

Zen Buddhism -

History and Development

Monks sit in perfect silence. Each one deep in meditation on the void/sunyata, or emptiness of all things. Another monk silently walks around the others, peering, and then pausing before one, he gently taps his shoulder with a huge club and suddenly slams it on the back of the docile monk! Why was this done? The offending monk's breathing was incorrect, or perhaps his back posture was off a little. Welcome to the world of Zen.

Like other versions of Buddhism, the roots of Zen are a bit murky. Buddhism spreads from India in the 6th century b.c. to China (Chan), Thailand, Cambodia and so on and eventually to Japan. One popular legend has Bohdidharma (Around the 5th century a.d.) coming out of Persia to India. He learned Mahayana Buddhism and then preceded to China, where he introduced the martial arts techniques to the moribund monks. In the 12th century a.d. Myoan Eisai (1141-1215) is said to have started the Zen movement in Japan and was the founder of the Rinzai School. Dogen founded another Zen school, the Soto, around 1225 a.d. Later other Chinese Chan masters came to Japan to further the development of the Zen teachings. Though many Japanese teachers made the reverse claim - that it was Japanese master who went to China to properly teach Zen. This is all irrelevant because the traditional teaching of Zen, negates the existence of the Chinese, the Japanese and even the Buddha himself.

The primary source of Zen in the western world was D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966) who promoted the teachings of the Rinzai School. He would be a huge influence on

former Christians like Anglican minister Alan Watts and Roman Catholic Monk Thomas Merton.

Scripture

The Zen understanding of enlightenment or satori, does not come through knowledge or understanding but rather only through direct experience of oneness and emptiness through meditation. Thus the role of scriptures is minimized in Zen circles. The teacher has the experience, which is passed through to the student, without any dependence upon rational understanding or creeds or scriptures. The famous Zen quote “I owe everything to my teacher for he has taught me nothing!” reflects the ideals of Zen followers. However Zen is but one part of the Mahayana school, so some of those writings are still influential. Over the differing periods Zen teachers were writing and using different sutras (scriptures) such as the Lankavatara sutras, the Diamond Sutras, the Lotus sutras and others. Collections of different koans (ko-an) also became critical. Koans are riddles or questions without answer, which are designed to show the inadequacy of the mind or rationality to achieve enlightenment.

Jesus

Like virtually all other Asian schools of thought, Jesus is a non-existent category, but since the introduction of Asian religions into the western world, most have subsequently included Jesus in their tradition in various ways. The Mahayana school already had in place the concept of a Bodhisattva, an enlightened master who out of great compassion, chose not to go on to nirvana but stay in the world to teach. Modern Zen teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh have developed this connection in books like *Living*

Buddha, Living Christ and Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers. Selling to an audience that knows very little about Jesus and virtually nothing about the Buddha, Hanh's books have helped promote the pluralistic notion of different spiritual masters, from different cultures and times, who in reality are teaching the very same thing. Hanh reduces Jesus to a Buddhist arahant or master, who taught mindfulness (sati) like the Buddha himself. Much like Deepak Chopra who had hinduized Jesus in his book *Jesus: A Story of Enlightenment*, Hanh takes familiar parables and sayings and the story of Jesus, and removes them from their Jewish context and redacts them through Buddhist eyes. For example in *Going Home* - Hanh states:

“There was a person who was born nearly two thousand years ago. He was aware that suffering was going on and in his society, and he did not hide himself from that suffering. Instead, he came out to investigate deeply the nature of suffering, the causes of suffering. Because he had the courage to speak out, he became the teacher of many generations. The best way to celebrate Christmas may be to practice mindful walking, mindful sitting, and looking deeply into things...”

Christmas is transformed into a life just like the one at a Zen retreat center or monastery. So there is no formal view of Jesus in Zen, but there are attempts to write him into Zen categories by modern propagandists.

