The Zen of Japan

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Outside teaching; apart from tradition.
Not founded on words or letters.
Pointing directly to the human mind.
Seeing into one's nature and attaining buddhahood. (qtd in Watts)

Zen Buddhism is a practice derived from Mahayana Buddhism. Concerned with the reaching of *Satori, or Sudden Enlightenment, Zen and* its methods and practice aim to bring forth realization of the buddha nature. Zen gives way to the "deeper purpose which consists in awakening in the disciple's mind a certain consciousness that is attuned to the pulsation of Reality"(Suzuki, "Zen and Japanese Culture", 9). Zen has no Dogma, nor sacred text, unlike Buddhism, that deals with sutras and doctrine. As D.T Suzuki puts it:

"If I am asked, then, what Zen teaches, I would answer, Zen teaches nothing. Whatever teachings there are in Zen, they come out of one's own mind. We teach ourselves; Zen merely points the way" ("An Introduction to Zen Buddhism", 38).

The student who comes to Zen looking for a teacher will find that there is no such thing. There is nothing to be taught. As such, the instruction received in Zen is through a method of "direct pointing", a way of directing attention to the real and immediate, as opposed to the symbolic and mythical. As the symbolic and the mythical—most often found through the use of language—is "like a finger pointing to the moon", however the finger is not to be mistaken for the moon itself. Dogen puts its so:

Cast away all speech.
Our words may express it,
but cannot hold it.

The way of letters leaves no trace,
yet the teaching is revealed. (“The Poetry of Zen”, 119)

“Direct pointing” is commonly demonstrated in the form of—to one who is unfamiliar with Zen—the most ordinary and simple proportions. This is demonstrated in the common situation in which a Zen master would hold up an object, and pose the question “What is this?”, in which the answer must not be in words—not the negation of one thing, nor affirmation of another. A master once posed this situation to two of his students, passing the first a fan. The first student opened up the fan and fanned himself. This was regarded as “Not Bad”. The second student took the fan, scratched his neck with it, opened then fan, placed a cake upon it, then offered it to the master. This was regarded as better, “for when there are no names the world is no longer ‘classified in limits and bounds.’”(Watts 148). The student must not get caught up in conceptions and abstractions that often arise from words. The action must arise intuitively and spontaneously.

The Zen influence has found its way into many aspects of the Japanese culture. Zen, manifesting greatly from the philosophy vehicle of the East fueled by the ancient Taoist text, “The Tao Te Ching”, and credited to be brought to Japan from China by Eisai (1141-1215), who established the Rinzai school derived from Chinese Chan Buddhism, has found its way into many practical settings and practices in everyday life and culture of Japan. D.T. Suzuki states “In Zen are found systemized, or rather crystalized, all the philosophy, religion, and life itself of the Far-Eastern people, especially of the Japanese”(“An Introduction to Zen Buddhism”, 37). The haiku, Ikebana, calligraphy, and the tea ceremony are just a few incantations of the prevalence of the Zen Influence in Japanese expression.

The Japanese haiku was greatly influenced by the work of Bashō. He expressed Zen through poetry with the use of simple speech and astonishing observation:

Unloading its freight,

spilling new rainwater,
the camellia bends (“The Poetry of Zen”, 149)

The works of haiku are written in three lines, the first and last containing 5 syllabus, and the second containing 7. A haiku speaks a moment, and conveys itself through the clear perception of the present. Many poems take many lines to set a scene, yet haikus convey an image or ‘sense’ in a few words. When it comes to the faculty of haikus, saying less is indeed, more. Kobayashi Issa writes:

The distant mountains
are reflected in the eye
of the dragonfly (“The poetry of Zen, 176)

Could such an image be painted any other way? Haikus speak about the unspeakable, paint the unpaintable. If there was more to be drawn out by words, the sense of this haiku, would surely be lost to the abyss. This is in part due to the fact that, with so little, it is also up to the experiencer of the haiku to also play a role in the experience. As “a good haiku is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener’s mind, evoking associations out of the richness of [their] own memory. (Watts, 183). Afterall, when it comes to Mind, what else is there?

When writing a haiku, the focus is the journey rather than the destination; meaning rather than feeling. The grasping of a particular message to express and undertaken the task of condensing this into haiku form is attentive to anything but the ‘eternal now’. There would also be a great deal of difficulty condensing this message, and fitting it into the 5-7-5 syllable matrix. With an image in mind, or more precisely, the idea of an image in mind, the role of Master is assumed, trying to bend words with intention—imposing will. In this course of action, there is a mistake of application. Just like in Zen, where there is no intention to reach satori, and rather, one “sits just to sit”, “The sudden visions of nature which form the substance of haiku arise in the same way,

for they are never there when one looks for them" (Watts 196)." In trying to find the words, they are rendered lost. In attempts to grasp the meaning, it becomes fleeting. The act of the haiku isn't to say something. When writing a haiku, just write a haiku. In surrendering Self to the act, letting go of intention and purpose, freedom to take any action arrives; The world becomes clear: "The Haiku sees things in their "suchness", without comment—a view of the world which the japanese call sono-mama, "just as it is" or "just so"(Watts, 185)."

