

The Nothing and the LOVE – Effort and Grace

There is hardly a conversation about Japanese Zen and Western culture, about Buddhism and Christianity, without sooner or later someone mentioning that there was a basic difference between the two: Zen and Buddhism, so, he or she says, are monistic while Christianity is theistic. Instead of ‘monistic’ more often than not the word ‘atheistic’ is used. The conversation proceeds to show that the basis of Christianity was love, while Buddhism, especially Zen, as well as the Indian Advaita know of no love, having just nothing but the One and the Nothing to aim at. Where there is nothing, there is certainly no love, there is just this Nothing which knows of no relation – so one argues.

The Christian further says: “At any moment I receive my existence from the hands of God, I am created by God’s love and for love.” And he goes on: “In Far Eastern religion, such as Japanese Buddhism, the emphasis is on ‘effort’ and man comes to enlightenment as far as it is possible for him alone by his natural powers. In Christianity, however, we have God’s grace and love, and man comes to salvation thanks to his grace, i.e. through divine powers. Man also participates in the inner-Trinitarian love experience. But the Buddhist does not admit of God.

The more or less final answer to these arguments lies in the fruits: The lives of Western Christians and of Japanese Buddhists. Even the most superficial glance across the world’s history shows immediately that the religion of love has generated more wars, struggles, revolutions, persecutions, strife and hostilities of all kinds than all the Eastern religions of no-love taken together ever did, Japanese Buddhism included.

How is this possible?

There is one laconic answer: love, as usually understood, has an opposite: hate, dislike. “Nothing” knows of no opposite. “Love” as conceived of by almost all Christians thus does not escape duality. “Nothing” does.

Before going into the question concerning Zen and Western Christians, it must be pointed out that Buddhism, and again Japanese Buddhism, is not an undifferentiated whole. There are as many Buddhist sects as there are Christian ones having sprung up over many centuries. Among those there is e.g. Jōdo-shu in Japan founded by Hōnen towards the end of the 12th century. The basic idea is precisely that man cannot rely on his own strength (Jap.: jiriki), but depends on the strength of another (Jap.: tariki), that is to say, on

the intervention of the saving Amida.¹ So the above mentioned generalization does not hold good, as this one example may show, being selected from many other possible examples we may find in Eastern and Far Eastern Buddhism. But here we are not concerned with that. We shall limit ourselves to giving a few spotlights in reply to those statements made by Westerners and which are, summed up as follows:

On the Christian side:

Love and Grace of God - receiving our existence at any given moment from the hands of God - participating in the inner-Trinitarian love experience - salvation through divine powers.

On the side of Zen, of Buddhism:

No God – there is the Nothing and the effort of man – liberation through enlightenment achieved by man’s natural powers – no love.

When it is said that “we receive our existence from the hands of God”, there is one who takes and one who gives, implying a subject that gives, God, and an object that receives, us.

The separation into subject and object is just one of the characteristics of the Fall and as we have seen, its most basic and important one. The abyss between subject and object, the abyss of duality, is overcome by Jesus-Christ. But in our everybody-consciousness we cling to the idea of splitting into subject and object.

Moreover, by the expression “from His hands” the notion of an anthropomorphic God becomes rather evident. A bear would probably say “from His paw”, or a horse “from His hoof”, and this would not be less respectful than our “hands”.

And again: God is a person. Wherever man conceives of himself as a “person”, i.e. as a single, isolated entity, there we also have a personal God. And where is that so? In the cultures of the Mediterranean area, precisely the area of the Fall: in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

According to the Revelation this separatedness, caused by the Fall, is overcome by God’s love and grace, by the mission of His son, Jesus-Christ. But is this separatedness really overcome, did it disappear? Certainly! So Revelation says.

¹ Amida = Sanskrit: Amithaba, one of the Dyana Buddhas. See also “Buddhism in Japan” by E.Dale Saunders, Charles Tuttle Comp. , Tokyo, 1972, p.193

But do Western Christians truly experience this fact, or is it just only a “belief” and “admitting” it to be true? When we hear of giving and receiving, of a love going from God to us, from there to here, there still seems to linger the ancient consciousness of the Fall, the pre-revelation state. Such love cannot be LOVE, it is at most a step towards it or an aspect thereof.

