

# Zen Christian experience

*Robert Kennedy*

SO OFTEN I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO EXPLAIN why I, a Jesuit, am also a Zen teacher who conducts Zen retreats for Christians.

Let me try to answer: it began one spring morning in 1976 in Kamakura, Japan, Standing with friends outside the Zen meditation hall of Yamada Roshi where we had just finished a five-day period of Zen meditation, I was so convinced of the value of the guided meditation and the experienced leadership of Zen training that I said to my Catholic companions, 'This belongs in the Church!' That I would make such a statement reflects my Jesuit orientation of bringing to the Church 'gifts of greater worth'. I believed then, as I do now, that Zen was a great gift to bring to the Church, even though I knew I would have much to do to prepare the Church to receive such a gift. Concerns I had made me wonder to which Christians I would attempt to bring the gift of Zen since most Buddhists themselves were not interested in the Zen expression of Buddhism.

The practice of Zen began as an attempt by Chinese monks to intuit and en flesh the ideals of Buddhism which they had received from India. Hence their life of meditation and compassionate service as well as their interpretation of their Buddhist scriptures were by no means accepted by the majority of Buddhists. Even the beloved saint of Pure Land Buddhism, Shinran, was especially critical of the Zen ideal of urging people to strive for enlightenment. So I wondered, if the majority of Buddhists are not interested in Zen, how will most Christians appreciate my bringing them such a gift and how many will give this gift a welcome reception?

Let me explain the gift that Zen offers. It is an imageless way of responding to a truth we cannot imagine. Reflecting on this gift, I remember reading in the autobiography of St Thérèse, the Little Flower, that on her deathbed she suffered the temptation that there was no heaven waiting for her. I believe this is a way of saying she was tempted to think there was no God waiting for her either. Since St Thérèse is not only a saint but a Doctor of the Church, it is wise to pay attention to her experience.

I believe the temptation of St Thérèse was not a temptation at all, but for her and for some other Christians at least it is the natural evolution

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of the human mind. Accordingly the Benedictine and Zen Master, Willigis Jager, writes, 'It is a decisive step when the individual in contemplation suddenly finds . . . God vanishing out of sight, or simply crumbling into pieces. This experience can at first give rise to great uncertainty. The Father's hand is withdrawn, loneliness and a sense of lostness turn into a kind of abyss.'<sup>1</sup> Not only is the experience of the loss of God common to fervent Christians, I believe it is the experience that Christ himself suffered on the cross and we have still not fully understood his final words: 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'

Contemplating Christ's last words, I am reminded how Zen and the words of the commandment, 'Thou shalt not put strange gods before me', invite us to have no image of God: to discard not only all idols, but all conceptions and mental images of God as well. There is really nothing that we can say definitively about God. Not even that he is good. Given our limited language, we can say only what he is not. Master Eckhart comes to mind: 'Keep silent and don't gape after God, for by gaping after him, you are lying, you are committing sin'. And later, 'Hence I beg God that he relieve me of God'.<sup>2</sup> To my thinking, Eckhart's comment that 'a man ought not to have a god who is just a product of his thought, nor should he be satisfied with that, because if the thought disappeared, God too would disappear'<sup>3</sup> clearly illustrates the commandment and Zen thinking.

It is true that most Christians do not journey on this arduous road of prayer, but for those who do, Zen contemplation can be of great help. The very purpose of Zen is to see into the emptiness of our concepts and emotions and into the emptiness of the culture which carries or expresses our faith. Zen reminds us of our own Christian truth that we need not subscribe to any philosophy or theology or any cultural expression of faith. Zen's gift to us is to understand that often it is not belief in God that we lose but belief or interest in the philosophy, theology or culture that expresses this belief. Again I am reminded of the Little Flower who discontinued reciting the rosary when she did not find it helpful. The rosary, here, is but a symbol of any form of piety or thought in Christendom. Any cultural expression of faith is, in itself, not faith; let us not then cling to mere expressions of faith. Let us realize that to die and rise with Christ is quite enough.

