Remarks on the Enigma of the Koan

by

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Anyone who has taken an interest, however slight, in Zen Buddhism knows that the koan is a formula that is absurd by design, destined to bring about a kind of liberating rupture in the mind of the person meditating on it, the mind in this instance being considered with regard to its hardness and blindness. All too frequently, however, the koan has been represented in a rather unsatisfactory manner: people like to pretend, not without a hint of relish with regard to common sense in general or to allegedly "Western" logic in particular, that koans are there to confer a new vision of the world and of life, an aim in itself completely devoid of interest; or else they make out that Zen is an integral part of practical life of the most everyday sort, a view that takes no account of spiritual values. We do not say that such assertions or praise are altogether lacking in reality: we simply emphasize that they do not constitute definitions and that if they did so they would not be of a sort to convey a lofty idea of Zen spirituality.

Obviously it is quite inadequate to declare that the purpose of the koan is to produce a particular mental change and that this is achieved by its very absurdity; such an opinion fails to explain why one koan differs from another, nor does it account for the trouble taken to assemble a collection of koans, a traditional work deriving all its canonical authority from the fact that the koans were given by the greatest masters. Were it sufficient for a koan to be absurd to bring about in the long run a state of illumination, one could confine oneself to the remark that two and two make five, and there would be no need to resort either to a traditional koan or to one koan rather than another.

The fact that koans do not deliberately include a statement of metaphysical doctrine and that it is impossible to explain their meaning verbally does not imply that they have no meaning at all: people are not enjoined century after century to meditate on absurdities pure and simple; and the traditional character of the koan as well as its illuminative result prove that this formula is not just anything. But if the koan possesses no intentional doctrinal content, what can its content be? Both the specific character of Zen itself and the replies of the masters provide us with the explanation: the koan expresses the spiritual experience of a given master in a symbolical—and

intentionally paradoxical—form, the significance of which is only verifiable by undergoing the selfsame experience. At the moment of that rupture which is *satori*[1] or illumination, the koan is suddenly "understood," its data are identified; and if one koan differs from another, this is not because the effect of *satori* is multiple but because its aspects are such. There can be no doubt that the koan has a metaphysical meaning if it has any meaning at all, or rather because it has a meaning; but its justification lies precisely in its referring to the inexpressible aspect of the experience of Awakening. The objection could be raised that in such a case the koan has no right to exist, having no place in language since language implies intelligibility; this objection is in itself pertinent, but the occasional exception must also be given its due, allowing that paradox can have a catalytic function in the economy of Maya.

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The above observations call for some further remarks on the intentions and means of Zen in general. What Zen wants is the supernatural recovery of the perception of things *sub specie aeternitatis* or in the "Eternal Present"; having neither the ability nor the need to step outside relativity, the mind henceforth finds itself rooted in the Absolute, both intellectually and existentially. But Zen also comprises another dimension, complementary to the first: this is its aspect of "simplicity" or "equilibrium," a returning to primordial nature. The complement of lightning and of rupture, or of *satori*, is found in the peace that dwells in the nature of things, as revealed in the stillness of a pond reflecting the moon or in the so to speak contemplative grace of the water lily, or yet again, in the calm and precise elegance of the tea ceremony. The nature-loving and somewhat iconoclastic sobriety of Zen is no mere luxury: whoever wishes to bring the human mind back to that "intuition of Eternity" for which it is made, but which it has lost through its decadence—its dispersing curiosity and its compressing passion—must also bring the soul and body back to their primordial simplicity by freeing them from the artificialities superimposed by civilization.[2] The one thing does not go without the other: there is no content without an adequate container; the lightning's perfection calls for that of the lotus. In this second dimension, Zen was able to profit from the ground prepared by Shinto, just as with regard to its first dimension, it had been helped by the presence of Taoism. This, however, must never lead to

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[1] *Satori* is not absolute illumination; it amounts already to a degree of *bodhi*, but is not yet the *Samyaksambodhi* of the Buddha. If the profane state is separated from that of the Awakening as the circle is separated from its center, *satori* would be the sudden realization of the ray which, without itself being identical with the center, is as it were a prolongation of it. In relation to the profane state one may say that *satori* "is" Illumination in itself; distinctions between degrees of Illumination have a meaning only on the spiritual plane, not in relation to the world.

[2] The posture in Zen meditation, *zazen*, is revealing in this respect: erectness and motionlessness; balance between effort and naturalness. Zen has developed an "art of gesture" extending to various professions, including the profession of arms and all kinds of decorative and more or less feminine activities; this art is at the antipodes of the would-be "sincere" and pseudo-natural casualness of today.

our losing sight of the fact that all was given from the beginning: by the Buddha's gesture, his smile and by the flower he held in his hand.

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When one starts from the rudimentary idea—aiming merely at a certain effectiveness—that the world is impermanent and nothing else, that it is composed of impermanent and changing "categories" or "atoms" and that Nirvana alone possesses permanence, one surprisingly forgets—unless one considers the thought of it superfluous—that escape from impermanence, or even the mere conception of the idea of impermanence and deliverance, would be impossible if no trace of permanence existed within the impermanent or of absoluteness within the relative. Conversely and a priori, there must be an element of relativity in the Absolute, otherwise the relative would not exist, let alone the notion of relativity and escape from the relative; the *yin-yang* symbol represents this truth in its own particular way, as we have often pointed out on other occasions.

Now it is precisely this element of absoluteness or of permanence at the very heart of the contingent or of the impermanent that constitutes our own essence, our "Buddha nature": to rediscover our own true nature is to realize Permanence and to escape from the "round of existence." It is by basing itself on this idea of immanence that Zen sets out to detach itself, not from tradition of course since it is Buddhist, but from concepts as such; its very foundation is the fact that everything that Revelation offers is to be found principially within ourselves. Zen teaches its disciples, by means of various signs and attitudes, to perceive and to become everything that gives its sufficient reason to words and ideas and to tradition.

We are not Aristotelian, but it goes without saying that Aristotle is a thousand times preferable to a falsified Zen, divorced from its roots and thus deprived of its justification and its effectiveness: if this point is stressed here, this is because modernistic Zen all too readily overlooks the fact that Zen is "neither with nor without forms" and that, besides rigorous introspection and what may be termed the cult of voidness, it includes, at least a priori,[3] an attitude of devotion, of humility and gratitude, which it shares in common with all spirituality worthy of the name.[4] Whatever the case, a spiritual method is not something that is freely

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[3] This reservation implies that the devotional virtues are supposed to become absorbed ultimately in an inward extinction which transcends them without being opposed to them; from another point of view one may also say that in Zen divergent attitudes are found side by side, everything being set in its proper place.

[4] Zen monks recite the sutras every morning, which proves they are far from despising texts: they also repeat the prayer of Ta-Hui, which contains a series of spiritual and material demands and is addressed to "all the Buddhas and Bodhisattva-Mahâsattvas of the past, present and future in the ten quarters (of the Universe), and to Mahâprajnâpâramitâ," the Shakti of the *Ādi-Buddha*—Vajradhara—with whom she is

available: to the very extent that it is subtle or esoteric it turns to poison when not practiced within the framework of canonical rules, therefore "in the name of God," as one would say in the West; in the case of Zen, this framework is above all the triad "Buddha—Law—Community" (*Buddha—Dharma—Sangha*). Zen depends on everything implied by this triad, or else it is nothing.[5]

sometimes identified. One should also note that every meal is accompanied with prayers and that the main building of the monastery contains an image of Shakyamuni.

[5] Thus there is nothing in common between Zen and the theories of men like Jung or Krishnamurti, or any other form of psychologism.