We become one with that which we love. In this case here: Man becomes one with that he was never separated from and never will be, with what he is One, a priori, basically, in all eternity.

In the Bible we read:

“.....is thy love of me before the foundation of the world.” (John 17, 24)

By these words of Jesus-Christ it gets quite obvious that this love has nothing to do with a love from there to here. “Before the foundation of the world” there was neither subject nor object. This is indeed the LOVE transcending all giving and receiving, all “from where” and “to where”. LOVE beyond the Fall, beyond any dualism, LOVE which is all-including, the In-Itself-Playing-Love, LOVE through which all is that is.

Or we read:

“For God so loved the world . . .” (John 3, 16)

Is the world then separated from Him? No! Here it is the same as with the words quoted above: No love from there to here, but LOVE playing in itself. The world itself is of God. Or does God have a limit beyond which He were not and something else began? In that case, He would not be God, but the “dead” God of our conceptual notions. If our bare existence is of God, so is the existence of everything existing – thus also of “the world”. Or: Where does God end? Where does the world that is outside of this limited God begin? Duality again! Duality of our everybody-consciousness, the duality of the Fall.

But this is not the only possible state of human consciousness. Dōgen Zenji, the great Japanese Zen-master of the 13th century (1200-1253) says:

“The world gets real through enlightenment.”

Here we have Reality, bare and direct, not clouded by any of those ideas which we ordinarily attach to everything. Freed from the illusion of “ourselves and others” we come to see what IS.

In the Bible it is said:

“Thou shalt not make unto you any graven image or any likeness, whether of that in heaven above, or of that in the earth beneath, or of that in the water under the earth.” (Exodus 20, 4)²

It is just this order that is perfectly obeyed by Dōgen Zenji’s enlightened consciousness. If we fulfil this demand, we come to experience Reality. As Christians we then may say: We experience the world as of God. As Zen-Buddhists we may say: We experience the WORLD (in its true Reality) - - - , if we say anything at all. The world-as-such! WORLD! This is not a world outside of us, outside of God, not the world-of-nature as opposed to the world-of-the-divine.

Where do the “divine powers” end? Where the “natural powers” begin? Such a division exists only for our space-bound, time-bound delusions, not for an enlightened consciousness. Are the “natural powers” outside of and separate from the “divine powers”? No, only our “fallen” consciousness tears open the gap of: here natural – over there divine, or for that matter: here deluded – there enlightened, breaks open the gap of good and evil. Do the divine powers not also manifest as the natural ones -, if after all we are so eager to separate and name them in a dualistic way. Isn’t it immaterial, how we name these powers -, or whether we name them at all? The decisive point is: Do we experience liberation and do we find that peace that “passes all understanding”, or not?

Angelus Silesius says:

“God has become man for you: If you now don’t become God you revilest his birth and scoffest his death.”³

This is nothing else but what has been said about the everybody-consciousness: The Revelation is not realized by our fallen mind, not experienced. Such consciousness is only nominally Christian. But Dōgen Zenji e.g. who had never heard anything about Christian Revelation realized that very Consciousness Angelus Silesius demands.

Is the experience of liberation, whether one calls it salvation or enlightenment, really as different as one says? The path leading us there may be different, but the experience itself? Formulations and interpretations - afterwards - are different again, according to each respective culture. Meister Eckehart won’t

² See also: “No image! No Likeness! Hakushi!”, p . . .

³ Der Cherubinische Wandersmann, I, 124

speak of Buddha, Dōgen Zenji not of Christ. But the experience itself does not have any “colour”, any “form”, any qualities whatever, does not know of any names – and if it had any trace of these, it would not be liberation, but just nothing than the experience of something objectified again.

When we get our thumb squeezed in a door and cry out “Ouch!”, is that a Christian or a Buddhist or a Hindu Ouch? No! It is what it is: Ouch! Direct – no labels attached. The Biblical words

“I am who I am”

point out the same Reality. Ouch is Ouch. I am who I am. That is all! But as soon as we start to formulate, we return willy-nilly to the objectified.

