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Zen's Gift to Christianity

Robert E. Kennedy S.J.

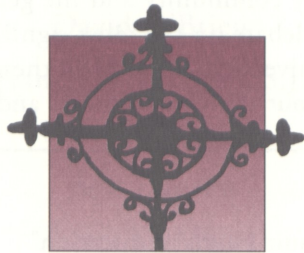
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The Santa Clara Lectures



“Zen’s Gift to Christianity”

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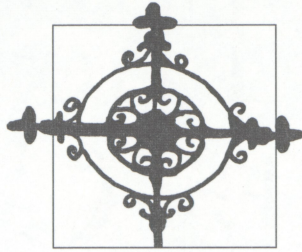
Public Lecture

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In 1994, through the generosity of the Bannan Institute for Jesuit Education and Christian Values, the Department of Religious Studies of Santa Clara University inaugurated the Santa Clara Lectures. This series brings to campus leading scholars in theology, offering the University community and the general public an ongoing exposure to debate on the most significant issues of our times. Santa Clara University will publish these lectures and distribute them throughout the United States and internationally.

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Zen's Gift to Christianity

Robert E. Kennedy, S.J.

Introduction

Our theme this evening is the interfaith dialogue between Zen Buddhism and Christianity and focuses specifically on 10 particular gifts or awarenesses that Zen can bring to Christians. These gifts, really Zen practices, come alive in the Ox Herding pictures, which for centuries in the East have been used to portray the process of human development that occurs during Zen training.¹ These gifts are *practical*: that is, they lay down a path of action for us to follow and offer us an experience rather than a theory or a theology of religion. They are *positive*: that is, they always add to the worth of the many other gifts that Christianity has received throughout time from other traditions. They are not foreign or unfamiliar to us: we have heard about them in our own Christian tradition and we have seen them extolled in the great literatures of the West. But perhaps we have not been totally energized by them. They are true gifts and nothing true is alien to our human spirit. Because the teaching of these gifts is both subtle and accessible, they evoke our gratitude. Accepting and practicing them provides us an opportunity to follow the directives on interfaith dialogue of both Vatican II and the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. Both urge us not merely to accept the truths of other faiths but to promote them as well. If we are to promote them, we must seek them with all our mind and heart.²

I have structured this lecture to follow the process of human development that one undergoes in the practice of Zen Buddhism. This process is depicted in the Ox Herding pictures, which inspire those who so desire to practice the gifts, to become insightful, and to enlist in the compassionate service of others. The ox stands for our true self, the ox herder is you and I in search of the truth of our deepest self. To explain the meaning of each picture I will present a koan (case study) from one of several classic collections of Zen teachings. I will also include poetry from our Western literature that can deepen our understanding of the picture. The pictures, koans, and poetry are all meant to evoke our determination to embark upon the journey of self-discovery that no one but we can take.

At the start, let me state the intent of the Zen Christian dialogue as I live and practice it in an interfaith community of men and women: we meet not to convert or to be converted but to learn and to listen to one another with respect and affection. The climate we have thus created, which is open, trusting, and growth producing, is reflected in the

beautiful poem by Denise Levertov in which she invites us to use our imagination to bring gifts to one another.

*Imagine this blur of chill, white, gray, vague, sadness
burned off.*

*Imagine a landscape
of dry clear sunlight, precise shadows,
forms of pure color.*

*Imagine two neighboring hills, and
your house, my house, looking across, friendly:
imagine ourselves
meeting each other,
bringing gifts, bringing news.*

*Yes, we need the heat
of imagination's sun
to cut through our bonds of cloud.*

*And oh, can the great and golden light
warm our flesh that has grown so cold?³*

I. Seeking the Ox: The Gift of Practice

To begin to search for the ox, our true self in the Zen tradition, is to begin to practice. Zen is not a thinking about life, but a practicing of life. It is the living of a process that leads to insightful service. To begin to search is already an awakening of the spirit. Since there is no end to life, or to Zen practice, or to Zen Buddhism (there is only the NOW of this instant), the beginning of practice is already a complete expression of wisdom at that moment.

The herdsman brings impressive strengths to his search for the ox. He is full of energy and searches with all his might. Although he encounters many difficulties (his feet are in a deep and muddy swamp), he does not notice them because he is intent on his search. Yet at the same time the herdsman brings a serious limitation to his search for the ox. He faces outward only. He looks for his true self in a place outside of himself. The Zen practice of paying attention helps the ox herdsman to turn his gaze inward. Sitting meditation (*zazen*) helps the beginner to pay attention, but sitting is not synonymous with paying attention. One can sit splendidly in a meditation hall and be totally distracted. Hence, the focus of practicing carefully. For if we

do not pay attention, then in the words of the great 17th-century Japanese Zen master Hakuin, we will be like torn rice bags. No matter how much rice is poured into the top of the torn bag, it spills out the bottom and the bag is never filled. So too, a half-hearted practice that does not sustain attention will never husband the energy that leads to insight.

