

ZEN AND CHRISTIANS

Ama Samy

NOT LONG AGO, I CAME ACROSS a book presenting the experience of Christian Zen teachers, mostly from the German-speaking world. They were men and women, Catholics and Protestants, ordained and lay. The contributors generally began by talking about 'how Zen has changed my Christianity', as the title of the book indicates.¹ Many then went on to make theoretical points about the relationship between Zen and Christianity and about their way of teaching. Some launched immediately into preaching. Most talked about how their concept of God has been changed by Zen's radically iconoclastic approach. They explained that Zen has no dogmas and no philosophy; indeed, it is not a religion at all. They pointed to Zen's objectless meditation: *munen muso*, an experience that is beyond concepts, thoughts or images. They spoke of being healed by Zen's emphasis on the body, and by its awareness of breathing and of physical sensations; they felt liberated by Zen's teaching on living in the now. Zen led them to a state of non-duality: union between God and the self, but also between the world and the self, and between the self and others. Theism's idea of a personal I-Thou relationship between the human person and God was called radically into question.

Admittedly, some authors struggled to show how Christian prayer can be in harmony with Zen practice, and questioned Zen's assertions about simple non-duality. There are hints of a theological dispute going on among some of them. But most simply said that Zen had deepened their Christian faith, giving them new insight into the Bible and into Christian tradition. Some, indeed, claimed that Zen had led them to

¹ *Wie Zen mein Christsein verändert: Erfahrungen von Zen-Lehrern*, edited by Michael Seitlinger and Jutta Höcht-Stöhr (Freiburg: Herder, 2004).

discover Christianity's mystics and mysticism. Meister Eckhart figures prominently as a pre-eminent mystic and model. Though there was some talk of compassion, the authors rarely touched on ethics and morality, or on the burning problems of evil and destruction in the world. Almost all seemed to think that Zen and Christianity could be synthesized and that the truths of mystical Christianity and of Zen were identical. There is but one ultimate mystery, of which all religions are mirrors. Dogmas and symbols and such like are only the outer garments of this reality—garments which Zen strips off so as to reveal the one reality behind them.

Nearly all these authors spoke of Christian Zen or of Zen Christianity. For them, Zen is a means of discovering Christianity's mystical truth. Some even equated *Zazen*, Zen's seated meditation, with Christian contemplation; we hear of Zen-Contemplation and Zen-Eucharist. One of the editors, Michael Seitlinger, was clearly a little embarrassed by what some of his contributors were saying, and he wrote an earnest appendix as an exercise in clarification and to establish proper perspectives. For him both Christianity and Buddhism involve polarities and tensions, and we need to keep a balance.

But, for me, Seitlinger did not go nearly far enough. On the basis of my own experience as a Jesuit and a Zen teacher in India, I find the approach to Zen and to Christian mysticism exemplified by this European book profoundly wrong. I would like to propose an alternative account of the role of Zen in Christians' relationship with other religions. This relationship is, of course, vitally important for us today. But if we mismanage the opportunities being offered to us, the long-term results will be disastrous.

False Convergences

Varieties of Mysticism

Zen has done a great service to many Christians, opening them up to the contemplative dimension within their own spiritual and religious tradition.² Many have rediscovered their Christian roots through Zen. Zen has helped them to live in the now, to see eternity in a grain of

² See my own book, *Zen: Awakening to Your Original Face* (Chennai: Cre-A, 2005).

sand, to see their lives as graced and grounded in mystery. It has also taught them to be open to other religions.

But the Zen taught by many Christian Zen masters is problematic. They speak of the 'mystical dimension of Christianity'. The problem here is that such a phrase suggests that mysticism is of only one kind: unity mysticism (that is, a mysticism where God and the self are a unity, or rather, not-two). But there are different kinds of mysticism, both within Christianity and within Hinduism and other religions. Christian bridal



Meister Eckhart

mysticism cannot be reduced simply to unity mysticism, and the mysticism of St Ignatius is not the same as that of Meister Eckhart.

