

## Zen Keys

Thich Nhat Hanh

Introduction by Philip Kapleau

Translated by Albert and Jean Low

*Zen Keys* is a unique explication of Zen Buddhism. Beginning with a discussion of the daily regimen of life in a Zen monastery, Thich Nhat Hanh illustrates the character of Zen as practiced in Vietnam. Drawing from both historical and personal examples, the author explains the central philosophic concepts of Awareness, Impermanence, and Not-I. But Zen is more than a philosophy, it is an attitude which must be involved in the awareness of all that one is and does.

As a leading spokesman of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace movement, Nhat Hanh has practiced his religion in the secular world. Rather than follow a path of world-denying self-illumination, he has integrated his beliefs and his actions as a response to the needs of the culture and society in which he lives. His example has particular significance for Western readers as we attempt to develop our own form of Zen for we too must create a living tradition applicable to our own situation. *Zen Keys* provides a valuable link between the great Asian traditions and the emerging outline of American Zen.

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# ZEN KEYS

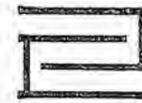


Monk Examines The Vietnamese Tradition

**Thich Nhat Hanh**

Introduction by Philip Kapleau

# ZEN KEYS



THICH NHAT HANH

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH  
BY ALBERT AND JEAN LOW  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
PHILIP KAPLEAU

THICH NHAT HANH is a Vietnamese Zen monk, a former professor at the University of Saigon, and a noted poet. He is the author of a number of works on Buddhism and has published three books in English: *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, *Vietnam Poems*, and *Zen Poems*. He is internationally known as one of the leading spokesmen of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace movement.

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ALBERT AND JEAN LOW, the translators of this volume from the French, have studied at The Zen Center at Rochester for the past seven years. They have also translated Dr. Hubert Benoit's *Let Go*.

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ZEN KEYS



## *Introduction*

THE PUBLICATION in English of Thich<sup>1</sup> Nhat Hanh's *Zen Keys* has particular significance for Americans. For not only is his work the first precise statement of Vietnamese Buddhism to come to us—we who have such a deep and tragic karmic connection with Vietnam—but also Thich Nhat Hanh is not an average Buddhist. He is a Zen monk, trained and developed in a Zen monastery, a man who has realized the wisdom and compassion which are the fruits of Buddhist practice. In the last fifteen years Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the leading spokesmen of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace movement, has taken himself into the market place, into the twentieth-century hell of war-ravaged Vietnam, and brought an "engaged" Buddhism into the mainstream of life of the Vietnamese masses. In the face of threats of persecution, imprisonment, and even death, he has repeatedly spoken out, urging his countrymen to avoid hatred and acrimony and insisting that the real enemy is not man but the grenades of greed, anger, and delusion in the human heart. Those Americans who believe Buddhism is a world-denying cult of inner illumination and its practice of meditation a navel-

<sup>1</sup> "Thich" is not, as many suppose, the Vietnamese equivalent of "Venerable," an appellation of Buddhist monks that roughly corresponds to "Reverend," but is the shortened form of "Thich-Ca," the Vietnamese for Shakyas, which is the abbreviation of Shakyamuni, the name by which the Buddha is known in Asia. It is a family name that monks assume upon ordination, replacing their own.

gazing escape from the sufferings of life do not know Thich Nhat Hanh or the Buddhism about which he writes. It is important that American readers, before delving deeply into this book, be aware of these aspects of its author's life.

It is well to note that while *Zen Keys* often presents weighty aspects of Buddhist philosophy, Nhat Hanh begins his book with the concrete, practical aspects of life in a Zen monastery, where the emphasis is not on the learning of philosophic concepts but on simple labor and a life of awareness. For in Zen, intellectual learning is nothing but the studying of the menu, while actual practice is the eating of the meal. As Nhat Hanh says, the truth of existence is revealed through a deepening awareness that comes from living a life of single-mindedness, of being "awake" in whatever one is doing. There is no better laboratory for doing this "aware work" than everyday life, especially one's daily work.

Yet we live in a society where the object for so many is to do as little work as possible, where the work place, whether office or home, is looked upon as a place of drudgery and boredom, where work rather than being a creative and fulfilling aspect of one's life is seen as oppressive and unsatisfying. How different is this from Zen! In Zen everything one does becomes a vehicle for self-realization; every act, every movement is done wholeheartedly, with nothing left over. In Zen parlance, everything we do this way is an "expression of Buddha," and the greater the single-mindedness and unself-consciousness of the doing, the closer we are to this realization. For what else is there but the pure act—the lifting of the hammer, the washing of the dish, the movement of the hands on the typewriter, the pulling of the weed? Everything else—thoughts of the past, fantasies about the future, judgments and evaluations concerning the work itself—what are these but shadows

and ghosts flickering about in our minds, preventing us from entering fully into life itself? To enter into the awareness of Zen, to "wake up," means to cleanse the mind of the habitual disease of uncontrolled thought and to bring it back to its original state of purity and clarity. In Zen it is said that more power is generated by the ability to practice in the midst of the world than by just sitting alone and shunning all activity. Thus, one's daily work becomes one's meditation room; the task at hand one's practice. This is called "working for oneself."

In Zen all labor is viewed with the eye of equality, for it is nothing but the workings of a dualistically ensnared mind that discriminates between agreeable and disagreeable jobs, between creative and uncreative work. It is to root out this weighing and judging that Zen novices are set to work pulling weeds by hand, licking envelopes, or doing other seemingly unimportant "non-creative" work at the start of their training, and why the abbot himself often cleans the toilets. For true creativity is possible only when the mind is empty and totally absorbed in the task at hand. Only at the point where one is freed of the weight of self-consciousness in the complete identification with work is there transcendence and the joy of fulfillment. In this type of creativity our intuitive wisdom and joy are naturally brought into play.

All this does not mean, of course, that attempts at bettering working conditions and making work more meaningful, such as we are witnessing today as a reaction against robot-like mechanization of the workplace, are worthless. But for a worker constantly to resent his work or his superiors, for him to become sloppy and slothful in his working habits, for him to become embittered toward life—these attitudes do most harm to the worker himself and serve little to change his working conditions. When it's time to work one works, noth-

ing held back; when it's time to make changes one makes changes; when it's time to revolt one even revolts. In Zen everything is in the doing, not in the contemplating.

There is one more area in which the untrained, ego-dominated mind plays thief to man, and this is in terms of energy. The fatigue that grips many of us at the end of the workday is not a natural tiredness, but the product of a day filled with wasted thought and feelings of anxiety and worry, not to speak of anger and resentments openly expressed or inwardly held. These negative mental states probably do more to sap energy than anything else. In contrast, the trained Zen person moves through his daily round aware and alert. The task in hand receives its due share of his energy, but none is wasted in anxiety, fantasy, or smouldering resentment. Even at the end of a full day's work his store of energy is not exhausted.

Throughout *Zen Keys*, Thich Nhat Hanh stresses that Awareness—and this is more than mere attentiveness—is everything. It is precisely this lack of Awareness that is responsible for so much of the violence and suffering in the world today. For it is the mind that feels itself a separated unit from life and nature, the mind dominated by an omnipresent Ego-I that lashes out to destroy and kill, to satisfy its desire for more and more at whatever cost. It is the unaware mind that breeds insensitivity to people and things, for it doesn't see and appreciate the value of things as they are, only seeing them as objects to be used in satiating one's own desires. The aware man sees the indivisibility of existence, the deep complexity and interrelationship of all life, and this creates in him a deep respect for the absolute value of things. It is out of this respect for the worth of every single object, animate as well as inanimate, that comes the desire to see things used properly, and not to be heedless or wasteful or destruc-

tive. Truly to practice Zen therefore means never to leave lights burning when they are not needed, never to allow water to run unnecessarily in the faucet, never to leave a scrap of food uneaten. For not only are these unmindful acts, but they indicate an indifference to the value of the object wasted or destroyed and to the efforts of those who made it possible for us: in the case of food, the farmer, the trucker, the storekeeper, the cook, the server. This indifference is the product of a mind that sees itself as separated from a world of seemingly random change and purposeless chaos.

From a Buddhist point of view the doctrines of Impermanence and Not-I, with which Nhat Hanh deals, hold the key to resolving the anxiety of this isolated point of view. Anyone alive to the realities of life cannot but acknowledge, for example, that Impermanence is not a creation of mystical philosophers but simply a concretization of what "is." In the last hundred years this process of constant and explosive change on the social and institutional level has accelerated to a degree unknown to men of earlier ages. Almost daily the newspapers report new and dizzying crises in the world: famines and natural disasters; wars and revolutions; crises in the environment, in energy and in the political arena; crises in the world of finance and economics; crises in the increasing number of divorces and nervous breakdowns, not to speak of crises in personal health, in the mounting incidence of heart attacks, cancer, and other fatal diseases. The average person looking out on this ever-changing, seemingly chaotic world sees anything but natural karmic laws at work, nor does he perceive the unity and harmony underlying this constant and inevitable change. If anything, he is filled with anxiety, with a feeling of hopelessness, and with a sense that life has no meaning. And because he has no concrete insight into the true character of the world or intuitive understanding of it, what else

can he do but surrender to a life of material comfort and sensual pleasure? And yet right in the midst of this seemingly meaningless swirling chaos of change stands the Zen Buddhist. His equanimity is proof that he knows there is more to life than what the senses tell him—that in the midst of change there is something that never changes, in the midst of impermanence there is something always permanent, in the midst of imperfection there is perfection, in chaos there is peace, in noise there is quiet, and, finally, in death there is life. So without holding on or pushing away, without accepting or rejecting, he just moves along with his daily work, doing what needs to be done, helping wherever he can, or, as the sutras say, “In all things he is neither overjoyed nor cast down.”

Like the law of Impermanence, the doctrine of the Not-I is not the product of philosophical speculation but the expression of the deepest religious experience. It affirms that contrary to what we *think*, we are not merely a body or a mind. If not either or both, what are we? The Buddha’s answer, stemming from his experience of Great Enlightenment, is ego shattering:

“In truth I say to you that within this fathom-high body, with its thoughts and perceptions, lies the world and the rising of the world and the ceasing of the world and the Way that leads to the extinction of rising and ceasing.”

What could be grander or more reassuring? Here is confirmation from the highest source that we are more than this puny body-mind, more than a speck thrown into the vast universe by a capricious fate—that we are no less than the sun and the moon and the stars and the great earth. Why if we already possess the world in fee simple, do we try to enlarge ourselves through possessions and power? Why are we “alone and afraid in a world I never made,” at times self-pitying and mean, at other times arrogant and aggressive? It is be-

cause our image of ourselves and our relation to the world is a false one. We are deceived by our limited five senses and discriminating intellect (the sixth sense in Buddhism) which convey to us a picture of a dualistic world of self-and-other, of things separated and isolated, of pain and struggle, birth and extinction, killing and being killed. This picture is untrue because it barely scratches the surface. It is like looking at the one eighth of an iceberg above the water and being unaware of the seven eighths underneath. For if we could see beyond the ever-changing forms into the underlying reality, we would realize that in essence there is nothing but harmony and unity and stability, and that this perfection is no different from the phenomenal world of incessant change and transformation. But our vision is limited and our intuitions weak.

Nor is this the whole of it. Sitting astride the senses is a shadowy, phantomlike figure with insatiable desires and a lust for dominance. His name? Ego, Ego the Magician, and the deadly tricks he carries up his sleeve are delusive thinking, greed, and anger. Where he came from no one knows, but he has surely been around as long as the human mind. This wily and slippery conjurer deludes us into believing that we can only enjoy the delights of the senses without pain by delivering ourselves into his hands.

Of the many devices employed by Ego to keep us in his power, none is more effective than language. The English language is so structured that it demands the repeated use of the personal pronoun “I” for grammatical nicety and presumed clarity. Actually this I is no more than a figure of speech, a convenient convention, but we talk and act as though it were real and true. Listen to any conversation and see how the stress invariably falls on the “I”—“I said . . .” “I did . . .” “I like . . .” “I hate . . .” All this plays into the hands of Ego, strengthening our servitude and enlarging our

sufferings, for the more we postulate this I the more we are exposed to Ego's never-ending demands.

We cannot evade responsibility for this state of affairs by claiming ignorance, for the machinations of Ego, as well as the way to be free of them, have been pointed out time and again by the wisest of men. After all, language is our creation. It reflects our values, ideals, and goals, and the way we see and relate to the world. There are languages that do not insist on the constant repetition of the vertical pronoun for clarity or grammatical completeness. In Japanese, for example, it is possible to make sentences without the "I" or other personal pronouns in all but a few cases. The Japanese ideal of personal behavior, which the language reflects, is modesty and self-effacement, in theory at least if not always in practice. The strong assertion of the Ego-I in contemporary American speech, as well as the decline of the passive voice in favor of the active, shows that we no longer value humility and self-effacement, if we ever did.

Our relative mind of Ego, aided by language, deceives us in other ways. It constantly tempts us into distinctions and judgments that take us farther and farther from the concrete and the real into the realm of the speculative and the abstract. Take the case of an individual walking alone who suddenly hears the sound of a bell. Immediately his discriminating mind evaluates it as beautiful or weird, or distinguishes it as a church bell or some other kind. Ideas associated with a similar sound heard in the past may also intrude upon the mind, and these are analyzed and compared. With each such judgment the experience of pure hearing becomes fainter and fainter until one no longer hears the sound but hears only his *thoughts* about it.

Or again, we tacitly agree among ourselves to call a certain object a "tree." We then forget that "tree" is an arbitrary concept which in no way reveals the

true identity of this object. What, then, is a tree? A philosopher might call it ultimate truth; a botanist, a living organism; a physicist, a mass of protons and neutrons swirling around a nucleus; an artist, a unique shape with distinctive coloring; a carpenter, a potential table. To a dog, however, it is nothing but a urinal. All descriptions, explanations or analyses are but a looking from one side at that which has infinite dimensions. The true nature of the tree is more than anything that can be said about it.

Similarly, we tinker with time by dividing it into past, present, and future and into years, months, days, etc. This is convenient, but we need to remember that this "slicing" is artificial and arbitrary, the product of our discriminating mind, which discerns only the surface of things. Timelessness is unaccounted for. Thus, we conceive a world that is conceptual, limited, and far removed from the actual.

Speaking of the way in which language falsifies reality, Korzybski, the father of general semantics, points the accusing finger at the verb "to be" as the chief offender. "The difficulty with the verb 'to be,'" Korzybski is quoted as saying, "is that it implies a static, absolute quality, whereas the law of the universe is constant change. The moment one says, 'This rose is red' it has already changed into something else. Besides, to someone else the rose may appear to be pink. Better to say," adds Korzybski, "'This rose appears to me as red.'" For Zen, however, a rose is not merely red, pink, yellow, but it is all colors and at the same time it is *no* color. Does not a "Rose is a rose is a rose" more nearly convey the cosmic grandeur and infinite beauty of a rose than "This rose appears to me as red"? But why say anything? Enter the heart of the rose—smell it, touch it, taste it—and what is there to say except perhaps, "Ah, wonderful!" or better yet, simply, "Ah!" or best of all, just a smile—a smile that flowers.

The Zen Masters have always been alert to the snare of language, which "fits over experience like a glove," and have used language in such a way as to liberate their disciples from its bind. What are these methods? Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, once taught: "If somebody asks you a question expecting 'Yes' for an answer, answer 'No,' and vice versa. If he asks you about an ordinary man, answer as if he asked about a saint, and vice versa. By this use of relatives teach him the doctrine of the Mean. Answer all his questions in this fashion and you will not fall into error."

Chao-Chou (Jōshu in Japanese), a famous Zen Master, was frequently asked, "Is it true that even a dog has the Buddha-nature?" the implication of the question being that if such an exalted being as man has the pure, all-embracing Buddha-nature, how can such a lowly creature as a dog also have it? To this question Chao-Chou sometimes answered, "No, it hasn't" (*Mū* in Japanese, *Wu* in Chinese), and at other times, "Yes, it has." The questioners may have been genuinely puzzled by the statement in the sutras to the effect that all beings possess the Buddha-nature, or they may have been feigning ignorance in order to see how Chao-Chou would respond. Since Buddha-nature is common to all existence, logically either answer makes no sense. But more than logic is involved here. So what is Chao-Chou up to? Is he flouting the logic of language to show the monks that absolute truth lies beyond affirmation and negation, or is he, by the manner in which he utters "Yes!" or "No!" actually thrusting this Buddha-nature at his questioners?

In another well-known episode Nan-Chüan, the teacher of Chao-Chou, returned to his monastery one day to find some of his monks quarreling about a cat sitting in front of them. Presumably they were arguing about whether a cat, like a dog, also has the Buddha-nature. Sizing up the situation at once and taking ad-

vantage of the occasion to bring home to them the truth they were obscuring, Nan-Chüan suddenly seized the cat, held it aloft and demanded, "One of you monks, give me a word of Zen! If you can I will spare the life of the cat, otherwise I will cut it in two!" No one knew what to say, so Nan-Chüan boldly cut the cat in two (not really, though; he merely went through the motions of doing so; "cutting the cat" makes the episode more vivid and dramatic). That evening Chao-Chou, who had also been away, returned. Nan-Chüan told him what had happened and asked, "Suppose you had been there. What would you have done?" Without a word Chao-Chou took off his slippers, placed them on his head and slowly walked out of the room. "If only you had been there," said Nan-Chüan admiringly, "you would have saved the life of the cat."

Now what is a word of Zen? In Zen there are what are called live words and dead ones. The admired live word is the gut word, concrete and vibrant with feeling; the dead word is the explanatory word, dry and lifeless, issuing from the head. The first unifies; the second separates and divides. Neither the monks nor Chao-Chou spoke a word, yet Nan-Chüan put down the monks and praised Chao-Chou. Why? What was the significance of Chao-Chou's putting his slippers on his head and walking out? What did Nan-Chüan demonstrate by his act of "cutting" the cat in two? And say where that dead cat is right now! Aren't we all dead cats whenever we argue and speculate, make gratuitous assumptions, jump to conclusions?

A Chinese Zen Master once gave this problem to his disciples: "A monk is hanging by his teeth from a branch high up in a tree. His hands can't reach a branch above him nor his feet touch a branch underneath. On the ground below someone seriously asks, 'What is the highest truth of Buddhism?' If he opens his mouth to speak he will fall down and possibly be

killed. Yet if he doesn't respond he evades his duty. What should he do?"

This is not a teaser designed to titilate the intellect—far from it. Among other things, it points up a fundamental problem in human relations: when to speak and when to remain silent. For to spin fine words and empty phrases, to embroider theories and explanations of one kind or another can be harmful, even fatal, to one's personality. But to be silent and not speak when by so doing we can help a suffering fellow being is craven. Also, there are many forms of silence. There is the silence where one doesn't know what to say, the silence which is the better part of valor, and the silence which speaks louder than words. Which of these forms of silence was the monk's, and furthermore, was he answering the question put to him or not?

These episodes or teaching methods were collected by later generations of masters and given to their students to solve as part of their training. They came to be called *koan* (*kung-an* in Chinese; literally "a public record"); that is, cases that could be relied upon as pointing to and embodying ultimate truth. They are not unlike cases at common law that establish legal precedent. One of the prizes of *Zen Keys* is a series of forty-three koan, appearing in English for the first time, by Tran Thai Tong, a Vietnamese who was the first king of the Tran Dynasty (1225-1400) in Vietnam. He practiced Zen while still reigning, and at the age of forty-one gave up his throne to his son, devoting himself thereafter to the most intensive practice of Zen. Each of the koan contains a theme, a brief commentary and a verse, all by Tran Thai Tong. Though in the style of the *Mumonkan*, a well-known Chinese book of koan, they nonetheless have a flavor distinctly their own.

Chapter VI of *Zen Keys*, entitled "The Regeneration of Man," may strike sophisticated readers as naïve and

perhaps even simplistic. Yet it would be a mistake to pass over lightly what lies behind the simple expression. Among other things, Thich Nhat Hanh pleads for a dialogue between East and West based upon mutual respect and understanding and not on feelings of Western superiority. These sentiments have been echoed innumerable times by thoughtful and knowledgeable Asians. We in the West must heed this wise and earnest voice speaking out of the heart of Asia if we are to avoid a third world war and the not improbable destruction of most of the human race and our planet earth. Americans especially must listen with an unprejudiced, believing heart, for not only is our karma with Vietnam and Asia deep—in one generation we have fought three land wars there—but to a large extent the fate of humanity rests upon us. To all but the obtuse it is clear that the world is at a crossroads, its very survival at stake.

We need to recover our basic humanity. Pride in our technological achievements has replaced love of our fellow man, as Nhat Hanh observes. We need to purge ourselves of pride and self-seeking. Above all, we must regenerate ourselves morally and awaken spiritually, and this means becoming aware of the true nature of things and of our responsibilities to the world. The contamination of our own and the world's environment and our squandering of dwindling natural resources through over-consumption, waste, and mismanagement speak eloquently of our greed and irresponsibility. How long will the rest of the world stand by while we in America with only 6 per cent of the world's population consume 40 per cent of its resources? The energy crisis we are now experiencing may well be the first signal of the revolt against this intolerable situation.

Many in America are beginning to understand this, and even our government leaders are saying we must drastically alter our style of living. Do they really un-

derstand the spiritual implications of this? How are we to uproot the greed, anger, and wrong thinking lying at the base of our actions? How, in other words, are we to horizontalize the mast of the inflated national ego?

One obvious answer is—through Zen. Not necessarily Zen Buddhism but Zen in its broad sense of a one-pointed Aware mind; of a disciplined life of simplicity and naturalness as against a contrived and artificial one; of a life compassionately concerned with our own and the world's welfare and not self-centered and aggressive. A life, in short, of harmony with the natural order of things and not in constant conflict with it.

The problems of pollution and energy we hear so much about have always been dealt with in Zen training. Zen, after all, speaks to the most fundamental pollution of all, the pollution of the human mind. As for an energy crisis, we have never been without one. The real energy crisis is an internal one: how to mobilize the unlimited energy locked within us—how to split the atom of the mind if you like—and use it wisely for ourselves and mankind. For it is the release of this energy that leads to awakening and Awareness.

As *Zen Keys* points out, in the East Zen is declining due to war and the heavy inroads of materialism and technology. In the West, however, it is the disenchantment with the "good" life produced by materialism and technology that is largely fueling the current interest in Zen. For together with the realization that technology makes "major contributions to minor needs of man" is the awareness that we have become cogs in an out-of-control wheel, living by a value system that does not see man as a human being but merely as a consumer of things. If Zen is to find a permanent home in America and become a living force in the lives of Americans, it is obvious it will have to shed its East-

ern cultural accretions and develop new forms in response to the needs of our own culture and society. This Thich Nhat Hanh and other Zen-oriented Asians affirm.

The outline of the new American Zen is already emerging. It is away from temple-based Zen and more in the direction of large centers where monks and laymen and women practice the Buddha's way together, with smaller affiliated communities functioning in other areas of the country. We also find many of the more "aware" trends in American society being incorporated into the life-style of these Zen communities. Many of these groups are eating natural foods, gardening organically, and living communally, as well as including within their Zen training such body-mind disciplines as *hatha* yoga and *tai-chi chuan*. In their religious life as well, they are beginning to create meaningful ceremonies and rituals appropriate to the American scene and the New Age. Also, in the cities members of Zen communities, carrying burlap bags, periodically clean up their neighborhoods, thereby learning humility and non-attachment. Others take such menial jobs as housecleaners, dishwashers, and garbage men for the same reasons. Their lives truly reflect the principle that "a man is rich, not in what he possesses but in what he can do without with dignity."

It would be a great pity, though, if American Zen severed its links with the great Asian traditions that spawned and nourished it; this would in effect be discarding hundreds of years of experiential knowledge of the human mind. Always there is the danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

As the first authoritative book in English on the Zen Buddhist tradition of Vietnam, *Zen Keys* is one more bright link in the chain of Asian Zen and for this reason invaluable.

Albert and Jean Low, the translators of *Zen Keys* from the French in which it was written, are no strangers to the world of Zen or to translations of Zen books. Both have been training in Zen at The Zen Center of Rochester for the past seven years. Before that they had studied and practiced several other spiritual traditions. Their translation of Dr. Hubert Benoit's *Let Go* evoked from the author a personal letter of commendation. When Thich Nhat Hanh was asked by them whether he wished to review their translation before it was published, he wrote: "I have perfect confidence in your abilities and do not feel it necessary to check your work." This confidence has not been misplaced. *Zen Keys* conveys the authentic "feel" and flavor of Zen. Understandably so, for it is a loving and knowledgeable translation.

PHILIP KAPLEAU  
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## AWARENESS OF BEING



### *The Little Book*

I ENTERED THE ZEN MONASTERY when I was seventeen years old. After a week's adjustment to monastic life, I presented myself before the monk who had been put in charge of me to ask him to teach me the Zen "way." He gave me a small book printed in Chinese characters and recommended I learn it by heart.