Supreme Being/God

Historic Buddhism in all its forms is unclear on whether or not there is a god or gods. In his rejection of much of his Hindu roots, the Buddha in one context ignored the question of the gods. Hinduism has both polytheism (330 million plus gods) and monotheism (typically among Hindu scholars the one god is Brahman - who is without any attributes or nirguna). So one might read Buddhist texts or speak to monks who are formal atheists, such as Theravada Buddhists. But in another context, the Buddha

spoke of evil spirits in his Great Renunciation account, so Buddhists aren't really atheists as seen in the western context of materialists or naturalists. Buddhist stories and legends are replete with numerous divine beings being in attendance when the Buddha would teach. Another concept that makes his teaching clear in one way is that when a Hindu would come to moksha or liberation through the Jnana or knowledge path - it was usually understood as the liberated one coming to understand that all the atmans or individual things perceived in the illusory universe, were really only one thing - Brahman. So the drop was part of the ocean.

The Buddha departed dramatically from Hinduism is in his doctrine of anatta - a complete denial of an individual self or essence. There is no drop, and if there is no drop, then there is no ocean. For many Buddhists, especially the Theravada, Buddhism is atheistic. By the first century A.D. the Mahayana or Greater Vehicle Buddhists had come to the forefront of the Buddhist movement. This "second turn of the wheel" rejected much of the Theravada teachings and insisted that there was an essence in all things that could be called the "Buddha self or Buddha consciousness". This essence sounded very similar to the classic Advaita Vedanta version of Hinduism espoused by people like Shankara and even more so by Ramanuja. The Bodhisattvas' become divine beings much like the Buddha himself who is often now seen as a divine being, especially by lay people.

In the particular case of Zen - teachers like Suzuki and others seem to want to have it both ways. In his interaction with alleged theists like Thomas Merton, Zen coheres with theism, while in other contexts he will pronounce the lack of a god. This is

confusing to the western mind, because it expresses a direct contradiction, which is exactly Suzuki's goal – 'There is a god and there is no god' is an antinomy held comfortably by the Zennist. How could this be? Because Zen might be the most strident attack on rationality that the world has ever seen. The purpose of Zazen (sitting meditation) and the koans - is to show the impossibility of achieving enlightenment by using the active, rational mind. Rationality is a product of the illusion of maya - which is the world. The mind becomes a 'maya machine' creating the illusory world at all times. Thus the very things which people are striving for, which causes suffering according to the Buddha's four noble truths, are literally nothing or sunyata. There is no mind - there is a mind. The Zennist revels in the contradictions. The question of a god is open or not open. Depends upon the teacher and the moment.

There is more here to think about as well. Suzuki like other Zen writers often describes his primary thoughts being "not-two". This of course leads commentators to say that Zen is monistic. But Suzuki rejects the label and insists that not two does not mean one. This is all because we all have a "dualistically-trained mind". So our problem is the way our mind sorts things out. Obviously rejecting Kantian types of categories, Suzuki emphatically denies the role of any "parts" in understanding the One. From the outsider perspective, the One seems very similar to Brahman - Nirguna, but without the name.

So there is a supreme being and there isn't a supreme being. Welcome to Zen.

Human Predicament

Like all other versions of Buddhism the human problem is ignorance. We live in maya - the dream or illusion. We are suffering because of our desires or thirst for things and stability. Because of annicca (the doctrine that everything is changing) those things we desire can never satisfy because they do not remain the thing that we initially wanted. The first two of the Four Noble Truths express these ideas and then explain that the only solution to the problem, which is found in Noble Truth #3, is to cease all thirst and desire. This even includes the thirst or desire to cease all thirst and desire! The Hindu's agrees with all this but the Buddha thought that the Hindu's had a fatal flaw in their thinking. The Hindu notion of the permanent self or atman, which reincarnates over and over again millions and millions of times, is seen as the reason why Buddhism is a better vehicle for moksha or liberation. According to the Buddha the greatest cause of desire and thus suffering is not the outside world, but rather the persistent notion of "I" or self. Statements such as "I am going to the store" or "I am hungry" both show that the root cause of all our desires is the notion that I exist. Therefore the best liberation will be the one that gets to the heart of the problem most effectively. The doctrine of anatta or no atman and no self then is an improvement over the Hindu path.

Salvation

The concept of salvation as seen through Western religious eyes is historically absent in all forms of Buddhism including Zen. To the ancient Hindu, moksha or liberation from the wheel of birth, death and rebirth (Samsara) meant the drop realizes its true self, drops all notions and actions of separateness and "rejoins" with the ocean.

