TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Masters and mastery in Zen

ZEN MASTERS, though occasionally to be found on the mystic fringes of an Iris Murdoch novel or wandering absent-mindedly through the pages of one of the Sunday supplements, are necessarily rather obscure—not to say obscurantist—characters. Like all religious virtuosi they are single-minded and ascetic, yet curiously manage somehow to combine profundity with humanity, wisdom with humour. They are hardly cosy characters, objects of admiration rather than affection and, to followers of a more comfortable and consoling religion, perhaps even something of a threat. It is not difficult to understand why this should be so. Their religion seems magnificently straightforward, thin on dogma and admirably free of aggressive argumentation. Yet, for all its superficial attractiveness, Zen is a lonely way and not for the faint-hearted. Perhaps to the average westerner this particular form of Buddhism seems to reflect too much the chinese or japanese character—remote and rather forbidding. Perhaps, too, the familiarity we often find in other religious traditions is obscured by the distinctly uncomfortable silence which hangs haughtily over so much of the religion of the Far East. But to anyone who is prepared to remain still long enough to note his or her discomfort Zen offers more than an object-lesson to stoicism. The Christian will find plenty that is familiar and much that is challenging. This little sketch of Zen and the *roshi* or master may not remove the obscurity: it might at least explain the context and ease our suspicion.

The aim of Buddhism, according to a modern collection of chants, is 'to dispel the clouds of ignorance and to make shine the sun of enlightenment'.[1] To become a master means coming to terms with one fact of experience which has become a sort of fundamental principle in all forms of Buddhism: we never actually perceive anything as it really is. All our experiencing, our understanding, even our recognition of objects or persons is conditioned by memories of the past or fears, hopes and anxieties for the future. Not a very profound observation, perhaps; more a statement of the obvious. But immediately it gives the lie to the popular caricature of the zen master as the other-worldly mystic rapt in contemplation of the eternal *Nirvāṇa*, the Totally Other, Utterly Transcendent or whatever. Zen concentrates on *this* world, on a correct view of the present in which the distorting effects of our petty ego have been eradicated and the full reality—the beauty *and* the pain—of our world are accepted and contemplated with complete peace and equanimity. The

first Noble Truth taught by the Buddha speaks of suffering at the heart of all human experience. But the real sickness, once properly diagnosed, is seen to lie not in the world 'out there' but in the nature of the human subject who brings suffering upon himself by refusing to accept that world as it really is. As one recent writer puts it, 'the desire for becoming other than what present experience gives'.[2]

In the whole massively complex vocabulary of the various canons perhaps the single most typically buddhist word is not one of the four Noble Truths nor one of the elements which makes up the Noble Eightfold Path, but the simple adjective which describes each element: the word 'right'. The Buddha does not just insist on striving or mindfulness or concentration but on *right* striving, *right* mindfulness, *right* concentration. But what makes a practice 'right'? That it leads to the goal—enlightenment. The Buddha saw himself essentially as a practical teacher or physician who could diagnose the ills of the world and prescribe a cure for those who wanted it. All forms of Buddhism—and this is especially true of Zen which prides itself on maintaining the essential purity of the original meditative tradition—teach a solution to or salvation from the present human condition. But in the first place—and in the last place too—one must *see* correctly. Only the right diagnosis will lead to the right cure; only the one who sees and accepts the present conditioned world of *Samsāra* and rebirth will gain an insight into the unconditioned: what is usually referred to as *Nirvāṇa*. In fact so essentially linked have these two become that in the more broadly-based and expansive *Mahāyāna* tradition they are identified. This is the ulitmate buddhist paradox: the one who lives completely in touch with *this* world of *Samsāra* is the most perfectly enlightened and in touch with the Ultimate.

Zen pushes this *Mahāyāna* notion to its extreme and thus tries to combine an absolutist concern for correct metaphysical analysis with a typically pragmatic buddhist humanism. There are no secrets, no esoteric doctrines, no mysterious initiation rites. Zen is essentially practical and direct. But, if this is the orthodox zen opinion of itself, the immediate impression one picks up is of philosophical perversity, hiding nihilism behind a façade of profundity. Horrific and rather unsubtle stories about the practice of the early patriarchs abound. Bodhidharma, for instance, the legendary founder of Zen, who brought the tradition from India to China, is supposed to have practised 'wall-gazing' for nine years until his legs dropped off. One of Bodhidharma's pupils, on being refused admission as a disciple, cut off one of his arms just to show the master how serious he was. Such stories may be dismissed as fanciful but, even today, Zen training, which involves long hours of silent sitting and various forms of physical beating and mental gymnastics, seems outrageously self-indulgent, not to say masochistic. Do not the enigmatic *koans* and the endlessly baffling stories about how such-and-such a master reached

enlightenment serve only to confuse rather than clarify? Is not the average western sceptic justified in regarding Zen as a typical example of human religiosity: at best a frustrating search for some sort of 'religious' experience, at worst a vain attempt to manipulate the divine?

