

James Breckenridge

Baylor University, Texas

## RELIGION AND THE PROBLEM OF DEATH

The problem of confronting death is found in all the major world religions. In this paper, however, I shall limit my consideration of this problem to Zen Buddhism and Christianity. My reasons for doing this are twofold: First, in recent years a number of publications have maintained that Zen and Christianity provide an especially meaningful context for interreligious dialogue.<sup>1</sup> I hope that at least in a small way this paper will lend some support to that thesis. Second, the importance of meeting death with an attitude of composure is a theme that appears frequently in Zen and Christian writings.

I propose to develop my subject as follows: First, I shall note how in Zen the experience of death is transformed by a monistic view of reality. Second, I shall discuss the manner in which Christians have found consolation in death through the suffering of Jesus. Third, I shall consider certain areas in which the subject of death both facilitates and strains Zen-Christian dialogue.

### 1. Zen and the Art of Dying

It has been said that the ancient Egyptians believed that the universe is essentially static; consequently, they tried to suppress the transitory character of the phenomenal world.<sup>2</sup> It is certain that the same cannot be said for the Zen view of man and nature. Zen writings do not suppress the transitory character of the phenomenal world; they demand that we give it our full attention. Matsuo Basho, a Zen monk

- 
1. Among the significant publications in this area, one must include Dom Aelred Graham's *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963) and *Conversations: Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968); William Johnston's *The Still Point* (New York: Harper & Row Perennial Library, 1971), *Christian Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), and *Silent Music: The Science of Meditation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Tucker N. Callaway, *Zen Way—Jesus Way* (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle, 1976).
  2. See Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

of seventeenth century Japan, used the *haiku* form of poetry with great skill. In his poems he often reminds his readers of the impermanence of the natural world. Consider, for example, his poem entitled "Summer Voices":

So soon to die,  
and no sign of it is showing...locust cry.<sup>3</sup>

The fascination which impermanence had for Basho is still evident in twentieth century Japan. A contemporary Japanese Buddhist expresses it in these words:

The cherry blossom is one of the most beautiful flowers in the world...But by even a short gust of wind, or rain during the night, will it fall and disappear. It cannot stay in the same state for even a moment. In the simple life of the flower, blooming and falling, we discover the truth of life.<sup>4</sup>

In these and similar observations which reflect the spirit of Zen, there is nothing to suggest that impermanence and death are unnatural or repulsive. Rather, it can be said that in the brief existence of the flower "we discover the truth of life" harsh words for those who would conceal death with flowers. Even though the cherry blossom is short-lived, it is beautiful. Indeed, from the Zen perspective the cherry blossom is an appropriate symbol of the unique beauty possessed by those natural objects that are singularly short-lived. In their own way such objects declare that death and nature are inseparable, and they confirm the truth of the Buddha's teaching that change is the basic fact of existence.

However, the practitioner of Zen does not maintain a calm attitude in the face of death simply by observing the course of nature and submitting to the inevitable. On a deeper level, a tranquil acceptance of death is derived from an intuitive grasp of reality through an experience of enlightenment which has the power to liberate one from dualistic modes of thought. It is beyond the scope of this paper to comment upon the ways in which one may attain enlightenment according to the various Zen schools. It will be our concern here simply to note

---

3. Harold G. Henderson, trans. and ed., *An Introduction to Haiku* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), p. 43.

4. Sho-on Hattori, "What We Learn from a Flower," *Young East*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 1976): 34.

three insights which are widely held by Zen Buddhists to be the results of such an experience.

First, there is the insight that the dichotomy that is made by some between this world and ultimate reality or *nirvana* is not a valid dichotomy. The enlightenment experience, it is said, enables one to see that the true essence of this phenomenal world is *nirvana* or the Buddha-nature. Since *nirvana* is devoid of all empirical attributes, it follows that the attributes which we ordinarily ascribe to this world are empty names. Seen from the standpoint of enlightenment, there is no real substance to birth, death and suffering that we associate with the realm of nature. It is recorded that when Hui-neng, the Sixth Ch'an (Zen) Patriarch was about to die, he said that "nature itself is without birth and without destruction, without going and without coming<sup>5</sup>." Because the Patriarch knew the emptiness of the phenomenal world, he was able to face death with composure.

