

ZEN AND HEALING

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Introduction

On being asked to write something on the theme "Zen and Healing" my first reaction, I must admit, was bewilderment: the Zen I have been familiar with till now has never dealt with the problem of healing in the commonly accepted meaning of the word. Then suddenly I remembered the advice of Ryokan (1758-1831), the Zen monk, who has been called the St. Francis of the East: "When you meet misfortune hail it; when death comes welcome it; that is the best way to avoid disaster".

This Advice was written in a letter to a friend who had commiserated with Ryokan after some misfortune. It would be impossible to add anything to those words: they are the ultimate in Zen *satori*. What he is saying is, "When you are ill, it is good to be ill: when death comes, that is the right thing for you".

There is another Zen phrase, which says, "Every day is a good day". And there is still another (though not Zen this time) which says, "Ill? Go with it". That is to say don't fight illness, make friends with it. These sayings, not found in dictionaries, express well enough the "life-wisdom" of the Japanese: "Everything is in a state of flux"; "Nothing is constant"; "The whole Buddhist way is summed up in negation of self". If one approaches the issue from these basic Buddhist concepts, it becomes clear that the question of "healing" is not seen as a problem at all. It would be regarded as a worry that afflicts only those who have not attained *satori*, the state of enlightenment that transcends health and illness, life and death. This being so, a topic such as "Zen and Healing" is not conceivable. That is why, to be honest, when the request came to write about it I was disconcerted.

On the other hand, we cannot just let it go like that and say nothing. Little by little, thoughts began to crowd in. I remembered Hakuin Ekaku (1684-1768), a Zen Master, who occupies a very special place in Zen

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history, and in whose writings one finds a veritable treasury of ideas that fit well into our theme. I remembered also that Zen has been proposed as an antidote for "the illness of our age" - neurosis, stress, personality disorders and so on. They are maladies especially evident in Japan's over-competitive society where people work so hard that they have been called beavers, workaholics, economic animals. Among the proposed remedies for these illnesses there is now a boom in so-called Yoga and pseudo-Zen meditation. This trend has grown so strong that hazardous, spurious religions are using their "super-human healing powers" as a selling point.

I should like to approach our subject "Zen and Healing" then from these two aspects.

1. HAKUIN AND HEALING

Among Hakuin's works there are two that have direct reference to healing- *Yasenkanna* and *Orategama*. To this day both are regarded as source books of healing practices. In these we find methods that he learned during a grave illness that overtook him as a neophyte engaged in Zen ascetic exercises. One method he calls *Nanso*, another *Naikan* or inner contemplation and there is another he calls *Hitori Amma* or self-massage. The content of these works however is not confined to cures for illness; it is intimately linked to Zen spirituality. Moreover, in the background of the Zen thought, or more accurately *Rinzai Zen* culture, we find Indian, Chinese and Japanese cultures overlaid, one on top of the other. This means that the spirituality found in Hakuin, who lived in the 1700-s (the Edo era in Japan) is rooted in three tiers. The Zen transmitted from India to China and thence to Japan became eventually a uniquely Japanese Zen. Hakuin is one of the best representatives of our Zen Masters. If we review, then, the historical background to the three stages we have mentioned it may help us to understand some of the problems posed by our theme.

2. HISTORICAL TRANSITIONS OF ZEN BUDDHISM

2.1. Zen Meditation: Speculative Zen

The Mahayana (Great Vehicle) Buddhism that the monk Daruma (Paramon) of southern India (?--528) brought to China in the sixth century bore a speculative, meditative character which expresses the special features of Indian spirituality. The legend about Daruma's "nine years of

meditation facing a wall" is symbolic of it. Indian Zen can be summed up as simply and solely meditation, a quality it inherits from the speculative nature of all Indian spirituality. It is called "speculative Zen" or in easier terms "Zen of the head". It is thought that the Zen of those times did not employ the various methods in use at present, but kept to Yoga-style meditation sitting cross-legged on the floor. This is now a basic posture for Zen meditation; but it was a normal position for Indian people at that time just as it is now. Circular straw pads and cushions were contrived after Zen began to spread to China. These too found their way unchanged to Japan. In this regard it is interesting to note the cultural traits common to India, China and Japan despite different physique and different customs. Most scholars tell us, however, that the "half-closed eyes", now emphasised so strongly in meditation, was not held to be so important at that time.

