

Sects and cults: Zen Buddhism

Zen is impossible to explain It doesn't make sense. If you understand Zen then I have failed to convey its meaning. No one can systematically clarify it's basic beliefs. If this is so, why take the time to read this article?

After the Second World War, and especially during the 1960s, the era of the rise of America's counter-culture. Zen Buddhism began to command the interest of many non-oriental youths. There is now a score of Zen Centres in the U.S. Zen disciples, can also be found in Canada and in Western European countries. Its main centre is a monastery located at Tasaajara, 150 miles south of San Francisco.

Zen originated in Japan where it profoundly influenced its culture, including the famous landscape paintings, the beautiful flower arrangements and the gracious tea ceremony. Interestingly, while North America goes through the Zen fad, Zen is declining in Japan where it was a powerful movement for some 800 years.

Why is Zen so appealing? You wonder what makes youth try out the way of Zen. It seems that Zen meets important religious needs of a secular age. Can you be religious while totally secular at the same time? This is possible according to Zen. It promises a way of bringing man to the absolute awareness and all-ness of God through the exploration of the mind. Salvation is sought through going into the self. Zen recognizes that the deeper one goes into himself through meditation the more one thinks he is "It" and not "he".

Many young people who have been drawn into Zen never thought of it as a religion, but rather as a way to get the most out of the NOW. It is a philosophy of immediacy. Today alone is what counts. Forget about the past or the future. Zen is anti-intellectual and anti-ideological. It is irrational. It neither preaches nor makes any moral demands. The supernatural is denied. There is no rigorous code of behaviour. It doesn't have any absolutes.

Zen is not Interested in a creed or in any profession of faith of any sort. All it wants is an experience. Though it may use the word God, It is atheistic in practice. Zen's foremost Japanese expositor Dalsetz T. Suzuki comments: "Zen has no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined, and, last of all, Zen has no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else and whose immortality is a matter of intense concern. "

The young people who have become Zen disciples have often been involved in the drug culture. They leave behind their drug induced experiences for the promise of a straight trip with Zen. Jacob Needleman. In the *New Religions*. states; "Almost all of the American students I interviewed (at the Zen Centre) spoke with respect of drugs such as LSD. Some said that without the drug experience they would never have been opened up to the possibilities in themselves which are being realized in the Zen practice. Drugs gave them so to say, a taste or glimpse of enlightenment."

William J. Peterson, *In Those Curious New Cults*, observes: "But there are other reasons why Zen is attractive. It contains no talk of morality, no commandments. no mention of sin. In fact it stresses the idea that you must accept yourself as Buddha."

Zen Buddhists trace their origin to Gautama Buddha (6th century B.C) and his flower sermon. It was a message without words. Buddha held aloft a golden lotus and said nothing. Around 520 A. D. a man called Bodhidharma carried the insight of the lotus sermon from India to China. After Zen Buddhism began to wane in China it caught on in Japan.

Without words

An Important fact in Zen is to remember the emphasis on the nonverbal. Even in their own writings the fact is pressed home that Zen cannot be equated with any spoken word whatever. The way to Zen is paved with contradictions, bewilderment and amazement. It is just not concerned with the limitations of language and reason. It seeks to transcend the mind until reason is collapsed, opening the way for intuitive experience.

How do you got to know Zen? "An ancient master, when he was asked the meaning of Zen, lifted one of his fingers. That was his entire answer. Another kicked a ball. Still another slapped the inquirer in the face . A monk approaches a master saying, 'I have just come to this monastery. Would you kindly give some instruction?' The master answers. 'Have you eaten your breakfast yet?' 'have is the reply. 'Then wash your bowls.' It is said that this conversation accomplished its purpose. The inquirer was brought to the understanding of Zen."

Three key words give a little insight into this medley of confusion called Zen zazen, koan, and sanzen. Zazen in Japanese literally means "seated meditation" Devotees sit in the lotus posture, taken over from India. Their eyes are half open, their gaze falls unfocused to the floor a few feet before them, the soles of their feet face upward on their thighs. They sit erectly hour after hour, trying to develop their Intuitive powers (thought to Centre somehow in the abdomen).

On what do they meditate? On the koan. In Zen literature there are 1,700 of these koans. What are they? They are seemingly fantastic and even absurd statements. To the Westerner they appear illogical. They just can't be grasped through one's intellect. The meditation on a single koan may take as long as writing a doctoral dissertation.

Here are some koans for mental gymnastics: "A cow passes by a window. Its head, horns, and the four legs all pass by. Why did not the tail pass by? ... "We are all familiar with the sound of two hands clapping. What is the sound of one hand? (if you protest that one can't clap, you go back to the foot of the class). Such a remark simply shows you haven't even begun to get the point." As the devotee meditates he may not consult a fellow cult member. Books will not help either. But he may seek the advice from

his teacher in a private audience. On the average he does this twice daily This consultation is called a sanzen.

What is the ultimate goal of all this? It is satori. Not the understanding of truth but an immediate intuitive experience of it. It brings a feeling of oneness with all things. Suddenly you are no longer thinking but feeling. Light has burst into the soul. You have attained enlightenment. Huston Smith, *In Religions of Man*, says: "Though its preparation may take years, the experience itself comes in a flash. exploding like a silent rocket deep within the experiencer and making everything look different thereafter.

Zen followers are totally preoccupied with their salvation and welfare. They have neither social concern nor social awareness. In the East begging is their means of support. Zen has nothing to say about good and evil, life and death, suffering and pain. It contributes nothing to the world. A Zen poem says it all:

We eat, excrete, sleep and get up:
This is our world.
All we have to do after that –
Is to die.

Zen Buddhism is poverty-stricken. If God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, why meditate lifelong with just a small chance to receive a divine light? In Christ we have true enlightenment. Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

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