



What is Zen Buddhism

By Ming Zhen Shaky, Order of Hsu Yun

WHAT IS ZEN BUDDHISM?

PART I - CHRISTIANITY AND ZEN

by Ming Zhen Shakya

In recent years Christians have shown increasing interest in Buddhism, an interest, I think, which doesn't arise so much from academic or neighborly curiosity, nor from any dissatisfaction with Christianity, but instead stems from a desire to return to older forms of Christian worship...forms that included the various methods of meditation that are still followed in Buddhism.

Buddhism's history is such that, having been founded in a preliterate time and place, it was spread by word of mouth and never found itself constrained or codified by any federalizing forces. Buddhism was all over the place and out of control before anybody committed its teachings to print. The genie was out of the bottle, so to speak; and nobody has ever been able to get it back. The upside of this freewheeling diversity is that Buddhism rarely has had to contend with the problems of organizational politics. A great deal was added to Buddhism... but nothing - no technique, no method - has ever been uniformly repressed. A universally intertwining Church and State has never been an issue in Buddhism as it has been in Christianity.

If we can imagine the U.S. Congress running our religious life, we can imagine what the early Christians had to face... There were civil authorities and religious authorities in a sort of bicameral legislative and executive body. Kings and Popes, Dukes and Archbishops, and a variety of lesser nobles and priests. In those days, before Chrysler Motors, Southwest Airlines and Amtrak, a person could very easily be born, live and die all within a radius of 50 miles.

Aside from the county sheriff, the only authority-figure the average man ever knew was his parish priest.

Priests had to wear many hats. They were lawmen, judges, family counselors, little league coaches, doctors, psychologists, teachers, supervisors of church administration and building maintenance, and on top of all this they were required to write letters and sermons, to hear confessions, and to perform rituals. Nobody in his right mind would envy the lot of a 14th century parish priest.

Christians had access to the methodologies of all the saints - their recipes for achieving exalted states of union with God; and many parishioners put those meditation techniques to use and became mystics, persons who could communicate directly with God.

Mystics are spiritual anarchists. You can't tell someone who has a direct-communication link to God what you think the divine word means or the divine will intends. A mystic can figure that out for himself. He prefers to tell you. The last thing a priest needed was a few mystics in his congregation challenging his authority. He had enough to do without having to coddle these troublesome elitists. So cloisters were created, lovely places where mystics could go and contemplate God in private. There would be a nice high wall around the cloister. But more than likely that wall wasn't there to keep people out, it was there to keep the mystics in...

At any rate, meditation, that means by which we come to directly experience God, was deemphasized and common prayer was put in its place. The emphasis was placed on fellowship, not solitude. This was quite a change. Cathedrals, you'll recall, were not designed to accommodate congregations. There were no pews for ordinary folks.

And so Christianity's great body of meditational lore was hidden away. Nobody counted on the stress of 20th Century life or on the separation of church and state that would allow Christians to explore the secret Paths to God.

Those meditation techniques have been available to Buddhists for two and a half millennia. And nobody has ever had to convert to Buddhism in order to use them. Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism, doesn't succeed according to the number of people it can claim as Buddhist. In fact, if the truth be known, Zen Buddhism has little or no group dynamic.

Zen is the mystical branch of Mahayana Buddhism. As the Sufis stand to Islam, as the Cabalists stand to Judaism, as the Yogis stand to Hinduism and the Contemplatives to Christianity, so does Zen stand to Buddhism. And as such it is singularly non-congregational.

For example, I'm considered the pastor of a thriving Buddhist congregation here in Clark County. Of course, a pastor is by definition a kind of shepherd - but Zen is a highly individualistic religious discipline, and shepherding Zen Buddhists is rather like trying to herd cats, as the saying goes. If you can get a congregation of cats to move when and where you want, it's because you've laid down the scent of Fancy Feast and not because of anything you've said. I'm also reminded of Benito Mussolini's answer when someone asked him if it was difficult to govern the Italians. El Duce sighed wearily and said, "Difficult? No. Useless!"

And so it is with Zen. There's an unwritten law that says Zen done in a group is not Zen at all. It is of course both possible and desirable to preach the Buddhist Dharma to large gatherings of people. The more the merrier. But not Zen. True Zen is done alone.

Let's consider the word's definition.

