

Reading the Bible with a Touch of Zen

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Zen (*ch'an*) is a way of meditation which restores a sense of the wholeness of things by leading one to a level of consciousness that breaks down the subject-object split that normally characterizes our view of reality. In the Buddhist sense, *zen* ends up in "emptiness" (*k'ung*), but it is an emptiness which fulfills rather than negates. *Zen* consciousness, which results from meditation practice, finds expression in many a Chinese poem, painting, or aphoristic saying.

This short paper chooses several Chinese poems which reveal a sense of *zen* and at the same time bring to the author's mind certain passages in the Bible which leave room for the interplay of consciousness. This need not be reading something extraneous into the text. *Zen* writers like to say that *zen* is "pure consciousness," without content; it is with this kind of "contentless" consciousness, if that is possible, that the biblical texts are read. Thomas Merton appears to have been concerned with this kind of question when he asks, "Is it... possible to say that both Christians and Buddhists can equally well practice *Zen*? Yes, if by *Zen* we mean precisely the quest for direct and pure experience on a metaphysical level, liberated from verbal formulas and linguistic preoccupations."¹

(1)

BECAUSE OF SNOW

因雪 宋·守端
瓊花一夜滿空山
天曉留言好雪寒
片片縱饒知落處
奈緣猶在半途間

1 Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968, 21st printing), p.44.

The poem depicts a snow scene at which people marvel and whereby they are prompted to say that the lovely scene is the result of a snowfall the night before. There is nothing wrong with the observation, but at most it contains only half the truth. A *zen* sense is suggested in the lines:

Even if the snowflakes know where they land,
That's only a half truth,
that hangs in mid-air rather than blossoms out in full.

Let us imagine that the snowflakes did stop in mid-air, that would give pause for thought, would it not? Of lighter weight than stone, they do not fall straight down, but they float adrift for a time before hitting the ground. May that not be true of life and reality as well? For not everything has to be bound by rigid cause-and-effect laws. Forgiving love, for instance, breaks the bonds of rigid retribution.

Turning to the Bible, Isaiah 55:10-11 says that, just as rain and snow fall from the heavens and never turn back, the Word of God never retracts itself, and, once spoken, it accomplishes something marvellously. Rain and snow fall to be sure, but after they have fallen to the ground, they nourish the soil to produce good food for humankind. While one can understand this passage without a sense of *zen* as such, the poem rather provokes our mind to go beyond conventional knowledge of cause and effect. The Isaiah passage urges us to go beyond the point where the snow and rain hit the ground, and, by analogy, to search further for the greater wisdom of God's words, not just muttering clichés about God's teachings.

By a play of Chinese words 落實 (*loh-shih*), 落空 (*loh-k'ung*), 倒空 (*tao-k'ung*), the thought of the realization of divine wisdom leads to the principle of kenosis, the emptying of one's self, as in Philippians 2:6-10. The idea of "emptiness" (*k'ung*) is hinted at in the poem by the description of snow filling the "empty" mountain. Christ's kenosis is not the same as Buddhist *k'ung*, but one echoes the other, and the mutual echoing makes for intriguing sounds, does it not?

A *zen*-awareness supports a breaking of the chains of legalistic moralism in Matthew's 5:43-48, where it is said that the sun rises on the evil as well as the good and rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. A restrictive kind of retributive justice shuts one's mind off from God's magnificent grace; on the other hand, it takes a *zen*-like reminder from a line about the universal bestowal of the benefits of the sun and the rain to break the fetters of the mind.

(2)

A THOUSAND-FOOT LONG FISHING LINE

千尺絲綸 唐·德誠
千尺絲綸直下垂
一波才動萬波隨
夜靜水寒魚不食
滿船空載月明歸

The first line, “A thousand-foot long fishing line drops down into the water,” invokes the image of a quiet fishing scene. It is evening and the stillness is broken only by the moving waves. The water is cold and no fish take the bait. When the fisherman is ready to go home, his boat is empty, without any fish, yet it is full – carrying a boatload of moonlight.

There is a subtle interplay between “emptiness” (*k’ung*), emptiness of things (like fish), and “fullness” – the fullness of enlightenment (*ming*), thanks to the bright moonlight.

