

EAST-WEST SPIRITUAL EXCHANGE - A REPORT ON A PROJECT

*"Christianity and Buddhism cannot be compared,  
but they can meet." A Rinzai Zen Priest*

In our Bulletin Nr.3 the reader has been introduced to a rather grand-scale project taken up by our institute in collaboration with several other Catholic and Buddhist institutes in Japan. In the meantime, it has been realized and commented on in many Japanese publications and, in English, in The Japan Missionary Bulletin, Vol. XXXIV, 3 (1980), pp.158-177 and in The Eastern Buddhist, Vol. XIII, 1 (1980), pp.141-150. It is from these English-language publications that the following report is condensed.

Since the meaning of the project was gone into in Bulletin Nr.3, I want to restrict myself here to some considerations on each of its parts.

The Project in Outline

It was realized in Europe during the months of August and September, 1979, and covered four phases:

*Residence of Japanese Religionists in European Monasteries.* In small groups of from three to six people, thirty-nine Japanese religionists, representing all the major sects of Japanese Buddhism and even including two Shinto priests, resided for about twenty days (September 3-23) in one or two monasteries (Benedictine or Trappist), to share, as fully as possible, in the life of the monks.

*Exhibition of Zen painting and calligraphy,* held at the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst in Cologne from August 17 till September 30.

*Conferences on Zen and Christianity and demonstrations of Zen Ways,* held in Cologne-Bonn, Paris, Amsterdam-The Hague, Brussels, and Munich.

*Rome.* All participants gathered in Rome (September 25-29) for a papal audience and an evaluation session (the "Nemi meeting").

The Cologne Exhibition

In Bulletin Nr.3, the rationale of this exhibition of works by representative Zen practitioners (Hakuin, Ikkyū, Jiun, Musashi, Tesshū, etc.) was said to be: "to demonstrate the intimate connection between spiritual

practice and artistic refinement," or again: "to point beyond the aesthetic level to something which, in the minds of the artists, can only be called 'spirituality' or 'religious experience.'"

Through the efforts of the organizers—and especially of Professor Terayama Katsujiō—the whole exhibition was geared to enabling the Western viewer to grasp precisely the above point and, maybe, to be challenged thereby in his own views on art and religion. Let me add that, during the time of the exhibition, live demonstrations of Zen shodō were regularly given in the museum, and that in these demonstrations, the one-stroke circle—of which H. Dumoulin says: "Anyone who has witnessed a Zen master in a state of inner concentration form a circle or a Chinese ideogram with a single stroke of the brush will not doubt the intimate relation between Zen and art"—played a big role.

The question is then: Was the message this exhibition tried to convey understood by the European visitors? This is, of course, hard to judge, but the Japanese Zen people certainly came back with a very positive impression. To quote only Professor Terayama's report:

"The exhibition was commented on by radio and television, and by seventeen different newspapers. During the 45 days, from August 17 till September 30, 15,722 people visited the exhibition—an average of 350 a day. Of the catalogue, which cost 13 DM (about 1560 yen), 1770 copies were sold. These figures were the highest for any exhibition since the museum's founding, and the director and members of the staff were highly pleased... It is a fact that there was something extraordinary in the popularity which this exhibition enjoyed with the German public, but the officials at the museum and those in the neighboring Japan Cultural Center as well declared that they could not explain it."

#### Zendō Demonstrations

One more method was used to show Zen spirituality: live demonstrations of different Zen ways or dō. Here, however, a certain reflection on these ways from a Christian point of view was also taken up in the program, mostly in the form of conferences.

There can be no doubt that, of all the participants in the whole project, the artists-demonstrators of this group had taken upon themselves the most strenuous task. The strong concentration they had to bring to each of their many performances was certainly not facilitated by the great amount of traveling by car, train, and airplane, and by the necessity to prepare, each time in a new setting, the scene of their demonstrations.

