THE ATTITUDE TOWARD NATURE IN ZEN BUDDHISM

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In Kyoto the May rains sometimes fall in gently undulating rhythms, the drops one moment ploshing hard enough to bounce on the large rock stepping stone just outside the opened shoji screen and leave a gentle mist above the channeled ground, and then moderating 'till the needles of the pine beside the porch seem to gather the dampness into drops and release them one by one from needle-tips to garden floor. Inside we sat on cushions and *tatami mats.* Steaming cups of tea were sipped, and small, sweet cookies shared. This was not acrid, ceremonial tea or the rigid formality of ceremony gone senile, but the good, strong, bright Japanese tea with herbs, the tea famous in the monasteries for a thousand years as the drink that exhilerates. The fellowship was profound, much too much to tell. The Roshi Kobori-san had teased his two American professor-guests, reminding them how great a gulf there is between the knowledge of Zen and the discussion of it. One of the most famous paintings in Japan – the Six Persimmons (ascribed to Mu-ch'i, 13th century)–had been observing our conversation from the *tokonoma.* No flower disturbed its place of honor or its possibility of intrusion. The conversation that day had been so serious that we had laughed together, so genuine that we had not been afraid of long moments of silence to hear the glistening drops and see their resounding splash.

Few days of my life have been so pleasantly, so rewardingly, so beautifully spent as that afternoon amid spring rain, with the Zen man, Kobori-san, and the inner garden, the inner life of the Ryokoin Temple. While we sat there amid such gentle loveliness, I think I asked, "How can you be a Buddhist? The first of all the noble truths is to know that life is suffering. Birth is pain, and illness, death and grief, to associate with abomination and to be separated from fulfillment. These are the story of life; and it is a story of sorrow. You and your friends have tended this garden for some 500 years, for us to see and share this afternoon. The pine, whose gathering drops accompany our tea, whose gentle fragrance flavors our thoughts, has been plucked one needle from each cluster, year after year, to evolve its gnarled limbs and wizened size. Where is that truth of which the Buddha spoke amid all this careful loveliness of life?"

"Precisely, precisely!" Kobori almost pounced on the underside of my vagrant thought. "Exactly that is the Zen. This loveliness, it is the sorrow: the sorrow is just this loveliness!"

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Before Zen was a fad it was a form of Buddhism. The point I was making in the conversation just mentioned is known as the "first noble truth" of Buddhism. It is the enlightening knowledge possessed and shared by the Buddha. "To live is to suffer. Birth is suffering; illness is suffering, as are aging and death; to accompany the detestable, to be separated from the enjoyable: all these are suffering. These sufferings are caused by our insatiable desires that things should be other than they are. To live without the suffering is the offering and the religion of the Buddha."

The opening of this stream of the Buddha message issued from northeast India at about the outset of the fifth century B.C. From the beginning the message was undergoing development and change as the teachings were interpreted and reinterpreted under the influence of changing circumstances and conditions. One of these developments with specific importance to Zen was the emergence of a form of philosophical/devotional Buddhism called Madhyamika, with its doctrine of Emptiness (*sunyata*), some seven centuries after the life of Gautama the Buddha. Various forms of Indian Buddhism were taken to China by monks and pilgrims, including this philosophy of the "middle-way" and its emphasis upon "emptiness." In the radically different intellectual and spiritual environment of China these Indian forms passed through metamorphosis and emerged as Chinese Buddhism. Taoism, a mystical, philosophical and religious doctrine, mingled especially with the philosophy of emptiness, and a tradition of personal mysticism using meditation to break out as Ch'an, the meditative Buddhism called Zen in Japan, where it began to flourish from the twelfth century.

It is often said that Zen has no philosophy, no rational structure, and finds no significance in discourse. If true, of course, there can be no "concept of nature in Zen," nor "concept" of anything else. In one sense it is true. All forms of Zen distrust language and seek alternative modes of expression and training. Such language as is used is frequently bewildering and unreasonable. But upon examination we might say that such behavior is not meaningless, though it is not entirely rational either. It is definitely purposive. On the other hand, I believe that this emphasis on the non-philosophical character of Zen can easily be overdone. Even in the mythological histories of Zen in China, the significance of thoughts concerning ultimate wisdom (*prajñaparamita*), and emptiness (*sunyata*), and the philosophy of the *Tao* are taken for granted. All the great Zen masters knew the sutras, though they did not customarily give them first place in their order of values. The idea that Zen has no philosophy occurs most readily to those who have little knowledge of the rich background in the Chinese sutras, or who define

philosophy so as to exclude all devotional thinking. It is a philosophy neither narrowly defined nor concerned with the whole range of explanations of things. It has only a very underdeveloped metaphysics, heavily dependent on Nagarjuna's concept of the Void and Lao Tzu's principle of Tao. Zen makes absolutely no positive contribution to the field of logic. Zen thought concentrates on ethics and aesthetics. We may prefer to speak of Zen *attitudes* toward nature rather than a "concept" as such.

Zen attitudes always center in what may bring about or radiate from the personal experience of *Satori*, enlightenment, absolute awareness, and total peace. Zen men hold that any person may be on the very verge of this experience of oneness, separated by only one barrier—but that barrier is our way of thinking, which is precisely what we use when we try to overcome it, thus thickening the wall of separation between ourselves and our fulfillment. We must somehow stop the thinking habit which separates, and just wake up to things as they are. Unorthodox methods may be required. For example this interview between two masters.

