ALAN WATTS

THE WAY OF ZEN

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The Way of Zen

禅の道

ALAN WATTS

VINTAGE SPIRITUAL CLASSICS

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To
TIA, MARK, AND RICHARD
who will understand it all the better
for not being able to read it.

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Preface

During the past twenty years there has been an extraordinary growth of interest in Zen Buddhism. Since the Second World War this interest has increased so much that it seems to be becoming a considerable force in the intellectual and artistic world of the West. It is connected, no doubt, with the prevalent enthusiasm for Japanese culture which is one of the constructive results of the late war, but which may amount to no more than a passing fashion. The deeper reason for this interest is that the viewpoint of Zen lies so close to the "growing edge" of Western thought.

The more alarming and destructive aspects of Western civilization should not blind us to the fact that at this very time it is also in one of its most creative periods. Ideas and insights of the greatest fascination are appearing in some of the newer fields of Western science–in psychology and psychotherapy, in logic and the philosophy of science, in semantics and communications theory. Some of these developments might be due to suggestive influences from Asian philosophy, but on the whole I am inclined to feel that there is more of a parallelism than a direct influence. We are, however, becoming aware of the parallelism, and it promises an exchange of views which should be extremely stimulating.

Western thought has changed so rapidly in this century that we are in a state of considerable confusion. Not only are there serious difficulties of communication between the intellectual and the general public, but the course of our thinking and of our very history has seriously undermined the common-sense assumptions which lie at the roots of our social conventions and institutions. Familiar concepts of space, time, and motion, of nature and

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natural law, of history and social change, and of human personality itself have dissolved, and we find ourselves adrift without landmarks in a universe which more and more resembles the Buddhist principle of the "Great Void." The various wisdoms of the West, religious, philosophical, and scientific, do not offer much guidance to the art of living in such a universe, and we find the prospects of making our way in so trackless an ocean of relativity rather frightening. For we are used to absolutes, to firm principles and laws to which we can cling for spiritual and psychological security.

This is why, I think, there is so much interest in a culturally productive way of life which, for some fifteen hundred years, has felt thoroughly at home in "the Void," and which not only feels no terror for it but rather a positive delight. To use its own words, the situation of Zen has always been–

Above, not a tile to cover the head;
Below, not an inch of ground for the foot.

Such language should not actually be so unfamiliar to us, were we truly prepared to accept the meaning of "the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head."

I am not in favor of "importing" Zen from the Far East, for it has become deeply involved with cultural institutions which are quite foreign to us. But there is no doubt that there are things which we can learn, or unlearn, from it and apply in our own way. It has the special merit of a mode of expressing itself which is as intelligible–or perhaps as baffling–to the intellectual as to the illiterate, offering possibilities of communication which we have not explored. It has a directness, verve, and humor, and a sense of both beauty and nonsense at once exasperating and delightful. But above all it has a way of being able to turn one's mind inside out, and dissolving what seemed to be the most oppressive human problems into questions like "Why is a mouse when it spins?" At its heart there is a strong but completely un-

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sentimental compassion for human beings suffering and perishing from their very attempts to save themselves.

There are many excellent books about Zen, though some of the best are out of print or otherwise difficult to obtain. But as yet no one–not even Professor Suzuki–has given us a comprehensive account of the subject which includes its historical background and its relation to Chinese and Indian ways of thought. The three volumes of Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* are an unsystematic collection of scholarly papers on various aspects of the subject, enormously useful for the advanced student but quite baffling to the general reader without an understanding of the general principles. His delightful *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* is rather narrow and specialized. It omits the essential information about the relation of Zen to Chinese Taoism and Indian Buddhism, and is in some respects rather more mystifying than it need be. His other works are studies of special aspects of Zen, all of which require general background and historical perspective.

R. H. Blyth's *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* is one of the best introductions available, but it is published only in Japan and, again, lacks the background information. As a series of rambling and marvelously perceptive observations, it makes no attempt to give an orderly presentation of the subject. My own *Spirit of Zen* is a popularization of Suzuki's earlier works, and besides being very unscholarly it is in many respects out of date and misleading, whatever merits it may have in the way of lucidity and simplicity. Christmas Humphreys' *Zen Buddhism,* published only in England, is likewise a popularization of Suzuki and, once more, does not really begin to put Zen in its cultural context. It is written in a clear and sprightly fashion, but the author finds identities between Buddhism and Theosophy which I feel to be highly questionable. Other studies of Zen by both Western and Asian authors are of a more specialized character, or are discussions of Zen *à propos* of something else–psychology, art, or cultural history.