The organizers deem themselves lucky for having been able to secure the

collaboration of really first-class people. It is only natural that the leader and "star-performer" of this group was Ōmori Sōgen Rōshi, who has carved for himself quite a unique name in the world of the Zendō through his "Way of Zen by brush and sword." But, from all reports it appears that none of the other members fell behind in total dedication to his performance or even in response from the public. But the words I am using—performance, public, etc.—are misleading, since they evoke the atmosphere of an art performance, to which the audience spontaneously reacts by applause. In the case of these demonstrations, the reponse of the audience was, indeed, completely different. Here is how Tea master Chisaka Shūgaku felt it: "The interest in the tea ceremony here in Cologne was far greater than I had expected. While I was preparing the tea, I felt—fast as a physical pain—the many fervent eyes riveted on me. The fervor with which the audience sought, through Zen, 'the heart of Japan' moved me deeply. And what amazed me most was that young people in their twenties formed the majority of the audience. Even after the demonstrations were finished, these people kept a profound silence, and there was nothing of the commotion or outburst of emotion commonly seen after a performance. I was deeply impressed by these figures returning home in silence as if they wanted to conserve forever in their hearts the depth of the experience which they had tasted."

No wonder that in the Königstein meeting—which was held September 19-21 as a first period of reflection—the question was formulated: "What is it in these demonstrations that distinguishes them from other performances, and inhibits people from clapping their hands?" Tentatively, the answer was given that art is not the right category for the Zen ways. While art can be said to consist of inspiration and technique, in Zen ways there is something more. The everyday of human existence is transformed here into religion, so that the feeling of reverence, this point of connection with the transcendent, is most strongly evoked. And precisely this does not permit of any bolsterous response.

The demonstration tour started in the framework of the Zen calligraphy exhibition in Cologne. It was an auspicious beginning. The hall of the Japan Cultural Center, with a seating capacity of 300 people, was filled every time by an overflowing crowd of up to 700 people. The program of these days may give an idea of how these sessions were organized:

*Friday, Sept. 7, 7PM* - Conference by Heinrich Dumoulin, *The religious and artistic aspects of Zen* - followed by

- demonstrations of Kyūdō and Sadō
- Saturday, Sept. 8, 3PM* - Conference by Ōmori Sōgen, *What does Zen have to do with art?* - followed by demonstrations of Shodō, Kendō, and Sadō
- 7PM* - Conference by Kadowaki Kakichi, *Similarities between Zen and Christianity* - followed by demonstrations of Kyūdō and Shodō
- Sunday, Sept. 9, 10:30AM* - Demonstrations of Sadō, Kyūdō, and Shodō
- 7PM* - Conference by H. Enomiya-Lasalle, *Comparison between zazen and Christian meditation*

On their tour, the Zendō specialists had the occasion of demonstrating in a Christian church several times or as Suhara Kōun expressed it, before the crucifix. It is hard to say what happened there exactly, but it cannot be doubted that this circumstance made a deep impression on several of them and brought, as it were, a new dimension or fullness to their Zen way. After these demonstrations, Suhara Kōun was told by the others that his bows at beginning and end of his makiwarasharei (archery ceremony) had become considerably deeper than the regular 45 degrees. He could only answer that he had not been aware of it but that, before the crucifix, he felt an excess of reverence which "pulled his breast toward the floor." We have also the testimony of Terayama Katsujō:

"I too have the impression of having been gradually purified in the demonstrations before Christ. I believe that precisely in such experiences the real exchange has taken place... Indeed, for me East-West exchange is not conceivable except through such a praxis... When I let the full weight of what happened there strike me, I cannot but feel that it was not merely something planned by man but a demand of the spirit of the times."

Enough echoes reach us from Europe to enable us to say that these demonstrations of the Zen Ways made a tremendous impact, the repercussions of which still seem to grow rather than to die out. At the same time, a real "exchange" has certainly taken place. The demonstrators all testify that they were carried along by the expectations of the European audiences, to the point of confiding to one another: "It's enough to get scared."

#### Living with Benedictine and Trappist Monks

"When we arrived at the monastery, we were given 'the key of heaven,' a rather small key with a triangular hole in it. Without this key, it is impossible to get inside the walls of the monastery. Women are, of course, not permitted to enter and, in general, entrance is not allowed to outsiders. And we, people of another faith, were given a free pass! It must certainly be the first time in the monastery's history."