Whether we call the experience of liberation now salvation in Christian terms or whether we call it enlightenment in Buddhism – both are characterized by the discovery of the non-existence of the ego, i.e. of dualism.

St. John of the Cross says:

“In order to arrive at being everything,
Desire to be nothing.”

Is that so different from the demand “hakushi!”⁴ of the Zen masters? Devoid of everything! What is devoid of each and any qualities? What we cannot see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think – which has no form, no colour, no weight, no size, no sound, no fragrance, etc. – so it is called Nothing. God-Absolute has no qualities. God-Absolute is not in contrast to anything else. And so it is with Nothing. Against what could Nothing stand? Against what could God stand? Can Nothing, can God be in contrast to anything? Against what can something stand that has no qualities whatsoever? Only a dead, thought-up god, a dead imagined “nothing” could be in contrast to something – an academic nothing which never amounts to Nothing, just being in fact: nothing in contrast to something.

Meister Eckehart says:

“When the soul has reached the level of being able to suffer the activity of God, then it is also enabled to have no God anymore.”⁵

⁴ “hakushi“ = “white paper“, stark whiteness

⁵ Meister Eckhart On the Renewal in the Spirit

Because here all duality has come to an end. Here is no question anymore of: here on earth the “miserable earthen worm” – over there God. All concepts and thoughts have come to an end. Silence.

If it is called in Zen at all, it’s Buddha-Nature, True-Self - - - - and immediately one wipes one’s mouth, such calling it this or that being a blemish. The name of JHWH may not be pronounced in Judaism either. No image, no likeness! No labels! Why quarrel about “God” or “Nothing”?

The experience of liberation the Christian calls “I am experiencing God”, while the Buddhist experiences the Nothing, and arguments follow, saying: “But this is a great difference!” Yes - - - - , if one mistakes God for something that had qualities, something imagined, something intelligible. But God has as little of all that as Nothing has. In God there is everything, there is only GOD! In Nothing there is everything; there is only NOTHING! But while the term “God”, sounding like a name in our ears, again and again induces ideas in us, our thinking immediately is crushed by Nothing. But GOD can as little be thought as Nothing can be!

So we also find in Christian mystics “the unknown” with St. John of the Cross, the “Nothing” with the anonymous author of “The Cloud of Unknowing” – just as in Zen – just as with Meister Eckehart - and again in Japanese Zen the “ku”, the Void . . .

Qualities can be thought up. A thought-up god is not God, but only a picture, an image of God.

How again is it with the Trinity, the Tri-Unity?

There are: God-Father – Son Jesus Christ – the Holy Spirit Ghost – in other words: The Absolute – the phenomenally Manifested – and both in One. Each of the Three again has a double aspect: absolute-phenomenal: God, the Absolute, acting as father and thus also phenomenal, and completely one and identical with this, Christ, Son of God, absolute. Not two sides of the same, no. Truly One. The Holy Spirit: acting as the love between Father and Son, phenomenal – and simultaneously, identical with it SPIRIT, absolute.

But all this talk about aspects here still is nonsense and thousand miles away from experienced True-Reality. Jesus-Christ: One. GOD-JESUS-CHRIST-HOLYSPIRIT: ONE! Tri-Unity.

Thus the inner-Trinitarian experience of love cannot be other than the Love-playing-in-itself – else there were three gods, six aspects . . . With our

thoughts we in vain try to knock at (shake) this impenetrable One-Manifold as ONE, at the unintelligible of quality-qualitiless: ONE! Here, our thinking breaks down, fainting. Here is True-Reality. “Our world” with all its “myriad things” – full of qualities – completely without any quality! Completely divine, completely ordinary, completely of God, completely World! Why then only can we not suffer, experience, LIVE, this? Where is the obstacle? The jungle of our concepts and ideas, our dualistic Fall-thinking – the only devil there is – the ego - - -

Which price then would be too high for this experience? None! And yet we cowardly cling to names, concepts, labels, instead of throwing it all away, getting rid of all things, of everything, and to throw ourselves, bare and naked, into the naked Godhead – or better: instead of discovering ourselves within the naked Godhead – ONE! This, however, is the NOTHING.

