

95 Zen and Christianity – The Inner Self and God

This quote is from

The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation

By Thomas Merton

Chapter 2: The Awakening of the Inner Self P 7 – 13

Note: This excerpt is a portion of Chapter 2.

Description of this book in Amazon: *This is Thomas Merton's last book, in which he draws on both Eastern and Western traditions to explore the topic of contemplation/meditation in depth.*

An Example from Zen

Although this book is mainly concerned with Christian mysticism, we might profitably pause to consider an example of inner awakening taken from an oriental text. It is a cryptic and telling instance of interior self-realization, and the elements in the experience are so clearly set out that they provide an almost “clinically perfect” test case in the natural order. This is an account of *satori*, a spiritual enlightenment, a bursting open of the inner core of the spirit to reveal the inmost self. This takes place in the peace of what we might ordinarily call contemplation, but it breaks through suddenly and by surprise, beyond the level of quiet contemplative absorption, showing that mere interior peace does not suffice to bring us in contact with our deepest liberty.

The thing that is most helpful about this example is that it makes no claims whatever to be supernatural or mystical. *Zen is, in a sense, antimystical.* Hence it permits us to observe the *natural* working of the inner self. In fact, the chief spokesman for Zen today, D. T. Suzuki, goes to some pains to contrast this spiritual event with Christian mystical experience, laying stress on its “natural” character as a “purely psychological” phenomenon. Hence no one will be offended if we presume to examine this as a psychological case, showing the workings of the inner self presumably without any influence of mystical grace. *[Whether or not such an experience is actually possible without grace, and on a purely natural level, and whether it might be possible to contradict Suzuki and to call it mystical might form the subject of a provocative study. At the moment, for the sake of convenience, I am taking Suzuki's word and accepting the example exactly as he presents it and on his own terms, as a purely natural, empirical fact.]*

Satori, which is the very heart and essence of Zen, is a revolutionary spiritual experience in which, after prolonged purification and trial, and of course after determined spiritual discipline, the monk experiences a kind of inner explosion that blasts his false exterior self to pieces and leaves nothing but “his original face,” his “original self before you were born,” *[or, more technically, his “Buddha nature.” Whatever you want to call this real self—the purusha (spirit) of Hindu philosophy, the tathagatha, or “suchness,” of Zen—it is that inner “I” that we are discussing at present.]*

This was the experience of a Chinese official of the Sung dynasty who was a lay disciple of one of the Zen masters. Chao-pien, the official, was sitting quietly in his office, at leisure, with his mind at rest in what we would call simple contemplative prayer. According to the Zen theory, he had reached that point of inner maturity where the secret pressure of the inner self was ready to break unexpectedly forth and revolutionize his whole being in *satori*. When one reaches such a point, say the Zen masters, any fortuitous sound, word, or happening is likely to set off the explosion of “enlightenment” which consists in large part in the sudden, definitive integral realization of the nothingness of the exterior self and, consequently, the liberation of the real self, the inner “I.” *Yet these are Western terms. The real self, in Zen language, is beyond the division between self and not-self.* Chao-pien was sitting there at peace when he heard a clap of thunder, and the “mind doors burst open,” in the depths of his silent being, to reveal his “original self,” or “*suchness*.” The whole incident is summarized, according to Chinese custom, in a four-line poem, and it has rightly become immortal:

*Devoid of thought, I sat quietly by the desk in my official room,
With my fountain-mind undisturbed, as serene as water;
A sudden crash of thunder, the mind doors burst open,
And lo, there sits the old man in all his homeliness.*

As an example of spiritual experience this is likely to perplex and even to scandalize those who expect all such things to be quite otherworldly and ethereal. But that is precisely what makes it incomparable for our purpose. Suzuki, incidentally, with his usual love of irony, capitalizes on the dry, unsentimental humor of the experience to contrast it with the more affective flights of amorous mysticism with which we are familiar in the West. Unfortunately, the lack of erotic or affective notes does not set *this experience* apart as distinctly “oriental” at all. In all spiritualities there is a contrast between the *affective* or devotional (*bhakti*) and the intellectual, anoetic type of experience (*raja yoga*). This story may have a distinctively Chinese flavor, but anyone familiar with *The Cloud of Unknowing* and other documents of Western apophatic mysticism will be perfectly at home with it.

And so Chao-pien finds himself with his false self blown to smithereens, and with the fragments carried away as though by a sudden, happy cyclone. There sits Chao-pien himself, the same and yet utterly different, for it is the eternal Chao-pien, one with *no familiar name*, at once humble and mighty, terrible and funny, and utterly beyond description or comparison because he is *beyond yes and no, subject and object, self and not-self*. It is *like* the wonderful, devastating, and unutterable awe of humble joy with which a *Christian* realizes: “I and the Lord are One,” and when, if one tries to explain this oneness in any way possible to human speech—for instance, as the merging of two entities—one must always qualify: “No, not like that, not like that.” That is why, of course, Suzuki wants to make quite plain that nothing is really said in this event about union with “Another.” Well, all right. Let us assume it is perfectly natural . . . In any case the event is full of significant elements and throws much light on what I have been trying to explain.