Having thanked him, I retired to my room with the small book. This book—which is famous—is divided into three parts: 1) Essentials of Discipline to Apply Each Day; 2) Essential Elements of Discipline for a Novice; 3) Exhortation of the Zen Master Kuai Chan.

There is no Zen philosophy in this book. The three parts treat practical problems only. The first teaches the method of mind control and concentration; the second sets down the required discipline and behavior of monastic life; the third part is a very beautiful piece of writing, an exhortation addressed to Zen disciples to encourage them in their meditations so that they will take to heart the fact that their time and life are precious and should not be vainly dissipated.

I was assured that not only novices of my age must start with this book—which is called *Luat Tieu* in Vietnamese (*Little Manual of Discipline*)—but that monks of even thirty or forty years of age must also follow the prescriptions of *Luat Tieu*.

Before entering the monastery, I had already received a little Western education, and I had the impression that the method of teaching the doctrine in the monastery was old-fashioned.

First it was necessary to learn by heart the whole book; then people were to engage in its practice, without even having been given the fundamental principles of the theory. I unburdened myself to another novice who had already been there two years. "It is the way followed here," he told me. "If you want to learn Zen, you must accept this way." I had to resign myself to it.

The first part of the *Little Manual*, "Essentials of Discipline to Apply Each Day," contains only formulations aimed at bringing about Awareness of Being (*samyaksrmrti*). Each act of the novice must be accompanied by a particular thought. For example, when I wash my hands, I must evoke this thought: "Washing my hands, I wish that the whole world should have very pure hands, capable of holding the Truth of Enlightenment." When I am sitting in the Meditation Hall, I must think: "In this upright position, I wish that all living beings should be seated on the throne of perfect enlightenment, their mind purified of all illusion and of all error." And even when I am in the toilet, I say to myself: "Being in the toilet, I wish that all living beings might rid themselves of greed, hatred, ignorance, and all other defilements."

"Essentials of Discipline to Apply Each Day" contains a limited number of similar thoughts. A ready intelligence should be able to make up others to be used on different occasions. Those proposed by the *Manual* are only examples; the practitioner can modify them, even change them and make them into others more suited to his needs and to his physiological and mental conditions. Suppose I should be about to use the telephone and I wish to evoke in my mind a thought capable of keeping me in a state of Awareness. This thought is not found in the *Little Manual* because at the time the book was written there were no telephones. I could then invent a thought like the following: "Using

the telephone, I wish that all living beings should free themselves of doubt and prejudice in order that communication between them should be readily established."

When I was seventeen years old, I thought that the *Little Manual* was designed for children or for people on the fringes of Zen. I did not attach any more importance to this method than as preparation. Today, twenty-nine years later, I know that the *Little Manual* is the very essence of Zen and Buddhism.



### *Necessary Awareness*

I REMEMBER A SHORT CONVERSATION between Buddha and a philosopher of his time.

"I have heard tell of Buddhism as a doctrine of enlightenment. What is its method? In other words, what do you do every day?"

"We walk, we eat, we wash ourselves, we sit down . . ."

"What is there that is special in those actions? Everyone walks, eats, washes himself, sits down . . ."

"Sir, there is a difference. When we walk, we are aware of the fact that we walk; when we eat, we are aware of the fact that we eat, and so on. When others walk, eat, wash themselves, or sit down, they are not aware of what they do."

This conversation clearly expresses the Awareness of Being which in Buddhism is the secret by which man "sheds light" on his existence, produces the power of

concentration, and, finally, brings wisdom to fruition. Awareness of Being is the backbone of the Buddhist method.

*To light existence?* Yes, and this is the point of departure. If I live without having Awareness of this life, that amounts to not having lived. I can then say, as did Albert Camus in his novel *The Outsider*, I live "as one dead." The ancients used to say, "One lives in forgetfulness, one dies in a dream." How many people there are among us and around us who "live as though dead"! That is why the first thing to do is to come back to life, to wake up, to be aware of what we are, of what we do. The one who eats, who is he? And who the one who drinks? The one who sits in meditation? And who is he, the one who consumes his life in forgetfulness and negligence?

*To produce the power of concentration?* Yes, because Awareness of Being is a discipline that helps man to realize himself. Man is a prisoner of his social sphere. He is governed by social events. He disperses himself. He loses himself. He cannot return to his integral state. In this case, to be aware of what one does, of what one says, of what one thinks, is to begin to resist invasion by the surroundings and by all the errors to which forgetfulness gives birth. When the lamp of Awareness of Being is lit, moral conscience lights up; and the passage of thoughts and emotions likewise is lit up. Respect for oneself is re-established, the shadows of illusion can no longer invade a man. From this fact, spiritual force is concentrated and develops. You wash your hands, you dress yourself, you perform everyday actions as before; but now you are *aware* of all your actions, words, and thoughts.

This prescription is not only designed for a novice: this prescription is for everyone, including the great Enlightened Ones, even Buddha himself. And, in

fact, are not power of concentration and spiritual force themselves the characteristics of the great men of humanity?

*To bring wisdom into bloom?* Yes, because the ultimate aim of Zen is the vision of reality, acquired by the power of concentration. This wisdom is Enlightenment, the perception of the truth of being and of life. This is what all practitioners of Zen wish to attain.



### *To Be Mindful*

THIS PROCESS—*To Light Existence, Produce the Power of Concentration, and Bring Wisdom to Bloom*—is called in Buddhism the "Process of the Three Studies." *Sila*, *Samadhi*, and *Prajna* (Discipline, Concentration, and Wisdom) are the Sanskrit terms. The word "Sila" (Discipline) must here be taken to signify Awareness of Being. Sila does not denote rules to prevent immoral actions. To be attached to rules without grasping their meaning is to take a means for an end; it is to fall into what Buddhism calls *attachment to rules*, one of the major obstacles to knowledge. It is not by virtue of moral conduct that one can realize Wisdom, but by maintaining body and mind in the permanent Awareness of Being. That is why the application of thoughts leading to Awareness of Being is called the "Essentials of Discipline."

When a scientist works in his laboratory, he does not smoke, he does not eat sweets, and does not listen to the radio. He abstains not because he thinks that these

things are sins, but because he knows that they impede the perfect concentration of his mind on the object of his study. It is much the same in *Zen Discipline*: the observance of this discipline must help the practitioner to live in Awareness of Being; it does not lead to moral objectives.

*Zen Wisdom* cannot be obtained by the intellect; study, hypothesis, analysis, synthesis. The practitioner of Zen must use all of his entire being as an instrument of realization; the intellect is only one part of his being, and a part that often pulls him away from living reality, the very object of Zen. It is for this reason that the *Little Manual* does not have as its object the preparation of a theory—it introduces the practitioner directly into the Way of Zen.

In the monastery, the practitioner does everything: he carries water, he looks for firewood, prepares food, cultivates the garden. . . . Although he learns the way to sit in the Zen position and to practice concentration and meditation in this position, he must strive to remain constantly aware of being, even when he carries water, cooks, or cultivates the garden. He knows that to carry water is not only a useful action, it is also to practice Zen. If one does not know how to practice Zen while carrying water, it is useless to live in a monastery. The *Little Manual*, as I have already said, introduces the practitioner directly into the world of Zen, even if the practitioner seemingly does exactly the same things as those who do not practice the way.

The Zen Master observes his student in silence, while the latter tries to "light" his existence. A student may have the impression that not enough attention is paid to him, but in reality his ways and his acts cannot escape the observation of the Master. The Master must know if his student is or is not "awake." In the monastery, one must be aware of all that one does. If, for example, the student shuts the door in a noisy way,

he thus proves that he is not aware of his being. Virtue does not lie exactly in the fact of closing the door gently, but in the awareness of the fact that one is in the process of closing the door. In this case, the Master simply summons his student and reminds him that he must close the door gently; that it is necessary for him "to be mindful" of himself. He does this not only in order that the silence of the monastery be respected, but in order to show the student that he is not in keeping with the way of Zen; this explains the absence of "acts of majestic behavior" (*uy nghi*) and "subtle gestures" (*te hanh*). It is said that in Buddhism there are ninety thousand "subtle gestures" the novice must practice. These gestures and acts are the expression of the presence of the Awareness of Being. All that one says, thinks, and does in this state of conscious awareness is described as having "the taste of Zen."

If a practitioner hears himself reproached for lacking the "taste of Zen" in what he says and does, he should recognize that he is being reproached for living without Awareness of Being.

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A CUP OF TEA



### *Seeing into One's Own Nature*

IN MY MONASTERY, as in all those belonging to the Zen tradition, there is a very fine portrait of Bodhidharma. It is a Chinese work of art in ink, depicting the Indian monk with sober and vigorous features. The eyebrows, eyes, and chin of Bodhidharma express an invincible spirit. Bodhidharma lived, it is said, in the fifth century A.D. He is considered to be the First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China. It might be that most of the things that are reported about his life have no historical validity; but the personality as well as the mind of this monk, as seen and described through tradition, have made him the ideal man for all those who aspire to Zen enlightenment. It is the picture of a man who has come to perfect mastery of himself, to complete freedom in relation to himself and to his surroundings—a man having that tremendous spiritual power which allows him to regard happiness, unhappiness, and all the vicissitudes of life with an absolute calm. The essence of this personality, however, does not come from a position taken about the problem of absolute reality, nor from an indomitable will, but from a profound vision of his own mind and of living reality. The Zen word used here signifies "seeing into his own nature." When one has reached this enlightenment, one feels all systems of erroneous thought crushed inside oneself. The new vision produces in the one enlightened a deep peace, a great tranquility, as well as a spiritual force characterized by the absence of fear. *Seeing into one's own nature* is the goal of Zen.



### *Bodhidharma's Dictum*

BUT TO SEE INTO ONE'S OWN NATURE is not the fruit of studies and research. It is accession to Wisdom through a life lived in the very heart of reality; in a perfect awareness of being. Thus, one might say that Zen is against all speculation and all writing. Words do not carry wisdom. According to Bodhidharma, Zen is:

a special transmission outside the scriptures, not based on words and letters, a direct pointing to the heart of man in order that he might see into his own nature and become an enlightened being.

In the fifth century, when Bodhidharma came to China, the Chinese Buddhists were entering an era of studying Buddhist texts that had just been translated in the preceding period (a period that might be characterized as being that of translations). Buddhists were occupied more with systematizing the ideas and with forming particular Buddhist sects than with practicing meditation. The dictum thrust forward by Bodhidharma was, therefore, like a clap of thunder which awakened the Buddhists and brought them to the practical and experiential spirit of Buddhism.

It is because it is like thunder that Bodhidharma's dictum seems excessive. Let us briefly examine the relations between Zen and Indian Buddhism, and we shall see that Zen is none other than Buddhism.

Bodhidharma said:

Zen has been transmitted by the Buddha and has no relation with the scriptures and doctrines that you are in the process of studying [a special transmission outside the scriptures].

At first sight, it seems then that Zen must be a secret teaching, transmitted from Master to student through the generations; a doctrine that is not carried on by writing and cannot be discussed, commented upon, or spread—a spiritual heritage that no one can understand except the initiates. One would not even be able to talk about teaching it, since Zen cannot be taught, that is, taught through symbols; it passes directly from master to student, from “mind to mind.” The image employed here is a *seal* imprinted on a mind; not a seal of wood, copper, or ivory, but a “mind seal.” The word “transmission” thus denotes here the transmission of this mind seal. Zen is itself a mind seal. The things that one might find in the enormous literature of Buddhist scriptures might be of Buddhism, but not of Zen Buddhism. Zen is not found in the scriptures, because Zen “is not founded on writing.” Such is the interpretation given to Bodhidharma's dictum by the majority of Zen commentators.

In reality, to see in the principle “not based on writings” that which characterizes Zen and differentiates it from all the other Buddhist sects is to ignore the very close ties existing between Zen and primitive Buddhism—above all the Mahayana Buddhist system—as well as the historical facts concerning the birth and development of Zen. The negative attitude toward the description of ultimate reality by words is common to all Buddhist doctrine. The dictum used by Bodhidharma is only a drastic way of bringing people to this original attitude *which underlines the importance of direct*

*spiritual experience and discredits intellectual speculation.*



### *The Buddhist Revolution*

BUDDHISM WAS BORN toward the end of the sixth century B.C. The word "Buddhism" comes from the Sanskrit verb *Budh*, which in the Vedic scriptures foremostly signifies "to know," then "to wake up." The one who *knows*, the one who *wakes up*, is called Buddha. The Chinese have translated the word "Buddha" as "the awakened man." *Buddhism is, therefore, a doctrine of awakening, a doctrine of knowledge.*

But Buddha made it known from the beginning that this awakening, this knowledge, can only be acquired by the practice of the "Way" and not by studies and speculation. At the same time one catches sight of another particular aspect of Buddhism: salvation, in Buddhism, comes about by wisdom and not by grace or merit.

The entry of Buddhism into Indian history must be considered as a new vision concerning man and life. This vision was expounded first as a reaction against the Brahmanic conception that dominated Indian society at the time. This is why the doctrine of Buddhism, reacting against the Brahmanic thought and society, is very clearly of a revolutionary nature.

What was this society? From the intellectual standpoint, the authority of the Brahmanic tradition dominated all; the Vedic revelation, the divine supremacy

of Brahma, and the miraculous power of sacrifice, were the three principal fundamentals one could not dispute. From the standpoint of belief, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva were the object of all the cults. From the philosophical standpoint, the thoughts of the Vedas and Upanishads were the basis of all philosophical concepts. Sankhya, Yoga, and the six philosophical schools were born and were developed upon this basis. Buddhism was thoroughly opposed to this Vedic authority and to all the points of view stemming from it. From the standpoint of belief, Buddhism rejected all deisms and all forms of sacrifice. From the social point of view, Buddhism combated the caste system, accepting the Untouchables in the Orders at the same level as a king. (Buddha, having met an Untouchable who carried excrement, brought him to the edge of the river to wash him, then afterwards took him with him and accepted him into the Buddhist community, despite the protests of the others.) From the intellectual standpoint, it rigorously rejected the concept of *I (Atma)*, which is the very heart of Brahmanism.

One can see how Buddha reacted against the currents of thought of his time by reading, for example, the *Brahmajasutta*, which is found in the series *The Long Discourses (Dighanikaya)*. His opposition to Brahmanic thought must be regarded primarily as a reaction, a revolt, rather than as an effort to present the Buddhist point of view. This total opposition to Brahmanism does not signify that all the thoughts contained in the Vedas and Upanishads are erroneous or contrary to truth. This opposition is a clap of thunder aimed at giving a great shock to change the customs, the manners, and the modes of thought that enclosed man in an impasse.

It is because Brahmanism considers the concept of *Atma (I)* as a basis for its methodology and its ontol-

ogy, that Buddha expounded the doctrine of the *Anatma* (the Not-I). What did Buddha mean? *This I of which you speak, no matter whether it be the great I or small I, is only a pure concept which does not correspond to any reality.* That is what Buddha meant.

If we think in ontological terms, we shall say that the doctrine of the Not-I was considered by Buddha as a truth opposing the doctrine of I, which is wrong. But if we think in methodological terms, we shall see immediately that the notion of Not-I is an antidote aimed at liberating man from the prison of dogma. Before examining the problem of truth and falsehood, it is necessary to examine the problem of the attitude and the method. This allows us to say that the notion of Not-I was born initially in reaction to the notion of the Brahmanic I, and not as a discovery which had nothing to do with the thought of the time. Yes, initially, it was a simple reaction; but one that was to serve later as the point of departure for the presentation of a new Wisdom.

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### *Not-I*

DRASTIC METHODS are very frequently used in Buddhism to upset habits and prejudices. This characteristic trait of Buddhism is manifested clearly in Zen.

Buddha used the notion of the Not-I to upset and to destroy; but, later, he used it to expound his doctrine of Awakening. It can thus also be said that the notion of Not-I is the point of departure of Buddhism,

The Buddhist scriptures often speak of the "Not-I" nature of all phenomena. Things do not possess an "I" (*Sarva dharmas nairatmya*). This means that nothing contains in itself an absolute identity. This means a rejection of the principle of identity which is the basis of formal logic. According to this principle, A must be A, B must be B, and A cannot be B. The doctrine of the Not-I says: A is not A, B is not B, and A can be B. This is something that shocks people; something that invites people to re-examine themselves.

In order to understand the expression Not-I (*Anatma*), the concept of Impermanence (*Anitya*) in Buddhism must be considered.

All is impermanent, because all is in a state of perpetual change. A thing does not remain the same during two consecutive *ksanas* (the *ksana* being the shortest period of time in Buddhism). It is because things transform themselves ceaselessly that they cannot maintain their identity, even during two consecutive *ksanas*. Not being able to fix their identity, they are Not-I; that is to say, devoid of absolute identity. Not having an identity, A is no longer the A of the preceding *ksana*; this is why one says that A is not A. Impermanence is only another name for Not-I. In time, things are impermanent; in space they are devoid of identity. Not only are physical phenomena impermanent and devoid of identity, but the same is true even for physiological phenomena, as for example our body, and psychic phenomena, such as our feelings.

However, Impermanence and Absence of Identity are by no means truths taken from reality with the intent to found a doctrine of Action. Many people, who are not conscious of this fact, say that *Anatma* and *Anitya* are the basis for a negative and pessimistic moral doctrine. To say, "If all things are impermanent

and devoid of identity, it is not worth the trouble to struggle so hard in order to obtain them," is to misunderstand the true spirit of Buddhism. We know that Buddhism aims at salvation through the means of Wisdom. It is therefore necessary to examine the Buddhist doctrine from the point of view of the problem of understanding, and not hastily to embrace a philosophy of Action. Impermanence and Absence of Identity must be studied as guiding principles with a view to Understanding.



### *Things and Concepts*

THE PRINCIPLE of Non-Identity brings to light that enormous chasm that opens between things and the concept we have of them. Things are dynamic and living, while our concepts of them are static and poor. Look, for example, at a table. We see the table; we have the impression that the table in itself and the concept of table that is in our mind are identical. In reality, what we believe to be a table is nothing other than our concept of the table, while the table in itself is something else entirely. Some scant notions—wood, of brown color, hard, being three feet high, old, etc.—bring about this concept of a table in us. The table in itself is not so scanty in reality. For example, a nuclear physicist would tell us that the table is not a piece of static matter, that it is constituted of a multitude of atoms whose electrons move like a swarm of bees, and that if we

could put these atoms next to each other, we would have a mass of matter smaller than a finger. This *table*, in reality, is always in transformation; in time as well as in space it is connected to other things that we might call *non-table*. It depends upon them so closely that if we should take from the table all that which is *non-table*, the table itself would no longer exist.

The forest, the tree, the saw, the hammer, the cabinetmaker, for example, are part of this non-table, and there are still other elements that are in relation to this non-table, such as the parents of the cabinetmaker, the bread that they eat, the blacksmith who makes the hammer, and so on. If we know how to look at the table in its relationship with all this non-table, we can see in it the presence of all the non-table. We can say that the existence of the table implies, or demonstrates, the existence of that which is non-table; that is to say, of the entire universe. This idea is expressed in the Avatamsaka system of Buddhism by the notion of the "multi-inter-origins" of things. A notion in which *the one is equal to the all, and the all equal to the one*.



### *The Principle of the Interdependence of Things*

THE PRINCIPLE of cause and effect is called in Buddhism the principle of "inter-origins." The birth, growth, and decline of things depend on a number of conditions and not upon a single one. These conditions are called *pratyayas*. The presence of a thing (*dharma*) implies

the presence of all other things. The enlightened man sees this thing not as a separate entity but as a complete manifestation of reality. A Vietnamese Zen monk of the twelfth century, Dao Hanh, said, "If it is of existence, everything exists, even a speck of dust; if it is of emptiness, everything is empty, even this universe."

The doctrine of Non-Identity aims at bringing to light the *inter-dependent nature of things*; at the same time it demonstrates to us the fact that the concepts we have of things, as well as the categories such as existence/non-existence, unity/plurality, etc. do not faithfully reflect reality and cannot convey it. It shows us that the world of concepts is other than the world of reality in itself. It forewarns us that conceptual knowledge is not the perfect instrument for studying truth; that our words are incapable of expressing the truth about that which concerns ultimate reality.



### *The Vanity of Metaphysics*

THESE PRELIMINARY REMARKS have a direct relationship with Zen; we can say that they constitute the point of departure of Buddhism and at the same time of Zen Buddhism.

If concepts do not represent reality, conceptual knowledge of reality must be considered erroneous. That is demonstrated many times in Buddhism. Buddha always told his disciples not to spend their time and energies in metaphysical speculation. Each time he was

asked a question of a metaphysical kind, he remained silent. He directed his disciples toward practical efforts. Questioned one day about the problem of the infinity of the world he said, "Whether the world be finite or infinite, whether it be limited or unlimited, the problem of your salvation remains the same." Another time he said, "Suppose a person should be struck by a poisoned arrow and that the doctor wished to take out this arrow immediately. Suppose that the wounded person did not want the arrow removed before having received certain information: who had shot it? what is the name of the bowman? his age? who are his parents? for what reason had he fired on him? and so on. What do you think would happen? If one were to wait until all these questions had been answered, I fear that the person would be dead beforehand." Life is short; it must not be spent in endless metaphysical speculations which will not be able to bring us the Truth.

But if conceptual knowledge is fallible, what other instrument shall we use in order to grasp reality? According to Buddhism, one can only reach reality through direct experience. Study and speculation are based on concepts. In conceptualizing we cut up reality into small pieces which seem to be independent of one another. This manner of conceiving things is called *imaginative and discriminative knowledge (vikalpa)* in the Vijnanavada Mahayanist sect. The faculty which, on the contrary, directly experiences reality without passing through concepts is called *non-discriminative and non-imaginative Wisdom (nirvikalpajnana)*. This Wisdom is the fruit of meditation. It is a direct and perfect knowledge of reality, a form of knowledge in which one does not distinguish subject and object, a form of knowledge that cannot be conceived by the intellect and expressed by language.



### *Experience Itself*

SUPPOSE THAT WE ARE TOGETHER at my house and I invite you to have a cup of tea. You take your cup, you taste the tea which is contained in the cup, and you drink a little of it. You seem to take pleasure in the tea. You put your cup on the table and we continue our conversation.

Now, suppose that I should ask you what you think of the tea. You are going to use your memory, your concepts, and your vocabulary in order to give a description of your sensation. You will say, for example, "It is very good tea. It is the best Tieh Kuan Ying tea, manufactured at Taipei. I can still taste it in my mouth. It refreshes me." You could express your sensation in many other ways. But these concepts and these words *describe* your *direct experience* of the tea; *they are not this experience itself*. Indeed, in the direct experience of the tea, you do not make the distinction that you are the subject of the experience and that the tea is its object; you do not think that the tea is the best, or the worst, of the Tieh Kuan Ying of Taipei. There is no concept or word that frames this experience, this pure sensation resulting from experience. You can give as many descriptions as you wish, but it is only you who witness this direct experience of the tea that I have given you. When someone listens to you he can only recreate for himself a certain sensation, basing this on experiences that he might have had himself in the past concerning tea. And you yourself, when you try

to describe your experience, are already no longer in the experience. In the experience, you are one with the tea, there is no distinction between subject and object, there is no evaluation, there is no discrimination. This pure sensation can be presented as an example of *non-discriminative knowledge*. It is that which introduces us to the heart of reality.



### *The Moment of Awakening*

TO REACH TRUTH is not to accumulate knowledge, but to awaken to the *heart of reality*. Reality reveals itself complete and whole at the moment of awakening. In the light of this awakening, nothing is added and nothing is lost; but emotions that are based on concepts can no longer affect a man. If Bodhidharma is the ideal man, it is because his image is that of a hero who has broken the chains of illusion that enclose man in the world of emotions. The hammer that is used to break these chains is the practice of Zen. The moment of awakening is marked by an outburst of laughter. But this is not the laughter of someone who suddenly acquires a great fortune; neither is it the laughter of one who has won a victory. It is, rather, the laughter of one who, after having painfully searched for something for a long time, finds it one morning in the pocket of his coat.

One day Buddha was standing in front of the assembly at Vautours Mountain. Everyone was waiting for the daily lesson, but he remained silent. After some

time, he lifted his right hand which held a flower, all the while looking at the assembly without saying a single word. Each looked at him without understanding at all. Only one monk looked at Buddha with sparkling eyes and smiled. Buddha then said, "I possess the treasure of the vision of the perfect doctrine, I have the marvelous spirit of Nirvana, I have the reality without impurity, and I have transmitted them to Mahakasyapa." The monk who smiled was, indeed, Kasyapa, a great disciple of Buddha.

Kasyapa reached the Moment of Awakening when Buddha raised his flower. At the same time he received the "mind seal" of Buddha, to use the Zen terminology. Buddha had transmitted his Wisdom from mind to mind; he had taken the seal of his mind and had imprinted it on the mind of Kasyapa. This smile of Kasyapa is not a great outburst, but it is of the same nature as the outburst of laughter of the Zen Masters. Kasyapa arrived at Awakening thanks to a flower; there are Zen Masters who have obtained their Awakening through a resounding cry and others through a terrible kick.

