

Zen and Esoteric Buddhism

Handout for study on May 10th 2020 at
The United Lodge of Theosophists, London UK
(initial reading from *The Tao Te King* on the last page)



I. Zen and Buddhism

Introduction. The Zen school of Buddhism is little mentioned in early Theosophical literature, but this is not surprising, as it was hardly known in Europe and America until the 20th century, and was mainly confined to Japan. The first studies appeared in the West in the 1920s, but in any case there were no ancient Zen texts for 19th century scholars to translate, like the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali. Zen has no conventional sacred writings, only collections of sayings of the Zen masters - brief aphorisms or 'koans' - which instruct the disciple by trying to dispel the illusory connections of the mind, formed by the visible world. The school goes back at least as far as the Tang dynasty of ancient China (7th to 10th centuries CE), but like Buddhism in general it did not survive in China, but took root in Japan where it is still practised and is an important part of traditional Japanese culture.

Yet Zen embodies many of the Buddhistic principles understood by Theosophy to be strands of the Ancient Wisdom. It is not considered to be one of the Esoteric schools, but its teachings are as illuminating to seekers after Ancient Wisdom as the those of the Tao or the Upanishads.

The word "Zen" or "ch'an" in Chinese, derives from the Sanscrit word "Dhyana", one of the principal concepts of Buddhism - the training of the mind to reach the highest state it can attain while still in its physical incarnation. Dhyana is withdrawal of the mind from the level of automatic responses and sense-impressions, aspiring to a state of perfect equanimity and awareness (in Pali *upekkhā-sati-parisuddhi*). According to Zen, the mind becomes entangled in associations with the visible forms of existence which distract it from its true nature and identity. The mind should become as clear as a mirror. So *The Voice of the Silence* says "the mind is the great slayer of the real, let the disciple slay the slayer."

In the old books, the word Janna, from the same root, is defined as "to reform one's self by meditation and knowledge," a second inner birth. Hence Dzan, Djan, by phonetic proximity suggest a connection with the name of the "Stanzas of Dzyan."



ZEN KOANS AND SAYINGS

“It is better to realize mind than body.
When mind is realized one need not worry about body.
When mind and body become one
The man is free. Then he desires no praising.”

- *The Gateless Gate*, by Ekai, known as Mu-mon

“Be without thought and one’s thoughts are correct;
Be with thought and one’s thoughts become false.
If one considers neither with nor without,
One will always ride the vehicle that is prepared.”

- *Platform Sutra of the 6th Patriarch*

A student came to Bankei and complained "Master, I have an ungovernable temper, how can I cure it?"
"Show me what you mean" said Bankei.
"I cannot show you now, it happens unexpectedly," said the student.
"Then it is not part of your nature," said Bankei, "or it would be apparent at any time. When you were born, you did not have it, and your parents did not give it to you. This is all you need to remember."

- Master Bankei Yotaku (1622-1693)

“In spring, hundreds of flowers; in autumn a harvest moon;
In summer, a refreshing breeze; in winter snow will accompany you.
If useless things do not hang in your mind,
Any season is a good season for you.”

- *The Gateless Gate*, 8th Century

“All my life have these eyes beheld the changing scene of autumn.
I have seen enough of moonlight,
Ask no more.
Only listen to the voice of pines and cedars when no wind stirs.”

- Ryonen b.1797

II. No-mind and Nirvana

Introduction. In the earliest period of modern Theosophy, the focus was mainly on Western Esoteric Schools and the Egyptian Mysteries, and writers such as Swedenborg and the Neo-Platonists, as we find in the pages of *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877.

But increasingly Theosophists began to turn to Buddhism as an important strand of the Ancient Wisdom, particularly in its Tibetan Mahayana form. One of the concerns about Buddhism was the popular perception that it was an atheistic creed, teaching “anatta” (no self, no soul, and no Atman), that its ideal of Nirvana was equivalent to the complete annihilation of selfhood rather than the transition to another plane. Theosophists were not looking for anthropomorphized gods as represented in many exoteric Theistic traditions, but it was felt that Buddhism was not as negative as it seemed from some of its exoteric representations, and that the inner, esoteric doctrine, not fully divulged, or only hinted at in its public written forms, needed to be explained.

