

CHICAGO REVIEW

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Source: *Chicago Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer, 1958), pp. 23-28

Published by: [Chicago Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25293451>

Accessed: 19-03-2016 00:23 UTC

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ZEN AND THE VARIOUS ACTS

Translated from the Japanese by Hyung Woong Pak

In Japan the word *gei*, which we might translate as *act*,¹ has been used traditionally to mean more than just the arts (*gei-jutsu*). It means the talents and abilities in general. When Ku-kai established his university in 828 he called it *So-gei-shu-chi-in*, the Academy of All Acts. (In China even *gei-jutsu* [*i-shu*] was used quite broadly to mean the six arts and four disciplines. Since the arts were ceremonies, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics, and the disciplines, poetry, history, ceremonies, and music, *gei-jutsu* then must have meant the general culture and creativity of the time.)

In Japan *gei* has been traditionally equivalent to the purely Japanese word *wa-za*, act, the general functioning or actions of men: learning as well as morality, and not simply the "arts" of today. In contrast to *wa-za*, the word *a-so-bi*, which we might translate as *play*, seems closer to the arts in its meaning. Thus a

¹ Dr. Hisamatsu wishes that *gei* be translated by *act*, and so in this essay *act* must be taken in the sense of any activity or occupation.—*Trans.*

footnote in *Ko-ji-ki*² reads: "Singing, dancing, and instrument-playing are all *a-so-bi*." And though the Japanese word *ra-ku* is pronounced both "*a-so-bi*" and "*wa-za*," *a-so-bi* must be considered merely one aspect of *wa-za*.

So when I speak of the various acts here, I do not mean the arts in a narrow sense, but various *wa-za* (of course the arts included in *wa-za*). I would like to consider the relationship between these acts and Zen.

Is it possible to say the various acts are Zen in themselves? Or is it possible that Zen in the various acts lies beyond a certain point of mastery? Or is the traditional interpretation correct, that when complete mastery and self-release are acquired in the act, that is, when the ultimate principle or essence is reached, it is Zen? Or does Zen refer to the mental state of the person performing the act, rather than to its technical mastery? Is it Zen if the acts are performed earnestly, with the whole spirit and body? It may be helpful for the correct understanding of Zen to clarify some other conditions which may be called Zen.

No one would think that the actual doing of the act is in itself Zen. But one might think that Zen is the mastery of the act, its achievement through hard practice, and that the master of fencing, archery, painting, or flower arrangement has achieved *satori* (awakening). In Japan the achievement of various acts was called the ultimate principle, essence, or *ko-tsu* (knack), and though extremely hard to reach, even with hard discipline and practice, when once reached, the act falls under complete control. Those who achieve *ko-tsu* are called the masters of their respective arts, and to acquire *ko-tsu* is to acquire the ultimate principle or essence of an act. But this principle is absolutely different from the knowledge of an act acquired through empirical scientific inquiry. The acquiring of scientific knowledge does not imply that scientists have mastered the ultimate principle of an act. For instance one can study scientifically the art of swimming, but such an investiga-

² *Ko-ji-ki* is a great national chronicle of Japan, compiled in 712 A.D. It is largely occupied with the mythology of Shintoism.—*Trans.*

tion does not automatically make him a master of swimming or even a good swimmer, for to know the ultimate principle of swimming means to swim freely. And even if the scientists who study swimming have the same objective knowledge as the masters of swimming, it will mean different things to each. *Ko-tsu* is subjective knowledge, self-functionary and active, and the masters of the various acts have it. *Ko-tsu*, not being objective knowledge, can neither be taught by others nor known scientifically; it must be acquired by oneself. And it is not the mere accumulation of phenomenal wisdoms, but it is the noumenal wisdom which, coming from them, replaces them. But at once, and then for all time.

The various acts should be practiced with a unison of body and spirit, rather than by reading or thinking. And since learning the act is the process of making it one's own, one practices and disciplines himself; he learns without being dependent on a teacher. A teacher does not teach (and really *cannot* teach), but he lets his disciples learn for themselves. And though today in Japan this method is vanishing and a teacher has come to "teach" everything, the various acts were traditionally taught by not-teaching, by letting the disciples learn for themselves. Consequently a teacher was apparently merciless and even brutal; he disciplined severely and taught nothing. Without exception, all the masters of the various acts had these brutal teachers, and the biographies of the masters are the records of their training and discipline, that is, how they learned and practiced acts under these brutal teachers. The aim of practicing various acts was to acquire *ko-tsu*, in other words not to stop at the phenomenal surface of the acts but to reach their source and substance. This method of practicing and teaching the acts, and its aim, have been very traditional in Japan, and have surely had their historical origin in the discipline and aim of Zen. "Do not depend on letters, but on special transmission outside of the scripture; pointing directly at the Mind, see into the Nature—thus Buddhahood is attained." In other words, Zen cannot be taught conceptually in words or doctrines, but has to be

learned by oneself: this is the way human nature is understood and Buddhahood attained. To recognize the true self and the original feature is Zen, and of course this can neither be taught nor given from without: "That which enters from without is not your own treasure." The Chinese Zen monk Tu-san said, "I have no words, not a thing to give you." Nothing was taught in Zen, and the disciples had to learn and discipline themselves, and even if the disciples learned nothing in ten years still nothing was taught. (Zen used the device of the *koan*—for example Chao-chou's "Wu" or Hakuin's "One Hand"—to help the student learn his real self.⁸) A teacher's job is simply to witness the learning of his disciples. The learning of various acts was derived from the self-teaching method of Zen. *Ku-den*, an oral transmission, and *hi-den*, a secret, were originally used in Japan to mean the witnessing of one who had learned by himself, even though they became corrupted in usage to mean formal initiation, not significant in itself. Thus the method of practicing the various acts in Japan and *ko-tsu*, the goal thereby achieved, are similar to the method and goal of Zen.

