

“The Zen Gaku Kenkyu” No. XXVI.

# **THE ZEN WAY OF LIFE**

BY SOHAKU OGATA

RINZAI GAKUIN COLLEGE

KYOTO

# THE ZEN WAY OF LIFE.

Delivered at

The Seventh Oriental Culture Summer College Kyoto. 1936.

By **Sohaku Ogata.**

---

Ladies and Gentlemen:

## Introductory Remark.

In the Vimalakirti Sutra it says: "When Buddha preaches with one voice, sentient beings take different comprehensions according to their respective stages of life." While Buddhism was still enjoying its high prosperity in Nara, then the capital of Japan, scholars and priests used to explain the significance of the verse by the following poem in Japanese:

"Teo-uteba-shikawa-tobikuru-uo-odoru,

Gejo-wa-cha-o-kumu-saru-sawa-no-ike."

The English translation runs:

"When a man claps his hands at Sarusawa Pond,  
Deers would come rushing, fishes would jump up,  
And maids would prepare tea."

This table standing before me may look to be square and high to you as you see it from the horizontal direction while it simply looks to be flat to me when I see it from the top. In like manner, no one can deny the fact that everything looks dissimilar and means differently to people who see it from various standpoints. As to our life we have many standpoints such as the logical, moral, artistic, and religious, and people take one of these as their main standard, the others remaining secondly. In the East, however, a special way of thinking and life called "Zen" which is somehow different from any of these has developed. To-day I am going to talk about the Zen way of life.

## What is Zen ?

What is Zen ? The question must be arising among you, I suppose. This is the very question that was earnestly asked by so many students of Zen from ancient time and that will probably be asked by many a man and woman in future, never the less it is impossible to explain it, — I mean to the satisfaction of the questioner. Zen is what sees but not what is seen. This is the reason why we can not describe it. But in many cases questioners do not understand this truth sufficiently, and various explanations have been made. But questioners should know that Zen itself is far from what is explained.

This is true with not only Zen but all other things. Without drinking the water no one can realize how cold it is; without tasting sugar no one can understand how sweet it is. When people say that they know some thing, it often means their intellectual comprehension which is mere the shadow or the picture of the reality. However pretty it may be, no painted flower has odour. However they may speak beautifully, talking pictures are pictures. No one can satisfy his hunger with bread in pictures.

“ A special transmission outside the Scriptures:

No dependance upon words and letters:

Direct pointing to the soul of man:

Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood. ”

As Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Zen in China, declared thus so Zen has its own unique way of comprehending life. And we may say that Zen is an art of seeing the nature of man.

In his book “ An Introduction to Zen Buddhism ” Dr. D. T. Suzuki says: “ Is Zen a system of philosophy, highly intellectual and profoundly metaphysical, as most Buddhist teachings are ? It was stated in the Introduction that we find in Zen all the philosophy of the East crystallised, but this ought not to be taken as meaning that Zen is philosophy in the ordinary application of the term. Zen is decidedly not a system founded upon logic and analysis. If anything, it is the antipode to logic by which I mean the dualistic mode of thinking. There may be an intellectual

element in Zen, for Zen is the whole mind, and in it we find a great many things; but the mind is not a composite thing that is to be divided into so many faculties, leaving nothing behind when the dissection is over. Zen has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual analysis; nor has it any set doctrines which are imposed on its followers for acceptance. In this respect, Zen is quite chaotic, if you choose to say so. Probably Zen followers may have sets of doctrines, but they have them on their own account, and for their own benefit; they do not owe the fact to Zen. Therefore, there are in Zen no sacred books or dogmatic tenets, nor are there any symbolic formulae through which an access might be gained into the signification of Zen. If I am asked, then, what Zen teaches, I would answer, Zen teaches nothing. Whatever teachings there are in Zen, they come out of one's own mind. We teach ourselves; Zen merely points the way. Unless this pointing is teaching, there is certainly nothing in Zen purposely set up as its cardinal doctrines or as its fundamental philosophy. . . . . Is Zen a religion? It is not a religion in the sense that the term is popularly understood; for Zen has no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined, and, last of all, Zen has no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else and whose immortality is a matter of intense concern with some people. Zen is free from all these dogmatic and "religious" encumbrances.