Zen is a *sanskrit* word which means meditation. I'll digress to tell you that in China the word is written C-H-A-N and is pronounced Jen which is more or less how it's pronounced in India. The *sanskrit* is written D-H-Y-A-N ...duh yen. Now, whenever we have a heavily voiced D followed by the glide Y, we pronounce that d-y combination as a J. For example, when we say, "Did you go?" Did you becomes dija. Dija go? Or, ed-u-cate, becomes ejucate. It's a natural speech change. So, dh-yen becomes Jen and then Zen. The English cognate is dwell.

When our mind truly dwells or meditates upon a thing then we're practicing Zen. Of course, this doesn't mean that we're merely pondering a subject, musing or mulling it over. Meditation which involves thought is a structured, orderly discipline. The meditator concentrates upon his subject, mentally circling it, and that concentration leads him into total absorption. Platonic dialectics is one form of this rigorous meditation technique; the *Zen koan* is another.

In the Republic, for example, Plato demonstrates this advanced Zen technique when he has Socrates engage in a dialogue on the subject of Justice. The Buddha, in the *Surangama Sutra*, uses the same technique when he inquired into the nature of the Mind. What is mind? What is justice? What is the sound of one hand clapping? Structured inquiry is an ancient meditation form.

But the important thing here is not acquiring knowledge about mind or justice or clapping hands. These topics are merely an excuse, if you will, to enter those higher levels of consciousness: concentration, meditation, and, if we're lucky, the orgasmic ecstasy of divine union, a state which we call *samadhi*.

Entering the Nirvanic precincts, the sacred state of *samadhi*, experiencing that incomparable bliss, is the goal of any spiritual practice. And obviously this isn't the kind of goal the serious practitioner would even want to attempt in a public environment. Prayer and meditation are personal and private endeavors. Every Zen Buddhist knows this as well as every Christian. In Matthew Chapter 6, verse 6, Jesus says, "*But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*"

When you succeed in meditation, it shows. You change! You radiate joy: You are rewarded openly!

Fellowship can be valuable. Human nature is such that people often need the feeling of security that comes with belonging to a group. And so we find many Zen organizations whose members regularly meet in order to sit on their cushions and then to enjoy a cup of tea and some spirited

conversation afterwards. There's nothing harmful about fellowship but it isn't Zen - it's fellowship, it's a social endeavor. Jesus didn't say that you shouldn't go to the Temple. He said that when you want to communicate with God, don't make a public spectacle of your piety. Talk to God in private.

The great problem with group Zen arises from the kind of meditation technique that is usually employed by groups, the technique called mind-blanking. As an advanced technique, it is dazzling. But it is not and should never be attempted by anyone who has not already experienced Samadhi and a few other exalted states of consciousness. Yet, because the instructions are so simple, everyone feels competent to try them. All you need do is sit down and stop thinking. Every time a thought arises in your mind you erase it. The aim is to attain a thought-free mind. Each thought is likened unto a speck of dirt that soils the mind and so you are obliged to polish it off immediately.

Unfortunately, this friction can have serious consequences. The next time you find yourself sitting around with nothing better to do, try making your mind blank by thinking about nothing. No thoughts. The normal person can't remain thought-free for more than a few seconds at best. He would give up quickly, unless, of course, he attached soteriological (salvation doctrines) significance to this activity. If he perceived it as a means to gain spiritual salvation, he'd be deadly earnest in his attempt - or if he was responding to peer pressure, that religious fervor which inspires mass-hysteria and mass-hypnosis. In either case a person might really try to hammer his brain into submission.

This mental self-flagellation then becomes a strange kind of sadomasochism. The most that can be accomplished by this activity is the state which we call Quietism - a stuporous blandness, a wretched, numb and passive state in which life's blessings and hardships are accepted without consideration. This is not reasoned equanimity. It is not tranquility. It is mere vegetative dullness.

Back in the 7th Century, Hui Neng, Zen Buddhism's 6th and last Patriarch who founded the order I was admitted to in China, once approached a young monk who was always sitting on his cushion trying to meditate in this manner. "Why do you spend so much time sitting like this?"

Hui Neng asked the monk. "Because I want to become a Buddha," the monk replied. The 6th Patriarch shook his head, "My son, you can make a mirror polishing a brick sooner than you can make a Buddha sitting on a cushion."

But usually the person who attempts this technique fails miserably and then, frustrated and disappointed, he abandons Zen, deciding that it's useless and a bit too bizarre.