2.2. Zen in Action: Active Zen

It is said that, unlike the abstract, speculative nature of the Indian personality, the mental structure of Chinese is resolutely pragmatic. This led to an emphasis being placed on ascetic practices over and above meditation, and thus to a "physical Zen" that involved training to adjust body posture and breathing to mental attitude. Then came the use of a rod (*keisaku*) for admonishing slack posture, etc. during meditation. In this way, methods of performing *zazen* were handed down in minute detail. Then comes another important feature, the use of *koan*, a speciality of Rinzai Zen. Spreading out of the framework of purely speculative Indian Zen, the methods contrived by the Chinese pragmatic character resulted in a uniquely Chinese form of Zen. A great influence here also was the "mu" (naught) philosophy of Lao-tze and Chug-tze which is central to the great tradition of Chinese spirituality. The influence on the pragmatic Chinese Zen is especially evident in the Rinzai temples, in their use of *Koan Zen*, the contemplation of words also known as *Kanna Zen*. In contrast we have the silent enlightenment, *Mokusho Zen* of the Soto monasteries, the special feature of which is purely sitting meditation in the speculative Indian style. This kind of Zen, which goes by the name of *Shikantaza*, i.e. nothing but pure sitting, was brought to Japan by Dogen (1200-1253). Midway between these two we have the Obaku sect, but this, along with Shomyo is a branch of Rinzai Zen. For the reasons set out above, Chinese Zen became known as "Zen in action". A typical example of their use of *koan* is found in the story about

Master Nansen killing a cat (Mumonkan VII4). That is indeed Zen in action, or should we call it militant Zen. At all events it is the type of Zen that combines *koan* and *zazen*, speculation and ascetic exercises, to achieve *satori*.

2.3 Zen in Daily Life in Intimacy with the Buddha

Zen, especially the two types mentioned above, Rinzai and Sodo, came to Japan in the thirteenth century. However, the Japanese, whose character and sensibilities were moulded in a small, rice-growing, island community, found it difficult to get used to the emotional Zen in action brought over from China. Through the influence of Japanese culture, where love of nature and a real affinity with nature is innate, the physical severity of Chinese Zen was replaced by a daily life spent in intimacy with the Buddha. The end result is found in the special training of monastic life called *gyo-ju-za-ga*. Among the Rinzai monasteries there are still some training halls where discipline is austere, but in Sodo monasteries one no longer hears of the thirty strokes of the rod or the tremendous, sudden shout in the midst of a meditation. In fact there are places where the rod is merely left lying in the *tokonoma*. Some Masters regard it as a mere toy. The rough, physical colliding with one-another between a Master and disciple, during a *mondo* session or *dokusan*, or on the occasion of entering monastic life - something common enough in China - would not be at all suitable in Japan. It might even have led to regrettable consequences (Rinzai Records: Hall Sermons). Even for Dogen, who places great importance on ascetic exercises, monastic life itself is the key to *satori*, or what is called in Zen, the gateway to success (Shobogenzo Zuimon Ki: 6-9).

Even the basic doctrine that all living things partake of the Buddha nature becomes in Japan "Mountain and river, forest and meadow - all partake of the Buddha nature". That is the source of the refreshing, existentialist, all embracing grasp of mankind and nature that we find in religious poetry. In the Buddhist way, especially among Zen Buddhist monks, you will find outstanding masters of calligraphy, tea ceremony, painting and drawing, and poetry. The way has been the source of a highly human-centered culture and world view. Yet, here too, we find that the approach is not on the grand scale: we are dealing with a Japanese sensibility and spirituality that discovers the greater hidden in the lesser. A vase for one flower or the simple black and white brush sketches so

different from the elaborate oil painting of the West still stand as examples of what I mean.

Here is an episode that appears in Dogen's records, the story of the one grain of rice:

Machines for hulling rice at the time were not perfect. In one's bowl one often came across a grain of rice still in its husk. If one felt such a grain in one's mouth the usual thing was to take it out and throw it away. Dogen castigates this custom saying. "Even that one grain of rice is a gift of the mercy of the Buddha, brought to us by the earth and the rain and the sun and the labour of many hands. Remove the husk within your mouth, then give thanks and eat the grain". This is a typical Mahayana story that sees the world of the infinitely vast mercy of the Buddha in one small grain of rice. For Dogen, it was not a matter of bringing Zen into the midst of daily life: Dogen equiparated Zen and daily life. Our day to day life, - that is Zen.