There was an Esoteric Buddhism (although HPB came to deprecate the term as being misleading to the public) which embodied the same higher truths that seekers find in all manifest religions - the golden thread running through the beliefs of many ages. The idea of ‘No-mind’ and extinction of the self were a misunderstanding of a more elevated doctrine.

EXTRACTS

Adhi Budha, the *one* (or the First) and “Supreme Wisdom” is a term used by Aryâsanga in his Secret treatises, and now by all the mystic Northern Buddhists. It is a Sanskrit term, and an appellation given by the earliest Aryans to the Unknown deity; the word “Brahmâ” not being found in the Vedas and the early works. It means the absolute Wisdom, and “Adi-bhûta” is translated “the primeval uncreated cause of all” by Fitzedward Hall.

Æons of untold duration must have elapsed, before the epithet of Buddha was so humanized, so to speak, as to allow of the term being applied to mortals and finally appropriated to one whose unparalleled virtues and knowledge caused him to receive the title of the “Buddha of Wisdom unmoved.” *Bodha* means the innate possession of divine intellect or “understanding”; “Buddha,” the acquirement of it by personal efforts and merit; while *Buddhi* is the faculty of cognizing the channel through which divine knowledge reaches the “Ego,” the discernment of good and evil, “divine conscience” also; and “Spiritual Soul,” which is the vehicle of *Atma*. “When *Buddhi* absorbs our EGO-tism (destroys it) with all its *Vikaras*, Avalôkitêshvara becomes manifested to us, and Nirvana, or *Mukti*, is reached,” “*Mukti*” being the same as Nirvana, *i.e.*, freedom from the trammels of “*Maya*” or *illusion*. “*Bodhi*” is likewise the name of a particular state of trance condition, called *Samadhi*, during which the subject reaches the culmination of spiritual knowledge.

Unwise are those who, in their blind and, in our age, untimely hatred of Buddhism, and, by reaction, of "Budhism," deny its esoteric teachings (which are those also of the Brahmins)...

Furthermore, the records we mean to place before the reader embrace the esoteric tenets of the whole world since the beginning of our humanity, and Buddhistic occultism occupies therein only its legitimate place, and no more.

Indeed, the secret portions of the "Dan" or "Jan-na"* ("Dhyan") of Gautama's metaphysics—grand as they appear to one unacquainted with the tenets of the Wisdom Religion of antiquity—are but a very small portion of the whole. The Hindu Reformer limited his public teachings to the purely moral and physiological aspect of the Wisdom-Religion, to Ethics and MAN alone. Things "unseen and incorporeal," the mystery of Being outside our terrestrial sphere, the great Teacher left entirely untouched in his public lectures, reserving the hidden Truths for a select circle of his Arhats.

* *Dan*, now become in modern Chinese and Tibetan phonetics *ch'an*, is the general term for the esoteric schools, and their literature. In the old books, the word *Janna* is defined as "to reform one's self by meditation and knowledge," a second *inner* birth. Hence *Dzan*, *Djan* phonetically, the "Book of *Dzyan*."

The Secret Doctrine, Introductory, Vol 1, pages xix-xx, by H. P. Blavatsky

Nirvana means the certitude of personal immortality in *Spirit*, not in *Soul*, which, as a finite emanation, must certainly disintegrate its particles a compound of human sensations, passions, and yearning for some objective kind of existence, before the immortal spirit of the *Ego* is quite freed, and henceforth secure against further transmigration in any form. And how can man ever reach this state so long as the *Upadana*, that state of longing for *life*, more life, does not disappear from the sentient being, from the *Ahancara* clothed, however, in a sublimated body? It is the "Upadana" or the intense desire which produces **WILL**, and it is *will* which develops *force*, and the latter generates *matter*, or an object having form. Thus the disembodied *Ego*, through this sole undying desire in him, unconsciously furnishes the conditions of his successive self-procreations in various forms, which depend on his mental state and *Karma*, the good or bad deeds of his preceding existence, commonly called "merit and demerit."