We forget one thing. Zen is not the sort of pre-packaged spiritual technology which comes with its own built-in guarantee of satisfaction. Zen cannot be learnt from a book; no religious tradition can be understood merely be reading the words on a page. Buddhism, as much as any religion, depends on the living tradition, on the practice of the saints and their countless disciples. As an aside we may note that, throughout the history of Buddhism, whenever the *Sangha*, the community of buddhist monks, dies out, the authentic practice is soon lost. The demise of Buddhism in its native India is only the most obvious example. Yet one of the most significant characteristics which Buddhism takes from its indian roots has never been lost: the central position of the holy man, the enlightened one who has the power to instruct and inspire, in short to be another Buddha. The *Mahāyānist* ideal is the compassionate *Bodhisattva*, the 'being-for-enlightenment' who puts off his own ultimate *Nirvāṇa* in order to lead others to theirs. In the ancient *Theravāda* tradition too we find the Way of Deliverance, described in many sermons, as beginning when the householder 'hears the words of a *Tathāgata*' (one who has 'fared so') and resolves to 'go forth from home to the homeless life'.[3] Right view, the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path, begins with an attitude of trust in the teacher. In the tantric tradition of Tibet the monk often takes a fourth refuge; in addition to the Buddha, the Dharma or Buddha's teaching and the *Sangha*, he seeks refuge in his teacher or *guru*, the embodiment of the buddhist ideal. And in Zen, perhaps more than in other buddhist schools, the way to enlightenment depends on the relationship established between teacher and pupil. The *roshi*, like all *bodhisattvas*, seeks not just his own enlightenment but the enlightenment of others too; his very *raison d'être* is to instruct, to be the medium whereby the Buddha's teaching continues.

In addition to all the many spiritual techniques which are shared with *Mahāyānists* and *Therāvadins* alike, Zen emphasizes the formal interview in which spiritual progress can periodically be established. So much of zen literature is based on the verbal sparring between master and pupil and only makes sense if it is seen as the record of a particular relationship and not as general rules of instruction. The aim is simple: to help the pupil see correctly, to accept everything that present experience gives. The obstacles, however, are formidable. The classical formula gives three: greed, hatred and delusion. They cannot be separated, the one growing from the others and enmeshing the individual in a net of his own making. Exacting periods of self-discipline and constant attention are required before the moment of liberating insight occurs. Much of zen practice—

the careful instruction on posture, the measured breathing, the deepening awareness of every aspect of experience—aim to overcome the three defilements which inhibit the growth of another triad, the three trainings: morality, concentration and wisdom. But enlightenment does not come through personal discipline alone. The story is told of the monk in a hurry who eagerly enquired of his teacher how long it would take for him to be enlightened. 'Perhaps ten years', said the teacher. 'But if I tried very hard?' asked the pupil. 'Then it would probably take you twenty', came the reply. Effort is not enough and can be positively unhelpful in developing true wisdom.

The function of the teacher—apart from elementary advice and direction—is to provoke the liberating insight, to discern when the moment has arrived quite literally to shake the pupil out of his everyday awareness and to induce that indescribable experience called *Nirvāṇa* or *Satori*. The interview between master and pupil is hardly akin to western notions of spiritual direction. The meeting is described by one author as having the 'sudden death quality of a duel'.[4] Each pupil has only a few seconds with the master, when his turn comes, after waiting some time in the queue, he is already keyed-up; he knows exactly what he wants to say, but he never knows what to expect. The master wastes no time in assessing the pupil's progress and problems. Sometimes he provides advice; sometimes he deliberately provokes or shocks—even to the extent of boxing his pupil's ears or (an old favourite) twisting his nose. The purpose, however, is not to punish. The point is, rather, that the spiritual crisis sometimes only comes through a physical one; the pupil is knocked out of his spiritual rut. Not that the shock has to be physical. Many of the best stories make the 'provocation' a statement of the obvious or the deliberately paradoxical. Dumoulin quotes an example:

