

# On Taishi, the Great Death, in Zen Experience

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## I

In Zen Buddhism, particularly in Hakuin Zen, a representative type of Zen which asserts that Enlightenment is the ultimate goal, the dark experience called "Taishi ichiban" 大死一番, or "the Great Death once for all" is an unaboidable stage on the way to Enlightenment and this is the crucial experience through which we pass in order to be reborn. Therefore we may call this dark stage "Human Death" compared to Animal or Physical Death; "Absolute Death" compared to Relative Death. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the importance and unique characteristics of this Great Death in Zen experience using as a comparison "The Dark Night of the Soul" of St. John of the Cross (1542-1591).

## II

Miss Evelyn Underhill classifies five stages under which we study the mystical life as follows;<sup>1)</sup>

- 1) Awakening of the self to conciousness of Divine Reality
- 2) Realization of the finite and imperfect self... Purgation
- 3) Illumination
- 4) The final and complete purification of the self... This is called "Mystic Pain", "Mystic Death" or "Dark Night of

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1) *Mysticism*, Meridian Books, New York, 1955, P. 169

the Soul”

### 5) Union with God

In considering the forth stage, it is best to take “Ascent of Mount Carmel” of St. John of the Gross<sup>2)</sup> in which he presents in detail the idea of the dark night of the soul.

At the very begining of Book the First, he writes,

“Wherein is described the nature of the dark night and how necessary it is to pass through it to Divine union; ...

Describes two different nights through which spiritual persons pass, according to the two parts of man, the lower and the higher... ”<sup>3)</sup>

In this way he describes two different nights, that is to say dark night of the senses and that of spirit, and details both of them. But it is not my purpose to elaborate these.

## III

What then does “Taishi” mean is Zen Buddhism ?

Man has necessarily conflict between good and evil, or life and death at the base of his existence, as his destiny, and in order to overcome or emancipate this fundamental conflict many religious people and philosophers have found various ways in our history. Here we may distinguish them by tree types.

1. when man was awakened to the finiteness of death or sin or evil, some tried to escape from this finiteness by way of depending on outside absolute being like God or Amitabha Buddha. This appeared as an absolut negation of humanity in Medieval times.

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2) Translated and edited with a general introduction by E. Allison Pears, Image Book, New York, 1958

3) P. 19

And this way of living is entirely passive and weak.

2. After the Middle ages humanism seems to have sprung into existence as a refutation of this attitude of negation. But too much emphasis on the egoistic attitude toward human existence brought humanity to a deadlock because it obscured the fundamental human conflict on which "Human being" exists.

3. Here is a place where the Zen attitude toward life can be welcomed as the only way of overcoming the human crisis today. The Zen way of emancipation is based on absolute negation of the basic element of human existence which is life and death or good and evil. In other words, it means the absolute negation of human existence itself, because this basic conflict is consonant with human existence. It does not mean the negation of humanity which is anti-humanity or theism; It means absolute negation. We may call this stage Taishi, absolute Death or Great Death. There is neither death nor life, nor good nor evil. Of course this is not only a matter of consciousness so-called, but of all existence.

This stage of experience might be compared with the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross in the sense of negation of ordinary humanity, or so far as black darkness of the soul is concerned.

It is however terribly hard to negate human existence by oneself. Here is a mission of Koan, 公案. The Koan is not an ordinary problem to be resolved but a way to make man emancipate himself from the fundamental conflict of human existence by identifying with it. The Koan makes man go beyond both sense and intelligence and make him realize the base of existence whence all human sense and intelligence issues.

The Koan has been used in Rinzai Zen 臨濟禪 since Ta-hui Tsung-

kaō 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163) declared Kanna Zen 看話禪 in China. But the Koan was systematized by Hakuin Ekaku 白隱慧鶴 (1689-1768) in the Edo period of Japan. Taishi or Great Death therefore can be experienced in Kanna Zen. Taishi is also called Taigi 大疑 or Great Doubt because of the nature of the Koan. Zen text says as follows,

“One should have doubt at first in order to practise Zen. Where there is a great doubt, there must be a great Enlightenment”<sup>4)</sup>

「參禪一著要起疑情 大疑必有大悟」

or,

“Arouse doubt throughout your entire being, and devote yourself to “Mu”, the Chinese character. Attend to it day and night; Do not make any nihilistic idea, nor any dualistic idea. Just as if having swallowed a hot iron pill, you can not spit the doubt out, even if you try to spit. Having your former wrong intelligence and wrong consciousness, and having come to pure maturity after a long course of practice, you will get naturally into the identity of subjectivity and objectivity; you will admit that you have realized the experience as a dumb person has dreamed a dream.”<sup>5)</sup>

「通身起箇疑團參箇無字晝夜提撕莫作虛無會莫作有無會如吞了箇熱鐵丸相似吐又吐不出蕩盡從前惡知惡覺久久純熟自然內外打成一片如啞子得夢只許自知」

As we see in these lines, Taishi or Taigi is the crucial experience through which we can come into Enlightenment, which is the true

4) Shimon-hozo-shu 緇門寶藏集

5) Mumonkwan 無門關 Chapt. I, commentary

Buddha himself, who has no conflict in conflict.

We call such an enlightend man Buddha, 佛, Mushoji-tei 無生死底, a man who has no life-and-death, or Fushizen-fushiaku-tei, 不思善不思惡底, a man who thinks of neither good nor evil.