The second insight is that the conventional distinction which is made between good and evil, life and death is erroneous. Hakuin Zenji, a Zen master of eighteenth century Japan, once wrote the following words to console a sick monk: "... I have come to the recognition of the real truth that life and death, the Buddha and all demons or spirits are in essence but one..."<sup>6</sup> While we cannot be certain what effect Hakuin's words had in the life of the ailing monk, we do know that this insight is referred to frequently in Zen literature as a source of consolation in time of death. It is written, for example, in the *Platform Sutra* that among the monks who witnessed the death of the Sixth Patriarch, only one was not moved to tears. The dying Patriarch turned to the monk and said, "... you have attained (the status of awakening) in which good and not good are identical." But to the rest he said, "You others have not understood..."<sup>7</sup>

The third insight is that man's true nature is empty, for it also is the Buddha-nature or *nirvana*. Zen teaches that as long as we take the ego with all of its feelings too seriously, we increase misery for ourselves. A person who is dominated by egoism may fear death, because he is convinced that somehow he will suffer loss as he departs from this earth. However, the Zen masters persist in reminding their students that the ego is just as empty as the rest of the constituents of the pheno-

5. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, Philip B. Yampolsky, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 174.

6. Hakuin Zenji, *The Embossed Tea Kettle and other works of Hakuin Zenji*, R. D. M. Shaw, trans. (Longon: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), pp. 100-101.

7. *Platform Sutra*, Yampolsky, trans., p. 174.

menal world. Since man's true nature is *nirvana* and not the insubstantial ego, it follows that the bliss of his true nature is not contingent upon transitory circumstances or possessions. In the words of Joshu Sasaki Roshi, a contemporary Zen master, "If you realize that you are born with everything and that you die with everything, then you don't have to take any particular flower to enjoy it."<sup>8</sup> One might assume that such teaching can offer consolation only to monks or to those who could anticipate dying in relatively peaceful circumstances. There was, however, a period in the history of Japan when warriors found Zen training to be a useful means of overcoming fear of death. A poem from that era makes it clear that enlightenment offers benefits for the performance of military duties when it ascribes these words to a soldier:

Neither heaven nor earth give me shelter.

I rejoice to know that all things are void,—myself and the world.<sup>9</sup>

In our brief survey of these three insights an attempt has been made to demonstrate the ways in which a monistic view of reality is used in Zen as a means of enabling one to meet death with equanimity. Since the way a person dies may be a commentary on the way a person has lived, the *ars moriendi* is especially important in Zen Buddhism. In a sense, the entire life of the Zen Buddhist consists of the practice of the art of dying. Realizing that the insubstantial ego stubbornly asserts itself, the practitioner of Zen constantly "dies" to the promptings of the ego so that he might attain complete enlightenment and live in the fullness of his true nature. Having attained complete enlightenment, his final departure from the phenomenal world in peace will only be a natural extension of his enlightened life-style.

## 2. Christianity and the Art of Dying

Traditional Christianity, like Zen, does not display any reluctance to acknowledge the inevitability of death. The earliest extant Christian documents frequently refer to the transitory character of human life. Jesus teaches his disciples that a man cannot add a single hour to his life by worry (Matt. 6 : 27); James compares human life to a "mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4 : 14); and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews gives his readers the solemn reminder that "it is appointed for men to die once" (Heb. 9 : 27). Yet, in spite of this universal recognition of mortality, it cannot be said that the two

8. Joshu Sasaki Roshi, *Zen Notes*, Vol. xxii, No. 4 (April 1975): 5.

9. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York : Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 202.

traditions under consideration are in complete accord in their attitude to death.

Zen, with its ability to find the Buddha-nature in all things, is able to extract beauty from death itself. Death is not regarded as some alien that has disrupted the order of nature; rather, it is seen as an essential part of that order. In the New Testament writings, however, death is depicted as an accidental element in the natural order. This is particularly true of the writings of Paul, which refer to death as a punishment for sin (Rom. 5 : 12, 6 : 23). Although Paul focusses his attention primarily on the human dilemma, he does refer briefly to the process of decay which pervades all of nature (Rom. 8 : 21). By suggesting that this process is somehow related to human sin, he comes close to the position of certain Jewish writings of his period which explicitly state that the Fall of Adam brought death upon other forms of earthly life.<sup>10</sup>

While it cannot be said that Christian theology since the first century of this era has been consistently Pauline, it can be said that the Pauline emphasis on the tragic nature of death has proven to be an enduring element in traditional Christian thought. However, the tragic element in death for Paul and the majority of Christian thinkers since his time has never been the mere cessation of physical life. Rather, it has been in the belief that sin inflicts a spiritual death upon man which deprives him of fellowship with God and a right relationship with others. Alienation constitutes the crux of the tragedy.