[Isis Unveiled Vol. 2, Page 320]

A. P. Sinnett writes in *The Occult World*: "The misunderstanding about the meaning of "Nirvana" is so general in the West, that it will be well to consider the following elucidation also:-

"Thus *annihilation* means, with the Buddhistical philosophy, only a dispersion of matter, in whatever form or *semblance* of form it may be; for everything that bears a shape was created, and thus must sooner or later perish, *i.e.*, change that shape; therefore, as something temporary, though seeming to be permanent, it is but an illusion, *Maya*; for, as eternity has neither beginning nor end, the more or less prolonged duration of some particular form passes, as it were, like an instantaneous

flash of lightning. Before we have the time to realize that we have seen it, it is gone and passed away for ever; hence, even our astral bodies, pure ether, are but illusions of matter, so long as they retain their terrestrial outline. The latter changes, says the Buddhist, according to the merits or demerits of the person during his lifetime, and this is metempsychosis. When the spiritual *entity* breaks loose for ever from every particle of matter, then only it enters upon the eternal and unchangeable Nirvana.”

[Isis Unveiled Vol. 1, Page 290]

Manas, or the Thinker, is the reincarnating being, the immortal who carries the results and values of all the different lives lived on earth or elsewhere. Its nature becomes dual as soon as it is attached to a body.

For the human brain is a superior organism and *Manas* uses it to reason from premises to conclusions...This is the lower aspect of the Thinker or *Manas*, and not, as some have supposed, the highest and best gift belonging to man. Its other, and in theosophy higher, aspect is the intuitional, which knows, and does not depend on reason.

[Ocean, Ch 7, W. Q. Judge]

III. Journey to the West

Introduction. Zen arrived in the West in the 1950s when intellectuals and progressives began to take up yoga, the I-ching, Tibetan texts, Zen Buddhism, and other spiritual traditions that became part of the counter-culture of the 1960s. Western guru Alan Watts was well-known for quoting the old aphorism that trying to explain Zen was like drawing legs on a snake.

The vogue for cryptic oriental sayings chimed in with the Existentialist philosophy made fashionable by the Beatnik subculture in the 1950s. Existentialism sees the human condition as undefined and self-determining. We must reject the ready-made identities our situation in the world imposes on us – we must rid ourselves of the illusion of the causal chain and discern our own path. And so the Seeker after the Way became one of the stereotypes of popular culture, and was embodied in the martial arts movies of the 1970s, in which an enlightened instructor would often quote Zen-like sayings.

A product of this genre was the 1978 Japanese TV series *Monkey*, an adaptation of the 16th century Chinese novel by Wu Cheng-en also known as *Journey to the West*. The story concerns the quest of a young monk to retrieve the authentic Buddhist scriptures from India, with the assistance of a roguish but partly-tamed monkey provided for his protection. The original novel is a treasury of wise sayings and wry insights into human nature, but it is not entirely a Buddhist text. When Buddhism came to China, in its more mythological and complex Mahayana variety, such as is still found in Tibet, it partly adopted the Taoist cosmology of demons, ghosts, dragons, magic spells and minor gods which we encounter in *Journey to the West*, and in the TV series an inflection of Japanese Zen came along with the Taoist mythology and the kung-fu.