Zen's gift to us is by no means a foreign one. Our own Catholic tradition has long supported the truth that recommends the abandonment of all confrontational understanding of God that would line up opinions, whether Christian, Greek or any other against one another like horses at the starting line. Our tradition advocates a way of

understanding God that transcends all differences.<sup>4</sup> Among the Doctors of the Church, St Gregory of Nyssa, for example, in *The life of Moses* asserts, 'The man who thinks that God can be known does not really have life; for he has been diverted from true being to something devised by his own imagination'.<sup>5</sup>

Here you may be asking yourself; if Christian thought itself has long taught us not to cling to any ideas about God, why should we now turn to Zen Buddhism? Why should we undertake a long training to end up where we were fifteen centuries ago? The answer to this question is that it is not the only goal of Christianity to keep repeating truths we were taught fifteen centuries ago. The Second Vatican Council and recently the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus stress that Jesuits, and analogously all Christian people, according to their personality and situation in life, must foster interreligious dialogue not just on the level of thought but also on the level of religious experience. Both urge us to share with one another spiritual experiences with regard to prayer, faith, and 'ways of searching for God or the Absolute'.<sup>6</sup>

To share our experience with others according to the 34th General Congregation implies two important principles. First, genuine dialogue with believers of other religions requires that we deepen our own Christian faith and commitment because real inter-faith dialogue takes place only between those rooted in their own identity.<sup>7</sup> The goal of inter-faith dialogue is not to convert one another but to be converted to an attitude of listening to the other that can lead to mutual respect and admiration at how truth manifests itself in different cultures and personalities. Even more than admiration, true listening can lead to the astonishment of Jesus who listened to the centurion and exclaimed, 'I have not found such faith in Israel'.

The second principle implied in sharing religious experience with others reminds us that Vatican II exhorted all Catholics to a dialogue with others to 'acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found in other religions and the values in their society and culture'.<sup>8</sup> This principle underlines how far we have come from going to war with our brothers and sisters of other faiths! We are now exhorted not merely to tolerate their otherness, not merely to accept their truth, but to promote it. And if we are called to promote this truth, then surely we are called to seek it with all our mind and heart and strength.

Zen Buddhism has an extraordinary appeal for contemporary men and women seeking a true, personal spiritual experience. It has had a powerful hold on the Catholic mind. According to Robert Aitken, a Zen

master in Hawaii, all the Zen centres in Europe, except one in France, have been started by Catholics. To my way of thinking this attraction to Zen practice is a God-given opportunity to practise the very exhortations that come to us from Vatican II, from the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, and finally from our own good common sense.

I view my having trained to be a Zen teacher and conducting inter-faith retreats for Zen Buddhists and Christians as a response to Vatican II and to the 34th General Congregation's statement which concluded that 'to be religious today is to be interreligious in a sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism'.<sup>9</sup> Although some Jesuits have already been trained for this work, the Congregation continuously encourages each assistancy to prepare Jesuits for interreligious dialogue and to understand and appreciate the urgency of this task in today's pluralistic world.

My interest in Zen Buddhism stems from my attempt to reach out to Zen Buddhism, not uncritically, but with a reverence for the truth which the Church admits is there, and to integrate these truths with our own truths for the benefit of all concerned.

Let me now demonstrate what we do when Zen and Christian students come to sit together. Let me give an example of the Zen teaching that Zen and Christian students practise together. This teaching is taken from the 11th Koan of the *Book of serenity*, one of the major books of Zen teaching which is familiar to Zen students and which teaches us to experience life free from preconceived concepts.<sup>10</sup> The Zen Master Yumen states that when light does not penetrate freely, there are three types of sicknesses that grow in the dark. The first sickness is not to get on the donkey. I understand this sickness to apply to those who do not engage in practice but remain on the level of theory or thinking or dogmatic conviction. Practising Zen we overcome this sickness. Zen aims at doing, not just thinking. It is the doing, breathing and living that transform the practitioner and make him or her useful in this world. Zen teaches that the self is not different from its function in a world of action. Kathleen Raine, a contemporary British poet, apparently agrees with this Zen teaching. She writes:

Each creature is the signature of its action.  
The gull swoops, shaped by wind and hunger,  
Eyes and avenging beak, and strong with wings  
Turned to a fine edge of beauty and power by wind and water.