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In default, then, of a fundamental, orderly, and comprehensive account of the subject, it is no wonder that Western impressions of Zen are somewhat confused, despite all the enthusiasm and interest which it has aroused. The problem, then, is to write such a book–and this I have tried to do since no one who understands the subject better than I seems willing or able to do so. Ideally, I suppose, such a work should be written by an accomplished and recognized Zen master. But at present no such person has sufficient command of English. Furthermore, when one speaks from within a tradition, and especially from within its institutional hierarchy, there is always apt to be a certain lack of perspective and grasp of the outsider's viewpoint. Again, one of the biggest obstacles to communication between Japanese Zen masters and Westerners is the absence of clarity as to difference of basic cultural premises. Both sides are so "set in their ways" that they are unaware of the limitations of their means of communication.

Perhaps, then, the most appropriate author of such a work would be a Westerner who had spent some years under a Japanese master, going through the whole course of Zen training. Now from the standpoint of Western "scientific scholarship" this would not do at all, for such a person would have become an "enthusiast" and "partisan" incapable of an objective and disinterested view. But, fortunately or unfortunately, Zen is above all an experience, nonverbal in character, which is simply inaccessible to the purely literary and scholarly approach. To know what Zen is, and especially what it is not, there is no alternative but to practice it, to experiment with it in the concrete so as to discover the meaning which underlies the words. Yet such Westerners as have undergone some of the special type of training followed in Rinzai Zen tend to become "cagey" and uncommunicative on the principle that

Those who know do not speak;
Those who speak do not know.

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Although, however, they do not "put up," they do not completely "shut up." On the one hand, they would love to share their understanding with others. But on the other hand, they are convinced that words are ultimately futile, and are, furthermore, under an agreement not to discuss certain aspects of their training. They begin, therefore, to take the characteristically Asian attitude of "Come and find out for yourself." But the scientifically trained Westerner is, not without reason, a cautious and skeptical fellow who likes to know what he is "getting into." He is acutely conscious of the capacity of the mind for self-deception, for going into places where entrance is impossible without leaving one's critical perspective at the door. Asians tend so much to despise this attitude, and their Western devotees even more so, that they neglect to tell the scientific inquirer many things that are still well within the possibilities of human speech and intellectual understanding.

To write about Zen is, therefore, as problematic for the outside, "objective" observer as for the inside, "subjective" disciple. In varying situations I have found myself on both sides of the dilemma. I have associated and studied with the "objective observers" and am convinced that, for all their virtues, they invariably miss the point and eat the menu instead of the dinner. I have also been on the inside of a traditional hierarchy–not Zen–and am equally convinced that from this position one does not know what dinner is being eaten. In such a position one becomes technically "idiotic," which is to say, out of communication with those who do not belong to the same fold.

It is both dangerous and absurd for our world to be a group of communions mutually excommunicate. This is especially true of the great cultures of the East and the West, where the potentialities of communication are the richest, and the dangers of failure to communicate the worst. As one who has spent somewhat more than twenty years trying to interpret the East to the West, I have become increasingly certain that to interpret such a phenomenon as Zen there is a clear principle to be followed.

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On the one hand, it is necessary to be sympathetic and to experiment personally with the way of life to the limit of one's possibilities. On the other hand, one must resist every temptation to "join the organization," to become involved with its institutional commitments. In this friendly neutral position one is apt to be disowned by both sides. But, at the worst, one's misrepresentations provoke them to express themselves more clearly. For the relationship between two positions becomes far more clear when there is a third with which to compare them. Thus even if this study of Zen does no more than express a standpoint which is neither Zen nor anything Western, it will at least provide that third point of reference.

However, there can be no doubt that the essential standpoint of Zen refuses to be organized, or to be made the exclusive possession of any institution. If there is anything in this world which transcends the relativities of cultural conditioning, it is Zen–by whatever name it may be called. This is an excellent reason for Zen's not being institutionalized, and for the fact that many of its ancient exponents were "universal individualists" who were never members of any Zen organization, and never sought the acknowledgment of any formal authority.

This, then, is my position with respect to Zen–and I feel I should be frank with the reader in a day when there is so much anxiety about people's credentials or "quantifications." I cannot represent myself as a Zenist, or even as a Buddhist, for this seems to me to be like trying to wrap up and label the sky. I cannot represent myself as a scientifically objective academician, for–with respect to Zen–this seems to me to be like studying birdsong in a collection of stuffed nightingales. I claim no rights to speak of Zen. I claim only the pleasure of having studied its literature and observed its art forms since I was hardly more than a boy, and of having had the delight of informal association with a number of Japanese and Chinese travelers of the same trackless way.

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This book is intended both for the general reader and for the more serious student, and I trust that the former will be tolerant of the use of some technical terminology, a Chinese character appendix, and other critical apparatus most useful for those who wish to explore the subject more deeply. The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the background and history of Zen, and the second with its principles and practice. The sources of information are of three types. I have, firstly, used almost all the studies of Zen in European languages. Naturally, I have made considerable use of the works of Professor D. T. Suzuki, but at the same time I have tried not to rely upon them too heavily–not because of any defect in them, but because I think readers are entitled to something more, by way of a fresh viewpoint, than a mere summarization of his views.