#### IV

Now I would like to consider Taishi in comparison with the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross.

In the case of St. John, a journey of the soul to the union with God originated with the awaking of the self to conciousness of Divine Reality. The dark night comes from the privation of every kind of pleasure which belongs to desire, in man's longing to elevate himself to the Divine. Here we can recognize man's will to escape from finiteness to infiniteness which is God. But such a dualistic way of escape can not emancipate us from the fundamental conflict of human existence. The dark night of St. John in this sense, might be indicative only of this conflict.

On the contrary, Taishi, the dark night of Zen experience, is caused by absolute negation of this conflict. It does not seek outward being but into one's self. This attitude toward reality may be called non-dualistic or introvert seeking.

In particular the attitude of St. John toward reality is emotional because it is caused by awareness of man's finiteness, on the contrary that of Zen is intellectual because it is caused by the strong will to overcome the conflict of man's being.

According to A. paulain, S. J., who is a good interpreter of the mysticism of St. John, the dark night of the soul is the extreme borderland separating ordinary prayer from the mystic union.<sup>6)</sup> It

6) The Graces of INTERIO PRAYER (LES GRACES D'ORAISON) Part III, Chapt. XV P. 200

sounds as if this dark state is a successive state which combines ordinary prayer with the prayer of mystical union.

St. John describes besides two dark nights as he says, "two different nights through which spiritual parsons pass, according to the two parts of man, the lower and the higher."<sup>7)</sup> And he gives names to these two nights "The night or purgation of the sensual part of the soul" and "The night of the spiritual part of the soul."

The night of Zen experience, however, has no such degree which St. John expresses: "two degrees of the contemplation of God."

In the state of Taishi, man does not realize such element as poulain describes as habitual aridity, memory of God, painful and persistent need, affection to our natural taste and so on, because there is neither subject nor object except the fact of night itself. Therefore how can such degrees as sensual and spiritual exist?

In other words, in the night of Zen experience there is no becoming but being. There is no direction to advance but existence itself, which has no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no sense, no spirit and no body.

Zen describes it in such word as "a mass of doubt 疑團", "A doubt including a hundred thousand small doubts 千疑萬疑只是一疑", "The earth being filled with black 大地黑漫漫", "In the midst of a region of ice 萬里一條層冰裏" and so on. In such a condition, man is darkness itself. Therefore Hakuin, for example, mentions as follows,

"When man breaks the bumpkin stick (body), the earth is at once a mass of black, the universe loses its colour and the sun and the moon swallow their shining. Or again, it is

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7) Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book I, Chapt. I, P. 19

like a black lacquered bowl with filled black soup.”<sup>8)</sup>

拗折山形柱杖子，從來大地黑漫漫。乾坤失色日月吞輝，黑漆桶裡盛墨汁。

In this respect, it is not hard to understand that Taishi of Zen experience can not be a borderland which ordinarily separates man from mystic union but is rather a precipice from which man casts himself at the risk of life.

St. John, as we see, describes two different nights of the soul. And on the second night he mentions as follows,

“This (second night) obscure night is a certain inflowing of God into the soul...Contemplatives call it infused contemplation or mystical theology...God secretly teaches the soul and instructs it in the perfection of love, without effort on its own part beyond loving attention to God, listening to His voice and admitting the light He send...”<sup>9)</sup>

From these lines, I understand that in the second night of St. John, Subjectivity of mystical action is replaced by God in place of man. God begins to draw man up to a higher level actively, and on the contrary, man who made the effort to elevate himself to the union with God actively on the first night is led by God passively without any effort. Passivity seems to be a typical characteristic of the dark night of the soul, a borderland state, because there is no distinct discontinuity but a gradual continuity in the context of the experience of rebirth.

On the other hand, in the Taishi of Zen experience we can not find any passive element anywhere, but we find active effort to

8) Hakuin Zenji Dokugo-shingyo, 白隠禪師毒語心經 Commentary on the word “the highest Mantram” 是大明咒

9) Obscure Night, Book II P. 380

break the shell of dark self. But here is a very important thing which we should not miss. That is motivation of man's enlightenment, given from outside man.

We call it "Sokutaku-no-ki 啐啄之機" or the motivation of the breaking of shell of egg which should be done from both outside by hen and inside by chicken at the same time. Master Hui-nêng 慧能, for example, got Enlightenment by listening to the chanting of the Diamond stura, Master Tê-shan 德山 got it by observing that Master Lung-t'an 龍潭 blew a candle flame out, Master Ling-yün 靈雲 got it by seeing a peach flower falling, Master Po-chang 百丈 got it when his master Ma-tsu 馬祖 twisted his nose in his young days, Master Hakuin 白隱 got it by hearing the sound of the temple gong. In this way, in the case of Zen experience, through nature or master's help man get Enlightenment. However there should be a brave effort of man at the same time.

In the case of St. John, the purpose of his journey of the soul is union with God, in other words elevation of the soul from finiteness to infiniteness or from sentient to Divine. Man who climbs the ladder toward God, however, seems to have no goal because God is infinite Being eternally. Even if he could be infinite Being man is still nothing but opposite of finiteness so far. There is no resolution.

On the contrary, the Zen man who comes out of the darkness is absolute infinite Being because there is neither finiteness nor infiniteness in him. Therefore man can be a man of absolute freedom who is beyond life and death, finite and infinite, sentient and Divine. Such an ideal image of man is a tremendous production of Taishi, the dark night, of Zen experience.