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Growing in Emptiness : A Zen way of Life

While Lord Buddha, the Blessed and the World-Honoured One, was staying on Mt. Grdhrakuta, just before he began his sermon, a certain Dharmaraja reverentially offered a flower to the Master. Buddha, holding the flower in his hand and looking at it in silence, smiled. Seeing the smile on Buddha's face, Maha Kasyapa, one of his disciples sitting among the audience, also smiled. That was the beginning of Zen, the first transmission of Enlightenment without words. A unique parallel of this way of looking is Christ's asking us to look at the flowers of the field. Yet we never care to look at anything with a mind uncluttered with all sorts of thoughts, let alone a flower. Truly speaking, the spirit of Zen is 'beyond words and Scriptures' and, therefore, it has nothing to do with any particular religion.

Bodhidharma, the first Zen Patriarch was the son of a Raja of Kancheepuram in South India. He took the seed of Zen to China in the sixth century A.D., and it was carried farther to Japan in the twelfth century. Zen has been described as "A special teaching without Scriptures, beyond words and letters, pointing to the Mind-essence of man, seeing directly into one's nature and attaining Enlightenment." 'Zen', Japanese is a derivation from Ch'an in Chinese. 'Ch'an' came from *Dhyan* (meditation) in Sanskrit. Truly speaking, Zen is not a sect, but an experience, a state of being which one is able to live through when placed in a responsive relationship with the Universe. True meditation is not only a self-search, but also the finding of the Truth and abiding in it. It is the thought-free state of awareness. During this emptying process of the mind, thoughts, memories and speculations cease. The Supreme Grace descends and our heart and minds are filled with immeasurable peace and happiness. It is this state of death of the mind which then becomes the mindless Mind or the Zero-point of Life

that makes life and death of man wonderful and meaningful. When the mind experiences 'Emptiness' as the true nature of all things, we then attain Wisdom, we 'know ourselves' and we have that 'absolute and non-intellectual understanding.' Wisdom is the knowledge of our ignorance. Deliverance, according to Zen, is freedom from the illusion that we are not free. The illusion is *to think* that there is illusion.

It has been said: "If you have Zen in your life, you will have no fear, no doubt, no unnecessary craving, no extreme emotion. Illogical attitudes and egoistical actions will not trouble you. You will serve humanity humbly fulfilling your life with loving-kindness and compassion and observing your own passing away as a petal falling from a flower. With Zen in life you are serene and you enjoy life in blissful tranquillity." With the understanding of Zen, the restless mind becomes calm, the narrow-minded becomes broad-minded and the unhappy becomes happy. It is significant that Zen started with a smile. The Indian mind expresses its love, appreciation, even blessing and wisdom by means of a smile. A life of Zen, as the name itself denotes, is centred in meditation. Life itself becomes a movement in meditation. The performance of every action, when inspired by constant meditation, has an ennobling and purifying effect on the individual. In this sort of spontaneous living, there is joy and freedom and it has a sacramental value. On the other hand, any pre-meditated action by a calculating and scheming mind has a binding and crippling effect on man.

Zen has no God to be worshipped, no rituals and ceremonies to be performed, no heaven or hell to go to after death, no gods to be appeased and no intermediary between God and man. Zen is the poetry of life and a life in Zen becomes the living poem. Zen is the music of life and when one has Zen, he is able to live with a song of joy in his heart. Zen's contribution for the promotion of the art and culture of Japan has been great. With Zen in life, one becomes an artist of life and, therefore, he knows the art of living. Zen has a sense of humour and it expresses itself by smiling at the paradoxes of life and by laughing at the stupidities of men. The distinctive Japanese mind is particularly good at it. Look at these sayings: "The desire for Enlightenment is also an illusion", "The flourishing will decline, those who meet must part", "Renouncing the world, but not renouncing the self", "The worldly passion is the dog of the house. It does not

go away though you beat it; Enlightenment is the deer of the mountain. It does not come though you invite it.”