Secondly, I have based the essential view of Zen here presented upon a careful study of the more important of its early Chinese records, with special reference to the *Hsin-hsin Ming*, the *T'an Ching* or *Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, the *Lin-chi Lu*, and the *Ku-tsun-hsü Yü-lu*. My own knowledge of T'ang dynasty Chinese is certainly not enough to deal with some of the finer points of this literature, but sufficient, I think, to get what I wanted, which was a clear view of the essential doctrine. In all this, my efforts have been greatly aided by colleagues and research associates at the American Academy of Asian Studies, and I wish in particular to express my thanks to Professors Sabro Hasegawa and Gi-ming Shien, to Dr. Paul and Dr. George Fung, Dr. Frederick Hong, Mr. Charles Yick, and to Mr. Kazumitsu Kato, priest of the Soto-Zen School.

Thirdly, my information is derived from a large number of personal encounters with teachers and students of Zen, spread over more than twenty years.

In the following pages the translations from the original texts are my own, unless otherwise indicated. For the convenience of those who read Chinese, I have supplied, following the Bibliog-

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raphy, an appendix of the original Chinese forms of the more important quotations and technical terms. I have found these almost essential for the more serious student, for even among the most highly qualified scholars there is still much uncertainty as to the proper translation of T'ang dynasty Zen texts. References to this appendix are by superscribed index letters in alphabetical order.

References to other works are by surname of the author and number, directing the reader to the Bibliography for full details. Scholarly readers will have to excuse me for not using the absurd diacritical marks in romanized Sanskrit words, since these are merely confusing to the general reader and unnecessary to the Sanskritist who will at once call to mind the Devanagiri script. As to the proper names of Zen masters and titles of Zen texts, these are given in the romanized forms of Mandarin or Japanese according to the country of origin, and technical terms are given in Mandarin unless used in the discussion of specifically Japanese Zen. For Mandarin one is almost compelled by general usage to adopt the Wade-Giles romanization, for which I have appended a table of pronunciation following this Preface, since it has so little relation to the actual sounds.

I am most grateful to Mr. R. H. Blyth for his kind permission to quote a number of his translations of *haiku* poems from his magnificent four-volume anthology, *Haiku,* published by the Hokuseido Press in Tokyo; to Professor Sabro Hasegawa for his generous help in preparing the jacket and providing illustrations; and to my daughter Joan for the photographs of Ryoanji.

In conclusion, I am most happy to express my thanks to the Bollingen Foundation for a three-year fellowship, during which much of the preliminary study was done for the writing of this book.

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Mill Valley, California
July 1956

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Consonants	Aspirated: Read *p'*, *t'*, *k'*, *ch'*, and *ts'* as in *p*in, *t*ip, *k*ilt, *ch*in, and bi*ts*. Unaspirated: Read *p*, *t*, *k*, *ch*, and *ts* (or *tz*) as in *b*in, *d*ip, gilt, gin, and bi*ds*. *hs* or *sh*, as in *sh*oe. *j* is nearly like an "unrolled" *r*, so that *jen* is nearly the English *wren*.
Vowels	Usually Italian values, *a* as in f*a*ther *e* as in *ei*ght *eh* as in broth*er* *i* as in mach*i*ne and p*i*n *ih* as in sh*ir*t *o* as in s*o*ap *u* as in g*oo*se *ü* as in German *ü*ber
Diphthongs	*ai* as in l*i*ght *ao* as in l*ou*d *ei* as in w*ei*ght *ia* as in Will*ia*m *ieh* as in Kor*ea* *ou* as in gr*ou*p *ua* as in *swa*n *ueh* as in d*oer* *ui* as in *sway* *uo* as in *whoah!*
Combinations	*an* and *ang* as in *bun* and *bung* *en* and *eng* as in wood*en* and am*ong* *in* and *ing* as in *sin* and *sing* *un* and *ung* with the *u* as in l*oo*k.

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PART ONE

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

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One

The Philosophy of the Tao

Zen Buddhism is a way and a view of life which does not belong to any of the formal categories of modern Western thought. It is not religion or philosophy; it is not a psychology or a type of science. It is an example of what is known in India and China as a "way of liberation," and is similar in this respect to Taoism, Vedanta, and Yoga. As will soon be obvious, a way of liberation can have no positive definition. It has to be suggested by saying what it is not, somewhat as a sculptor reveals an image by the act of removing pieces of stone from a block.

Historically, Zen may be regarded as the fulfillment of long traditions of Indian and Chinese culture, though it is actually much more Chinese than Indian, and, since the twelfth century, it has rooted itself deeply and most creatively in the culture of Japan. As the fruition of these great cultures, and as a unique and peculiarly instructive example of a way of liberation, Zen is one of the most precious gifts of Asia to the world.