Nor is Meister Eckhart, so much cited by the adherents of Christian Zen, a typical Christian mystic. He was as much a philosopher in the Neoplatonic tradition as a mystic, and his teaching owes a great deal to his philosophical understanding. But Eckhart was primarily a Christian, and needs to be interpreted as such, rather than in esoteric Buddhist terms. All mystics are situated in cultural, social and historical contexts that shape their experience. Christian mysticism flows from the Bible, from Christian liturgy, from Christian doctrine and practice.

When Karl Rahner talks of the future Christian as a mystic, he is thinking in terms of Ignatian Christocentric spirituality. Rahner is right—and Zen can be a grace for us in this context—to call us to God as Mystery. But Rahner's Mystery grounds our *whole* existence, and that of *all* beings; our *whole life* is embraced in a horizon of unconditional love and mercy. By contrast, some teachers of Christian Zen seem obsessed with special, particular experiences. The experience of Rahner's Mystery is manifested in self-transcending love: in hoping

amid a hopeless situation; in forgiving without acknowledgment; in bearing pain patiently; in taking up the burden of responsibility; in facing loneliness and the darkness of death; in selfless service; in trustful endurance of what seems to be life's meaninglessness.³

Duality and Non-Duality

Further, many teachers seem to become confused when they talk about duality and non-duality. Some speak as if the religious goal were for all finite reality, including the human, to be dissolved into eternal divinity. In fact, however, both Christianity and Buddhism involve a subtler interplay between the two, marked by polarity and tension rather than by sharp contrast.

In the Christian vision, God is the one author of existence and of the universe; and God is also the redeemer, bringing enemies together and healing division. All creatures are in God; at creation's final consummation, God will be all in all. In Zen too, dualities are embraced in non-duality: there is no direct opposition. The great Zen master Dogen taught that the freedom flowing from *Zazen* practice is not a matter of transcending our polarities and dualities, but of realising them:

... opposites of dualities are not obliterated or even blurred: they are not so much transcended as realised. The absolute freedom in question here is that freedom which realises itself in duality, not apart from it.⁴

Nevertheless, there are differences. In Zen, talk of non-duality refers most often to the experience of acting spontaneously, without calculating self-reflection, in such a way that any sense of a subject-object duality disappears. By contrast, there is a relational dimension to the Christian vision of ultimate reality, something about which Zen remains ambiguous. The *Heart Sutra*, which is recited daily in most Zen centres, proclaims: 'form *is* emptiness and emptiness *is* form, form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form'. Whereas Christianity's non-

³ See Karl Rahner, 'Reflections on the Experience of Grace', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 3, translated by Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 86-90.

⁴ Hee-Jin Kim, *Dogen Kigen: Mystical Realist* (Tucson: U. of Arizona P, 1987), 52-53.

dualism is grounded in a sense of creatures participating in God, Buddhism's is more a matter of paradox.

Religious Language

Most people, even Zen teachers, do not understand the function of religious language. The European Zen teachers whom I have been reading seem to take language mostly as literal and representational. But this is only one function of language: religious language is also expressive, narrative, performative, symbolic, paradoxical and metaphorical. Not all truth is expressed conceptually and literally. Simone Weil made the point memorably:

When genuine friends of God repeat words they have heard in secret amidst the silence of union of love, and these words are in disagreement with the teaching of the Church, it is simply that the language of the market place is not that of the nuptial chamber.⁵

Despite what religious writers often say, experience and language cannot be separated. *Human* reality is reality permeated by symbols, images, concepts and ideas. Enlightenment or awakening thus takes place *in* language; enlightenment is a metaphoric process.⁶ Without religious language, there is no religious or spiritual experience. Many seem to think erroneously that Zen is beyond all concepts, language and philosophy. Of course, there are the realities of being-with-oneself, of consciousness-being-conscious, and of objectless meditation; but such experiences are necessarily enfolded, validated and authenticated in conscious experiencing-as or seeing-as. Zen awakening involves an affirmation of the Zen Buddhist vision. Moreover, even in Zen there are *conflicting* interpretations of awakening. The great Zen masters such as Rinzai and Dogen, and the great Indian advaitic savants such as Sankara, are rooted and grounded in their respective scriptures, sutras and traditions. Their work is marked by a tension, a dialectic, between the written text and what lies beyond the written text.