Even before the starting of Zen meditation, the most important thing is to be quiet and to sit at ease. Taking everything easy, it is necessary to relax, to reflect and to let go of everything. In this manner of sitting relaxed both within and without in a contemplative mood, our mind and the world around us become peaceful and tranquil. What Zen does is to break down our usual pattern of thinking and to arrive at complete cessation of thoughts, ‘Emptiness of the mind’, otherwise known as the Void or the Buddha Mind. In pure observation, gentle reflection and profound feeling of every thing which we see both within and without—various thoughts coming and going, life, and its recurring problems, the heart-breaking brutalities going on everywhere in society, the sad plight of the world and humanity, the extraordinary beauty of Nature or of a particular object in Nature, the mystery of this vast and wonderful Universe—there arises a strange feeling and a profound state of compassion in the heart. In this state of pure feeling and loving compassion, thoughts melt in love, thinking of the mind gets merged in the feeling of the heart. If anything, Zen requires that our respect for and reliance on thoughts be reduced and finally destroyed.

Zen meditation is not for getting anything new, but to throw away all we have in the mind, to throw away even the idea that we are throwing away. Zen is unhindered freedom, flowering in love, loving the Universe and being loved by it. It is the life-death feeling, the activity of inaction and the realizing of the universality of Truth. Instead of choosing ‘this’ and rejecting ‘that’, clinging to one and hating another, we should remain quiet and live in all simplicity in that undifferentiated state where subject and object are non-distinguishable. When we are thus able to be free from doubt and confusion, we become simple and natural in mind and heart. Because of Zen’s constant emphasis on ‘Emptiness’ which is the true universal nature of all things and which Buddha had preached so eloquently, we are asked to be like empty space—detached, disinterested and indifferent. Let everything take its natural course without our interference. Echoing the Taoist mode of expression, a Zen Master says: “Remove selfishness and self-assertion from yourself. Then the world will be properly governed. Cut out your cleverness and discard your knowledge, then the world will benefit a hundredfold.” We should not trouble our

mind with various happenings that take place around us all the time. It is quite easy to get involved and entangled in them. We should learn to remain unmoved in mind, no matter what goes on around us. Again and again, we are asked to learn from 'Pure Emptiness' and even if we stray away from that natural state, we are urged to return to that pure simplicity, to that state of ease and detachment. When asked to give something positive or some affirmations of life, a Zen Master says: "Without zero no mathematics, without black no white, without emptiness no fullness, without darkness no light, without woman no man and so on. Unless the Universe is empty, nothing can live or move in it, unless the room is empty no one can sit or live in it, unless the pipe is empty, no water will flow through it and so on." Speaking about detachment, another Zen Master says:

Be detached, be detached and be ever detached,
Even when you think that further detachment is not possible,
Be still more detached and detached remain ever more.

Everything has a place in the scheme of the Universe. Therefore, the natural order of things should not be tampered with. One should not interfere with the minds of others. A Zen Master says: "People limp about in pursuit of cleverness (knowledge) striving with each other in their desire for gain to which there is no end. When people forget Nature and are concerned only with knowledge, they are full of doubts and confusion. With their notions of right and wrong, good and bad, continually throw the world into confusion by distorting the nature of things. They thus run about and exhaust themselves in these pursuits." Says another Zen Master: "See the absolute Essence of the mind. With intensity and attention watch the flow of life in which there is no will. When there is no resistance or escape, when there is total absence of the will, there is joy, beauty and freedom. Life, therefore, should be lived to its fullness at each moment in tune with the rapid rhythm of life."

