

East—West Spiritual Exchange II

October 5 to November 5, 1983

"Like trees we extend our roots to the water. And if we go deep enough, we shall discover that it is the same stream out of which both Christians and Buddhists drink." (Words spoken by Hōzumi Genshō at the beginning of the Sōgenji sesshin)

"This kind of experience must continue." These words were spontaneously uttered by Pope John-Paul II during his few minutes of conversation at the general audience of September 26, 1979, in St. Peter's square, with a group of some 40 Japanese Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay people who had been sharing for three weeks the life of Catholic monks and nuns in eleven Benedictine and Trappist monasteries of Western Europe—Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, and Italy. (For a report see *Bulletin Nr.4*, pp.8-18). The following lines are an evocation of the first step in the continuation of that experiment, which was christened with the rather generic name: East-West Spiritual Exchange.

I

On October 5, 1983, fifteen Catholic monks of different orders and two Benedictine nuns, from various European countries, landed in Japan for a stay of one month. They had been invited by Japanese Zen centers (notably, the Zen Cultural Center at the Hanazono University, Kyoto, which took care of the entire organization) to learn the reality of Zen by seeing it in its natural environment and sharing the life of the Zen monks.

From before the successful completion of the 1979 venture, the idea of a return visit was in the air, of course, but the Japanese Buddhists had some serious qualms about it. First of all, where in Japan were there to be found centers of monastic life, more or less comparable to a Benedictine monastery, where Catholic monks and nuns could be received in order to share in the life of the community? In the end, it had to be admitted that none of the Japanese Buddhist sects had preserved enough of the (celibate and communitarian) monastic tradition to have such places at their disposal, with the exception of the Zen school—to which then naturally the responsibility of the return invitation devolved. Indeed, if anything in Japan resembles—and surprisingly so even in many a minor detail—the monastic life of the oldest religious orders in the Church, it is life in the *zendō* (Zen halls), where young monks (called *unsui*, "clouds and water") are trained.

But it is precisely this word "training" that made for the second big hurdle. All the Japanese visitors in 1979 had been amazed to find so many older, and even some very old, monastics in Europe's monasteries, and many had expressed their admiration for the fact that Catholic monastic life is "for life." This means that the Christian monastic life, rather than training to obtain some spiritual skill or capacity, is basically simple "living with God;" and that the training which is certainly involved—St. Benedict sometimes calls the monastery a *schola*—develops at a relatively leisurely pace. Japanese Zen halls, on the other hand, are practically training centers where people in their twenties pass a short time (six months to three years) to be prepared for a life as (married) temple priests. Consequently, the training is intense and the pace fast. This difficulty was aptly phrased by one Zen monk: Catholic monastics are marathon runners, *unsui* are sprinters. It is easy for sprinters to keep pace with marathon runners for a short stretch; but can marathon runners be expected to keep up with sprinters?

And, indeed, the going did prove tough, if not at times nearly unbearable for the European monastics whose average age was 51. This impression runs like a red thread through their reports. "I found myself digging down to the last resources of physical endurance." "The pain in the legs was so bad that only union with the passion of our Lord pulled me through." "I think that I discovered again the role of pain in ascetics and in the spiritual life." Also the speed with which everything had to be done comes in for much comment. It astounded and disconcerted them at the beginning. Their picture of the oriental monk as an immobile or slowly moving figure was soon shattered. But they realized after a time that doing things well at great speed is only possible if one engages one's full attention, and that paying full attention to what one does now is of the essence of Zen. The Zen master who guided them most of the way later expressed his admiration for the way those Catholic monastics came through everything, and attributed this strength to the depth of their Christian spirituality.

Already in the preparatory stages the organizers had realized that a continuous stay of three weeks in the same Zen hall—a kind of duplication of what had happened in Europe—would not be feasible: it would tax most of the visitors too much, and it would also disturb the life of the Zen hall more than permissible. Accordingly, the schedule that was finally worked out for the visitors was a mosaic of various experiences revolving around two longer periods of full participation in Zen monastic life. The first of these "strong times" took place at the Sōgenji, a presently deserted old Zen monastery in Okayama city, from October 8 in the evening until October 16 in the morning. Here all 15 European monks (the two nuns had already gone to a nunnery in Nagoya) were brought together with 12 Japanese *unsui* from different Zen halls to form an instant community that would live the daily Zen monastery life in all its details and with all its rules, rituals, ceremonies, instructions by the *rōshi*, work periods, begging expeditions, etc.—including, of course, three to four hours of *zazen* a day. After this thorough initiation, the European monastics were then ready to go and participate, in small groups of two or three, in the life of different functioning Zen monasteries. This took place from 23 to 29 October. The receiving monasteries were Tenryūji and Tōfukuji in Kyoto, Shōfukuji and Kaiseiji in the Kobe area, Ryūtakuji in Mishima, and Zuiōji on the island of Shikoku. The Catholic monastics with most experi-