The Hindu belief that atman equals Brahman (Tat Tvam Asi- that art thou) doesn't really hold to a sense of rejoining but the metaphor is seen as helpful, because there never was any real separation in the first place. The drop was always the ocean and the ocean is all there actually is, so no motion is even possible. As seen in the above section however, the Buddha rejected the permanent self or atman and maybe Brahman as well.

So what does moksha mean to Zen Buddhism? Moksha to the Buddhist originally meant nirvana - which means the snuffing out of a candle flame. In other words liberation was found in the extinction of the self. Without any self - there would be no desire and no suffering that comes from desire. In the *Holy Teaching of Virmilkirti* the Buddha taught that a good Bodhisattva does not give a hungry person food, as that only helps feed the illusion quite literally. This is called the "sympathetic compassion" which the Bodhisattva is enjoined to abstain from. Instead the enlightened Bodhisattva should teach the hungry person that they are non-existent, which alleviates the "real" problem, not the temporary problem of hunger that stems from incorrect thinking in the illusory world. This is called the "great compassion".

In more modern times, especially as Buddhism moved into the western world, the complete extinction of the self as the understanding of Nirvana has morphed into a much more user - friendly idea. Now Nirvana is a place, of sorts. Filled with blessing, and peace and joy, of sorts. Nirvana is beyond description or even words (ineffable). It defies all description because all forms of duality are part of maya and words are inadequate to explain. Buddhists are reluctant to go beyond vague language, as

someone might confuse Nirvana with a Jewish or Christian idea. But this is problematic, as it seems clear that Buddhism accommodated itself to preexisting beliefs in the western world. Many serious thinkers such as Ken Wilbur (*A Brief History of Everything*) talk about eventual morphing of all things into the One. In many ways this lines up perfectly with the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism and brings up even more confusion

Last Things

Buddhists have a variety of beliefs concerning the end of the world. Like their Hindu forerunners some Buddhists emphasize the end of a cyclical age or aeon. Each cycle's end corresponds with another age's birth. Others believe that a messianic type of individual, Lord Maitreya, is waiting to descend to the earth and bring about a renewal of the dharma, meditation and Buddha consciousness. Concerning Heaven and Hell, many Buddhists believe that there are multiple layers of heavens and hells that the individual must go through because of their karma from past lives. Tibetan Buddhists believe that the Buddha lived for a million years. Other Buddhists teach that all human beings used to live for 80,000 years but due to decadence and wrong (unskillful) behavior the life spans and physical prowess continually was diminished. Someday as the dharma is ascendant again life spans will expand to 80,000 years again.

Summary of Beliefs

Zen Buddhists are one of the Mahayana sects. Although their roots are murky, they are clearly distinct in Japan by the 12th century a.d. Their two main techniques are sitting meditation (zazen) and koans. The koans are used to show the inadequacy of

the mind in achieving enlightenment or Satori. Once the mind is abandoned through the koan, and then zazen and other forms of meditation are used to experience the emptiness and or the Buddha nature or consciousness. Zen Buddhists also affirm t karma (action) and reincarnation, although since there is no personal self (anatta) then their view of reincarnation differs significantly from Hindus and other groups. Buddhists also believe in dependent origination, which means that nothing exists independently and permanently. All things exist because of other things. All things cause and in turn are caused by other things. In other words this is cause and effect or karma in action.

Zen Buddhists are at best ambivalent about the existence of God, and have no official opinion on Jesus and other Christian beliefs. Zen accepts the belief in Maya, the illusory status of all we perceive and especially the most serious illusion of them all - the illusion of the permanent self or atman. The Four Noble truths are the core teaching of the Buddha:

- 1) All of life is suffering. Because of annicca (the transitory nature of maya) each person grasps onto what cannot bring liberation.
- 2) The cause of suffering is desire or thirst. This means that because we are attached to the things of this illusory world, we cannot be liberated and we suffer because the things we are attached to are constantly changing.
- 3) The solution to the problem is the cessation of attachment or thirst or desire.