There is also an empty boat scenario in the New Testament – Peter’s empty boat; having toiled all night but without catching any fish (Luke 5:4-11). It was only after he heeded Jesus’ bid to “go out to the deep” that he had the full catch, heavy enough to almost break the net. Was Peter an exemplary success story of “church growth” in the numerical sense? Well, he would have never thought of himself as a success in that sense. In fact when he came face to face with Jesus after the full catch, he said to his master, “Lord, leave me, I am a sinner!” What has *zen* got to Peter and his fishing boat? He wanted to be emptied of sin, and once that was done, he was ready to be the “fisher of men [and women].”

(3)

THE HOUSE OF FRESH WIND

清風樓上 五代·師僊
清風樓上 赴官齋
此日平生眼豁開
方信 普通年事遠
不從葱嶺帶將來

The poem recounts the author’s enlightenment experience as being comparable to the beholding of a bright light. He now realizes that the *dharma* (Buddhist teachings) was not just a matter of verbal transmission as during the Liang period when Buddhism was brought over from India, but that, rather, the receiving of the *dharma* can be a life-changing experience to one

who is enlightened, irrespective of the limits of time and space. In other words, the transmission of the *dharma* does not depend on temporal and spatial conditions exclusively and is discoverable anew in every age.

Who is the author of the poem. He is Master Chien Chen (鑑真), who became a famous missionary (to Japan). Chien Chen's experience reminds one of Saul of Tarsus, who was "struck" by a brilliant light on the Road to Damascus and who, adopting the name Paul, was subsequently changed from a zealous persecutor of the followers of Christ to a tireless apostle to the Gentile world. Remarkably alike, both Master Chien Chen and the Apostle Paul, in their respective missionary journeys, experienced shipwreck and endured hardships of all kinds, but finally achieved goals beyond anybody's expectation. Moreover, Chien Chen's understanding of the "transcendence-immanence" of the *dharma* is not unlike the "high" Pauline Christology of Colossians: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creatures; for in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, . . . He Himself is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." (Colossians 1: 15-17)

Buddhist *dharma* is not comparable to the Christian way. They represent two different paths. Yet may they not cross at certain points even as they diverge at other places? That may well be the case. Why, then, should there be any blockage of the passage ways to cut off communication?

(4)

IN THE MOUNTAIN

山居 五代·延壽
真柏最宜堆厚雪
危花終怯下輕霜
滔滔一點無依處
舉足方知終道場

Strong pines stand up to thick snow,
Frail flowers tremble under thin frost.
A flowing stream allows no spot to settle in,
yet, lifting one's foot,
there, is the occasion for *zen* practice.

A mountain scene of engaging contrast: strong pines standing up to thick snow, and frail flowers trembling under thin frost. The contrast is engaging enough to be thought-provoking – it is strength of character that can bear a heavy onslaught of winter weather, while a timid soul is shivering at the slightest show of cold. Let us not moralize too much, though. The scene is

very beautiful; we might as well enjoy it. How majestic the strong pine trees look holding up piles of white snow, and how touchingly lovely frail flowers appear under the threat of a thin layer of frost. Scenes such as this are actually common sights, only we are often numbed to their beauty and revelatory power.

Climate and ecology in Bible land are not the same as in urban areas of China, so that instead of snow and frost one is more apt to find the desert and heat. A prince who rules with justice is

like a hiding place from the wind,
a covert from the tempest,
like streams of water in a dry place
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.” (Isaiah. 32:1-2)

It is in these striking contrasts that the protection of God is effectively revealed. If that is so, then revelation can happen in the commonest of nature’s elements.

The tender care of God for the frailest of creatures is brought out in the lines describing the chosen “servant” of God: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.” (Isaiah 42:3) A bruised reed cannot even stand straight, and a dimly burning wick gives off smoke but no light, yet God’s care is lovingly revealed through these lowly objects people might have passed by without noticing. Jesus quotes the same passage from Isaiah to assure his redeeming love for even the Gentiles who have not heard his name before (Matthew 12:19-21). What may have passed us by unnoticed, God reveals in his unfailing mercy.