In dealing with the problem of alienation, Christians from various traditions have generally accepted that in some manner the suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross has removed the tragic element from death for the faithful. There is, however, one aspect of the agony of Jesus which has been a focal point of discussion over the centuries. It is his dying cry of dereliction which is recorded in two of the Gospels: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27 : 46, Mk. 15 : 34). Christianity's difficulty in dealing with this utterance is directly related to its belief in the deity of Jesus. To put it more pointedly, why did the divine Son of God say he had been forsaken by God? This question has given rise to two major schools of interpretation. One school holds that as Jesus was dying, his humanity experienced for the first time a sense of alienation from God. In other words, the cry of dereliction came only from the human nature, not the

---

10. See 2 *Baruch* 54 : 15-19, *Jubilees* 3 : 28-29. For a discussion of Paul's affinity with Jewish speculation on this point see chapter two of W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London : S.P.C.K., 1955), revised edition.

divine nature, of Jesus. This line of interpretation has always appealed to Christians who have been influenced by the Stoic concept of the *apatheia* or impassibility of God.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, there is that school of thought which holds that in the agony of Jesus, God himself paradoxically experienced alienation from God. It is within the context of this second tradition that Jürgen Moltmann says:

When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth, he not only enters into the finitude of man, but in his death on the cross also enters into the situation of man's godforsakenness. In Jesus he does not die the natural death of a finite being, but the violent death of the criminal on the cross, the death of complete abandonment by God....He humbles himself....so that all the godless and godforsaken can experience communion with him.<sup>12</sup>

In Moltmann's words we find a basis for the Christian *ars moriendi* in the suffering of God. Since this line of thought seems to be a growing option for Christian theologians who are dissatisfied with the concept of an impassible God, we shall return to it later as we consider its implications for Zen-Christian dialogue.

### 3. Dying as an Issue in Zen-Christian Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is a demanding and, often, frustrating activity. Unless those involved in it are intelligently and honestly committed to the task of promoting mutual understanding, their efforts can soon degenerate into an exercise in debate. It would seem that one way of reducing the possibility of such a futile outcome would be to construct the dialogue around issues that are an integral part of the human quest for meaning. Dying is undoubtedly such an issue. By its power to challenge our most cherished dreams, death constrains us to pursue the meaning of existence with intensity. On the positive side, this makes this highly existential issue an ideal topic for Zen-Christian dialogue. Yet, as is the case with any issue that touches a deep human concern, this issue has the power to strain dialogue as well as facilitate it. This will be evident when we consider the art of dying from two perspectives.

11. The influence of this aspect of Greek philosophy on Christian thought is discussed by T. E. Pollard in his article "The Impassibility of God" in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. VII, 1955, pp. 353-364.

12. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 276.

First, let us consider the art of dying as an ongoing quest for reality. It has been suggested earlier in this paper that the *ars moriendi* could refer to an entire life-style; let us explore this further. Christianity derives much of its inspiration for the devout life as a *via crucis* from the writings of Paul. In his letter to the church of Rome, Paul speaks of his "flesh" which makes him "captive to the law of sin" (Rom. 7 : 23). Although Paul occasionally uses the term "flesh" to refer to the physical body, within this context the word refers to an attitude that is in opposition to the will of God. A similar use of the term is found in another of his letters where he says that the flesh is manifested in such attitudes as jealousy, anger, and selfishness (Galatians 5 : 20). In order to live on the highest plane, Paul declares, one must die in the flesh. Thus he says, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5 : 24).