Liberation can be achieved through a complete detachment to all things in the world and ultimately through detachment to your own existence.

4) The mean by which one becomes detached is through the Eight Fold Noble Path.

This series of 8 “rights”, such as right thinking, right actions, right consciousness and so on are part of the meditative process by which one can detach from the illusory existence and achieve nirvana.

Nirvana has come to mean a place of bliss and peace as Buddhism has reached into the western world and cultural milieu.

Witnessing Tips

In the Bible we are commanded to Love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This verse as well as many others enjoins the believer to use our mind that God gave us and to use it well. By contrast the Zen practitioner has been told that his mind is the enemy and only its ultimate destruction will bring about a release from the world of suffering. Since it seems so important to the evil one in his deceptions that people do not think - it strikes me as important that we bring people to think through what they have been told. Two Biblical examples seem pertinent here. In the many conversations we see between Jesus and his opponents, one consistent strategy seems to come up over and over. Virtually every time someone would ask Jesus a question - he would ask him or her a question back. This tells us that at least part of what Jesus is doing is getting his questioner to think through the heart of the issue, as opposed to the often-poor question that was asked. For example in Luke 18:18 a ruler asked Jesus this “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.’” Jesus goes on to give him an answer but it is clear he wanted to get at a larger issue that the one the

ruler had brought up. Another biblical example is Paul's interaction with the philosophers on Mar's Hill in Athens in Acts 17. In this example while Paul does grant some obvious points such as "I see that you are very religious" (which in Athens was the equivalent of arriving at the airport in Las Vegas and observing that people in Las Vegas like to gamble!), for the rest of his discussion he goes on to contradict virtually everything that the Athenians held dear. Reminiscent of Isaiah's interaction with pagans in chapters 42-48 - Paul notes the obvious - since God is the creator of the universe - he does not dwell in houses nor does he need to be fed or bathed! Both of which are activities you can see in pagan temples all over the world to this day. In plain language, the creator does not need the creations help.

And this is exactly where our discussion with the Zennist must start. Romans 1 says that when people turn away from the creator, they turn to worshipping idols and immoral activities. But important to that degradation is what it says in Romans 1:18 where Paul points out that the pagan "suppresses (or makes void) truth in unrighteousness." This active tense verb "suppresses" is something I have seen over and over again in dealing with Buddhists and many others. Whether it is through mindless zazen or through drugs, the mind is the problem and it must be averted if not outright destroyed. The only way one can make sense of the extremely contradictory notions of Zen teachers is that the mind that God gave the Zennist - is ignored or destroyed. The eight fold path will say something like "right thought", but when one sees how this is understood in the Buddhist world it is not an injunction to think better, but to try and avoid thinking all together. For example I might be upset at evil in the

world or in my family or something like that. Thinking of these things brings me suffering. The solution is not to do something in the world to change the evil to good or to do away with the evil entirely. The solution is to realize (right thoughts) that the evil and the evildoer are non-existent and therefore there is nothing to be upset about. The softer American friendly version of Thich Nhat Hanh makes the statement that the evildoer is also really nothing but the "One" and therefore one can have compassion for the evildoer. But this softer version does not make sense even within Buddhism itself. Even wonderful concepts like compassion are really nothing - the earlier Buddhists tried to live this out more consistently. In this sense when I talk to American Buddhists I try to make them better Buddhists by pointing to the early Buddhist writings and stories to show how the Buddha taught against compassion in the Christian sense. In this way we must properly allow the Buddhist teaching about something like compassion - as mentioned earlier in the discussion about the Holy Teaching of Virmilkirti - and what Jesus would say about compassion.

This was wonderfully illustrated by Ravi Zacharias in his book *"The Lotus and the Cross: Jesus talks with the Buddha"* where Jesus and Buddha are juxtaposed in a conversation with a dying prostitute. According to classic Buddhist sources, the Buddha's response would not be sympathetic to her condition of dying slowly and painfully from Aids, but rather that she should recognize the illusory nature of the disease which stems from a false idea that she exists in the first place. By contrast Jesus speaks of real love and mercy for one who is in such a horrible state. If she were hungry, Buddha would teach her that her stomach's growling is merely part of the real

problem in that she thinks she exists and this is why the symptom of hunger persists. Jesus would feed her. Jesus would give her shelter, or water, or medicine or whatever she needed. The Buddha ridiculed this notion and enjoined the Bodhisattva to take the “greater path” of teaching non-existence.

