



The Meaning and Context of Zen

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We know the kind of interest Zen has evoked even outside specialized disciplines, since being popularized in the West by D. T. Suzuki through his books *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* and *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. This popular interest is due to the paradoxical encounter between East and West. The ailing West perceives that Zen has something “existential” and surrealistic to offer. Zen’s notion of a spiritual realization, free from any faith and any bond, not to mention the mirage of an instantaneous and somehow gratuitous “spiritual breakthrough”, has exercised a fascinating attraction on many Westerners. However, this is true, for the most part, only superficially. There is a considerable difference between the spiritual dimension of the “philosophy of crisis”, which has become popular in the West as a consequence of its materialistic and nihilist development, and the spiritual dimension of Zen, which has been rooted in the spirituality of the Buddhist tradition. Any true encounter between Zen and the West, presupposes, in a Westerner, either an exceptional predisposition, or the capability to operate a metanoia. By metanoia I mean an inner turnabout, affecting not so much one’s intellectual “attitudes”, but rather a dimension which in every time and in every place has been conceived as a deeper reality.

Zen has a secret doctrine and not to be found in scriptures. It was passed on by the Buddha to his disciple Mahakassapa. This secret doctrine was introduced in China around the sixth century C.E. by Bodhidharma. The canon was transmitted in China and Japan through a succession on teachers and “patriarchs”. In Japan it is a living tradition and has many advocates and numerous Zendo (“Halls of Meditation”).

As far as the spirit informing the tradition is concerned, Zen may be considered as a continuation of early Buddhism. Buddhism arose as a vigorous reaction against the theological speculation and the shallow ritualism into which the ancient Hindu priestly caste had degraded after possessing a sacred, lively wisdom since ancient times. Buddha made tabula rasa of all this: he focused instead on the practical problem of how to overcome what in the popular mind is referred to as “life’s suffering”. According to esoteric teachings, this suffering was considered as the state of caducity, restlessness, “thirst” and the forgetfulness typical of ordinary people. Having followed the path leading to spiritual awakening and to immortality without external aid, Buddha pointed the way to those who felt an attraction to it. It is well known that Buddha is not a name, but an attribute or a title meaning “the awakened One”, “He who has achieved enlightenment”, or “the Awakening”. Buddha was silent about the content of his experience, since he

wanted to discourage people from assigning to speculation and philosophizing a primacy over action. Therefore, unlike his predecessors, he did not talk about *Brahman* (the absolute), or about *Ātman* (the transcendental Self), but only employed the term *Nirvāṇa*, at the risk of being misunderstood. Some, in fact, thought, in their lack of understanding, that *Nirvāṇa* was to be identified with the notion of “nothingness”, an ineffable and evanescent transcendence, almost bordering on the limits of the unconscious and of a state of unaware non-being. So, in a further development of Buddhism, what occurred again, *mutatis mutandi*, was exactly the situation against which Buddha had reacted; Buddhism became a religion, complete with dogmas, rituals, scholasticism and mythology. It eventually became differentiated into two schools: *Mahāyāna* and *Hīnayāna*. The former was more grandiose in metaphysics and *Mahāyāna* eventually grew complacent with its abstruse symbolism. The teachings of the latter school were more strict and to the point, and yet too concerned about the mere moral discipline which became increasingly monastic. Thus the essential and original nucleus, namely the esoteric doctrine of the enlightenment, was almost lost.