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THE CYPRUS IN  
THE COURTYARD



### *The Language of Zen*

THE ESSENCE OF ZEN is Awakening. This is why *one does not talk about Zen, one experiences it*. But Awakening is a great phenomenon that radiates like the sun. The "awakened" man is recognizable by particular signs. First of all is liberty; he does not allow himself to be influenced by the vicissitudes of life, by fear, joy, anxiety, success, failure, etc. Then there is the spiritual force that shows itself in calmness, the ineffable smile, and serenity. It can be said without exaggeration that the smile, the look, the word, and action of the awakened man constitute the *language* of Awakening. This language is employed by Zen Masters to guide practitioners. A Zen Master uses concepts and words like everyone else; but he is neither conditioned nor captivated by these concepts and these words. The language of Zen always aims at destroying the habits of those who only know how to think by concepts. It tends to provoke crises, whose function it is to bring to fruition the precious moment of Awakening.

Let us examine two fragments of conversation:

(1) Chao-Chou (to Nan-Chüan): What is the Way?

Nan-Chüan: It is our everyday mind.

Chao-Chou: In that case, is it necessary to realize it?

Nan-Chüan: The intention to realize the Way is something opposed to the Way itself.

Chao-Chou: If one has no intention, how can one know that it is the Way?

Nan-Chüan: The Way does not depend on what one knows or on what one does not know. If one knows it, this knowledge is only made up of speculative ideas. If one does not know it, this ignorance is not different from inanimate things. If you get to the state of non-doubt, you will see open in front of you an unlimited universe in which things are only one. How can one discriminate in this indiscriminating world?

(2) A monk asks Zen Master Chao-Chou: What was Bodhidharma's intention when he came to China?

Chao-Chou: Look at the cyprus in the courtyard.

The first conversation aims at showing the obstacles created by conceptual methods and, at the same time, engaging the questioner in the way of non-discriminative realization. The second conversation aims at shaking loose the habit of conceptualization and creating the shock necessary to bring about Awakening. If the mind of the man is ripe, Enlightenment can occur in him.

A Zen Master who has obtained Awakening possesses an extraordinary capacity to understand the mentality of students working under his direction. It is be-

cause he well understands the mentality of his disciple that he can recommend to him effective methods to initiate him into the world of Awakening. The language of Zen is one of these ways. Aimed at helping the practitioner, this language must:

1. Possess the power of liberating the man from prejudices and attachments to knowledge;
2. Be suitable to the man to whom it is addressed;
3. Be a skillful and effective method.



### *The Finger and the Moon*

AS REALITY CAN ONLY BE LIVED and experienced, Buddhist doctrine would never have as an aim the description of reality; the doctrine serves only as a method, as a guide, to the practitioner in his experience of this reality.

The *Sutra* "The Perfect Awakening" (*Mahavaipulyapurnabuddha sutra*) says: "All doctrines taught by Buddha must be understood as a finger pointing to the moon." To show the moon, we make use of the finger; but we must not confuse the finger and the moon, because the finger is not the moon. *Skillful means*—in Sanskrit, *upaya*—are things created with the intention of guiding people in their efforts toward Awakening. If these means are taken as ends, that is to say, as the description of Awakening or as Awakening itself, they cannot play their useful role; on the contrary, they become a sort of permanent prison. *As soon as one*

*thinks that the finger is the moon itself, one no longer wants to look in the direction the finger is pointing.*

The "skillful means" here can be a verbal declaration or a simple gesture. The great Masters possess what Buddhism calls the *Wisdom of the Skillful Ways* (*Upaya-jnana*), or capacity to create and employ different methods suitable for different mentalities and different occasions. The conversations between Chao-Chou and Nan-Chüan, for example, are some "skillful means." The cyprus in the courtyard and the flower shown by Buddha in silence are equally skillful means.

But these means are only truly skillful if they are suitable to the *particular circumstances*. They must be *effective* and for this reason should respond exactly to the real needs and to the particular mentality of those whom they seek to guide. If the Master is not capable of understanding the mentality of the student, he will no longer be able to create these skillful and effective means. A single means cannot be employed in all circumstances. Thus, the Master must create many others by relying on his understanding of the mentality of individuals or of groups—in Buddhism one speaks of the 84,000 entrances to reality. Zen Buddhism underlines the extreme importance of the effectiveness and the skillfulness of the means employed by Zen Masters seeking to bring to fruition the Awakening of their disciples.



*"If You Meet the Buddha, Kill Him!"*

ONE OF THE GREATEST POTENTIALITIES of the skillful means is to *free beings from their prison of knowledge and prejudice*. Man is attached to his knowledge, to his habits and to his prejudices; the language of Zen must be capable of liberating him. In Buddhism, knowledge constitutes the greatest obstacle to Awakening. This obstacle is called the *obstacle of knowledge*. What is referred to here is knowledge based on concepts. If we are trapped by this knowledge, we shall not have the possibility of realizing Awakening in us. *The Sutra of the Hundred Parables* tells the story of a young widower who was living with his five-year-old son and who, one day, returned home to find his house burned down and his child lost. Near the destroyed house there was the charred corpse of a child that he believed was his, and in this belief he wept over his child, then set about the cremation of the body, according to the Indian rites. He kept the ashes of the child in a bag which he carried with him day and night, whether he was working or whether he was resting. Now, his son had not perished in the fire but had been taken off by brigands. One day the child escaped and returned to his father's house. He arrived at midnight, when his father was about to go to bed, still carrying the famous bag. The son knocked at the door. "Who are you?" asked the father. "I am your son." "You lie. My son died some three months ago." And the father persisted in this belief and would not open the door. In

the end the child had to depart, and the poor father lost forever his beloved son.

This parable shows that when we have acknowledged a certain thing to be the absolute truth and cling to it, we can no longer accept the idea of opening the door, even if truth itself is knocking at it. The Zen practitioner must therefore strive to liberate himself from his attachment to knowledge and to open the door of his being in order that truth might enter. His Master must also help him in these efforts. Zen Master Lin Chi once said: "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet the Patriarch, kill the Patriarch." For the one who only has devotion, this declaration is terrible; it confuses him completely. But its effect depends on the mentality and capacity of the one who hears.<sup>1</sup> If the man is strong, he truly will have the capacity to liberate himself from all authority, whatever it might be, and to accomplish in himself ultimate truth. Truth is reality itself and not concepts. If we cling to a certain number of concepts and consider them as being reality, we lose reality. This is why it is necessary to "kill" the concepts of reality in order that the reality itself can be realized and reveal itself. To kill the Buddha is without doubt the only way to see the Buddha. The concept that one has formed of the Buddha impedes one from seeing the Buddha himself.

<sup>1</sup>"My friends of the Dharma Way, if you wish to acquire a correct view of reality, do not allow yourself to be deceived by anyone. When you meet someone, either going out or returning, you must kill him. If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet the Patriarch, kill the Patriarch. If you meet the Saint, kill the Saint. This is the only way by which you might be liberated, free and independent."—Conversations of Lin Chi.



### *"Go and Wash the Bowl"*

TO RETURN HOME, to see into one's own nature, is the end aimed at by the practitioner. But how is one to see into one's own nature? It is necessary to bring light to one's existence, to live life, to render present and permanent the awareness of being. Put in another way, it is necessary that one sees the cyprus in the courtyard. If one does not see the presence of the cyprus in his own garden, how can one see into his own nature?

The Zen Master who has obtained Awakening is a man with eyes open to living reality; it is he who, after years lost in the world of concepts, has decided to come to see the cyprus in the courtyard and his own nature. Hence, he cannot allow his disciple to continue to wander in the world of concepts and thus lose his own life, lose Awakening. This is why the Master feels compassion each time his disciple is content to pose questions on principles of Buddhism, on the *Dharmakaya*, on the *Tathata*, etc. "This man," he thinks, "still wishes to engage in the search for reality through concepts." And he does his best to tear his student from the world of ideas and to put him in the world of living reality. Look at the cyprus in the courtyard! *Look at the cyprus in the courtyard!*

One day a monk asked Master Chao-Chou to speak to him about Zen. Chao-Chou asked: "Have you finished your breakfast?" "Yes, Master, I have eaten my breakfast." "Then go and wash the bowl."

"Go and wash the bowl." This is also, "Go and live

with Zen." Instead of giving the questioner explanations about Zen, the Master opened the door and invited the man to enter directly into the world of the reality of Zen. "Go and wash the bowl." These words contain no secret meaning to explore and explain; it is a very simple, direct, and clear declaration. There is no enigma here, nor is this a symbol, either. It refers to a very concrete fact.



### *The Good Reply*

BUDDHIST TERMS, such as *tathata* (reality in itself), *svabhava* (own nature), *dharmakaya* (the body of ultimate reality), *nirvana* (extinction), etc., suggest concepts that have nothing to do with living reality. Zen Buddhism does not consider abstractions and symbols as being important. What is important is reality itself, Awakening, Awareness of Being. It can be understood why questions that have been asked about the *tathata*, Buddha, and *dharmakaya* have been turned inside out by many Zen Masters. Let us take the case of a question that has been put many times by students of Zen to their Masters: "What is the Buddha?" Here are some of the answers given:

"The Buddha? He is in the sanctuary."

"He is made of clay and covered with gold."

"Don't talk nonsense."

"The danger comes from your mouth."

"We are surrounded by mountains."

"Look at this man who exposes his breast and walks with bare feet."

These replies embarrass us perhaps. But the man who has lived in Awareness of Being can open the way to Awakening by one of these replies, and the man lost in forgetfulness can be awakened by the same reply. He who was busy wandering in the world of abstractions can sink back into the heart of reality because of such a reply.



### *The Kung-an and Its Function*

THERE ARE, IT IS SAID, nearly 1,700 declarations or short conversations between Zen Masters and their disciples which serve as *kung-an*.<sup>2</sup> One understands a *kung-an* as a sort of meditation theme, although again it is not exactly a theme. *Kung-an*, a Chinese word, means "official document," or a "juridicial document," or "a document of official value." Sometimes one uses, instead of *kung-an*, the words *co tac* (*kou tso*), or *thoi dau* (*hua t'ou*), which mean respectively "classical formats" and "the nub of a conversation." The *kung-an* are used as training subjects in Zen; the practitioner uses *kung-an* for meditation until his mind comes to Awakening. It can be said arbitrarily that the *kung-an* is like a mathematical problem that the student must resolve by furnishing a reply. However, a big difference exists between the *kung-an* and the math-

<sup>2</sup> In Japanese it is called a *koan*; in Vietnamese, *cong-an*.

ematical problem—the solution of the mathematical problem is included in the problem itself, while the response to the kung-an lies in the life of the practitioner.

Put in another way, the kung-an is a useful instrument in the work of Awakening, like a pick is a useful instrument in working on the ground. What is got from working on the ground depends on the man who works on the ground and not on the pick. The kung-an is not an enigma to resolve; this is why one cannot truly say that it is the theme or subject of meditation. Being neither a theme nor a subject, the kung-an is only a skillful means that helps the practitioner to reach his goal.

Kung-an were in vogue during the T'ang Dynasty. Each Zen practitioner had a kung-an to work on. But before this period, Zen Masters did not need kung-an. The kung-an is, therefore, not something absolutely indispensable to the practice of Zen. It is, more or less, a skillful means created by Zen Masters in order to help people who work under their direction. But the kung-an can also become a great obstacle to Awakening if the practitioner thinks that truth is hidden in the kung-an and that one can interpret it in conceptual terms.

Zen Master Hakuin (a Japanese monk of the Rinzai sect) used to lift his hand and ask his disciples, "What is the sound of one hand?" That is a kung-an. One reflects. One wants to know what is the sound emitted by one hand. Is there a profound significance hidden in this question? If there is not, why has Hakuin asked the question? And if there is one, how must it be got out? In fact, like a train that always sees the rail in front of it and rushes forward, our intellect always establishes logical principles in advance of itself and engages in the search for truth. Now,

here, the rails are suddenly cut—taken up. Habit still tries to establish imaginary rails in order that the train of the intellect can rush forward as before. But watch out! To go forward here is to fall into the abyss!

"What is the sound of one hand?" Such a question is the ax that cuts the rails in front of the train—it destroys the habit of conceptualization in us. And if the fruit is ripe, that is to say, if our spirit is well-prepared, this blow of the ax will be able to liberate us from the ties that have bound us for so many years to the world where we "live as though dead," and bring us back to the heart of living reality. But if we are not ready to receive it, we shall continue our vain pilgrimage in the world of concepts. The question is there in front of us, "What is the sound of one hand?" We speculate as much as we can, we imagine this famous "sound of one hand" in a thousand different ways, and what we find we present to the Master with the hope of replying to his ideal. But the Master always says "No!" Arriving then at an impasse, we are on the point of going mad, of losing our mind because of this accursed kung-an. And it is exactly at this moment of terrible crisis that the return to ourself begins. Then "the sound of one hand" can become a sun which dazzles our whole being.

Hsiang-Yen was a disciple of Master Po Chang. He was intelligent, but on the death of his Master he had not yet obtained Awakening. He joined Master Wei-Shan and worked under his direction. Wei-Shan asked him one day, "Speak to me about birth and death. What were your face and your eyes when you were not yet born?" Hsiang-Yen, having vainly tried to give a reply, retired to his room, reflected day and night, reread the texts he had studied, searched through the notes he had made during the time of Po Chang, but was unable to find a reply. When he presented himself to

Wei-Shan, the latter said to him, "I do not want to know what knowledge you have acquired; I only want to learn what is your spiritual vision. Well then, tell me something." Hsiang-Yen replied, "I do not know what to say, Master. Please teach me something." But Wei-Shan replied, "What use will it be to you if I should tell you my own view?"

Hsiang-Yen felt desperate, he thought that his Master did not whole-heartedly want to help him. He burned all the books he possessed and went off to a remote part. He said to himself, "What is the good of subjecting myself to so much trouble to study Buddhism? It is not necessary to be a man well-versed in doctrine. I want to live the life of a simple monk." One day, as he was in the process of preparing the ground to sow some beans, his fork dislodged a pebble which struck against a bamboo stem and went "crack." This sound "crack" brought about Awakening in him. What Wei-Shan called "your face and your eyes before your birth" suddenly became dazzling in his mind. He had attained Awakening. Wei-Shan refused to introduce Hsiang-Yen into the world of the intellect. He wanted Hsiang-Yen to return to his true nature. And, in fact, the possibility of Awakening only came to Hsiang-Yen when he abandoned the enterprises of the intellect. The kung-an, in this case, had done its work well. In an effective way, it put the practitioner back on the road of spiritual experience, and created a crisis aimed at releasing Awakening.



### *The Significance of the Kung-an*

WE HAVE DISCUSSED the function of the kung-an rather than its significance. But a kung-an, to be effective, must at least signify *something* for the person to whom it is given. When the Master proposes a kung-an for his disciple it is necessary he be certain that this kung-an is suitable to the disciple. Put in another way, the kung-an must be a "skillful means."

The kung-an cannot be any random word enclosing a contradiction designed to derail the practitioner in his search for truth by way of speculation. For this reason, when he receives a kung-an, the practitioner is tempted to discover some significance in it. This desire to decipher the kung-an always takes him off into the labyrinth of philosophical reflection.

It is first necessary to recognize that a kung-an only has significance when it is addressed to a determined person or to a determined group. Outside of this person, or this group, the kung-an no longer has significance. This is the principle of skillful means. *Each kung-an is applied to a particular case.* If a kung-an is used for more than one person, it is only because those people resemble each other in their mentality and psychological conditions. The significance of a kung-an, therefore, only exists for the person concerned and not for others.

To have significance, a kung-an must have significance *for someone*. This significance cannot be expressed in concepts or reduced to concepts. If one at-

tributes the significance to concepts and ideas hidden in the kung-an, then the kung-an does not indeed possess any of this sort of significance. *The significance of the kung-an is the effect produced by the kung-an itself on the mind of the one who receives it.* If a kung-an is not adapted to the one for whom it is destined, it no longer has significance, even if it should come from the mouth of a Zen Master.

A monk walking through a market heard a butcher say to his customer, "This meat is of prime quality." And the mind of the monk was enlightened, he obtained Awakening. Undoubtedly the butcher is not a Zen Master and what he said was not meant to help the monk, but *by chance*, this declaration about the quality of the meat struck the mind, already ripe, of the monk and produced a great effect. Only the one newly enlightened saw the significance and effect of the kung-an, while the butcher, who was its author, was totally unaware of what had happened.

The Master must know the mentality of his disciple well in order to be able to propose an appropriate kung-an. Every Master meets success, but he also knows failure, and he fails each time he proposes an inappropriate kung-an.

When a former kung-an—that is to say a kung-an already proposed to another person—is recounted to us, it can sometimes happen that we reach enlightenment ourselves; all that is necessary is that the kung-an is suitable to us and our mind is ripe.

If the kung-an does not produce any effect on us, it can be for two reasons: the first is that the kung-an is not destined for us; the second is that we are not yet ready to receive it. In either case, it is necessary to allow the kung-an to act and not to make efforts at deduction and reasoning in order to find in it a conceptual significance. The kung-an only has significance

for the one who is in the "circle of circumstances." If we are outside this circle, it can have no meaning for us at present. Perhaps one day we shall be within the circle; that is to say, we shall find ourselves in exactly the same condition as the one to whom the kung-an is presently addressed. But while waiting we are still outside the circle. What we must do in this case is to sow this kung-an in the soil of our spiritual life and water it like a plant with the water of our Awareness of Being. One day it will offer to us the flower of Awakening.



### *Chao-Chou's "No!"*

A MONK ASKED CHAO-CHOU, "Does a dog have the nature of Awakening?" "No," said the Master. Another time, another monk asked him, "Does a dog have the Awakening nature?" Chao-Chou replied: "Yes."

Why two contradictory replies to the same question? Because of the difference of the mentality of the two questioners. The answers "yes" and "no" must here be considered above all as skillful means, aiming at producing appropriate effects on the mind of the practitioners. Each reply does not claim to be an objective truth. On the conceptual level, objective truth is on the side of the word "yes" because in Mahayana Buddhist circles it is said that every being has the Awakening nature. But in the non-conceptual world of living truth the word "yes" is no longer a concept that is opposed to the concept "no." The words "yes" and "no"

act here on the practitioner in a different way; this is why their "significance" can only be received subjectively by the mind of the practitioner concerned.

The "no" of Chao-Chou is employed by a number of Masters as a kung-an for their students. Let us listen, for example, to Master Wu Men<sup>3</sup> in his work *Wu Men Kuan*:

In order to come to Zen it is necessary to go through the gates of the patriarchs. To attain Awakening it is necessary to get to the bottom of the mind. If you cannot pass through the gates of the patriarchs, if you cannot get to the bottom of your mind, you will remain forever ghosts clinging to plants and grass. But what is the gate of the patriarchs? This single word "no" is indeed the gate for the whole school of Zen. The one who can pass through this gate will be able not only to meet Chao-Chou, but even to walk hand-in-hand with all the other patriarchs. He will see things with the same eyes, hear things with the same ears. Is that not a great joy? Is there among you someone who wishes to pass through this gate? If there is someone, I invite him to pick up the doubt mass of his body, with its 360 bones and its 84,000 pores, and go in search of this "no" day and night, without a second's respite. Do not understand this "no" as Nothingness; do not take it to be a concept of non-being, as the opposite of being. It is necessary to swallow it as you would swallow a ball of red-hot iron that you cannot bring up. It is necessary to rip out all the knowledge stored up in the course of long previous years; one must ripen slowly. One day inner and outer will be found to be one and you will wake up. As a dumb person who dreams, you will keep what you

<sup>3</sup> A Chinese monk, born at Hangchow, who died in 1260.

have obtained to yourself, without being able to communicate it to anyone. . . . Awakening will make the very earth and sky tremble. It will be as if you have in your hands the precious sword of Kan-u.<sup>4</sup> When you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha; when you meet the Patriarch, kill the Patriarch. You will come to absolute freedom at the very edge of the precipice of life and death, and you will walk in the six Realms<sup>5</sup> and in the four species,<sup>6</sup> all the while remaining in Samadhi.<sup>7</sup>

How are we to reach this state? There is only one way: mobilize the energy of your whole being and pick up this "no" without being interrupted for a single moment. Awakening will come, like the wick of the lamp which is lit at the very moment of contact with the flame. Listen:

Buddha-nature of the dog,  
Is the official decree, is the concrete theme;  
But if you meddle with concepts of being and  
not-being,

You will lose your life.

This poem of Wu Men has become a great kung-an itself. What does Wu Men mean when he says, ". . . Pick up the doubt mass of [your] body, with its 360 bones and its 84,000 pores, and go in search of this 'no' day and night, without a second's respite?" It is so simple! He says that we must bring light to our existence. We must not allow it to be swallowed up by

<sup>4</sup> A hero of the Chu Dynasty in China.

<sup>5</sup> In ascending scale these are the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, beasts, fighting demons, human beings, and devas.

<sup>6</sup> The four modes of rebirth are through the womb, through eggs hatched outside the body, through moisture, and through metamorphosis.

<sup>7</sup> Ecstasy, the state of perfect control of Awareness of Being.

the shadows; we must not remain plunged in unconsciousness and forgetfulness; we must not live as though dead. We must be alive at each moment, at each *ksana*—the 360 bones and 84,000 pores must be awake, like lights of candles. In the light of these candles the problem is presented and the face of “no” is revealed. This is true life and not the play of the intellect, the play of words pronounced by the lips; this is a ball of red-hot iron to swallow—the problem of life and death. As life is something other than concepts, it is not necessary to have truck with concepts. “Do not understand ‘no’ as Nothingness, do not take it as a concept of *non-being* as opposed to *being*,” because “if you meddle with concepts of being and non-being you lose your life.” We will lose our lives if we leave living reality to engage ourselves in the world of conceptual phantoms. We shall then only be specters devoid of flesh and bones, those attributes of living reality.



### *Entering the Circle*

MASTER HUANG PO has said about the “no” of Chao-Chou:

All those who consider themselves to be knights must try this kung-an. Stay with this “no” twenty-four hours a day, whether you are sitting, standing or lying down, and even when you are dressing yourselves, eating, drinking or going to the toilet. Your mind must be continually concentrating all its energies on this “no.” The flower of the mind

will bloom one day and you will see the great Way of Liberation open in front of you. Then you will no longer be deceived by this old monk and his kung-an.

What Huang Po says does not differ from what Wu Men said. Huang Po thoroughly endorses the importance of the function of the kung-an as a skillful means when he speaks of the “deception of this old monk” Chao-Chou, the author of the kung-an himself.

Let us look again at the example of the cyprus in the courtyard given by Chao-Chou to his disciple. The cyprus in the courtyard is a cyprus that belongs only to two people, Chao-Chou and his disciple. The one points to the cyprus in the courtyard and says to the other, “Look at the cyprus in the courtyard.” Let us suppose that there is a circle enclosing Chao-Chou, his disciple, and the cyprus. We, ourselves, are outside the circle. Chao-Chou points out the cyprus to his disciple, not to us. We are not concerned, but only spectators, or, if you prefer, observers. We do not know what really passes between Chao-Chou, his disciple, and the cyprus. And the question will really only arise for us when we have our own cyprus.

But what does this mean, “our own cyprus”? This cyprus, which is in the circle, will only become ours when we have entered into the circle ourselves; when we have accepted the kung-an as our own, when we no longer simply wish to study the kung-an of others!

A kung-an is only a kung-an when it is ours. The kung-ans of *others* are not kung-ans. Thus, the cyprus of the disciple of Chao-Chou is not *my* cyprus. I must make the cyprus *mine*. Once it becomes mine, it is no longer his. Put in another way, there is no relation between *my* cyprus and *his* cyprus, they are two different cypruses.

The first step to take is to reject the attitude of an observer. Thanks to Chao-Chou's pointing, look at the cyprus with your own eyes. Chao-Chou is seated there before you and the cyprus is in the courtyard within sight. You are face to face with Chao-Chou. You are face to face with the cyprus. Do you see the cyprus? If you see it, the kung-an is a success.

Whether it is a cyprus, a lemon tree, or a willow is of no importance. It can be a cloud, a river, or even this hand that I put on the table. If you see it, the kung-an is a success.

Sometimes Zen Masters, instead of creating a new kung-an, use a former kung-an. This does not mean to say that they allow their disciples to play the role of observers, using their intellect to examine the kung-ans of others. Zen Masters want the former kung-ans to be renewed and the disciples to take them as their own. A monk asked Dien Ngu Giac Hoang, a Vietnamese Zen Master of the thirteenth century, "What is meant by the unprecedented matter of advancement?" Referring to an ancient picture, Dien Ngu replied, "It is to carry the sun and the moon on the end of a stick." The monk replied, "What is the use of an old kung-an?" Dien Ngu smiled, "Each time that it is restated, it becomes new."