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The teachers whom I have been reading, however, present Christian Zen as individualistic and narcissistic in its emphasis on

⁵ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 1952 [1950]), 39.

⁶ See the chapter on metaphoric process in *Zen: Awakening to Your Original Face*.

experience beyond words. In so doing they also ignore the long tradition of negative theology within Christianity. Even the great scholastic Thomas Aquinas wrote that we cannot know what God is, only what he is not (*Summa contra gentiles*, I c. 14). This Christian negative theology, moreover, has a strong moral stress on conversion which is strikingly lacking in what European teachers of Christian Zen seem to be writing.

Evil, Suffering and Community

It is quite common for people to feel detached from institutional religion even though they are seeking a religious sense for their lives. But it is simply impossible to be religious without being committed to fellowship, discipleship and ethical precepts. Zen Enlightenment alone is not sufficient to ensure right action in the world, action informed by discerning judgment.⁷ Evil runs through one's own heart, and even enlightened Zen masters can fall prey to self-



Yamada Ko'un

deception. This is one reason why Christians speak of 'no salvation apart from the Church'. However enlightened or charismatic we may be, we need the support of the community and its tradition. Christian faith, for example, responds to the world's suffering, brokenness, injustice and conflicts by recalling the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Europeans all too easily imagine Zen meditation as non-religious, as not really Buddhist. And one factor encouraging them in this

⁷ See Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (Trumble: Weatherhill, 1998) and *Zen War Stories* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

reading of Zen is the decision of Yamada Ko'un, master of the Sanbo Kyodan school, to teach Zen to Christians and other non-Buddhists. This decision was an act of great openness and generosity, but he was unclear about all the ramifications and consequences, and failed to draw the necessary distinctions and boundaries. Westerners, in particular Christian clergy and religious, fascinated him. As soon as they had gone through the *koan* curriculum, he authorised them as Zen teachers. Later he regretted having acted so uncritically and indiscriminately, but he could not undo his mistakes.

His successors, along with the Christian Sanbo Kyodan teachers, have further muddied the waters with their talk of Christian Zen and Zen Christianity. If there is no difference at all, there is no point in Christians practising Zen. And the mere practice of *koans* so as to arrive at the correct answers, without the religious dimension, is simply game-playing. All too easily, people speak of 'pure experience', free from ideology and dogma. They ignore the questions of power, with its potential for misuse, involved in knowledge and in relationships, especially in Zen *koan* practice. When Zen enlightenment is authenticated, it is not simply a matter of truth and its validation. Factors involving transmission, lineage and the master-disciple relationship are also, inevitably, in play.

It is an illusion to suppose that the Soto way of 'just sitting'—the Zen practice of seated meditation in silence and non-thinking—is emancipated from all these considerations. Of course, 'just sitting', *shikantaza* in Japanese, is a beautiful practice. But it takes on meaning only in a religious context; otherwise it is no more than relaxation and stress-relief, perhaps with some element of healing. *Shikantaza* can be done by Christians as contemplative practice, as Thomas Merton pointed out long ago. But if 'just sitting' is done as Christian form of prayer, then the Zen element is not intrinsic to its rationale. Some of the modern Christian prayer methods such as 'Centring Prayer' or 'Mantra Prayer', associated with figures such as Thomas Keating or Lawrence Freeman, bear witness to this. *Shikantaza*, by contrast, is rooted in Soto Zen Buddhist tradition. An eminent historian of Zen comments on Dogen's choice of *shikantaza*:

... no text or set of texts determined the orthodox understanding [of *shikantaza*]; this was done only by the enlightenment of the Buddha and the historical continuity of the tradition with that

enlightenment. ... In religious terms, then, the act of sitting becomes the sign of our faith in the historical reality of the tradition of enlightened practice and our acceptance of participation in it.⁸

Spiritual 'Orientalism'

The idea of Christian Zen about which I have read, the idea that is seemingly current in Europe, is not true to Zen. Zen is not being presented as Zen: rather, it is being expropriated in order to promote a particular brand of Christianity. Some parts only of Zen are being extracted, and then being idealized as eternal, non-religious, transcendent truths, before being imported back into a non-doctrinal form of Christianity. What is happening is a form of colonialism, or even what Edward Said would call 'orientalism': the appropriation of another culture in the attempt to understand its 'otherness'. The whole practice is caught up in illusions and power-games.

Of course, this accusation cannot be made against every Christian interested in Zen, and nor can we say that non-Christian teachers of Zen in the West are any better off. Zen as taught in the West, whether by Buddhist teachers or by non-Buddhist ones, has many blindspots and lacunae—a matter not only of the differences between cultures, but also of the teachers' personal maturity and depth of awakening.

Authentic Christian Zen

The question then arises: can Christians be true Zen teachers and masters? Can Christians teach Zen authentically? My answer, despite all the criticisms I have been making, is 'yes'. Let me try to articulate how this kind of authenticity is possible.

As we have seen, many Christians are helped simply by adopting certain Zen practices: sitting in silent awareness or doing some *koans* in order to open their minds. But such Christians are not entering the deeper reality of Zen. If one wants to practise Zen seriously, one has to *pass over* into the realm of Zen Buddhism.

⁸ Carl Bielefeldt, *Dogen's Manuals of Zen Meditation* (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1990), 168-169.

Passing Over and Return

The term 'passing over' was used first by the US Catholic theologian John Dunne.⁹ 'Passing over' takes place in varying degrees of intensity and radicality (Dunne himself seems not to have gone through the process very deeply). It involves a shifting of standpoint, going over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another religion. But then there is a return: an equal and opposite process we might call 'coming back'—coming back to one's own culture, way of life, and religion, not only with new insights, but also with a transformation of the self.

If Christians are truly to practise Zen, they have to pass over into the world and vision of Zen—into Mahayana Buddhist tradition, sutras, symbols, rituals, transmission, lineage and so on. In passing over, one dies, so to speak, to one's own world of meaning, culture and religion, and learns to think, feel, imagine and act in Zen terms. Such passing over can truly take place only when one has come to the limits of one's own life-world or religion, when one has come to an impasse in life and one faces an abyss of darkness and night. It involves letting oneself go into the abyss, and then, in falling, discovering that one is redeemed. One is baptized into a new birth; one enters a new world of meaning and language.

There are similarities, overlaps and analogues between the Zen and Christian world-views, and the two traditions can 'vibrate sympathetically like two distinct strings on an instrument'.¹⁰ Nevertheless,

Buddhist and Christian characterizations of absolute reality are neither contradictory, nor complementary, but simply incommensurable. Their 'grammars' simply do not correspond.¹¹

Ko'un Yamada used to say that tea is tea whether you are Christian or Buddhist or atheist, and likewise enlightenment is also the same, whoever you are. The analogy is false. Think of the wine and bread in the Eucharist. They might look and taste the same to a Buddhist, to a Christian and to an atheist, but they are not really the same, because the

⁹ See John S. Dunne, *A Journey with God in Time: A Spiritual Quest* (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame P, 2003).

¹⁰ Christopher A. Brown, 'Can Buddhism Save? Finding Resonance in Incommensurability', *CrossCurrents*, 49/2 (Summer 1999), 166-196, here 188.