If someone may say now that this were not love - - - then love is of no interest. Then it is only a “loving from somewhere to somewhere”, stuck in duality, in opposite forces. But the LOVE of God is beyond such pairs of opposites; it transcends love and hate.

LOVE has nothing to do with one or two: those are only concepts of our “fallen” way of thinking. In this our miserable consciousness we do not have the shadow of an inkling that there is a love beyond any directedness, beyond any one or two. And this though the Bible distinctly points it out to us: Trinity – Tri-Unity! The manifold as One. The phenomenal-Absolute!

Here now we have to speak of the Bodhisattva.

Is this someone who does not know of love?

The Bodhisattva is a being who, having experienced deep enlightenment, “postpones” becoming a perfect Buddha, ere not each sentient being has experienced liberation, enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva is a being to whom the world of Zero-Infinite has revealed itself as identically One with the world of the manifold-phenomenal, i.e. one who has experienced the world of Infinity, of the Absolute, the Nothing, of God and has “returned” to the marketplace, that is into the world of the phenomenal – without any movement, without changing his place, his position, experiencing the phenomenal as undivided, not separated from the Absolute. Only now the phenomenal has LIFE, now “the world has become real” for him. He has overcome the state of separatedness, of dualism, he is living the Mani-Unity. There is not a certain place, the world of the True-

Nature, and another place, the world of illusion. In the Absolute there is no activity; therefore: God-father. In the phenomenally-manifested there is no Reality: therefore Jesus-Christ. Complete enlightenment is the ever present living and lived eternity-infinity moment by moment; the Absolute-Phenomenal, ABSOLUTEPHENOMENAL! Thus the compassionate Bodhisattva is living - - - in the religion of no love.

With our thinking we can grasp the phenomenal, that which has qualities. But it is impossible for us, no matter how brilliant our intelligence may be, to think the Absolute, that which has no qualities. More impossible still – if there were any increase of “impossible” - to our thinking capacities is it to grasp the quality-qualitiless simultaneously as insolubly One. All our thinking is ever Fall-thinking.

The Nothing of the Buddhists is by no means foreign to Christianity, to Christian mystics.

Angelus Silesius says:

“God truly is nothing, and if he were something,
he is so just for me, as he chooses me for him.”⁶

The Nothing of the Zen-masters, the Buddhist Nothing – in Christian terms.

He who has been so fortunate as to “catch just a glimpse” of this Nothing is tempted to praise It by giving It a thousand names and attributes, to sing of It in his enthusiasm. Now even all these attributes are True, are Real, being carried by the experience of this Nothing, of One, of God, of the Living. But woe to us, if we were to start out with that: We nevermore would get out of the jungle of qualities.

How then do we arrive at such an experience?

Which Ways are there in West and East?

One thing is clear: Whether East or West, it is impossible without effort. He who takes the Path of Zen has to strive with all his might and main. But does the Christian passively wait for the kingdom of God to drop down on him? No, never! That is very evident e.g. in the “Ascent of Mount Carmel” by St. John of the Cross.

And let’s hear again Angelus Silesius:

⁶ *Der Cherubinische Wandersmann*, I, 200

“It is not God who gives the kingdom of heaven: you yourself have to draw it to you, and to strive for it with all your strength and eagerness.”⁷

There is not the slightest doubt that the Christian just as the Zen-Buddhist struggles for his salvation, liberation, enlightenment with all his strength.

But what are the ways leading us there? Where are the masters? Where are the masters in the West who can lead us there?

As Christians we may say: Jesus-Christ is guiding us there through Scripture and Church.

Let's see:

With our everybody-consciousness, our consciousness of the Fall we are unable to read the Bible. It is not the text that could reveal us the experience, but the other way around: our experience reveals us the text. One can only read what to a certain degree and on some level of consciousness one knows already, has experienced already. Thus we can read the Bible only “backwards”, that is only to the degree we have experienced already. The Bible is written throughout from a level of consciousness that lies far beyond everybody-consciousness. Scripture itself leads our attention to this fact:

“Who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Math. 11, 15)

Just so! So it is.

But how do we come to “have ears to hear”, how can we develop these ears?

