

Reflections on Zen Buddhism

by Nyogen Senzaki

Editor's note: Nyogen Senzaki was one of the disciples of the famed Zen teacher Sōen Shaku, whose participation in the World Parliament of Religions of 1893 was instrumental in introducing Zen to the West. Shaku made another trip to the United States in 1905. At that time he was accompanied by Senzaki, who stayed on in the United States, and who eventually began teaching in 1922, establishing a Zen center in San Francisco. Despite his propagation of Zen in the United States, Senzaki has generally been obscured by another, much more famous of Shaku's disciples, D.T. Suzuki. The following articles originally appeared in *Pacific World* I, no. 2 (September 1925): pp. 40–42, 56; *Pacific World* II, no. 2 (March 1926): pp. 41, 48; and *Pacific World* II, no. 6 (May 1926): pp. 57, 71.

ZEN BUDDHISM

THERE IS A SAYING: The one who knows much says little, and one who knows little says a great deal. This proverb also may apply to Zen. If you should ask any Japanese if he knows the term "Zen," and he answers "yes," you can judge him to be a learned man, and you will see that he is of higher culture than the ordinary Japanese. If you ask, however, what is Zen, you will never get, from anyone, an answer that will give you a clear understanding; for many Japanese think about Zen, and even like it very much, but few will talk about it.

If you meet anyone who chatters about Zen too much, you can be assured that he has not the Zen spirit as yet. If you ask others, a wise one might tell you to go to a Zen master—that is, a Zen teacher. Then you pay a visit to a Zen monastery, and meet a Zen master. "What is Zen?" you may ask him. He may shut his door in your face, or he may slap your cheek with his strong hand. There comes a spark of Zen. Zen spirit cannot be explained, it must be experienced.

The word "Zen" is a Japanized Sanskrit. It should be pronounced *dhyāna* in its original. When Buddhism entered China, the translators adopted two Chinese characters to stand for the word *dhyāna*. The Chinese never had the phonetic letters until very recently, so they applied two characters like this 禪那 to represent *dhyāna*. These characters were pronounced "zen-na"

at that time, though modern Mandarin pronounces them “shan-nai.” Of course, they simply copied the nearest pronunciation to Sanskrit, and they used several synonyms for *dhyāna* besides these two characters.

In these two characters, the last one is auxiliary, but the first one has some very interesting meanings. When the ancient Chinese worshipped the heavens, they used to sweep the ground very carefully, then they stood on this swept ground and paid homage to the heavens. This ceremony was called Zen and written in this first character. Another meaning of this character is “to inherit.” When a father gave the family treasures to his son, or when the Emperor abdicated his throne in favor of the crown prince, this was also called Zen, and was written as this character. Another meaning of this character is “quietness,” which coincidentally comes very near the true meaning of *dhyāna* in Sanskrit. In Sanskrit, *dhyāna* means quietness, or meditation, or contemplation, and Chinese synonyms for *dhyāna* are translated accordingly. When Zen Buddhism flourished in China, this one character Zen became the signification of that teaching, and entered Japan with its simple and new name.

Zen Buddhism first entered China from India in the Leang dynasty, which began in 502 of the Christian Era and flourished in that land for nearly one thousand years. In these one thousand years were included the Tang dynasty and Sung dynasty—the golden age of Chinese literature. Many Japanese Buddhists went to China in that time, learned Zen, and then returned to the Mikado’s land, that is, Japan.

Now in this modern age, in India, Zen spirit is sparsely found, and in China, it has almost vanished. It seems to me Zen has remained in Burma and Siam in a different form. True Zen masters, however, are living in Japan at the present, and they are the few who carry the lamp of wisdom which was inherited directly from the Buddha Śākyamuni, and handed down from master to master. It is the mission of the Japanese Buddhists to introduce this thought to the Western world, and have the term “Zen,” which is Japanized Sanskrit, live up to its true meaning.