¹¹ Brown, 'Can Buddhism Save?' 186.

meaning and significance are not the same for everyone. Symbols, words and rituals in one religious system cannot be simply taken out of their living context and equated with those of another tradition, religion or culture. It will not do to equate Zen emptiness with the Christian idea of God. Words and concepts in a language take on their meaning from their uses in the community of those who speak the language. To understand Zen concepts, one has to experience the world and reality in Zen terms and learn to act in Zen ways. There is a surplus of meaning in Zen actions and words over and above what is yielded by linguistic analyses and word equivalences.

But if one is to be an authentic Christian practitioner of Zen, passing over into Zen is not enough. One has to return to one's original, Christian home. Having been transformed, one can now discover new depths and heights in one's own religion. It is not a matter of rejecting or denigrating that religion, but discovering a creative fidelity—a continuity with the tradition marked also by an openness to fresh development. The encounter with Zen enables one to find a new freedom in the language, symbols, doctrines and rituals of Christianity and move towards worship in spirit and in truth.

Of course the process can go wrong. People can get lost in the new-found religion of Zen, taking it as the final and absolute truth. People can also become cynical or over-critical regarding either Christianity or Zen. But when things go wrong, it is normally a sign that people have not moved beyond simple literalism. They have not really come to awakening; they are still unliberated.

The Discourse of Disclosure

David J. Krieger explains this whole process in terms of three different ways in which conversion and interreligious communication can occur. He calls them Argumentative Discourse, Boundary Discourse and the Discourse of Disclosure.

The first of these takes place *within* the boundaries of a particular culture or religion. Conversion in this realm is *confessional conversion*: one is 'converted' to one's own religion or culture, and becomes more committed to it. One gradually discovers the reasonableness, validity and superiority—in its own terms and using its own criteria—of one's existing way of life or religion. At the same time, there is some detachment and refinement in one's reasoning and understanding. One may become more flexible in one's ways of thinking, and one may

incorporate elements from other cultures and religions into one's personal world-view, in a process of assimilation.

Boundary Discourse happens, by contrast, when different religions meet and confront one another, with their different and incompatible life-worlds, different paradigms of reality, and different *stories*. Alasdair MacIntyre writes: 'I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"'¹² Here argument and reasoning will not work, because the different religions' criteria for truth and meaningfulness clash. Hence one simply *proclaims* absolute truth, and *presents* one's truth as *the* truth. One proclamation and one revelation are set against another proclamation and another revelation; one attempts to convert the other to one's own world-view. Proclamation calls for mission in the classical sense, for prophets and apostles claiming universal truth and salvation. Their message is not subject to scrutiny according to a set of agreed criteria. Rather it amounts to a call to conversion, to decision, to a leap of faith. It is in such terms that missionary work was carried out alongside colonialist expansion, with obviously controversial implications.

The third of Krieger's forms of conversion and communication is Discourse of Disclosure. This requires us, as it were, to inhabit and to cherish the spaces between religions and cultures, in the belief that something of value can be disclosed in these liminal spaces. Here there is a genuine encounter between different horizons of meaning. The Other can be the Other, presenting itself for what it is, without distortions arising from one's own categories, expectations and needs. Here Zen is Zen, and Christianity is Christianity. As we open ourselves to the Other, we become more deeply ourselves. 'Within a discourse of disclosure, identity is not constituted by exclusion and repression.'¹³ The self's way of being and acting is not based on power and exclusion but on non-violent love, redemptive solidarity and voluntary suffering. Here the self becomes 'a medial subject', a place of transformation:

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The medial subject is constituted by the wisdom of knowing that it does not know 'who' it is (*docta ignorantia*), for it can be anything—

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 201.