The origins of Zen are as much Taoist as Buddhist, and, because its flavor is so peculiarly Chinese, it may be best to begin by inquiring into its Chinese ancestry–illustrating, at the same time, what is meant by a way of liberation by the example of Taoism.

Much of the difficulty and mystification which Zen presents to the Western student is the result of his unfamiliarity with Chinese ways of thinking–ways which differ startlingly from our own and which are, for that very reason, of special value to us in attaining a critical perspective upon our own ideas. The problem here is not simply one of mastering different ideas, differing from our own as, say, the theories of Kant differ from those of Descartes, or those of Calvinists from those of Catholics. The

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problem is to appreciate differences in the basic premises of thought and in the very methods of thinking, and these are so often overlooked that our interpretations of Chinese philosophy are apt to be a projection of characteristically Western ideas into Chinese terminology. This is the inevitable disadvantage of studying Asian philosophy by the purely literary methods of Western scholarship, for words can be communicative only between those who share similar experiences.

This is not to go so far as to say that so rich and subtle a language as English is simply incapable of expressing Chinese ideas. On the contrary, it can say much more than has been believed possible by some Chinese and Japanese students of Zen and Taoism whose familiarity with English leaves something to be desired. The difficulty is not so much in the language as in the thought-patterns which have hitherto seemed inseparable from the academic and scientific way of approaching a subject. The unsuitability of these patterns for such subjects as Taoism and Zen is largely responsible for the impression that the "Oriental mind" is mysterious, irrational, and inscrutable. Furthermore, it need not be supposed that these matters are so peculiarly Chinese or Japanese that they have no point of contact with anything in our own culture. While it is true that none of the *formal* divisions of Western science and thought corresponds to a way of liberation, R. H. Blyth's marvelous study of *Zen in English Literature* has shown most clearly that the essential insights of Zen are universal.

The reason why Taoism and Zen present, at first sight, such a puzzle to the Western mind is that we have taken a restricted view of human knowledge. For us, almost all knowledge is what a Taoist would call *conventional* knowledge, because we do not feel that we really know anything unless we can represent it to ourselves in words, or in some other system of conventional signs such as the notations of mathematics or music. Such knowledge is called conventional because it is a matter of social agreement as to the codes of communication. Just as

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people speaking the same language have tacit agreements as to what words shall stand for what things, so the members of every society and every culture are united by bonds of communication resting upon all kinds of agreement as to the classification and valuation of actions and things.

Thus the task of education is to make children fit to live in a society by persuading them to learn and accept its codes–the rules and conventions of communication whereby the society holds itself together. There is first the spoken language. The child is taught to accept "tree" and not "boojum" as the agreed sign for *that* (pointing to the object). We have no difficulty in understanding that the word "tree" is a matter of convention. What is much less obvious is that convention also governs the delineation of the thing to which the word is assigned. For the child has to be taught not only what words are to stand for what things, but also the way in which his culture has tacitly agreed to divide things from each other, to mark out the boundaries within our daily experience. Thus scientific convention decides whether an eel shall be a fish or a snake, and grammatical convention determines what experiences shall be called objects and what shall be called events or actions. How arbitrary such conventions may be can be seen from the question, "What happens to my fist [noun-object] when I open my hand?" The object miraculously vanishes because an action was disguised by a part of speech usually assigned to a thing! In English the differences between things and actions are clearly, if not always logically, distinguished, but a great number of Chinese words do duty for both nouns and verbs–so that one who thinks in Chinese has little difficulty in seeing that objects are also events, that our world is a collection of processes rather than entities.

Besides language, the child has to accept many other forms of code. For the necessities of living together require agreement as to codes of law and ethics, of etiquette and art, of weights, measures, and numbers, and, above all, of role. We have dif-

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ficulty in communicating with each other unless we can identify ourselves in terms of roles–father, teacher, worker, artist, "regular guy," gentleman, sportsman, and so forth. To the extent that we identify ourselves with these stereotypes and the rules of behavior associated with them, we ourselves feel that we *are* someone because our fellows have less difficulty in accepting us–that is, in identifying us and feeling that we are "under control." A meeting of two strangers at a party is always somewhat embarrassing when the host has not identified their roles in introducing them, for neither knows what rules of conversation and action should be observed.

Once again, it is easy to see the conventional character of roles. For a man who is a father may also be a doctor and an artist, as well as an employee and a brother. And it is obvious that even the sum total of these role labels will be far from supplying an adequate description of the man himself, even though it may place him in certain general classifications. But the conventions which govern human identity are more subtle and much less obvious than these. We learn, very thoroughly though far less explicitly, to identify ourselves with an equally conventional view of "myself." For the conventional "self" or "person" is composed mainly of a history consisting of selected memories, and beginning from the moment of parturition. According to convention, I am not simply what I am doing now. I am also what I have done, and my conventionally edited version of my past is made to seem almost more the real "me" than what I am at this moment. For what I *am* seems so fleeting and intangible, but what I *was* is fixed and final. It is the firm basis for predictions of what I will be in the future, and so it comes about that I am more closely identified with what no longer exists than with what actually is!