A Sōtō Zen Priest

We come at last to the center piece of the whole "spiritual exchange" program, and there is no better gateway to that story than the amazement before the taking down of the no-entry sign at these jealously guarded gates. Our question will of course be, "What happened inside those walls?" But several of the participants must feel that half the answer is already given in the above words.

Indeed, nearly all of the Japanese participants commented on the extraordinary human warmth of the welcome given them by the Catholic monks. One even writes: "The loving care the monks showed us during the entire period of our stay is about the strongest concern I ever experienced in my whole life." And many saw in it the perfect realization of Saint Benedict's rule "to treat each guest as if he were Christ himself." Nevertheless, the really amazing event does not lie there; it lies in the fact that they, members of another religion, were recognized and welcomed, not as guests but as full-fledged religionists and, be it only temporary, members of the monastic community. It may be significant that this point was brought to the fore in the most forceful way by a participant who had the dubious fortune of living for three weeks in the monastery that showed relatively least of the above human concern for its guests. He writes: "The monks of our monastery lead a terribly busy life. They had no time to talk with us Buddhists, or to bestow on us any special service. The only thing they could do they did: to show us their lives without hiding or embellishing a thing. To welcome us as members of their community to the deepest recesses of the monastery, and to show us the back as well as the front of things, that in itself was ten times more meaningful than to try to make us understand things through formal dialogues. These monks had understood that in their spiritual wisdom..."

What then made these monasteries make this "leap in the dark?" I do not find a better word for it than faith: faith-expectation towards the Spirit who blows wherever He wants; faith-obedience to Vatican II, which had called for an openness to other faiths...and maybe a grain of that youthful spirit of adventure which is never completely absent from enduring institutions. It must be added that the decision in favor of the "Japanese guests" did not necessarily meet with the enthusiastic consent of the whole community. Thus, to cite only one example, the abbot of a monastery found it advisable to tell his visitors, right from the beginning, that several monks of the community were opposed to their coming and might possibly show that opposi-

tion. However, in the same chronicle could be written that, as the days of the visit went by, that bulwark of opposition melted like snow, to make place for the most cordial relationships. Something had happened... But before turning to the events of that visit, we should have a look at the visitors. By every standard they were a motley group, with a rich diversity in age, religious affiliation, "monastic" experience, clothing...and motivation. Still, if the hospitality of the European monks was beyond praise, the attitude of the Japanese guests was at the least a match for that of their hosts, and earned the general admiration of these hosts. From the very beginning they revealed themselves as "exemplary monks": always on time for all exercises and always displaying a disciplined bodily attitude. But the most admirable thing was the wholeheartedness with which they entered into the spirit of the thing. They certainly never gave the impression of being mere observers or recorders of impressions, but really went all the way in their participation in all the elements of the Christian monastic life, up to the last bow and sign of the cross during the religious ceremonies.

The scene is now set but, apart from a few indications, the question has not been answered yet, "What, if anything, happened there? And can that something lay claim to the name of 'spiritual exchange'?" Knowing quite well that these things are hard to gauge, I still feel confident in saying: "Yes, indeed, something happened, something in the nature of a spiritual exchange." But if you ask me to pin it down further, I do not feel confident at all. Let me simply try to give a few pointers. Certainly it seems to me that, in this experiment, people of vastly different backgrounds were able to meet as human beings on a level of their deepest aspirations, beyond all differences of race and dogma. This fraternal meeting, moreover, was not experienced as something made possible by a mutual "putting into brackets" of the respective religious commitment. On the contrary, on both sides, the feeling was strong that this meeting could only happen on the strength of their respective spiritual training (experienced as a common bond and horizon), and could reach such human depth only because it happened in the religious sphere and in a mutual recognition of the authenticity of one another's religiosity. It could even be said that the meeting was lived by both sides as a mutual religious commitment. And precisely here lies, I would feel, the central happening of these three weeks.

Of course, if it is true that a man is changed by every meaningful

encounter with a fellow man, we must go further and ask: How were the partners changed and enriched? In a very tentative endeavor to define that change, we could speak of a "widening of consciousness," and say that the religious consciousness of the partners had taken on a new dimension, precisely in that practiced recognition of the other. One of the (Catholic) mentors-interpreters formulates this beautifully: "Praying side by side with a Buddhist, and bowing together before the crucified Christ, gave me a new approach to the Father of all men." In other words, if each of the partners could heretofore practice his own religiosity in splendid isolation, after this experience each will have to live his religion "in the presence of the other"; or, as the same mentor suggests, "in a growing awareness of a broader community of faith, which embraces all honest seekers of what we call God."