¹³ *The New Universalism: Foundation for a Global Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 151.

in fact, it is everything. It is pure transformational potential, pure relation, the infinite movement and process of identification, and never its particular and limited result.¹⁴

Krieger does not use the vocabulary of passing over and returning; but it is when we pass over into the Other and return that the Discourse of Disclosure becomes possible. In the phase of return one is at home and grounded in one's original culture and in the other through which one has passed. Or better, *one stands in the in-between*. Christianity is absolutely and fully true, and Zen is absolutely and fully true. At the same time, Christianity is being transformed by Zen and Zen is being transformed by Christianity. The heart of Christianity is discovered as boundless openness to the other, and so also Zen is realised as openness to Christianity. But the traditions are not intermixed or harmonised or synthesized; this is not relativism or pluralism. Each tradition is unique, irreplaceable and absolute. Conflicts and contradictions will still be there; but the tension is a dynamic and creative one. Christianity embraces all of reality, and Zen embraces all of reality. It is a divine paradox, a mystery. But it is in the praxis of passing over and returning that one realises and lives out the mystery.

This experience is exemplified in the life of Swami Abhishiktananda, who struggled to integrate Christianity and Advaita, the non-dual spirituality of the Upanishads. Advaita and Zen are close, and the tension between Advaita and Christianity is similar to that between Zen and Christianity.

Abhishiktananda was born in 1910 in France as Henri Le Saux. He became a Benedictine monk and went to India, establishing a contemplative centre with another French priest, Jules Monchanin, with the aim of bringing about the inculturation of Christianity. He became interested in Hindu Advaitic spirituality, and he interpreted it at first as being fulfilled in the Christian Trinitarian tradition. But the more he understood Advaita, the more his doubts and questions about such integration surfaced, and he underwent a prolonged struggle and considerable suffering. Sometimes he felt that Christianity included and was superior to Advaita, sometimes that Advaita included and was

¹⁴ 'Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 30/3-4 (Summer-Fall 1993), 331-353, here 350.



Logo of the Bodhi Sangha Zen school

superior to Christianity. But before his death he experienced a deep Advaitic revelation.

After that the tension between his two experiences seemed to have disappeared ... he accepted the two experiences—Christian and Advaitic—as different, and no longer sought to subordinate one to the other or see one as being fulfilled by the other. He had two experiences of the absolute in tension.¹⁵

Zen has been a wonderful gift to the Church and to Christians. But the depth and riches of Zen will be realised only if one can pass over into its heart and awaken to the Buddha heart-mind. Then one can return to one's Christianity liberated in joy and gratitude. In this process Zen also receives the gift of Christ's grace and light. In the praxis of continuous passing over and returning the Christian who practises Zen comes to stand in the inbetween. And the passing over and returning make possible the Discourse of Disclosure, in which

¹⁵ Michael Amaldoss, 'From Syncretism to Harmony', *Chakana*, 2 (2004), 4.

reasoning and proclamation, argument and affirmation, are transformed and rehabilitated.

If you are a Zen master and teach Zen, you must teach it through and through, though you may use Christian terms, or any other terms, as helpful devices. When you do Christian service, you must be Christian through and through, though of course you may use Zen stories and insights for illumination. For people who are not ready for Zen as Zen, you can of course teach some half-way Zen! But if you want to teach Zen authentically and truly, teach Zen as Zen, in terms of its own tradition, vision and language. Let Zen awakening be Zen awakening and Zen realisation. In Abhishiktananda's words:

The best course is still, I think, to hold on even under extreme tension to these two forms [Christian experience and Advaitic experience] of a unique 'faith' until the dawn appears.¹⁶

Ama Samy SJ is a Zen master, and has taught and written on Zen for many years. He studied with Yamada Ko'un of Sanbo Kyodan and was authorised by him to teach Zen; after Yamada Ko'un's death he set up his own Zen school, Bodhi Sangha. He lives and teaches at Bodhi Zendo, in Perumalmalai, India.

¹⁶ J. Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told through His Letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989), 268.