> A monk once asked Chao-chou, 'Master, I am still a novice. Show me the way!' Chao-chou said, 'Have you finished your breakfast?' 'I have', replied the monk. 'Then go wash your bowl!' Thereupon the monk was enlightened.[5]

The master's role then, is primarily to act as a catalyst, to trigger an appropriate response from the pupil. To that end he must have established a real human relationship with the pupil. Zen stories are not, therefore, funds of universal wisdom but intended for particular individuals. What *is* universal is the respect with which all pupils regard the master, as an enlightened one. His charism is not, in the first place, the skill of the director but the sympathetic wisdom of one who has 'gone before'. The atmosphere of the interview may be highly charged, but not because the pupil is nervous or the teacher overbearing. Rather the former realizes he is in the presence of a wise man who speaks only of what he knows.

Each word counts; no doubt the mood of constant expectation combined with a few terse phrases can be enough to provoke the insight into the nature of reality which is the aim of Zen. The early text attributed to Bodhidarma sums up:

> A special tradition outside the scriptures;
> No dependence on words and letters;
> Direct pointing at the soul of man;
> Seeing into one's own nature, and the attainment of Buddhahood.[6]

Members of the zen school trace their own origins right back beyond Bodhidharma to the Buddha himself. One day while preaching to the assembled *Sangha* the Buddha held up a golden lotus flower. None in the assembly understood except the great elder, Mahākāsyapa, who looked at the master and smiled. The Buddha said: 'I have the True Dharma Eye, marvellous mind of *Nirvāṇa*. This now I transmit to you, Mahākāsvana'. The great theravādin scholar, the Venerable Walpola Rahula, has to admit that this episode is 'of doubtful origin' and points out that the whole notion of truth being handed down through a sort of hierarchy is 'absolutely repugnant to the spirit of Buddha's teaching'.[7] Nevertheless, the story illustrates one of the key elements of the ethos of Zen: the passing on of the 'seal of the Buddha-mind' from master to pupil.[8] Where does this particular ethos come from? Zen comes from the chinese *Ch'an*, meaning meditation, and it owes its peculiar quality as much to the native chinese taoist religion as to its ancient indian roots. The taoist sage, like the indian *sannyāsi*, retires to the forests and mountains in search of contemplative peace, but he is much more a sign of contradiction than his indian counterpart. He seems almost deliberately opposed to the stolid conservatism and conventionality of Confucianism. He represents the spontaneous side of the chinese character, that which keeps intuitively in touch with the everyday world of birth and death, growth and decay. Whereas the indian *sannyāsi* is a refugee from the world, responding to the universal call to seek *Mokṣa*, release or otherwordly value, the chinese sage lives very consciously in harmony with this world and the everyday rhythms of nature.

We must be careful, however, not to overstate the case. The two are not opposed; they complement each other. And it is this fundamental complementarity of inner vision which allowed Buddhism to grow so fruitfully on chinese soil. The celebrated distinction between gradual and sudden enlightenment which some chinese commentators put down to a fundamental difference in temperament—the Indians, with their inclination to scientific analysis, preferring the former and the Chinese, with their deeply ingrained intuitive sense, given to the latter—is found in all forms of Buddhism; it says more about the complex nature of the

enlightenment experience than it does about the chinese contribution to buddhist culture. Zen does have its own—admittedly pretty undefinable—quality, but it is one which has fundamentally enhanced rather than changed the basic buddhist spirit: to see and accept the true nature of reality.

How then are we to describe the special character of Zen? The name of the school takes us back to the sanskrit *Dhyāna*, meditation, and we would not go far wrong in assuming from this that Zen is remarkable not for any special doctrine so much as for practice. But the first thing that must strike the student of Zen is the influence exercised by so many of the ancient patriarchs and masters. They all seem quite eccentric, given to extravagant gestures and crazy expressions. They are iconoclastic too: on one particularly cold night T'ien-jan took down the wooden Buddha-image from the wall of the temple and made a fire out of it. After all, it was no more than a piece of wood. And Hui-neng, the legendary sixth patriarch and founder of the southern school of Ch'an which emphasizes sudden enlightenment, is supposed to have torn up the *sūtras* in order to show that enlightenment does not consist in learning words but in having experience.