If one does not see the cyprus, it is because one has not been able to make the cyprus into a *new cyprus for oneself*—the living cyprus of reality—and that one is content to go in search of the picture of the cyprus of another.

After the death of Chao-Chou, a monk came to learn from one of his disciples. "Did he give any explanation about this cyprus?" the monk asked. The disciple, who had reached Awakening at the time, replied, "My Master didn't speak about a cyprus." Now, the kung-an of the cyprus was very famous, everybody was speaking about it in Zen circles. Why then did the disciple

want to deny a fact known by all? The monk insisted, "Everybody knows that the Master himself has stated the kung-an of the cyprus. Why deny it?" The disciple of Chao-Chou parried energetically, "My Master never stated such a kung-an; you had better stop slandering him."

It may be wondered why the disciple of Chao-Chou acted thus. The reply is, however, simple: the cyprus could not be "seen"; the monk stayed outside the scene to "observe" the cyprus. He now looked for a cyprus which was already dead. It would be much better to "kill" the cyprus, to avoid all possible slander.

The reply of Chao-Chou's disciple has become a new kung-an: one can see another enormous cyprus rise up, which becomes revitalized. But whether one does or does not see this new cyprus, it has nothing to do with Chao-Chou's cyprus.



### *The Mind Must Be Ripe*

KUNG-ANS ARE NOT study or research material. Each kung-an must be considered as a finger pointing to reality—the reality of your nature as well as the reality of this world.

This finger can only play its role of pointer if it is pointed directly at you—put in another way, if you are *aware* that this signal is addressed to you. You must be very vigilant, very awake, and very alert because you are face to face with the Master who observes you with his piercing look; and the Master can at any moment

strike you with his stick, or let out a shattering cry.<sup>8</sup> It is as though you were on the edge of a precipice and you run the risk of going over at any moment. It is in this state that your mind receives the shock of the kung-an.

Here is a kung-an that shows the intense and urgent nature of the problem of "birth and death." One day Hsiang-Yen said to his disciples, "Suppose that a man should be suspended by his teeth from a very high branch, his hands and feet not touching anything or holding on to anything. Another man, standing at the foot of the tree, asks him this question, 'Why did Bodhidharma come to China?' Suppose also that our man has to reply to the question. If he speaks, and therefore opens his mouth, he will inevitably fall and crush himself on the earth below. What must he do?" One of the disciples named Hu Tou presented himself and said to Hsiang-Yen, "I beg you, Master, do not take the case of the man who is clinging by his teeth. Speak to us of the man who has already got down." Then Hsiang-Yen burst out laughing.

We can understand how disappointed he felt. Having used an old kung-an, he had transformed it into an entirely new kung-an, whose impact could have been very great. That particular day Hu Tou and his colleagues did not get the impact. But it is possible that, three hundred years later, other people can come to know enlightenment thanks to that very kung-an.

Te-Shan came to Lung-t'an and stood near him right up to midnight. Then Lung-t'an said to him, "It is late, why don't you go home?" Te-Shan opened the door and left, but retraced his steps immediately, saying,

<sup>8</sup> To put their students into an alert state, Chinese Zen Masters sometimes use methods that seem bizarre. They let out piercing yells, strike with sticks, and even go so far as to throw their disciples into the river.

"It is dark outside." Lung-t'an then lit a candle for him; but as soon as Te-Shan took the candle Lung-t'an blew it out. Darkness enveloped them suddenly and, just as suddenly, Awakening came to Te-Shan. He bowed. The sudden darkness helped Te-Shan to understand Lung-t'an's act.

Hsiang-Yen, as we said earlier, once thought that Wei-Shan did not want to teach him the secret of Zen. He left the monastery and retired to a distant place. But Hsiang-Yen is not the only practitioner of Zen who has thought thus. Many disciples put to their Masters questions that they believe are important but which the latter seem reluctant to answer. The disciples complain, "I have been here for years already, why do you treat me like a newcomer?" A monk asked Master Lung-t'an, "What is reality in itself (tathata)? What is supreme wisdom (*prajna*)?" And Lung-t'an replied, "I haven't the least reality in me; I do not possess supreme wisdom." Another monk interrogated Chao-Chou on the essence of Zen. In reply Chao-Chou asked him if he had had his breakfast, and when the monk replied affirmatively, he was sent to wash the bowl. Another monk questioned Ma Tsu on the First Patriarch's intentions. Ma Tsu said, "I am very tired today, I cannot tell you. Go and ask your older-brother-in-the-dharma, Te-Shan." When the monk addressed Te-Shan, the latter said, "Why don't you ask the Master?" "I have already asked our Master. He said he was tired and he told me to come to you." Te-Shan said, "I have a headache. Go and ask our-brother-in-the-dharma, Tche Hai." And when the monk addressed Tche Hai, the latter replied, "I don't know."

To refuse to answer a question, or to *say* something that, in appearance, has nothing to do with the question, does not signify that the Master refuses to help his disciple. The Master seeks only to bar the disciple

from the world of speculation, which is foreign to Awakening. In fact, the Master can always cite passages from the scriptures and give detailed explanations concerning the notions of tathata, nirvana, prajna, etc. If he does not do it, it is because he knows that explanations are not useful to the Awakening of his disciple.

Certainly there are cases where such explanations can help the disciple in his efforts to get rid of false views about the doctrine and the methods. But the Master refuses to give a reply or explanations that could destroy the chances of Awakening and do harm to the disciple. Wei-Shan once asked Po Chang: "Can one speak without using the throat, lips, and tongue?" And Po Chang replied, "Certainly, but if I do it I destroy my whole posterity."

Lung-t'an lived for years with his Master T'ien Huang without receiving from him the secrets of Zen. One day he could keep silent no longer. "Master," he said, "I have been with you for years, but you have never transmitted anything to me. I beg you to treat me with more compassion." T'ien Huang said, "I have always transmitted to you the secrets of Zen, from the day of your entry into the monastery. When you bring me my dinner, I thank you; when you bow down in front of me, I also bow my head; why do you say then that I have never transmitted to you the essence of Zen?"

The Vietnamese Zen Master Tinh Khong, whose disciple reproached him for not having taught him the secret of Zen, said to this disciple, "We are living together in this temple; when you light the fire, I wash the rice, when you beg for alms, I hold the bowl for you. . . . Never have I neglected you."

To help practitioners cross the river and gain the bank of Awakening, Zen Masters hold out to them the pole of skillful means. The disciple must grab hold of the pole. But if his eyes remain shut and his mind

blocked, the practitioner misses the pole. A monk came to ask Zen Master Cam Thanh<sup>9</sup>, "What is Buddha?" Cam Thanh said, "Everything." The monk continued, "What is the mind of Buddha?" Cam Thanh replied, "Nothing has been hidden." The monk said, "I don't understand." Cam Thanh responded, "You missed!"

Each time that a pole is held out to us, we either miss it or grab it. There is no third alternative. Hesitation is also a failure. Hesitation shows that we are not yet ripe for the test. And when we fail we must not regret it, but strive anew. We must go back to our daily work of carrying water, cooking, and cultivating the earth with greater awareness of being.

At the time when Tri Bao<sup>10</sup> had not yet reached enlightenment, a monk asked him, "Where did you come from when you were born, and where will you go to when you die?" Tri Bao thought about it. The monk smiled, "In the length of the thought the cloud has crossed a thousand miles." If you are not ripe, all efforts will be in vain.

<sup>9</sup> A Vietnamese Zen monk of the Vo Ngon Thong Sect of the ninth century.

<sup>10</sup> A Vietnamese Zen monk of the Vo Ngon Thong Sect of the twelfth century.

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MOUNTAINS ARE  
MOUNTAINS AND  
RIVERS ARE RIVERS



### *The Mind Seal*

WE SHALL SAY that the Mind Seal is *the continuous reality of Awakening*. Indeed, one cannot “transmit” the Mind Seal because it is not transmissible. The Master does not transmit his Awakening to the disciple; he does not even create Awakening in the disciple. He only helps him to realize this Awakening already latent within him. The expression to “transmit the Mind Seal” is therefore essentially a symbolic picture. The Mind Seal, as reality in itself (tathata) and Awakening nature (*Buddhata*), expresses the nature of Awakening. According to Mahayana Buddhism, all living beings possess the Awakening nature. As a consequence, the Mind Seal is latent in each person and does not need to be transmitted to him. Master Vinitaruci, founder of the Vietnamese Zen sect that carries his name, spoke thus to his disciple Phap Hien, “The Mind Seal of the Buddhas is a reality. It is perfect like the All; nothing can be added to it, nothing can exist outside of it; one does not get it, one does not lose it; it is neither permanent nor impermanent; it is neither created nor destroyed; it is neither similar nor different. It is as a skillful means that it is thus named.”

“It is as a skillful means that it is thus named. . . .” Here one sees again the characteristic method of Buddhism. Nirvana, prajna, and tathata are only words or concepts; being words and concepts, they are not really nirvana, prajna, and tathata. This is also true of the reality of Awakening, which Zen calls the Mind Seal. It is only a concept that one must use as a skillful

means, it must not become an obstacle. To combat the idea that the Mind Seal is a thing that can be transmitted or obtained from others, Master Vo Ngon Thon<sup>1</sup> left this message for his disciple Cam Thanh before dying:

At the four cardinal points  
It is noised abroad  
That our founding patriarch lived in India  
And that he had transmitted his Eye of the Dharma  
treasure called "Thien":

A flower, five petals,  
Perpetual seeds . . .  
Secret words, mystical symbols,  
And thousands of other similar things  
Are considered to belong to the Mind Sect of  
immaculate nature.  
Indeed, where is India? India is here itself.  
Sun and moon are the sun and moon of our time;  
Mountains and rivers are mountains and rivers of our  
time;  
To meddle with something, is to be attached to it;  
And one slanders even the Buddha and the Patriarchs.  
An error drags in its wake a thousand errors.  
Examine things closely,  
In order not to deceive your posterity.  
Don't question me further:  
I have nothing to say, I have said nothing.

"I have said nothing": such is the conclusion of Master Vo Ngon Thong after having *said* something. One sees clearly the "letting go" mind of Buddhism. To say something and to say it in such a way that people do not become attached to it is the meaning of the term "Vo Ngon Thong" (communion without

<sup>1</sup> Founder of the Zen sect Vo Ngon Thong in Vietnam, living in the ninth century.

words), which is precisely the name of this Zen Master. He means that there is really no transmission to speak about, no "Seal" transmitted from generation to generation; one should not wait for Awakening from someone other than oneself, even though this other might be the Master in person. He rejects the *affirmation* of the idea of transmission; but he is also afraid that the disciples will come to the *negation* of the idea of transmission. In consequence, he states, "an error drags in its wake a thousand errors," and, "I have said nothing."

To receive the Mind Seal is to see clearly into one's own nature—the Mind Seal (or true nature) as the *tathata* or *Buddhata* is one of the great themes of the Mahayanist school. If the Zen Masters often refuse questions on this subject, it is not because Zen is opposed to it but because they wish to prevent their disciples from wasting their time in speculation. In reality, the idea "true nature," of *tathata* and *Buddhata*, is very close to the thought and practice of Zen. The *idea* of true nature, for example, can become an obstacle for the practitioner, but true nature as reality is the very aim of Zen.



### *True Mind and False Mind*

HUANG PO, in speaking of the reality of true nature (what he called "the mind of unity and thusness"), said:

Buddhas and living beings participate in the same pure and unique mind. There is no separation concerning this mind. Since time immemorial

this mind has never been created or destroyed; it is neither green nor yellow; it has neither form nor aspect; it is neither being nor non-being; it is neither old nor new, neither short nor long, neither big nor small. It transcends all the intellectual categories, all words and expressions, all signs and marks, all comparisons and discriminations. It is what it is; if one tries to conceive it, one loses it. Unlimited like space, it has no boundaries and cannot be measured. This Mind is unity and thusness, it is Buddha.

The statements of Huang Po are clear: one must allow the mind to reveal itself; it is lost if one tries to conceptualize it. This means that in order to realize it one must take a road other than that of concepts. The only way to realize this Mind of Unity and Thusness, which is also called True Mind is to return to oneself and to see into one's true nature.

True Mind is the radiant nature of Being, while False Mind is only the faculty of conceiving and discriminating. If one realizes True Mind, reality of Being is revealed in its completeness; it is the enlightened life of Zen. The world built of concepts is different from living reality. The world in which birth and death, good and bad, being and non-being are opposed, exists only for those who do not live as Awakened. But the vicissitudes of this world no longer affect the "awakened" man because he has already come to the world of reality in which there is no discrimination between birth and death, between good and bad, between being and non-being.

In the work *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (*Mahayana Sraddhotpada*), one reads, in connection with the world of reality without discrimination:

All phenomena of being, since time immemorial, are independent of concepts and words; concepts and words cannot transform them nor separate them from their true nature.

This Mahayanist work uses the expression "*wu-nien*," which is translated as "non-conceptual." Non-conceptual wisdom is wisdom that is not based on the concepts of the False Mind—it is also called non-discriminative wisdom (*nirvikalpajnana*).



### *Reality in Itself*

TRUE NATURE, or True Mind, is not what one would call an ontological entity of the idealistic kind. It is reality itself. The word "Mind" is sometimes called "Nature"; True Mind and True Nature are two different names for the same reality. From the standpoint of knowledge, one uses the word "Wisdom," and sometimes the word "Mind." When one is talking about reality in itself, the distinction between the subject and object of knowledge no longer exists. This is the reason why the expressions "True Nature" and "True Mind" sometimes refer to reality in itself, sometimes to non-discriminative Wisdom which reflects this reality in itself. Such an understanding of reality in itself is described in Zen as the act of *seeing into one's own nature*.

Zen thought is the crystallization of the thought of all Mahayana Buddhist schools. Its notion of *Tathagata Dhyana* is derived from the *Lankavatara*. The Zen no-

tion of True Mind, radiant and miraculous, comes from the *Suramgama*. Its notion of the merits of *Dhyana* comes from the *Mahavaipulyapurnabuddha*. Its notion of the universe as a harmonious whole comes from *Avatamsaka*. Its notion of emptiness is derived from the *Prajnaparamita*. The Mind of Zen is entirely free; the synthesis of all these currents of Buddhist thought is accomplished in Zen in quite a natural manner, just as plants absorb air and light.

True Mind is not born at the moment of Awakening, because it is neither created nor destroyed. Awakening only reveals it. This is also true of nirvana and Buddhata. The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says:

The foundation and the cause of Nirvana, this is the nature of Awakening—the Buddhata. The Buddhata does not produce Nirvana; this is why I say the Nirvana-without-cause (that is to say, non-created) . . . The nature of Awakening among living beings is the same: although living beings manifest themselves and are transformed, they are always grounded in the nature of Awakening. . . .

Consequently, the practitioner must not await an Awakening that might come from outside, a transmission or a gift of Wisdom. Wisdom cannot be obtained, the Mind cannot transmit itself. The *Heart Sutra* (the *Mahaprajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra*) assures us: "There is no obtaining because there is no object to obtain." Master Nguyen Hoc, a Vietnamese monk of the twelfth century, said to his disciples: "Do not wait for another person to transmit Awakening."

All that is created and destroyed, all that can be obtained and lost, is conditioned: a thing is produced when the necessary conditions to its production come together; a thing is lost when these same conditions

disperse. Reality in itself is the base of everything; not being ephemeral, it is not conditioned by production and destruction, by gains and loss. Master Nguyen Hoc says: "True Nature is non-nature; it has nothing to do with production and destruction." However, to say that it exists in a world in itself independent of the world of phenomena would be to commit the gravest of errors regarding the problem of True Mind. To say, for example, "A world exists which is real in itself" already classifies this world in the category of *being*, in opposition to the category of *non-being*. Being or non-being, as we have said, belong to the conceptual world. If the world of True Mind transcends the world of concepts, why classify it in the world of concepts? It then ceases to be the world of True Mind, it becomes a concept—vaguer and more impoverished perhaps than any other concept. As a consequence, words cannot describe True Mind, concepts cannot express True Mind. And if one speaks of True Mind, one simply does so through "skillful means," as Vinitaruci says. To say a thing is easy; most people allow themselves to be taken in by the thing said. It is better to say nothing; it is better to "understand without words."

As for the world of phenomena, we are inclined to believe that it is illusory, separate from reality. And we think that only by ridding ourselves of it shall we be able to reach the world of True Mind. That, too, is an error. This world of birth and death, this world of lemon trees and maple trees, is the world of reality in itself. There is no reality that exists outside of the lemon trees and the maples. The sea is either calm or stormy. If one wants a calm sea one cannot get it by suppressing the stormy sea. One must wait for this same sea to become calm. The world of reality is that of lemon trees and maple trees, of rivers and mountains. If one

sees it, it is there in its total and complete reality. If one does not know it by seeing it, it is but a world of ghosts, a world of concepts, of birth, and death.

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### *The Lamp and Lampshade*

THE TS'AO-T'UNG ZEN SECT,<sup>2</sup> during meditation, applies the following five principles:

1. It is sufficient to sit in meditation, without having a subject of meditation.
2. To sit in meditation and Awakening are not two different things.
3. One must not wait for Awakening.
4. There is no Awakening to obtain.
5. Mind and Body must become one.

These principles, in reality, do not contradict the method based on the use of the kung-an in the Lin Chi sect. Better still, the Ts'ao-t'ung principles can help the practitioners of the Lin Chi sect not to discriminate between the end and the means. Indeed, many practitioners are inclined to think that sitting in meditation is a means for obtaining Awakening, which would thus be an end. However, a line of demarcation between the end and the means cannot truly be established. When we turn from forgetfulness to awareness of being, this state is already true Awakening. This is why

<sup>2</sup> Soto Zen in Japan.

the Ts'ao-t'ung sect has said, "To sit in meditation is to be Buddha." When one truly sits in meditation, one finds oneself Awakened; and Awakening is Buddha himself.

In the state of dispersion and forgetfulness we lose ourselves, we lose our life. To sit in meditation is to restore and to recuperate oneself. Imagine that the different parts of our physical body are dispersed here and there in space. Very well! To sit in meditation is to re-assemble them all at once; it is to regain the completeness of our being, to bring oneself to life, to become Buddha.

According to this principle, sitting in meditation is a great joy. But why must one put oneself in this sitting position? It is because this position (lotus or half lotus) makes it easier to control the breathing, to concentrate, and to return to the state of Awareness of Being. Nevertheless, Zen does not only apply itself to the sitting position. Zen is applied to all positions, walking, eating, talking, working. . . . "What is a Buddha?" "A Buddha is one who lives twenty-four hours a day in Zen, all the while living his daily life."

A monk asked Hsiang Lin, "Why did the First Patriarch come to China?" Hsiang Lin replied, "It ruins the health to go on sitting for too long." This same question has been given diverse replies by several Masters. Master Kieou Feng replied, for example, "The fur of a tortoise weighs nine kilograms." Master Tkong Chan said, "Wait until the river Tong flows in the opposite direction and I will tell you." These two replies produce particular effects in particular minds. But the reply given by Hsiang Lin, "It ruins your health to go on sitting for too long" is simple and can be applied to nearly all cases. To sit with only the intention of finding the meaning of a kung-an is not truly to sit in Zen;

it is to spend one's time and one's life vainly. If one sits in meditation it is not in order to reflect on a kung-an, but in order to light the lamp of one's true being; the meaning of the kung-an will be revealed quite naturally in this light which becomes more and more brilliant. But if this lamp is not lit, one will remain sitting in the shadows all of his life; one will never see into his own nature. One will ruin his health if he goes on sitting too long!

The kung-an should not be taken as a subject for research in meditation, because one does not sit in meditation in order to reflect. The kung-an is not life; it is sitting in meditation that is life. The kung-an simply plays a role of testing, witnessing and maintaining vigilance. It could be said that the kung-an is the lampshade, while Zen is the lamp itself.



### *A Non-Conceptual Experience*

THE OBJECT OF SITTING in meditation is not to think, reflect, or lose oneself in the realm of concepts and discriminations; neither is it remaining immobile like a stone or a tree trunk. How must these two extremes of conceptualization and inertia be avoided? The solution is to remain in the midst of the experience of reality, under the lamp of awareness of being. Direct experience and awareness of this direct experience constitute the whole problem. The words seem to be complicated, but the thing is so simple!

When you have some tea, you have direct experi-

ence of the tea. This experience can be had with the full and enlightened participation of your awareness, or without this participation. But the experience you thus have of the tea is a direct and living experience of reality. It is not a concept. It is only when you think about it, when you remember it, or better still, when you make a distinction between it and other former experiences that this experience becomes a concept. To be more precise, the concept of this experience is not this experience itself; as a consequence, we cannot say that the experience has *become* a concept.

At the moment of the experience you and the taste of tea are one. You are not different from the tea. The tea is you, you are the tea. There is not the drinker of tea, there is not the tea that is drunk, because there is no distinction between the subject and the object in the real experience. When one starts to distinguish subject and object, the experience disappears. Only concepts remain. *The world of Zen is the world of pure experience without concepts.* To introduce a kung-an as a subject of meditation is certainly not to practice Zen. This is the reason why the Ts'ao-t'ung sect says, "It is sufficient to sit in meditation without having the need for a subject of meditation."

The world of direct experience of Zen is, therefore, that of life and of awareness, not that of inert matter. On a conceptual level, if we can make the distinction between the one who tastes the tea and the tea that is tasted, which are two elements basic to the experience of the tea (a single experience without subject or object), we can also make the distinction between the practitioner of Zen and the reality lived by him in his experience. This spiritual experience is produced when the practitioner and his reality (the closest part of this reality being the psycho-physiological current of his own existence) enter into direct communion. The

nature of this experience, like that of the tea, is also indivisible. However, it must be noted that the notion of "unity" is only another concept. All concepts, including those of "unity" and of "duality," are foreign to experience which can be described as non-conceptual. It is life, and not a representation or description of life; it is reality in itself that transcends all descriptions, all ideas. It is tathata. The world of Zen is the world of tathata itself.



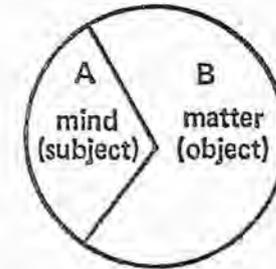
### *The Principle of Non-Duality*

DOGEN, a Japanese Master, said, "All phenomena is mind; mind is all. It contains rivers, mountains, moon and sun." In Zen experience there is no longer an object of knowledge. *The Treatise of the Great Virtue of Wisdom* (the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra*) of Nagarjuna says:

All phenomena are to be understood in two categories: mind and matter. On the conceptual level we distinguish mind and matter, but on the level of Awakening, all is mind. Object and Mind are both marvelous. Mind is Matter, Matter is Mind. Matter does not exist outside of Mind; Mind does not exist outside of Matter. The one is in the other. This is what is called the "non-duality of Mind and Matter."

All discrimination between subject and object removes us from Zen and its principle of non-duality.

Look at the following figure. Total reality is given as a circle divided into two parts A and B.



It seems possible for us to make a distinction between Mind and Matter, Subject and Object. To do so in reality is artificial, if not impossible. First of all, let us notice that Mind, considered as the subject of knowledge, can be at the same time the object of knowledge. If we turn this subject of knowledge back on itself, it becomes at the same time object of knowledge. And, when Mind becomes its own object of knowledge, is that which is grasped Mind itself, or only a projection of a collection of pictures of the Mind? Put in another way, are psychological phenomena, considered as objects of study and analysis, the Mind itself, or only images and concepts used to represent the Mind? This question could be put in the following way: can the Mind enter into itself, or is it only capable of seeing its image, of moving around on the periphery of itself?

Another question: does the Mind exist independently of its object? Or put in another way: can the subject of knowledge exist without the existence of its object?

The doctrine of Vijnanavada, one of the Mahayanist Buddhist doctrines, says that the word knowledge (*vijnana*) indicates *at the same time* the subject and the object of knowledge. The subject and object of

knowledge cannot exist independently of each other. As a consequence A does not exist if B does not exist, and vice versa.

For reasons already given, the division of reality into Mind and Matter, subject and object, must be considered as superficial, conventional, and also as "skillful means" to be used with very great care. When reality is revealed in the light of awareness of being, Mind is revealed as True Mind; Matter as True Matter. The *Treatise of the Great Virtue of Wisdom* says: "Mind is Matter, Matter is Mind, Matter does not exist outside of Mind, Mind does not exist outside of Matter."

Consider figure A:

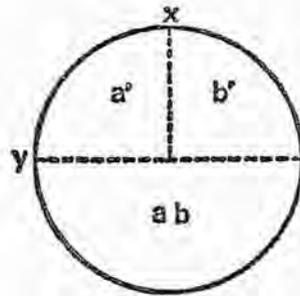


FIG. A

Reality (ab) is symbolized by the circle. This is the dharmakaya, the tathata, the nirvana (the *perfection*, the *totality*, the *unconditioned*), that transcend all mental categories and all concepts. Above the dotted line (y) two parts are distinguished which themselves are separated by the dotted line (x), distinguishing the subject of knowledge (a') and the object of knowledge (b').