ence of zazen went to these monasteries where a smaller *sesshin* (a kind of Zen retreat with at least eight hours of zazen a day) was held that week. The others shared the less intensive (but still strenuous enough!) everyday life in the remaining Zen halls.

The rest of the time was devoted to a wide-ranging introduction to Japanese religious life. This included among other things three days (this time more as observers) at the majestic Eihei-ji, the oldest head-temple of the Sōtō sect, participation in some special Buddhist ceremonies, visits to many more temples and shrines in Kyoto, Nara, and Kamakura, and a reception at the headquarters of one of the Japanese new religions, the Risshōkōseikai. Near the end of the stay a day of reflection that came to be known as the "Kyoto Symposium" was held, where the European monastics told their Japanese hosts of their deepest impressions of the experience and had the occasion to ask the six attending Zen masters the most important questions aroused during their stay in the Zen monasteries.

II

After this general overview of the venture, we may now give brief consideration to the many questions which this unusual experiment undoubtedly provokes in us. For the answers we shall rely as much as possible on the testimonies of the visiting European monastics. In order not to encumber this informal report with too much technical apparatus, these testimonies will be accompanied only by the initials of their authors, a list of whom will then be appended at the end.

We might first like to have a closer look at just who these visitors were. Simply put, they comprised a group of persons recruited by the European Benedictine organization for interreligious dialogue called *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique* (D.I.M.). The conditions were "that one lived in a religious community, was interested in Eastern and Western spirituality, and had some previous experience of zazen. The last condition in order to assure that one would be able to stand the many hours of zazen in the Zen halls" (C.S.). From this one must expect the group finally assembled to consist mostly of younger people. This was however far from the case. As mentioned already, the average age was 51, with most people around that age, two of 65, and only one youngster of 26.

But how did they come to be interested in Zen? This same question was asked in a questionnaire which the participants were asked to fill out at the beginning of their stay in Japan. Allow me here simply to collate the answers of the 16 people present at the time:

- research on the wisdom of the body in prayer.
- through Graf Dürckheim in his center.
- through books.
- by seeing cha-no-yu (tea ceremony) and then practicing it.
- by practicing cha-no-yu in Rome.
- through my study of the Mahāyāna.
- initially by books of Fr. Lassalle and D. T. Suzuki; later through a *sesshin* led by Jiyu Kennett rōshi.

- by a meeting in a Cistercian monastery.
- need for a method of prayer; meeting with Fr. Besnard O.P. and Graf Dürckheim
- through zazen practice with Fr. de Béthune.
- through meeting with different persons; desire for spiritual deepening; need for universal ecumenism.
- by the stay of Japanese nuns in our convent in 1979.
- by reading about it, and because I saw that it could help me to make progress in my prayer life, which was blocked at the time.
- I was sent to a Zen course given by Fr. Lassalle in Maria Laach.
- My friend Minegishi Shōten, a Sōtō Zen monk who was living with us, awakened in me a great interest in his life and religion.
- I could no longer practice the object-bound kind of meditation which I had learnt in the novitiate.

Most of them had been practicing zazen more or less regularly for from 5 to 15 years (the exceptions being three relatively new "converts"), and it might also be interesting to know what they answered in that same *enquête* to the question: "What effect did your practice of zazen have on your religious life?" I again copy literally the 14 answers given (two persons did not answer):

- practical training in silence; an esteem for the present moment.
- relaxation, interiority, presence, deepening of my spiritual life.
- it sharpened my inwardness and made me conscious of my bodily posture.
- it helps me to be a better religious.
- a broadening of outlook, especially during a period of disenchantment with Christian practice; then a deepening of outlook, which included a recognition and re-union with my own tradition.
- more attention to the core of the Christian way, i.e. losing the self and coming to Christ "in us;" also a new understanding of the gospel.
- it gives me better non-attachment and efficiency.
- spiritual life in the center of my desire, in the body which I am—a better approach to the gospel.
- it played a very important role, especially as regards meditation, prayer, silence, attention to the rituals, cult objects, etc.
- an experience of reality not, or at least less, mediated by words, a greater capacity for attention.
- to be there where I am and to live what I am doing—to get myself empty before prayer, in order to be filled by God's Spirit.
- it gave me a clear experience of the location of the *fine pointe de l'âme* in the practice of religion and monastic life.
- it afforded me a certain interior calm and is a good preparation to our community prayers.
- I got to understand the Bible and the mystics better.

