

Trip to Europe, Summer 1973

When moving around in Europe with some leisure, for the first time after ten years, many things were observed, some surprisingly new, some surprisingly obsolete. While all of these observations reveal one or the other aspect of the European consciousness of today, these notes shall be limited to those which directly relate to Zazen.

Just as a gardener studies the foreign soil and the qualities of his tree which he is going to transplant there, I'll try to study the soil of the European consciousness with regard to the qualities of Zazen, the big tree that is going to be transplanted from Japan to Europe.

A brand new generation has sprung up, youngsters now in their early twenties, raggy-shaggy in appearance, bearded, and talking a different language, a language lively and longing, not dried up by mere reflections and scientific learning, a language coming from an over-whelming desire for experience. Experience! This is the one cry. They rebel against the teachings of the schools, the one-dimensional, causal way of thinking the older generation tries to feed them. They are fed up with the starvation the church offers, that comes down to hearsay and information. They are ignoring a society that is dominated by a materialistic intellectualism that has overgrown and suppressed other abilities and possibilities of man. They want experience. They want to know about life and death, they want to discover more about consciousness, not satisfied with its ordinary form. They want to discover their source. Yes – some of them. And these follow this trend quite consciously. In others it is more a blind urge. Others again are only following a fashion, and finally there are those with whom that strange outfit is but an expression of their instinctive wish to retire into the Middle-Ages, being subconsciously afraid of the future that will be the

inheritance coming from the prior generation the value of which they justly doubt.

While all this is going on, and while young people move away from a predominantly intellectual, scientific culture, turning towards the intuitive, the artistic, the religious, the German universities go just the other way by their newly invented “*numerus clausus*” according to which e.g. Einstein never could have entered a German university, being a genius of intuition and not of dry intellect. Occasionally I met young people on a train, in a restaurant, at the home of friends. In some cases their way of thinking, their answers or questions were so astounding that I asked one or the other a *koan* question – and the correct answer was given. I neither told them where the question comes from nor did I give any comment on the answer. There is no doubt, however, that these people never had experienced *kensho*. They also never had practiced Zazen. And these were non-educated people. For sure they did not derive it from an intellectual process. So where do they get it from? It reminds me of what two well-known physicists had told me on different occasions: “When in my youth I heard about the law of relativity, I had great difficulties to grasp it. But my students understand it immediately.” The next generation is born with different abilities.

With educated people the sophistication of the European mind is stunning. When it is said that *koan* cannot be answered by the intellect, this may not be quite true for some Europeans of the 20th century. Highly imaginative and inventive, highly apt to adjust to strangest combinations including the paradox, rapidly discovering certain lines of procedure, this terribly agile mind can produce correct answers to *koan* without any genuine experience. Emotion is easily made to participate. Once a Westerner said in all innocence: “Well, with *koan* one either has to demonstrate the verb, or the noun, or do the opposite, or.....”. This mind is “of the devil”, and it is not only now that I have discovered

this. It was in my twenties, when I suddenly realized: “One is not allowed to think all that one can think” and it was meant exactly in this way: anticipating or replacing experience by thoughts.

When listening to this or that person in Europe. I remembered a *dokusan* when Yamada Roshi had told a German: “The answer you give, many of the Japanese couldn’t give yet, although they are sitting here much longer.” Among Europeans there are those who may be able to give such an answer almost right away after having been told that Mu has no meaning. If there is not a safeguard in the character of that person, he/she may easily fall prey to intellect.

While I met two, three Europeans who, although not practicing Zazen, are close to its spirit, there was often not much of this Zen-spirit to be discovered in those who are “teaching Zazen”.

When a German “Zen-master” – and that’s how he was announced on two successive evenings – said in a public talk on August 26, 1973:

“Fortunately the number of those who are able to give basic instructions and who can guide to some degree is increasing.”, he evidently overlooked that there is nobody among those “increasing numbers “ who has any genuine experience in Zen. He, moreover, assumes that “giving basic instructions” and “guiding to some degree” are like teaching simple objective facts at an elementary school. But guiding in Zen and teaching are totally different: For an elementary school a less educated teacher is necessary than for a university, but with Zen it is the opposite: The least developed ones need the best guidance.

Within the same speech followed the explanation for the eagerness to increase the numbers of people teaching Zazen:

“It is necessary to strengthen our Christianity.

The change in the liturgy was not very effective.”

While the change in the liturgy was not very effective, one has to try it with Zazen. This confirms what I feel since quite some time: The aim is to prop up a Church by the help of Zazen, a church that is at the point of disintegrating. The Church, while perceiving Zazen with its attraction to many people as another threat to her existence, tries to incorporate Zazen – to maintain her power. But this “Zazen” is going along the same old lines. This becomes clear by the following.