What animates the story is the symbolism of the higher and lower selves. The monk is unworldly and ill-equipped for the pantomimes of illusion: sorcery, monsters and ghosts. These must be fought and defeated by his worldly companions, the Monkey, the Pig-man and the over-speculative Sand-man. They represent the conflicts and challenges of the Lower Manas as it tries to fulfil the mission of the Higher Self to find spiritual treasure and pure knowledge, in the symbolic form of the Tripitaka, the Buddhist scriptures. The horse which carries the monk is a symbol of higher thought, not the thoughts of desire, but it is not itself enlightened. For us as much as the original Chinese readers it is the journey we are all taking.

FROM *THE JOURNEY*

“To the ape's immortal body is matched a human mind:
That the mind is an ape is deeply meaningful.
Horse and ape together make mind and thought;
Bind them tightly together, and do not seek elsewhere.
When all phenomena are reduced to truth they follow a single pattern;
Like the Tathagatha reaching Nirvana under the two trees.”

- Chapter 7

A fool will not be led by a wise man, and a wise man will not be led by a fool.
But what happens when two fools set out on a journey together?”

- Episode narration

"Seeing that his intentions were indeed good Sanzang the monk asked him his name.
'Sun,' replied the Monkey King.
'I'll give you a Buddhist name that I can call you by,' said Sanzang.
'There's no need,' said the Monkey King, 'I've already got one: Sun Wu-kong – Monkey Awakened to Emptiness.'
'That's just right for our beliefs,' exclaimed the monk. 'As you look so much like a young novice, I'll give you another name and call you Brother Monkey.'
And from then on he was called Brother Monkey, or Sun the Novice."

- Chapter 15

"There is One. It is infinite. Yet what is called Buddha fills it. The One takes myriad forms, since everything is a form of the Whole. Forms change; the One does not change. Its total is always the same."

- Episode 26 (narration)

“The heart must be frequently swept,
The dust of emotions removed.
Control the ape and horse of the mind.
Only when breath is calm by day and night
Can one achieve the insight of a true adept.”

- Chapter 50



IV. Two Zen Stories

1. Before Zen entered Japan, four pupils of the Tendai school vowed to meditate for seven days in silence. On the first night, after one day of meditation, the oil-lamps went dim and one of the pupils said to his servant in a low voice: "Servant, refill the lamps." The second pupil was disconcerted "We are not supposed to say a word" he remarked. "You two are both foolish," said the third pupil "Why did you break your silence?" "I was the sensible one," said the fourth, "I didn't say anything."

The moral of the story is that when the mind enters into discourse, one thought follows another and all insight is lost.

2. At an America university in the 1970s, a Zen teacher gave a handout to his audience which was a blank sheet of paper. When the sheets ran out and some of those at the back complained they hadn't got the handout, the teacher solemnly gave his sheet of paper to the administrator and sent her to make more xerox copies. There was an uneasy pause while everyone waited for her to return. Some understood - it was a lesson about the restless mind seeking explanations which it can never really obtain.

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THE DOCTRINE OF INACTION

Initial reading

THE Sage occupies himself with inaction, and conveys instruction without words.

Is it not by neglecting self-interest that one will be able to achieve it?

Purge yourself of your profound intelligence, and you can still be free from blemish. Cherish the people and order the kingdom, and you can still do without meddlesome action.

Who is there that can make muddy water clear? But if allowed to remain still, it will gradually become clear of itself.

Who is there that can secure a state of absolute repose? But let time go on, and the state of repose will gradually arise.

Be sparing of speech, and things will come right of themselves.

A violent wind does not outlast the morning; a squall of rain does not outlast the day. Such is the course of Nature. And if Nature herself cannot sustain her efforts long, how much less can man!

Attain complete vacuity, and sedulously preserve a state of repose.

Tao is eternally inactive, and yet it leaves nothing undone. If kings and princes could but hold fast to this principle, all things would work out their own reformation.

If, having reformed, they still desired to act, I would have them restrained by the simplicity of the Nameless Tao. The simplicity of the Nameless Tao brings about an absence of desire. The absence of desire gives tranquillity. And thus the Empire will rectify itself.

from The Tao Te King page 106-107

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