The actions of such men remind us more of the jewish prophets than of indian mystics. There is more than a little of the prophet in Ma-tsu, one of the successors of Hui-neng and influential in the founding of the powerful Lin-chi sect. He used paradox, rudeness of manner and plain brutality to induce enlightenment, on one occasion grabbing and twisting the nose of a disciple until the poor man cried out with pain. The disciple—of course—attained instant enlightenment. For Ma-tsu constant sitting in meditation was not enough. He recalled the occasion when his own master questioned him rather roughly:

> 'Why are you sitting in meditation?' 'In order to become a Buddha', replied the aggrieved disciple. The master took up a tile and started polishing it. 'What are you doing?' asked Ma-tsu. 'Polishing this stone to make a mirror', replied the master. 'But how can you make a mirror out of a tile?' asked Ma-tsu. 'How can you make a Buddha by sitting in meditation?' came the reply.

What 'more' is required? The endless—seemingly ludicrous—stories about enlightenment being attained by breaking a leg, losing a finger, or being beaten over the head are meant to underline the fact that all methods and means are in the last resort only intended to help one see correctly. To use the Buddha's favourite illustration: the raft which is used to cross over the stream must be left behind when it has served its purpose. 'What is the Buddha?' a monk asked Yun-men. 'A dried-up shit-stick', came the reply. The Buddha is everything. To be enlightened

is to see the Buddha-nature in all things. It is simply a matter of Right View.

In Japan there are two major branches of Zen—Rinzai, the successor of the chinese southern or Lin-chi school, and Soto which reaches back to the ninth century Ts'ao-tung sect in China. The greatest soto master is acknowledged to be Dogen (1200–1253) who learnt his Zen in China where he first sought an answer to the problem of innate and acquired *Nirvāṇa*: if all things contain a Buddha-nature, then why did the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas arouse the longing for enlightenment and engage in ascetic practices? The monastery where Dogen finally solved his problem was notable for its extreme ascetism. Dogen learnt to sit in meditation for long hours and it is largely through his influence that *zazen* or sitting-meditation is accepted as the central practice of all Zen, representing the age-old traditions of the Buddha and the patriarchs.

An accout of zen training and techniques of meditation by a modern master, Katsuki Sekida, bears witness to the continuing influence of Dogen's teaching and to the claim of Zen to present no esoteric teaching but simple practical methods for reaching enlightenment.[9] Soto attaches great importance to right surroundings, to posture, to regular breathing and to mindfulness. Various ways of sitting are recommended, the ideal being the lotus-posture which produces the perfect solid base on which the body naturally squats upright. But other postures are possible. It is important to be comfortable, with the weight firmly anchored so that the breath can sink naturally into the belly area, the *tanden*, the source of all vitality and power. Correct posture helps correct breathing, allowing the vital energy of the body to flow unhindered—to find, as it were, its natural level. In *zazen* one does not force the breathing into a special pattern: the body finds its own equilibrium. In this Zen differs from Yoga. In the latter consciousness is deliberately conformed to—and therefore formed by—the pattern of breathing. In Zen, as taught by Dogen, the meditator must allow the breath to regulate itself so that one becomes conscious of the movement and of the unity of mind and body. In Dogen's own words, 'Free yourself from all attachments . . . Bring to an end all desires, all concepts and judgments. Do not think about how to become a Buddha'.[10] Enlightenment is of course, a special experience and must be prepared for with great patience, but it is not different *in kind* from every moment spent in the peaceful practice of *zazen*. Why desire anything for the future when everything is to be found in the present moment? All things already contain the Buddha-nature. If only—Dogen would say—we could recognize the fact and rest content.

Unlike the calm and contemplative Dogen, Hakuin (1685–1768), the great representative of the rinzai school, appears as an ecstatic for whom enlightenment is a regular—and deeply emotional—experience. A sudden rapture can seize him, whether in meditation or walking or standing still,

whether in the temple or out in the country. Nevertheless he agrees with Dogen that only long hours in painstaking formal meditation will lead to enlightenment. For Hakuin meditation means especially the practice of the *kaon*—a puzzling, paradoxical or even nonsensical statement which challenges and tries the limits of the problem-solving intellect. *Kaon* means literally 'public notice' or 'public announcement'. The technique is said to go back to the earliest days but is associated with some of the great names of the Lin-chi sect in China. Collections of the most famous *koans*, based on the anecdotal utterances of great masters, are presented to the pupil not to try his patience but, as Dumoulin puts it, as 'one great mockery of all the rules of logic'.[11] The pupil tries to solve the problem intellectually. He fails of course. Somehow the rigid straitjacket in which the mind is encased which forces the pupil to perceive and think in one particular way has got to be broken. Built up gradually is a certain doubt about the normal mode of perception and with it an inevitable psychic tension. Sooner or later something must snap—and then true enlightenment can begin.