This more authentic Buddhism doesn’t sell well to a western audience, so it is imperative that we help people see the real difference between Jesus and the Buddha and not the deliberately muddled version of someone like Hanh. Even in a post Christian culture like ours people still believe that one should help others in need and Buddhism becomes an untenable position in light of that. Even pagans still have the conscience that God gave them concerning others (as Paul mentions in Romans 2) and so Buddhists suppress their real teachings to win over a new audience. They are very successful at it so far. There is thousands of Buddhist centers and organizations operating in the western world today. This is a good example of what the Buddhists call “upaya” or skillful means. Upaya is the practice of lying well, not in the usual clumsy political manner, but with such skill that the one who has been lied to is not even aware of it. Like many other false religions, Buddhists use an ends justify the means type of argument to rationalize their dishonesty.

Another good witnessing tip is to see whether Buddhism successfully deals with the problem of suffering as it claims to, or perhaps it makes the problem worse. Many years ago I was on a television show entitled “America’s Most Wanted”. I was interviewed because of my knowledge about a certain cult leader who had left the country. The show’s executive producer was a long time correspondent who had spent

many years living in Thailand while reporting on the Vietnam War in the late 60s and 70s. While the cameras were being set up he looked at me and said, "I just hate when you Christians think Jesus is any better than the Buddha or Krishna or Lao Tzu or anyone else!" Then he smiled and said, "I bet we are going to have an argument aren't we?" (I have had some version of that statement thrown at me literally hundreds of times-it does really help one as a witness to know about the other beliefs and religions in the world!). I said to him that since he had live in Thailand for many years, which is a predominantly Buddhist culture, how come it was alright for a Thai farmer to take his eight year old daughter and sell her to a whorehouse in Bangkok, knowing what was going to happen to her?" His response was chilling. "But Bill you don't know how good that is for the local economy" (Word for word quote!) I looked rather disgusted at him and he immediately backed off - "well maybe its not the best thing..." But his knee jerk response is rather telling. He knew what is wrong and what is right, but his first response was to attempt to defend one of the great evils in the history of this world.

If I were a Buddhist I can defend that practice all day long. For example, since karma is merely a version of what goes around comes around - then perhaps the girl was a male rapist in a previous life. Or since the world is an illusion (maya) then there is no little girl being raped and no rapist. Or perhaps in the Americanized version of Buddhism then one could say that she chose to be repeatedly raped, drugged and destined to die of Aids or something, for her personal "growth". Buddhism thus requires one to look past the obvious (the evil of destroying little girls) and see the "real" problem

- which is of course that the little girls are persisting in the most noxious notion - that they actually exist.

If one does not believe in the reality of good and evil - then the notion of sin is a lost cause. It is imperative for our Buddhist friend and others to understand that evil and suffering are not illusory, but rather the results of people's individual choices. In one sense the Buddhist notion of karma already affirms this, but then the truth is suppressed by the "higher" understanding of maya. This is where I see the suppression mentioned in Romans 1 is clearly in play. The Buddhist knows it is wrong to rape and kill a young girl, because they have the same conscience God gave everyone. But their teachings force them to suppress that knowledge and somehow end up rationalizing great evil. How could Buddhism be seen as an answer to the problem of suffering? And it seems quite obvious that the centers of the Buddhist world don't exactly remind one of Shangri La - the mythical Buddhist paradise. In this same vein Zen was very much a part of the Bushido or warrior tradition within Japanese culture. It was a critical part of the militaristic culture that led to wars with Korea, Russia and eventually World War 2. So the notion of the peaceful benign Buddhist monk (who by contrast was probably trained in some form of martial arts!) is a nice western myth concocted through skillful means. One Buddhist tract I have enjoins its followers to try to do no evil deeds and no good deeds, since both are karma and will prevent one from achieving moksha. But even there is still a hint that the Buddhist still knows the difference between good and evil.