At this crucial time Zen appeared, declaring the uselessness of these so-called methods and proclaiming the doctrine of *satori*. *Satori* is a fundamental inner event, a sudden existential breakthrough, corresponding in essence to what I have called the “awakening”. But this formulation was new and original and it constituted a radical change in approach. *Nirvāṇa*, which had been variously considered as the alleged Nothingness, as extinction, and as the final end result of an effort aimed at obtaining liberation (which according to some may require more than one lifetime), now came to be considered as the normal human condition. By these lights, every person has the nature of Buddha and every person is already liberated, and therefore, situated above and beyond birth and death. It is only necessary to become aware of it, to realize it, to see within one’s nature, according to Zen’s main expression. *Satori* is like a timeless opening up. On the one hand, *satori* is something sudden and radically different from all the ordinary human states of consciousness; it is like a catastrophic trauma within ordinary consciousness. On the other hand, *satori* is what leads one back to what, in a higher sense, should be considered as normal and natural; thus, it is the exact opposite of an ecstasis, or trance. It is the rediscovery and the appropriation of one’s true nature: it is the enlightenment which draws out of ignorance or out of the subconscious the deep reality of what was and will always be, regardless of one’s condition in life. The consequence of *satori* is a completely new way to look at the world and at life. To those who have experienced it, everything is the same (things, other beings, one’s self, “heaven, the rivers and the vast earth”), and yet everything is fundamentally different. It is as if a new dimension was added to reality, transforming the meaning and value. According to the Zen Masters, the essential characteristic of the new experience is the overcoming of very dualism: of the inner and outer; the I and not I; of finitude and infinity; being and not-being; appearance and reality; “empty” and “full”; substance and accidents. Another characteristic is that any value posed by the finite and confused consciousness of the individual, is no longer discernible. And thus, the liberated and the non-liberated, the enlightened and the non-enlightened, are yet one and same thing. Zen effectively perpetuates the paradoxical equation of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, *Nirvāṇa* = *Samsāra*, and

the Taoist saying “the return is infinitely far”. It is as if Zen said: liberation should not be looked for in the next world; the very world is the next world; it is liberation and it does not need to be liberated. This is the point of view of satori, of perfect enlightenment, of “transcendent wisdom” (*prajñāpāramitā*).

Basically, this consciousness is a shift of the self’s center. In any situation and in any event of ordinary life, including the most trivial ones, the ordinary, dualistic and intellectual sense of one’s self is substituted with a being who no longer perceives an “I” opposed to a “non-I”, and who transcends and overcomes any antithesis. This being eventually comes to enjoy a perfect freedom an incoercibility. He is like the wind, which blows where it wills, and like a naked being which is everything after “letting go”—abandons everything, embracing poverty.

Zen, or at least mainstream Zen, emphasizes the discontinuous, sudden and unpredictable character of satori disclosure. In regard to this, Suzuki was at fault when he took issue with the techniques used in Hindu schools such as *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*. These techniques were also contemplated in early Buddhist texts. Suzuki employed the simile of water, which in a moment turns into ice. He also used the simile of an alarm, which, as a consequence of some vibration, suddenly goes off. There are no disciplines, techniques or efforts, according to Suzuki, which by themselves may lead one to satori. On the contrary, it is claimed that satori often occurs spontaneously, when one has exhausted all the resources of his being, especially the intellect and logical faculty of understanding. In some cases satori is said to be facilitated by violent sensations and even by physical pain. Its cause may be the mere perception of an object as well as any event in ordinary life, provided a certain latent predisposition exists in the subject.

Regarding this, some misunderstandings may occur. Suzuki acknowledged that “generally speaking, there are no indications on the inner work preceding satori”. However, he talked about the necessity of first going through “a true baptism of fire”. After all, the very institution of the so-called “Halls of Meditation” (*Zendo*), where those who strive to obtain a satori submit themselves to a regimen of life which is partially analogous to that of some Catholic religious orders, bespeaks the necessity of a preliminary preparation. This preparation may last for several years. The essence of Zen seems to consist in a maturation process, identical to the one in which one almost reaches a state of an acute existential instability. At that point, the slightest push is sufficient to produce a change of state, a spiritual breakthrough, the opening which leads to the “intuitive vision of one’s nature”. The Masters know the moment in which the mind of the disciple is mature and ready to open up; it is then that they eventually give the final, decisive push. This push may sometimes consist of a simple gesture, an exclamation, in something apparently irrelevant, or even illogical and absurd. This suffices to induce the collapse of the false notion of individuality. Thus, satori replaces this notion with the “normal state”, and one assumes the “original face, which one had before creation”. One no longer “chases after echoes” and “shadows”. This under some aspects brings to mind the existential theme of “failure”, or of “being shipwrecked” (*das Scheitern*, in Kierkegaard and in Jaspers). In fact, as I have mentioned, the opening often takes place when all the resources of one’s being have been exhausted and one has his back against the wall. This can be seen in relation to some practical teachings methods used by Zen.

