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ZAZEN AND CHRISTIANITY
by Koun Yamada Roshi

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues. Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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(Yamada Roshi [Mar 1907-13 Sep 1989] was a successor of Hakuun Yasutani Roshi and a teacher of Robert Aitken Roshi. His zendo is in Kamakura, Japan, where he taught a number of westerners, including many Catholic priests and nuns. This particular talk was given by him to a group of Catholics in Kamakura in 1975. This document was scanned from an un-referenced 2-page typed manuscript in the collection of the Sydney Zen Center.)

I am often asked by Christians, especially Catholics, whether they can practice zazen and still preserve the beliefs of Christianity. To that question I usually answer that Zen is not a religion in the same sense that Christianity is a religion. There is no reason, therefore, why Christianity and zazen cannot co-exist.

Almost all Buddhist sects can be called religions. Zazen, however, is quite different in this respect. Quite simply, it is the core of all Buddhist sects. As you know, there are many sects in Buddhism, but the core or essence of them all is the experience called satori or self-realization. The theories and philosophies of all the sects are but the clothing covering the core. These outer wrappings are of various shapes and colors, but what is inside remains the same. And the core, this experience, is not adorned with any thought or philosophy. It is merely a fact, an experienced fact, in the same way that the taste of tea is a fact. A cup of tea has no thought, no idea, no philosophy. It tastes the same to Buddhists as it does to Christians. There is no difference at all.

You may ask what makes this experience happen. Well, quite simply, it is when certain conditions are present to the consciousness of a human being, and a reaction occurs. This reaction we call the Zen experience. The reaction of this experience is always the same, regardless of the beliefs we may hold or the color of our skin. It could be compared to playing billiards. When we hit the balls with the same amount of power and in the same direction, all the balls roll along the same course and at the same angles, regardless of their color.

Now you may ask, what are the conditions that bring our consciousness to the experience? It is to concentrate with our mind in one-pointedness,

and to forget ourselves in it. The one-pointedness is achieved sometimes in breath-counting, sometimes in what call, "following the breath", sometimes, in "just sitting", and sometimes working on koans. You will notice that all these ways point inwardly. It is a very interesting fact, but when we concentrate on an object outside ourselves, for example, as in archery where we aim at a target, no matter how strong the concentration may be, we cannot attain the Zen experience. So in Zen practice, when we want to attain satori, we have to be absorbed inwardly.

Here you must remember that the experience attained by zazen practice is not a thought or a philosophy or a religion, but merely a fact, a happening. And strange as it may seem, the experience of that fact has the power to free us from the agonies of the pains of the world. It emancipates us from the anxiety of all worldly sufferings. No one knows why that experience has such wonderful power, but it does. This is the most important point, and it's the most difficult to try to explain.

In the Zen experience, a certain unity happens, subject and object become one, and we come to realize our own self-nature. This self-nature cannot be seen, it cannot be touched, it cannot be heard. Because of these characteristics we refer to it as 'empty' - (in Japanese, 'ku') - but its activities are infinite. So we say the Zen experience is the realization of the empty-infinitude of our self-nature or our essential nature, as it is often called.

When this happens, the fact is accompanied by a great peace of mind. At that moment, we feel as though the heavy burdens we have been carrying in our head and on our shoulders, indeed all over our body and soul, suddenly disappear as if thrown away. The joy and happiness at that time are beyond all words. And there are no philosophies or theologies attached to this experience.

Should such a fact be called a religion? I don't think so. It is called satori, or self-realization or enlightenment. Catholics are attaining the satori experience here in this zendo. I feel that in the future, they should do research into the meaning of the fact of satori from the Christian's point of view. (This should be the work of Catholics, not mine.)

Having discovered this new world, the Zen student must learn that it is essentially one with the phenomenal world we all know so well.

Regarding the relation between Christianity and Zen, I think it can be thought of as two highways, going in separate paths, but crossing at an interchange. The two roads may seem quite apart, but where they cross is common ground. Now, if we take Zen as a religion, Christianity and Zen do seem to be quite different. But their teachings have as their interchange a common area which belongs to both. That is the area of religious experience. I'm sure that a lot of words and phrases in the Bible could never have been uttered outside of a true religious experience. That, it seems to me, is not irrelevant to the satori experience in Zen.

What are we going to attain by doing zazen? There are three categories: 1) Developing concentration of the mind. 2) Satori-awakening, enlightenment. 3) Personalization of satori.

The first, to develop concentration, is of utmost importance in establishing and maintaining a successful life in this world. The ability to concentrate calms the surface of our consciousness. This is most necessary in making correct decisions and for receiving external impressions and information in the right way. Also, when the mind is

deeply absorbed, it does not easily yield to the influence of external circumstances. And, moreover, when we want to actualize ideas which arise in our heart, or when we want to accomplish some work or business, a strong concentration of mind is indispensable. The second, satori, is the most important to a Mahayana Zen Buddhist. Dogen Zenji, the great Zen master who brought Soto Zen to Japan, has clearly stated that without enlightenment there is no Zen. This satori does not happen necessarily by mere concentration. Our life problem of life-and-death, cannot be solved fundamentally by concentration. It can only be resolved by enlightenment and the personalization of that experience. If we want to free ourselves of the anxiety of the sufferings of life through zazen, the satori experience should be our main purpose for practicing zazen. Dogen Zenji has told us that we should pray for the help of Buddhas and Patriarchs. This resembles Christianity's prayers for intercession.

The third aim of zazen, the personalization or embodiment of satori, comes as a matter of course only after having attained satori. To attain this experience of enlightenment is not very difficult. For some people, only one sesshin is necessary. But to accomplish our ultimate personality is very difficult indeed, and requires an extremely long period of time. The experience itself is only the entrance. The completion is to personalize what we came to realize in the experience. After washing away all the ecstasy and glitter of the experience, the truly great Zen person is not distinguishable in outward appearance. He is a man who has experienced deep enlightenment and consequently extinguished all illusions, but is still not different externally from an ordinary man.

Through satori and zazen, you should not become a strange person, not an eccentric or an esoteric person. You should become a normal person, a real person and, as far as is possible, a perfect human being. I think the truly great Christian is not much different.

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