According to Zen there is one monster to be dealt with and to be overcome. This is the dualistic notion of the mind: Triumph and failure, gain and loss, good and bad, which keep one divided like a fragmented being. It is for this reason that Zen has scant respect for discriminative knowledge. It wants man to rise above duality to attain the non-discriminative Wisdom in which there is unity, harmony, peace and tranquillity. Zen is not a system of thought or philosophy. *It*

is a way of looking at life. Our bondage, when it is seen by the Enlightened Mind, turns out to be our freedom. Buddha says: “*Samsara i Nirvana*”. Zen is more psychological than philosophical. Above all, what makes Zen so unique and distinct is its directness and simplicity. Zen would say: Be as simple as a child and look at the world through a baby’s mind. Zen Masters, by their own life and behaviour, teach their disciples to be simple, natural and direct instead of their drifting away from Truth through various thoughts, even the thoughts of Truth itself. A certain Zen Master stopped teaching his monks but asked them to meditate instead. When asked why he stopped his sermons, his reply was: “I am nothing, I know nothing and, therefore I teach nothing, for there is absolutely nothing.” To Zen the spoken words are nothing but a sound in the air, the written and printed words are only some scratches on paper and thoughts are only a noise created in the mind. Says a Zen Master: “If you utter the name of Buddha, wash your mouth twice.” So Zen does not want us to waste our time and energy in unnecessary discussion and argument. A Zen Master says: “The sun and the moon carry out their functions without wasting time on thoughts, arguments, debates and discussions. Why don’t we learn this lesson from them?” What Zen values most is Buddha’s Noble Silence and his Serene Smile. The former puts us in complete harmony with all things and beings and the latter teaches that man’s ultimate goal is Happiness.

Zen is iconoclastic. There is a beautiful saying in Zen:

Stone Buddhas break into pieces,
Metal Buddhas melt in the furnace,
Clay Buddhas dissolve in the water,
Wooden Buddhas become ashes in the fire,
True Buddha alone lives for ever.

There is an interesting story of a Zen Master, Tanhsia (738-824). One day when he was staying at Yarinji Temple, it was so cold that he took out one of the three wooden Buddhas and burnt it to make fire to warm himself. The monk in-charge burst out: “What do you mean by burning my Buddha?” Tanhsia poked about in the ashes with his stick and began to search. When asked what he was searching for, he replied: “I am looking for the ‘Asti’ (relic) of Buddha.” When the monk said, “How would a wooden Buddha have any ‘Asti’?” Tanhsia’s retort was: “If so, why don’t you give me the other two Buddhas to make fire?”

Certain Zen anecdotes are famous: The Chinese Zen Master, Sengtsan when he was a monk, asked his teacher, Huike: "I have no peace of mind. I implore you to give me peace." Huike said: "Show me your mind. I shall grant you peace." Sengtsan thought for a while and then said, "I have been searching for it, but cannot find it." Huike's immediate reply was: "Then I have already given you peace." One day Taohsin came and bowed to Sengtsan and said: "Master, I want liberation." Sengtsan asked in a flash: "Who is binding you?" "No one", he replied. "Then why do you ask for liberation?" At once Taohsin came to a profound realization.

Even though the reading of books on Zen may be useful for a theoretical understanding of it, without the 'Awakening' by Zen experience, a care-free and thought-free life in freedom and happiness becomes almost impossible. It is this profound experience that puts an end to one's search and keeps the mind at rest. Without it, the mind will be striving and restless by thinking, imagining and speculating about Truth. Such restlessness caused by mental activities has no place in Zen. Even if studies and reflections are helpful for the intellectual grasp of Zen, the experiencing of Truth is quite a different thing. Words are only like the finger pointing to the moon and if one looks only at the finger, he will not be able to see the moon. Zen says clearly: "The mind should have nothing to grasp and no one to grasp. There should be nothing in the mind and no mind in things. Even if you meet Buddha and the Patriarchs in meditation, kill them outright." One Zen Master puts it beautifully: "When the mind is nowhere, God is everywhere." Zen Masters often put puzzling questions to their disciples in order to test them. One such is: "Every thing exists in space. But where does space exist?"