The knowledge of (a'-b') is in this case conceptual knowledge; it is based on the dualistic notion of reality, existence separated into Mind and Matter. This

form of knowledge has *vikalpa* as its nature, that is to say, *discrimination-imagination*, and cannot introduce us directly into reality.

Let us now look at figure B:

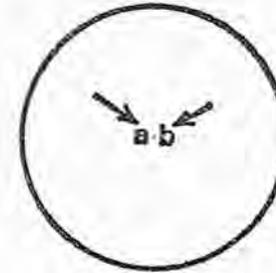


FIG. B

Here the two dotted lines (y) and (x) are removed. The subject (a') and the object (b') return to themselves, in perfect, non-discriminative and non-imaginative reality. This is the world of Awakening of Zen. Then let us look at figure C:

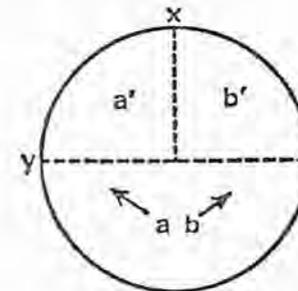


FIG. C

In this figure we see the two dotted lines (y) and (x) reappear. Arising from non-discriminative and non-imaginative reality (a-b) is expressed in the subject (a') and in the object (b'). Figure C is similar to

figure A, but in this case there are, in addition, two small arrows which indicate the movement of re-manifestation.

The awakened man lives in the world of things like everyone else. When he sees a rose he knows that it is a rose, like everyone else. But the difference is that he is neither conditioned nor imprisoned by concepts. Concepts now become marvelous "skillful means" in his possession. The awakened man looks, listens, and distinguishes things, all the while being perfectly aware of the presence (a-b) that is the perfect and non-discriminative nature of everything. He sees things perfectly in their interdependent relational nature.

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### *Interdependent Relation*

THIS EXPRESSION "the interdependent relational nature" of things is tied directly to the concept of non-identity just discussed. To see things in their interdependent relational nature is to perceive their nature of non-identity. Put another way, it is to recognize their existence, even when they are not present. Let us look, for example, at a table. It exists at this very moment. We recognize its existence only when the interdependent conditions, upon which its presence is grounded, converge; but we cannot recognize its existence before these conditions are brought together. Nevertheless, the table existed before being there; it existed formerly through the play of interdependent factors such as the wood, the saw, the nails, the carpenter, and the multi-

tude of other elements directly or indirectly connected with its existence. If one can see the existence of the table through these interdependent conditions, one can also see it in unlimited space and infinite time. This profound vision of reality delivers man from the fear that results from concepts such as "existence/non-existence," "permanent/impermanent," "I/Not-I," etc. The awakened man is free, serene, and happy. He has no fear of the vicissitudes of life. He is master of himself. Nothing is added at the moment of Awakening. Figure C represents the state of Awakening, while figure A represents the state of sleep. The two figures are identical. A Zen Master said, "Before practicing Zen, rivers were rivers and mountains were mountains. When I practiced Zen I saw that rivers were no longer rivers and mountains no longer mountains. Now I see that rivers are again rivers and mountains are mountains." The figures A, B, and C give support to this testimony. Once Awakening is reached, the practitioner is master of himself; while living in the world of conditioned things, he lives his life of liberty. Concerning the relation between matter and mind, phenomena and true nature, knowledge and action, Chu Chi, a Vietnamese monk of the Vo Ngon Thong sect who lived in the eleventh century, said:

All methods aiming at the realization of Awakening have their origin in your true nature; the true nature of everything is in your mind. Mind and Matter are one, and not two different things. Conditioning, slavery and error do not really exist; true and false, sins and merits, are only illusory images. So is the law of cause and effect. Your activity must not be based on conceptual discrimination; otherwise your activity will not be completely free. The free man sees all, but nothing is seen by him; he perceives things, but is not

taken in by the concepts of things. Why? Because when he looks at things he sees their true nature; when he perceives things, he penetrates their interdependent relational nature. Thus, while living in the world he possesses the secret of the production and manifestation of phenomena. It is the only way to arrive at Awakening. There is no other. Once free of errors caused by concepts, you can live in peace and freedom in the world of karma; by using skillful means, realize your calling of Awakening in this conditioned world, without even thinking that the world is conditioned or unconditioned.

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FOOTPRINTS OF  
EMPTINESS



### *The Birth of Zen Buddhism*

IT WAS TOWARD THE END of the eighth century that the term "Zen school" was used for the first time. Before this the terms *Leng Chia Tsung*, *Tung Ch'an Tsung*, *Ta Ma Tsung*, *Ho So Tsung*, *Nieu T'ou Tsung*, etc. were used—all these terms denoting the Buddhist traditions that considered the practice of meditation in the sitting position the basis of Buddhism.

In the middle of the fifth century, the Indian monk Gunabhadra (394-468) translated the *Lankavatara Sutra*. His disciples and their friends organized study sessions of the text and formed a school called *Leng-chia Tsung* (Lankavatara school). The *Lankavatara* is generally considered as a basic text for Zen Buddhism.

In the seventh century, a Chinese monk named Tao Shin founded a special monastery for meditation on Mount Tung Shan at Ho Nan. One of his disciples, Hung Jen, continued his work and taught the practice of Zen to certain disciples. Among these disciples of Hung Jen were such celebrated monks as Shen-hsiu, Hui-Neng, and Fa Jung. Later Shen-hsiu was to teach in the north of the country and Hui-Neng in the south. Fa Jung remained at the monastery Yeo Ts'i in the mountain of Niu-T'ou at Nan King, and founded the Niu-T'ou sect. Zen started to break up with the Tsing T'ou (*Amidaism*). According to most authorities, Fa Jung (594-647) was a disciple of Tao Shin and the founder of the Niu-T'ou sect. In reality, Fa Jung was neither the disciple of Tao Shin nor the founder of the

sect in question. The tradition founded by Tao Shin and Hung Jen is called the Tung Shan sect. Both taught in their monastery situated in the mountain of Tung Shan.

Shen-hsiu founded the Northern school (Pei Tsung). It was in this school that the use of the kung-an was started.

Hui-Neng founded the Southern school (Nan Tsung), but in effect it was his disciple Shen Hui (668-760) who was the true founder. Most of the historical documents of Chinese Zen Buddhism arise from this school. It is also the Southern school which developed the notion of *sudden enlightenment*, while the Northern school embraced the doctrine of *gradual enlightenment*.

As the grandeur and prestige of the Southern school was assured, Shen Hui felt it necessary to establish a history of the tradition of Zen Buddhism. Using available facts, he retraced the history of Indian Buddhism, with its twenty-eight patriarchs, from Mahakasyapa the first, to Bodhidharma the twenty-eighth. Bodhidharma is the First Patriarch of the Zen school of China. After him the Mind Seal was transmitted to Hui-Ko, then to Seng ts'ang, Tao Shin, Hung Jen, and Hui-Neng. According to Shen Hui, Hui-Neng is the Sixth Patriarch of the school. Shen Hui himself is considered the legitimate successor of the Sixth Patriarch.

The historical documents of Zen furnished by the Southern school aimed, certainly, at consolidating the prestige of this school, so they do not reflect the entire truth and, above all, the truth concerning the Northern school. Shen Hui attacked the Northern school, while the latter was in vogue, because the idea of gradual enlightenment preached by this school was taken up enthusiastically by the aristocracy and the courtiers. Even at this time, the expression "Zen school" was not

used, but rather the traditional appellation "Bodhidharma school" (Ta Ma Tsung).

At the same time, in Niu-t'ou, the monk Huian Sou (668-752) was exploring the doctrine of *non-reference to words*. This doctrine, as well as the use of the kung-an started by the Northern school, was to affect generally the evolution of the Zen sects of the following generations.

When the Northern school started to decline, the Southern school knew a rapid development. After Shen Hui the great monks like Hsi Ch'ien (700-790), Tao Yi (707-786) and Fa Kin (714-792) appeared, and the five famous schools of Zen—Lin Chi, Ts'ao Tung, Yun Men, Kuei Yang and Fa Yen—were founded. These schools were introduced in Japan and Vietnam, particularly the Lin Chi and Ts'ao Tung schools.

After Shen Hui the tradition was called the Ho Tso school, Ho Tso being the place where Shen Hui lived. The expression "Zen school" (Ch'an Tsung) appeared at the time of Po Chang (739-808), the author of the famous monastic rules. Called Po Chang Ts'ing Kuei, these were the rules by which the Zen tradition separated itself completely from the monasteries of the Vinaya School.

Zen certainly derives from Buddhism, but a form of Buddhism that belongs to a geographical zone influenced by the Chinese culture. The Chinese Zen tree, transplanted in Japan, in Vietnam, and in Korea, has grown well and greatly. Zen Buddhism, in each of these countries, differs with certain nuances from that practiced in China. One can, however, easily recognize its identity.



### *Zen and the West*

A GREAT NUMBER OF SCHOLARS and monks have wanted to transplant Zen in Europe and America. Have these efforts proved successful? It remains to be seen.

From the standpoint of knowledge, certain scholars, including Professor Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, have contributed a great deal toward arousing the interest of Westerners in Zen Buddhism. Zen has influenced the thinking of theologians like Paul Tillich, and philosophers like Erich Fromm and Carl Jung. But Zen does not yet exist in the West as a living tradition. Many monks are teaching the practice of Zen there, but this practice still remains Oriental; foreign to Western culture. The fact is that Zen has not yet been able to find roots in this soil. Cultural, economic, and psychological conditions are different in the West. One cannot become a practitioner of Zen by imitating the way of eating, sitting, or dressing of the Chinese and Japanese practitioners. *Zen is life; Zen does not imitate.* If Zen one day becomes a reality in the West, it will acquire a Western form, considerably different from Oriental Zen.



### *Zen and China*

THERE ARE IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES between the Indian and Chinese mentality; it is these differences that have given birth in China to the form of Buddhism called Zen. The Chinese are very practical people. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism reflect this character. The declaration made by Bodhidharma on his arrival in China has become the foundation of the Zen Buddhist tradition, because this declaration corresponds so well to the pragmatic nature of the Chinese. The Indian world of ideas and images, such as is revealed in the holy scriptures *Avatamsaka*, *Saddharma*, *Pundarika*, *Vimalakirtinirdesa*, etc., have no equivalent in China. Perhaps this tendency toward dreaming and speculation was the cause of the decline of Indian Buddhism at the beginning of the eighth century. Buddhism, which is founded on human experience and not on speculation, cannot exist without returning to spiritual experience—its base. Naturally the Chinese are capable of studying and understanding the fantastic world of ideas and images in Indian Mahayanist Buddhism. They have, indeed, translated, commented upon, and systematized all the literary sources of Indian Buddhism. But their practical nature attracts them to the experiential base of Buddhism. It is this that has permitted Buddhism to become firmly established in Chinese soil. Though Zen is a Chinese form of Buddhism, it reflects entirely the spirit and splendor of Indian Buddhism, from its inception to its full develop-

ment. For this reason one can say that Zen brings us the authentic spirit of Buddhism.

The experiential and pragmatic nature of Zen, its attitude vis-à-vis concepts and words, are witness to this authenticity. The personage of Buddha, in the Avatamsaka, Shingon, and T'ien T'ai sects, is represented under all the extremely allegorical forms. *In Zen, Buddha is represented as a man of flesh and bones, among men.*<sup>1</sup>

Although different from Indian Buddhism from the standpoint of form and practice, in the end Zen seems to be more authentic than many other Buddhist schools. In particular, Zen emphasizes the necessity of practice aiming at enlightenment which is the very foundation of Buddhism.

As we already know, the principle of non-identity (Not-I), is used only as a means to open the way of Buddhism—it is not a dogma. The principle of non-identity is applied to the world of living beings as to the world of inanimate things. Non-identity signifies ab-

<sup>1</sup> Master Lin Chi said, "If it is said that Buddha is immortal, why did he have to die between the two Sala trees in the forest of Kusinara? Where is he now? It is necessary to know that Buddha, just like us, must obey the law of birth and death. You say that Buddha possesses miraculous powers. But the Asulas and Brahma possess these miraculous powers also. Are they Buddhas? The miraculous powers of Buddha are those which allow him to be free of forms when he enters into the world of forms, free of sounds when he enters the world of sound, free of smells when he enters the world of smell, free of tastes when he enters the world of taste, free of perceptions when he enters the world of perception, free of thoughts when he enters the world of thought. . . . To acquire the six miraculous powers is to acquire the nature of emptiness of the six domains of the object of knowledge. Although he is there, in his body of five skandas, he walks on the earth in his miraculous powers."

sence of permanent identity. Non-identity is non-permanence itself. Everything is constantly changing. Therefore, nothing can be fixed in its identity. Everything is subject to non-identity.



### *The Notion of Emptiness*

THE NOTION OF *emptiness* in Buddhism is derived from the notion of non-identity. Emptiness (*sunyata*) signifies the hollow space at the interior of a thing, the absence of *identity* of this thing, and not the absence of the thing itself. The image is that of a balloon. The balloon is empty; in the same way, everything is devoid of absolute identity.

Let us examine the following passage from the *Samyutta Nikaya*:

- Sir, why is the world called empty?
- It is because in the world identities and things possessing this identity do not exist.
- What are the things which do not have identity?
- Eye, image and sight do not possess identity, nor that which belongs to identity. In the same way, ear, nose, tongue, body, thoughts, their object and their knowledge, do not possess identity either, nor that which belongs to identity.

All phenomena (physical, psychological, and physiological) are devoid of permanent identity. To be

empty is not to be non-existent; it is to be deprived of this permanent identity. To illustrate this point, Nagarjuna, in his *Mahaprajnaparamita-Sastra* (second century) said: "It is due to this emptiness that all phenomena exist." There is nothing ambiguous in this declaration, if things are considered in the light of non-identity and non-permanence. It is impossible that things should be permanent and identical to themselves in an absolute manner; nothing changing, nothing being created, nothing being transformed, nothing disappearing. Existence would be impossible if things were not empty of absolute identity. To affirm that there is an absolute identity is to deny the existence of things, while the proclamation of the principle of non-identity is an affirmation of these very things. This is why the expression "the identity of things" is itself a contradiction. Things are only possible while they are devoid of identity. This can be expressed in these formulae:

Non-permanence = non-identity = things exist.

Permanence = identity = nothing can exist.

The notion of *emptiness*, such as Buddhism understands it, is therefore the affirmation of the existence of things and not its negation. Our desire for a world in which things are permanent and indestructible is an unrealizable and contradictory desire.



### *Complementary Notions*

THE HINAYANA SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM (such as the Sarvastivada, the Sautrantika and the Theravada) have for this reason established philosophical systems that aim at demonstrating that the absolute identity of things does not exist, while the things (dharmas) that are devoid of this identity exist.

However, in order to avoid confusion between identity and existence, these schools teach that things exist *only in the present moment*. These schools, in particular the Sarvastivada, engage in the study and analysis of physical, physiological, and psychological phenomena and also of phenomena that cannot be classified in any of these three categories. The works devoted to these studies and analyses are numerous. The fear of nothingness, inspired by the doctrine of non-identity, has given rise to the need to confirm the existence of things. But in proclaiming that things exist only in the present moment, some difficulties have been created. How can one explain the notions of karma, rebirth, and enlightenment, for example, if one cannot establish the relation between things that exist in the present moment and things that exist in the past and in the future?

The Hinayana doctrines have developed other ideas to complete their doctrine. In the Sarvastivada school, for example, it is taught that from the standpoint of the noumena, things exist in the past, in the present, and in the future; but from the standpoint of phenomena, they exist only in the present moment. The formula

“identity does not exist, things exist” is not completed by the formula “the true nature of things exists in a continuous way through the past, the present and the future.”

The Theravada school uses the notion of obtainment to establish the relation of cause and effect between things. The Sautrantika school uses the notion of seeds (*bija*), perfumation (*vasana*), and lineage (*gotra*). The Sarvastivada school teaches a pluralist-realist doctrine, a sort of pan-realism, and devotes all its time to the study and analysis of ideas about the dharmas.



### *Anti-Scholastic Reactions*

REACTING AGAINST THIS scholastic and dogmatic tendency, new schools and doctrines grew up. In the middle of the fourth century B.C., the Mahasanghika school again posed the problem of knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of purifying the mind in order to realize enlightenment. Showing the futility of study and analysis of dharmas, this school encourages direct spiritual experience.

The Pudgalavada school, originating at the beginning of the third century B.C., proclaims that the *I* (identity) exists, and that the point of view of the Sthavira schools concerning the notion of Not-I (non-identity) is contrary to the spirit of Buddhism. Although condemned as heretical by many others, the Pudgalavada has been able to demonstrate the errors committed within the scholastic and dogmatic tendencies of tradition. It is

known that in those times, the Pudgalavadin monks were very numerous. There were about sixty thousand, while the total number of monks existing in India was only two hundred fifty thousand.

The second century B.C. saw the appearance of the first *Prajnaparamita Sutra* text and the rise of the doctrine of *emptiness*, in an effort aimed at regaining the original spirit of Buddhism. The *Prajnaparamita* texts, as well as other Mahayanistic texts, such as the *Sadharmapundarika*, the *Lankavatara*, the *Mahaparinirvana*, and the *Avatamsaka*, continued to appear in the following century. The explorations made by the Mahasanghika schools and by the Pudgalavada contributed much to the appearance of these Mahayanist schools.

In order to see the characteristics of Zen better, we must examine the essential traits of the Sunyatavada school and the Vijnavavada school. The Sunyatavada school, known later as Madhyamika, is founded on the *Prajnaparamita* scriptures, while the Vijnavavada school is based on the *Sandhinirmocana*, *Lankavatara*, and other texts. The texts mentioned are used in the Zen tradition. It can be said that Zen Buddhism reflects the essence of all these Mahayanist scriptures in a harmonious way.



### *Return to the Source*

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE of the *Prajnaparamita* thought is the notion of *emptiness*. In the beginning, as we know already, the word *emptiness* signified the

absence of permanent identity. When the Sarvastivada school declared that from the phenomenal point of view things do not exist as permanent identities, but that the true nature of things exists from the ontological standpoint, it can be seen that this permanent identity of things is now disguised as an ontological entity. The *Prajnaparamita* explains: "Things do not have their own nature; the ontological entity of things does not exist." The *Prajnaparamita*, through this declaration, tends to bring us back to the source of Buddhism.

The notions of impermanence, of non-identity, of interdependent relation, and emptiness are means aimed at revealing the errors of knowledge rather than at giving a description of the objects of knowledge. These notions must be considered as *methods* and not as *knowledge*. We must correct the habit we have of seeing things while having principles of conduct as our basis. According to the *Vajracchedika-prajnaparamita*, this problem is *the most important problem of all*. Buddha said to Subhuti, who asked him what was the method to correct understanding:

Subhuti, the great bodhisattvas must correct their understanding in the following way. It is necessary for them to think: while living beings exist, whether they are oviparous, viviparous, exudative, or metamorphosics, whether they possess a form or not, whether they are gifted with perception or not, I must bring them all to Nirvana. But, although these innumerable living beings must be brought to Nirvana, in reality no living being has to be so brought. Why is this? It is very simple. If a bodhisattva maintains in his mind the concepts of self, others, of living beings, of person, then he is not a true bodhisattva.

Why are concepts the source of errors that must be corrected? Because the concept is not reality. "To bring

all living beings to Nirvana" is reality itself; but "to bring," "living beings," "Nirvana," "the bringer," and the "brought" are only concepts. And why is there this great distance between reality and the concept? There is no discrimination in reality in itself. But "reality" in the world of concepts is full of discriminations: subject/object, I/Not-I, etc. This is not truly reality but an erroneous image of reality. The origin of this erroneous image is called *discrimination* or *imagination* (*vikalpa*) in the Vijanavada school.

This flower, for example, which is near the window, is a true flower in its non-discriminated reality. Because we discriminate it is no longer revealed. In its place stands an erroneous image of it. The word "empty" which at first signified the absence of permanent identity, now acquires another meaning: the image created by the concept does not represent any reality, it is imaginary.



### *The A Which Is Not A Is Truly A*

IN THE *Vajracchedika-prajnaparamita* we find many expressions given in the form, "The A which is not A is truly A." Let us take several examples: "Living beings, I say that they are not living beings, this is why they are truly living beings." "The Buddhist doctrine, I say is not the doctrine of Buddhism, this is why it is truly the Buddhist doctrine." What does that signify? It is quite simple. *Reality is only reality when it is not grasped conceptually*. What we construct through our

concepts is not reality. It can also be said, "This flower, which is not a concept, is truly a flower." Here again is found the rejection of the principle of permanent identity, and a tendency to see things by means of the go-between of conceptualization. The practitioner of the Way must enter into direct contact with reality, without allowing concepts to separate him from this reality. Reality cannot be conceived, nor can it be described in words. *Reality is reality; it is thus.* This is the significance of the word *thusness* (tathata).

The *Prajnaparamita* begins with this declaration: there is no true nature, there is *no* permanent identity. *Emptiness* itself has become a concept, the opposite of the concept "existence." Being a concept, emptiness can no longer reflect reality. *Emptiness* has been offered as a means, one must not take it as a reality. It is the finger pointing to the moon, it is not the moon itself.

The *Maha Ratnakuta* says:

Attachment to erroneous views is comparable to a sickness. All erroneous views can be cured; only attachment to the view of emptiness is incurable. Attachments to the view of being piled as high as a great mountain are much more preferable than attachment to non-being.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason true emptiness is identical to the tathata, which is non-discriminated and non-conceptualized reality. Many go too far in seeing in emptiness or the tathata the ontological basis of everything. The idea of an ontological entity, as we already know, is the notion of absolute identity in disguise, which is the very enemy of the *Prajnaparamita*. All that can be said is that emptiness or the tathata

<sup>2</sup> *Kasyapa parivarta* of the *Maharatnakuta Sutra*.

is non-conceptualized reality. All concepts about emptiness are enemies of emptiness, all concepts about the tathata are enemies of the tathata. To arrive at the reality of emptiness or the tathata will be to arrive at the Great Wisdom. Let us read this dialogue in the *Astahasrika-prajnaparamita*:

*Subhuti*: It is truly marvelous that the tathata can reveal the true nature of things when nothing can be said about this true nature of things! Have I understood you right, sir, when I say that we cannot say anything about things themselves?

*Buddha*: It is true; one cannot speak about things.

*Subhuti*: And things which transcend words, can they grow or diminish?

*Buddha*: No, they cannot.

*Subhuti*: If it is thus, the six practices of the paramita<sup>3</sup> cannot progress. How then can the Bodhisattva arrive at complete enlightenment. How can one realize complete enlightenment without perfecting the six paramitas?

*Buddha*: Subhuti, nothing grows or diminishes in the nature of the six paramitas. The Bodhisattva who practices the paramita of wisdom, who develops the paramita of wisdom and who practices the skillful means never thinks, for example, "this paramita of generosity is in the process of growing or declining." On the contrary, he thinks "the paramita of generosity is nothing other than words." When the Bodhisattva offers something to someone he offers him his whole heart

<sup>3</sup> The six practices which lead to absolute enlightenment are generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom.

and all the roots of the good of this act as a gift of wisdom to all beings. This offering expresses the method of realization of total Wisdom. When he practices discipline, patience, diligence, meditation and wisdom he acts in the same way.

*Subhuti*: And what is this complete enlightenment?

*Buddha*: It is the tathata. The tathata does not grow and it does not decline either. If the mind of the Bodhisattva remains at peace in the tathata, the Bodhisattva is near to complete enlightenment; he can never lose this enlightenment. Reality, which transcends words and concepts, does not contain the paramitas, or things, neither does it grow nor diminish. From which one knows that when the Bodhisattva remains in this mind, he becomes the man already near complete enlightenment.



### *Penetrating the Tathata*

THE IDENTIFICATION of the tathata with emptiness is an attempt to prevent people from conceptualizing emptiness. Similarly, the *Mahaprajnaparamita-Sastra* puts forward the expression *non-empty* (*asunyata*). The *non-empty* is another name for *emptiness* and for the *tathata*. The non-empty is treated in the *Mahayana Sraddhotpada* by Asvaghosa in a very appropriate way. After confirming that the tathata of things cannot be described by words or represented by concepts, Asva-

ghosa states that a method exists by which to penetrate the tathata; it consists of "following skillfully." According to Asvaghosa, this supposes abandoning the dualistic tendency. When one speaks of something, one does not distinguish the subject that speaks from the object treated. When one sees something, one does not distinguish the subject that sees from the thing seen. When one is able to get rid of discrimination, one begins to penetrate the world of tathata. "Following skillfully," according to Asvaghosa, is to clear a path amid words and concepts in order to arrive at reality.