Scholarly philosophic and theological talks or writings are of no help being almost all “hearsay”, second hand information, being “images and likenesses” and only the so-called “mystical theology” is an exception.⁸ What is not carried and charged by direct experience that does not ignite the heart. The words of the Bible are Living-Words, but the level is so high we can't “read”, can't “hear”, can't “reach” them by ordinary consciousness to which academic philosophy and theology thoroughly belongs.

The sermons? The majority of those who preach, preach their “own understanding”, their own intellect – dead words, second hand again, not alive by own experience. So again they don't reach us. We can't grasp the words of the Bible then – even though we may “understand” them. But “words understood” are already again “dead words” in our head: we cannot transform them to a Path – we cannot live them.

⁷ *Der Cherubinische Wandersmann*, I, 211

⁸ See also *Theology, the Science of God*, p . . .

The Paths, the method has the East.

When now a Christian may say: “But we have the Revelation; we don’t need any methods”, I shall ask once more: “Where are the fruits?” Where among all the millions of Christians do I find today a truly “saved”, liberated, enlightened one who may guide us? Where among all the baptised ones, those saved through Jesus-Christ, can I find a single one who by his own experience is saved, who truly transcends life and death? A human being, his heart filled with an unconditioned peace, a peace independent of any conditions and changes of life, who can say with Ummon Zenji (China 864-949):

“Day by day good day, - and that even while facing the most horrible events?”

This is the state of consciousness of the great martyrs, I suppose, and it is well possible that under severe pressure again the consciousness of this or that man or woman may be purified to the same degree. But where are they now, those who can guide us?

Where are the living successors from the line of St. John of the Cross, of Meister Eckehart? Where do I find a master-disciple of the disciple of the disciple of St. John of the Cross? Of St. Therese of Avila? Well: St. John of the Cross. And then? Today? Well, then came the Inquisition, this institution of the Fall par excellence being labelled as “Christian” and it put the writings of St. John on the index. So it was not only in his case.

Everywhere in Europe the currents of the Living Spirit, of Living-Experience were cut off for more than 400 years by the “Holy Office” – the name being just blasphemy. “If you do not believe in my religion of love, I shall persecute you, torture you, burn you or kill you – until you will believe in my love!” Licensed “Christian” murder.

So there is no transmission through the generations.

The reasons, why not, are not even of great interest here. The fact is: We do not have a method, a Path transmitted over the centuries to arrive at this experience of God, none that has been handed down from human being to human being, and finally from one living human being, a master, to myself. This is not only so for laymen, it seems, but for religious people as well. More and more monks, nuns and priests of almost all religious orders are looking today for Ways of spiritual training: Jesuits, Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Third Orders, Missionary Orders, etc., and several ones of them have found the looked-for guidance in Zen and other Eastern Ways of training.

There are Japanese Christians driven by deep religious striving who say: “We have become Christians, already decades ago, - and what now? We are grateful for receiving the Eucharist, for our children getting baptized – but we are looking for genuine guidance, for a Path of training guided by priests who are not only good scholars but who have direct enlightened experience. Yet, there is nobody . . . “

True; almost nobody. It seems today the way to living Christianity leads us through the Ways of the East. We find everything any great religion can tell us in the Bible. What we don't have that is the Path.

This is where for us today the great importance of the East sets in: across the millennia there is in the East the living master-disciple tradition on several Paths.

Basically there are three kinds of Paths: Karma-Yoga, the Way of good activity; Bhakti-Yoga, the Way of devotion and surrender; and Jnana-Yoga, the way of enquiring wisdom.

For most Westerners today, Karma-Yoga does not seem to be advisable. It usually digresses to some kind of “social” work, rather inflating the ego than killing it, based on the wrongly understood Biblical sentence:

“Love thy neighbour as thou love yourself” (Math.22,39)

Most Christians only read: “Love your neighbour”. Period. Then eagerly they run around, ready to help their neighbour, but in most cases doing more damage than good. In some circles there is almost an obsession with the desire to help - - -, and it leads to an ego-feedback. It is much easier, or so it seems, to “help” one's neighbour than to help oneself. It is such a nice excuse to do nothing for one's own development, enlightenment. One is always “justified”: We have no time to train ourselves, being so busy to help, to “love our neighbour”, to take care of him. Well, people of good will - - -

But only then are we able to truly love our neighbour, truly to help him, when we have come to help ourselves, to “love ourselves”. Loving ourselves is possible only when we have come to forget ourselves. Forgetting ourselves is possible only through the experience of enlightenment, when we have come to experience what this Self is. Just as we can find this SELF only within ourselves, so we can find the neighbour only within ourselves too, can we find God within ourselves – at the Root. Only after we have got an inkling of this Source, can we love God, can we love our neighbour, can we love ourselves. At this very Root, this very Source, all three are One. There is no separatedness.

