

THE GOLDEN AGE OF ZEN

By John C. H. Wu



禪學的黃金時代

張其昀題



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Revised Edition

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PREFACE

By the "Golden Age of Zen" I mean the Zen as experienced and taught by the great Zen Masters of the T'ang period (618-906). Although the School of Zen had its origins in the sixth century with the coming of Bodhidharma, its solid foundations were actually laid by Hui-neng in the seventh century. The whole movement flowered forth magnificently in the hands of such vigorous spirits as Ma-tsu, Shih-t'ou, Nan-ch'uan, Pai-chang, Huang-po and Chao-chou. In the ninth century, it began to ramify into different branches. Inevitably the sap of Zen ran thin in the course of the succeeding generations, but with the founders of the "houses" there is still no sign of abatement of the original vigor.

In the epilogue I have drawn mainly upon the Zen literature after T'ang. Those little sparks of Zen will serve to indicate that although the School of Zen has long since passed its zenith, the spirit of Zen never dies.

Father Thomas Merton's Introduction to this book presents an illuminating picture of the nature of Zen. Here as in his other writings he goes to the bottom of things, and he finds that at bottom Humanity is one, and one with its Divine Source. I suggest that the reader should first study his introduction before he proceeds to take up the body of the book. In a real sense this book may be regarded as a long foot-note to the profound insights embodied in his introduction.

I am grateful to Father Merton not only for the invaluable introduction he has contributed, but even more for his generous cooperation in the making of the book itself

There is no telling how much the friendship of this *true man* has meant to me during all these lonely years of my life.

The story of my friendship with the late Daisetz Suzuki is told in the appendix to this book. It is touching to think that he spent a great part of his last months perusing and enjoying the manuscript of this book.

Finally, this book would not have seen the light so soon were it not for the encouragement of my friend Dr. Chang Chi-yun, the founder and the head of the College of Chinese Culture. He is a humanist in the full sense of the word, for to him nothing human is alien. At his request I had the pleasure of offering a special seminar on Zen Buddhism at his college, and I have not only enjoyed but profited by the class discussions. I had taught the same subject at the Seton Hall University. It is delightful to compare the reactions from students of entirely different backgrounds and to find that ultimately the diversity of views points up the selfsame mysterious Whole.

In this book I have used "Zen" and "Ch'an" interchangeably. With this exception, I have followed the Wade-Giles system of romanizing the Chinese words.

John C. H. Wu
(Wu Ching-hsiung)

Taipci, Taiwan, China.
August 22, 1967.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition of this book, published in 1967, has been out of print for some time. I am, therefore, happy to accede to the earnest request of United Publishing Center to publish the present edition in order to answer the growing demands for the book. As the first edition is fraught with misprints, I have taken this occasion for correcting all the mistakes to the best of my ability. In this I am indebted to the kind cooperation of my friends Dr. Wei Tat and Mr. Liu Chih-hsiang.

The reader will be interested to know that a Chinese translation of this book was made by the able hands of Dr. Wu Yi and published by the Taiwan Commercial Press in 1969. This excellent translation has since passed through five editions. I am deeply consoled to learn that the message of this book is so well received among the younger generation of Chinese intellectuals.

Finally, let me offer this edition to the blessed memory of Thomas Merton, one of my dearest friends.

August 4, 1975
91 Yang Ming Road,
Yangmingshan, Taipei,
Taiwan, Republic of China.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John C. H. Wu", with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

John C. H. Wu

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INTRODUCTION

A Christian Looks At Zen

by Thomas Merton

Here is a book that will do much to clarify the still very confused western idea of Zen Buddhism. It is not an apologia, not a criticism, not a purely academic history, not a romantic exercise of imaginative concordism. It looks at the great Chinese Zen Masters of the 7th to 10th centuries A.D., and portrays them in their "Five Houses". It enables us to situate their teaching and to enjoy it in its context.

Dr. John C. H. Wu is in a uniquely favorable position to carry out this task. An eminent jurist and diplomat, a Chinese convert to Catholicism, a scholar but also a man of profoundly humorous simplicity and spiritual freedom, he is able to write of Buddhism not from hearsay or study alone, but from within. Dr. Wu is not afraid to admit that he brought Zen, Taoism and Confucianism with him into Christianity. In fact in his well-known Chinese translation of the New Testament he opens the Gospel of St. John with the words "In the beginning was the Tao."