It is important to recognize that the memories and past events which make up a man's historical identity are no more than a selection. From the actual infinitude of events and experiences some have been picked out–abstracted–as significant, and this

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significance has of course been determined by conventional standards. For the very nature of conventional knowledge is that it is a system of abstractions. It consists of signs and symbols in which things and events are reduced to their general outlines, as the Chinese character *jen* [a] stands for "man" by being the utmost simplification and generalization of the human form.

The same is true of words other than ideographs. The English words "man," "fish," "star," "flower," "run," "grow," all denote classes of objects or events which may be recognized as members of their class by very simple attributes, abstracted from the total complexity of the things themselves.

Abstraction is thus almost a necessity for communication, since it enables us to represent our experiences with simple and rapidly made "grasps" of the mind. When we say that we can think only of one thing at a time, this is like saying that the Pacific Ocean cannot be swallowed at a gulp. It has to be taken in a cup, and downed bit by bit. Abstractions and conventional signs are like the cup; they reduce experience to units simple enough to be comprehended one at a time. In a similar way, curves are measured by reducing them to a sequence of tiny straight lines, or by thinking of them in terms of the squares which they cross when plotted on graph paper.

Other examples of the same process are the newspaper photograph and the transmission of television. In the former, a natural scene is reproduced in terms of light and heavy dots arranged in a screen or gridlike pattern so as to give the general impression of a black-and-white photograph when seen without a magnifying glass. Much as it may look like the original scene, it is only a reconstruction of the scene in terms of dots, somewhat as our conventional words and thoughts are reconstructions of experience in terms of abstract signs. Even more like the thought process, the television camera transmits a natural scene in terms of a linear series of impulses which may be passed along a wire.

Thus communication by conventional signs of this type gives

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us an abstract, one-at-a-time translation of a universe in which things are happening altogether-at-once–a universe whose concrete reality always escapes perfect description in these abstract terms. The perfect description of a small particle of dust by these means would take everlasting time, since one would have to account for every point in its volume.

The linear, one-at-a-time character of speech and thought is particularly noticeable in all languages using alphabets, representing experience in long strings of letters. It is not easy to say why we must communicate with others (speak) and with ourselves (think) by this one-at-a-time method. Life itself does not proceed in this cumbersome, linear fashion, and our own organisms could hardly live for a moment if they had to control themselves by taking thought of every breath, every beat of the heart, and every neural impulse. But if we are to find some explanation for this characteristic of thought, the sense of sight offers a suggestive analogy. For we have two types of vision–central and peripheral, not unlike the spotlight and the floodlight. Central vision is used for accurate work like reading, in which our eyes are focused on one small area after another like spotlights. Peripheral vision is less conscious, less bright than the intense ray of the spotlight. We use it for seeing at night, and for taking "subconscious" notice of objects and movements not in the direct line of central vision. Unlike the spotlight, it can take in very many things at a time.

There is, then, an analogy–and perhaps more than mere analogy–between central vision and conscious, one-at-a-time thinking, and between peripheral vision and the rather mysterious process which enables us to regulate the incredible complexity of our bodies without thinking at all. It should be noted, further, that we *call* our bodies complex as a result of trying to understand them in terms of linear thought, of words and concepts. But the complexity is not so much in our bodies as in the task of trying to understand them by this means of thinking. It is like

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trying to make out the features of a large room with no other light than a single bright ray. It is as complicated as trying to drink water with a fork instead of a cup.

In this respect, the Chinese written language has a slight advantage over our own, and is perhaps symptomatic of a different way of thinking. It is still linear, still a series of abstractions taken in one at a time. But its written signs are a little closer to life than spelled words because they are essentially pictures, and, as a Chinese proverb puts it, "One showing is worth a hundred sayings." Compare, for example, the ease of showing someone how to tie a complex knot with the difficulty of telling him how to do it in words alone.

Now the general tendency of the Western mind is to feel that we do not really understand what we cannot represent, what we cannot communicate, by linear signs–by thinking. We are like the "wallflower" who cannot learn a dance unless someone draws him a diagram of the steps, who cannot "get it by the feel." For some reason we do not trust and do not fully use the "peripheral vision" of our minds. We learn music, for example, by restricting the whole range of tone and rhythm to a notation of fixed tonal and rhythmic intervals–a notation which is incapable of representing Oriental music. But the Oriental musician has a rough notation which he uses only as a reminder of a melody. He learns music, not by reading notes, but by listening to the performance of a teacher, getting the "feel" of it, and copying him, and this enables him to acquire rhythmic and tonal sophistications matched only by those Western jazz artists who use the same approach.