And a final recourse to the questionnaire provides us with an answer to our next question: What did these monastics expect from their stay in Japan? Summarizing this time, for brevity's sake, the following motivations emerge:

- growth and deepening of the spiritual life; a better understanding of one's own monastic tradition; a better knowledge of non-Christian monasticism.
- deepening one's experience of Zen by experiencing what a Japanese monk experiences; attuning one's experience of Zen to the reality of Zen in Japan; getting more background information on Japanese Zen; experiencing how not only zazen but the entire daily life in a Zen monastery is Zen.
- contributing to the religious dialogue with Buddhism.
- expanding and deepening my personal contacts with Zen monks.

This covers the field pretty well, but I cannot refrain from quoting one of the answers literally: "In Zen fashion I would answer: 'Nothing'—I expect a communion without words, in the spiritual wayfaring, lived in mutual respect" (B.R.).

III

As to the Japanese "receiving side," I shall only touch on a few disconnected points, since I could not hope here to provide a full description of the situation. As all the participants testify with gratitude and an admiration bordering on incredulity, the Zen Cultural Center, with the help of the Hanazono University on whose campus it is situated, did an incredibly thorough job of organizing this encounter. "The Zen cultural Center spent more than a year at the preparation and organization of our stay. Every one of our guides had a 'script' wherein was printed, hour by hour, what was to happen. Everything functioned with the perfection of a Japanese camera. One had the feeling that nothing, absolutely nothing, could get out of hand" (C.S.). And on the general structure of the stay: "We were struck by the perfection in the organization of the visit in general: the preparatory stay in Sōgenji permitted us to learn the usages and rituals of the Zen halls and to grow together as a group; and the short stay at Eihei-ji provided us with much information, through conferences and video tapes. We were then ready to enter a monastery for a week—something which would have been utterly unwise at the beginning of our stay in Japan" (B.B.).

But, as always happens with European visitors guided around by Japanese, this close-knit organization, geared at synchronized movement in group, more than once exasperated the European monastics, who would have liked some time for personal initiative and reflection. "This very minute and detailed organization is in danger of 'killing us with kindness.' I mean that we are rushed from one point to another with little time to look around and absorb things...The Japanese do not seem to understand that we need time to breathe" (S.G.). No wonder that, in 1979, the Japanese visitors had experienced the European organization sloppy and improvised! This particular cultural difference, which illustrates the difficulty of intercultural communication, is nicely caught in the following comment: "After two hours of free time in the Asakusa district of Tokyo, we are all back at the bus in time, to the surprise of our Japanese guides: 'These Europeans are thus not so undisciplined as we thought'" (B.B.).

It must be added that the reception of the Christian visitors was not only well prepared but also lavish to the point of often embarrassing these Europeans not used to the ways of Japanese hospitality. "Truly, the East-West Exchange was a marvellous

experience which I'll never forget.. It took me some time to get used to being on the receiving side of so much care and attention" (S.G.). "We have been received here in such a grand fashion and we were given so many presents that we sometimes imagined ourselves to be the plenipotentiary ambassadors of the Emperor of all Westerners, and that... we now have an enormous surplus of baggage. Everyone of us had to send home by boat some fifty pounds of presents" (B.B.).

A short word of explanation may not be remiss here. In general there appears to exist a big difference in the conception of hospitality between Japanese and Westerners—a difference which may be characterized as follows. While the Western idea seems to be to make the stranger feel at home by taking him into the family and its everyday running, the Japanese conception might be best expressed by the word "regaling": the best is not good enough for the *o-kyakusama* ("venerable" visitor), with whom one wants to share only the highlights of one's life. Hence, also in the monks' case the lavishness of their reception which, of course, did not apply to the two central stays in Zen halls, where the visitors were made to share the extremely frugal life of the *unsui*. But it was precisely in those places that the visiting monastics sensed a deeper dimension to the hospitality. "We were touched by the hospitality experienced at Kaiseiji: a hospitality different from the ordinary or mundane kind, a hospitality animated by the inner life" (H.v.H.).

