

On the occasion of
The 75th Birthday of the Ageless Roshi

(Spotlights on the Transmission of Zen)

The transmission of Zen is an impossible task – yet here we are right in it.

Objects can be given and received. Objectified knowledge can be taught and learnt. Qualities can be demonstrated to some degree.

But Zen?

IT is no object; IT cannot be given or received. IT is no knowledge of something; in fact, IT has no qualities. IT cannot be taught or demonstrated. And yet, the Roshi makes the impossible possible – now as throughout nearly two and a half millennia. How?

Through the way he is. It is rather the “how” of his multifarious activities for his disciples than the “what” which is effective. Just as it is not the scriptures which open the experience, but the experience which opens the scriptures, so it is in general with spoken words. “Who has ears to hear, let him hear”, this is said numerous times in the Bible. We can hear only according to our state of consciousness and nothing beyond that. However, the words of the Roshi, charged with his experience, touch us, the way they are uttered, beyond the meaning of the words – as freely written ‘shuji’ penetrate our heart without the necessity of our ‘reading’ the characters and understanding their meaning. It is the ‘How’ which is all-important. It is this charge that ignites a spark in the heart of the hearer, stimulates a deep urge.

Now, does the Roshi reveal anything other than what is revealed by each thing, by the cry of a bird, by laughter or lifting the hand, by the wind or a stone? No! But while ordinary man cannot see what is revealed to him instant by instant, he is strangely drawn to one who sees. The wind, the stone, a cat and most humans have not realized what is. The Roshi has. So our heart-mind is drawn to this realization as by a magnet. It starts to react as a liquid does in the presence of a catalyst. Happy the man who meets such a ‘Catalyst’!

But when practice has ripened and we truly MEET the ROSHI, we ‘meet’ HIM in our deepest heart. We do not see HIM ‘face to face’ – there are not two faces. What then is there? Nothing!

So all the patience of the Roshi and all the trouble to realize - - - nothing? Oh this NOTHING: WIND, STONE, TIME – and wind-WIND, stone-STONE, time-TIME – each utterly different and unique and yet: the Same. There is TIME-time, there is I-i – no difference. There is MOVEMENT-movement – and all is still. Is that all? No, just a beginning.

Like a clown on a trapeze, tight-rope dancing in seeming awkwardness, falling down alternately right and left, somehow holding on to the trapeze, we – not seemingly awkward but willy-nilly – falling down now to the Essential- Qualityless – then back up again – and over we go to the other side, falling to the phenomenal qualities. How comic! How sad!

To live ‘on the trapeze’ in perfect equilibrium, the trapeze even having vanished, just firm ground, our very Home, the Quality-Qualityless, is possible for moments at best. At first the koan are our balancing pole, and by and by we become a bit steadier. To integrate experience into each cell so that we can live it, what a long process! But it cannot be hurried up; there is no “go and get it”. “Slowly! We have no time to make haste”, decades ago our teacher of mathematics said. It certainly applies to Zen-practice.

Oh, the genius of the *koan*! A closed barrier to everybody-consciousness, each turns into an open entrance to our turned consciousness: barrier-entrance – signifying exactly the state of balance ‘on the tight rope’. By challenging us they create an emergency and – phuuuiit – we pass. No barrier, no entrance. Yes – afterwards.

Europeans, however, now and then manage to spoil this process in a similar way as Herrigel did who in Japanese archery manipulated his thumb instead of staying there

without intention or interference until the arrow took off by itself.¹ Those using this ‘thumb-trick’ come up with formally correct answers, - yet, made-up answers, arrived at by the very means they have become used to for so long. So the ‘correct’ answer is entirely incorrect. It is, as a Hasidic master once said to a Rabbi: “What you have expounded is correct. But your knowledge has no life.”² As the means, so the end/result. Path and goal are one.

The transmission to a culture as different from the Japanese one as the imperial summer residence of Schönbrunn is from Katsura Rikyu, as English ‘high tea’ from ‘o-cha no yu’, as Tizian from Sesshu, is beset with pitfalls, the consciousness of the respective people being as different from the Japanese one as their cultural expressions, their languages and ways of writing are. Since it is the ordinary mind with which we start, this has to be taken into account. It affects e.g. the way the *kyosaku* is used.

Today, however, there are many indications that the Western consciousness undergoes a deep change. The ‘great track’ to the East of thousands and thousands of Westerners is one of them. We also hear these days from Western physicists and astronomers what sounds like words uttered by ancient Buddhists or Hindus. The results of Western science now point to a universe which resembles rather that of Eastern sages millennia ago than the narrow earth-centered one which the West up to quite recently had insisted upon.