We are not suggesting that Westerners simply do not use the "peripheral mind." Being human, we use it all the time, and every artist, every workman, every athlete calls into play some special development of its powers. But it is not academically and philosophically respectable. We have hardly begun to realize its possibilities, and it seldom, if ever, occurs to us that one of

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its most important uses is for that "knowledge of reality" which we try to attain by the cumbersome calculations of theology, metaphysics, and logical inference.

When we turn to ancient Chinese society, we find two "philosophical" traditions playing complementary parts–Confucianism and Taoism. Generally speaking, the former concerns itself with the linguistic, ethical, legal, and ritual conventions which provide the society with its system of communication. Confucianism, in other words, preoccupies itself with conventional knowledge, and under its auspices children are brought up so that their originally wayward and whimsical natures are made to fit the Procrustean bed of the social order. The individual defines himself and his place in society in terms of the Confucian formulae.

Taoism, on the other hand, is generally a pursuit of older men, and especially of men who are retiring from active life in the community. Their retirement from society is a kind of outward symbol of an inward liberation from the bounds of conventional patterns of thought and conduct. For Taoism concerns itself with unconventional knowledge, with the understanding of life directly, instead of in the abstract, linear terms of representational thinking.

Confucianism presides, then, over the socially necessary task of forcing the original spontaneity of life into the rigid rules of convention–a task which involves not only conflict and pain, but also the loss of that peculiar naturalness and un-self-consciousness for which little children are so much loved, and which is sometimes regained by saints and sages. The function of Taoism is to undo the inevitable damage of this discipline, and not only to restore but also to develop the original spontaneity, which is termed *tzu-jan* [b] or "self-so-ness." For the spontaneity of a child is still childish, like everything else about him. His education fosters his rigidity but not his spontaneity. In certain natures, the conflict between social convention and repressed spontaneity is so violent that it manifests itself in crime, insanity, and neurosis,

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which are the prices we pay for the otherwise undoubted benefits of order.

But Taoism must on no account be understood as a revolution against convention, although it has sometimes been used as a pretext for revolution. Taoism is a way of liberation, which never comes by means of revolution, since it is notorious that most revolutions establish worse tyrannies than they destroy. To be free from convention is not to spurn it but not to be deceived by it. It is to be able to use it as an instrument instead of being used by it.

The West has no recognized institution corresponding to Taoism because our Hebrew-Christian spiritual tradition identifies the Absolute–God–with the moral and logical order of convention. This might almost be called a major cultural catastrophe, because it weights the social order with excessive authority, inviting just those revolutions against religion and tradition which have been so characteristic of Western history. It is one thing to feel oneself in conflict with socially sanctioned conventions, but quite another to feel at odds with the very root and ground of life, with the Absolute itself. The latter feeling nurtures a sense of guilt so preposterous that it must issue either in denying one's own nature or in rejecting God. Because the first of these alternatives is ultimately impossible–like chewing off one's own teeth–the second becomes inevitable, where such palliatives as the confessional are no longer effective. As is the nature of revolutions, the revolution against God gives place to the worse tyranny of the absolutist state–worse because it cannot even forgive, and because it recognizes nothing outside the powers of its jurisdiction. For while the latter was theoretically true of God, his earthly representative the Church was always prepared to admit that though the laws of God were immutable, no one could presume to name the limits of his mercy. When the throne of the Absolute is left vacant, the relative usurps it and commits the real idolatry, the real indignity against God–

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the absolutizing of a concept, a conventional abstraction. But it is unlikely that the throne would have become vacant if, in a sense, it had not been so already–if the Western tradition had had some way of apprehending the Absolute directly, outside the terms of the conventional order.

Of course the very word "Absolute" suggests to us something abstract and conceptual, such as "Pure Being." Our very idea of "spirit" as opposed to "matter" seems to have more kinship with the abstract than the concrete. But with Taoism, as with other ways of liberation, the Absolute must never be confused with the abstract. On the other hand, if we say that the *Tao*,[c] as the ultimate Reality is called, is the concrete rather than the abstract, this may lead to still other confusions. For we are accustomed to associate the concrete with the material, the physiological, the biological, and the natural, as distinct from the supernatural. But from the Taoist and Buddhist standpoints these are still terms for conventional and abstract spheres of knowledge.