We must keep in mind, though, there is no linear connection between being attentive and insight. Whether we call it insight or muse or spirit we know it is not bound to do our determined bidding; it is a gratuitous gift. Reading May Sarton's poem on this theme helps us to understand that no matter our effort, the receiving of insight is a gift.

The Muse

*Ripples the waters, opens doors,
Lets in sunlight, dazzles and delights ...
There is no way to make it happen by will.
No muse appears when invoked, dire need
Will not rouse her pity.*

*She comes when she can,
She too, no doubt, rising from the sea
Like Aphrodite on her shell when it is time,
To play a difficult role she has not chosen,
To free a prisoner she has no reason to love.⁵*

To explain the gift of insight which this Ox Herding picture illustrates, I have chosen the 49th koan in *The Record of Transmitting the Light, The Denkoroku*, a 14th-century collection of teachings.⁶ The story tells of a community of monks who, while chanting a well-known Buddhist scripture, are interrupted when one of the monks suddenly jumps up and shouts, "Why haven't I been told of this before?" Calling the monk to his quarters, the abbot questions him about the nature of his insight. Because the abbot knows that the monk has learned nothing new, has acquired no new knowledge, he realizes that the monk has just been given the insight to see deeply into the truth he had always known. Zen measures insight not by the yardstick but by the plumb line, not by a new fact seen but by the depth of vision that makes us hear a shop-worn truth and shout, "Why haven't I been told of this before?"

It would seem any faith, Eastern or Western, would be enriched by a community of men and women regularly practicing the discipline of paying attention under experienced direction. Indeed, if those Christians who sometimes become distracted during liturgies had the

opportunity to sit with Zen Buddhists during zazen, they would be moved to exclaim with the astonished Jesus, "I tell you, I have never found faith like this, not even in Israel."⁷

II. Finding the Traces of the Ox: The Gift of Not Knowing

The traces of the ox that the herdsman sees in this picture are analogous to all we know about the ultimate truth of things. The traces include theologies, philosophies, and faith as well as their aesthetic expressions. In brief, the traces can stand for the whole of Buddhist or Christian civilization. The traces are like so many fingers pointing to the moon, but they are not the moon. From the traces we may know a great deal, but knowing is not the Way.

The eighth koan of *The Record of Transmitting the Light* illustrates the gift of "not knowing."⁸ A zealous young monk comes to Master Vasumitra and says, "I have come to discuss the truth with you." The Master responds, "Good sir, if you discuss it, it is not the truth, truth cannot be discussed. If you intend to discuss the truth, then in the end it is not a discussion of truth. No one, not even the Buddha himself has ever seen truth, even in a dream. It is like someone who is born blind never seeing objects or colors."

The Zen teaching that we cannot know ultimate truth reminds us of our own apophatic tradition, which claims we cannot know God. That God is unknowable, that knowledge of God is beyond words, beyond discussion, was clearly taught by the Greek Fathers of the Church. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, writes: "The man who thinks that God can be known does not really have life; for he has been diverted from true being, to something devised by his own imagination."⁹

The theologian John Keenan observes that in this passage, Gregory seems to be going beyond the idea of God as unchanging, immutable essence and focusing instead on an awareness of an ever-expanding dynamic of passing beyond. Indeed Keenan contends that Gregory would have us empty all concepts, erase all ideas of God as well as all mediated knowing of God whether ordinary or theoretical.¹⁰ Does not the teaching of the early Christian teachers urging us to always go beyond what we know or think we know about God prepare us to accept the Zen gift of not knowing?

The complete reasonableness of our not knowing what can never be known is the theme of a poem by Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish 1996 Nobel prize winner for Literature. "Utopia" or "Nowhere" reinforces the enormous richness of the Zen gift of not knowing and encourages us to avoid stunting our human development

by adhering slavishly to truths.