To round off this report, I would like to record the main impressions and questionings which this exchange program provoked in the participants, but here again it must be understood that this report can only be partial and provisional. Very little can be said as yet about the European side, since their impressions have not been fully communicated yet. Speaking from my own observations, I would say that the European monks felt themselves being questioned first and foremost by the "spirituality of the body" of their guests. While it struck the Japanese that "the postures of the monks in the choir were rather sloppy," or that "during their meditation, the monks gave the impression of being immersed in sadness," the Europeans were impressed not only by the zazen posture—a meditation not determined by any object but first of all by a bodily attitude—but, more generally, by the unbelievable "amount" of spirituality and reverence the Japanese knew how to convey in their bodily behavior. The reflection was made a few times that the liturgy in the monasteries would be helped more by a course in tea ceremony (*sadō*), for instance, than by any amount of "spiritual theory."

The impressions of the Japanese participants are much more documented already. I shall pick up a few of them, rather at random, to end with those that could lead to serious questionings on both sides. Evidently not a few of the Japanese pilgrims had expected something rather forbiddingly dark and cold in its unworldliness. To their surprise, they found something full of "ningenmi" (the human touch), "austerity in warmth," "a life wherein one can smile," "people whose greatest pleasure seems to lie

in making somebody happy." While one of the first impressions of the travelers, on arriving at their destination, was that of being landed in an old folks' home (they were used after all to training halls full of trainees in their twenties and thirties), the most diverse elements soon made them experience the monastic life as surprisingly alive, bright (akarui), anchored in the region, and responsive to modern times: modern architecture (in some places), the stream of pilgrims come to share the monastic life for a few days, the contacts with youth, up-to-date equipment for the work, and so forth. Herewith the following considerations are often associated. One, how is it possible that this life is inspired and regulated by a rule (the *Regula Benedicti*) that is 1500 years old? And, two, Christianity in Europe must be more alive than we had been led to believe. That in the monastic life the individuality of each monk is respected, and that the abbot shares in the most humble jobs with all the brothers, are two more points often remarked upon. We must hurry, however, to come to the more central points.

The Christian monastic life certainly struck the Japanese visitors as an authentic spiritual life. Many comment on the depth and the quality of the silence in these precincts, and on the pacifying rhythm of that always identical routine of prayer, work, and reflection. "Six o'clock. The birds start chirping and soon there is the sound of crows flapping their wings like pigeons do. That signals the end of the meditation period. In the three weeks we passed in the monastery, there was not the slightest deviation from that routine. It is as if the orderliness of the life according to the rule of Saint Benedict affects even the birds that live here." And twice I heard a nearly identical remark from Zen people: "The days of this life bring me to the same kind of concentration and serenity as a sesshin." In this context, it is only natural that the divine office and its Gregorian chant—in its intimate combination of the religious and the aesthetic—came in for much admiration. Strangely enough, it is precisely in this same office that several Japanese monks experienced their first sense of estrangement. In these psalms God is continually asked for benefits and forgiveness of sins. Is this an adult form of prayer, or does it not rather betray the attitude of an irresponsible and naughty child? This became one of the six questions formulated by the Japanese, to which Benedictine representatives tried to give an answer in the "Nemi meeting." We do not have the space to report that answer here. So, let me only remark that several



of the Japanese participants, while having that objection, were at the same time sensitive to the high degree of humility and the depth of reverence before the Absolute, which that same attitude of prayer implies.