Much like the false hope of booze and drugs in my youth, the things that I was trying to run from, were always still there when I came down from that “high”. My best solutions were no solution at all - they only masked for a very brief time the real problems I was dealing with. The real problem that was causing me suffering, the abusive drunken home that I grew up in, was only made worse by my best attempts at resolving the unlivable problem. Buddhism does not advocate drugs (although this certainly never stopped modern Buddhists like Jack Kerouac or Michael Foucault) but in the same way meditation only truly hides the real problems in this world. Becoming detached from this world does nothing to actually solve suffering, as much as it might provide the meditating individual a temporary dodge from its reality. Teaching others to do the same thing only worsens the problem. Let me give a type of analogy. The giant trash dump in Manila is called “Smoky Mountain”. This hellhole is home to approximately 200,000 people. As a shame based culture, many Filipinos have resorted to pretending that it doesn’t exist. A wall was once built so that a rich neighborhood would not have to see the reality of the horror story in the next barrio. Many Filipinos here in the states have been told that the problem has been solved. This “I don’t see it so it can’t be real” mentality has persisted for who knows how long and through many modern administrations. My own Filipino son who was raised in a different poor part of the Philippines went to Smoky Mountain a few years ago and came back crying and mad. “Why doesn’t the government do something about this?” I had to explain his own culture to him. One group of people at Precious Jewels Ministries does not choose to look the other way and pretend. They have been serving the people

affected with Aids for over 25 years now. They provide hospitals, hospice and an orphanage for the survivors of the afflicted. They have brought tremendous help to so many there, but the government has fought them for many years. To have people helping in Smoky Mountain means there must be a need for help there, and this cannot be so - since there really is no problem. (Sarcasm alert!)

It was not Buddhist detachment, which brought PJM to Smoky Mountain. It was the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which moved those ladies who have reached out to the poorest of the poor. It is this same Gospel that tells us that there really is an answer to the sin and suffering problem. It is this same Gospel that informs us that God's love is so great - that Jesus came to die for us when we were at our worst behavior. In the same way Christian hospitals, orphanages and schools have been established virtually all over the known world for two thousand years now. Buddhism has been around for 2500 years now and historically there were no hospital, orphanages or schools. Modern Buddhists, like their Advaita cousins, have learned to mimic Christian charity in order to gain an audience in the western world. But in both cases their own foundational thinking undermines such things, which is why history paints such a different picture than the modern sales-pitch. If the world is maya - why build an orphanage? There are no orphans, there is no problem.

But if the world is real, then you have real problems that demand real solutions. I had one Buddhist tell me once that when you are detached then you are better able to help with whatever problem. Americanized Buddhism at its finest! I went on to explain what the Buddha had *actually* said about both detachment and helping. I also pointed

out the logical contradiction of being detached and then still caring. This didn't move him. I pointed out the contradiction of the Koans being used to show the inadequacy of the mind, when ironically each of the koans are constructed using rationality, so that they are without answer. Imagine one coming up with the koan - "What is the sound of two hands clapping?" Oops. Back to the drawing board for that one.

Following Christ does not mean suffering goes away. It might in fact bring more suffering as one might be called to endure much suffering as a witness to a fallen world. But believing in Jesus does give a *context* for suffering that makes sense and enjoins the believer to use their God given gift of a mind to think creatively of how to help those who are suffering. Ultimately the point of the Cross of Jesus Christ was to deal with the suffering and evil that we as human beings have caused and are still causing.

Buddhism claims to have the deeper answer to the problem, but that answer leads to the denial of any actual problem at all. Telling a rape victim that there was no rape or rapist so she needs to get her mind right (Southern for "Right Thought") can hardly be seen as a virtuous or helpful position. By contrast telling her that this evil act was an affront to a Holy God, who will bring about justice in this life or the next, is a comforting thought. Telling her that we are all one and that she needs to have compassion for her rapist as he is part of her (Hanh) is hardly helpful or even desirable. By contrast Christians can tell her that there is real good and evil and that even though we suffer in this fallen world now - because of what Jesus did on the Cross-for her, she can find comfort in this world and the next.

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