He nowhere feels himself obliged to pretend that Zen causes him to have dizzy spells or palpitations of the heart. Nor does he attempt the complex and frustrating task of trying to conciliate Zen insights with Christian doctrine. He simply takes hold of Zen and presents it without comment. Anyone who has any familiarity with Zen will immediately admit that this is the only way to talk about it. To approach the subject with an intellectual or theological chip on the

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shoulder would end only in confusion. The truth of the matter is that you can hardly set Christianity and Zen side by side and compare them. This would almost be like trying to compare mathematics and tennis. And if you are writing a book on tennis which might conceivably be read by many mathematicians, there is little point in bringing mathematics into the discussion: best to stick to the tennis. That is what Dr. Wu has done with Zen.

On the other hand, Zen is deliberately cryptic and disconcerting. It seems to say the most outrageous things about the life of the spirit. It seeks to jolt even the Buddhist mind out of its familiar thought routines and devout imaginings, and no doubt it will be even more shocking to those whose religious outlook is remote from Buddhism. Zen can sound, at times, frankly and avowedly irreligious. And it is, in the sense that it makes a direct attack on formalism and myth and regards conventional religiosity as a hindrance to mature spiritual development. On the other hand, in what sense is Zen, as such, "religious" at all? Yet where do we ever find "pure Zen" dissociated from a religious and cultural matrix of some sort? Some of the Zen Masters were iconoclasts. But the life of an ordinary Zen temple is full of Buddhist piety and ritual, and some Zen literature abounds in devotionism and in conventional Buddhist religious concepts. The Zen of D.T. Suzuki is completely free from all this. But can it be called "typical"? One of the advantages of Dr. Wu's Christian treatment is that he too is able to see Zen apart from this accidental setting. It is like seeing the mystical doctrine of St. John of the Cross apart from the somewhat irrelevant backdrop of Spanish baroque. However the whole study of Zen can bristle with questions like these, and when the well meaning inquirer receives answers to his questions, then hundreds of other questions arise to take the place of the two or three that have been "answered".

Though much has been said, written and published in the west about Zen, the general reader is probably not much the wiser for most of it. And unless he has some idea of what Zen is all about he may be mystified by this book, which is full of the classic Zen material: curious anecdotes, strange happenings, cryptic declarations, explosions of illogical humor, not to mention contradictions, inconsistencies, eccentric and even absurd behavior, and all for what? For some apparently esoteric purpose which is never made clear to the satisfaction of the logical western mind. This being the case, it becomes the difficult task of the writer of an introduction to actually introduce the western reader to Zen: that is, to try and get the reader to properly identify what he is about to encounter, and not think of it as something entirely other than it is.

Now the reader with a Judeo-Christian background of some sort (and who in the west does not still have some such background?) will naturally be predisposed to misinterpret Zen because he will instinctively take up the position of one who is confronting a "rival system of thought" of a "competing ideology" or an "alien worldview" or more simply "a false religion". Anyone who adopts such a position makes it impossible for himself to see what Zen is, because he assumes in advance that it must be something that it expressly refuses to be. Zen is not a systematic explanation of life, it is not an ideology, it is not a worldview, it is not a theology of revelation and salvation, it is not a mystique, it is not a way of ascetic perfection, it is not mysticism as this is understood in the west, in fact it fits no convenient category of ours. Hence all our attempts to tag it and dispose of it with labels like "pantheism", "quietism", "illumination", "pelagianism" must be completely incongruous, and proceed from a naive assumption that Zen pretends to justify the ways of God to man and to do so falsely. Zen is not concerned with God in the

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way Christianity is, though one is entitled to discover sophisticated analogies between the Zen experience of the Void (*Sunyata*) and the experience of God in the "unknowing" of apophatic Christian mysticism. However, Zen cannot be properly judged as a mere doctrine, for though there are in it implicit doctrinal elements, they are entirely secondary to the inexpressible Zen experience.