Above we have traced Zen back through the different stages to its Indian origins. We shall now take Hakuin, one of the great Zen Master of recent times, and see what we can learn from his life and his experiences. We shall then have an outline of our theme "Hakuin's Zen and Healing".

3. HAKUIN'S LIFE. CHILDHOOD AND UPBRINGING

3.1. Nothing is forever. Genius displays itself even in childhood.

Hakuin was born a little over 300 years ago (1685), in the early dawn of the 25th of December, Christ's birthday, in the post-town of Harajuku, Shinzuoka, as the last child of the Sugiyama family. He was given the name of Iwajiro. To this day, a monument to mark the spot stands at the roadside in Hara Higashi Machi, Numazu City.

The story goes that one day at the age of five, while playing in the sand beneath a pine tree on the beach near his home, he began to watch a column of clouds forming and then disintegrating, and suddenly he was overcome by a sense of grief and loss. Even as a boy of five, perhaps he had caught a glimpse of the Buddhist doctrine that all is passion. When he was seven it was one of his joys to visit the temple with his mother. One day, after listening to an explanation of *the Lotus Sutra*, he astonished everyone in the neighbourhood by going home and learning it by heart.

3.2. Youth and Early Manhood.

(i) *His religious sensibility. Early days as monk.*

One day when he was eleven, he heard a sermon on the ten states of mind as found in the *Makashikan*. He was overcome by fear on learning that anyone committing the ten sins that arise out of Greed, Anger and Folly would go to hell. He determined to avoid this danger and gave himself to popular devotions especially devotion to Kannon. He was unable, however to rid himself of the fear of hell and at last he decided he must become a monk. He was now twelve. His parents refused permission; but he continued his appeals to them and at last, at the age of fifteen, he was allowed to leave home and enter the monastery. He presented himself at Harajuku temple, shaved his head and entered the Buddhist Way.

(ii) *Incomparable*

At the age of twenty he apprenticed himself to Master Bao of Mino, a monk renowned for his austerity. The three years Hakuin spent with this man became an unforgettable period in his life. It was also a sad time because of the loss of his mother. When his pupil had completed his apprenticeship and was taking his leave, even the austere Bao had to admit that Hakuin had incomparable talent. The young man then travelled by way of Wakasa to a temple called Shoshuji, in Iyo-Matsuyama and began training under Master.

(iii) *False and Satori*

After completing five years of Zen exercises, Hakuin returned to Shoinji in his native place and after a while set out with a companion to visit Master Seitetsu of Echigo Takada. It was around this time that he had the illusion on hearing the stroke of the temple bell announcing the dawn. He thought that he had achieved *satori*. But it was indeed an illusion and filled with the danger of spiritual pride. He adverted to this pride, however, and had recourse to a Master called Shoju. This was in April of his 24th year. During his time with Shoju he had an experience that truly humbled him. One morning as he went out begging, he met an old woman who refused to give him anything. Moreover, she sent him flying with a mighty stroke of her broom. Hakuin fell to the ground unconscious. On coming to himself, however, he realised in one great flash that he had achieved complete enlightenment. Shoju also recognised what had happened and

congratulated him. "You have indeed made the breakthrough", he said.

3.3 Prime Life. Serious Illness

The young Hakuin, his pride so rudely demolished, has left us a humble confession of his state of mind at that time. In his biography, in the chapter devoted to his 25th year, he writes:

My *satori* was merely *satori* in name, without fruit. I don't seem to be able to die the great death. My actions do not conform to what I understand with my head. I must therefore whip the dying ox, grit my teeth, open my eyes and in the chores of the daily round make sure that my actions mean something. Then when I come to *zazen*, I must make sure it is the real thing, i.e. pure Zen meditation in which one almost forgets to eat or sleep.

These exercises he undertook were beyond the limit of human endurance and Hakuin developed lung trouble. Anyone who contracted the disease at that time was considered to be incurable, could do nothing but await death. In fact, tuberculosis had come to be called the Zen illness, because it was often the result of the rigors of Zen asceticism. For Hakuin, with his frail constitution and intense spiritual vigor, the illness was a fatal blow. He was then twenty-seven years old.

A friend advised him to seek the advice of one Hakuyu, an old hermit who lived in the mountains in Shirakawa to the east of Kyoto. From Hakuyu he learned the methods *Nanzo no ho* and *Naikan no ho*, inner contemplation. The latter he described in detail in the *Yasenkanna*, written when he was seventy-seven. Besides what he learned from Hakuyu we also have in these writings cures Hakuin contrived himself - a massage one can do oneself, and a cure for ailing eyes.