Considering the fact that the great Zen masters also reject the attitudes condemned by Paul, one wonders if a similar "death" is required in Zen. D. T. Suzuki makes it clear how crucial terminology can be in dealing with such a question. "In the East," he says, "there is no ego. The ego is non-existent and, therefore, there is no ego to be crucified."<sup>13</sup> Since the word "flesh" seems to have a connotation similar to "ego" as used by Suzuki, it would appear that at least this exponent of Zen would respond negatively to our question. However, when we pursue the matter further, we find that Suzuki does not wholly abandon the concept of the ego. In the same essay he makes a distinction between the "transcendental ego" and the "relative ego". It is clear from his usage of these terms that the former is the Buddha-nature, while the latter is the impermanent ego-nature that is empty. Stressing the insubstantial nature of the relative ego, Suzuki says, "As there is from the first no ego-substance, there is no need for crucifixion."<sup>14</sup>

Suzuki is obviously not pleased with the corporeality of Paul's terminology, and, like many Japanese, he is also repulsed by the display of a crucified figure.<sup>15</sup> Finding Paul's reference to crucifixion to be too violent, he prefers to speak of the relative ego being absorbed into the transcendental ego "quietly and without much fuss".<sup>16</sup> And so the relative ego is put to death by "absorption" rather than by "cruci-

13. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 129.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

15. Cf. Sho-on Hattori, "What We Learn from a Flower," pp. 31-32.

16. Suzuki, *Mysticism*, p. 132.

fixion." Suzuki's language is milder than that of the Apostle but, in a sense, the final result is the same. Man is liberated from his compulsion to pursue that which can only lead to misery for himself and others. Whether or not there can be agreement on the "substance" of the ego, both Zen Buddhists and Christians can certainly agree that one must "die" to certain impulses and desires in order to realize spiritual freedom. A basic difference exists, of course, in the manner in which spiritual fulfilment is understood. For the Christian it consists in being "in Christ", to use a Pauline expression. For the Zen Buddhist it consists of a state of freedom in which the mind perceives its own true nature. A further investigation of these conceptions of fulfilment is beyond the scope of this paper.

Let us now consider the art of dying as a preparation for the event of physical death. In both Christianity and Zen Buddhism we find those who would assure us that they have received an insight into the nature of reality which has transformed their attitude toward death. This insight is frequently associated with the conviction that that which is of greatest value in man is indestructible, and, second, the example of the Buddha or the Christ is also seen as a means of casting new light upon the experience of death. It is to these aspects of the transforming insight that we would now turn our attention.

Christians have frequently expressed their belief that the fullness of their salvation cannot be enjoyed as long as they remain in the mortal body. Thus we find Paul saying that "to depart and be with Christ . . . is far better" (Philippians 1 : 23). He also declares that "to die is gain" (Philippians 1 : 21). Then there is Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop of the second century church, who had an intense desire for martyrdom so that he might "get to God".<sup>17</sup> Such statements reflect both an assurance of life beyond the grave and the dualistic view of reality that has characterized Christianity all through the centuries. A clear-cut distinction is made between this world and life beyond the grave, death being the great divider between the two. Insofar as Christianity has adhered closely to its earliest documents, it has always understood life beyond the grave to mean the survival of individual personality, not the loss of individuality by absorption in God.

The Zen masters have also found it possible to overcome fear of death by their conviction that there is a dimension to man which cannot be annihilated by death. There are, however, two significant differences

---

17. Ignatius, *Romans* 4 : 1, Cyril C. Richardson, trans., *Early Christian Fathers*, Vol. 1 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 104.



between Zen and Christianity at this point. First, the monistic view of reality espoused by Zen is incompatible with the desire for death that has been expressed by some Christians. To crave death and a life beyond the grave suggests that there is a radical difference between life and death, or between this world and *nirvana*. Zen rejects such desires and beliefs as the products of ignorance. In the words of Dogen, the founder of the Soto school of Zen in Japan, "To find release, you must begin to regard life and death as identical to *nirvana*, neither loathing the former nor coveting the latter."<sup>18</sup> Second, the Zen masters also disapprove the craving for life after death, because they regard such a desire to be an expression of the unenlightened belief that there is a "soul" or "self" in man which can experience salvation. Such a belief is clearly rejected in these words ascribed to the Buddha in the *Diamond Sutra*: "All beings are without self. . . .without personality." This affirmation is then followed by the question, "Who then is to be delivered?"<sup>19</sup> Assuming that man's true nature is the Buddha-nature, it follows that he does not stand in need of salvation. To think that an individual can be saved to enjoy eternal life is to think of the relative ego as an immortal entity. It is sufficient consolation for an enlightened person to face death with the realization that his true nature is inherently immortal. In the words of D. T. Suzuki, "We are immortal as we are. We may die this moment yet there is no death whatever."<sup>20</sup>