The most frequently employed methods, on an intellectual plane, are the koan and the mondo. The disciple is confronted with a saying or with questions which are paradoxical, absurd and sometimes even grotesque and “surrealistic”. He must labor with his mind, if necessary for years, until he has reached the extreme limit of all his normal faculties of comprehension. Then, if he dares proceed further on that road he may find catastrophe, but if he can turn the situation upside down, he may achieve metanoia. This is the point where satori is usually achieved.

Zen’s norm is that of absolute autonomy; no gods, no cults, no idols. To literally empty oneself of everything, including God. “If you meet Buddha on the road, kill him”, a saying goes. It is necessary to abandon everything, without leaning on anything, and then to proceed forward, with one’s essence, until the crisis point is reached. It is very difficult to say more about satori, or to compare it with various forms of initiatory mystical experience whether Eastern or Western. One is supposed to spend only the training period in Zen monasteries. Once the disciple has achieved satori, he returns to the world, choosing a way of life that fits his need. One may think of satori as a form of transcendence which is brought to immanence, as a natural state, in every form of life.

The behavior which proceeds from the newly acquired dimension, which is added to reality as a consequence of satori, may well be summarized by Lao Tzu’s expression: “To be the whole in the part”. In regard to this, it is important to realize the influence which Zen has exercised on the Far-Eastern way of life. Zen has been called “the samurai’s philosophy,” and it had also been said that “the way of Zen is identical to the way of archery,” or to the “way of the sword”. This means that any activity in one’s life, may be permeated by Zen and thus be elevated to a higher meaning, to a “wholesomeness” and to an “impersonal activity”. This kind of activity is based on a sense of the individual’s irrelevance, which nevertheless does not paralyze one’s actions, but which rather confers calm and detachment. This detachment, in turn, favors an absolute and “pure” undertaking of life, which in some cases reaches extreme and distinct forms of self-sacrifice and heroism, inconceivable to the majority of Westerners (e.g. the kamikaze in WWII).

Thus, what C. G. Jung claims is simply ridiculous, namely that psychoanalysis, more than any other Western school of thought, is capable of understanding Zen. According to Jung, satori coincides with the state of wholeness, devoid of complexes or inner splitting, which psychoanalytic treatment claims to achieve whenever the intellect’s obstructions and its sense of superiority are removed, and whenever the conscious dimension of the soul is reunited with the unconscious and with “Life”. Jung did not realize that the methods and presuppositions of Zen, are exactly the opposite of his own. There is no “subconscious”, as a distinct entity, to which the conscious has to be reconnected; Zen speaks of a superconscious vision (enlightenment, *Bodhi* or “awakening”), which actualizes the “original and luminous nature” and which, in so doing, destroys the unconscious. It is possible though, to notice similarities between Jung’s views and Zen, since they both talk about the feeling of one’s “totality” and freedom which is manifested in every aspect of life. However, it is important to explain the level at which these views appear to coincide.

Once Zen found its way to the West, there was a tendency to “domesticate” and to moralize it, playing down its potential radical and “antinomian” (namely, antithetical

to current norms) implications, and by emphasizing the standard ingredients which are held so dear by “spiritual” people, namely love and service to one’s neighbor, even though these ingredients have been purified in an impersonal and non-sentimental form. Generally speaking, there are many doubts on the “practicability” of Zen, considering that the “doctrine of the awakening” has an initiatory character.

Thus, it will only be able to inspire a minority of people, in contrast to later Buddhist views, which took the form of a religion open to everyone, for the most part a code of mere morality. As the re-establishment of the spirit of early Buddhism, Zen should have strictly been an esoteric doctrine. It has been so as we can see by examining the legend concerning its origins. However, Suzuki himself was inclined to give a different account; he emphasized those aspects of *Mahāyāna* which “democratize” Buddhism (after all, the term *Mahāyāna* has been interpreted to mean “Great Vehicle”, even in the sense that it extends to wider audiences, and not just to a few elect). If one was to fully agree with Suzuki, some perplexities on the nature and on the scope of satori may arise. One should ask whether such an experience merely affects the psychological, moral or mental domain, or whether it affects the ontological domain, as is the case in every authentic initiation. In that event, it can only be the privilege of a very restricted number of people.

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