Biology and physiology, for example, are types of knowledge which represent the real world in terms of their own special abstract categories. They measure and classify that world in ways appropriate to the particular uses they want to make of it, somewhat as a surveyor deals with earth in terms of acres, a contractor in truckloads or tons, and a soil analyst in types of chemical structures. To say that the concrete reality of the human organism *is* physiological is like saying that the earth *is* so many tons or acres. And to say that this reality is natural is accurate enough if we mean spontaneous (*tzu-jan*) or *natura naturans* ("nature naturing"). But it is quite inaccurate if we mean *natura naturata* ("nature natured"), that is to say, nature classified, sorted into "natures" as when we ask, "What is the *nature* of this thing?" It is in this sense of the word that we must think of "scientific naturalism," a doctrine which has nothing in common with the naturalism of Taoism.

Thus to begin to understand what Taoism is about, we must at least be prepared to admit the possibility of some view of

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the world other than the conventional, some knowledge other than the contents of our surface consciousness, which can apprehend reality only in the form of one abstraction (or thought, the Chinese *nien* [d]) at a time. There is no real difficulty in this, for we will already admit that we "know" how to move our hands, how to make a decision, or how to breathe, even though we can hardly begin to explain how we do it in words. We know how to do it because we just do it! Taoism is an extension of this kind of knowledge, an extension which gives us a very different view of ourselves from that to which we are conventionally accustomed, and a view which liberates the human mind from its constricting identification with the abstract ego.

According to tradition, the originator of Taoism, Lao-tzu, was an older contemporary of Kung Fu-tzu, or Confucius, who died in 479 B.C.[1] Lao-tzu is said to have been the author of the *Tao Te Ching*, a short book of aphorisms, setting forth the principles of the Tao and its power or virtue (*Te* [e]). But traditional Chinese philosophy ascribes both Taoism and Confucianism to a still earlier source, to a work which lies at the very foundation of Chinese thought and culture, dating anywhere from 3000 to 1200 B.C. This is the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*.

The *I Ching* is ostensibly a book of divination. It consists of oracles based on sixty-four abstract figures, each of which is composed of six lines. The lines are of two kinds–divided (negative) and undivided (positive)–and the six-line figures, or hexagrams, are believed to have been based on the various ways in which a tortoise shell will crack when heated.[2] This refers to an ancient method of divination in which the soothsayer bored a hole in

[1] Modern scholarship has questioned both the date and the historicity of Lao-tzu, but it is hard to say whether this is really more than a manifestation of fashion, since there are periodic tendencies to cast doubts on the existence of great sages or to question the hoariness of their antiquity. One recalls similar doubts in connection with Jesus and the Buddha. There are some serious arguments for a later date, but it seems best to keep the traditional date until evidence to the contrary becomes more conclusive. See Fung Yu-lan (1), vol. 1, pp. 170–76.

[2] Fung Yu-lan (1), vol. 1, pp. 379–80.

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the back of a tortoise shell, heated it, and then foretold the future from the cracks in the shell so formed, much as palmists use the lines on the hand. Naturally, these cracks were most complicated, and the sixty-four hexagrams are supposed to be a simplified classification of the various patterns of cracks. For many centuries now the tortoise shell has fallen into disuse, and instead the hexagram appropriate to the moment in which a question is asked of the oracle is determined by the random division of a set of fifty yarrow stalks.

But an expert in the *I Ching* need not necessarily use tortoise shells or yarrow stalks. He can "see" a hexagram in anything–in the chance arrangement of a bowl of flowers, in objects scattered upon a table, in the natural markings on a pebble. A modern psychologist will recognize in this something not unlike a Rorschach test, in which the psychological condition of a patient is diagnosed from the spontaneous images which he "sees" in a complex ink-blot. Could the patient interpret his own projections upon the ink-blot, he would have some useful information about himself for the guidance of his future conduct. In view of this, we cannot dismiss the divinatory art of the *I Ching* as mere superstition.

Indeed, an exponent of the *I Ching* might give us quite a tough argument about the relative merits of our ways for making important decisions. We feel that we decide rationally because we base our decisions on collecting relevant data about the matter in hand. We do not depend upon such irrelevant trifles as the chance tossing of a coin, or the patterns of tea leaves or cracks in a shell. Yet he might ask whether we really know what information is relevant, since our plans are constantly upset by utterly unforeseen incidents. He might ask how we know when we have collected enough information upon which to decide. If we were rigorously "scientific" in collecting information for our decisions, it would take us so long to collect the data that the time for action would have passed long before the work had been completed. So how do we know when we

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or spontaneous mind he will not only respond with ease, but the responses themselves will acquire a startling appropriateness. This is something like the professional comedian's gift of unprepared wit which is equal to any situation.

The master may begin a conversation with the student by asking a series of very ordinary questions about trivial matters, to which the student responds with perfect spontaneity. But suddenly he will say, "When the bath-water flows down the drain, does it turn clockwise or counter-clockwise?" As the student stops at the unexpectedness of the question, and perhaps tries to remember which way it goes, the master shouts, "Don't think! Act! This way–" and whirls his hand in the air. Or, perhaps less helpfully, he may say, "So far you've answered my questions quite naturally and easily, but where's your difficulty now?"