Finally, we would note the consolation that is associated with the examples of Christ and the Buddha. We noted earlier a line of interpretation in Christian thought which identifies the death of Jesus with the suffering of God. By interpreting the passion of Jesus as a vicarious death, this school of thought claims that God took upon himself the complete agony of death—both spiritually and physically—for all mankind. In this manner death was deprived of its terrible hopelessness for others. Wolfhart Pannenberg expresses this belief when he says, "The vicarious efficacy of Jesus' death. . . .means that from now on no one has to die alone. . . .Because Jesus gathers up our dying into his own, the character of our dying changes."<sup>21</sup>

- 
18. From a sermon by Dogen entitled "On Life and Death" in *Zen: Poems, Prayers, Sermons, Anecdotes, Interviews*, Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto, trans. and ed. (New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1963), p. 41.
  19. *A Buddhist Bible: The Favorite Scriptures of the Zen Sect*, Dwight Goddard, ed. (Theford, Vermont: Dwight Goddard, 1932), p. 193.
  20. D. T. Suzuki, *The Field of Zen*, Christmas Humphreys, ed. (New York: Harper & Row Perennial Library, 1970), p. 81.
  21. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed: In the Light of Today's Questions*, Margaret Kohl, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 89.

The figure of Jesus dying in agony is in strong contrast to the traditional image of the dying Buddha. For centuries Buddhists have been instructed to emulate the tranquil manner in which the Enlightened One passed from this earth. From a Zen perspective, the calmness with which the Buddha expired was a demonstration of his awareness of the hollowness and insubstantiality of death. With such an example before him, the Zen Buddhist naturally finds the solace which a Christian derives from the crucified Jesus to be inappropriate. This is particularly true when he remembers that as Jesus was dying he asked why he had been forsaken by God.

Here we should note that the word "God", as commonly used by Christians, cannot be employed as a synonym for the *nirvana* of Zen Buddhism. Nevertheless, the two terms do symbolize ultimate reality. With this in mind, some interpreters of Zen in the Western world occasionally use the word "God" as a provisional substitute for *nirvana* or the Buddha-nature. When the word is used in this way, there is no intention of following the dualistic distinction which traditional Christianity makes between man and ultimate reality. Joshu Sasaki Roshi makes this clear when he says that "because of the fault of education, human beings believe we are separated from God."<sup>22</sup> Traditional Christianity, however, has never ascribed Jesus' cry of dereliction to a fault in his education. Rather, in his cry it sees him temporarily bearing the pain of alienation from God so that physical death may not deprive others of the beatific vision.

At this point it might appear that Zen-Christian dialogue reaches a complete impasse. However, as a concluding postscript, I would suggest that this is not so. Dogen once said, "Life and death constitute the very being of Buddha."<sup>23</sup> This statement must be understood within the context of Dogen's revolt against the tendency of his co-religionists to disassociate the Buddha-nature from all impermanence. In opposition to those who contended that true piety consists in renouncing that which is impermanent for the sake of that which is permanent, Dogen asserted that impermanence is the Buddha-nature, and *vice versa*.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, he was able to see change and death itself as a manifestation of the Buddha-nature. Of course, it must be admitted that this is not the same as the Christian conception of the suffering

22. Joshu Sasaki Roshi, *Zen Notes*, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (March 1975): p. 1.

23. Dogen's sermon "On Life and Death" in *Zen*, p. 41.

24. For a discussion of Dogen's position concerning the impermanent aspect of the Buddha-nature see Hee-Jin Kim, *Dogen-Kigen—Mystical Realist, Monograph XXIX of The Association for Asian Studies*, Paul Wheatley, ed. (Tucson; University of Arizona Press, 1975), pp. 180-183.

God. What is significant is that Dogen believed that the identification of the Buddha-nature with death was an effective means of overcoming fear of death.

Christianity, as we have already noted, finds the "sting" removed from death by its belief that in Jesus, God has identified himself with the experience of dying. While it cannot be said that Dogen speaks for all Zen Buddhists any more than it can be said that process theologians speak for all Christians, I would suggest that the comments of Dogen might serve as a useful basis for dialogue between Zen Buddhists and Christians who find the identification of the ultimate with the temporal to be an important element in the *ars moriendi*.