*Island where all becomes clear
Solid ground beneath your feet.
The only roads are those that offer access.
Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.
...
If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.*

*Echoes stir unsummoned
And eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.*

On the right a cave where meaning lies

*On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.
Unshakable confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.*

*For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
And the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
Turn without exception to the sea.*

*As if all can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.*

Into unfathomable life.¹¹

To accept the gift of not knowing and to live it implies risk and a sense of feeling abandoned. For his part, the poet Stephen Dunn warns us that the loss of any cherished way of looking at God, any shift in emphasis, is painful. When we put aside the certitudes that have upheld us, we always face the risk of total doubt. When he changed his gaze from looking at the known, Dunn writes of the risk he knew he was taking. As if to convince himself to shift, he tells us he talked to himself: "I'm saying this to myself: the sacred cannot be found unless you give up some old version of it. And when you do, *mon semblable, mon frère*, I swear there'll be an emptiness it'll take a lifetime to fill."¹²

III. Finding the Ox: The Gift of Self-Reliance

After a long and arduous search the herdsman finally finds the ox. The picture shows us that the herdsman opens his eyes and sees nothing

other than himself. When the herdsman perceives the ox can no longer hide from him because he himself is the ox, he realizes he can rely only on himself. Thus is born the Zen trait of self-reliance. This is the fundamental insight of Zen that can be expressed in different ways. One way is that there is nothing but the self and this self contains the whole universe; another is that there is not a hair's-breadth difference between the seer and the seen. To have this insight: that the self disappears and the universe remains, or the universe disappears and only the self remains, is to understand the absolute unity of all things. This insight makes us self-reliant, for we know there is nothing outside the self. A koan that expresses the gift of self-reliance in a brief and clear way is the seventh in *The Blue Cliff Records*, another collection of teachings from the 12th century.¹³ The koan tells us about a monk by the name of Echo, who speaking to Master Hogen says, "My name is Echo. I ask you, what is Buddha?" Hogen says, "You are Echo." It is a happy coincidence that the monk's name rhymed with echo and this highlights Hogen's response. Echoing back the question of the monk, Hogen says, "You are Echo. Why do you ask about the Buddha?" What Hogen is telling Echo is you are all there is. You are the absolute unity of all things. Don't look outside yourself for anything.

The 49th verse in *The Book of Serenity* also focuses on the gift of self-reliance.¹⁴ In this koan Master Dongshan offers incense before the picture of his deceased teacher. A monk asks him for which instruction does he particularly revere his teacher. Dongshan replies that he reveres his teacher particularly for not having explained everything to him, for letting him find his own way. The monk asks if he agrees with his master's method of teaching. Dongshan says he partly agrees, partly disagrees. When the monk asks why he does not fully agree, Dongshan replies that if he fully agreed with his master, he would be unfaithful to his master's teaching. The Zen method of teaching shines forth brightly in this koan. The master must never clone himself in his students but allow them, urge them, to find their own style and to be truly self-reliant.

Poet James Applewhite illustrates the teaching of the koan in his poem "Prayer for My Son." In it the poet describes a scene in which his son leaves the security of home in search of fame. The father in one line tells us how different the son is from him.

*My youngest is boarding an airplane
To a New York he's never seen.
Raised in such slumberous innocence
Of Bible schools and lemonade
I adjust poorly to this thirst for fame*

Counseling the son, the father reminds him that fame comes from within, no matter the city. Beautifully the father advises his son to develop into his own talent and uniqueness.

*Oh son,
Know that the psyche has its own
Fame, whether known or not, that
Soul can flame like feathers of a bird.
Grow into your own plumage, brightly.
So that any tree is a marvelous city.¹⁵*

Similar to the father of the poem, the Zen teachers take care not to let their students imitate them; Zen teachers, instead, encourage their students to become self-reliant, to “grow into [their] own plumage brightly.”

Most vividly, William Butler Yeats forbids the security-seeking posture of subservience and demands his readers be totally self-reliant.

*What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide?¹⁶*

Yeats asks us to stop begging for favors or forgiveness and to start living out of the beauty of our lives and be as self-reliant and free as the wild geese. Agreeing with Yeats, most optimistic Christians would say we have already been forgiven and Zen Buddhists would say, “the rice has long been cooked.”¹⁷

IV. Catching the Ox: The Gift of Impermanence and Constant Change

The picture illustrates the importance of catching the ox. It is the only moment that counts. All reality exists in that moment. Focusing on the impermanence of all things, Zen offers us this gift to be aware always of flux and change in life. We Christians might think it is hardly necessary to receive such a gift as an awareness of the impermanence of all things from Zen, since we know from our many Christian sources that all things pass away. Yet John F. Haught writes that in spite of all the nuances of biology and cosmology, many theologians “have not allowed

these scientific advances to affect their thinking about God and God's relation to the world.”¹⁸ If this is so, then perhaps we can with benefit study the gift that Zen extends to us in the 13th koan of *The Gateless Gate*.¹⁹ In this koan the aged abbot Master Tokusan leaves his room and walks to the dining hall carrying his utensils for the noonday meal. A monk sees him and reminds his abbot that the bell for the noonday meal has not yet sounded. On hearing this, Master Tokusan simply turns and walks back to his room. Although some monks laugh at their beloved abbot's forgetfulness, others say he still does not know the last word in Zen. Actually, these latter are highly praising their abbot because they realize, as does the Master, that in an impermanent world such as ours, there can be no last word, no final expression of a truth. Just as Master Tokusan wisely changes his course from the dining hall to return to his room, so too whenever receiving new information, he readily changes his thinking without a hint of defensiveness or denial. He never expects permanent answers in an impermanent world. Because all teachings in Zen are descriptive rather than dogmatic statements, they are like rafts. And like the rafts they are not to be carried around after the river has been crossed.