Many centuries ago Buddha spoke of 'Emptiness' as the essential nature of all things, as modern science proves it. Things are not what they seem to be. All is nothing but energy, Divine Energy. As any thoughtful person will agree, life, as Buddha said long ago, is *Dukkha* (suffering), as we see everywhere with our own eyes, and is transient, in a flux, as science confirms it. As a skilful physician prescribing medicine for a disease, he also prescribed the sovereign remedy for the disease of life, for the disease of the mind that causes untold suffering to countless millions of beings all over the world. Unless the mental apparatus is put in its proper gear, one will not be able to find for

himself perfect peace and happiness. Without Enlightenment, a sensible and intelligent way of living is impossible. According to Buddha, compassion is the cream of religion, loving compassion for the erring multitude, unlimited compassion for all living beings. Says he: "Absolute Wisdom is absolute compassion." Without this healing touch of our loving compassion for one and all, even if we make the whole world a place flowing with milk and honey, widespread misery and suffering in one form or the other will prevail on earth as ever before. Buddha's words still echo in our ears and minds with a ring of sparkling freshness. The freshness has not faded with the long passage of time: "Light your own lamp", "Be a light unto yourself", "Truth is everywhere except for the blind", "Anyone who knows the Truth, knows my doctrine", "Even if one conquers thousands of men in thousands of battles, he who conquers himself is the greatest conqueror", "Heedfulness is the way to life, heedlessness is the way to death. The heedful never die, but the heedless are dead already, though living."

When the mystic-poet asks us "To see heaven in a wild flower and Universe in a grain of sand", what he really tells us is to see that the essential nature of a wild flower, a grain of sand, heaven and the Universe is one and the same. It is the true knowing or seeing that the whole is in the part and that the part is in the whole, or in Buddha's words: "Form in Emptiness and Emptiness in form." Only by not standing apart from the whole, by not arrogating oneself as being above everything else and judging things with thoughts, the essential nature of everything can be realized. Then one sees oneself as not different from the Universe and the Universe not different from oneself, as All is One and One is All. We are all made of the same stuff and are tarred with the same brush. With a sip of the tea in the cup, we know the taste of the tea in the whole cup. A drop of the ocean is enough to know the taste of the whole ocean. As Zen Master, Hakuin says: "One mouthful of Reality relieves an eternal hunger."

There are many simple Zen stories that drive home the point succinctly and beautifully. A few of them are given below:

Nan-in, a Japanese Master during the Meiji era (1868-1912) received a university professor who came to enquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself: "It is overful. No more will go in," said the pro-

fessor. "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup. Only an empty cup can be filled, not a full cup."

Zen Master, Hakuin, was praised by his neighbours as one living a pure life. The parents of a beautiful Japanese girl who owned a food-store near Hakuin's place suddenly found that their daughter was pregnant. She would not confess who the man was; but after much harassment she named Hakuin. In great anger the parents went to the Master. "Is that so?" was all he would say. After the child was born, it was brought to Hakuin. By this time he had lost his reputation and this did not trouble him either. He took very good care of the child. He obtained milk from his neighbours and everything else the little one needed. A year later, the girl-mother could stand it no longer. She told her parents the truth—that the real father of the child was a young man who worked in the market. The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask his forgiveness, to apologize and to get back the child. Hakuin was willing, but while giving back the child, all he said was: "Is that so?"

Tanzan and Ekido were once walking along together down a muddy road. Heavy rain was still falling. Coming round a bend, they met a lovely girl in silk Kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection. "Come on, girl", said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud. Ekido did not speak until that night when they reached a lodging Temple. Then he could no longer restrain himself. "We monks do not go near females, especially not such young and lovely ones. Why did you do that?" "I left the girl there. But are you still carrying her in your mind?" Tanzan asked.

Shoichi was a one-eyed teacher of Zen, sparkling with Enlightenment. He taught his disciples in Tofuku Temple. Day and night the whole Temple remained in silence. There was no sound at all. Even the reciting of *Sutras* was abolished by the Master. His pupils had nothing to do but meditate in silence. Then one day the neighbours heard the ringing of the bell and the recitation of *Sutras*. Then they knew that Shoichi had gone.

**Zen is freedom. The free want others to be free.
Zen is happiness. The happy make others happy.**