Zen Buddhism

By Jason Barker

Founder: Bodhidharma (sixth century AD)

Official Publications: *Lankavatara Sutra*; *Lotus Sutra*; *Heart Sutra*; *Diamond Sutra*; *Surangama Sutra*; *Platform Sutra*; koans

HISTORY

The founding of Zen Buddhism is traditionally linked to a story about the "Flower Sermon" given by Gautama Buddha, in which the Buddha simply stared at a flower; a disciple named Mahakasyapa broke into a wide smile after also staring at the flower, thereby giving birth to the wordless wisdom of Zen (the earliest appearance of this story is in 1029 AD, roughly 1400 years after the event).[1] Zen maintains that this wordless wisdom was then transmitted outside the doctrinal teaching of Buddhism through a series of patriarchs until Ch'an—the Chinese form of (and predecessor to) Zen—was firmly established in the sixth century.

Buddhism was brought from India to China approximately 148 AD, although it did not begin to grow as a religion distinct from the native Taoism until early in the third century. [2] The religion did not become firmly established until approximately 520 [3], when the 28th patriarch (and first Zen patriarch), Bodhidharma, traveled from India to northern China. Bodhidharma reportedly spent nine years meditating while facing a wall in the famed Shao-lin monastery—stories about these years include anecdotes about his legs falling off, and his tearing away his eyelids to prevent himself from sleeping. [4]

Hui-neng, the sixth Zen patriarch and considered to be the father of modern Zen, attracted thousands of disciples in the late 600s with his intense emphasis on non-duality and regaining the original enlightenment in which we are born through "no-thought," or refusing to entertain or become attached to thoughts. [5] Zen was carried to Vietnam (becoming Thien Buddhism) in the late sixth century, and Korea (becoming Seon Buddhism) in the seventh-ninth centuries.

Zen was established in Japan during a time of tremendous societal upheaval, as the Kamakura period(1185-1333) saw the establishment of a military dictatorship and reformation of Japanese Buddhism.[6] While Buddhism itself was introduced to Japan in the sixth century, Zen was not brought to the islands until Myoan Eisai returned from studies in China in 1191 and established the *Rinzai* school[7] (founded in China in the late ninth century by Lin-Chi [8]), which maintains that individuals can become suddenly enlightened, and toward this end practices *zazen* (sitting meditation) and meditation upon *koans* (riddles and paradoxical stories that demonstrate the inadequacy of logic). In comparison, the second primary Zen school in Japan, *Soto* (founded in China in the ninth century by Tung-Shan and Ts'ao-Shan, and established in Japan in 1227 by Dogen), emphasizes the primacy of *zazen* in enlightenment. [9]

Factionalism arose among Zen practitioners during the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries (particularly as Ch'an priests fled from China to Japan during the fall of the Ming dynasty). [10] This factionalism initiated a growing link between Buddhism and Japanese nationalism that reached its zenith during World War II. [11] The growth Zen experienced during the Tokugawa dictatorship (1603-1868) declined due to official governmental support for Shintoism during the Meiji period (1868-1912), as well as the effects of industrialism and growing criticism from Marxists. [12] In response, during the early Showa period (1926-45) of Emperor Hirohito (who ruled until 1989), the Buddhist sects closely aligned themselves with the national government, supporting the

emperor and the war effort in exchange for enhanced status and patronage. [13] The alignment was so explicit that the Zen concept of "no-thought" was used as a rationale for the willingness of Japanese soldiers to sacrifice themselves in battle. [14]

Zen Buddhism has experienced a significant decline in post-war Japan, with the religion largely being relegated to funerary services, cultural rituals and tourism (although some experts are optimistic about its revival). [15] The West, in contrast—and particularly North America—has been a fertile ground for Zen. D.T. Suzuki predicted in 1909 that many Americans would abandon Christianity for Buddhism if they saw something to be gained through the conversion [16]—this prediction has proved prescient, as there are now over three million Buddhists in the United States.[17] The significance of Zen can be seen in the presence of over 400 Zen centers throughout the country; furthermore, almost all of these centers have opened since 1965. [18]

