

The Quest in Zen Buddhism

Selva Rathinam SJ

Dept. of Scripture, JDV, Pune

It was my summer vacation. As usual I was on my way to Perumalmalai in the Kodaikanal hills of Tamil Nadu to practise Zen meditation at "Bodhi-Zendo" under the guidance of Fr. Ama Samy SJ, the only qualified Zen meditation teacher in India. Coming to know of my plan, some theology students who met me on the way put this question to me, "Can we afford to spend time in meditation facing the wall when millions of our countrymen are suffering?". Yes, this is the question which I grapple with in this paper. What is Zen and what is the quest in Zen Buddhism?

1. What is Zen?

When we arrive at "Bodhi-Zendo" for Zen meditation the administrator gives us a pamphlet which contains an introduction to Zen. The first point states that "the word "Zen" is a Japanese modification of the Sanskrit word 'dhyana' (Pali, 'Jhana'). 'Dhyana' became in China 'Ch'an or "Ch'an-na" and in Japan, 'Zen' or Zenna. "Zen" is originally Zen Buddhism, which is a sect of Mahayana Buddhism. According to legends, a certain Bodhisattva from South India – from Kanjeevaram, according to one legend – went to China in the 5th-6th century and taught this form of meditation. From China Zen Buddhism spread to Korea and to Japan. An ancient verse describes the Zen

methods, realisation and transmission, thus:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;

No dependence on words and letters.

Directly pointing to the heart-mind. Seeing into one's Nature and attaining Buddhahood.¹

2. The Quest in Zen Buddhism

The quest here is for liberation, freedom.² This liberation is not merely individual and otherworldly, but it is also communitarian and this-worldly. "It must be remembered that Buddhism originated as a liberation movement. The Buddhist meditation and philosophy are primarily soteriologies or ways of liberation. There can be no true Liberation Theology for the East without such in-depth encounter and experience".³ But, when we talk about liberation as the quest in Zen Buddhism, what kind of liberation are we talking about? "The Zen quest is, first and foremost, a religious quest".⁴ By religious quest what I mean is a spiritual quest as opposed to a material one.⁵ In a material quest one looks for fulfilment in power, prestige, wealth and health, but in a spiritual quest one searches for meaning in life in the face of human frailty, limitation, suffering and death. When one begins to search for

meaning one begins the Zen quest. When one finds it, one becomes enlightened. This enlightenment or *satori* is the primary goal of Zen. Now, what is the way in which Zen achieves its goal?

3. The Ox-herding Pictures of Zen⁶

As we climb up the steps to enter into the meditation hall at “Bodhi-Zendo” in Perumalmalai, we see on the wall the ten pictures of the so-called “The Ox and His Herdsman”. The ten pictures are these which illustrate the way of Zen:

1. The Search for the Bull;
2. Discovering the Footprints;
3. Perceiving the Bull;
4. Catching the Bull;
5. Taming the Bull;
6. Riding the Bull home;
7. The Bull forgotten;
8. Both Bull and Self forgotten;
9. Return to the Source and Origin;
10. Entering the Market Place with Open Hands.

The Bull here represents the ultimate reality, the True Self. In the first, one searches for it. In the second, one discerns a suitable way, perhaps under a guru, to realise it. In the third, one experiences the true reality. In the fourth one gets hold of the bull which struggles to get away. In the fifth, the bull is tamed. In the sixth, not only is there an absence of struggle but also there is peace and joy. In the seventh, man is alone and lonely. This is the anthropocentric world. In the eighth, even the man has vanished and there is only nothingness and emptiness. Here one lets go of everything. In the ninth, man is

absent but there is a tree, a brook, birds and fish. When one dies completely, he wakes up to the reality of everything. Here the world is no more anthropocentric but reality as such. Here one is enlightened about his true self and this is what is shown by the presence of Nature in this picture. Dogen (1200-1253) says in his Shobogenzo, “To study the Way (*satori*) is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one’s self and others. At that time, there is no trace of enlightenment, though enlightenment itself continues [into one’s daily life] endlessly”.⁷ In the tenth, man is back in the world with wisdom and compassion. It is an *advaitic* reality.