Back to the *zen* poem, in the last two lines present a curious scene: a flowing stream allows no spot to settle in, yet someone lifts one foot from water – there, a moment for *zen* arises. The flow of the river may be ceaseless on the surface, yet a person can wade through the river, and can nevertheless raise one foot above water. Ah, one’s consciousness may be awakened at that moment. One need not flow with the current only but can have the occasion to rise above the flowing stream – by first locating something to stand on. There is some spot to settle in after all. There is some reference point in the ever-changing flow of events after all – the *k’ung* (“emptiness) in Buddhist thought. Such awareness can come anywhere, anytime.

Speaking of vivid contrast, take these images from the biblical passages: “waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.” (Isaiah 35:7) God’s righteousness can be revealed in unexpected but striking ways.

On the other hand, divine revelation can be forthright and direct: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” (Amos 5:24)

Justice and righteousness move on like a mighty power, but they do not tumble down blindly. It is the Lord whom we must seek. “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.” (Amos 5:15)

The river or stream can be part of God’s design. Psalm 46:4:

There is a river whose streams
make glad the City of God,
The holy habitation of the most high.

(5)

WHERE ON THE GREEN HILL CAN’T THE *DHARMA* BE REALIZED?

何處青山不道場 唐·無名氏
何處青山不道場
何須策杖禮清涼
雲中縱有金毛現
正眼視時兆吉祥

A seeker wanted to go to the famous Wu T’ai Shan, the “holy mountains” of Buddhism, to meet the masters in order to learn the *dharma*. A wise person said to him, “Where in the green hill [a place already familiar to you] can’t the *dharma* be realized? Why would you need to take a ceremonial staff to go to Ch’ing Liang [a place in Wu T’ai Shan] for worship? Supposing the golden lion [on which Bodhisattva Wen Shu, according to legend, is said to have ridden] appeared in the clouds, correct insight would not necessarily view that as a blessed event.”

It is a fundamental *zen* Buddhist tenet that “Buddha-nature” is not confined to one particular location but is, rather, realizable everywhere. Buddha-nature is the same as “self-nature,” the realization by the enlightened self that the Buddha is within the self.

Chapter 6 of the Book of Acts recounts the persecution of Stephen, who, along with six others, had been elected earlier to attend to food service. He was a man of good repute and a pious follower of Jesus, but he was accused of blaspheming Moses and God by certain groups. Chapter 7 records the long speech in which Stephen answered the charges. There is nothing in what he said that can be construed as a blasphemy to God and Moses. He testified to his belief in God who has worked wonders in the history of the people of Israel, starting from His blessing to Abraham on going out into the far country, in His protection of the subsequent generations, to His guidance

to Moses and the Israelites in their journey out of Egypt as well as to Joshua and David after settlement in the promised land. It was good that King Solomon built a magnificent temple for God. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." Stephen then blasted the people who persecuted him: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit."

The New Testament does not speak the language of "Buddha-nature" and "self-nature" of course. In the words of Stephen, God's power and action, or the Holy Spirit, to those who believe, is not confined to a human-made house, even a house of worship. Alas! those who persecuted Stephen did not understand him. Even though he was stoned to death, the active Spirit of God to whom he testified lives on.

John 4:1-26 records an incident in which Jesus meets a woman by the well in a Samaritan city called Sychar. The woman, impressed by what Jesus said to her about water gushing up to eternal life, thought that he must be a prophet, and then said that her Samaritan ancestors always worshipped on the mountain nearby, and assumed that Jesus, a Jew, would insist that people worship in Jerusalem. Jesus said to her, ". . . the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . . God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The questions asked of the Buddhist seeker, "Where on the green hill can't the *dharma* be realized? Why would you need to take a ceremonial staff to go to Ch'ing Liang to worship?" these same questions in essence can be addressed to the Samaritan woman or a contemporary Christian worshiper. Even if impressive visual figures appeared, they would be a poor substitute for the true God whom we are called to worship.

As a concluding word, the exercises in reading biblical texts with a touch of *zen* recorded on these pages are not instances of the comparative study of religions. Nor do they need lead to syncretism, the random mixing of religious beliefs and practices. Neither is any assumption made concerning the possibility of a universal religion. Rather, it is simply to let the mind be awakened from conventionalized beliefs by a method of reading poems with a touch of zen consciousness; and then, with a mind thus opened up, let it be immersed afresh in related biblical texts. It is the experience of the writer that fresh insights come through, insights that remain identifiably Christian and yet enlivened by a heightened consciousness.