Scholars frequently observe two general categories of Buddhism—both Zen and others—in North America: "Asian American" or "immigrant" Buddhism, and "convert American" Buddhism. The "Asian American" Buddhist prioritizes the ethnic and/or national identity reaffirmed within the Buddhist community, whereas the "American convert" Buddhist prioritizes the search for personal fulfillment. [19]

Also, while Buddhism is primarily an immigrant religion in North America, "American convert" Buddhists are overwhelmingly white, well-educated and middle class. [20]

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

Mahayana Buddhism: Zen is a school within Mahayana, or "Great Vehicle" Buddhism. Most Buddhists are Mahayana Buddhists; the more traditional Theravada, "Teaching of the Elders" Buddhism is largely limited to Southeast Asia. With all Buddhists—both Mahayana and Theravada—Zen adheres to the Four Noble Truths (suffering exists; suffering arises from attachment to desires; suffering ceases when one is no longer attached to desires; and freedom from suffering comes through following the Eightfold Path) and the Eightfold Path (right understanding; right intention; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; and right meditation).

Nothingness: The foundational concept of Zen Buddhism is *sunyata*, meaning "emptiness" or "nothingness." The concept is memorably expressed in a famous axiom from the *Heart Sutra*, "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form; form is not other than emptiness; emptiness is not other than form." This emptiness or nothingness is not a "nothing" that is set up in opposition to "reality" or "existence," but instead means that everything we experience does not have any kind of independent or self-supporting existence; all things are of the single, absolute nature (*shinnyo*, or "suchness" (or, as D.T. Suzuki puts it, "as-it-is-ness" [21]), and therefore are inextricably interrelated.

If emptiness or nothingness is true reality, why then do independent things seem to exist? Russell H. Bowers, Jr., explains the Buddhist understanding like this:

> All the things-which-are-at-heart-truly-nothingness come into existence through pratìtya-samutpàda or codependent origination. Pratîtya-samutpàda is symbolized in Buddhist art as a twelve-spoked wheel conveying the idea that 'because of this, that becomes; because of that, something else becomes.' Reality is thus 'a boundless web of interrelations whose momentary nodes make up the 'things' of experience. It is pure relation without substance.' [22]

All things arise because we (for lack of a better term) think them into existence. As Seung San explains, "You make your world. You make your time and space. You also make the cause and effect that controls your life. All these things come from our minds." [23]

No-Thought: In Zen, the key to overcoming the problem of codependent origination is "no-thought" which, as we saw above, means refusing to entertain or become attached to our thoughts as they arise. This does not mean that all thinking ceases; instead, it means the mind does not have "any gaining idea." [24] In other words, a mind that is freed from attachment to thoughts—that attains "no-thought"—realizes what Shunyru Suzuki calls the "original mind," which "includes everything within itself. It is always rich and sufficient within itself." [25]

God and Creation: No-thought transcends the false concepts of duality. Shunryu Suzuki says,

> When everything exists within your big mind (i.e., a mind that is untroubled by dualistic thoughts) all dualistic relationships drop away. There is no distinction between heaven and earth, man and woman, teacher and disciple…In your big mind, everything has the same value. Everything is Buddha himself. [26]

Because everything is Buddha himself, there is no Creator God, nor any creation to be made or sustained by Him. As Robert Aitken puts it, "All things are indeed the Tathagata (i.e., the Buddha—Alan Watts says the term frequently describes reality itself [27]," and thus "all beings by nature are gods. Lofty indeed!" [28] We must therefore realize that we ourselves are "God;" in fact, problems exist in the world because "we forget the fundamental source of our creating," [29] namely, that we ourselves create all things through attachment to dualistic thought. The Kyoto school of Zen, which uses Western philosophy and religion to re-express Eastern concepts, explicitly teaches that Christians must mature to the point where they no longer see the need for a personal God. [30]

Evil and Sin: Among the dualistic constructs Zen rejects are the conceptions of good and evil. Shunryu Suzuki clearly states the Zen ethical position when he says, "Good and bad are only in your mind. So we should not say, 'This is good,' or 'This is bad'…If you think, 'This is bad,' it will create some confusion for you. So in the realm of pure religion there is no confusion of time and space, or good or bad." [31]