Poets and playwrights see the impermanence of life as a liberating gift. Samuel Beckett, like Tokusan, knew there was no last word in life and wanted none in his plays. When he trusted directors, he gave them freedom to find their own solutions to their particular staging problems. Writing to a director about the staging of one of his plays Beckett writes, “what matters most is that you feel the spirit of the thing even if it involves deviations from what I've written.” He had found that this particular director, who had been touched by the disasters of war and the horror of the age, would not substitute endless repetitions of a past event for the present tense in which theater happens.²⁰

The present moment in which theater happens and which is all we have in an impermanent world is stressed by the American 1984 Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver:

*The god of dirt
Came up to me many times and said
So many wise and delectable things, I lay
On the grass listening
To his dog voice,
crow voice,
frog voice; now,
he said, and now,
—
and never once mentioned forever....²¹*

The theme of an impermanent world where the present is all we have and where there can be no last word is also the theme in Wislawa Szymborska's poem. Her poem, similar to Oliver's, stresses the importance of the now in a world of flux and change:

*... Even if there is no one dumber
If you're the planet's biggest dunce
You can't repeat the class in summer:
This course is only offered once.*²²

And in another poem Szymborska writes so emphatically about the impermanence of all things that we should be shocked into living the *now* attentively.

*Alack and woe, oh song; you're mocking me;
Try as I may, I'll never be your red, red rose
A rose is a rose is a rose. And you know it.
I worked to sprout leaves. I tried to take root.
I held my breath to speed things up, and waited
For the petals to enclose me.*

*Merciless song, you leave me with my lone,
Nonconvertible, unmetamorphic body:*

*I'm one-time-only to the marrow of my bones.*²³

Is it not most wise then to allow the Zen gift of impermanence to interrupt our theologizing and theorizing on fixed truths and to listen instead to the 'dog/crow/frog/'voice of God that repeats "now and now," and to realize that we are "one-time-only to the marrow of our bones" and so exult and live deeply in the moment.

V. Taming the Ox: the Gift of Wisdom

The picture illustrates the ox herder gently and patiently taming the ox so that the latter on its own will follow. As such, this picture moves us beyond the gift of impermanence to the further gift of wisdom. Before we define the Zen gift of wisdom from the Zen perspective, let us look at three koans from *The Record of Transmitting the Light* that reveal what wisdom is not.

In the 23rd koan a young man asks Master Manorhita why a flock of cranes follows him wherever he goes. The Master replies that in a former life, the young man was a teacher and had five hundred disci-

ples who followed him blindly, and because they did, they were reborn as birds that must still follow him. Zen teaches that imitation can never lead to wisdom because another's gift can never bring us to the wonderful brightness of our own life. That can only come through personal and courageous effort.²⁴

The 21st koan tells of Master Jayata who meets a young man who is pure and desireless, who eats just one meal a day, and pays constant reverence to the Buddha. Jayata is appalled at this behavior and is determined to liberate the boy from his asceticism. Jayata teaches that ascetic practices are the root of vanity and falseness; in fact he says they are meaningless and nothing but a big laugh. Jayata contends that even if one spends countless ages fasting and venerating the Buddha, one will not find the liberation that comes only from insight. Explaining his own insight, Jayata says:

*I do not seek the way, yet I am not confused.
I do not venerate the Buddhas, yet I am not conceited.
I do not meditate for long periods of time, yet I am not lazy.
I do not restrict myself to just one meal a day, yet I am not
attached to food.
I do not know what is enough, yet I am not covetous.
When the mind seeks nothing, this is called the Way.*²⁵

A third koan in *The Record of Transmitting the Light* illustrating what wisdom is not is the 35th. In it Master Wu-chi is said to have come upon a shrine where the inhabitants of the area are slaughtering oxen to appease demons they believe are dwelling in the area. Wu-chi burns down the shrine and liberates the oxen to teach those bent on sacrifices that the way to wisdom is neither the sacrificing of the animal nor the sacrificing of the dark side of themselves, instead he teaches them to integrate these dark powers into their personality and shape them through constant practice.²⁶

If the Zen gift of wisdom does not lie in imitations or in asceticism or in sacrifices, then where does it lie and where is it to be found? In its most basic teaching Zen Buddhism says that suffering is born from the thirst for continuity or permanence and that suffering ceases when wisdom sees that there is no continuity but only impermanence. Well then, if there is only impermanence, who is wise? Zen answers emphatically that no one is wise, that there is only wisdom itself being wise. Just as it is thought that thinks but no thinker behind the thoughts; so too there is wisdom, but no permanent self who possesses it. The one therefore who is selfless and who sees and lives the impermanence of

all things, the one who is emptiest, that one is the wisest and freest and greatest of all.