Be this as it may, the transmission as such goes through the ROOT-of-no-qualities, a ROOT which knows of no differences. In this ROOT-state everything falls into One. Here the disciple awakens to THAT which the master had awakened to before. Without that, Zen is just welcome as a useful ‘method’, a ‘technique’ for other ends. But when there is the slightest interference by any secondary aim, by any concept or plan, Zen evaporates for us – though IT never vanishes. But what then remains as process amounts to patching up this or that old garment, or, as the Roshi often has said, “to binding the branches of different trees together”.

¹ “Zen in the Art of Archery”, by Eugen Herrigel

² “Tales of the Hasidim” by Martin Buber

Genuine transmission is impossible without having undergone the Zero-state and that of the Zero-multitude. Even with this experience it cannot be undertaken lightly. When are we ever truly sufficient? Do we not hear e.g. that even Bassui Zenji in spite of his profound enlightenment hesitated at first to transmit Zen even within his own culture, again and again withdrawing from his would-be disciples? Lack of compassion? No! Just deepest compassion, based on profound responsibility.

ZEN, beyond all names and terms, cannot be claimed by any religion and of course, also not by Buddhism. There is no such thing as ‘Buddhist Zen’ or ‘Christian Zen’ or ‘Hindu Zen’. A scream in pain, a cry of joy – is that Buddhist? Christian? Hindu? Islamic? Or what? Ha!

ZEN just IS: our very heart-mind: the graceful bamboo – the meowing cat – fragrance of the plum blossoms – storm on the ocean – pain – laughter – ah, when is there a moment that IT is not? From where to where could Zen be brought, could Being be brought – BEING beyond “to be or not to be”?

But since we are not aware of IT, there is practice, in the process of which obstructions, interference, delusions (our favorite ‘toys’) slowly, slowly fade away. (Only much later it dawns on us that not even the ‘sickness’ is outside the ‘cure’ – but to see that we have to be ‘cured’ somewhat.) Patiently again and again the Dharma is taught – but who can hear it? When, after all, we have come to be aware of the Great-ORDER, going right through, unobstructed by being the numberless things and changes, changeless, empty, infinite, perfect – or rather: of no qualities - , in stillness and in chaos, nothing separate and outside of IT, we may exclaim: “ So, that is what is called ‘Dharma’!

Indeed:” When it rains the earth gets wet” – just that – what a revelation! But the blind one considers that a platitude; it can’t be helped.

When becoming aware that our inside coincides with what we had been told all along, deepest gratitude and admiration arise. Only now we can begin to truly esteem the treasure of the teaching. But now, to the degree we have grasped IT, IT is our own

treasure, as if nobody ever had said so before. Ah, if only everybody could be aware of This, of his Treasure! But in guiding Zen-companions – now seeing it ‘from the other end’, so to speak – it is evident that there is no ‘giving’ as there was no ‘taking’. All that can be done is to utter this own Truth in the certainty that it tallies with the age-old, ever new Dharma and to see to it that at any given time each one according to his state is in the best position to discover IT in his practice.

The telephone rings – I get up. How? Unexplainable by ever so many volumes. A ‘miracle’ has occurred: I got up! Nothing has changed. No intention – just happenings – facts of no quality - - - and we glance at the world where words like ‘good’ or ‘evil’, like ‘sacred’ or ‘profane’ have no meaning whatever.

How fragrant the earth now in spring!

Glimpses of the Second-Naturalness, i.e. the Primordial-Naturalness to which the Path leads us ‘back’ – glimpses of THAT which walks the feet, inclines the hand, moves the fingers on the typewriter, puts the blankets in order in sleep, awakens us on the minute, an ‘inbuilt alarm clock’ working to perfection – ah, of that which works to perfection each aspect of our life. No interference – no intentions – no Emptiness – no things – yes no Dharma, no God - - - “glimpses of being rid of God”, as Meister Eckehart says³, the state of “the Buddha killed”.

Yes, only by being rid of ‘Buddha’, forgetting Buddha, we find BUDDHA; and we find HIM to the very degree that we find ourSELF. Only by being rid of ‘Christ’, forgetting Christ, we find CHRIST.

Is this not what Jesus-Christ tells us by”...it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you..”(John 16,7)? As long there are superimpositions by any attachment, any clinging to Himself, by any ideas about him – about anyone or anything else, for that matter -, the Spirit, THAT, cannot be realized, and we are far from the Reality.

³ Meister Eckehart “The Poor in Spirit”, Math.5,3 (translated from German)

“Thou shalt make unto you no idols and erect no graven images ...”, we read in the Bible (Lev.26,1). But making idols, erecting graven images, images deeply engraved in our consciousness, is what we are constantly doing. All our concepts, ideas, dogmas, imaginations are nothing but ‘graven images’, and the more closely man is involved in a cultural set-up, the more difficult for him to tear himself loose from those.