When I say there is no God in Zen, the pious reader may be shocked, but this does not mean that Zen denies the existence of God; neither denial nor affirmation concerns Zen. When a thing is denied, the very denial involves something not denied. The same can be said of affirmation. This is inevitable in logic. Zen wants to rise above logic, Zen wants to find a higher affirmation where there are no antitheses. Therefore, in Zen, God is neither denied nor insisted upon; only there is in Zen no such God as has been conceived by Jewish and Christian minds. For the same reason that Zen is not a philosophy, Zen is not a religion."

I shall introduce to you another description of Zen which appears in Wu Men Kuan, one of the two important text books in Zen. "At one

time a monk came to Master Chao Chou and asked, " What is the message of Zen for which Bodhidharma came from the West? " Chao Chou said. " An oak tree in the garden. " What can you learn from this answer of Chao Chou? In this case, if you think that the conception of " an oak tree in the garden " makes the answer, it is a great mistake. What he meant to show is his action of recognizing an oak tree in the garden but not the conception of it. Hui K'ai, the author of Wu Men Kuan, approves when, in his commentary verse, he says:

" Words cannot describe everything.

The heart's message cannot be delivered in words.

If one receives words literally, he will be lost.

If he tries to explain with words, he will not attain enlightenment in this life. "

I will also mention, on this occasion, about the meaning of the word " Zen " and about the developing process of Zen movement. The term " Zen " is the abrigment of Ch'na which is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word " Dhyana " . It is usually translated into English by such terms as meditation, tranquillisation, concentration of mind, etc. But none of them is the exact equivalent of the original term. Generally speaking, we are to do injustice when we put Buddhist ideas into Christian terms. For instance; the word " Bhiku " which means a beggar or one who lives on alms is often translated into the term " priest " which means one who works between God and men through prayer. Sodo or Dojyo means a place for training and Buddhist monks gather there for the purpose of practising Zen, expecting to leave as soon as they reach the goal in order to teach people in the word. When we translate it into the term " monastery " it means a place where Christian monks choose as their dwelling for the life time. But this can not be avoided.

In the first place, Buddhists should study together the three aspects of the teaching: that is, Sila or moral precepts, Dhyāna or meditation, and Prajña or intuitive knowledge. But they have, in fact, parted and become schools of Buddhism. And the Zen Buddhism is the Chinese interpretation

of the Dhyāna school which was brought into China by Bodhidharma in early the fifth century. And the present form of Zen was, it is said, accomplished by Hui Neng, the sixth patriarch, and his successors.

Zen was most glorious in China during the Tang and the Sung dynasties, that is to say, from the sixth to the twelfth century, and it came to Japan in the thirteenth century, when the Kamakura Government was in power. Zen most appealed to Samurai class or the warrior people in Japan and many temples and monasteries were erected both in Kamakura and Kyoto. It is no exaggeration to say that Zen has lifted Japanese military arts up to Bushido or the spirit of Samurai which is compared, in admiration, with cherry blossoms, the symbol of Japanese spirit, and Zen influenced all Japanese culture, more or less, that developed after this period up to Meiji restoration. We have at present three schools in Zen: Rinzai, Soto, and Obaku, embracing twenty thousand temples and nine million men and women adherents all over Japan.

There are, in the world, some people who think that Zen is useful to the followers of Zen sect only but has nothing to do with believers of other sects of Buddhism, or, meditation is necessary to only monks and nuns, and laymen can not practice it, even they wish to. This is a great mistake. For Zen is the essence of all Buddhist teachings and meditation is an easy task while it is of great help to all men and women, no matter whether they be monks or laymen. Every year of late several Americans and Europeans come to Japan to study Zen Buddhism and make a fair success.