Zazen: *Zazen*, or sitting meditation, is the central practice of Zen. Robert Aitken calls *zazen* "the heart of Zen training," explaining, "This unity of ends and means, effect and cause, is the *tao* (way) of the Buddha, the practice of realization." [32] Shunryu Suzuki sums up, "Your zazen is sitting Buddha, or Buddha's zazen, which is realization itself. It is enlightenment itself. It becomes the unsurpassable wisdom…itself. Have this kind of faith." [33]

In *zazen* the practitioner sits in a lotus position, with legs crossed and hands arranged upon each other. The position is not merely intended to enhance the person's concentration, but to open his or her concentrated self. [34] The practitioner also focuses on his or her breathing, initially counting breaths as a way of settling the mind, [35] but ultimately to breathe into and out from the "infinite openness" in "a kind of infinite exchange between the internal and the external." [36]

Shunryu Suzuki, in delineating the four stages of Zen practice, says the highest stage involves forgetting all physical and mental sensations, forgetting about oneself and the fact that one is meditating; [37] in this state the body expresses "just-as-it-is-ness" through *zazen*. [38]

Koans: While *zazen* in Soto Zen typically refers almost exclusively to sitting meditation alone, Zen practice in Rinzai also includes meditating upon *koans*. As stated above, *koans* are riddles and paradoxical stories that demonstrate the inadequacy of logic; as one wrestles with an unanswerable question, he or she experiences the futility of rational, logical thinking. One of the most famous examples—attributed to the seventeenth century master Hakuin Ekaku—ends with the question, "What is the sound of one hand (clapping)?"

In Rinzai the practitioner receives a *koan* from the master, meditates upon the *koan*, then returns for a meeting in which his or her understanding of the *koan* is tested; the master determines if the practitioner has been carried beyond the entanglement of words and logic into the true experience of thoughtless silence. [39] *Koans* are used complementarily with *zazen*: the practitioner moves back-and-forth between the silent, individual practice of *zazen* and the active engagement with the master using *koans* in order to overcome the discriminating mind.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

God is Personal: God is alive (Deut. 5:26)—in fact, He is entirely self-existing and self-sufficient (John 5:26). While He is far beyond our comprehension (Rom. 11:33-34), God nonetheless enables us to know Him (1 Cor. 2:11, Deut. 29:29), and therefore know He is intelligent (Rom. 11:33), engaging in activity that accomplishes His will (Ps. 135:5-7, cf. Eph. 1:11, 3:11). God is also distinct from His creation: He is the Creator, (Neh. 9:6) making both the spiritual (Ps. 148:2, 5) and physical (Gen. 1, Isa. 45:18) worlds.

Creation: The mere fact that God reveals to us, His creation, that He is our Creator is overwhelming evidence for the existence of a created, physical world. Furthermore, God not only created humanity, but also made humans the apex of His creation (Ps. 8:3-8, cf. Gen. 1:26-28).

Evil and Sin: Evil and sin are not simply faulty conceptions of dualistic thinking, but instead are very present realities. Evil entered the world with Satan (Gen. 3:1), [40] and is intrinsically tied up with fallen human nature (Mat. 15:19, Mark 7:21-22, cf. Rom. 7:14-23). The suffering which Buddhism works to eradicate is therefore not merely flawed thinking, but instead is the physical and psychological result of evil and sin (Gen. 3:17, Rom 5:12, 6:23, 8:19-21). God is opposed to evil and evildoers (Prov. 6:16-19, Ps. 34:16).

Thinking and Meditation: While acknowledging both that we can never fully comprehend God and His ways, and that our thoughts are corrupted by our fallen nature, we nonetheless are never called to develop "no-thought." Instead, we are called to "be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2, cf. Eph. 4:23). Christians are to set our minds on things above (Col. 3:2), applying our minds to God's knowledge and thinking about what is true, pure and lovely (Prov. 22:17, Phil. 4:8).

Likewise, Christian meditation involves not emptying the mind of attaching thoughts, but instead focusing one's thoughts upon God and His works (Josh. 1:8, Ps. 1:2, 55:17, 77:6, 12, 119:15, 12, 48, 97, 99).