What is necessary in Zen or in any other religious discipline is *clarity of thought*. Life can be cruel and confusing especially when we discover that we're largely responsible for the mess we find ourselves in. We need to understand our predicament. Escaping from life to sit on cushion and obliterate our minds is hardly the answer to anything.

Next we discuss how a Zen practitioner develops the necessary clarity of thought to transcend ego-consciousness - the state in which the ego doesn't exist.

WHAT IS ZEN BUDDHISM?

PART II - SAMSARA AND NIRVANA

by Ming Zhen Shakya

The aim of any meditation technique is to transcend ego-consciousness, that is, to go from ego-awareness to the state in which the ego doesn't exist. This is a tall order, one that specifies a division of experience.

On one side we have Nirvana - unconditional loves, permanent values - the Real world, our heaven. No egos and no judgments, just God in all His Persons - and peace, joy, truth and freedom - and the Eternal moment. We enter Nirvana through the act of meditation.

On the other side we have ego-awareness or Samsara as we call it... this is the Buddhist equivalent of hell... it is the world of illusion - appearances, judgments, opinions, conditional loves and values... the world that measures distance and history by Greenwich Mean Time.

Samsara is the hellish world of time and space and the shifting shapes which energy assumes, the fluctuating world which is apprehended by the senses and presided over by the judgmental ego. This is the world that the Buddha described as being "bitter and painful."

Why do we call Samsara hell? Let's take a look at the world of the ego. Suppose I see a woman who's wearing a yellow sweater. I would be making a Nirvanic utterance if I said simply, "I see a woman wearing a yellow sweater." I would be making a *Samsaric* utterance if I said, "I see a woman wearing a hideous yellow sweater." By my contemptuous, judgmental statement, by my egotistical usurpation of the exalted rank of "Arbiter of Fashion." I have placed myself in the hell of Samsara because I now must stand trial for every garment I wear. I must commit much of my time and energy, and my financial resources, to looking good because I dare not ever be caught

wearing any thing hideous. Nobody will love me for dressing well; but if I make a fashion blunder then all those whom I have criticized will gleefully get their revenge.

In all our egotistical judgments - about clothes or art, or our instantaneous opinions about other people's guilt or innocence, or their sincerity or duplicity - about anything at all - we place ourselves at hellish risk.

Jesus said it best. "Judge not and ye shall not be judged."

In Samsara we believe that a man who drives a Cadillac is a better man than a man who drives a Ford because a Cadillac is a better car than a Ford. Right? And the man who wears a Rolex spends his time better than a man who wears a Timex... Isn't that how it goes? In Samsara we believe that the quality of a possession magically adheres to the possessor. People who have expensive junk are much happier than people who have cheap junk. How painful it is to learn that this belief is false... that this illusion defines deceit itself.

Thorstein Veblen, the great economist, wrote a book called, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In it he compares sterling silver flatware to stainless steel flatware. Now, if you eat eggs or tomatoes - or many other foods - with sterling, you'll get this vile-tasting chemical reaction. You don't get this reaction with stainless steel. So stainless steel in many ways is superior to sterling. But be honest: a great hostess would sooner commit hara kiri with a butterknife than lay out anything but sterling.

In his famous Allegory of the Cave, Plato likens people who live in the everyday world of ego-conscious existence, that is to say, Samsara, to people who have been chained since birth inside a Cave. They sit there facing the rear wall of the cave and their heads are so restrained that they cannot look around. Immediately behind them is a stage upon which marionette figures are moving; and behind this stage is a large fire. The fire casts the marionettes' shadows on the rear wall. And these moving shadows, then, are all that the chained people see. They regard them as real. But this isn't Reality, it's Maya ...Illusion...Samsara. Shadows of the shadow world... the world of the ego.

Transcendent Reality, or Nirvana, is what is seen in the brilliant sunlight outside the cave. There truth can be seen in its pure Ideal Forms. But few people ever try to free themselves from their chains to go out into the light. People always get into their dreary ruts and don't want to trust anything outside their own little niches.

Plato ended his allegory by saying that if a person ever got out of the cave and then in a mad desire to help his fellow man returned to tell them about that beautiful real world outside, they'd call him crazy and if he didn't shut up, they'd kill him.

WHAT IS ZEN BUDDHISM?