The starting point in the first picture is seeking and looking for liberation. One can talk about liberation only when there is a situation of oppression, suffering and alienation. In the religious context we call this alienation “sin”. Gautama went out of his palace looking for liberation, after having experienced this *dukkha*, suffering. This looking for also implies a tremendous faith, hope and love. If the starting point is one of sin, alienation, then the final picture is one of reconciliation, relationship with oneself, with others and with the whole reality. This is what in Christian terminology is called “salvation”. The pictures in between are the liberative processes for the Zen students from the dualistic realm to the non-dualistic realm. The process in-between is the paschal mystery where one passes over from falsity to truth, from darkness to light and from death to life. The goal of Zen is

achieved with a well defined method which is called *Zazen*.

4. The Method of Zazen⁸

There is a simple and reasonable way to do it. Let me give this method from my own experience, so that it will be easy for anyone to practise. First of all, as to “where and when”, find a tidy place without much noise. Any place could be suitably calm early in the morning. At Bodhi-Zendo we usually start at six in the morning except on some days when we start at five. We, as has been said in Zen circle, “sit an incense stick’s burning” since it gives a comfortable odour of peaceful atmosphere and a help in some other places in measuring time. For a comfortable sitting it is important to put on loose-fitting clothes and avoid sitting when very tired, very sleepy, very hungry or just after a meal.

After finding an adequate place and time, you need two ordinary flat and thick cushions, one over the other, then seat yourself on the thick cushion. The cushion lying under the buttocks will shift the weight of the upper half of your body to the front and you can stabilise your whole body. Then swing the upper half of your body slowly, back and forth, right and left, for more stability.

There are two methods of cross-legged sitting; one is full-lotus and the other half-lotus. The former is the method in which you draw your right foot on to the left thigh, and then draw up your left foot on to the right thigh. I took this regular posture, but it sometimes gives pain to one who has a fat body or short legs. In such cases, half-lotus is permitted where you draw up

either foot up on the opposite thigh. Such a posture gives a balanced state of muscle while sitting and helps to sit a long time without fatigue.

After the foundation is thus set, you deal with your hands. You put one hand upon the other, palms up, and let the tips of both thumbs touch each other. The hands are then placed on the lap with both elbows kept slightly away from the body and with the shoulders kept free from tension. Then you straighten your spine and pull in your chin a little, when you feel that the end of your nose and your navel are lying on the same line perpendicular to the floor.

Then keep your eyelids half shut or cast down the line of your vision naturally so as to see the area about one metre before you. When we gaze at anything for a long time, we are apt to get dull in mind, therefore “half opened eyes” indicate that we should not be excessively watchful. By shutting the eyes one may fall into blunt stillness and may not be able to exercise the vivid and effective *Susokukan* (Breath-Counting Meditation). You keep your mouth closed and breathe naturally through your nostrils, preferably deep or abdominal breathing. So much about your posture in Zazen and now you are counting your own breaths.

4.1. How to practise *Susokukan*

Start counting your natural breaths in your mind. You put an inhalation together with the following exhalation and count “(wa...n)” etc. Though experientially it is found effective, those who are already happy with another mode of counting can continue it. If you want

to know why this method is called the Pleasant Path to Truth, you will have to train yourself until you can “count breaths without counting”. The whole course can be divided into three courses: the first course (counting one to hundred), the second course (counting one to ten) and the final course (virtually no counting). This division is based upon the degree of one’s fulfilment of three requisites. Were it not for the three requisites which make *Susokukan* an outstanding act of self-training, the whole thing seems to be so easy that you may say you can have it done straight away. The three requisites are:

1. Do not miscount your breaths.
2. Do not let anything else into you.
3. As soon as you fail in step two, restart from step one.

When put in writing, they are as simple as that. When you really want to perform in line with them, you will immediately find it strenuous. Let me illustrate this in the following way. While at meditation if a mosquito were to pass before your eyes keep on counting your breath. Were you to entertain a thought about the passing mosquito it would lead to a second, a third and a fourth thought until you are drifting far away from your focus and entering into a world of memory and imagination.