True, we cannot really understand Chinese Zen if we do not grasp the implicit Buddhist metaphysic which it so to speak acts out. But the Buddhist metaphysic itself is hardly doctrinal in our elaborate philosophical and theological sense: Buddhist philosophy is an interpretation of ordinary human experience, but an interpretation which is not revealed by God nor discovered in the access of inspiration nor seen in a mystical light. Basically, Buddhist metaphysics is a very simple and natural elaboration of the implications of Buddha's own experience of enlightenment. Buddhism does not seek primarily to understand or to "believe in" the enlightenment of Buddha as the solution to all human problems, but seeks an existential and empirical participation in that enlightenment experience. It is conceivable that one might have the "enlightenment" without being aware of any discursive philosophical implications at all. These implications are not seen as having any theological bearing whatever, and they point only to the ordinary natural condition of man. It is true that they arrive at certain fundamental deductions which were in the course of time elaborated into complex religious and philosophical systems. But the chief characteristic of Zen is that it rejects all these systematic elaborations in order to get back, as far as possible, to the pure unarticulated and unexplained ground of direct experience. The direct experience of what? Life itself. What it means that I exist, that I live: who is this "I" that exists and lives? What is the difference between the authentic and an illusory

awareness of the self that exists and lives? What are and are not the basic facts of existence?

When we in the west speak of "basic facts of existence" we tend immediately to conceive these facts as reducible to certain austere and foolproof proposition—logical statements that are guaranteed to have meaning because they are empirically verifiable. These are what Bertrand Russell called "atomic facts." Now for Zen it is inconceivable that the basic facts of existence should be able to be stated in any proposition however atomic. For Zen, from the moment fact is transferred to a statement it is falsified. One ceases to grasp the naked reality of experience and one grasps a form of words instead. The *Verification* which Zen seeks is not to be found in a dialectical transaction involving the reduction of fact to logical statement and the reflective verification of statement by fact. It may be said that long before Bertrand Russell spoke of "atomic facts" Zen had split the atom and made its own kind of statement in the explosion of logic into *Satori* (enlightenment). The whole aim of Zen is not to make foolproof statements about experience, but to come to direct grips with reality without the mediation of logical verbalizing.

But *what* reality? There is certainly a kind of living and non-verbal dialectic in Zen between the ordinary everyday experience of the senses (which is by no means arbitrarily repudiated) and the experience of enlightenment. Zen is not an idealistic rejection of sense and matter in order to ascend to a supposedly invisible reality which alone is real. The Zen experience is a direct grasp of the *unity* of the invisible and the visible, the noumenal and the phenomenal, or if you prefer an experiential realization that any such division is bound to be pure imagination.

D.T. Suzuki says: "Tasting, seeing, experiencing, living

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—all these demonstrate that there is something common to enlightenment-experience and our sense-experience; the one takes place in our innermost being the other on the periphery of our consciousness. Personal experience thus seems to be the foundation of Buddhist philosophy. In this sense Buddhism is radical empiricism or experientialism, whatever dialectic later developed to probe the meaning of the enlightenment experience" (1)

Now the great obstacle to mutual understanding between Christianity and Buddhism lies in the western tendency to focus not on the Buddhist *experience* which is essential, but on the *explanation* which is accidental and which indeed Zen often regards as completely trivial and even misleading.

Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to *explain* but to *pay attention*, to *become aware*, to *be mindful*, in other words to develop a certain *kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception* by verbal formulas. Deception in what? Deception in its grasp of itself as it really is. Deception due to diversion and distraction from what is right there—consciousness itself.

Zen, then, aims at a kind of certainty: but it is not the logical certainty of philosophical proof, still less the religious certainty that comes with the acceptance of the word of God by obedience of faith. It is rather the certainty that goes with an authentic metaphysical intuition which is also existential and empirical. The purpose of all Buddhism is to refine the consciousness until this kind of insight is attained, and the religious implications of the insight are then variously worked out and applied to life in the different Buddhist traditions.