Since the organizing entity, the Zen cultural Center, is a Rinzai institution, it is only natural that Rinzai Zen loomed largest in this project, by providing, for example, five out of seven Zen halls for a stay in little groups of two or three. Still, the other two branches of Japanese Zen were certainly not left out of the picture. Manpukuji, the headquarters of Ōbaku Zen, graciously treated the visitors to an excellent vegetarian dinner, and Sōtō Zen not only offered them a two-days stay in its most prestigious head temple, Eiheiji, but also two of their Zen halls for a week's stay: Zuiōji for three monks and—last but not least—the Aichi Nisōdō in Nagoya for the two Benedictine sisters.

IV

At the beginning of this article a word was said about the question: In how far are Christian monasteries and Zen halls comparable entities? The difference is, of course, remarked on in the reports written by the European monastics. "Henri and I who came to encounter monks found in fact the equivalent, not of a stable community but, of a novitiate" (B.B.). "At the moment, the 'Zen monasteries' are rather schools of formation of a monastic type" (M.D.V.). A concomitant question here might be whether in the Japanese Zen world this absence of stable monastic communities is felt as a lack. Some indications in the direction of a positive answer can be found in the reports on the *Spiritual Exchange I* program (1979), and also this time some European monks tell about young *unsui* being seemingly attracted by the radicality of commitment found in the celibate life, and about meeting a Buddhist priest of 40 years old who would like to continue a communitarian monastic life but does not find a place in Japan to do this. It would, however, be unwise to conclude from there to the existence of a rather general

feeling of lacking something in one's own tradition.

This brings us to the more general question: What did the Japanese Zen world (or at least the Zen monks involved) expect from this visit? I submit that the basic and honest-to-God answer to this question is: Nothing—and this time not only in the above Zen sense. There was, of course, the wish to repay the visit of 1979, the desire to make personal contacts, and the hope that this visit would help in making Japanese Zen better known in Europe. But expectation in its deepest sense—the hope of receiving or learning something—was, I fear, practically non-existing, except then in a few individuals. However, nothing would please me more than to be proven false on this point...

But let us come back to the "monastery" question, for a very important point remains to be made. The above rather basic difference notwithstanding, the Christian monks recognized life in the Zen halls not only as deeply religious but as essentially monastic. "Gratitude for the discovery of a spiritual path that differs from ours but is related to Christian monasticism much more than I had ever thought" (J.H.). "One of my greatest discoveries: When people in Europe speak of Zen, they always think of zazen. But 'zen-meditation' is the whole life, day and night: being silent, reciting sutras, eating, bathing, working, and sleeping. It is a continuous concentration and breathing exercise. This is very close to the Benedictine ideal. Benedictines have no special techniques of meditation, but the whole rhythm of prayer, work, and studies during the day brings us after a few years also to a continuous meditation; in Christian terms: to a life in the presence of God" (N.W.).

Speaking of the Japanese side of the encounter, we should not forget that there was, in fact, a third but rather silent partner, namely the Catholic Church of Japan. Already in the preparatory stages the European monks had expressed their concern: Would their participation in the Zen life be "acceptable" to the Catholics of Japan? How should they behave in order not to be a scandal to these young Christians? To the best of my knowledge these fears proved unfounded but, on the other hand, the visitors seem to have left Japan with the sobering impression that the Japanese Church had been absent from this encounter or, as one of them expressed it: "Notwithstanding the repeated presence with us of Msgr. Tanaka, bishop of Kyoto, and some religious, Japanese or living in Japan, we did not sense the church in Japan" (B.B.). The accompanying impression is, of course, that the Japanese Church is not really interested in the dialogue with Buddhism. This time I would like them to be proven false..., and for the record I may not fail to mention that several Japanese religious communities cooperated wholeheartedly by lodging the group of European monastics gratis for several days: the Passionist Fathers in Mefu, Takarazuka, the Carmelites in Uji, the Franciscan sisters in Kamakura, and the Jesuits in Tokyo and Shinmeikutsu.

V

The stage having been set, we are now ready to follow the visitors on their pilgrimage. But since space does not permit a full-blown account, we must content ourselves with a few glimpses of the wayfarers in between those mist-covered mountain tops.