Among the three requisites, the second one is the hardest, while the third one should be observed with honesty and decisiveness. Now facing an undeniable fact that a beginner can hardly do the first course of *Susokukan* perfectly, allowances are made to such an extent that you can continue breath-counting in such cases as you wrongly count fifty

in the place of seventy or you bear a thought in mind, owing to pains in legs etc. Do it slowly and steadily in view of the fact that scarcely any one succeeded in doing it to perfection in six months or one year.

I cannot forget the advice Fr. Amasamy gave me in 1979 when I began to practise Zen under his guidance. I did exactly as he said. I am ever thankful to him because it is due to his guidance that I could continue my practice till today and go beyond the first stage. Hence, it is very important to do it “slowly and steadily”. Once a person is accustomed to it, then he will not be happy without meditation.

The second course wherein one counts only one to ten could be much simpler, if the same allowances as with those in the first course were made. But it is essential to know that in the second course the three requisites work in their fullness. As a matter of fact, under the guidance of Fr. Neudecker, my Zen teacher in Rome, I entered this stage. I could feel my strenuous effort there bearing fruits now.

Finally, as to the third course, it must be said that the course will not be mastered by simply practising *Susokukan*, even by doing it as long as twenty years or a generation. Time to be spent does not count here; only the depth of devotion counts. The words “slowly and steadily” are for those in the first and second courses, but for those in the third course the guiding words are: “Do it with zeal and urge”. There is a famous Zen saying, “To the brave, Truth comes in an eyes’ twinkling; for the timid, trillions of years pass

before awakening". Attentive *Zazen* will minimise the time to be spent in passing through the path.

In the third course, one is not cognisant of breath, not, therefore, counting breaths but just leaves all this with oblivion. Simultaneously, one is in *Susokukan* state and not in any way in a trance. I can say with confidence that I can enter into the arena of this initial accomplishment more often now if not for the whole hour of meditation. This can be called the growth in "Dharma Power" needed to enter into the training with a Zen-master as Zen student.

With this I believe that I can enter into the more complete koan course (i.e., Zen subject given by one's Zen master). The koan training will open and strengthen the "Dharma sight". I am yet to step into this field in full swing. The Zen system works with the aim of formation of a man who will live his life with such confidence that he can tell others, "I am here in the right way of Being", and in training there of a follower in a Zen School will turn each and every idea occurring to him right into Truth and will walk through the Path with the steady and vigorous steps of the real Being.

4.2. *Kinhin* or Meditative walking

Susokukan in *Zazen* posture is not the only way to grow Sammal (meditative) power. The same effect can be expected from meditative action. An old saying has it: "Zen exercise in action by far exceeds that in stillness". For the exceeding effect *kinhin* is devised. *Kinhin* has its origin in group walking in the Zen hall with recitation of Sutra.

What we practise at Fr. Amasamy's Bodhi Zendo is *Susokukan* or *Gyonen* (concentration of mind on one thought) while walking. *Kinhin* is done by standing erect, with both hands crossed before the breast, palms toward you, with the chin pulled in a little so that you cast your eye on the part of the floor two metres before you when doing a round quietly in the Zen hall, clockwise in the regular way. When you practise *Susokukan* in *kinhin*, you will so arrange your breath that the first left foot step forward will come with the inhalation, the next right foot step with the exhalation and so on. The general principle of *Susokukan* ("thir" when left foot moves forward and "teen" with the same movement of the right foot) applies here, except that in a group we must walk with an equal pace and space.

4.3. *Samu* and Mess

Samu (work training) may be farming, house cleaning, weeding and floor scrubbing etc. Before setting out to work the leader gives instruction, and ten minutes before winding up the work she gives a winding-up signal by knocking on a wood block. After putting back the instruments she asks for the report of the work and before concluding *Samu* she speaks a few words for betterment, if any. *Samu* is for further power to integrate myself. It has a deeper meaning than the usual enthusiasm in doing things. Here one's "whole self" is so directed within the "work itself" as the two selves are merged into one self. Supposing that garden cleaning is the work for me to do in *Samu*, I should not be like a paid gardener whose duty is just to clean the garden. If I attend well

to the work, I will clean the garden, the environment, together with my mind, the appreciative one. Weed and dust in a garden are as good as stain and blur in the mind. Unless I clean the two selves in one and the same moment, real cleanliness will not be there. There is a quartrain of an ancient Zen monk which is as follows:

Body bears Truth like the fruits lime-
trees bear;
State of mind is like a mirror plain.
Incessantly cleaning with great care,
Let it not have one single stain.