"Pray and work" is often said to be Saint Benedict's motto, and the work as practiced by the monks drew at least the same amount of comment and questioning as the prayer. And, as so often happens in the interreligious dialogue, the questions—coming as they did out of the blue sky of a completely different frame of reference—did not always find a ready answer. We must again limit ourselves to the essentials: What role does work play in the monastic spirituality, and what is its relationship to prayer? As to the first point, the Benedictine principle of self-support of monastery and its concrete implementation were a great source of wonderment for the Japanese monks with their essentially mendicant tradition. For the rhythm it brings to the life of the monk, it is often compared to the samu in the Zen hall, and it is also remarked that the work makes the monastery take roots in its regional environment and opens avenues of social service. On the other hand, some Japanese monks had the impression they could observe here a fissure in the armour of Christian spirituality. Is not, after all, prayer as a "spiritual activity" more highly valued than work, than bodily activity? Is not this one of the points wherein Western spirituality shows its dualism, its lack of shinjin-ichinyo (body and mind at one)? This question also was brought up in Nemi, and the Benedictine respondent fully conceded that Western anthropology, especially in modern times, certainly did not favor that unity, and that he expected much from Buddhist influence on that point. Interestingly enough, the spiritual reading during the silent meals became the symbol of that lingering dualism. While fully agreeing with that diagnosis, I cannot hide my impression that many Japanese participants rather found in the monastic practice a far greater unity of body and mind than Western theory led them to expect.

I cannot go into a further question which also intrigued the visitors: is there any social commitment, service to the world, in that secluded monastic life? I shall only use it as an introduction to a characteristic of Christian monasticism which undoubtedly made the most decisive impression on many a Japanese participant, namely the fact that the monks essentially take up that way of life for life. While the Bodhisattva ideal shows an ōsō-gensō rhythm, and Zen insists that enlightenment obtained on the mountain must prove itself in the return to the market-place, how do these monks, who

stay forever on their sacred mountain, prove their love and contribute to human society? This objection—which often enough is formulated within Christianity itself—could not but come up among Japanese Buddhists. The fact is, however, that before that life-long commitment the Japanese reaction was one of practically undivided admiration which, in some of the participants, turned into an explicit questioning of the Japanese Buddhist practice. "The Zendō has become a short-distance competitive race, a school to obtain a diploma." "This state of affairs, wherein one lives one's whole life in community, without possessions, in great silence, and unmarried, reminds us of the ideal life of the samgha in Sakyamuni's time. It is sad to see that in Japanese Buddhism this samgha life has become only a passage in one's life, and this passage tends to become shorter and shorter... If we do not renovate our shukke and return to the original form of the samgha...our Buddhism will become an irrelevant superfluity in these present times." Or again, "If the Zen halls can bring renewal to Japanese Buddhism, it will not be because Zen people leave these halls to work in the world but, on the contrary, because out of society many people enter these Zen halls." My admiration for the openness and honesty revealed in these questionings is unlimited, and I can only hope that a parallel thing is happening in Europe. For, to me they signify two things: one, that Buddhism is alive in Japan and, two, that something really happened during that quiet European September.

#### The Roman Finale

It was fitting that the Spiritual Exchange Program ended in Rome, the "honzan" of Catholicism. However, I have the impression that this pilgrimage to Rome became a highlight of their Christian experience for only a very small number of the group. The Roman fiesta in its massive setting could not compete with the sober serenity of the monastery.

Suffice it to mention two salient points. At the occasion of the visit to the Roman Secretariat for non-Christians, the total receipts of the sale of sumie paintings by Ōmori Sōgen Rōshi in the different exhibition sites were handed to the director of the Secretariat, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, for the benefit of the charitable works of Mother Teresa. A splendid ecumenical gesture.

And then there was the papal audience on the evening of September 26. No special audience could be procured because Pope John-Paul II was too

busy preparing for his imminent trip to Ireland and the United States. But, as it turned out, that general audience—on the gigantic St. Peter's Square filled with people of all nationalities and a sea of umbrellas under the occasional showers—proved to be a bonus. Our group was given the place of honor right under the papal throne and, after the allocution and benediction, the Pope came straight to us, to talk with Yamada Mumon Rōshi and to shake hands with everyone of us. In the words especially addressed to us from the dais, the Pope had called our endeavor "a truly epoch-making event in the history of the interreligious dialogue," and expressed his joy "that the interreligious dialogue is moving on this basic spiritual level." And now, while standing in our midst, he encouraged us by saying very emphatically: "This kind of experience must continue."

The many Catholics in the audience before whom we passed on our way out and who applauded these Buddhist monks and wanted to shake hands with them, seemed to share that opinion.

Jan Van Bragt