‘Buddha’, ‘Christ’, ‘Buddha-Nature’, ‘God’ – what we conceive of under these terms in our everybody-consciousness are projections of this consciousness and thus necessarily as limited and conditioned: idols.

Isn’t it the physicist’s consciousness, the way his attention is directed, which determines whether light appears either as waves or as particles? So it is with everything: characteristics of our mind.

This fact cannot be stressed enough with Western Zen-companions with whom the subject-object split is far more radical than with the Japanese. But finally it has to be experienced – no other way to overcome our delusion.

Buddha, Buddha-Nature – Christ, God, Holy Spirit – they are not objects of our knowledge or non-knowledge. In fact: nothing whatever is! Even when all is said, described, explained about a blackbird, we don’t know the blackbird at all, and this is not the living, chirping reality: BLACK BIRD !

How much more evident is this fact with the Supreme NAMELESS ONE, with THAT which by its very nature offers no hold for any thought. But our understanding of any being or thing which we – wrongly – regard as “object” is only an apparent one as well.

Western scientists slowly become aware of this fact. “It is a question whether scientific man is in touch with ‘reality’ at all – or can ever hope to be”, says L.Barnett ⁴, and more and more scientists tell us now “We don’t know” – words indicating a significant change, an insight which provides soil for *zazen*.

Without knowing ourselves we don’t know anything, this is an ancient wisdom. But when about 700 years ago Meister Eckehart said: “How may man recognize God without

⁴ Lincoln Barnett “Dr. Einstein and the Universe”, p. 16

first having recognized himself”, Europe was not ready. Is it ready now to follow e.g. his demand: ”You shall love him (God) as he is a non-God, a non-Spirit, a non-person, a non-shaped one: but rather pure, clear Oneness, far from all duality“? ⁵ Quite a shock to a dualistic culture, to one where it is heresy to this day to regard God or the Holy Spirit not as persons. But here everything is transcended. “Pure, clear Oneness”, the “loving one” included, himself not separate from That, “far from all duality” - - - How far have we strayed from the awareness of That!

Without passing through the ‘dark night’ of St. John of the Cross, without utter deprivation and loss, without the Great Death, as said in Zen, there always remains a clinging to names, forms, terms, i.e. to the surface, the objectified. But when, stripped of any attachment, THAT is experienced, there suddenly arise deep veneration, gratitude and faith – such is the paradox. Now being bare of all clinging, everything can be set up again freely, freely we can utter names, have pictures and statues. Now everything is new and very natural.

Who is anchored in THAT from which all religions spring and to which they lead back, feels an equal respect for each of them, while he may choose the expression through his native religion. But having been ‘soaked’ to some degree in the One-Reality of which all names, forms, terms of whatever great religion are equally valid expressions, he discovers THAT under each guise. Now it is evident that the very names, forms and terms which for our everybody-consciousness hide the Reality are revealing IT now.

It is death which presents us with LIFE. It is death which makes us transcend the duality of life and death. This gives the scale for *dokusan*: each one of us inevitably goes through suffering and must surely die his own death; so it is urgent to go beyond some puny experience. This implies severity. Our everybody-consciousness has a terribly strong hold on us, and there is resistance, quite often caused by fear of the Unknown. However, death knows of no negotiating – and it is impending any time. So we better ‘die’ now.

⁵ Meister Eckehart “On the Renewal in the Spirit”, Eph.4,23 (translated from German)

Nowadays the dualism of the Mediterranean cultures with its ensuing deadly technology has brought mankind to the verge of extinction and more and more Westerners try to turn in upon themselves. They join this or that Path of spiritual training, Zen among them, searching for something, not quite knowing what, but which, no doubt, is unconditioned peace.

Weren't it always the troubled times which were especially apt to bring forth spirituality or even spiritual genius? In this respect we live in the best of all times. A unique chance and happy the man who has found a Path which is endless, an inexhaustible, unsurpassed Treasure leading him to discover IT by direct experience as his own inexhaustible Treasure, the very Treasure he IS.

But the more we 'see' of 'IT', the deeper the longing finally to be able to live IT right through in full awareness, and with it to come to ultimate freedom and peace in joy and in suffering. So we 'move' on and on in this fathomless depth . . .

This small sketch, poor as it is, I offer to Go-Roshi Sama who, never sparing himself, has given me whatever he only can give, even aside of hundreds of *dokusan* and numerous go-Teisho. It is offered in deep gratitude for his guidance throughout many years on a Path to which I owe a 'second life'.

Gassho

Kamakura, March 18, 1982

Koun-An