Notes

[1] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "History of Zen Buddhism from Bodhidharma to Hui-Neng (Yeno)," in D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series*, ed. Christmas Humphreys (New York: Grove Press, 1949), 168-69.

[2] Thomas Hoover, *The Zen Experience* (New York: Plume, 1980), 20.

[3] Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 83-84.

[4] Hoover, 27, 29-30.

[5] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "History of Zen Buddhism," 212-13, 219-20; Hoover 72-74.

[6] See Whalen Lai, "After the Reformation: Post-Kamakura Buddhism," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 5.4 (1978): 258-65. In addition to Zen, the Nichiren Buddhist movements were started during this period; see David J. Hesselgrave, *Watchman Fellowship Profile: Nichiren Shoshu / Soka Gakkai Buddhism*.

[7] Hoover, 186, 189.

[8] Ibid. 139.

[9] Ibid. 153, 198.

[10] Michael Mohr, "Zen Buddhism During the Tokugawa Period," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 21.4 (1994): 348-49.

[11] For the most extensive study of this development, see Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006).

[12] Christopher Ives, "Protect the Dharma, Protect the Country: Buddhist War Responsibility and Social Ethics," *Eastern Buddhist* 33.2 (2001): 23.

[13] Ives, 23-24.

[14] Aasulv Lande, "Japanese Zen Buddhism in the Pacific War," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 93.2 (2005): 190-91.

[15] George Tanabe, Jr., "The Death and Rebirth of Buddhism in Contemporary Japan," *Buddhist Studies Review* 23.2 (2006): 251.

[16] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "The Prospects for Buddhism in Europe and America," trans. Wayne S. Yokoyama, *Eastern Buddhist* 39.2 (2008): 70.

[17] Gary Storhoff Gary and John Whalen-Bridge, "American Buddhism as a Way of Life," in *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, ed. Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010): 1.

[18] Peter N. Gregory, "Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America," *Religion and American Culture* 11.2 (2001): 238, 239.

[19] Ibid. 242, 244; cf. Jason C. Bivins, "Beautiful Women Dig Graves: Richard Baker-roshi, Imported Buddhism, and the Transmission of Ethics at the San Francisco Zen Center," *Religion and American Culture* 17.1 (2007): 64-67; Wendy Cadge, "Reflections on *Habits*, Buddhism in America and Religious Individualism," *Sociology of Religion* 68.2 (2007): 202-03.

[20] Gregory 245-46. Indiana University Buddhist scholar Jan Nattier says this places Zen in the socio-economic category of "elite Buddhism."

[21] Abe Masao, "Emptiness is Suchness," *Eastern Buddhist* 11.2 (1978): 133.

[22] Russell H. Bowers, Jr., "Defending God Before Buddhist Emptiness," *Biblioteca Sacra* 154 (1997): 399. Bowers quotes Jan Van Bragt.

[23] Seung Sahn, *The Compass of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 89.

[24] Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. Trudy Nixon (New York: Weatherhill, 1970 (34th ed., 1995), 41.

[25] Ibid. 21.

[26] Ibid. 44.

[27] Watts 68.

[28] Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), 83.

[29] Shunryu Suzuki 67. Suzuki adds, "How is it possible for (God) to help when He does not realize who He is?"

[30] See Bowers, Jr. 401-02.

[31] Shunryu Suzuki 30.

[32] Aitken 13, 14.

[33] Shunryu Suzuki 34.

[34] Ueda Shizuteru, "The Practice of Zen," trans. Ron Hadley, *Eastern Buddhist* 27.1 (1994), 19.

[35] Aitken 24.

[36] Shizuteru 21.

[37] Shunryu Suzuki 73.

[38] Shizuteru 21.

[39] See Steven Heine, "Does the Koan Have Buddha-Nature? The Zen Koan as Religious Symbol," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58.3 (1990), 360, 381. Heine argues against the traditional Rinzai approach for a more symbolical understanding of *koans*.

[40] Also, the serpent is identified in Revelation 12:9.

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