The student, likewise, is free to challenge the master, and one can imagine that in the days when Zen training was less formal the members of Zen communities must have had enormous fun laying traps for each other. To some extent this type of relationship still exists, despite the great solemnity of the *sanzen* interview in which the *koan* is given and answered. The late Kozuki Roshi was entertaining two American monks at tea when he casually asked, "And what do you gentlemen know about Zen?" One of the monks flung his closed fan straight at the master's face. All in the same instant the master inclined his head slightly to one side, the fan shot straight through the paper *shoji* behind him, and he burst into a ripple of laughter.

Suzuki has translated a long letter from the Zen master Takuan on the relationship of Zen to the art of fencing, and this is certainly the best literary source of what Zen means by *mo chih ch'u,* by "going straight ahead without stopping."[13] Both Takuan and Bankei stressed the fact that the "original" or "unborn" mind is constantly working miracles even in the most ordinary person. Even though a tree has innumerable leaves, the mind takes them

[13] Suzuki (7), pp. 73–87. Excerpts from this letter also appear in Suzuki (1), vol. 3, pp. 318–19.

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in all at once without being "stopped" by any one of them. Explaining this to a visiting monk, Bankei said, "To prove that your mind is the Buddha mind, notice how all that I say here goes into you without missing a single thing, even though I don't try to push it into you."[14] When heckled by an aggressive Nichiren monk who kept insisting that he couldn't understand a word, Bankei asked him to come closer. The monk stepped forward. "Closer still," said Bankei. The monk came forward again. "How well," said Bankei, "you understand me!"[15] In other words, our natural organism performs the most marvelously complex activities without the least hesitation or deliberation. Conscious thought is itself founded upon its whole system of spontaneous functioning, for which reason there is really no alternative to trusting oneself completely to its working. Oneself *is* its working.

Zen is not merely a cult of impulsive action. The point of *mo chih ch'u* is not to eliminate reflective thought but to eliminate "blocking" in both action and thought, so that the response of the mind is always like a ball in a mountain stream–"one thought after another without hesitation." There is something similar to this in the psychoanalytic practice of free association, employed as a technique to get rid of obstacles to the free flow of thought from the "unconscious." For there is a tendency to confuse "blocking"–a purely obstructive mechanism–with thinking out an answer, but the difference between the two is easily noticed in such a purely "thinking out" process as adding a column of figures. Many people find that at certain combinations of numbers, such as 8 and 5 or 7 and 6, a feeling of resistance comes up which halts the process. Because it is always annoying and disconcerting, one tends also to block at blocking, so that the state turns into the kind of wobbling dither characteristic of the snarled feed-back system. The simplest cure is to feel free to block, so that one does not block at blocking. When one feels

[14] *Bankei Kokushi Seppo.* Read to the author by Professor Hasegawa.
[15] In Suzuki (10), p. 123.

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free to block, the blocking automatically eliminates itself. It is like riding a bicycle. When one starts falling to the left, one does not resist the fall (i.e., the block) by turning to the right. One turns the wheel to the left–and the balance is restored. The principle here is, of course, the same as getting out of the contradiction of "trying to be spontaneous" through accepting the "trying" as "spontaneous," through not resisting the block.

"Blocking" is perhaps the best translation of the Zen term *nien* [n] as it occurs in the phrase *wu-nien*, "no-thought" or, better, "no second thought." Takuan points out that this is the real meaning of "attachment" in Buddhism, as when it is said that a Buddha is free from worldly attachments. It does not mean that he is a "stone Buddha" with no feelings, no emotions, and no sensations of hunger or pain. It means that he does not block at anything. Thus it is typical of Zen that its style of action has the strongest feeling of commitment, of "follow-through." It enters into everything wholeheartedly and freely without having to keep an eye on itself. It does not confuse spirituality with thinking about God while one is peeling potatoes. Zen spirituality is just to peel the potatoes. In the words of Lin-chi:

> When it's time to get dressed, put on your clothes. When you must walk, then walk. When you must sit, then sit. Don't have a single thought in your mind about seeking for Buddhahood. . . . You talk about being perfectly disciplined in your six senses and in all your actions, but in my view all this is making *karma*. To seek the Buddha (nature) and to seek the Dharma is at once to make *karma* which leads to the hells. To seek (to be) Bodhisattvas is also making *karma*, and likewise studying the *sutras* and commentaries. Buddhas and Patriarchs are people without such artificialities. . . . It is said everywhere that there is a Tao which must be cultivated and a Dharma which must be realized. What Dharma do you say must be realized, and what Tao cultivated? What do you lack in the way you are functioning right now? What will you add to where you are? [16 o]

As another *Zenrin* poem says:

[16] *Lin-chi Lu* in *Ku-tsun-hsü Yü-lu*, 1. 4. 6, 11–12, 12.

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