Ikebana, also known as *kadō (Way of Flowers),* is the Japanese art of flower arrangement. In the Western sense, in the consideration of flower arrangement, what comes to mind may be various types of flowers, symmetrically arranged in a bundle; or perhaps the vibrant colors of roses, carnations, or daisys. However, Ikebana is more asymmetrical and minimalistic. In Ikebana, the arrangement strives at accentuating the nature of the flowers. Lao Tzu writes in the Tao Te Ching:

> We join spokes together in a wheel,
> but it is the center hole
> that makes the wagon move. We shape clay into a pot,
> but it is the emptiness inside
> that holds whatever we want. We hammer wood for a house,
> but it is the inner space
> that makes it livable. We work with being,
> but non-being is what we use. (21)

The emptiness in the minimal style of Ikebana plays an integral role in enriching the form and expression of the flowers. The individual petals, branches, leaves, or sprays—whichever of which a flower may contain—are outlined further by the emptiness surrounding. Being is contrasted with Non-Being. And as such, like how one is only able to breathe the breath of life freely in open space, the same goes for the breath of life given off by the arrangement.

When practicing the way of the flowers, the arranger does not interrupt nature. In arranging, the outlines and suggestions of the flowers are followed. In experiencing *ikebana* practice in japan, I saw that attempt at deliberate action, would also bring hesitation and doubt, and the faith of the inner self revealed, is lost. Just like in haiku, if the Will is imposed, the intentionless intention of nature becomes hard to sense, and the illusory distinction between 'maker' and the 'made' arisies. In dropping destination driven action, and embracing the journey and 'such-ness', the disambiguation between man and nature arises, and the practitioner of the way of the flower, much like the Zen Gardener, is "not interfering with nature, because [they are] nature" (Watts 194).

The art of shod*ō* is an expression of Zen. Shodou is unlike most Western art forms in performance as well as appreciation. While in the west, art is greatly performed and appreciated as much as it can be understood—or not understood—through conventional knowledge. That is, the ability to understand the symbolism and the techniques used in the piece as well as its complexity to represent through words. This is not the case in shodou. In shodou, the writing is done stroke after stroke, incorporating harmony, rhythm, and feel. The Kanji being written, as well as the way it is written, is evoked from a deep expression of the writer. This expression goes beyond the conscious mind, as just as quickly as you begin to commit a stroke to paper, it ends. The function of active thinking will only interrupt the process. The distinction between writer, tool, and medium seems to blur during the performance, and the end result stands as an expression of a spontaneous act. In this way, the wielder of the brush does not will the piece to fruition, but rather, is a tool in the process of creation as much as the brush, as it is "the brush, ink and paper which determine the result as much as your own hand" (Watts 175).

Cha no yu, also known as *chadō (Way of Tea), is* the japanese tea ceremony. The form of preparing the tea commonly used in *Cha no yu*, matcha, was also brought from China by Eisai,who returned to Japan with the Rinzai school of Zen as well as Tea seeds. In this, the connection of the Way of Tea and Zen can already be surmised. The practice of the Tea Ceremony was further perfected by Rikyū (1522-1591), who

incorporated within it the expression of *wabi* and *sabi*, where, perhaps not the best translation, "*sabi* characterizes the vigorous beauty of the old and pithy, and *wabi* points to the self-transforming beauty of the impoverished"(Ludwig 47). Hard to translate because the feeling of *wabi* and *sabi* are better understood through just that—feeling.

The Tea Ceremony usually takes place in a small room, floored with *tatami,* with a fire put in the room that is used to boil tea. There is also an alcove, or *tokonoma,* in the room where a piece of calligraphy, or flower arrangement, or some other work of art is placed. This is tactically picked by the host to set the mood further, and may be influenced by the occasion. The tools present are minimalistic; only those necessary for preparing and serving tea, as well as the snacks that the guest eat while waiting for the tea to be served. From the many movements the host takes in the preparation and serving, to the guest appreciating the art that adorns their cups, turning the bowl slightly, and finishing the tea in 3 sips, this ceremony may seem ritualistic—and it very well may be said so. However, "The whole emphasis in the way of tea is on natural, serene, purposeless human activity"(Ludwig 43). Arguably more pronounced modern day, life in society can be faced paced, unceasing, and seemingly unrelenting. Yet, such unhurried awareness and appreciation expressed in Chad*ō* aid in cultivating "the sense of an infinitely expanded present [that] is nowhere stronger than in *cha-no-yu*"(Watts 190), and help reduce the allostatic load accrued from the daily turmoil of the world.

It should be noted that the names of all these crafts and practices are known as a *dō,* meaning the "way" or the "tao". Implying that the performance of these practices and crafts are an expression of the tao. From this standpoint, it is more accurate to say in these ways, what we call the product is "grown" rather than created. Because 'created' implies an subject-object, of there being a creator—a maker. The *Tao Te Ching* states:

In the practice of the Tao,
every day something is dropped.
Less and less do you need to force things,
until finally you arrive at non-action.

When nothing is done,
nothing is left undone. True mastery can be gained
by letting things go their own way.
It can't be gained by interfering. (48)

The action necessitated by force is not the way of the tao. When there is an end in mind the tao is lost. In Zen: “hurry, and all that it involves, is fatal. For there is no goal to be attained. The moment a goal is conceived it becomes impossible to practice the discipline of the art”(Watts, 175-176). Whether it is writing through shodō, arranging flowers through kadō, or having tea in chadō, the practice of these dō lie in doing them, not in the end result or what can be gained at the end of the doing.

The influence of Zen in Japanese art and culture is very apparent. Through all these art forms, the way of Zen lies behind. Zen in the expression of art and practice is like an artist who draws bamboo. If the drawing of the bamboo is deliberated, the greater intent of the practice is missed. Instead the artist must “become a bamboo and to forget that [they] are one with it while drawing it”(Suzuki, “Zen and Japanese Culture”, 31). The feeling of *Haiku*, unhurriedness in *Chadō,* the rhythm of shod*ō*, attunement with nature in kad*ō*. The way in which these art forms and practices beckon the full submersion of the Mind in the ‘eternal now’, or the Tao, is unmistakably the way of Zen.

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