Scream and wing-beat utter the holy truth of its being.  
 Man acts amiss: pure only the song  
 That breaks from the lips of love . . .<sup>11</sup>

The second sickness that grows in the dark where light does not penetrate freely is not getting off the donkey. I understand this statement to express a warning to those students who cling to the forms and rules of practice when these forms and rules have ceased to serve their purpose and no longer serve life. One Zen story tells of a monk far advanced in training who comes to a master for further instruction. He comes to him loaded down with Zen scripture, Zen customs, Zen language, Zen clothes; in other words he stinks of Zen. The Master asks him if he has had his breakfast. 'Yes, I have,' responds the monk. 'Then go wash your bowl,' says the Master. He means there is no such thing as Zen apart from our very life as we live it moment by moment. We are to live freely and not to be caught by forms that once had their place but no longer serve an adult and insightful life.

Concerning this, Dogen, a Japanese Zen philosopher of the thirteenth century, wrote:

Suchness is the real form of truth as it appears throughout the world – it is fluid and differs from any static substance. Our body is not really ours. Our life is easily changed by life and circumstances and never remains static. Countless things pass, and we will never see them again. Our mind is also continually changing. Some people wonder 'If this is true on what can we rely?' But others who have the resolve to seek enlightenment, use this constant flux to deepen their enlightenment.<sup>12</sup>

My understanding of the second sickness is that when we cling to forms that we have outgrown, we stay on the donkey and we stink of Zen.

The third sickness, that grows where the light does not penetrate freely, is to say, 'What donkey?' Zen training is not meant to lead us into a vacuum called emptiness but to prepare us to return to the market place laden with wine and fish or with whatever those in front of us need at this moment. For Dogen and for the Mahayana tradition generally, doctrinal expressions and ritual forms must correspond to the suffering and ignorance of the world. Buddhist thought is true and its forms are authentic when they alleviate suffering and enlighten ignorance.<sup>13</sup> We cannot say 'What donkey is there?' or 'What world is

there?' We must turn to life with full hands and hearts, again and again and again.

Catholics legitimately want, and respond to, what Merton calls 'the hardheaded spiritual realism (of zen) . . . non-charged with melodrama'. The proof of this is in the large numbers of Christians who show up regularly for zen retreats in the New York area alone. 'Why haven't we been taught this before?' or, 'We've always known that God is unknowable – this practice gives us lay people an opportunity to experience this' or 'It's great to know we can practise Zen without compromising our Christianity' are the kinds of comments that come up repeatedly. A non-conceptual approach to prayer is of value, in itself and to balance out the whole spectrum of Christian prayer forms and retreats as well.

In summary, I am attracted to inter-faith work between Zen Buddhists and Christians because it is the work of the imagination. I have no better way of describing what I mean by imagination than to end with a poem by a contemporary American poet, Denise Levertov.

Imagine this blur of chill, white, gray, vague, sadness  
burned off.

Imagine a landscape  
of dry clear sunlight, precise shadows,  
forms of pure color.

Imagine two neighbouring hills, and  
your house, my house, looking across, friendly:  
imagine ourselves  
meeting each other,  
bringing gifts, bringing news.

Yes we need the heat  
of imagination's sun  
to cut through our bonds of cloud.

And oh, can the great and golden light  
warm our flesh that has grown so cold?<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Willigis Jager, *Search for the meaning of life* (Liguori MO, Triumph Books), p 20.
- 2 Jager, p 21.
- 3 Jager, p 21.
- 4 John Keenan, *The meaning of Christ, a Mahayana theology* (Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books), p 104.
- 5 Keenan, p 103.
- 6 *Documents of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), p 69.
- 7 *Documents*, p 74.
- 8 *Documents*, p 68.
- 9 *Documents*, p 69.
- 10 *Book of serenity*, translated and introduced by Thomas Cleary (Boston and London, Shambhala, 1998), pp 46–50.
- 11 Kathleen Raine, *Collected poems* (London, Hamish Hamilton), p 159.
- 12 Dale S. Wright, 'Doctrine of the concept of truth in Dogen's Shobogenzo', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol LIV, no 2 (Summer 1986), p 273.
- 13 Wright, p 274.
- 14 Denise Levertov, *The freeing of the dust* (New York, New Dimensions), p 63.