#### The Means of Zen Practice.

If Zen is so helpful to everybody, the problem of means, how to reach the goal, must be considered, and in this very matter Zen is unique among philosophies and religions of the world. Hundreds of questions in life return, I think, to the following three: What is self; what is the universe; and what is the relation between self and the universe. To answer these questions in accordance with idealism our practical life is too full of contradictions. To solve the problems by realism, some inner want of

human psychology is not satisfied. Thus we see a fact that men shall never be in peace unless they get rid of dualistic thinking which stands on the contrast of subject and object. Here most people will agree to accept mysticism which emphasizes the unity of self and the universe or oneness of God and man. But most mysticisms do not, to our regret, teach the way to God or realization, and we have to wait for the revelation until it comes to us by accident.

Zen has a systematic method of mind-training through which one may attain the absolute oneness. It is Zazen, Koan exercise, and Samu labour. Students of Zen are, first of all, requested to sit in meditation taking up a proper posture and counting breaths. This is called Zazen. It is by medium of breath that our mind and body can be brought into perfect harmony in which stage of our being we can obtain the experience of the oneness psychologically. But to those who devotedly practise Zazen there is a crisis of getting intoxicated in idle reverie. Many Indian Buddhists in later time have fallen in this mistake and it is one of the chief reasons, I think, why Buddhism has died in its mother land. Chinese people were aware of this weakness of the path and invented a means called Koan to save it. Koan means a problem which masters give students in order to lead them to enlightenment. Here are some of the examples:

#### 1. The Three Barriers of Tou Lü.

Master Ts'ung Yüeh, of Tou Lü, made three barriers for Zen students.

(1) To see one's own nature is the very aim of studying Zen. Where is your nature at present?

(2) When one has seen his own nature, he is free from the fear of birth and death. How can you free yourself when your visual power is falling down?

(3) When one has gotten free from the fear of birth and death he knows where he passes to. Where do you go away when your flesh breaks up?

#### 2. Hsiang Yen Mounts a Tree.

Hsiang Yen said, " Zen is like a man hanging in a tree by his teeth

over a precipice. His hands grasp no branch and his feet rest on no limb, and under the tree another person asks him, "What is the message of Zen for which Bodhidharma came to China from the West?" If the man in the tree does not answer, he can not satisfy the man at the foot of the tree and Zen has no merit; but if he speaks, even a word, he will at once fall down to death. Now what shall he do?"

### 3. Who is He?

Master Fa Yen said, "Sakya, the present Buddha, and Maitreya, the future Buddha, are all his servants. Tell me, who is he?"

These Koans are not subjects to intellectual reasoning but they are targets which we are to shoot with the arrow of our whole being. When we hit the mark, we and Koan are but one, and that one is the all enlightened One who can take Buddhas in past, present, and future as his servants.

Another thing important in Zen practice, is work. A day of no work is a day of no eating. This is the golden rule in a Zen monastery. All sorts of manual work such as meal-cooking, house-cleaning, fuel-making and so forth are done by monks, and such works are called Samu. Samu labour is important to them not only because of the necessity in their practical life but for the sake of their spiritual progress. Among Koans we see many examples that were discussed while they were at work. In work we can concentrate ourselves upon one thing, that is the work, and our intellectual limitation does not bother us. Then the gate to intuitive knowledge will open to us frequently.

However, the only teacher of freedom is our sincere wish to attain it. The criminal who made the bondage is oneself, so the emancipator must be also oneself.

### Daily Life.

What is, then, the attitude of Zen towards daily life, you may ask. The key-note of life of the Zen followers is exposed in the following verse which they chant every day several times at least:

"How innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them all;



How inexhaustible our evil passions are, I vow to exterminate them;

How immeasurable the holy doctrines are, I vow to study them;

How in accessible the path of Buddha is, I vow to attain it. ”

According to Zen philosophy Buddha is not the only divine thing in the world but all sentient beings are equally sacred. Not only human beings but all animals and plants, even pebbles and lumps of soil, are to be respected equally as Buddhas. If it is so, we ought to come to a conclusion that nothing should be ignored or wasted. Modern people are accustomed to estimate things at their money value and abuse things that cost only one or two cents. But Zen goes strongly against this idea and insists upon regarding each thing as having an absolute value. A piece of paper, a single leaf, therefore, must not be wasted in a Zen monastery.