Buddha Śākyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, was born in India as a crown prince, but gave up his bright future for the spiritual emancipation to free himself from all worldly delusions and to enlighten his fellow beings on this earth. He was called Siddhārtha Gautama. He entered the monkhood when he was twenty-nine years old, and studied many teachings of that time, seeking the true emancipation. He journeyed from place to place for six years, and at the end of that time, he found himself tired and weakened from his wanderings and many fastings. Then, one day, he took a bath in the river Nairanjana, a branch of the great Ganges. Owing to his weakness, he could not regain the bank of the river. A milk maid, Nandabara, happened there, and after helping him out, she gave him some rice milk. On gaining strength, he determined to attain Buddhahood through *dhyāna*—that is, meditation.

He then crossed the river and went to Gaya, which is now called Bodhgayā. There he sat under the Pippala Tree and meditated seven weeks. He entered into a spiritual condition called *samādhi* until one dawn, and when he saw a star blaze forth in the eastern sky, he, at that moment, acquired the realization. He cried out: "I see now all beings in this world have perfect wisdom and complete virtue, but they simply do not know it. I must teach them the truth." That was five hundred thirty years before the Christian Era, or 2455 years ago. All Japanese Buddhists believe this date, and J. F. Fleet almost believes the same.

Buddha Śākyamuni preached in India until he was eighty years old, and then passed from this world. His teachings were recorded in many thousands of scriptures. Zen Buddhism endeavors to actualize what Buddha Śākyamuni acquired through his meditation. Buddha said, "If you are brave enough to break down your delusions, you will be a buddha at this moment. If you are weak-minded and walk back and forth, you will never get enlightened."

In Buddhism, a truth-seeker is called a bodhisattva, meaning a person who has a great big heart and seeks his own enlightenment to enlighten others. Buddhism is not a teaching revealed from heaven. It is the teaching of our own living world. It is the result of our own intellectual work. Buddha was not a son of a Supreme being. He was merely a human, a truth-seeker, a bodhisattva. We all should be bodhisattvas, and we will be buddhas in the future, not the future of a hereafter, but in these actual living days.

Generally speaking, I am a Buddhist, but I do not belong to any sect. As a citizen of the world, I have a right to study the thought of any teaching and discuss any problem of human experience freely, in the comparison of modern science and philosophy.

One writer said, "Can any faith not based on the Christian Bible contain anything good? Once upon a time, the question would have been answered with a sharp and emphatic negative. Such times have passed away." This is the age of free thinking. We should enjoy our privilege as thinkers in the twentieth century.

Zen is a sort of monism, and a very practical one. People think that Buddhism is a pantheism. Yes, you can trace some pantheistical color in many Buddhist scriptures, as well as some polytheistic features here and there. But, its significance should rather be called materialistic pantheism or plainly atheism. Buddhism is a religion of thought, not feeling; therefore, the more you trace back into its essence, the more you will experience a cold, intellectual analysis of thought. A study of Buddhism will be "an ambassador of good will and understanding between East and West—between the old world of thought and new world of action," and then, "may help to a revival of that true spirit of charity which neither despises nor fears the nations of another creed and color." The true meaning of worldly brother-

hood will be found right there. Buddhism is the backbone of the Oriental culture, and Zen is the spirit of Buddhism.

Dr. David Starr Jordan once walked in a garden with a little girl, to whom he told James Whitcomb Riley's story of the "goblins that get you, if you don't watch out," an uncanny freak of imagination supposed to be especially attractive to the children. The little girl said to him, "But, there isn't any such thing as a goblin, and there isn't ever going to be such a thing." She was such a practical little girl. Dr. Jordan said to her, "Maybe there isn't any such a thing as anything." Then she said to him, as she looked about the garden for unquestionable reality, "Yes, there is such a thing as a squash." Dr. Jordan mentioned this anecdote in his book and said, "In this conclusion of the little girl, the reality of the objective world, the integrity of science, the sanity of man are alike bound up. The distinction between objective and subjective, between reality of perception and illusion of nerve disorder, between fact and dream, between presence and memory, is fundamental in human psychology—is essential in human conduct."