PART III - MEDITATION

by Ming Zhen Shakya

Let's suppose that a Guru comes to our town and advertises that for some fee or other he will teach a class in meditation and that a certain group of ladies who have the necessary time and money sign up for his class. He tells his students to close their eyes, relax deeply, breathe rhythmically, get into a passive, receptive mood, and then to concentrate upon a rose - to construct mentally, petal by petal, thorn by thorn, leaf by leaf, this rose.

So everybody sits there trying to do this and then after awhile one woman starts squealing like Tweety Bird. "Ooooooh: I did it: I did it:" And she totally disrupts the proceedings babbling on about seeing this perfect rose that glowed with a kind of brilliant AURA and she jabbbers on about how she never really understood roses until this very moment... and how after a mere ten minutes? or twenty? how long was it anyway? - time just seemed to stand still! - no matter! she NOW knows all there is to know about roses... and wasn't Gertrude Stein so right when she said, "Rose is a rose is a rose! Wow!" Blah, blah, blah. And this woman won't shut up or can't shut up ... but whatever the reason people become annoyed because she's really making a nuisance of herself and being quite unfair. The others have come there to learn about meditation not to hear her silly jabbering. Everyone's relieved when the Guru comes to sit with the woman and stroke her head.

Isn't it amazing? At any given moment on the earth's surface there are dozens of philosophy professors who would KILL for even a glimpse of one of Plato's Ideal Forms... and there's that silly woman babbling on and on about this perfect rose that she's seen in this brilliant, timeless moment.

Well, for the record, this woman has indeed seen one of Plato's Ideal Forms and she may be vilified and ostracized but nobody can take that vision of perfection away from her. She knows

what it is, as the mystical poet William Blake has said, "*To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.*"

We call her irrepressible chattering Zen Disease. Plato called it Divine Madness. This is the euphoria that immediately follows the experience of true meditational transcendence. The euphoria is definitive. As I tell my students, if, when you get up from your cushion you are not euphoric, then I don't know what it was you were doing but one thing you were not doing was meditating.

Quietism is not meditation. Neither is hypnotic trance.

Incidentally, when the Guru went to that woman to stroke her head, he wasn't being merciful to the unfortunate or gentle towards the absurd as everybody thought. He was simply trying to share her most uncommon joy. And needless to say, while that woman may well have wanted to become a disciple of that Guru, she wouldn't have tried to repeat her success sitting publicly in his ashram. She would have gone to his ashram to sit at his feet and learn from him.

I'll repeat the rules the Guru gave: sit quietly, relax deeply, breathe rhythmically, get into a passive, receptive mood as if you're listening for something. Then mentally focus your attention on a common object... a rose, a shoe, an umbrella, a stone, a pencil... without, of course, going first to the object to inspect it - this is not an exercise in memory training: Just construct the object and itemize its qualities without discursive thoughts.

In other words, if you contemplate a shoe, don't start thinking about shoes you have known... your favorite shoes... shoes you hate, etc. Just construct a shoe in your mind - any shoe will do - see the sole, vamp, heel, tongue, laces - without getting personal about it.

Another powerful meditation technique is merely to listen to sounds without analyzing them. Get yourself in a gentle, receptive mood, close your eyes, and record the sounds you hear without thinking about them. Have no expectations. Without expectations there are no anxieties. Just

concentrate and keep your attention focused. You'll be surprised at how successful you can be if you bring a gentle, unassuming humility to the task.

Baba Ram Dass who in his secular life was Richard Alpert, a psychology professor at Harvard, used to tell the story about a lecture on meditational transcendence he once gave before an audience of mostly academic types, learned men and women from such disciplines as psychology, theology, and philosophy. Encouraged by this array of intellectuals, Ram Dass, in clear but sophisticated language, began his exposition.

Sitting conspicuously in the front row was a pleasant-looking old grandmotherly lady and whenever Ram Dass made a point that should have provoked a response from his audience, this lady and only this lady nodded appropriately.

When he resorted to insider's wit, this lady and only this lady laughed. Clearly, she was the only one in the whole group who understood what he was talking about. At the end of the lecture he came down from the podium and questioned her.

"Are you a teacher?" he asked.

"No, no." she replied.

Then how is it that you understand so much?" he asked. "What do you do?"

"Oh," she said simply, "I knit."

And on that pearl, I'll quit.



Image Credit: FLY, 2018

Copyright © 2018