The Zen gift of wisdom is beautifully illustrated by Denise Levertov in her poem "Annunciation."

We know the scene ...

*Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
The angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
Whom she acknowledges, a guest.*

...

She did not say "I cannot, I am not worthy" nor "I have not the strength."

Such thoughts as "I cannot" or "I have not the strength" are vocalized only by those who are far from the wisdom that lives emptiness. Rather this young woman, the "Seat of Wisdom" opens herself utterly, and the emptiness and the fullness are complete.

Levertov then questions her readers about their openness to wisdom. She ends the poem on a tragic note for all who refuse the emptiness and fullness of the moment.

*Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?*

*Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.*

*More often
these moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.*

Ordinary lives continue.

*God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.²⁷*

VI. Returning Home on the Back of the Ox: The Gift of Incarnation

In the sixth Ox Herding picture the herdsman realizes totally his (the

Relative) unity with the ox (the Absolute): that is, the incarnation. Enlightened, he rides home in peace. An orthodox Jewish woman who converted to Catholicism once told me she thought Christians did not understand the incarnation because they applied it to Jesus only and not to themselves. Christians usually believe Jesus' incarnation is essentially different from ours because Jesus is the Son of God by nature; we are children of God by grace; hence Jesus is our unique and only Savior. Zen remains silent on this point; yet it offers us a gift: that is, another way of looking at the union of the absolute and the relative. Using our terms we can say that Zen offers us a new way to look at the union of God and the world, though the terms God and the Absolute are not equivalent. Because they experience the unity of the absolute and the relative, this unity is a firm tenet of Zen Buddhism and many koans dramatize it.

In the 17th koan in *The Book of Serenity*, the great teacher Master Fayán asks, "A hairs-breadth difference is as the distance between heaven and earth—how do you understand this?" Fayán understands it to mean there is not even a hairs-breadth difference between heaven and earth because if there were, heaven and earth could never be united. What Fayán is saying is there is no absolute apart from the relative. All the separate objects of our perception and thought are like flowers in the sky, they have no independent existences of their own, yet they are one with the eye that sees them.²⁸ Kathleen Raine expresses beautifully the absolute unity of all things:

*Little children
Have known always
... that the world we see
we are,
Tree, leaf and flower
Sun, moon and farthest star.²⁹*

Miss Raine's understanding about the seer and the seen being one reiterates Fayán's point that no separate object of our perception has an independent existence of its own. They are distinguished from one another but cannot be separated.

Aquinas puts the same truth philosophically when he says that creation adds nothing to the sum total of reality: that is, there can be no dualism, no two realities when we speak of God and the world. God wears different faces and speaks with different voices but there is only one reality behind all the masks. Jesus says it most simply of all: at the final judgment the King will say, "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty

and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me into your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.” And the righteous will be astonished and ask, “When did we see you ..?” (Matthew 25:31-46). The righteous seemingly believed the “King” could never be associated with the hungry, the thirsty, and the sick. Yet the parable tells us that when we touch our neighbor, we do not touch the friends of Christ; we touch Christ himself and when we touch Christ, we touch the One who sent him. In a beautiful poem “Seen in a Glass,” Kathleen Raine touches on the theme of the unity of the absolute and the relative. She writes:

*Behind the tree, behind the house, behind the stars
Is the presence that I cannot see
Otherwise than as house and stars and tree.*

...
*Upheld by being that I cannot know
In other form than stars and stones and trees ...*³⁰

Raine does not say that we are upheld by being that we do not know, but rather we are upheld by being we “cannot know/ In other form than stars and stones and trees.” Again dwelling on the unity of the absolute and relative, the verse in the 43rd koan of *The Record of Transmitting the Light* shows us this unity in a simple image.

*If you release a blackbird at night,
It flies clothed in snow*³¹

The blackbird at night is the unknowable absolute. Wherever it flies, it is covered with the snow of the visible relative moment. Incarnation then, the gift Zen offers us in the ox herding picture, encourages us to deeply appreciate that God is fully incarnate at every moment in the whole of creation. When the absolute returns to the relative, even the pebbles sparkle.