The process is often explained by analogy with archery. There comes the crucial moment when the archer must give way to the enormous tension he is fighting to control. At that point he lets go and the arrow is allowed to shoot itself. The art of japanese *sumi-e* painting and calligraphy (and Hakuin was nothing if not a great artist) depends on the painter overcoming his natural desire to control and direct the brush. Katsuki Sekida speaks of his own experience of entering a state of absorption or *samādi* in which the picture seemed to paint itself; he was quite unaware of any process of thinking *about* the picture. The brush strokes follow automatically from the regular rhythm induced by controlled breathing.

But—to return to Hakuin and the *koan*—such a strange method of meditation only begins to make sense when we understand that what is being developed is not an intellectual 'answer' but a moment of intuition which goes quite beyond discourse or words. Perhaps the most famous of all Hakuin's *koans* is the sound of one hand clapping. If what we have said above is correct, there is no right or wrong answer. Hakuin once gave it to one of his female disciples:

> 'What is the sound of one hand?' he asked her. 'Much better than hearing the sound of Hakuin's hand is to clap both hands—then we can do business!' she shot back. Hakuin replied: 'If you can really do business by clapping both hands, you don't need to hear the sound of one hand'.[12]

The one hand *Koan* was the product of Hakuin's old age. He believed that, more than any other problem, it had the power to awaken doubt and, with the tension that great doubt induced, provoke great enlightenment.

However we may seek to explain the process psychologically, it seems clear that the moment of release after a period of intense confinement or pressure brings with it a tremendous stimulus and a moment of great exaltation. But is is probably a mistake to see the *koan* technique as a practice limited to times of meditation. It represents not so much 'a problem' but the paradox of life itself—which one must live with patience and which can only be resolved in the stillness of inner recollection. That much must be an experience of all religions. Tempting as it is, however, to speculate about christian parallels, let us end rather with some words of the great master himself:

> A man went astray and arrived at a spot which had never been trodden by the foot of man. Before him there yawned a bottomless chasm. His feet stood on the slippery moss of a rock and no secure foothold appeared around him. He could step neither forward nor backward. Only death awaited him. The vine which he grasped with his left hand and the tendril which he held with his right hand could offer him little help. His life hung as by a single thread. Were he to release both hands at once, his dry bones would come to nought.
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> Thus it is with the zen disciple. By pursuing a single *koan* he comes to a point where his mind is as if dead and his will as if extinguished. This state is like a wide void over a deep chasm and no hold remains for hand or foot. All thoughts vanish and in his bosom burns hot anxiety. But then suddenly it occurs that with the *koan* both body and mind break. This is the instant when the hands are released over the abyss. In this sudden upsurge it is as if one drinks water and knows for oneself heat and cold. Great joy wells up. This is called rebirth [in the Pure Land]. This is termed seeing into one's nature. Everything depends on pushing forward and not doubting that with the help of this concentration one will eventually penetrate to the ground of one's nature.[13]

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NOTES

[1] *Daily Sutras for chanting and recitation* (London, Zen Society) p 43.
[2] Carrithers, Michael: *The Buddha* (OUP, 1983) p 64.
[3] Sāmaññaphala Sutta, DN 1, 62ff (PTS ed.)
[4] Robinson, Richard H. and Johnson, Willard L.: *The buddhist religion* (Wadsworth, Belmont, Ca.: 3rd ed. 1983) p 179.

[5] Dumoulin, Heinrich: *A history of Zen Buddhism* (Faber, 1963) p 37.
[6] Quoted in Dumoulin, *op.cit.*, p 67.
[7] Rahula Walpola: *Zen and the taming of the bull* (Gordon Fraser, 1978), p 19.
[8] Dumoulin, *op.cit.*, p 68.
[9] Sekida, Katsuki: *Zen training, methods and philosophy* (Weatherill, New York, 1975). Perhaps more accessible is *Selling water by the river*, by Jiyu Kennett (Allen and Unwin, 1973), a manual of zen training which provides a fascinating insight into the religious practices of Zen.
[10] Quoted in Dumoulin, *op.cit.*, pp 163-164.
[11] Dumoulin, *op.cit.*, p 130.
[12] Quoted in John Stevens, 'Zen and the common man'; *The middle way*, vol 60, 1, May 1985, p 33.
[13] Quoted in Dumoulin, *op.cit.*, p 259.