Thus the cleaning should be done thoroughly regardless of the time to be spent on it. Once Rev. Tel of Tsuton was picking up pin needles one by one in the gateway of the temple. A monk attending upon him said, "Would you not refrain from all that? Later on, the gateway will be swept clean anyway". Rev. Tel stared at his face and said, 'A Zen monk should not say that. If you leave things behind by saying "always" and "laters," you will not be able to clean anything. Pick up a needle and you are cleaning that much'.

Mess is another activity to be explained. I must describe the way we must eat in Zendo's mess hall. We do not eat with the feeling that we have the right to eat after paying a mess charge. We are grateful even to the food itself and the gratefulness is expressed by pressing both palms before eating. We are grateful to the provisions not merely because of the energy given for the maintenance of our bodies, but also because of the Truth embodied in food. We act at signals in the mess hall, which is one of the Two Silence Halls of the

Zen School, the other being the *Zazen* hall.

4.4. The Effects of *Susokukan*

In this method of exercising *Zazen* one refines oneself. This is "not to avoid problems or run away from difficulties. We do not practise to escape. We practise to have enough strength to confront problems effectively. To do this, we must be calm, fresh and solid".⁹ That is why we need to practise the art of *Zazen*. This method of Self Observation has been employed in our country from time immemorial as the "Pleasant Path to Truth". It was handed down to China with Buddhism and to Japan later on. So the method of physical as well as mental training has a long tradition behind it. Obviously it is not Buddhism itself, but it worked so effectively that Buddhist leaders used it in their activities together with other ways of training in Buddhism. We would hear people say that, when angry, first count your breath three times in silence before you open your mouth or raise your fist to others. I see much reason in this saying, since, as one is aware, most furies can hardly survive the dose to diminish self-agitation. "Zen Master Dogen has pointed out that anxiety, when accepted, is the driving force to enlightenment in that it lays bare the human dilemma at the same time that it ignites our desire to break out of it".¹⁰ Be that as it may, in the system of *Susokukan*, breath counting is arranged in such a way that one will be able to free oneself from unredeemed conditionings and to keep one's mind and body in right state, through its practice. Whenever one practises it, one will be able to be in

sound state of calmness, to make little fuss over trivials, to make natural decision on sudden happenings, and, accordingly, to protect oneself in an emergency. In short, the proper practice of it in one's daily life will make one take most suitable actions in the stream of varying scenes. Finally, it is needless to affirm how this art can make us better "prayers", and its medical application can achieve even psychosomatic fitness.

5. The Four Great Vows

After finishing the above form of meditation and before coming out of the meditation hall, all Zen students recite daily the "Four Great Vows":

Though the many beings are numberless,
I vow to save them all;
Though delusive passion-and-thoughts rise endlessly,
I vow to renounce them all;
Though the Dharma is vast and fathomless,
I vow to realize it fully;
Though the Way of the Awakened is unsurpassed,
I vow to walk along all the Way.¹¹

Here one should not understand the word "vow" in the way it is understood in Christianity. In the latter it is made before the personal God while in the former it is a universal demand that every person by the very fact of being human cannot but adhere to. The outcome and the quest of Zen is compassion as it is crystallized in the "Four Great Vows". According to this the compassion found in the first two lines – to save all and to renounce passions – is possible only when we master the Dharma

with determination to self-awakening as is portrayed in the next two lines. Therefore, this is the compassion reached through the experience of the emptiness of the formless self. Here the enlightened become compassionate, transcending all codes and commandments! Let me illustrate this with a story found in the Mumonkan (The Gateless Gate), a collection of the twelfth century.