The Asian Catholic bishops who met in Thailand in January 2000 at the assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference had been directed by the Vatican to evangelize primarily by proclaiming Jesus as the unique Savior of the world. The bishops claimed that they certainly did not deny the uniqueness of Christ, but added that they were committed to the Asian quality of the Church in Asia: that is, they had to be sensitive to the enduring spirituality of Asia which is largely Buddhist. Hence the bishops stressed their need to present

both Christ and the Church not simply as unique but also as humble companions and partners of all Asians in their common quest for the truth.³²

VII. Ox Forgotten - Herdsman Remains: The Gift of Emptiness

The Zen teaching of emptiness is illustrated in the seventh Ox Herding picture, the disappearance of the ox. Whereas in the fourth Ox Herding picture we considered the Zen gift of impermanence, in the seventh Ox Herding picture we will look at how emptiness takes us a step further than impermanence. Emptiness makes us aware that there are no things that pass, that fundamentally not one thing exists, that there is not a single speck of dust in the whole universe. What Buddhism taught two thousand years ago is now taught as basic physics. The universe is the ebb and flow of energy. The “things” of this world are not static entities but processes in motion. Nature is an immensely complicated communication system. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead sums up all these ideas saying, “There is no nature at an instant.”³³ In each instant we see the emptiness or the interconnectedness of nature that allows no one thing to exist or endure. It does mean that there is no free standing universe apart from the viewer who creates his own unique world with all he sees, hears, and perceives. This emptiness is aptly expressed as inter-generational dependence, husband and wife, parents and children, young and old. There is nothing that exists independently.

In her poem “Even” Marie Ponsot not only writes about the interdependence of Adam and Eve, that is the emptiness of all, but also of the flux and impermanence of every thing. Adam and Eve exist only now:

*Adam wakes present
in the present tense
to his present Eve*

Eve comes to
Adam was nothing

not even lonely

*till Eve came to
listening*³⁴

Three Zen koans in particular tease our mind into awareness of the emptiness of all things. In the 43rd koan in *The Book of Serenity* a monk asks Master Yantou, “When arising and vanishing go on unceas-

ingly, what then?" Yantou shouts and says, "Whose arising and vanishing is it?" In this koan Yantou is teaching that the fundamental constant principle of the universe is 'moving,' but it is empty of one who moves. The koan asks if there is a pure spirit that can exist outside the moving of this universe? For Zen, because we cannot know this "pure spirit," it does not exist.³⁵ The 25th koan in *The Record of Transmitting the Light* throws up its hands at such a question and asks, "What kind of thing would an eternal spirit be?"³⁶ What the author is asking is what experience do we have of an existence outside of arising and vanishing?

When the ox herdsman realizes that there never was an ox, he comes to grips with the dream-like qualities of our existence. When we dream the characters in our dream seem very real. They may charm us or frighten us. When we wake up, however, they all disappear. That is, they show their true nature whose existence depended on our staying asleep. So too with the things of this world of our everyday life. They may charm or frighten us but their true nature depends wholly on our point of view. When we wake up they show their true nature: the ox disappears. Mary Oliver expresses the emptiness of the ox in her poem on the emptiness of the constellation Orion:

*I love Orion, his fiery body, his ten stars,
his flaring points of reference, his shining dogs.*

...

*Behind him
everything is so black and unclassical; behind him
I don't know anything, not even
my own mind.*³⁷

In the final analysis emptiness for Zen is a vision of life that fosters interdependence and cooperation. In no way does it encourage a solipsistic and individualistic lifestyle.

VIII. Complete Disappearance of Ox and Herdsman as Separate: The Gift of No Buddha—No God

For some Christians the Zen teaching of No God can be the most difficult to accept as a gift. If we examine it through a koan, we will appreciate its subtlety. The 41st koan in *The Record of Transmitting the Light* presents a student speaking to Master Tung-an; the student says, "The ancients said, 'What worldly people love, I love not.' I wonder what you love?"³⁸ The koan enumerates a list of the many things that people love. They love themselves and they love others; they love their

environment and they love their own bodies. However, Zen believes that the consequence of these loves is often iron shackles since they are born without freedom, with these shackles they will die without freedom. The lack of freedom is intensified when these shackled people begin to love the Buddhas and the patriarchs, thereby adding iron shackles to iron shackles until they are bound hand and foot and have lost all freedom. Zen demands freedom from form (your form, my form) and freedom from no form (Buddhas or patriarchs). The Buddha outside ourselves can do nothing for us. There is nothing to be had from him. He has no eyes or ears, no senses, no enlightenment or purity, and no country. He does not exist outside ourselves. Where will you meet him? Nowhere.³⁹ Wislawa Szymborska echoes the image of this koan and tells us the Great Mother has no need of the "world's details" to love and so is without shackles.