At one time two monks were travelling together. Looking at a piece of spinach floating down on the river near by the road one of the monks said, “ There seems to be a home near about, let us go and ask to be put up to-night. ” “ No, I do not like to stay in such a careless man’s home who let a green leaf flow away. ” said the other. Thereupon a monk ran down breathlessly holding a pole in his hand to pick up the floating spinach.

One day a Zen master told his attendant to renew the water in the wash-basin as it had gotten stale. The attendant threw it on the ground. “ Don’t you know to make it work usefully? ” said the master, And when the monk confessed his ignorance the master advised him to pour the water around the root of a tree which was evidently in need of moisture. Zen teaches us by no means to become miserly. But it requests us to make living use of things. This living use may mean, economically speaking, to utilize things to the highest point in proper way. But the Zen point of view is not to look at the matter economically and the importance lies in how to make the living use of it. Here a certain reverential attitude towards nature is brought into play, and this reverence can be found within us only when we take ourselves humbly. Modern

people are apt to associate, when speaking of equality or same right, the equality of forms or the same measure of quantity. Accordingly they lack respect to one another when they insist upon equality or same right, and they have to fight in stead of going together in peace and happiness.

Once a travelling monk stayed in a house near by a river. He was given a bucketful water to wash his hands and feet. Having finished his wash with a part of the water he went to the river to return the rest of it.

Another monk had a wash in one autumn evening at a country inn. When he needed to throw the water he noticed the insects singing all around him. If he throws the water he would stopped the insects' music and killed some of them. For a while he stood with a wash-basin without knowing what to do whereupon a Haiku poem came out of his heart:

“ Gyo-zuino-suteba-nashi-mushi-no-koe. ”

The English translation is:

“ Where shall I empty this basin of washing water?

Every space is full of singing insects! ”

A country man planted morning glories at his well.

One morning he found the tendril of morning glory running up the rope of the buckets. If draws water from the well he has to spoil his morning glory that has so beautifully blossomed. So he went to a neighbour to ask for water, He also got a Haiku:

“ Asagao-ui-tsurube-torarete-morai-mizu. ”

The English translation runs:

“ I go to ask for water,

Because my well was taken up by my morning glory. ”

I shall tell you another Haiku by unknown author which is also connected with water:

“ Yama-mizuni-kome-o-tsukasete-hiru-nekana. ”

The English translation is:

“ I make a mountain stream hull rice,

While I take a midday nap, Shame! ”

I hope you have seen a certain mystery in these poems. Without some sense of mystery one can not realize any religion. The term "Mystery", however, has varieties of meaning or application. Some take supernatural power as mystery. Others exclaim, "It is mysterious!" when they hear an impressive music, when they stand on the top of a high mountain, and when they see the crimson colour of sun-set. But Zen finds mystery in the daily life. A Zen poet sings:

"How wondrous strange, and how miraculous this!  
I draw water, I carry fuel."

#### The Matter of Birth and Death.

The entire aim of Buddhist teaching is to get rid of the suffering from birth and death. The very object for which Gautama, the Buddha, left his castle and became a mendicant was to seek the way to emancipation from the fear of Birth, Age, Illness, and Death. The most important and urgent matter in Zen study is also the solution of this problem. The reason why so many Zen masters could have betrayed no sign of confusion when threatened by the naked sword of a criminal, or could pass away with calm composure was due to nothing but the fact that they were prepared before those events took place. Then, what is the attitude of Zen towards the matter of life and death? I shall try to state it by quoting some examples.

In the middle part of the thirteenth century the Mongolian army invaded China and perpetrated all sorts of robbery and slaughter. When they came, one day to Neng Jen Temple, of Wen State, all the monks of the monastery strove to run away except Master Tsu Yuan who quietly sat before the Buddha image in the main hall of the temple. When one of the soldiers held a sword just above the head to kill him, he remained still as before and said:

"In the whole universe there is no place to put my stick.

Now, I am glad to realize the truth of emptiness in both spiritual and material existences.

Thanks to the great Yuan's sword of three feet long,

That is going to cut the spring breeze with wonderful agility. ”

Saying to one another, “ This man is not a common priest. ” they all begged his pardon for their violence.