But words and concepts can be used without allowing oneself to be taken in by them; in this case, words and concepts become useful and even indispensable. On the level of words and concepts, two forms of the tathata can be distinguished—emptiness and non-emptiness. It is because emptiness is not a concept, but the emptiness of the tathata, that one calls it *true emptiness*; and it is because non-emptiness is not a concept either that one calls it the *true non-emptiness*. All of this is designed to combat the *concept of emptiness* which is the true enemy of emptiness.



### *Subject and Object*

DISCRIMINATION between subject and object (a dualistic tendency) is the cause of all error concerning both knowledge and practice. The attitude of the *Prajnaparamita* vis-à-vis knowledge and method is expressed

very clearly in this passage from the *Astahasrika-prajnaparamita*, which can be looked upon as a true Zen text:

*Subhuti*: How must Bodhisattvas practice in order to be able to see clearly that things do not have their own nature?

*Buddha*: Forms must be seen as devoid of the true nature of form; sensations must be seen as devoid of the true nature of sensation. It is the same concerning the other sense organs and their objects.

*Subhuti*: If things are devoid of true nature, how can the Bodhisattva realize perfect wisdom?

*Buddha*: It is non-realization which is in the process of realizing perfect wisdom.

*Subhuti*: Why is this realization a non-realization?

*Buddha*: Because one cannot conceive wisdom nor the Bodhisattva who practices wisdom, as one cannot conceive realization, the realizer, the methods of realization, nor the media of realization. The realization of wisdom is therefore a non-realization in which all speculation is without value.

*Subhuti*: If it is thus, how can the beginner realize wisdom?

*Buddha*: From the first moment of awareness, the Bodhisattva must meditate on the inaccessible nature, or non-obtainability [*anupalambha*], of things. While practicing the six paramitas the Bodhisattva must say to himself that he can obtain nothing.

*Subhuti*: What is obtaining? What is non-obtaining?

*Buddha*: Where object and subject still exist, obtaining exists. Where the object and subject cease to exist, non-obtaining exists.

*Subhuti*: What is the subject-object and what is the non-subject-object?

*Buddha*: Where the distinction between eye and form, ear and sound, nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and sensation, act of thought and thought still exists; where the distinction between the man who acquires enlightenment and the enlightenment which is acquired subsists, the subject-object exists. Where there is no longer a distinction between eye and form, ear and sound, nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and sensation, cogitation and thought; where there is no longer the man who acquires enlightenment and the enlightenment acquired, there there is no longer subject-object.



### *The Three Gates of Liberation*

THE TS'AO-T'UNG SCHOOL, as we know, emphasizes the importance of non-obtaining. This position reflects the spirit of the *Prajnaparamita*. The principles of "meditation without subject" and "practice and enlightenment are one" certainly derive from the principle of non-obtaining. It must be recognized here that the doctrine of non-obtaining has as its origin the notion of non-pursuit (*apranihita*) in primitive Buddhism. The

*Digha Nikaya*, *Lalita-Vistara*, *Abhidharma Kosa-Sastra*, *Vibhasa* and *Visudhimagga* texts, all speak of this in the context of the "three gates of liberation."

The three gates of liberation are *emptiness* (*sunyata*), *no-trace* (*animitta*) and *non-pursuit* (*apranihita*). *Emptiness* is the absence of permanent identity of things. *No-trace* is the nature of non-conceptualization of things. *Non-pursuit* is the attitude of someone who does not feel the need to run after an object, the need to realize it or obtain it. It is, for example, not pursuing enlightenment as an object of knowledge. The Sanskrit word *apranihita* signifies "putting nothing in front of oneself." The *Vibhasa*, *Abhidharma Kosa-Sastra* and *Visudhimagga* texts have the tendency to interpret non-pursuit as non-desire; since things are impermanent, one must not run after them. For the same reason these texts interpret no-trace as the false value of facts provided by the sense organs.

The three gates of liberation are therefore interpreted by the majority of Hinayanist texts from the moral point of view rather than from the epistemological point of view. In Mahayanist Buddhism in general, and Zen Buddhism in particular, a close relationship can be found between the three stages. Absence of an absolute identity in each thing (emptiness) is manifested by the non-conceptual (no-trace) knowledge in which a subject in quest of its object does not exist (non-pursuit). In the true knowledge of reality the distinction between subject and object, obtaining and obtained, no longer exists.

But if non-pursuit signifies the cessation of the desire vis-à-vis impermanent things, it could be said that in this case the desire vis-à-vis liberation, or the desire for enlightenment, still exists, which is radically opposed to the idea of non-attaining in the *Prajnaparamita* and

in Zen. Jacques Gernet, in the introduction to his translation of *Conversations with Master Shen Hui*,<sup>4</sup> speaks of the sudden enlightenment of Zen as being a special product of Chinese Zen Buddhism, which does not exist in Indian Buddhism. In my opinion, this is not the case. The notion of non-obtaining in the *Prajnaparamita* was the basis for the doctrine of sudden enlightenment. The passages of the *Prajnaparamita* that we have cited prove this.



### *The Eight Negations of Nagarjuna*

IN THE SECOND CENTURY A.D., Nagarjuna systematized *Prajnaparamita* thought. He compiled the *Mahaprajnaparamita-Sastra*, the *Madhyamika Sastra* and the *Dvadasanikaya Sastra*. His disciple, Arya Deva, compiled the *Sata Sastra* in the same line of thought. Nagarjuna's three texts later became the foundation of a Mahayanist school called *Madhyamika* in India and *San Lun* in China. Candrakirki was the founder of the *Madhyamika* and Ki Tsang that of *San Lun*.

The method used by the *Madhyamika* consists of demonstrating the absurdity and the uselessness of concepts. It aims at showing the reality of emptiness, dealt with by the *Prajnaparamita*. It is not a linguistic philosophy, a simple play of words, or an intellectual exercise. The aim of the *Madhyamika* is clear: to reduce

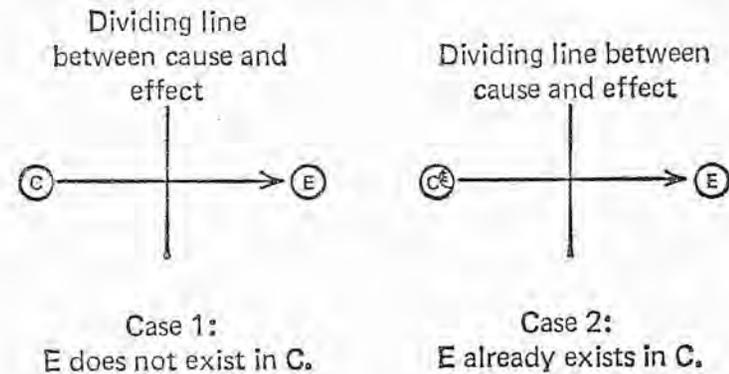
<sup>4</sup> Published in Hanoi in 1949.

all concepts to absurdity in order to open the door of non-conceptual knowledge. It is not the intention of the *Madhyamika* to propose a view of reality in order to oppose it to other views of reality. *All views*, according to the *Madhyamika*, are erroneous, because the views are not reality. The *Madhyamika* is, therefore, proposed as a method and not as a doctrine. This makes the *Madhyamika* the legitimate heir to the *Prajnaparamita* thought.

In his *Madhyamika Sastra*, Nagarjuna proposes the following eight negations:

There is no generation;  
 There is no destruction;  
 There is no continuation;  
 There is no interruption;  
 There is no unity;  
 There is no plurality;  
 There is no arriving;  
 There is no leaving.

This is the negation of the eight fundamental concepts through which reality is habitually considered. Other concepts derived from it, such as those of cause, effect, time, space, subject, object, etc., are also analyzed and finally rejected by Nagarjuna as simply products of discriminative knowledge. When speaking of generation, for example, one also speaks of the object which is generated; but if one goes in search of this object, one does not find it. Generation is not possible without an object that is generated. Nothing generates itself, says Nagarjuna, because generation does not exist. To demonstrate this Nagarjuna poses this question: before the effect E is produced as a function of the cause C, does the effect E already exist within the cause C?



If we reply (case 1) that the effect E does not exist in the cause C, Nagarjuna demonstrates to us that in this case generation is not possible. Indeed, if there is no relation between C and E, if E does not exist in C, it is impossible that E should arise from C. A chick cannot be born of a table; a chick is born from an egg. If we reply (case 2) that E already exists in cause C, Nagarjuna demonstrates to us that, in this case, E has no need of being generated since it exists already. The relation between an egg and a chick is not a relation of cause and effect; it is becoming and not generation. The concept of *generation* is thus rendered absurd. In the process of his analysis, the impermanent nature, the non-identity and also the emptiness of what we believe to be the object of generation and of destruction can be seen.



### *The Middle Way*

ALL CONCEPTS ARE DESTROYED in the same way by Nagarjuna, who takes all precautions necessary to avoid replacing one concept by another. In the process of analyzing the concept of *generation*, for example, the concepts "to become" and "non-production" are brought forth. Both these concepts must also succumb to Nagarjuna's dialectic. This dialectic aims at combating concepts in such a way that the concepts that are diametrically opposed to them cannot be used; for this reason it is called "The Middle Way." The term "middle" does not signify a synthesis between opposing concepts such as "being" and "non-being," "generation" and "destruction"—it signifies the transcendence of all concepts.

This dialectic is also expressed in the principle of the *two truths*: absolute truth (*paramartha satya*) and relative truth (*samvritti satya*). In its pure form, presented by an enlightened man, dialectic is absolute truth. Seized by concepts, it becomes relative truth. To render it absolute once more, it is necessary to take a new step; and if it is still conceptualized, another step must be taken in order to bring it back to its original pure form.

Conceptual Description (relative truth)	Non-Conceptual Description in a dialectic form (absolute truth)
Being	Non-Being
Being and non-Being	Neither Being nor non-Being.
Being and non-Being — neither Being nor non-Being.	Neither non-Being nor non non-Being.
Neither non-Being nor non non-Being.	Neither "neither non-Being" nor "nor non non-Being." etc.

According to the principles of the "three gates of liberation," negation therefore has the role of breaking down concepts to the point where the practitioner comes to rid himself of all discrimination and penetrates undiscriminated reality. Dialectic aims at producing a transforming crisis and not at expounding a truth. In this close relationship between the language and attitude of Zen, the Prajnaparamita thought and the Madhyamika thought can be clearly seen.

Zen Masters do not use dialectic in the way that Nagarjuna does, but their words, their acts, and their looks also have the function of combating concepts, of producing crises, and of creating conditions that arrive at releasing the vision of reality. If one were to spend his days in the Zen monastery in the study of the *Prajnaparamita* and the *Madhyamika* texts, much time would be wasted, and there would not be enough time left to practice Zen. But these texts are always there in the Zen monastery; they can be consulted at any time.

This demonstrates that there is a close relationship between the Vijñānavāda and Zen, just as there is between the Prajñāparamita and Zen.

✱

### *The Vijñānavāda School*

THE VIJÑĀNAVĀDA SCHOOL, which benefits considerably from the researches of the Sarvastivāda school and inherits from it to some extent, also deals with the problem of the *tathata*, as did the Prajñāparamita thought, but from the phenomenological view. The most fundamental texts of the Vijñānavāda school are the *Saṅghinirmocana Sūtra*, which appeared during the middle of the second century, and the *Lankavatāra Sūtra*, which appeared during the beginning of the third century A.D. According to Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the *Lankavatāra* is not a true Vijñānavāda text, but a Zen text. The reason for this, he says, is that it is the only text transmitted by Bodhidharma, the First Zen Patriarch, to his disciple Hui-Ko, and, further, the text emphasizes the importance of the inner spiritual experience of Buddha and of reaching enlightenment. But, in fact, nearly all Buddhist texts speak about this spiritual experience and about reaching enlightenment. It cannot be said that the *Prajñāparamita* texts are not basic Zen texts; on the contrary, the *Vajracchedikā* and the *Hridaya* are the two most popular *Prajñāparamita* texts among Zen practitioners. The fact that Bodhidharma transmitted to Hui-Ko the *Lankavatāra* clarifies only one thing for us: the *Lankavatāra* text was the favorite text of Bodhidharma.

The *Lankavatāra* can be considered as a basic text for Zen Buddhism, as Suzuki thought, but it is at the same time the basic text of the Vijñānavāda school.

✱

### *Classification of the Dharmas*

THE VIJÑĀNAVĀDA classifies dharmas (things) into five groups:

1. The phenomena of knowledge (*citta*), of which there are eight.
2. The phenomena of states of consciousness (*citta śika*), of which there are fifty-one.
3. Physical and physiological phenomena (*rūpa*), of which there are eleven.
4. Relational phenomena (*citta viprayutasamskāra*), of which there are twenty-four.
5. Unconditioned phenomena (*asankṛta*), of which there are six.

There are, then, in all one hundred dharmas. The last category groups the *dharmas* under consideration as unconditioned, and distinguishes: (1) unconditioned space, i.e., that which is neither created nor destroyed by conditions; (2) the unconditioned acquired by enlightenment; (3) the nature of the unconditioned, which has nothing to do with enlightenment; (4) the unconditioned that is freedom from all pleasure and all pain; (5) the unconditioned that is the cessation of

all thought and of all sensation; (6) the unconditioned of tathata.

It should be noticed at this point that the tathata is also considered as a dharma. If one calls "all that which can be conceptualized" dharma, why can tathata, which transcends all concepts, be considered as a dharma? The Vijñānavāda replies: "The tathata and all other dharmas cannot be conceptualized. It is only by convention or expediency that one uses these representations."

The *Trimsika Vijñaptimatratā* of Vasubandhu begins with this declaration concerning these representations:

It is because of the presupposed existence of permanent identities and of dharmas which possess this permanent identity that so many diverse representations are manifest. All these representations come from conscious-knowledge [*vijñāna*].



### *Conscious Knowledge*

THUS, THE RECOGNITION of one hundred dharmas divided into five groups is only an acceptance of the presupposition that dharmas exist. This acceptance serves as a means for the beginning of the exposition of the Vijñānavāda doctrine. This already emphasizes the difference between the methodology of Vijñānavāda and that of the Sarvastivāda. According to Vijñānavāda, all sensation, perception, thought, or knowledge is manifested from the basis of reality, which is called *alay-*

*avijñāna*. In its nonconceptualized nature, *alayavijñāna* is tathata or "wisdom of the great and perfect mirror."

There are in all eight kinds of conscious knowledge (*vijñānas*) which are classified in three categories:

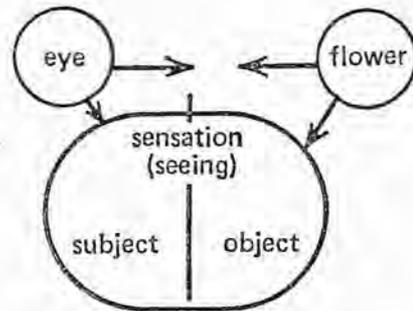
1. *Vijñāna of knowledge of objects (vijñaptirviśaya)*, which concerns sight, touch, hearing, taste, and smell, and the *manovijñāna*, which is the center of sensations, perceptions and thoughts.
2. *Vijñāna of the activity of thought (manas)*, center of the discrimination I/Not-I and of reflections.
3. *Vijñāna of the base (ālaya)*, the base of the manifestation of all knowledge, subject and object.

The *Mahāyāna Śraddhotpada-Sāstra* says about the *ālaya*:

True Mind [ultimate reality] can be seen from two sides: the side of birth/death [phenomenal] and the side of true nature [tathata]. Phenomena come from the "tathata"; phenomena are neither the replica of "tathata" nor different from it: "Alaya" means the basis of conservation and manifestation of all the dharmas; i.e., the "tathata."

All the *vijñānas*, all sensations, perceptions, and cogitations contain in themselves at the same time their subject and their object of knowledge. When the eye is opposite a flower, one can say that the eye and the flower are dharmas which can exist separately; *but when "seeing" occurs, the subject and object of the seeing exist at the same time in the sensation.* The eye as object is not the object seen. The object of the seeing

is found in the seeing itself, and cannot exist independently of the subject of the sensation.



The above figure shows us that when sensation occurs the first phase, which is contact between the physiological phenomenon (eye) and the physical phenomenon (flower), has already passed in order to arrive at the second phase, which is the sensation (seeing). This underlines another difference between the phenomenological style of the Vijñānavāda and the Sarvāstivāda's tendency toward pluralistic realism. Does *the image of the flower* in the sensation faithfully reflect the *flower* in reality? This is a question. The relation between the reality of the flower and the sensation which arises from it is another subject posed by the Vijñānavāda.

The first point reveals that the world of sensations and of concepts is only the world of Vijñāna (conscious-knowledge). The object of vijñānas is only the object of knowledge. One can then wonder whether the physiological and physical conditions, according to which the vijñānas are produced, are truly existing. The Vijñānavāda tells us they exist, as an object of alaya, and one can call them the "world of reality in itself." The role of alaya is to maintain all the dharmas and to make them appear. Alaya is also defined as the totality of dharmas themselves. The word alaya implies to con-

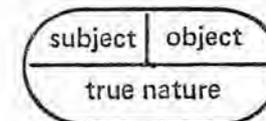
serve and to maintain. Though considered as a vijñāna, alaya does not function as do the *Manovijñāna* or the *Manas* on the discrimination of subject and object, I and Not-I.

In the case of pure sensation, where the discrimination of subject/object does not exist, the "world of reality in itself" is revealed. This world of reality in itself is tathata, the true nature of alaya. If the vijñānas are separated from the discrimination of subject/object, they become wisdom (*jñānas*) and perfect revelation of reality in itself.

✽

### *Method of Vijñānavāda*

EACH VIJÑĀNA consists of three parts: subject (*darśanabhāga*), object (*nimittabhāga*) and true nature (*svasamvittibhāga*).



Each sensation, perception and thought also possesses these three parts. The notion of three parts shows that the Vijñānavāda plays heavily on the ontological problem. The part called "true nature" is considered as the basis of reality, the essence of vijñāna and the tathata. The first two parts are only the manifestation of the tathata. As each drop of water is salted, each dharma

is produced on the basis of the tathata of reality. The realization of reality does not come about by pinning things down, but by seeing into their true nature.

What is the method proposed by the Vijnanavada? First of all the importance of the non-dualist way must be recognized. Things depend upon each other in being produced; they do not possess any true identity. This is what is called the *interdependent nature* (*paratantra*) of things. All knowledge not based on the principle of paratantra is wrong. It does not reflect reality. Indeed, it carries with it this illusion-imagination which is called *vikalpa*. *Vikalpa* cuts reality into separate pieces, giving them each separate identities. *Vikalpa* discriminates. If *vikalpa* is destroyed, knowledge becomes pure and able to reveal the tathata. Things will then be presented in their thusness. They will reveal their nature of *nispanna* (perfect reality). Knowledge, being pure, is called wisdom (*jnana*).

But in reality *vikalpa*, *paratantra* and *nispanna* are only states of knowledge. As knowledge is *vikalpa*, the object of knowledge is also *vikalpa*. As knowledge is clarified by the *paratantra*, the object of knowledge is revealed in its *paratantra* nature. As knowledge becomes absolutely pure, the object of knowledge becomes *nispanna*. This once more indicates that the subject and object of knowledge are but one.

Having dealt with these three natures (*tri-svabhavas*) of things, the Vijnanavada then tells us that these three natures do not truly exist. Take, for example, the *vikalpa* nature (illusion-imagination) of things. This nature does not truly exist. It is only a kind of illusory veil, through which things are seen. It is the same for the *paratantra* and *nispanna* natures. As things do not have true identity they cannot possess any "nature."

The Vijnanavada therefore establishes the principle of three non-natures (*trinisvabhavatas*) to combat the principle of three natures which was first established

to guide people in the way of the purification of knowledge. This method makes us think of the method of Madhyamika which uses concepts in order to destroy concepts. At the same time it shows us that the Vijnanavada is very closely connected to the method of Zen. Absolute reality, according to Vijnanavada, cannot be described by the three natures or by the three non-natures, or by any other concept. This is because it is tathata, because it is the absolute truth of the dharmas (*dharmanam paramarthas*), absolute truth that is only revealed by enlightenment.

Just like the Prajnaparamita and Zen, the Vijnanavada emphasizes the importance of *non-obtaining* in the process of purification of knowledge. Vasubandhu says in his *Trimsika*:

As long as the *vijnana* does not wish to remain in peace in its non-dualistic nature, the roots of discrimination between subject and object are still there, indestructible.

When the practitioner places in front of himself something that he considers as the true nature of *vijnana* [*vijnaptimatra-svabhava*], he is still not in the heart of the true nature of *vijnana*, because he still distinguishes subject and object.

When, faced with the object of knowledge, he does not consider it as an object of his own realization, the practitioner begins to live in peace in the true nature of *vijnana*, because he has rendered the dualistic discrimination immanent.

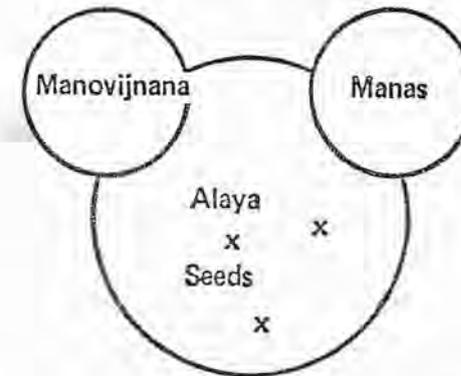
This reality, which can neither be conceived nor obtained, is the transcendental wisdom.

\*

*Alaya as the Basis*

THE TRUE NATURE of vijnana, of which Vasubandhu speaks, is none other than the tathata, or "illuminating nature of knowledge." In the state of enlightenment, the five vijnanas of sensation become "the wisdom of the miraculous powers"; the manovijnana becomes "the wisdom of the marvelous inspection"; the manas become "the wisdom of the non-discriminating nature"; and alaya becomes "the wisdom of the great and perfect mirror."

Zen Buddhism does not enter the realm of analysis and discussion as does the Vijñānavāda, but it brings out its spirit in a profound way. The notion of alaya can throw a great deal of light on the mechanism of enlightenment in Zen. Alaya is the profound base of life and the psyche while the manovijnana and the manas are only reflecting elements, ideas, and concepts. From the phenomenological point of view, alaya is the basis of being and non-being. It conserves and maintains the energies and the essences that are manifested in the dharmas. These energies and these essences are called seeds (*bija*). The manas and the manovijnana



are manifested on the basis of alaya. The roots coming from their errors are thrust into alaya and are called *anusaya*. The practitioner of meditation on the *paratantra* (interdependent nature of things) brings about changes at the heart of alaya and these changes transform and neutralize the *anusaya* roots. Enlightenment is the fruit of this transformation, called *asrayaparavrtti*. According to Huiian Tsang, the word signifies transformation (*paravrtti*) and support (*asraya*). To transform is not to destroy. The support is here *paratantra*. Using the principle of *paratantra* as a basis, one transforms the seeds and roots of ignorance into seeds and roots of enlightenment. This transformation does not come about only in the manas and *manovijnana*, it comes about in the heart of alaya itself. When alaya is enlightened, the manas and the manovijnana are also enlightened.

Flowers and grass, mountains and rivers, are no longer given as *vikalpa* images to the enlightened man, but are given in the reality that they acquire in "wisdom of the marvelous inspection." The expression "wisdom of non-discriminating nature" indicates the ability of the enlightened man to penetrate to the heart

of reality itself, without being paralyzed by duality.

The efforts of manovijnana alone do not culminate in enlightenment. In the first place, since the very basis of the manovijnana is alaya, a genuine transformation must be realized at the heart of alaya; secondly, reality itself is not revealed in the manovijnana, which still clings to dualism. For this reason, alaya itself must be put into action in order that it transform the seeds (*bijas*) of the *two attachments* (the errors concerning I/Not-I, subject/object). Each moment in which the manovijnana is enlightened by the paratantra and the nispanna is a moment of awareness of being, a moment of Zen, in which all vikalpa image is absent.

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### *The Process of Enlightenment*

LET US READ THE FOLLOWING important passage in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, in order to understand clearly the process of enlightenment of Zen and Vijnanavada:

Mahamati, the five sorts of dharmas are: representations [*nimitta*], names [*nama*], discrimination [*vikalpa*], thusness [*tathata*] and true wisdom [*samyajñana*].

All forms, colors, and images, etc. are called representations [*nimitta*].

From these representations concepts are formed, such as the concept of the base on the model "this is this," "this is not that," etc. It is this which is called name [*nama*]. "Conscious-knowledge" and

their functions, which give rise to these concepts, are called discrimination [*vikalpa*].

These representations and concepts are not true things that can be obtained; they are only the product of discrimination. The true nature of things, liberated from this discrimination, is called thusness [*tathata*].

Mahamati, these are the characteristics of thusness: reality, exactitude, ultimate end, true nature, foundation and non-obtaining.