The Great Mother has no face.

Why would the Great Mother need a face

...

The Great Mother's visage is her bulging belly

With its blind navel in the middle.

The Great Mother has no feet.

What would the Great Mother do with feet

Where is she going to go.

*Why would she go into the world's details.*⁴⁰

This Zen teaching of no Buddha outside the self offers a middle road between theism and atheism. Zen avoids theism and the poet who wrote the verse for the Ox Herding picture warns us not to fall into it: "Do not linger where the Buddha dwells."⁴¹ If we search outside of ourselves for the Buddha, "he will not resemble us."⁴² Zen also avoids atheism and the same poet charges us to avoid it: "Go quickly past the place where no Buddha dwells." Century after century Zen teachers insist they are not "nihilists" like the non-Buddhists." For example the great Master Nagarjuna whom all Buddhist schools revere as a patriarch, taught that to linger with "dwell" or "not dwell" is an attachment to extreme views of existence and nonexistence.⁴³ Since we cannot know the absolute, we cannot affirm or deny anything about it. Given this view no sane person should get caught in such an endless discussion.

The Zen teaching of no Buddha can remind Christians of our own theological tradition of no God. Think, for example, of Maximus the Confessor who, agreeing with the early teaching of Dionysios, affirms the limits of theological language and consequently the primacy of apophatic theology:

[God] himself neither is nor becomes in any way at all any of the things that are or become, since he can in no way be ranked naturally with the things that are. Therefore, it is more appropriate to say that he is not, because he transcends being.... He has an existence that is simple and unknown and inaccessible to all, utterly beyond any understanding, and beyond any affirmation or negation.⁴⁴

This ancient and wholly orthodox Christian teaching of the utterly unknowable God should enable us to receive with appreciation the Zen verse of the 47th koan of *The Record of Transmitting the Light*,

*The icy spring of the valley stream -- no one peeks into it.
It does not allow travelers to penetrate its depth.*⁴⁵

Just as we cannot see the face of God, we must experience with St. Paul that Christ lives in us or as Zen would say, “the Buddha wiggles his toes in our shoes.”

IX. Return to the Origin: The Gift of No-Self

The return to the origin means to experience for the first time that there is no separate self. Nothing has changed but our capacity to realize what has always been. Zen’s gift in this ninth Ox Herding picture expands our vision of non-duality: there is nothing outside the self (no Buddha) and nothing permanent inside the self (no-self).

The 32nd koan in *The Record of Transmitting The Light* features Master Hung-Jen as a young man who by chance meets a Zen teacher on the road. When the teacher asks his name, Hung-Jen replies that he has no name. When he is questioned why he has no name, Hung-Jen astonishes the teacher by saying that since his nature is empty, he can have no name. Seeing into the emptiness of the self, Hung-Jen is not ignorantly fascinated by the forms of the people he sees in front of him nor does he separate the forms into individual selves. Living this way he is never attached to what does not independently exist.⁴⁶ The verse of this koan shows the beauty of a clear autumn evening and wonders how we could separate one “speck” of it from the whole even

if that “speck” appears different.

*Moon bright, water pure, the autumn sky clear,
How can a speck of cloud mark this immense purity.*⁴⁷

The verse of the fourth koan in *The Record of Transmitting the Light* places even more emphasis on the concept of no-self,

*House demolished, the person perished, neither inside or outside,
Where can body or mind hide their forms?*⁴⁸

The “house demolished” does not mean there is a vacuum but rather that there is no independent enduring entity that can be called a self or a soul. Reality is impermanent and impermanence is often called the permanent truth of Buddhism. The gift of no-self may be painful for us to contemplate and accept; assuredly many poets have written about losing everything and the risk of not doing so. Listen to Daniel Berrigan, for example, in his poem,

*It may be expedient to lose everything,
The moon says it, waxing in silence, the fruit of the heavens,
Grape vine, melon vine.
Autumn upon us, the exemplar, the time of falling.
One who has lost all is ready to be born into all.
buddha moon socratic moon jesus moon
light and planet and fruit of all:
“Unless the grain falling to earth die, itself remains alone”⁴⁹*

Very much resounding Berrigan’s insight, Iris Murdoch in *The Good Apprentice* writes of Thomas, a psychiatrist, who after years of practice no longer believes in dreaming along with his patients, playing doctor in an endless therapeutic drama of mutual need. He begins to see that it may be expedient for his patients to lose everything and so live. He understands that his specific work is to communicate to his patients the death that leads to life.⁵⁰

For Zen this death into life that Berrigan and Murdoch reflect upon is instantaneous. The one moment is all death and all life; it is the no-self. Neither the self nor the no-self may—can—be kept, nourished, and made holy. Its sole task is to find the force needed to choose life-giving death. Perhaps the concept of no-self can be best understood as a continuous and instantaneous transformation.