Now, Zen realization transcends all distinctions and sees them all as one. There is no such thing as a squash separate from the whole universe. You just call it a squash. You may call it an orange; why not? I wave my hand. This is really not my hand. I grasp my hand. I am grasping the whole universe, and now I am opening my hand. There goes out the whole universe. I am not trying to make the matter strange; I am only trying to show you absoluteness, or oneness, or emptiness, according to the Prajña school of Buddhism. Emmanuel Kant called it "noumenon." They say in German, "das Ding an sich," that is, "the thing in itself." In Kantian philosophy, noumenon is used to denote an object, thought, which is not also an object of intuition or perception, actual or possible. According to Kant, knowledge is possible only as the object of perception. It is the result of the cooperative function of perception and conception. Perception without conception is blind. Conception without perception is empty. Now, noumenon is an object of conception without collaboration of perception. Such a noumenon would be, for instance, a substantial soul as a thing itself, or matter as a thing itself. In antithesis to noumenon stands phenomenon. That little girl about whom Dr. Jordan was speaking accepted phenomenon as a squash. But, to find out what a squash really is will take a thinker's hard work. Zen will teach you how you can realize this noumenon, and how you can live up to it—one for all, and all for one.

Jalal-ud-din Rumi was a Persian philosopher and poet who lived in the early part of the thirteenth century. He was a thinker of Persian Sufi. To him, the ego, the world, and the Divine were one. He considered God as absorbing universe. Vedānta is pantheistic with occasional theistic phraseology, but Sufi has more poetical color to it. Sufis are so strongly devoted to the Beloved that they look for the Divinity everywhere, and see

Divinity everywhere. I can see that Sufis are walking to the Zen road. The intellectual forms given to the most Sufi doctrines in Persia are from foreign sources, among which must be mentioned Buddhism and Neo-Platonism. "An experience in feeling God" or "A way to the One" is another gate to enter *samādhi*, that is, Zen realization.

I am very much interested in the German mystics—like Johannes Eckhardt—Meister Eckhardt they call him. He said, "The eye with which I see God, is the eye with which God sees me." In Buddhism, they say "I come to Buddha, and Buddha comes to me. Buddha, my mind, and all fellow beings are one." Eckhardt's pupil, Johann Tauler, preached to some Zen thought in his Christian pantheism, if I may call it by this name. He was in the Dominican Order, in the first part of the fourteenth century. "Apart from God, there is no real thing," were his words. That is exactly the idea of Eckhardt, yet, you can enter Zen through any gate—east, west, south, or north, only do not cling to a seat of any doctrine, just walk freely and enjoy the emancipation. Then you will know that all teachings in the world are your own inner treasures, and all thoughts of the world are the running currents in your inner ocean.

Master Sengai, a Japanese Zen teacher, once sang:

*"Hotoke towa ikanaru mono to hito towaba,
Kaze ni kaketaru aoyagi no ito."*

Translated is:

*"What is Buddha? You may ask.
Look at the weeping-willow there!
See, the gesture of thready limbs,
playing with the breezes sweet!"*

Here is the whole thing, nothing more, and nothing less. This is the true intellectual oneness as well as the harmony of science and philosophy, of poetry and religion. This is a viewpoint of universal brotherhood according to Zen Buddhism. Buddha said: "I see now, all beings have perfect wisdom and complete virtue. They do not know it. I must show them the truth." Abdal Baha said: "O people of the world, you are the fruits of one tree, and leaves of one branch." Our friends of Bahaism express the words in Esperanto. Let us use these words as a formula for modern Zen Buddhism.

"Ho popolo de la mondo, vi estas ciuj la fruktoj de unu arbo kaj la folioj de unu branĉo."