Who never experienced this One, this Nothing, does not have any insight into LOVE. He who has experienced LOVE also knows the One, the Nothing. As an experience they are One again, no matter how far apart they may appear to scholarly conceptual thinking.

The second Path is Bhakti-Yoga, the Way of devotion and surrender. “Yoga” actually means “union”. What I really “love with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my mind” (Math.22,37), I become one with. All of a sudden our consciousness “turns”, and us Christians call that that the activity of the grace of God. Nobody can say, how it happens. Nobody can “make” it occur. And yet: Without undergoing great effort, almost nobody can ever experience That - - - though we are never anything but That!

This “turn of consciousness” we may also experience on the third of those Paths: with Jnana-Yoga, e.g. in Zen. Here ones starts without any further ado to empty oneself of all things, to rid oneself of all thoughts, feelings, ideas, imaginations, to “become poor in spirit”. Then, after severe training, in the fraction of a second, the unintelligible happens. All of a sudden we break through the imagined narrow barrier of our consciousness – enlightened – and, blinking, we look, delighted and deeply amazed, into a new world which is just the old one.

Zen-master Yamada Kōun Roshi (Japan, 1907-1989) gives us a parable taken from mathematics characterizing this event:

In our ordinary consciousness we just see the numerators of the phenomena thinking that were all. Then, when we break into enlightenment, we discover the denominator: Zero-Infinite, the Absolute, Nothing. But this is by far not the end of the development! Finally numerator and denominator are congruent, identical, are One – no line of a fraction any more – we even discover that this line never had existed at all.

As Christians we may say: thanks to the grace of God. Why do Zen-people not say so? Avoiding conceptions, ideas, avoiding even the shadow of any “from there to here”, any duality, any dichotomy. Wouldn’t we do better to avoid any shadow of the Fall by avoiding especially those terms and concepts that are overgrown with so many misunderstandings?

But whether we are Christians or Zen-men: After such an experience our heart is overflowing with gratitude and veneration.

The three Ways, Karma, Bhakti, and Jnana are not really separated as it may seem. The Path of Bhakti also needs a collected mind, the Path of Jnana also needs strong faith and veneration acting as dynamic charges on our heart; and it is self-evident that on both these Paths nobody can go far who behaves miserably towards his surroundings, towards men as well as things. So, both these Paths to a certain degree also include Karma-Yoga – But the real Karma-Yoga is a fruit of one of the others. So it is more a question of what the dominant factor is in each, not one of exclusiveness.

But who has caught a glimpse on one of these Paths ever, and if only slightly, of the Goal, who has discovered that the Way itself contains the Goal – that where we are, there is Perfection – to him/her the “world has become real”, because his/her consciousness has become real by having experienced REALITY. After “passing through” Zero-Infinite, after the experience of NOTHING, of the ONE, after “passing through” the experience of GOD, of LOVE, there suddenly a brilliant new world has arisen for him – that world that always has been there which he only never had seen. Now he may say “what he likes” – everything is right and correct. He may talk of “person”, of right and wrong, good and evil, - - - each distinct in its qualities, yet bare of any quality! He may set up subject and object – now everything is transcended. No problem anymore of Nothing or Love – knowing LOVE by the experience of the NOTHING (everything else just being a “loving around”, totally helpless). No more attached to concepts, it does not matter what he calls IT. Whatever he may say, he only talks of the ONE, the NOTHING, of GOD, of LOVE.

In the words of Meister Eckehart:

“. . . where you – now He – regognizest Him with eternal mind: a nameless Nothing, an uncreated: AM!”

(Meister Eckehart “On the Renewal of the Spirit”)

(Kōun-An 1980)