On the morning of October 8, the European monks donned the *unsui* outfits which they had received the day before, carefully separated the few belongings they would be allowed to take with them to the Zen halls (in addition to the eating bowl, chopsticks, and sutra texts which they had also received, shaving kit, tooth brush, change of underclothes, a Bible) from the rest of their luggage, and set out by bus for the Sōgenji in Okayama, where they would receive an eight-day initiation into the arcana of Zen monastic life. This period was officially referred to as a *sesshin*, though the military term "boot camp" might also be applied. "First impressions on arrival were a little similar to those that I experienced when arriving at basic training camp in the Royal Air Force in 1959: we were dressed in strange clothing, in a strange country, in a strange place... Then also there were a large number of rules and regulations to observe. The disorientation, whether intentional or accidental, was very effective" (S.G.). Still, most of the participants, not being ex-recruits, experienced things in more monastic categories: "This initiation into the life of the Zen monk evoked in most of us the memories of our novitiate: making the acquaintance of a very strange but captivating world, the awareness that something very important and essential but also difficult and exacting was being offered to us, a feeling of beauty but also of irritation before the multitude of often incomprehensible rules and customs,...a very brusque transition into a totally new world, full of mystery and promise" (J.H.).

As already intimated above, this *sesshin* as well as the second "strong point" of sharing the life of the *unsui* in different Zen halls (October 23-28), taxed these older aspirants nearly to the limits, as they themselves confess unanimously in their reports. "I soon discovered that life in the Zen hall means 'total war.' In everything one does, one must be constantly aware and alert. Negligence is not tolerated. When the straw sandals for exclusive use in the Zen hall are not neatly aligned, a reprimand is immediately forthcoming. There is no possibility of withdrawing for a moment. Since one is always together with others, even at night, privacy is reduced to a minimum" (C.S.). "The multitude of rules and the speed in all actions were hard to bear for me, and in the end surpassed my powers" (H.v.H.). "I feel that I passed through barriers of pain that I would not have passed through under any other circumstances" (V.C.). "I have caught bronchitis...and Henri damaged the cartilage in his right knee... There is nothing serious in all this, but it is clear that our bodies resist this treatment; they do not want to go where they are being led" (B.B.).

In these comments we find various elements of hardship indicated, but evidently for these people not used to living "on the floor," the crux of the ordeal was pain in the legs. And here the question naturally arises as to whether this was really necessary, first of all in the given circumstances and, more generally, in Zen monastic life as such. For even supposing that *zazen* itself requires the lotus position or an approximation of it, and that authentic Zen training requires a modicum of "painstaking diligence," would it go against the spirit of Zen to adopt a seated position more suited to Western—especially *older* Western—legs during the other activities (meals, sutra readings, lectures by the *rōshi*, etc.)? "At Sōgenji we did not do all that much *zazen*, but we were sitting practically the whole day on the floor in some squatting position, so that by nightfall our knees were in fairly bad straits, with the result that for most of us the evening *zazen* was difficult and painful" (J.W.). "It was certainly the toughest

sesshin I had ever encountered. The pain of sitting in *zazen* would have been more bearable if we had been able to sit some other way at other times... I wondered sometimes what the point of it was—was it an endurance test, to prove to ourselves that we could put up with more pain than we thought?" (S.G.). Granted that chairs do not fit very well the Zen architecture, one can still think that here something apart from the difference between sprinters and marathoners was involved.

All this does not mean that the European monastics did not manage, each in their own way, to reap profits from the ordeal. "At any rate, I was able to have an experience of my limitations. When I saw the young Buddhist monks, I admired them and became very humble in a positive way" (N.W.). And many testify to the support provided by the Zen community and especially the encouraging role of the *jikijitsu*, the monk in charge of the exercises who administers the *keisaku* ("alerting stick") during *zazen*. "By myself, I would never have had the courage to remain in the *hanka* (half-lotus) position for such a long time (eight hours a day during the *sesshin*). However, the stimulus from the community is efficient. The hall was pervaded with a silence that was appeasing, embracing, and carried a great spiritual energy" (M.D.V.).

In this regard two further conclusions were drawn by the participants. "What struck me most is that here in Japan one puts more effort into one's *Zazen* than we ordinarily do in Europe" (J.W.). And second, these Catholic monastics who, since Vatican II had become accustomed to a regime that pays much greater attention to the individual, observed "that life in a Zen hall is centered on the group and promotes the formation of community. One notices in everything that the good of the group is primary and that the individual is subordinated to it... It breaks one's little ego in order to make room for something that is greater" (C.S.). And finally, there was a saving grain of humor: "It was quite a relief to get our sense of humor back and to laugh together about our tribulations with straw sandals, chopsticks, Japanese toilets, etc., and to discover that these model Japanese monks would themselves sometimes nod off during meditation and could sympathize with our troubles like good confreres. This, too, reminded us of our novitiate" (J.H.).

