at hand.

For the Western mind the real question is how to bridge the gap between the mystical awareness achieved via Zen meditation and the kind of situational ethics involved in justifying combat. On the one hand there is the realization that individuality is illusory and that ones ego is really the One Mind presenting itself in all phenomenon. On the other hand there is the perception of the moment as "evil" and "threatening" so that the appropriate response it to move to avoid death and to inflict death on the attacker. The response is "appropriate" only because the responder is a trained combatant. As soon as one recognizes that the perception of a moment

as having meaning involves the mind of the perceiver as much as the field of his perception, one can no longer accept an “evil” or “threatening” moment at face value. A samurai warrior creates the opportunity for combat. A monk might not be inclined to see evil in the world.

The inevitable conclusion is that the techniques and teachings which enable Zen monks to achieve an altered state of consciousness can also be used to achieve different results. It is almost as though there is an intermediate stage between *samsara* and *nirvana* in which a fear of death can be overcome and the individual is able to concentrate his entire mind on a single task for which he has trained. Just as Buddhism itself can be viewed as an attempt to bring the other-worldly or life-negating tendencies of ancient Indian yoga back to earth, Japanese culture appropriated Buddhist meditation and thought and applied it to even more human pursuits such as art and war.

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