How strange it was, however, that Tsu Yuan should be in Japan and encourage the leader of the Japanese nation to defeat the Mongolian Navy when they came to attack Japan, in the fourth year of Koan, that is, 1281 of the Western era. He had come to Japan at the invitation of Tokimune Hojo, the prime minister of Kamakura Government and had been teaching Zen among statesmen as well as monks at Engakuji, Kamakura. Hearing of the Mongolian attack in Hakata, Kyushu island, Tokimune went up to Engakuji and asked the master for advise saying;

“ Dear master, a serious thing has happened! What shall I do about it? ”

“ Go ahead straight, and never hesitate! ” said Master Tsu Yuan. And Tokimune, with his fellow men, destroyed the Mongolian Navy.

In the early autumn of the ninth year of Koan a mandarin orange tree in the garden of the temple died suddenly.

“ What ill omen is it. ” People wondered.

“ Don't you know I shall have something in this late fall? ” said the master. “ What is it? asked people but he did not give any answer. And in the end of August he had a slight illness. One evening he told the attendant to change his robe and prepare ink and brush for writing.

“ I do not go forward when I come.

I do not go backward when I leave.

Milliards of lions appera.

Milliards of lions bark. ”

Writing this verse of passing-words he died away in his sitting posture.

National Teacher Daito, the founder of Daitokuji, Kyoto, one day, announced that he would die on a certain day. For many years he had been prevented from sitting in meditation posture owing to the infirmity

of his left leg. But on the day of his death he forced upon himself to sit up in crossed legs according to the examples of Zen masters.

“ I obeyed you for a long time. To-day you must obey me. ”

Thus saying he bent the weak leg with his two hands, and a pop of breaking was heard by his men and blood spread out of his robe. People were shocked and awe struck but he smiled, and wrote a passing poem:

“ Passing over Buddha and Fathers,  
I have always polished the wisdom.  
Where I turn the wheel of Zen,  
The universe grows by itself. ”

Prior to this, when he was walking in the Gojyo Bridge one midnight some one followed him and thrust his sword at him with a yell. Turning back quietly he said, “ What can I do for you? ” The man was petrified with fright. Later on that man said to people: “ I have never seen any dreadful thing except a priest who glared at me when I assaulted him with a sword. He must have been the long-nosed goblin of Kurama. ”

National Teacher Kwanzan, the founder of Myoshinji, Kyoto, once told his disciple, Juwo, that he was going on a trip. Dressing up in the travelling dress he stood by the well in the garden of Myoshinji. “ You must take very good care of the temple after my departure. ” Thus saying he passed away.

Birth is coming and death is going. Coming is a matter for congratulation and passing is an event of mourning. This is what ordinal people think. But to Zen followers, life is what they want to escape from and death is what they want to get rid of. It makes no difference to Zen whether they come or go. Until one gains Satori or realization both life and death are lifeless. After he or she has become enlightened the whole world is the manifestation of Buddha. There is no life to please: there is no death to grudge. When life comes we are with it, and when death goes we are with it. What is the use of thinking of death when life is here, and what is the use of clinging on life when death takes place?

“ In spring, hundreds of flowers, in autumn, the moon light;

In summer, a refreshing breeze, in winter, the snow view accompany you.

If useless things do not hung on your mind,  
Any season is a good season for you. ”

When Oda Nobunaga, a powerful chief in the war period of Japan, layed a siege to Erinji, of Kofu Province, all the monks were driven to the room over the gate. Soldiers made every preparation to put the gate house on a fire. When monks sat in meditation just as on an ordinary day in the monastery, Master Kaisen said, “ Bretheen, how do you turn the wheel of Dharma in the midst of this fire? I request every one of you to say a word of Zen and make it serve as your passing word. ” When each monk had exclaimed some words of his last sermon, the gate was wrapped in firely flames. And Master Kaisen at last said:

“ The practice of Zen does not necessarily require the beauty of landcape.

When one puts all thoughts out, even fire is cool to him. ”

To recite this verse in Japanese:

“ Anzen-wa-Kana-razu-shimo-sansui-o-mochii-zu,  
Shinto-o-mekkyaku-sureba-himo-mata-suzu-shi.

