

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

The Buddha Does Not Know, He Sees

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THIS REMARKABLE miniature-sized book of ninety small pages—of which at least ten are devoted to Huston Smith's preface and Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi's introduction—might well serve as a pocket mirror in which many a Westerner may glimpse and perhaps recognize, as in a glass darkly, his own Original Face. It is the lucid, unadorned and beautifully written account of the author's travelogue from childhood, via the upheavals of adolescence and the hubris of academia, to her arrival at that "nothing special" that is our birthright. As such it is in welcome contrast with that unceasing stream of verbose academic outpourings on Buddhism and Zen which flood the marketplace, that confused marketplace which needs Bodhisattvas to guide the bedevilled out of their delusions, their conditioning.

Flora Courtois should not be unfamiliar to this journal's readers; her magistral overview of Mahayana in relation to the "Growing Perceptual Revolution" in the Autumn 1981 issue of the *Eastern Buddhist* is well worth rereading in conjunction with this little book of considerable inner dimension.

I read it a number of times. In each reading I was struck by its experiential openness, its honesty and such absence of pretentiousness that I concluded that it must be the publisher rather than the author who is responsible for its somewhat lofty title. I also felt that Flora

* This is a review of Flora Courtois, *An Experience of Enlightenment* (Theosophical Publishing Company).

Courtois' pilgrimage may well be one in which many Westerners will recognize their own Way to that contact with the innermost workings of life known as Zen. I was one of these, hence could identify so many bus stops on her itinerary as in a *déjà vu*, that instead of reviewing this lovely autobiography I must take the risk of appearing presumptuous by really responding to it, which implies having to be autobiographical—let me quickly add: without any claim of having reached, or be anywhere close to, the destination.

Flora Courtois' journey started in the American Middle West, mine on that southernmost tip of Holland that, like a thin, narrow appendix, lies compressed between the Belgian and German borders. Precisely at the tip of this appendix, less than a mile from where I was born, both World War I and II exploded. Nevertheless we have both lived our lives through most of this appalling century, so full of pain that D. T. Suzuki's saying that "The spiritual life is pain raised above the level of mere sensation" comes to mind.

She, when still a child, felt herself in "magic communion with other living things," rescued drowning insects, saved the lives of wayward spiders. I almost killed the schoolmate who took delight in pulling out the wings of the flies he caught. Both she and I were uncomfortable with people of our own age; from quite early in life we were too busy searching for meaning, experimenting with possible roles to play when grown up. We both collected scrap books full of the sayings of sages, buried ourselves in the great thinkers from Plato through Nietzsche, vainly hoping, not so much for the solution as for the existential resolution of our philosophical and metaphysical problems. In early adulthood we chose the role of healer, she in psychology, I in medicine, trying desperately to break through what Viktor Fränkl speaks of as "the existential vacuum." At some point we had a crucial and almost identical experience while undergoing general anesthesia. In her case it was the perception of a spiral of light; what I saw was the rhythmic expanding and contracting of concentric light circles. To both of us it gave the sensation of a revelation, of suddenly "understanding all things." Aldous Huxley wrote about such moments of self-transcendence that they are "a gratuitous grace which is no guarantee for permanent enlightenment or lasting improvement of conduct."

Flora Courtois was brought up a Catholic. I grew up in an agnostic

family, surrounded by a solidly Catholic culture. We both were to reject our programming. I had the good fortune to escape Catholic indoctrination and to absorb the Catholic symbol system as by osmosis without the distortions of theological conditioning. These symbols therefore could serve as vehicles for first hunches of Reality and Meaning and retain their poignancy later in *life, filtered through* and trans-illuminated by, Buddhist insights.