Since *ko-tsu* is the ultimate principle of the various acts, their original, subjective knowledge, artists and artisans who wish to achieve Zen have tried to find it in *ko-tsu*—this is why the *ko-tsu* of painting, the essence of fencing and archery, the ultimate principle of flower arrangement and the way of tea, the essence of music and dance have been considered Zen. But Zen is not merely the *ko-tsu* of the various acts, but the *ko-tsu* of persons, the very state of human beings themselves. Zen is not the original, subjective wisdom of the various acts, but the original, subjective wisdom of the person himself. The original, subjective wisdom of the various acts is a province of original, subjective wisdom, yet it is not the

⁸ The *koan* is a riddle given to Zen students, which cannot be answered correctly by intellectual means. The student is asked to explain a puzzling or paradoxical statement made by some old Zen master, and generally reaches a psychological impasse. The answer comes as a sort of *satori*. Chao-chou's "Wu" is the *koan* in which the student is asked to explain why Chao-chou answered *wu*, that is, no, to the question "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" (all sentient beings are supposed to have Buddha-nature). Hakuin's "One Hand" *koan* is, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"—*Trans.*

same, it is not the original, subjective wisdom of the person himself, the total person. A person who has acquired the *ko-tsu* of an act is master of it, and he is free as far as the act is concerned, but he is not necessarily master or free as a total person; the master of Zen is one who is free as a total person. Zen is not a particular act or ability of a person, but the person himself, his free and total being. This is not to belittle *ko-tsu*, for it is the origin and real substance of various acts, and to acquire it is a kind of *satori*. Awakening to realize *ko-tsu*: learning it! *Satori* is not to know the phenomenon objectively, but the noumenon or origin subjectively, and in this respect to achieve *ko-tsu* of the various acts may be regarded as a kind of *satori*. The awakening of Zen is *satori* (self-awakening), and the *satori* of Zen is recognizing the real noumenon of a person, his original feature, not necessarily recognizing the real substance of various acts. The *satori* of various acts is simply the *satori* in the domain of specific acts, and not the total and universal *satori* of the person himself. The *satori* of various acts may be unhindered freedom as far as the acts are concerned, and yet not be the unhindered freedom of the person himself. However free one may become in painting, the minor arts, singing and dancing, and archery, this freedom is not in itself the *satori* of Zen. To realize the *satori* of Zen is to become one who is unhinderedly free, released from all chains, one who recognizes himself truly, being no longer attached to the forms of matter and spirit, one who faces the present world of existence and non-existence, life and death, good and evil, pro and con. The *satori* of Zen is not the *satori* of any particular act of a person, but the *satori* of the original self of a person, regardless of who he is. It is not the *satori* of the visible and special phenomena, but the *satori* of the original, formless, undifferentiated, and noumenal self.

To explain with an analogy, the *satori* of various acts is like an individual wave awakening to the individual origin of the wave, and though it may be the origin, it is simply the individual phenomenal origin. This kind of *satori* is no release from the phenomenon of the wave. The *satori* of Zen is like all individual waves

awakening to water, their noumenal origin. Water is the noumenon of all individual waves; water is the original feature of waves. Water raises all waves and goes over all waves, and water raises the waves and goes over them at the same time. There are many different kinds of waves, different forms, but water has neither form nor difference; water is homogeneous and formless and yet the origin of waves of all forms. Water raises all waves, exists with the waves inseparably, and yet goes over them. Water is not concerned with the appearance or disappearance of waves. Waves form and vanish, but water is eternal and indestructible, and it remains so even when it appears and disappears. But waves exist only when they appear, and they vanish forever when they disappear. The *satori* of Zen is like the phenomenal waves returning from waves to water, recognizing water as their original feature, that is, as their noumenon. It is the return of phenomenal wave to noumenal water. Only by returning to its noumenal self can the *satori* of various acts, which are phenomenal, become the *satori* of Zen. As waves can surpass themselves by returning to the original feature of all waves, the *satori* of various acts can surpass itself by returning to the *satori* of Zen, the origin of all acts, and thus the various acts can be Zen. But if they remain acts even after *satori* is reached and *ko-tsu* acquired, they are not Zen. As waves become absolutely, unhinderedly free from waves by returning to water, the *satori* of various acts becomes absolutely and unhinderedly free from its acts by returning to the *satori* of Zen. The masters of various acts in Japan turned to Zen in order to free themselves in their acts, to pass beyond the boundaries of their acts. The master of an act can become unhinderedly free, not only in any act, but in all, through the *satori* of Zen. And only when an act is performed in this way can we say it is Zen, and not just because it is performed earnestly with the whole spirit and body. When various acts are performed, and yet remain various acts, this is not the attitude of Zen; there is no freedom in them. The freedom of Zen is the freedom of water to wave and not the freedom of wave to wave.