In the *Mahayana* tradition, which includes Zen, the chief implication of this insight into the human condition is *karuna*

or compassion which leads to a paradoxical reversal of what the insight itself might seem to imply. Instead of rejoicing in his escape from the phenomenal world of suffering, the Bodhisattva elects to remain in it and finds in it his *nirvana*, by reason not only of the metaphysic which identifies the phenomenal and the noumenal, but also of the compassionate love which identifies all the sufferers in the round of birth and death with the Buddha whose enlightenment they potentially share. Though there are a heaven and a hell for Buddhists, these are not ultimate, and in fact it would be entirely ambiguous to assume that Buddha is regarded as a Savior who leads his faithful disciples to *Nirvana* as to a kind of negative heaven. (Pure Land Buddhism or Amidism is however distinctly a salvation religion).

It cannot be repeated too often: in understanding Buddhism it would be a great mistake to concentrate on the "doctrine", the formulated philosophy of life, and to neglect the experience which is absolutely essential, the very heart of Buddhism. This is in a sense the exact opposite of the situation in Christianity. For Christianity begins with revelation. Though it would be misleading to classify this revelation simply as a "doctrine" and an "explanation" (it is far more than that—the revelation of God Himself in the mystery of Christ) it is nevertheless communicated to us in words, in statements and everything depends on the believer accepting the truth of these statements.

Therefore Christianity has always been profoundly concerned with these statements: with the accuracy of their transmission from the original sources, with the precise understanding of their exact meaning, with the elimination and indeed the condemnation of false interpretations. At times this concern has been exaggerated almost to the point of an obsession, accompanied by arbitrary and fanatical insistence on hair-

splitting distinctions and the purest niceties of theological detail.

This obsession with doctrinal formulas, juridical order and ritual exactitude has often made people forget that the heart of Catholicism too is a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations. What too often has been overlooked, in consequence, is that Catholicism is the taste and experience of eternal life: "We announce to you the eternal life which was with the Father and has appeared to us. What we have seen and have heard we announce to you, in order that you also may have fellowship with us and that our fellowship may be with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." (I John 1:2-3) Too often the Catholic has imagined himself obliged to stop short at a mere correct and external belief expressed in good moral behavior, instead of entering fully into the life of hope and love consummated by union with the invisible God "in Christ and in the Spirit, thus fully sharing in the Divine Nature". (Ephesians 2:18, 2 Peter 1:4, Col. 1:9-17, I John 4:12-12)

The Second Vatican Council has (we hope) happily put an end to this obsessive tendency in Catholic theological investigation. But the fact remains that for Christianity, a religion of the Word, the understanding of the statements which embody God's revelation of Himself remains a primary concern. Christian experience is a fruit of this understanding, a development of it, a deepening of it.

At the same time, Christian experience itself will be profoundly affected by the idea of revelation which the Christian himself will entertain. For example, if revelation is regarded simply as a system of truths *about* God and an explanation of how the universe came into existence, what will eventually happen to it, what is the purpose of Christian life, what are its moral norms, what will be the rewards of the

virtuous and so on, then Christianity is in effect reduced to a worldview, at times a religious philosophy and little more, sustained by a more or less elaborate cult, by a moral discipline and a strict code of Law. "Experience" of the inner meaning of Christian revelation will necessarily be distorted and diminished in such a theological setting. What will such experience be? Not so much a living theological experience of the presence of God in the world and in mankind through the mystery of Christ, but rather a sense of security in one's own correctness: a feeling of confidence that one has been saved, a confidence which is based on the reflex awareness that one holds the correct view of the creation and purpose of the world and that one's behavior is of a kind to be rewarded in the next life. Or, perhaps, since few can attain this level of self-assurance, then the Christian experience becomes one of anxious hope—a struggle with occasional doubt of the "right answers", a painful and constant effort to meet the severe demands of morality and law, and a somewhat desperate recourse to the sacraments which are there to help the weak who must constantly fall and rise again.

This of course is a sadly deficient account of true Christian experience, based on a distortion of the true import of Christian revelation. Yet it is the impression non-Christians often get of Christianity from the outside, and when one proceeds to compare, say, Zen experience in its purity with this diminished and distorted type of "Christian experience" then one's comparison is just as meaningless and misleading as a comparison between Christian philosophy and theology on their highest and most sophisticated level, with the myths of a popular and decadent Buddhism.

When we set Christianity and Buddhism side by side, we must try to find the points where a genuinely common ground between the two exists. At the present moment, this