VI

Next, it may be instructive to have a look at the questions which the European monastics laid before the panel of Zen masters at the Kyoto Symposium, held on October 31 at the Christian Academy Seminar House. Here I literally mean "the questions," for space does not permit an analysis but only a passing indication of the answers on different levels given by the masters. I shall render the questions as far as possible in their original (sometimes slightly abbreviated) form, beginning with the "simpler" and passing on to the meatier ones.

We have been asked to write down our impressions of Sōgenji, Eihei-ji, and our individual monasteries. We would like to ask our organizers and guides to state frankly the impressions they have of us.

This "simple" question was, admittedly, a tall order, and one that taxes to the extreme the Japanese idea of what is fitting and becoming. But Hōzumi Genshō, the man who

had been most intimately involved in the guidance, rose to the challenge and made of his answer a fine, but not uncritical, testimony to the spirit of the Christian monastics.

Where do the material resources necessary for the upkeep of the many temples and Zen halls, buildings, and persons come from? In this connection, the experience we had of the takuhatsu (begging tour) made it look rather artificial and dated to us. Here the explanation was given that the begging is nowadays rather seen as one of the elements of spiritual training, and that the real support has to come from elsewhere.

We have noticed here in Japan a problem similar to the one we have in many parts of the Catholic world: the decrease in vocations, due to the fact that the contemporary mentality is less and less favorable to the monastic life. Here most of the problem seems to be solved by having a son of a priest succeed his father. But is this solution sufficient for the coming years?

The Zen masters conceded that a problem does indeed exist and expressed their concern in this regard.

Why do you feel that the monastic life of the Zen halls is the best and most adequate preparation for the "pastoral" life of a Buddhist priest which most of your young monks will be leading? Will their primary function be the teaching of zazen in their temples? And is the short training time sufficient to mature the person and animate his spiritual life for the rest of his life?

The question is evoked in a different form in the report of one of the monks: "At the end of our seven-day stay in the Zen hall, all these young "shaved heads" came to be individuals for me... I asked myself: What will become of them after their training?... This method probably forms very solid human beings, but it is not so certain that it will enable them to understand and guide their contemporaries" (B.B.). In the answer, the relationship between the monastic and pastoral life was not really taken up, but it was stressed that the Zen priest is expected to keep in contact with his training hall and sometimes participate in a sesshin.

In Europe there are many young people who want to learn zazen and ask us to teach them. But during our stay in Japan we have become conscious more than ever that we are not Zen masters, and we cannot spare the long years necessary for a thorough training in Japan. At the same time, we have thought until now that our personal spiritual experience complements in a sense our lack of teaching competence. What would you advise us to do, and what should we avoid doing?

The answers to this eminently practical question were much too complex to report on here, but tended to encourage these European spiritual guides to continue their teaching of zazen.

Modern civilization is bringing profound changes in the lives of people. What repercussions do these changes have on the Zen monastic life? And conversely, how is the monastic life challenged by the grave problems of modern society to contribute to their solution and not to shut itself up in a closed world?

A two-pronged question about the relationship of Zen monastic life to the modern world, the first part inquires about the adaptation of this life to life in society whence the recruits come and to where they will return to guide people later. As the reports testify, participation in the life of the Zen halls had provoked this question in most of the European visitors, who themselves had gone through all kinds of experiments of

adaptation during the last twenty years. "I cannot shake off the impression that this ritualistic life-style contains lumps of antiquated formalism" (J.W.). "An impression of dated monastic usages (the ritual of going to bed, the repetitions...)" (L.K.). "What interests the Zen Buddhists in this encounter is, among other things, whether we Western monastics manage to keep our traditional values and to give them new forms in a quickly changing society. As far as I could see there is scarcely any such adaptation yet in the Zen monasteries where, with but a few exceptions, everything still seems to run as it did seven centuries ago" (C.S.).

The second part of the question asks more directly for the concern with the great problems that beset modern life and the possible contribution to their solution. "But now a question began to haunt every one of us: Are we not, from the start, in a somewhat aristocratic and closed world, far from the real problems of today's Japan? Are not these temples and monasteries museums, splendid museums? Are they not a kind of preserve or conservatory of the old Japan? Or are they, on the contrary places where the soul of an entire nation, the wellspring of an entire culture, regularly renews itself? We do not as yet have the beginning of an answer" (B.B.).