“Christian priests, even though they do not practice Zazen themselves, can be good counsellors for people who practice Zazen.”

In the Church it is taken for granted that a priest who teaches and guides people, never has experienced enlightenment. He just passes on hearsay. So, what is correct within the Church is correct with Zazen. We have the same old spirit; one is moving in the same old tracks. Only the words have changed.

Another quote from this speech:

“Sufi and Christians go beyond the Self to God.

With Buddhists the Self dissolves in the Absolute.

It is an error to stop with the Self.”

According to this, the Self, God and the Absolute are three different ”things”.

I remembered a sentence from one of the books of the speaker that was recommended during this speech:

“However, one should not imagine this experience of God in a way that God would be experienced as a person , i.e. a concept, as it may be possibly the case with someone who has found God already.”

So, the one “who has found God already” may experience him as a concept.

From the same book of the speaker:

“Once this Mu is practiced well, it works as a reinforcement of *shikantaza*.

If it is helpful to someone, he may think, as a Christian background, that in comparison with the Final and the Absolute, God is all and the ‘other nothing’.”

What does that mean? Does this want to say that Mu, equal nothing, is separated from God???

Or:

“It is also possible to combine both by doing the Jesus prayer while sitting Zazen, in a similar way as it is done in Japan by ‘nenbutso’ (invocation of Amida).”

I have never experienced that anybody does the “nembutsu” while sitting Zazen. It may be quite good to do the Jesus prayer while sitting on the floor, but whether this is Zazen is another question. It is rather a path of “Bhakti” and should not be mixed up with “Jnana”, Zen.

“Disciples of disciples are teaching already “Zen” in Europe. An avalanche of “nisemono” Zen and Yoga is running all over Europe. We have lots of “courses in meditation in the style of Zen” (see enclosure). In the style of Zen – in the style of inquiry – in the style of enlightenment – the very words reveal that it is a copy. So everybody is informed. But some of those courses called “Zen-meditation” are actually also just “in the style of Zen”. Progress e.g. is measured by the ability to sit long on end. 45 minutes sitters are the “advanced ones”. Zen is being killed in Europe before it has ever been born there. The situation reminds me a little of some stories of “The Tales of the Hassidim” by Martin Huber. I’ll give a short translation of one of them:

“The Hassidim of the devil.

.....The devil is determined to eliminate the Hassidim. At first he tried it with attacks. ...

But when he felt that his plan failed totallyhe thought of something else. He decided to make Hassidim himself.....By the thousands the Hassidim of the devil spread in the country, and the lie was mixed with the truth.”

He also gives the solution:

“He who makes himself holy and is truly prepared for the service of God ...his eyes will be enlightened, so that truth and lie won't be mixed up for him.”
By the end of the 19th century the Hassidim had found their end.

It is the age-old fate of almost all mystics in Europe: The Christian mystics, the Jewish ones, the Sufi. The Christian Church persecuted almost all her mystics. The 20th is not different in this respect. Genuine spiritual experience is as suspect today as ever, as we can see e.g. by the preventive measures the Church used against Padre Pio only a few decades ago.

When the above mentioned speaker is saying: “Who is called to be mystic? Today all!”, he is advertising a popularized “mystics for all” under the supervision of the Church, something which has nothing to do with genuine spiritual life. The Church is as hostile against deep enlightenment as ever.

As far as I could see there are not many Europeans who are prepared to enter Zazen right away. Quite a number will need some pre-training. Most Europeans who have come to Japan for Zazen had some prior experience or some relevant pre-training: One had done eight years of Mantra-Yoga, another one six years of some kind of Hatha-Yoga, another underwent breathing and musical training, and so on. One finds the same with the Americans. Zen cannot be entered successfully by people of a weak and distracted mind. When I arrived at this insight, I discovered that others had come to the same conclusion before me. Mouni Sadhu, a German aristocrat, who had experienced deep enlightenment under the guidance of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, says in his book “concentration” p.42:

“Some people believe that it is not possible to practice Jnana (=Zen) before some degree of Mantra- or Hath-Yoga has been mastered. The writer agrees with this opinion.”

And so do I. Only, there are several other ways of pre-training aside of Mantra - or Hatha-Yoga.

John Blofeld who had practiced Zazen for years and who then turned to Tantric Buddhism writes on that subject in his book (p.22):

“Nobody who knows Zen well can doubt its excellent methods. Only there is doubt concerning the ability of most of us to apply those successfully.”

and (p.36):

“In Zen we start, so to speak, with the Ph.D. but with Vajrayana we can enter at any level - from kindergarten to professorship.”

That is quite true. In Tantric Buddhism, existing abilities of senses and intellect are used in the beginning and finally transcended. In Zen, none of such abilities is of any use; they have to be discarded right away from the outset.