In one of her poems Mary Oliver illustrates the moment of transformation.

*For years and years I struggled
Just to love my life. And then*

*the butterfly
rose weightless, in the wind.
"Don't love your life
too much," it said,*

*and vanished
into the world.⁵¹*

X. Entering the Market with Open Hands: The Gift of Compassionate Service

The last Ox Herding picture illustrates the enlightened herdsman bringing his gifts to the marketplace. This picture depicts the end and the goal of Zen aspiration. The ox herdsman enters the marketplace with bare chest, with his face smeared with earth, and with a huge laugh streaming over his cheeks. He does not humble himself to perform miracles, but his very presence makes withered trees, that exult in his fullness of life, bloom. At the end of the journey he is a man/woman fully alive. What other achievement could any sane religious community strive for than to bring, according to their own abilities, compassionate service to the busy marketplace of humanity? The koan I have chosen to illustrate this final Ox Herding picture presents Master Ju-ching as a young monk. Full of youthful fervor, he goes to his abbot and requests that he be assigned to clean all the latrines in the monastery. The abbot refuses the request at once and tells the crestfallen young monk that he is not fit to clean the latrines. Why not, asks the young monk. Is not humble service the goal of Zen training? "Before you can do this," says the abbot, "you must show me that which is never soiled." For two years the young monk meditates and labors to find the answer to this question, and when he does, the abbot affirms his insight, and tells him, "Now you are fit to clean the latrines. Find a shovel and get busy."⁵² The abbot is a true guide to his young monk. He knows that the desire for compassionate service can come from dark and often unconscious areas of the human heart: ambition for glory, desire for approval, or the need to excel are just a few of a long list of motives that can hide behind our request to be in the service of others. Zen contends that wisdom goes hand-in-hand with compassion; with wisdom one sees what is never soiled: that is, one can serve others without becoming soiled with pride and spiritual self-seeking.

It is ironic that at the end of my attempt to present Zen as a gift to Christianity I now use the insight and example of two Jews to explain the entrance into the marketplace. Emmanuel Levinas writes that philosophy (the love of wisdom) must begin and not end with Ethics. He follows the insight of his Talmudic teacher that the material needs of our neighbor are our spiritual needs. The afflicted face of our neighbor, who appears before us, impels us to reach out and heal; and in this compassionate service we become human ourselves. Levinas believes that the Messiah is not any individual of the past or of the future, and not any one group of chosen people; the Messiah is I myself whenever I respond as a human being to the afflicted face that turns to me. In this sense Levinas teaches that we are to love the Torah more than God, because any attempt to go to God directly and bypass our suffering neighbor is madness.⁵³ Thus Levinas reinforces the insight of the last Zen Ox Herding picture: only when we are empty, that is, fully human, can we enter the marketplace.

A living example of wise and compassionate service is the service rendered by Etty Hillesum. Imprisoned as a Jew in Westerbork and waiting for death, Hillesum refused to hate her persecutors or to ignore the women suffering all around her. She also refused to hide behind words such as "God" and "death" and "suffering" and "eternity." Forgetting all stereotyped ideas about life and letting all personal ambition fall away, Hillesum lived as the thinking and compassionate heart of the barracks, and when they came to kill her, she went to her death "singing." What a wonderful example of the final Ox Herding picture is the life and death of this magnificent Jewish woman: clear eyed, refusing to hate, the thinking heart of the barracks, who stepped into the worst life had to offer, and went to her death singing.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In the second half of the 20th century, global communications have evolved to the point where the Christian world can no longer be ignorant of Zen Buddhism. The meeting of these two international religions can bring needed light and compassion to many and must not be allowed to degenerate into pre-judgments and misunderstanding. Fortunately there is a new generosity and openness in the Christian world to non-Christian religions that can enrich us profoundly. The gifts Zen Buddhism offers will not satisfy every personality and many Christians will be content to be completely nourished by our own scriptures and traditions. But for some Christians, coupled with the

insights of our tradition, the gifts of Zen are life enhancing: an inter-faith practice with like-minded men and women, mutually supportive and inspiring and always for the common good.

Recall again the words of Denise Levertov:

*Imagine two neighboring hills, and
your house, my house, looking across, friendly:
imagine ourselves
meeting each other,
bringing gifts, bringing news.*

Endnotes

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