Almost comically, at thousands of miles distance, we both were naive enough at some point to question ordained deputies of God to shed light on His mysteries. We were sent home by these poor parish priests with a string of ready made platitudes and books that could only estrange us even more from all institutionalized religion, "organized efforts to protect and distract people from the awesome struggles and dangers of transformation" as Courtois puts it. We were both destined to search, suffer and experiment until the moment of an un hoped-for 180 degree turnabout. It changed our view of self and world as radically as it transmuted what we had assumed to be our very own character structure. Introversion in a minor key changed overnight into an entirely positive attitude to Being. We saw ourselves not only as on earth, but as part of it. We had come home. What is interesting is that, for both, the turnabout seemed literally to consist in a radical revolution in sense perception, to that quality of "seeing" which as Hui-neng says constitutes the very Meaning of life. Flora Courtois speaks of it as "open vision." For me it was the retrieval of that "stereoscopic seeing" of which I recalled having known foretastes before even entering grade school. In this stereoscopic seeing grasses, trees, insects, myself, were perceived as each one growing from its own roots, yet from a root system infinitely intertwined. It was a first hint of what I later recognized in Wanshi's: "Take up anything you want and see It so clearly manifested" . . .

There was more we had to go through: we both were referred to psychiatrists by worried relatives for whom the difference between metanoia and paranoia was unclear, and with whom communication therefore was seriously impaired.

Then we were to discover in literature, with a joyous shock of recognition, confirmation of what we had experienced. For Mrs. Courtois it was the reading of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* followed by sutras and the Tao Te Ching. For me it happened

when while browsing in a secondhand book store I picked up a dog-eared copy of D. T. Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, in the old Rider & Co. edition. But for both it was as if we suddenly found ourselves in a never trodden landscape where every tree, every moleheap, was so familiar that we had the feeling of having come home to where we were born. We had at last, each in his own bumbling way, re-discovered the repressed Eastern half of our truncated Western lives.

Twenty-five years after her East-West kenshō Flora Courtois met Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi who in his introduction to her book writes: "Our Buddha Nature has the great function by which illumination is deepened endlessly through practice."

It is in this "practice" that our ways were to part. Hers was that *shikan taza* of which the Rōshi wrote: "It is the sitting in the center of a clearing in the forest, knowing that ultimate danger is about to strike, but *not* knowing what form it will take or from which direction it will come." She has continued to practice *shikan taza* assiduously.

For me the deepening of my retrieved "stereoscopic seeing" seemed to demand another discipline. I happened to be an "artist," that is: a loner driven to make, to secrete as it were, images. And so my zazen, my Way, became what later I was to call seeing/drawing, in which the seeing and the drawing become one divided act. In seeing/drawing the hand notes down directly what the eye perceives with minimum interference of the word-processor in the brain, the discursive, labeling intellect. In seeing/drawing I live those "moments of ultimate danger" in which the "tension between peak alertness and profound stillness is stretched to its taut limit." The field of perception becomes maximally open and receptive to Being. In seeing/drawing the total concentration is on the *not-I* until the split between subject and object seems suspended, It becomes I and I become It. Egoic perception, "looking-at" seems to evaporate. Boehme's "*umgewandtes Auge*"?

Are we "mystics" perhaps? The Way is not the privileged reserve of "mystics." It is no more than the assignment of everyone born human to become Human, to confront the Real face to face. It is the endless voyage to the Unattainable Self of which Hui-neng says: "Everything is a manifestation of the Buddha-nature which is not defiled by the passions, nor purified in enlightenment." Dōgen clarifies it further as the Buddha-nature all beings ARE, and none of us HAVE, those from

FRANCK

“north as well as south of the river,” those from the Eastern and Western shores of the Pacific. The indispensable little push needed to set us on the Way to its awakening, however, had to come for us, Westerners, from the Eastern shore. That the first one to apply that little push to us so forcefully, so irresistibly, was that pioneer, that Francis Xavier of Zen to the West, Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, must never be forgotten. The story of American Zen started in 1897, when Suzuki left Japan to reside in Chicago. It is an axial event.

Count Karlfried Dürckheim, perhaps the most powerful transmitter of Zen in Europe, tells us how he once asked Suzuki:

“Surely a person looking for the truth is like a fish looking for water?”

“Yes,” the old pioneer answered, “but even more like water looking for water.”

Still, Flora Courtois’ miniature book will be a refreshing thirst quencher for many.