BODHI-DHARMA

Bodhi-Dharma was the twenty-eighth successor of Buddha Śākyamuni. He was the first patriarch to bring Zen teachings into China. We do not know how old he was when he went to China, but history gives us the date of his arrival there. It was in the Leang dynasty, in the year 520 of the Christian Era. He must have been quite old at the time, for he had already done a great deal of spiritual work in India.

After he received his teacher's mantle and became the twenty-eighth patriarch, he studied forty years more. Then he started to preach in the southern part of India. At that time there were six schools of Buddhist philosophy, each believing its doctrine to be the best. Bodhi-Dharma thought none of these perfect as the Buddha's teaching, so he challenged them and won them over to his teachings after many debates. Since then, throughout the entirety of India, he has been recognized as the twenty-eighth successor of the Buddha.

After preaching in India, he started for China. It took him three years to reach there from India—drifting on the sea and wandering in the strange lands. References in history, however, show that the Chinese Buddhists had heard of him before he came to China, as some of his early works had been translated into the Chinese.

He entered the capital of China, and there met the Emperor Wu Ti. After entertaining him cordially, the Emperor said to him, "I have established many churches; I have educated many priests and priestesses; I have translated and published many sutras; now, what merit shall I receive for all of this?" Bodhi-Dharma answered disdainfully, "No merit." Then the Emperor asked him, "What is the most profound teaching of all sages?" Dharma said, "In all your spacious outlook, there is no such thing as a sage existing." The Emperor was a little excited and said, "Then, who are you?" Dharma said quietly, "I know not."

This is one of the famous dialogues in Zen. Let us go over it again, and have a little discussion about it. The Emperor Wu Ti was, perhaps, expecting to receive a promise from this living buddha that he would go to paradise after his death. As the Bible says, "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth." Poor Emperor—he failed to understand Bodhi-Dharma, and lost the key to paradise, if any such place exists. Dharma said, "No merit." This is the best merit for the Emperor, and for anyone else.

Thomas Carlyle wrote two very interesting terms for his "Sartor Resartus." They are "Ever-lasting Yes" and "Ever-lasting No." In Buddhism, these two terms are not like two parallel lines which will never meet, but are like two lines which make an angle. The Emperor was clinging to "Ever-lasting Yes," so he thought Dharma declared "Ever-lasting No." If the Emperor

could have realized that this angle is merely an illusion, he would not have asked about “the most profound teaching of all sages.”

“No merit”—such a priceless treasure! Dharma was showing his pocket, frankly and openly, turned inside out, and the Emperor thought there was something hidden somewhere. Such a stubborn, ignorant man! Dharma was, however, a nice, old gentleman, and said, “In all your spacious outlook, there is no such thing as a sage existing.”

Read Cornwall’s poem:

*“The sea! the sea! the open sea!
The blue, the fresh, the ever free!
Without a mark, without a bound
It runs the earth’s wide regions round.”*

At this moment, you can meet Bodhi-Dharma, face to face. Wu Ti, the Emperor, still failed to open his eyes, and asked again, “Who are you?” “I know not,” was Dharma’s ultimatum. He now saw that his teaching was beyond the understanding of the Emperor. The elephant can hardly keep company with rabbits.

Dharma left the palace and quit the capital the next day. He then went north, crossing the great river, Yang-Tsu-Chiang, and passing through the Wei states, he climbed the Sung Mountain and took up his residence in a little temple called Shao-Lin-Szu. Those who wished to realize the cream of Buddhism went to his place there and studied Zen. He stayed there nine years, devoting himself to mediation many hours every day. Few people understood him. The rest called him “a blue-eyed monk who loves to sit, facing the wall.”

He taught his disciples with brief but strong words. He always said, “Outside of the sutras, outside of all teachings, there is another way. I direct your mind straightforward, and you see your own inner self.” At Shao-Lin-Szu, he found and ordained his successor, and then passed away. The lamp of wisdom was thus handed one to another, yet, the light of knowledge, the true knowledge of emancipation, will burn on forever, and illuminate the world beautifully.