Once the monks of the eastern hall [of the monastery] were quarrelling with those of the western hall about a cat. To end the quarrel, Master Nan-ch'uan held up the cat and said: "All you monks assembled here! If any one of you can say it [the right Zen word], I will spare this cat. If you cannot, I will kill it". The monks stood silent and did not answer. Nan-ch'uan killed the cat.¹²

Where do we find compassion here which is beyond all ethical laws? In Buddhism it is not permitted to kill any living being. Yet, the master kills a cat. Why? It is to make the monks realize their true selves. This is the most compassionate act! Let me explain. First of all, the monks did not utter the right Zen word because of their lack of self awakening. This lack leads to the killing of the cat. Now at the moment of its killing they realize that so long as they lack this self awakening they lead innumerable living beings to death. This killing of the cat shocks them and they realize the oneness of their self with the cat and thus awaken to the self. Thus it was for the goal of leading them to the self awakening that the master did this killing and therefore this is a compassionate act. Secondly, by killing a living

being he is bound to go to hell. Yet, he is ready even to go to hell provided this makes the monks awaken to their true selves. Thus his primary concern is not his own self but compassion. "Of course, those who are aware of the true self know that one must not commit any breaches of the law of this world. But they also have the option to neglect the ethical in favour of the religious".¹³ We find this synthesis of compassion with the suspension of the ethical in the act of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible (Gen.22). Soren Kierkegaard when speaking of this act of Abraham says that it created "a teleological suspension of the ethical".¹⁴ In the Hebrew Bible it is not permitted to kill one's own son even to the extent of concealing it from his wife and kin. Thus, while being faithful to his God, Abraham committed a great crime. Yet, what Kierkegaard means here is that in this case God's command invalidated all ethical concerns and rules for a time. Here I see the importance of Zen. Unless a person

is steeped in compassion, no religious suspension of the ethical can be justified. It can cause great harm to the wider society. The demolition of the masjid and the churches, the violence let loose against the Christian missionaries and the Dalits in our country are a few examples for this. However, "it is a matter of course that anyone breaking the law of this world, even for a religious goal, must yield to the judgement of this very law".¹⁵ The point of emphasis here is this that one who lives in the ethical dimension alone will not be able to understand what compassion is. As is given in the "Four Great Vows", when one masters the dharma one lives in a balanced way both in ethical as well as in religious dimensions. It is for this that one strives to become aware of the true, formless self. The compassion which is born out of it can become a great force in alleviating the sufferings of the world. Thus, this quest in Zen Buddhism can become relevant to all persons at all times.

Notes

1. This is found at the beginning of the introductory pamphlet given at Bodhi-Zendo.
2. Cf. Ueda, Shizuteru, "Thoughts in Zen", found in the collection of articles preserved at Bodhi-Zendo.
3. S. Ama, "The Way Of Zen", in *VJTR*, 54 (1990) 2, p.73.
4. Ibid., p.82.
5. See Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig, *Marriage, Dead or Alive*, Dallas, Texas: Spring Publication, 1977, who lists human desires into two categories: well-being and salvation. Ama Samy groups the Zen quest with the second in "The Way Of Zen" p. 77.
6. See Paul Repts, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 135-147. Cf. Ama Samy, "The Way of Zen".
7. *Shobogenzo*, translated by Yuho Yokoi, Tokyo: Sankibo, 1986, vol. 1, p. 2.
8. Much of this method in this paper is taken from the talk, "A guide to Susokukan Breath-Counting Meditation in Zen," given by Eizan Tatsuta in Japan in 1974. This is found in the collection of articles preserved at Bodhi-Zendo. Since the same method is followed at Bodhi-Zendo in Perumalmalai, I present it here adapting it to my personal experience.

9. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1992. P. 17.
10. P. Kapleau, *Zen Bow Newsletter*, NY: Rochester Zen Centre Publication, 1969, p. 3.
11. This is found at the end of the introductory pamphlet given at "Bodhi-Zendo". This is a slightly adapted translation. Cf. D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, London, Rider, 1950.
12. See Seiko, Hirata, ed., *Mumonkan*, in *Zen no goroku*, Tokyo: Chikuma, 1981, vol. 18, p. 62.
13. Eiko Kawamura-Hanaoka, "Compassion in Zen", found in the collection of 'Zen articles' preserved at Bodhi-Zendo at Perumalmalai. p. 11.
14. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 106.
15. Eiko Kawamura-Hanaoka, *Op.cit.*, "Compassion in Zen, p. 12.