To my regret, I must report that the question was not understood by the rōshi who was nominated to give an answer. There was nothing surprising in this, however, for this same scene of misunderstanding has been enacted often in the interreligious dialogue in Japan, when the problem of the relevance of religion to society is brought up. It looks indeed as if it is a problem that occupies people in the West a great deal and yet remains very alien to the religious consciousness of Japanese Buddhists in general.

The final question reflects, in all probability, the greatest surprise, the most radically new experience, and the most important lesson—one which may have a deep influence on their future practice of zazen—that came to the European monastics during their stay in the Zen halls. This rather complex question was originally asked from two different angles. I put them together in abridged form:

We had learned that the essence of Zen is precisely an appeal to that which is most personal, intimate, "subjective" in the human being, and that zazen is a path to the inner human being. Now we have experienced that the objectivity of rituals plays a very big role in the life of the Zen monk, and we get the impression that these rituals and cult are directed towards an other. How can we reconcile these two? In the West, Zen is usually presented as zazen. Here we have experienced that worship has a large place in the life of the Zen monks. What role and meaning does worship have in Zen? Can these two elements of Zen, zazen and worship, be separated?

Taking the two prominent elements contained in these questions apart for a moment, we can first notice the astonishment of the European monastics at finding Zen monastic life hemmed in by a set of rules, usages, and rituals, to the point that no room seems to be left for the person and personal spontaneity, and that scarcely any resemblance to ordinary daily life remains. "At Sōgenji, I soon felt a certain disillusion and irritation that the attention went so strongly to the learning of all kinds of minute usages and that the whole setting was so ritualistic. This irritation was partly due to the fact that I had experienced that ritualistic tendency in the first fifteen years of my Trappist life. Then I often had the feeling that the rituals alienated us from our-

selves, as if we had to put on a corset. Since Vatican II, however, a big dent has been put in this ritualistic way of life, and room has been created for the dynamics of personal spontaneity and interpersonal relationships" (J.W., summarized from different reports). "At Eiheiji I felt myself in the 'HIGH CHURCH,' a heavenly liturgy far away from daily life. I got the impression that the entire life of Eiheiji is liturgy, from getting up to going to bed" (C.S.). "The rules seemed to be inflexible; the law mattered more than the person" (V.C.). "I could not but feel that too much importance was given to minutely defined rituals and gestures, as if a calamity would occur if one were to take something with the left hand instead of with the right" (T.T.).

Still, the experience led many of the monastics to a kind of re-evaluation of ritual, and to the reflection that also in their own lives "ritual was intended to draw our attention to another, deeper reality, to bring us to a life of attention to the deepest reality" (J.W.). In the answers of the Zen masters, different roles of rule and ritual were stressed:

- The training function. Training by rules is necessary to come to Zen concentration; it helps to get rid of one's own little ego and to come to self-surrender.
- The "spreading" function. Just as the one moon is reflected in every wavelet on the surface of a pond, so is the unity of wisdom refracted into the many aspects of daily life. It is through the rituals that the concentration of zazen spreads over all the actions of the day, so that one's whole life becomes zazen.
- The "cosmic" function. As one of the monks related it later, "According to Soto Zen, one's entire behavior must be regulated by rules, because these rules are a reflection of the eternal order of things; and whoever observes these rules lives in enlightenment" (J.H.).
- The psychological function. Another monk phrased this answer as follows: "The abess added that rituals were necessary to avoid becoming voluntaristic." And in a later report: "In the conferences and exchanges at Eiheiji, I learned much, especially that zazen must be practiced in a liturgical framework, to avoid becoming ego-centric" (J.W.).

The second element of the question is eminently "theological." It inquires into the presence of an "other" in the Zen life. Seemingly nothing had prepared these Christian monastics, who in the Zen literature had come to know Zen as "the self only, no religion; nothing transcendent, nothing holy," to the encounter with the great role of cult and worship in Zen monastic life. "At our arrival, Reverend Aoyama brought us to the *hondō* before the Buddha statue to burn an incense stick. This gesture marked the importance of the religious dimension in our encounter" (M.D.V.). "We were impressed by the serious participation of the Zen monks in the sutra chantings and ceremonies, giving witness to a strong sense of the sacred... We were struck by the religious character of the Zen hall" (T.T.). "In Eiheiji, for example, we were admitted into the *zendō*, a place where no outsider had set foot since the founding of the temple seven centuries ago. For these monks this place is so sacred that we had to study a special ceremony before entering it, and our admittance there expressed their willingness to consider us practically as their equals... Respect for the sacred plays an important role in the Japanese monasteries" (C.S.).