When I came to this country, I was told that America had no philosophy, and that she is only reflecting the speculations of other lands. This was not wholly true. America had philosophers, original thinkers who, though their influence may not have reached abroad, were makers of history at home. Of course, I enjoyed reading many free thinkers’ books, from Thomas Paine to Robert Ingersoll. I admired very much the native philosophy of Emerson’s Transcendentalism. When I saw that Emerson casually puts Jesus and Socrates on the same level, and then goes on to quote Coleridge and Spinoza, Plato and Zoroaster, and ends with the assertion, “All goes back to the East,” I

smiled and said to myself: "There is no East, when you really think, for the West is East, and the East is West."

"I found, however, that what I had been told about "the speculations of other lands" bothered me a great deal until I read William James. In the other works, there was always a little of the medieval—even in Emerson. But I felt that James had washed it all away. Some free thinkers had a lot of deistic notions which did not agree with my Zen taste. Then, at last, I found light in James' Pragmatism.

Pragmatism has emerged triumphantly as the development of national thought. It is a typical American philosophy. The name Pragmatism was first used by Charles Peirce in 1878, and some twenty years after, William James wrote his famous *Pragmatism*. It is a method, not a system. Zen can be called a method, too, in comparison with many other Buddhist sects. The method of Pragmatism consists in the pursuit of knowledge, in close relationship with human existence and its development. Nothing is to be reckoned true that cannot be justified from this point of view. The true thus becomes a portion of the good. The true is whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief.

Suppose you are to ask what is the Holy Path, and Zen answers you "Outside of your room." Naturally you will then say, "I do not mean the street. I mean the great road of God and man." Then Zen will say, "You can take a street-car and then take the ferryboat, if you like." If one tries to reach the Holy Path apart from his actual life, he is running away from Zen. Zen belongs neither to fairy land nor to dream land. In this respect, Zen is in common with Pragmatism.

Pragmatism is the philosophy of practicality, the gospel of energy, whose prime criterion is success. It has been called a business philosophy which demands results—a bread and butter view of life which aims at consequence. In short, Pragmatism furnishes a sort of speculative house-cleaning which says that a philosophic theory must have cash value, and be true if it works—and false if it fails. As far as speaking like this, I feel that I am describing Zen at the expense of Pragmatism, begging pardon of Professor James.

Bodhi-Dharma's influence has spread over all of Japan; not only by Zen thought, but in somewhat of a playful manner, it has seasoned Japanese life. It is so popular that no God-like sense comes with the mention of the name Dharma. Children draw his picture on their kites. Geisha-girls use his statue as a lucky God—rather a toy. Tobacco stores use his picture as a trademark; vaudeville performers use his name as the subject of their jokes; popular songs are written about him, now and then. When Japanese children make a snow-man, they call him snow-Dharma. Many novelty manufacturers use him as a design. There is no such word as "blasphemy" as far as Dharma is concerned. The most popular toy of Dharma is called

“Okiagari-koboshi,” meaning “ever-getting-up monklet.” It will never fall down, but always rebound to an upright position.

FISH BALLOONS

Let us imagine that we are in Tokyo, Japan, on the fifth of May—the day of the Boy’s Festival there. We see many thousands of balloons floating above the houses of the city. You may wonder what they are, and wish to know the meaning of this strange custom.

According to a Chinese legend, all fish try to go up against the rapid stream of great rivers, just as you have often read of the salmon that go up the Columbia River. Far away on the upper stream, there is a cascade that the fish must leap over. If any fish swims to the cascade and leaps over the waterfall, each of its scales radiates golden light, and the fish transforms itself into a dragon, and jumps up on the clouds, and goes to heaven. Many thousands of fish try to reach the goal, but few succeed in reaching there. They have very few heroes among them.