The Buddhas and myself have realized and expounded thusness.

All those who are capable of making good use of this exposition in order to penetrate into thusness, can transcend concepts of continuity and discontinuity, get rid of discrimination-imagination, and reach the spiritual experience of self-realization, an experience unknown to philosophers, Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas. This is called True Wisdom [*samyajñana*].

Mahamati, the five sorts of dharmas that I have just expounded to you imply the essential doctrine of three natures, of eight vijñanas and of the two stages of *nairātmyas* (no true identity).

Mahamati, you must use your ability to realize these dharmas. Once you have realized them, your mind will be confirmed; nothing will be able to disturb you.

By way of illustration, we can use a circle with C at its center. The circle, perfectly round, symbolizes the reality of the *tathata*, which reveals only the true non-discriminating and non-dualistic wisdom. In the unenlightened state, however, what we take for our world of reality is only the world of discrimination (*vikalpa*) which is manifested on the *tathata* basis. In



this world of discrimination, subject and object, representation and name, are revealed. By penetrating through skillful means we come back to the world of tathata and true wisdom. But that does not imply the disappearance of the world of phenomena. What disappears is discrimination-imagination. The world of phenomena is revealed in true wisdom without being veiled by vikalpa. *The world of phenomena is but one with the world of tathata, in the same way that waves cannot be separated from the sea.*

The passage quoted from the *Lankavatara* now becomes clearer. The expression "penetration by skillful means" makes us think of the *Sraddhotpada Sastra* in which Asvaghosa speaks of the efforts of penetration by a clever use of words and concepts. In Buddhism, the language of the enlightened man aims at expounding the way of realizing the tathata. This language, which has its source in wisdom that transcends word and concept, must, however, use words and concepts. When we reach absolute reality, while using this lan-

guage of words and concepts we practice what the *Lankavatara* calls "penetration by skillful means."

Although Zen declares that it is not based on words and phrases, it in fact manipulates words and concepts in order to reveal the reality which transcends words and concepts. The Master achieves success or failure according to whether his disciple can or cannot "penetrate by skillful means" when the Master's pole is held out to him. If the disciple is attached to the word of his Master in the way of vikalpa, the release of enlightenment will be impossible for him. It must be clearly understood that though Zen Masters will not allow their disciples to spend their time in studying the Madhyamika and the Vijnanavada, it is not because these doctrines contradict Zen; in fact, they can very well illustrate the history of Zen. *But Zen is not the study of Zen; Zen is life.* Zen is direct contact with reality. The Madhyamika and Vijnanavada doctrines can explain many things, but they do not put the practitioner in direct contact with living reality. Zen can only be lived and experienced. As Master Tue Trung Thuong Si said, "This marvelous piece must be played." What is the good of discussing a musical masterpiece? It is its performance that counts.

VI



THE REGENERATION  
OF MAN



### *Monastic Life*

LIFE IN A ZEN MONASTERY is well organized. The Zen monastic tradition is still the same in present-day monasteries as it was when it began at the time of Master Po Chang (720-814). The monastic code was set down by Po Chang himself and carries his name. The monastery where Po Chang lived was situated in the Ta Hiong Mountain at Hong Chou in the province of Kiang Hi. The name of the mountain was later changed to that of Po Chang.

The rules of Po Chang are a synthesis of the spirit of the Hinayanist and Mahayanist disciplines. The monastic tradition of the Zen school began to be distinct and independent of the monastic tradition of the Vinaya school of that time.

The monastery is placed under the direction of a Superior, *vien chu* or *giam vien*. The monk who has the role of administrative director is called *tri su*, and he is responsible for the monastery as if it were a community or an organization. The monk *tri vien* has charge of the garden and grounds, the *thu kho* that of the granaries, the *tri tang* that of the library, the *tri dien* and the *huong dang* that of the sanctuary. The *tri khach* looks after the visitors, monks, and lay people; the *duy na* is in charge of the recitation meetings and the ceremonies; and the *tri chung* is charged with problems concerning relations between members of the community. There are some jobs that are done by everybody in turn; the monks who are responsible for them during

the day are called the *tri nhat*. The young and the novices (*sramanera*) fill the role of *thi gia* (attendants) in order to help the Grand Masters in their daily existence, and in order to learn from them the way to conduct themselves in monastic life.

Twice a month the Buddha Sanctuary reunites all the monks for the *bo tat* ceremony, a review of the observance of the *bhikhu* rules, of which there are 250, and of the fifty-eight rules of Bodhisattva. The novices do not participate in the recitation of these rules. They have their own novitiate rules, of which there are ten, and their manual of conduct to recite together in another room in the monastery. The six principles of the *luc hoa* community life, "the six ensembles," are also repeated:

1. To live together in the same conditions.
2. To observe the same rules.
3. To speak carefully to avoid dispute.
4. To share one's goods.
5. To share different points of view.
6. To create harmony of opinion in order to maintain the *joie de vivre* in the community.

The monks get up at four o'clock in the morning to the sound of the *bao chung* bell. They have fifteen minutes to wash, dress, and make their beds. Then they gather in the Meditation Hall and take up the lotus posture.

A monk stands by the *bao chung* bell and chants the meditation chant, accompanied by the sound of this bell. It is a prelude chant:

The fifth division of the night has already begun and the gateway to reality is open.

I would that the whole world were on the path of prajna wisdom.

That each of us should penetrate deeply into the doctrine of the three vehicles and realize the harmony between the two Truths.

That the sun of marvelous wisdom should rise and dispel all the clouds of darkness.

The great bell emits regular and slow clangs during the meditation period (*tao tien*).

After the *tao tien* everyone assembles in the sanctuary for the recitation of the sutras.

Breakfast normally consists of a bowl of rice, sometimes mixed with beans. It is eaten with pickled vegetables and soya sauce. Silence is maintained during eating; the meal finished, the *Prajnaparamita Hridaya* (Heart of Perfect Wisdom) is recited.

After breakfast each goes about his task. The housework is done, the sanctuary floor is washed; some monks work in the garden or in the fields, carry water, or look for firewood.

At 11:30 A.M. there is a short rest. Lunch is at midday and is the principal meal of the day. In accordance with the summons of the *bao chung* bell, one washes and dresses in the *ao trang*, then goes to the refectory in procession and sits upright on his seat in front of his bowl. The meal proceeds according to a ceremony; body and mind are fixed on the content of the meal. From 2:30 until 5:30 there is a work period, just as in the morning. The evening meal, if there is one, consists of rice soup and the left-overs from lunch.

The period for the recitation of the sutras begins at 7:00 in the evening. After 8:00 comes the time of study and practice of *zazen*. Bedtime follows the end of the last meditation period. Anyone may continue to meditate very late into the night.



### *The Retreats*

EACH YEAR, from the fifteenth of the fourth lunar month to the fifteenth of the seventh month, the *ket ha* season is organized. During this period one does not leave the monastery and intensively practices *toa thien* (meditation in the lotus posture). Monks who live alone in distant pagodas return to their monastery according to tradition, in order to participate in the *ket ha* season. During this period a great deal is learned about spiritual things.

Sometimes *ket dong* seasons, which also last three months, are organized in the winter. These allow whoever could not leave his pagoda or community during the summer *ket ha* to participate in *ket dong*.

Outside the collective meditation hall, which can sometimes hold up to several hundred monks, there also exist little Zen huts for one person called *that* or *coq*. In Vietnam, especially in the southern part, many of these little Zen huts are found. The climate is warm in the southern region, and it is ample protection to construct small huts with bamboo and coconut palm leaves in a very simple way. A Zen practitioner can remain in his *coq* three years, or one year, or three months, according to his liking. A novice is appointed to assist him during this period of intensive Zen practice.

The period during which a Zen monk intends to be alone in his *coq* (*nhap that*) is truly a period of absolute retreat. The monk does not leave the vicinity of the *coq*. The novice who attends him maintains connections between the monastery and the *coq*; he gets

water, rice, vegetables, fruit, etc. The monk in retreat may do his own cooking. In his *coq* there is only a bed (which also serves as a meditation seat), a table, a lamp, a towel, a toothbrush, and some sutra texts. The monk, during this absolute retreat, rarely speaks or does not speak at all. His assistant must be very attentive; he must know what his Master needs, be attentive to him, and make his life as comfortable as possible. While assisting a Master in retreat, a novice can learn in silence many things.

For the most part the *ket ha*, *ket dong*, and *nhap* that periods are devoted to the practice of *toa thien*. The practitioner sits on his Zen seat in the lotus posture, the right foot placed on the left leg and left foot placed on the right leg. He holds his head up and his spine very straight, keeps his eyes down, and places the left hand on the right hand. The lotus posture is a very stable and energizing position. Beginners may feel pain in this position. They must begin by the half lotus position, the right leg placed on the left leg, or vice-versa.

After several hours stationary in the lotus posture, the practitioner may get up and walk in *kinh hanh*, that is to say, a very slow walk in the meditation hall or around the *coq*. If the *toa thien* is practiced collectively, the time of *kinh hanh* will be fixed in advance. One walks in file, very slowly, silently, with eyes lowered, several times around the meditation hall in a clockwise direction. Meditation is continued while walking. Alternating *toa thien* and *kinh hanh* ensures that the blood circulation is maintained and eases the pain in the legs.

But Zen is not only practiced during *toa thien* and *kinh hanh*. It is necessary to learn to remain in Zen even while cultivating the vegetables, sweeping the courtyard, washing clothes, or washing the dishes. Many Zen

Masters have come to enlightenment during their daily work. It is essential that a Zen practitioner be able to live Zen at each moment of the day. *There is no enlightenment outside daily life.*



### *The Encounter*

FROM TIME TO TIME meetings are organized during which the disciple finds himself face to face with his teacher in an encounter.<sup>1</sup> He then tells his teacher about his experiences, his difficulties, and his doubts. He may also present to his teacher his view of Zen in order to get instructions. These meetings are called *tham thien* or Zen encounters. Questions and answers may sometimes be expressed very energetically. The disciple then has the opportunity to present himself and to present his individual case. The individual encounters of this sort, as well as the impromptu encounters between the Master and a group of monks in a corridor or in a garden, are called *tieu tham* or small encounters. The encounters that take place at fixed times, in which the whole assembly participates, are called *dai tham* or great encounters.

The exchange of questions and answers during these great encounters may have the appearance of formidable confrontations. A monk presents himself to the Master, before the entire assembly, and exposes himself to a severe test. The Master uses questions, sometimes yells

<sup>1</sup>*Sansen* in Japanese.

or blows, in order to put the disciple to the test. Everybody attends as a witness to the scene, in a state of tension that arouses awareness of being in them. Monks who voluntarily offer themselves to the test are described as "entering into combat" (*xuat tran*).

Enlightened monks sometimes leave the monastery in order to live in a private hut, to become Masters in a new monastery, or to go on a journey.



### *The Role of the Laity*

ZEN, HOWEVER, does not belong to monks only. Everyone can study and practice it. Many laymen have been recognized as illustrious Zen Masters, and have aroused the respect of the monks themselves.

The laity are related to the monasteries by the material support they provide to them, as it sometimes happens that the labor of the monks may not be sufficient to ensure the upkeep of the monastery. The laity are also related to the monasteries by their participation in the construction of temples and sanctuaries and by their cultural activities; for example, the printing and publishing of sutras and scriptural works by monks. A good number of monasteries each month organize *bat quan trai gioi* for laymen who wish to live for twenty-four or forty-eight hours in a monastery exactly like monks. Places are reserved for them for these periods of *bat quan trai gioi*, during which they practice Zen under the direction of monks.

It is through the close interaction of the laity and

the monks that the essence of Zen penetrates social life. Zen influences the poetry, painting, architecture, and music. The traditions of flower arrangement, tea ceremony, calligraphy, Chinese ink painting and water color have their source in the spiritual reality of Zen. Zen is not only reflected in the technique of art but also by the essence of the art. The technique reflects the self-mastery of the artist, while the content reflects the degree of spirituality of the artist. The arts are here the connecting link between the spiritual world of Zen and the technical world of men.

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### *The Zen Man and the World of Today*

THE PICTURE of the enlightened man is that of a free man who possesses spiritual force and who is not the plaything of chance. The practitioner, once enlightened, sees himself in his true nature, knows himself, and possesses a clear view of reality—the reality of his being and of the social situation. This vision is the most precious fruit that Zen can offer to a man. The way of being of the enlightened man is considered to be his most fundamental and most beneficent contribution to all life. Zen is a living tradition which can help to make sober, healthy, well-balanced, and stable people. The arts and thought that have their source in the enlightenment of Zen also possess this sobriety, this vitality, and this clear-sighted serenity.

Contemporary man is dragged along in a producing and consuming cog-wheeled system to the point where

he begins to become a part of the machine and loses mastery of himself. Daily life dissipates our spirit, eats up our time and thus does not leave the opportunity to become aware of ourselves and to return to our deeper self. Accustomed as we are to being constantly "occupied," if these occupations should happen to be taken from us, we find ourselves empty and abandoned. We then refuse to confront ourself and instead go off in search of friends, to mix in with the crowd, to listen to the radio or to the television, to get rid of this impression of emptiness.

Present-day life, agitated to the extreme, makes us very easily irritated. Emotions shake us several times each day; they dominate and possess us. They influence our decisions to a considerable extent. If we are no longer ourselves, how can we say that it is we who live and decide our life?

Life today is organized according to "reason"; man participates in life with only part of his being—his intellect, his *manovijnana*. The other half, deeper and more important, is the unconscious, the fundamental foundation into which the roots of his being are thrust. This part is *alaya*, it cannot be analyzed by reason and by the *manovijnana* itself. The man of today loves reason. He trusts himself to rationality. He is uprooted from the basis of his true being. From this comes the feeling of alienation from which he suffers and through this, little by little, his humanity becomes more and more mechanical.

The revolt of the younger generation, in the capitalist as well as in the socialist countries, is witness to the desire of man to recapture his human nature. It is not known yet where this revolt will lead us. But one thing is sure: if men are unable to create a new path by which to rediscover their true nature, the human race is condemned to disappear before long.

Never in all history has man had to face such terrible dangers. He is at the point where he is no longer sure of being able to control the situation. The economic, political, and military systems he has established have turned against him and imposed themselves upon him. Such is the cause of the phenomenon of the "dehumanization of man."

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### *Future Perspectives*

LET US CONSIDER, for example, the problem of food. The world population is presently 3.5 billion, and two thirds of this population go to bed at night on an empty stomach. According to sociologists, in the year 2000, that is to say, in less than thirty years' time, the population of the world will have doubled—it will be 7 billion people. How can the world support such a population when its resources are not unlimited and the problem of feeding the present population has not yet been solved?

The Third World War will not be unleashed by the great powers; it will break out first in the zones of famine and oppression. Famine and political oppression are the most profound causes for all war. Today all wars (Vietnam, the Middle East) have an international character; the great powers are engaged in them to a greater or lesser extent because their influence and their prestige are tied in large measure to these wars. People on all sides trembled during the crises of Cuba

and the Middle East. We know a world war can explode at any moment. A false alert, like that which was produced in the United States at the beginning of 1971, was sufficient to create a complete panic. Will man possess the coolness necessary to control the situation? It takes only 250 atomic projectiles to destroy almost the entire continent and people of America. The same quantity is sufficient to destroy the Soviet Union. In 1970 the United States already possessed 2,500 of these projectiles and the Soviet Union 1,500. By 1975 the United States will have 8,000 of them and the Soviet Union 5,000. The buttons are always in reach of men.

From another standpoint, insecticides and defoliating agents, used in the wars and also in agriculture, have affected the entire ecological system of the earth. According to a study done by UNESCO, the pelican species has begun to be extinguished along the coast of California. It has been estimated that all the eggs in all but five of twelve hundred pelican nests were infected by DDT and could not hatch. The conclusion of the UNESCO report is that "Man will perhaps perish by his own fault."<sup>2</sup>

Paul R. Erlich, professor of biology at Stanford University, stated at the "Man and His Environment" conference organized in San Francisco in November 1969, "Theoretically the new techniques of agriculture should be able to increase the production of food to feed the seven billion people, but practically speaking, it is an impossible thing." Professor Sterling Bunell added, "If we try to slow down famine by applying all the techniques that we know, such as the use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides, we would completely contaminate our biological environment. Nothing could survive in it, including man."

<sup>2</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, Paris, December 1, 1959.

The separation between the rich countries and the underdeveloped countries gets greater and greater, and one cannot expect that this separation will disappear in the future. The debts that the poor countries must pay to the rich each year are greater than the sum they receive as aid to help them develop economically. The lack of capital, the lack of political stability, and the necessity to resist exploitation carried on by the great economic powers, increase the difficulties and obstacles that the poorer countries meet on the way to liberation.

At the same time the affluent society of the West consumes the greater part of terrestrial resources and pollutes the earth and its atmosphere by this consumption. The population of the United States, for example, represents only 6 per cent of the world's population; but it consumes nearly 50 per cent of the world's resources. As another example of injustice, the population of Peru suffers from grave malnutrition. An important anchovy fishing industry exists on the coast of Peru, in which the United States, Great Britain, and France have invested large amounts of capital. The anchovies are very rich in protein, but the population has the privilege of consuming only 6 per cent of the harvest of anchovies. Ninety-four per cent of this harvest is bought by the great powers at a very low price *to use as food for beasts and fowls*.

This disequilibrium makes the situation more and more dangerous. Professor C. P. Snow, in a conference given at Westminster College in Missouri, declared that in just seven years' time the famine zones will start to burgeon, becoming oceans of famine by the end of the century (*New York Times*, November 13, 1968). War, in these circumstances, cannot be avoided. Men of science, historians, and sociologists have sounded the alarm. The young are in revolt. But the system of our

society does not seem to change. Each of us, for the most part, continues his daily life, contributing to the maintenance and consolidation of the machinery of production and consumption. We eat, drink, work, and divert ourselves, as if nothing is going to happen.



### *Is an Awakening Possible?*

THE PROBLEM THAT FACES US is the problem of *Awakening*. What we lack is not an ideology or a doctrine that will save the world. What we lack is *awareness of what we are, of what our true situation really is*. Through this awakening we will rediscover our human sovereignty. Our situation is that of a man mounted on a horse that does not wish to obey his master. The way of salvation is, therefore, a new culture in which human nature can rediscover itself.

Zen, as all other living spiritual traditions of the East or West, has contributed to the elevation of the spiritual life of man, while clarifying the way of thought, art, and culture. But, like so many others, Zen has degenerated under the present forces of technological civilization.

The development of technology in the Western countries has created the need to conquer the Afro-Asian countries in order to ensure the possession of markets and industrial material. The wars of liberation continue. War absorbs the energies of nations and aggravates the problem of hunger, already difficult to resolve because of the rapid increase in population. All

this turns society and the structure of its moral values upside down.

The Zen tradition has also been shaken. In Vietnam, for example, the majority of Zen monasteries are situated in distant regions in the mountains. War is destroying them or threatening them. Monks must evacuate the monasteries and live in cities or in refugee camps. Everybody is absorbed, either by the efforts of the war or by efforts against the war. In China socialism mobilizes the mass of the people to realize national goals, and in part to increase the army. The development of Japanese economy has made Japan into a Western-like nation, in which many of the spiritual values have given place to materialism. The temples and monasteries must also participate in the present economic way of life and be based upon the present social needs of producing and consuming in order to exist. They can no longer play their role of spiritual leadership, as in the past. Zen is threatened on the very ground on which it was born and developed.

The West has begun to learn about Zen when it is already on the way to disintegration. If there are young people and Western intellectuals who appreciate Zen, it is perhaps because they have had enough of the material civilization and of the rationalist way. Technological civilization, based on logic and science, has reached its culmination, and has begun to produce crises and revolts. In this situation Zen appears as something fresh and comforting. Paradoxically, the citizens of the countries of the Zen tradition turn toward a life of material comfort and subscribe to a policy of intensive industrialization of their country. Their time and energies are almost completely devoted to it, and this is the reason why things like Zen can no longer continue to be important. The East, like the West, is witness to the spiritual bankruptcy of man. The com-

plete destruction of the human race can only be avoided by finding a new cultural direction in which the spiritual element will play its role of guide.

As I have already said, what we need is not a doctrine, but an awakening that can restore our spiritual force. What made Mahatma Gandhi's struggle a great success was not a doctrine—not even the doctrine of non-violence—but Gandhi himself. In our day a lot is written and read about the doctrine of non-violence, and people everywhere are trying to apply it. But they cannot rediscover the vitality of the kind that Gandhi had. The reason for this is that the "Gandhians" do not possess the spiritual force of Gandhi. They have faith in his doctrine but cannot set into motion a movement of great solidarity because none of them possess the spiritual force of a Gandhi and therefore cannot produce sufficient compassion and sacrifice. But if we continue to be dragged along by the present machinery of producing and consuming, it will be difficult to build a spiritual force. Gandhi dressed himself simply, walked on foot, fed himself with frugality. The simplicity of his life is witness not only to his emancipation with regard to conditioning by material things, but also to a great spiritual force. The sole point of departure for the new civilization which we need can only be the determination of man not to allow himself to be invaded any longer by material goods, to contribute no longer to the consolidation of the present system of producing and consuming. Those who are determined to struggle against the cog-wheeled system for the recuperation of human nature can be considered as men of the avant-garde. Many young people who live in material abundance have revolted. They have found a new need: *the need to be a human being*. In reality, this need is not truly new, it is one of the fundamental needs of man, stifled by arbitrary needs. This need can be considered as our greatest hope. It is the element that will bring

to birth and cause to be developed the new civilization of man in the future.

The first phase of this civilization must be to establish social conditions in which life can be lived in a human way. "Awakened" people are certainly going to form small communities where material life will become simple and healthy. Time and energy will be devoted to the enrichment of spirituality. These communities will be like Zen monasteries of a modern style where there will be no dogma. In them the sickness of the times will be cured and spiritual health will be acquired; what will be produced in the way of art and thought will contribute to the new "way."

In the East, Zen monasteries still exist and the influence of Zen still remains in literature, art, and manners. But the young Westerners seem more interested in Zen than are the young people in the East, who are more preoccupied with revolution and industrialization. Many young people in the East have not yet tasted the bitterness of materialism and the inhuman nature of technological civilization. The rebirth of Buddhism in many Asiatic countries in the twentieth century has been indirectly the work of Western scholars who, by their studies and researches, have manifested their admiration for Buddhist art and thought. It is they who have helped the Asiatics to regain confidence in their own cultural heritage. The same thing is now happening with Zen Buddhism. Because Westerners are interested in Zen many Orientals may return to their own spiritual tradition. It is only regrettable that Zen should no longer be in its past splendor.

Undoubtedly, even for enlightened men, however determined they may be, it is very difficult to go against the system. The question posed today is what must we do to prevent ourselves from being taken over by the system? Engaging in political or economic conflict does not seem to be the answer.

Man is turning toward the East to find new sources of inspiration. In Eastern spirituality is found that tendency toward universal harmony that refreshes the heart. The East, although poor, has not suffered from fanaticism and violence during whole centuries as has the West. But the East has been oppressed; the East has risen all ready to struggle against the West with arms that the West has used against it. This is why the West has had difficulty in establishing a dialogue with the East. In its effort to learn from the West the technology that will enable it to defend itself, the East knows that it must be modest, ready to gather what it does not know. But the majority of Westerners do not possess this virtue of modesty in their approach to the East. They are satisfied with their methodology, with their principles; they remain attached to criteria and to values of their own civilization while desiring to know the East. They are afraid of losing their identity and this is the principal cause of their difficulties.



### *Spirituality versus Technology*

WESTERN CIVILIZATION has brought man to the edge of the abyss. It has transformed him into a machine. The "awakening" of a certain number of Westerners, the awareness that they have acquired of the true situation in which they find themselves—in which man finds himself—has freed them of their superiority complex. They are on the way, engaged in the search for new values.

On their side, some Asiatics have come to the West with the intention of initiating the Western public in their spiritual tradition. The intention is fine, but the task is difficult. If there is not a sufficiently deep understanding of the Western culture and mentality, success cannot really be had. There is the risk of simply imposing the Oriental way of seeing on the Westerners, who will find it difficult to accept. Zen is not a collection of rituals; it is life. Westerners who live in different social circumstances from those of the East cannot merely imitate the Orientals. In the same way that Chinese Zen has Chinese characteristics, so Western Zen must be Western in its form.

An effort is therefore necessary. The West must be willing to get rid of its intellectual luggage and principles in order to prepare itself for the new experience. Easterners who intend to help their Western friends must also make efforts in order to better understand the Western mentality and Western cultural and social circumstances. It is only through such efforts and such collaboration that Zen will be able to become a living tradition in Western soil.

Zen is the way of realizing the "true man," as Lin Chi called him. But the West also has spiritual traditions, formed in the course of its history and aiming at realizing the "true man." The problem is, in reality, that the majority of these spiritual sources, Western or Eastern, have dried up. The religious institutions, for example, have become more political than spiritual powers. Motivated by material and political interests, they are engaged in worldly conflicts and neglect their spiritual task.