IN CONCLUSION: THE DIMENSIONS OF HEALING

Dualism. Under the influence of Greek philosophical theory people in the West usually thought of a human being as consisting of body and soul. The human body was regarded as "matter" and its relation to the human spirit was not fully realised. In treating human illness, then, they relied on medicines and surgery, i.e. remedies for the body. In the East, however, we have a philosophy that says "body and spirit make a whole", "matter and

mind are one unit". Healing methods were based on that way of thinking: their purpose was to "restore the natural harmony" which illness had disturbed. The Chinese, for instance, adopted a triple view of the problem in hand, i.e. they were dealing with 'Nature', 'Body', and 'Spirit'. In this way they devised what we know as "Kanpo" (Chinese medicine), which includes natural medicinal cures, physical posture and exercises, controlled breathing and so on. (E.g. *Kiko, Taikyokuken*). The so-called Zen maxim of "adjusting physical posture, breathing and mind" belongs in this category, but one must remember that the original object in Zen or *zazen* is not healing; nor indeed does it have for its purpose the easing of stress or the curing of psychological disorders and other ills of our age. Even supposing that Zen exercises were useful in that field, the results must be seen merely as side effects.

The ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism is a meeting with oneself. That self is the *Atman*, the "I", that is the source of every human personality. When this "I" has been united with the universal "self"; when "it" and "I" are identical, then is the real "self" revealed. It is at that point that the world of the transcendent self is revealed and grasped. Nor is it solely the domain of the spirit - by the total acceptance of everything in the universe, regardless of true or false, good or evil, one knows that one has transcended all and become detached from all. There is a saying, "On the most excellent of all ways there are no obstacles". There is, however, one condition, namely that one must be completely indifferent. And with that we are back to Ryokan's frame of mind: When illness comes, that is a good time to be ill; when death comes calling, that is a good time to die. Dogen has the following, "Both life and death are contained in the Buddha life. To spurn either is to lose the Buddha life" (*Shobogenzo: Life and Death*). The peak, the ultimate goal of Zen, is not the mere healing of an illness but the salvation of the person in the true sense of the word.

Hakuin left us a record of what was an extremely personal and experimental healing method; he did not use medicines or surgery. His method has that special character, that basic Zen mind of being totally detached. When he used breathing and physical exercises he based them in the spirit of Zen.

The "interior contemplation" (*naikan*) that is at present becoming popular all across the world is influenced by the Zen spirit. In this age when

everything is going global, if Indian Yoga and Zen can contribute to opening up people's horizons in the field of medicine, let us hope they will also open up the deeper realms of the soul.

GLOSSARY

KOAN: [Originally, in China, a public notice or decree] In Zen it is a phrase from a *sutra* or a *mondo* or an episode in the life of an old Master. Paradox is essential to a *koan*. It is not a mere riddle, and cannot be solved by reason. Solving it requires a leap to another level of comprehension.

KANNA ZEN: "Zen of the contemplation of words". The name designates the style of Zen that regarded the *koan* as the most important means of training on the way to enlightenment.

MOKUSHO ZEN: Literally the Zen of silent enlightenment. The name is used to distinguish the style of meditative practice favoured by the Soto School from the Kanna Zen mentioned above. Mokusho Zen stresses the practice of *zazen* without the support of such means as *koan*. It emphasises the form which was later called Shikantaza by Dogen.

SHIKANTAZA: Literally, nothing but sitting. A form of practice in which there are no supportive techniques such as beginners use, e.g. counting the breath or *koan*. Dogen says it is "resting in a state of brightly alert attention that is free of thoughts, directed to no object, and attached to no particular content. This is the purest form of *zazen*."

MONDO: Literally, question and answer. Zen dialogue between Masters, or between Master and disciple, concerning something in Buddhism or some existential problem, without recourse in any way to theory or logic.

DOKUSAN: Meeting of a Zen student with his Master in the seclusion of the master's room.

MU: Nothing, Not, Nothingness, Is Not, Not Any. Usually used in *koan*, where the student has to come to an immediate experience of its profound content.

KYOSAKU: The "wake-up stick"; a flattened stick, 75 to 100 cm. in length, with which the "sitters" in Zen monasteries are struck on the shoulders and back during long periods of *zazen* to encourage and

stimulate them.

TOKONOMA: An alcove or recess in Japanese rooms where a scroll or *kakemono* and the like may be hung.

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