> One day Po-chang asked Huang-po, "Where have you been?" The answer was that he had been at the foot of Ta-hsiung Mountain picking mushrooms. Po-chang continued, "Have you seen any tigers?" Huang-po immediately roared like a tiger. Po-chang picked up an ax as if to chop the tiger. Huang-po suddenly slapped Po-chang's face. Po-chang laughed heartily, and then returned to his temple and said to the assembly, "At the foot of the Ta-hsiung Mountain there is a tiger. You people should watch out. I have already been bitten today."[1]

Such directness, spontaneity, unpretentious humor, are both producers and products of *satori*. Thus Zen men express their experience in the same unorthodox ways and choose forms of expression uncommon for religious purposes in the west. They build and tend gardens, make ink drawings and calligraphy, serve and share tea, practice archery or swordsmanship, engage in bewildering games of wit and spontaneous response, write poetry. Perhaps one of the clearest verbal expressions of this basic character of Zen is the statement, "Everything is perfect, just as it is; but it is enlightenment (zen, *nirvana, satori*) to see it so."

Zen aesthetic attitudes are conventionally summarized by four main ideas: harmony (*wa*), reverence (*kei*), purity (*sei*) and tran-

[1]Chang Chung-Yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 103.

quility (*sabi/wabi*).[2] When Dogen (1200-1253) returned to Japan from Zen studies in China he was asked what he had learned. "Not much except soft-heartedness," was his response. D. T. Suzuki suggests that harmony is the formal side of gentleness of spirit, "soft-heartedness," the attitudes and habits which replace egoism, self assertion, and all demands. This is harmony—shared by man and nature in gentleness of spirit.

The Chinese/Japanese tradition of reverence is always bound up with propriety – the doing of right things in the right way, simplicity and natural, spontaneous, self-confidence without direct attention to the self. Reverence requires that one make himself available to the elements of nature that they may act together in the common enterprise. In the final analysis in the Zen attitude reverence is sincerity, the perfection of art so that it loses all self-consciousness of its artfulness.

Purity as applied to Zen thinking may be more specifically Japanese, deriving from notions made articulate in Shinto. It is identified sometimes with cleanliness or orderliness, but is more than the negative removal of defilement or contamination. In the Taoist tradition attention was especially drawn to the otherwise unnoticed—the emptiness at the hub of the wheel by which it may turn, or in the bowl by which it may be filled. Taoist art and Zen art make great and effective use of space—the emptiness that defines the full, the universe outside the landscape, the unframed view. This is a kind of purity which requires no improvement.

Finally, the Zen attitude is called "tranquillity," but we must not assume too easily that we know just what this means. This tranquillity is not always peaceful, nor what we usually mean by pleasant. Suzuki defines it as *sabi* and *wabi*. No proper English equivalents exist for these rich terms. *Sabi* has to do mostly with age, obscurity, an active appreciation of poverty, the unadorned, the absolutely simple. *Wabi* comes to the same point from its initial concern for the solitary, unconnected, gently passive, a quiet joy in simplicity, until the meanings blend.

So we come back to my afternoon in the garden, and the deeply rooted Buddhist devotional philosophy of emptiness. Toward all experience and knowledge we must, the Madhyamika philosophers insist, take two stances at once. Nothing finally explains itself or anything else. Nothing has to be, yet something is. There is no ultimate way of understanding it. From that standpoint, everything is emptiness, void

[2]The following discussion is adapted from D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1970), pp. 273-289. See also his essays in the same work under the titles, "Love of Nature," and "Zen and the Art of Tea II."

of self-explaining, self-creating character or power. But we also take the other stance and deal very practically and immediately with an inexplicable world. When this is possible, not schizophrenically as suggested by my words, but in *one* single vision of the world empty and full, yes and no, changing and perfect, then *samsara,* the world of death, change and suffering, is *nirvana,* the end of suffering, change and death. To be a man who loves a garden enough to build it and tend it with great pains, and to celebrate its fragile beauty while rains wash gullys in its raked path, and age withers and wipes out its creator, is to know the identity of *samsara* and *nirvana.* To know that this world is perfect just as it is, is to know this identity as enlightenment.

Zen is Buddhism, not just Taoism, the Middle way, and not just the mystic way. Sometimes the Zen attitude toward nature has been interpreted *romantically,* a celebration of the spontaneous, the lovely and the odd, the harmonious and non-symetrical. In my view this is to spit out the corn and eat the cob. Those attitudes are part of the zen-way, but they are part of self-indulgence. Zen knows better than to love a garden, for all compound things shall fall apart. The garden will fade and go to weeds; its builder will die and his successors after him. We shall not find an adequate answer in loving the garden, melding in with nature. But it is after all a garden, and the world is perfect, just as it is — momentary garden, momentary man.

The Japanese invest a whole national consciousness in cherry blossoms. Hotels are booked ahead. The people wait in great expectancy, and then one day the gardens are glorious in pink and white. A few days later there is soggy, brown litter all over the garden floors, and the breeze shakes loose the last persistent blossom. It's all over for another year. An early sudden freeze, a fierce, torrential storm and there may be no blossoms at all. I think that only a people nourished on Buddhist thought could do that, could celebrate so fragile, uncertain, unimportant and purposeless a puff of beauty. Man is nature, conscious of itself, conscious of itself as perfect and ephemeral, just as it is.