This story suggests the struggle of life which we, human beings, are experiencing. Japanese parents wish their children, especially their boys, to be strong and brave, and to be always ahead in the battlefield of life. Therefore, on this day, they tie a fish balloon on the top of a bamboo rod, and set it up on the roof. Besides, they display images of heroes both in history and in legends, in their homes. Their aim in life is not only to get ahead among the islanders, but to be one of the leaders among the nations of the world.

A Chinese Zen-poet, Kanzan, wrote a poem which expresses an ideal of man—in the viewpoint of Buddhism in general. The translation reads as follows:

Be a man, a real man. Do everything neatly and accurately. Hold your mind like a great iron wall against all evil thoughts. Just one road for you—that is the road of *bodhi*. Walk ahead on this road without hesitation. Do not take the wrong road. If you do, you will suffer. Do not yearn to become Buddha. Meet your own true self.

There is nothing new in describing a manly man, but we have to take notice of two points. First: we do not recognize sin and punishment in the way the Western religions do. No God or gods will punish us for our wrongdoings. We believe in the law of cause and effect. Whatever we sow, we have to reap by ourselves. The ethical aspect of Buddhism is based on clear understanding, not on make-believe. When we find our true self, we realize our mission in life, yet, if we take a wrong road, we must go back to

the right one, paying in time and toil to regain the lost part. This striving may be called punishment by some, but for us, it is a part of *bodhi* which means "wisdom" or "the true path of man."

For instance, we start for Golden Gate Park, and we wander on the way, and go to Fillmore Street Park. To stay in Fillmore Street Park thinking and praying for Golden Gate Park to come to us will avail us nothing. We must enter Golden Gate Park by ourselves. The moment you realize that Fillmore Street Park is not Golden Gate Park, you are in the right road, and your every step, every breath, and even every drop of your sweat, is for Golden Gate Park, and not for Fillmore Street Park anymore.

A Buddhist is also subject to the law of causation or the law of cause and effect of this world, just the same as anyone else, but for him, every struggle, every trouble, and even every pain of his life is for the development of his own buddhahood. Step by step, he is coming nearer to the true emancipation, nay, he is paying his tributes to the *prajñā-pāramitā* which is the work of true wisdom.

Second: we are Buddhists, but we do not worship Buddha. Buddha was a teacher. We owe him a great deal for his noble thought, but we cannot depend on him for our own emancipation. One cannot open the inner eye merely by praying "Buddha" or calling Buddha's name. You must get realization through your own striving. Buddha does not save you. You must save yourselves.

Zen students always say, "Do not follow Tathāgata, just stand up yourself, if you are a real man." Zen Buddhism is a very rational, non-sentimental, purely intellectual religion. No poetical dreams are allowed in Zen Buddhism. The only way to enter Zen is to catch alive your own true self, and stay alive with it.

The following story will make my meaning clear: Gutei was a Chinese Zen master in the olden time. When anyone asked him, "What is truth?" he always raised his finger. That was his way of preaching. Even on his deathbed, he raised up his finger, and said, "I got this Dharma from my teacher, and practiced it in my whole life." He then shut his eyes and passed away.

He used to have a boy as his attendant. This boy was always imitating what his master did. When anyone asked him a question, he would raise up his finger just like his master did.

The master called the boy to him and said, "The people say you are mocking my preaching. Is it true?" The boy had formed the habit of raising up his finger to any question, and instantly he raised his finger in front of the great master. The master caught him in that moment, and with a sharp knife, he cut off the rascal's finger.

The boy cried painfully. Then the master asked the boy, "What is truth?" and the force of habit was so strong that the boy tried to raise up his finger

again, and on discovering it was gone, and that there is nothing to indicate with, the boy got enlightened.

He all at once discovered that truth does not need a finger as a pointer, that truth is always present. He became a great fish, he leaped the cascade, he ascended the clouds, and the glory of the dragon was his. He became a man, real man, just because he did not follow the Buddha or any master or masters, but he realized his own true self.