For these religious pragmatists, this "bodily" experience was, of course, suffi-

cient to sweep away all the theory they had ever learned. The facts were there, but what did they mean in the face of the theory? "How do the Zen monks experience this cult and worship, since a Supreme Being does not clearly exist in their doctrine? 'You yourself are the Buddha,' they say, 'and the bowing is directed not at the other (reality or person) but at one's own deeper self'" (J.W.). The answer given by Hirata rōshi was: "We venerate wisdom, without distinguishing between the inner and the outer, beyond the discrimination of self and other." This answer set the visitors thinking, so that the same monk later wrote: "Buddhism, as it has struck me, is the living of the undifferentiated elemental unity in all that exists" (J.W.).

What did this encounter of Buddhist and Christian monastics do? Much could be said here, but again I would restrict myself to a few random remarks. It certainly made Zen a concrete reality for these Europeans, and they came to see the practice of zazen in perspective, as the soul of a much more embracing spiritual path. "What I knew of the Zen tradition from books received much more density and depth. I could test it all in reality. Through meditating together with Japanese Zen monks my zazen probably underwent a deepening, although such things are hard to gauge..." (J.W.). "It was during the *sesshin* that I discovered that the whole of daily life in a Zen monastery is pervaded by the Zen spirit" (C.S.). "After my stay in Shofukuji I think that I can begin to divine the heart of the Buddhist quest; and I feel confirmed and encouraged to pursue my own way as a Christian monk" (L.K.).

The encounter also brought a new breadth of vision to the participants. "With gratitude I look back on a trip that has become so meaningful for me and was a real encounter. 'Encounter'—to be broadened oneself so that one can admit others and through the others obtain a new look at oneself; and to be enabled to ask oneself a whole host of new questions" (J.W.). I have no direct evidence for the Japanese side, but the Europeans certainly went back home with a new respect for Japanese Zen and for Buddhism in general. "Their hard work and simplicity of life could be an example for us Christian monastics" (T.T.). "Admiration for the asceticism practiced by the *unsui*, an asceticism in function of a search for the truth which lies stored in ourselves as a hidden treasure" (H.v.H.). "In particular the personal encounter with many Zen monastics has made me feel the truth in their path and the fruits it bears. To specify a little: simplicity, attention, detachment, unsentimental but sincere charity, generosity" (J.H.). "I do not want to attempt a value judgment of Zen monastic life in Japan,... but I have the greatest admiration for the zeal for zazen which I found in the Zen halls. I can now say from experience: Zen is alive; the pure source of Zen is being passed on in the Zen monasteries" (J.W.). "For there is no doubt that, 25 centuries after his earthly life, the Buddha is still alive... From the way the head priest of the Tōdaiji in Nara spoke of him, for example, I felt well enough that the Buddha is still alive today. And it provoked in me the desire for opening my life a bit to the Buddha and of asking him the question: But who are you, after all?" (B.B.).

More testimonies could be added, but the core of the answer is undoubtedly this: the encounter brought the participants the astonishing experience and living proof that, for all the cultural and doctrinal differences, they share a common ideal and

that, notwithstanding all language barriers and other obstacles, they understood one another amazingly well. "I felt in truly fraternal communion with the *unsui*" (J.B.). "The most beautiful thing in this living together was that we were able to meet people who, with full commitment, openness, and good spirits, are striving for purity of heart and encounter with ultimate reality. We could recognize one another as companions on the way" (T.T.).

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List of participants cited:

B.B.	Benoît Billot, O.S.B., France
J.B.	Jacques Breton, France
V.C.	Vincent Cooper, O.S.B., Great Britain
S.G.	Stephen Gowers, O.C.S.O., Great Britain
J.H.	Jaap Hendrix, O.S.B., Netherlands
L.K.	Laurent Knaff, O.S.B., France
B.R.	Bernard Rerolle, S.M., France
C.S.	Chris Smoorenburg, O.P., Netherlands
T.T.	Thomas Timpte, O.S.B., Germany
H.v.H.	Henri van Heyster, O.S.B., Netherlands
M.D.V.	Marie-Daniel Vanhoomissen, O.S.B., Belgium
J.W.	Jeroen Witkam, O.C.S.O., Netherlands
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