Technological civilization in the past continually created new needs of consumption, of which the majority are not truly indispensable. But this civilization also created suffering and tragedies which awaken in man his need for humanity. Religions must be conscious of

this need. With the means at their disposal, the churches must again work to construct communities in which a healthy and sober life can be lived, with the realization that true happiness does not reside in the ill-considered consumption of goods paid for by the suffering, famine, and death of others, but in a life enlightened by the feeling of a constant responsibility for one's neighbor.

VII



LESSONS ON EMPTINESS

FORTY-THREE KUNG-ANS

WITH COMMENTS AND VERSES

OF TRAN THAI TONG

(1218-1277)

TRANSLATED FOR THE FIRST TIME

BY THICH NHAT HANH

ADAPTED BY LUC DECAUNES

TRAN THAI TONG was the first king of the Tran Dynasty (1225-1400) in Vietnam. He practiced Zen while reigning. At forty-one years of age he gave up the throne to his son, Tran Hoang, and devoted himself to the most intensive practice of Zen. He is the author of two books: the *Thien Tong Chi Nam* (*Guide for Zen*) and the *Khoa Hu* (*Lessons on Emptiness*). The forty-three kung-ans presented here are taken from this latter book.



*Questions and Answers  
by Way of Introduction*

ONE DAY when the Emperor<sup>1</sup> was visiting the pagoda of Chan Giao, Tong Duc Thanh put this riddle to him: "The World Honored One was born in the palace of King Suddhodana, before having left Tusita heaven; he had fulfilled the vow to save all living beings before he left his mother's womb. What is the meaning of this?"

The Emperor replied, "All rivers reflect the moon in their waters; there where there is no cloud, the blue sky is seen."

A monk asked, "Those who are not yet liberated need instruction. What about those who are already liberated?"

The Emperor replied, "The clouds which form at the summit of Nhat mountain are a pure white; the waters which flow into the river Tieu are a clear blue."

Another monk inquired, "When clouds arrive, the color of the mountains becomes soft; when the clouds depart, the grotto is lighter. Why is it said that the hidden and the revealed are the same thing?"

The Emperor replied, "Is there no one beyond my own descendants who would dare to walk blindfolded?"

<sup>1</sup> Tran Thai Tong himself. These dialogues are reported by his disciples.

A monk asked, "The Way is single: all the enlightened ones are on the same way back to the Source. Do you think that Lord Buddha should be the only one able to find a road?"

The Emperor replied, "Spring rain waters all plants in the same way, and yet the flowering branches can be long or short."

A monk asked, "Each person possesses his own perfect enlightened nature; why did the World Honored One have to go into the forest in order to realize the Way?"

The Emperor replied, "Because of injustice the precious sword is drawn from its scabbard; because of illness, rare medicines are taken out of their jar."

A monk asked, "No longer allowing the dust to get into one's eyes; no longer bringing on the itch by scratching the skin: such is my vision of the Way. Do you think that I have got something?"

The Emperor replied, "Water which flows down the mountain does not think that it flows down the mountain. The cloud which leaves the valley does not think that it leaves the valley."

The monk remained silent. The Emperor continued, "Do not think that non-thinking itself is the Way; non-thinking is very far from the Way."

The monk replied, "If it is really a question of non-thinking, how is one able to say that *it is far* or that *it is not far*?"

The Emperor said, "The water which flows down the mountain does not think that it flows down the mountain; the cloud which leaves the valley does not think that it leaves the valley."

## 1.

*The Case*

The World Honored One was already born in the palace of King Suddhodana, even before having left the Tusita heaven; he had accomplished the salvation, according to his vow, of all living beings, but he had not yet left his mother's belly.

*Commentary*

The identity of the knight is revealed even before his sword has been drawn from the scabbard.

*Verse*

A very small child who does not possess  
Even the form of a body,  
Leaves his village at midnight for the first time;  
Making his people cross the seas  
And visit distant countries  
Without the help of either a boat or a raft,  
He meets no obstacle.

## 2.

*Case*

The World Honored One had just been born into the world. With one hand pointing to the sky, the other to the earth, he said: "In the heavens and on the earth, I alone am the honored One."

*Commentary*

But one white cloud passes by the grotto, and a thousand birds stray far from their nest.

*Verse*

Siddhartha ought to have revealed his true identity  
When he was born in Suddhodana's palace.  
He took seven steps and with his hands  
Pointed to heaven and the earth.  
Because of this gesture who knows  
How many disciples were lost.

## 3.

*Case*

The World Honored One shows a flower to the assembly; Kasyapa's face is transformed, and he smiles.

*Commentary*

Open your eyes, look carefully; a thousand chains of mountains separate he who reflects from the real.

*Verse*

While he was looking at the flower  
That the World Honored One raised in his hand,  
Kasyapa that morning  
Suddenly found himself at home.  
To call that "transmission of the essential Dharma"  
Is to say that for him alone  
The chariot shaft is adequate transport.

## 4.

*Case*

A philosopher asked Buddha, whom he came to consult, to neither speak nor be silent.

*Commentary*

Other than my own descendants,  
Who would dare to walk with their eyes blindfolded?

*Verse*

Is it known that it is difficult,  
Difficult to shut once more  
The door of the prison?  
Words and speech disappear,  
No support remains;  
If it is not a good horse,  
How can it succeed  
In such an admirable way?

## 5.

*Case*

The World Honored One takes up his seat. Manjusri rings the bell and announces, "Listen well, I beg you, to the Dharma which the King of the Dharmas teaches you. The Dharma taught by the King of the Dharmas is as it is."

*Commentary*

On a guitar without strings the music of spring is playing, its notes are heard across the ages.

*Verse*

Each utterance, each word is impeccable,  
But one glimpses a tail-piece, which cannot be hidden.  
Here is a flute without holes in my hand,  
Playing for you the universal Song of Peace.

## 6.

*Case*

Sword in hand, the Emperor of the Tan Kingdom interrogates the Twenty-fourth Patriarch: "Are you already clear about the emptiness of the five skandhas [aggregates]?" "Yes," replies the Patriarch. "Have you crossed over Birth and Death?" "Yes," replies the Patriarch. "Can you give me your head?" "This body does not belong to me, how much less does this head belong to me?" The Emperor beheads him. White milk gushes from the severed head, the Emperor's arm falls.

*Commentary*

The sword at the neck of the knight: it beheads the spring breeze.

*Verse*

The sharp blade sweeps through the air like lightning;  
We must be aware of it, but there is nothing to fear.  
I announce to you my departure this morning: I leave  
the country of waters and mists;  
No one knows if some thought is not hidden beneath.

## 7.

*Case*

The Great Master Bodhidharma goes to the Thieu Lam pagoda at Lac Duong. For nine years he sits facing the wall.

*Commentary*

Watch out, don't go on sleeping!

*Verse*

The giant bird has taken a lot of trouble  
 To reach the southern sea,  
 But he regrets the long, long distance traversed,  
 Last night, we drank too much at the Great Festival;  
 This morning, it's more difficult to awaken.

8.

*Case*

The Second Patriarch begs Bodhidharma to pacify his mind. Bodhidharma says, "Show me your mind, that I may pacify it for you." The Second Patriarch replies, "I have searched well, I cannot find it!" Bodhidharma answers, "I have already pacified your mind."

*Commentary*

Crowned with garlands, the three-year-old child  
 plays on the drum;  
 The eighty-year-old man plays with a balloon.

*Verse*

If Mind is not-Mind, who can we ask for advice?  
 Is it possible to become an embryo once more?  
 This old monk who kids himself that he can calm the  
 mind of another,  
 Has really made fun of the people around him  
 Without even being aware of it.

9.

*Case*

Manjusri notices the presence of a lady who is sitting in a trance near Buddha. He tries to awaken her, but

in vain. Buddha then asks Vong Minh to awaken the lady, and Vong Minh does so in one stroke.

*Commentary*

This little horror has destroyed my whole fortune.

*Verse*

Facing Buddha, no discrimination is possible.  
 This trance does not appear to be a real trance.  
 If Nature is impartial,  
 When spring comes, it must be spring everywhere.

10.

*Case*

During the thirty years that the Ho War lasted, Master Ma To Dao Nhat never lacked for salt or soya sauce.

*Commentary*

This declaration is undoubtedly impeccable, but the thing is still to eat with the fingers, all the while holding the sticks.

*Verse*

Since he became the friend of this drunkard,  
 He has taken the liquor store as his own home.  
 When you brag about being a great knight,  
 Do you want to play forever the role of a man who  
 lost his shirt?

11.

*Case*

Bach Truong returns to Ma To for another interview. Ma To lets out a yell. Bach Truong is enlightened.

*Commentary*

Better one blow with a pickax than a thousand taps  
with a mattock.

*Verse*

Formerly, when Way and Book  
Were not yet confused,  
I heard on all sides  
The humming of bees.  
Now, on my horse,  
The precious sword in my hand,  
I have perfect communion  
On the Way of Truth.

## 12.

*Case*

The National Teacher one day calls his assistant three times. And three times his assistant replies, "I am here." "I thought," says the Master, "I had transgressed against you, but in reality it is you who have transgressed against me."

*Commentary*

It is only he who drinks who knows exactly whether the drink is warm or cold.

*Verse*

Both parties have the same talent.  
On whom can one rely for a comparison?  
My lungs and my entrails are exposed to your inspection:  
But it is I alone who knows my true situation.

## 13.

*Case*

Dai Quy says, "The concepts *being* and *non-being* are like climbing plants which cannot survive on a great tree." So Son replies, "If the tree is cut down, if the plants are dried out, where will the concepts *being* and *non-being* go?" Dai Quy then leaves with a great burst of laughter.

*Commentary*

Water which flows remains in the sea, the moon which sets remains in the sky.

*Verse*

The sea is calm if the wind ceases to blow.  
We take trouble in searching outside of ourselves.  
A burst of laughter dissipates a hundred thousand doubts;  
Pearls and stones are distinguished  
After that.

## 14.

*Case*

Bach Truong asks Nam Tuyen, "What is the doctrine preached for the non-profit of people?" Nam Tuyen answers, "It is not the Mind, it is not the Buddha, it is not a thing."

*Commentary*

Thousands upon thousands of wise men have searched but the doctrine has not disclosed any traces: they are hiding in the great space.

*Verse*

The Kung-an is there, standing before you.  
 Face up to it squarely, look at it!  
 Have you understood it?  
 Invited to stay in the dwelling of Buddha,  
 We have always refused:  
 We are already accustomed to sleeping each night  
 among the rushes.

## 15.

*Case*

Nam Tuyen says, "Mind is not the Buddha, Wisdom is not the Way."

*Commentary*

I yearn for the soul of the marvelous truth,  
 And, coming back to myself, I walk beneath the  
 shining moon.

*Verse*

Stars move with silent sounds;  
 The universe is calm, nothing brings trouble.  
 Leaning upon a stick, I climb up to the terrace.  
 Perfect tranquility: nothing happens.

## 16.

*Case*

In order to instruct his disciples, after enlightenment,  
 Master Lam Te only uses a stick and yells. Each time  
 he sees a monk, he yells.

*Commentary*

At midday on the fifth day of the fifth month, all the  
 poisons of the mouth and of the tongue are neutralized.

*Verse*

Scarcely having arrived at the threshold, one hears  
 the yell;  
 Children and adolescents wake up.  
 The first clap of thunder in spring,  
 Everywhere the green buds burst forth on the branches.

## 17.

*Case*

Master Nam Tuyen says, "Everyday thought, that  
 is the Way."

*Commentary*

If it is cold, say "cold"; if it is warm, say "warm."

*Verse*

The precious stone has an immaculate nature;  
 Its beauty does not depend on the work of the jeweler.  
 If this road back is not followed,  
 You let go and fall into the deep valley.

## 18.

*Case*

Master Trieu Chau says, "You are controlled by the  
 twenty-four hours of the day; I control the twenty-four  
 hours of the day.

*Commentary*

He calls himself Master and despises people. His speech has no foundation.

*Verse*

The old man kids himself  
That he can, twenty-four hours each day,  
Tame fiery dragons and ferocious tigers.  
In truth, the one who knows how to change iron into  
gold  
Will not go to the point of telling all those he meets  
in the street.

19.

*Case*

A monk questions Lam Te, "What is *the true man of no rank?*" Lam Te replies, "Dried shit."

*Commentary*

Aiming at the sparrow with an unloaded rifle,  
Striking a mouse with a stick that he doesn't want  
to soil!

*Verse*

The true man of no rank is nothing but dried shit;  
How Buddhists must be led astray by such a teaching!  
Look and consider once more!  
Don't you see it yet?  
When the clay buffalo walks in the sea, it does not  
leave any footprints.

20.

*Case*

Master Trieu Chau says, "I have found the old lady of the Ngu Dai Son mountain."

*Commentary*

Whoever has committed the five major crimes is forbidden to stuff his ears when thunder growls.

*Verse*

In the wink of an eye, Ngu Dai Son mountain has disappeared;  
Without having walked for days, here suddenly one is at home;  
If the war is finished and no-one dreams any more of vengeance,  
What need has he of taking his sword from its scabbard?

21.

*Case*

Golden buddhas cannot save the crucible, nor wooden buddhas the fire, nor clay buddhas the water. The true Buddha is sitting in the sanctuary.

*Commentary*

Mountain is mountain, river is river. Where is the Buddha?

*Verse*

If Cuong Xuyen's picture has such renown,  
It is thanks to the famous poet Vuong Duy.

I have my talent also, but what must I paint?  
 In space one sees the moon,  
 And one feels the freshness of the wind.

22.

*Case*

Master Trieu Chau says, "When I was at Thanh Chau, I made a linen robe which weighed seven pounds."

*Commentary*

Tan Chau's radishes, they are acceptable; but Thanh Chau's linen—that only upsets people!

*Verse*

It is a very spectacular linen robe!  
 How could Trieu Chau's bamboo trunk contain such a robe?  
 One is meticulous; one distinguishes ounces and half-ounces;  
 But at will and without pity one holds up to scorn  
 The eight Manh brothers who lodge in the Eastern neighborhood.

23.

*Case*

On being questioned as to whether the dog possesses the Buddha nature, Trieu Chau replies once "yes," replies once "no."

*Commentary*

Two choices, one chance.

*Verse*

Confronted by people, you can say yes or no;  
 A single word put Ho's army to rout.  
 He boasts all his life of being someone brilliant  
 Who is only a distant relative of a true knight.

24.

*Case*

Master Trieu Chau said, "There where Buddha resides, do not stop. There where Buddha does not reside, pass quickly by!"

*Commentary*

The water which collects makes a pool; the stick which strikes the earth leaves a mark.

*Verse*

Residing, not residing—the two things do not reside at all.  
 Words are never perfect.  
 After the flower was shown to the assembly, the fact could be recounted.  
 In Buddha's country one arrives  
 Without having taken a single step.

25.

*Case*

Showing his bamboo cane, Master Thu Son says to them, "Call this a bamboo cane, and you have fallen

into my trap. Do not call it a bamboo cane, and you fall into error. Well, what do you call it?"

*Commentary*

Don't move! Whoever moves gets thirty blows of my stick.

*Verse*

Difficult it is to choose between the cane and the non-cane.

Who can give a clear and exact reply?  
The Way is there, as always,  
But so many obstacles are yet to be met.

26.

*Case*

A monk asks Dong Son, "What is the Buddha?" And Dong Son replies, "Three pounds of flax hanging on the wall."

*Commentary*

To call (Buddha) a thing is not correct.

*Verse*

What is the Buddha, I will tell you:  
The three pounds of linen Dong Son hangs on his wall.  
Even if people were no longer to engage  
In speculative research,  
It is still necessary to use things  
To point to the truth.

27.

*Case*

"What was the Patriarch Bodhidharma's intention?" asks a monk of Hien Tu. And Hien Tu, answers "The liquor table before the spirits' shrine."

*Commentary*

A real lion's cub will not race after a rolling lump of earth.

*Verse*

All its roots cut, the tree is felled.  
I will tell you what I have seen with my own eyes.  
To say, "The Patriarch's intention is the liquor table in front of the shrine"  
Is to say, "The pants are the trousers!"

28.

*Case*

The National Master Vo Nghiep says, "If a discrimination is made between enlightenment and non-enlightenment, even as small as the point of a hair, it will cause people to be reborn donkeys and horses." The monk Bach Van Doan replies, "Even though this point of hair discriminating between enlightenment and non-enlightenment should disappear, people nonetheless will be born donkeys and horses."

*Commentary*

When one burns the forest, the tigers flee; when one beats the bushes, snakes become afraid.

*Verse*

The formulation is still very feeble!  
 What is the good of beating the bushes to make snakes  
 afraid?  
 If the road to the Capital is really known,  
 There is no need to go to the trouble of asking others.

29.

*Case*

Master Huyen Sa says to the Assembly, "The Honored Ones often speak of the efforts intending to show people the Way of Salvation. Supposing a deaf, dumb, and blind man were to arrive here. How would you show him the Way? . . . If you show him your flyswat, he will not see it. If you speak to him about the way of sitting in meditation, he will not hear you. If you seek to teach him to recite the sacred texts, he will not be able to pronounce a single word."

*Commentary*

We eat when we are hungry, we drink when we are thirsty, we cover ourselves when it is cold, we fan ourselves when it is warm.

*Verse*

When sad one cries and when joyful one laughs,  
 The nose is vertical, the eyebrows horizontal;  
 Hunger and thirst, warmth and cold, are natural.  
 Why set problems  
 Which don't really exist?

30.

*Case*

Master Thuy Nghiem often said to himself, "Wake up! Wake up! Don't allow people to despise you any longer."

*Commentary*

It isn't worth the trouble to cry until the blood gushes from the mouth: it is better to shut up and wait until the spring has passed.

*Verse*

Thuy Nghiem often said to himself, "Wake up!"  
 But he is not truly very courageous!  
 If he believes himself to be an invincible hero,  
 He should overthrow the sun and make it fall to the  
 earth!

31.

*Case*

"I will take up the life of politics," says Tam Thanh, "if it should happen that a great statesman should arise; but if I take it up, it will not be in any way for him." Hung Hoa replies, "If a great statesman of talent should arise, I will not take up a political life; and if I take it up, it is for him that I will do so."

*Commentary*

A blind tortoise forms a friendship with two paralyzed tortoises.

*Verse*

One does not drink dirty water each time one is thirsty.  
 Simply to talk of food does not fill the stomach.  
 The child must refrain from licking the grains of sugar  
     which stay on the knife,  
 If he doesn't wish to cut his tongue.

32.

*Case*

Master Nam Tuyen shows a vase to Dang An Phong who has just arrived, and says to him, "The vase is an object; one must not be attached to objects."

*Commentary*

If this object exists, to what is he attached?

*Verse*

The clarity of the mirror  
 Has nothing to do with the dust;  
 What is the good of so much trouble to get rid of the  
     dust?  
 One must rejoice calmly  
 In all circumstances.  
 Have a cup of tea  
 After your dinner!

33.

*Case*

Master Tach Dau says, "It cannot be left thus; it cannot not be left thus; it can neither be left thus nor not be left thus."

*Commentary*

Everything is impermanence, everything is suffering.

*Verse*

I have a very touching story to tell you;  
 But wait until this cloud passes our grotto.  
 Even if I can tell you  
 This story in a perfect way,  
 The distance between us  
 Is still ten thousand miles.

34.

*Case*

A monk asks Master Giap Son, "How is it, Giap Son's world?" "Carrying his little one in his arms, the monkey returns to its virgin forest, while the flower petals strew the ground of the green valley."

*Commentary*

Take a stick with you, and you will dance everywhere there are people.

*Verse*

No one has visited the distant world of Giap Son.  
 But in any case you must consider doing so.  
 Those who are among the enlightened  
 Who see by their eyes of Great Wisdom,  
 Can be shown midday at midnight.

## 35.

*Case*

A monk asks Master Muc Chau, "The great Tripitaka Collection, can it be read in the time of a breath?" And Muc Chau replies, "If Tat La, the cake seller, comes by here, tell him to come."

*Commentary*

One returns home without going to the trouble of walking.

*Verse*

The Tripitaka is read in the time of a breath;  
No one has need to consider each word, each phrase;  
The profound truths disclose themselves in a natural way;  
It is not necessary to consult the hermit on the hill.

## 36.

*Case*

One day, in an encounter presided over by Master Lam Te, two senior monks started to yell at the same time. An ordinary monk questioned Lam Te, "In the present case, is there a distinction between the consultor and consulted?" And Lam Te replied, "It is obvious that the consultor and consulted are there."

*Commentary*

Some white monkeys with absurd gesticulations.

*Verse*

The voice of the Enlightened One is heard in the wind,  
The meaning of a kung-an is not something other.  
Lam Te knows well how to measure land and rice paddies;  
He divides them into lots and distributes them to the population.

## 37.

*Case*

Master Huyen Sa said, "I am like the owner of some land, at the center of which I have planted a tree. I want to sell all the land, but still remain owner of the tree."

*Commentary*

The Great Ocean is not big enough to receive a corpse.

*Verse*

Even if you have been enlightened,  
Even if your thoughts have ceased to assail you,  
There still remains a very small point to resolve:  
To consider gold and silver as dust.

## 38.

*Case*

A monk questioned Master Hue Tu on the essence of Buddhism. Hue Tu replied, "What is the price of rice at Lu Lang?"

*Commentary*

The shadow of the bamboo branches sweeps the floor  
of the veranda, but the dust does not move.

In the water the moon is reflected, but nothing marks  
the surface of the pond.

*Verse*

The speech is worthy of a knight.  
It corresponds well to the mentality of the people  
And helps them on the Way of Salvation.  
What is the price of rice at Lu Lang?  
If you know it, you will no longer have to cover  
The distance of a thousand miles.

39.

*Case*

A monk asks Van Thu Vien Minh, "Things go into  
the One. But what does this One go into?" And Van  
Thu replies, "The Hoang Ha River consists of nine  
sections."

*Commentary*

The countryside beneath the moon was so beautiful,  
I didn't realize that my boat had passed Thuong Chau.

*Verse*

I speak to you of the nine sections of the Hoang Ha  
River,  
To help you regain your home  
Without having to cross a long distance.  
You have not stopped observing the outstretched net,  
And you have let the bird pass by  
Without having even noticed it.

40.

*Case*

Master Nam Tuyen asks of Trieu Chau, "Novice, do  
you already have a Master, or do you not have one?"  
Trieu Chau answers, "I already have a master." Nam  
Tuyen asks, "What does it mean to have a Master?"  
Trieu Chau rubs his hands and replies politely, "To-  
day it is cold; I hope that the Very Honorable One  
enjoys the greatest well-being."

*Commentary*

For him who possesses quick hands, needles can re-  
place cudgels.

*Verse*

While rubbing his hands Trieu Chau shows us  
The thing which stands between these two extremes:  
the consultor and the consulted.  
Is it not Hoa Lam's and Han Lenh's subterfuge,  
If Hoi has retired from the contest?

41.

*Case*

A monk questioned Master Moc Am, "It is said that  
the monk's robe, made of scraps of cloth, is not worth  
very much. What does that mean?" "The needle," re-  
plied Moc Am, "cannot go through it."

*Commentary*

In the perfect state of meditation, all discrimina-

tions are absent: even a thread could not find its way in the space.

*Verse*

The monk's robe is soft like snow,  
But needles of steel cannot pierce it.  
Space is one, without a crack:  
By what road does the perfume of the cinnamon flowers  
Come to us at the end of the day?

42.

*Case*

The layman Lung declares, "This is Buddha's examination. Those who pass the test of emptiness will be declared winners."

*Commentary*

In order that your name should figure on the list of winners, don't leave blank pages.

*Verse*

Can one make straw sandals  
With the feathers of a bird?  
Can one become a Buddha  
By taking part in this strange competition?  
Be on guard! Don't go and say  
That you will be crowned  
After you have passed the test of emptiness,  
Otherwise you will one day receive  
Some great blows of a stick.

43.

*Case*

Master Tu Minh asks Chan Diem Tru, "What is the essence of Buddhism?" Chan Diem Tru replies, "Clouds which form at the summit of the mountain do not exist; but the reflection of the moon in the water does exist." Tu Minh roars, "You have reached your age and you submit such a stupid idea to me!" Chan Diem Tru weeps. A moment later, he says to Tu Minh, "It is obvious that I do not know what the essence of Buddhism is, I beg you to clarify it for me." And Tu Minh declares, "The clouds which are formed at the summit of the mountain do not exist, but the reflection of the moon in the water does exist." At these words Chan Diem Tru is transfigured, and reaches enlightenment.

*Commentary*

Compassionate men think that that is humanism; men of wisdom think that that is erudition.

*Verse*

The music that you play is equally mine.  
We are friends who know each other thoroughly.  
The mountain is above, the river below,  
But the moon and the clouds still remain the same.