Shibayama Zenkei Roshi writes in his book “A Flower does not talk” (p.42):

“Zen has been, therefore, described from olden days as the way for only a handful of geniuses.”

(p.48):

“We have to admit that basic Zen is a very difficult way and only a handful of religiously endowed people under favorable conditions can attain satori.”

Zen (Jnana) is called the shortest path, the Direct Path. There is no doubt about that. But it is correspondingly also the steepest path. Just as people with a heart condition cannot walk the steepest path up a high mountain, so also people with a weak mind cannot start successfully with Zazen. They are better off when walking a longer path that may lead up in serpentines or even in spirals, but which they are able to walk, instead of sitting admiringly at the foot of the Direct Path, unable to really set foot on it. This is the situation a lot of Europeans find themselves in. Others could be sufficiently strengthened by

preliminary training which could enable them finally to enter Zazen. But such pre-training has nothing to do with Zazen and should not go under its name.

Among the people having met Yamada Roshi in winter in Germany, there is one who gave up the practice of Mu as too difficult for his own level. Another one is sitting only occasionally and assured me everything were fine, but I could see at first glance that it was not and this person was just dreaming the mind totally distracted. Such confused people cannot practice Mu. Certainly all these people had no guidance in the meantime. However, it seems to me this is not the only reason. If people can do something appropriate to their respective level, they do it with joy, and this joy drives them on. Another hindrance seems to be the method of telling disciples right away that “Mu has no meaning.” It takes the impetus away and practice becomes dull. There are few who can jump far without having a good run charging them up.

Mu is indeed a very difficult practice. Years ago, an American, serious, sitting a lot, attending all the Zen-meetings, told me: “I have never practiced meditation before. Now I am doing this Mu which is the most difficult practice of all. I don’t know how to go on.” At that time he had been sitting with Mu for about three years. Shortly afterwards he left for good.

There is absolutely no doubt that Mu, just by its extreme simplicity and bareness, is the most difficult practice.

When talking with some people in Europe who told me they were interested in Zen, after a while their words revealed quite clearly that their path is rather a Bhakti one, not Jnana - Zen.

I remembered several people who had practiced Zazen here with us and who afterwards turned to a Bhakti path, three of them even after *kenshō*, all stating clearly: Zen is not my path. Whether Jnana – Zen or Bhakti, all these paths

finally lead to the same goal. It depends on the character of the person which one to choose.

While it is not enough sending people away telling them Zen is not their path, I have been looking around for what is out there one could recommend as another path or as preliminary training. At least with regard to the latter there are: different kinds of relaxation and breathing exercises, some kind of Hatha Yoga, in a few places Aikido. Moreover, one can lead them through specially devised concentration exercises. Which one to choose, again, depends on the type of person.

The ordinary Westerner is more distracted than the ordinary Japanese. It is amazing how most ordinary Japanese can get absorbed in a book or a newspaper while around them it is extremely noisy, with the television on, playing children, etc.. Ordinary Europeans cannot do this, because they use concentration instead of absorption.

German scientists have a surprising degree of concentration. But concentration is not absorption. Here comes an example: Many Westerners are shocked by the loud bells and clappers in a Zendo, especially in monasteries. The Japanese are not. Why this difference? A high degree of concentration is like a thin, highly tense string, and when a sound strikes against it, the string is torn, shock is felt. Quite different with diffuse absorption: There is no tense string that can offer resistance. No shock felt.

But it is much easier to proceed from concentration to absorption than from distraction to absorption, something which is almost impossible. Many Europeans will have to be trained first to collect the mind by concentration before they can proceed to absorption.

Ancient Chinese and Japanese Zen-Masters are said to have tested their would-be disciples rather severely before accepting them. The same is true with Indian Guru and Christian monasteries of the Middle-Ages before accepting an applicant. Sufi masters do their best to discourage disciples. To me it seems that such tests are highly valuable and advisable for Europeans of the present age. Many psychologically ill or weak people will want to do Zazen, but it will lead them nowhere. If basic strength is lacking, they will get even more confused and schizophrenic when trying to do Zazen, or they even may end up with suicide. But this is certainly not the only reason for such tests.

By many observations of small events, incidences, activities and conversations it has become quite evident that Europeans and Japanese differ greatly. There is much in the general atmosphere of Japanese daily life that is helpful to people who practice Zazen. This help is lacking in Europe. But today there is quite a number of Europeans who are urgently longing for spiritual training of one kind or another. A steadily increasing stream of people goes to Japan, India and South-East-Asia in search of such training in surroundings more favorable than those of Europe. However, there will be a few, and there are already a few, who will be able to enter the Path of Zazen in Europe. Their number, however, will be small.

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(Brigitte D'Ortschy)