First of all, even before his *satori* Chao-pien is in a condition of tranquil recollection. *[He is devoid of "thought." He has entered into the "cloud of unknowing," in which the mind is "pure" but by no means blank, passive, or inactive. For this emptiness is also a kind of fullness, and this stillness is not dead or inert. It is filled with infinite possibilities and stands poised in expectation of their fulfillment, with no comprehension of what that fulfillment may be and no desire for it to take any special preconceived form or direction. This is described as a "fountain-mind," which suggests, at least to me, that it is capable of receiving, and perhaps is actually receiving, from it knows not where and with no evidence of psychological effort, something that it knows not and about which it is unconcerned.]*

This placid unknowing is not yet *awareness* of the true inner self. But it is a natural climate in which the spiritual self may yield up its secret identity. Suddenly there is a clap of thunder and the "doors" of the *inner* consciousness fly open. The clap of thunder is just startling enough to create a sudden awareness, a self-realization in which the false, exterior self is caught in all its naked nothingness and immediately dispelled as an illusion. Not only does it vanish, but it is seen never to have been there at all—a pure fiction, a mere shadow of passionate attachment and of self-deception. Instead, the real self stands revealed in all his reality. The term "old man" must of course not be given Pauline connotations. In St. Paul's language this would, on the contrary, be the "new man." *[Why "old"? Because of the Buddhist belief that the true self has existed from all eternity in the uncreated Absolute and is itself "uncreated." Such a self is ever old and ever new because it is beyond old and new. It lives in eternity.]*

But why is this self described as "homely"? In some cases of *satori*, the inner self appears as wonderful or even terrifying, like a roaring lion with a golden mane. Such cases might find analogues in the poetry of William Blake. But here Chao-pien is happy with his "old man in all his homeliness" perhaps because he is thoroughly relieved to discover that the real self is utterly simple, humble, poor, and unassuming. The inner self is not an *ideal* self, especially not an imaginary, perfect creature fabricated to measure up to our compulsive need for greatness, heroism, and infallibility. On the contrary, the real "I" is just simply *ourselves* and nothing more. Nothing more, nothing less. Our self as we are in the eyes of God, to use Christian terms. Our self in all our uniqueness, dignity, littleness, and ineffable greatness: the greatness we have received from God our Father and that we share with Him because He is our Father and "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

The laconic little poem, then, expresses the full sense of liberation experienced by one who recognizes, with immense relief, that he is not his false self after all, and that he has all along been nothing else but his real and "homely" self, and nothing more, without glory, without self-aggrandizement, without self-righteousness, and without self-concern.

The Christian Approach

This discovery of the inner self plays a familiar part in Christian mysticism. But there is a significant difference, which is clearly brought out by St. Augustine. In Zen there seems to be no effort to get beyond the inner self. In Christianity the inner self is simply a stepping stone to an

awareness of God. Man is the image of God, and his inner self is a kind of mirror in which God not only sees Himself, but reveals Himself to the “mirror” in which He is reflected. Thus, through the dark, transparent mystery of our own inner being we can, as it were, see God “through a glass.” All this is of course pure metaphor. It is a way of saying that our being somehow communicates directly with the Being of God, Who is “in us.” If we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass “beyond” the inner “I,” we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the “I AM” of the Almighty.

The Zen writers might perhaps contend that they were interested exclusively in what is actually “given” in their experience, and that Christianity is superadding a theological interpretation and extrapolation on top of the experience itself. But here we come upon one of the distinctive features of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic mysticisms. For us, there is an infinite metaphysical gulf between the being of God and the being of the soul, between the “I” of the Almighty and our own inner “I.” Yet paradoxically our inmost “I” exists in God and God dwells in it. But it is nevertheless necessary to distinguish between the experience of one’s own inmost being and the awareness that God has revealed Himself to us in and through our inner self. We must know that the mirror is distinct from the image reflected in it. The difference rests on theological *faith*.

Our awareness of our inner self can at least theoretically be the fruit of a purely natural and psychological purification. Our awareness of God is a supernatural participation in the light by which He reveals Himself interiorly as dwelling in our inmost self. Hence the Christian mystical experience is not only an awareness of the inner self, but also, by a supernatural intensification of faith, it is an experiential grasp of God as present within our inner self. In the interests of brevity, let us proceed without further explanation to a few classical texts, first from St. Augustine:

Is God, then, anything of the same nature as the soul? This mind of ours seeks to find something that is God. It seeks to find a Truth not subject to change, a Substance not capable of failing. The mind itself is not of this nature: it is capable of progress and decay, of knowledge and of ignorance, of remembering or forgetting. That mutability is not incident to God.

Having therefore sought to find my God in visible and corporeal things, and found Him not; having sought to find His substance in myself and found Him not, I perceive my God to be something higher than my soul. Therefore that I might attain to Him I thought on these things and poured out my soul above myself. When would my soul attain to that object of its search, which is “above my soul,” if my soul were not to pour itself out above itself? For were it to rest in itself, it would not see anything else beyond itself, would not, for all that, see God. . . . I have poured forth my soul above myself and there remains no longer any being for me to attain to save my God. . . . His dwelling place is above my soul; from thence He beholds me, from thence He governs me and provides for me; from thence

He appeals to me, calls me and directs me; leads me in the way and to the end of my way. (*Enarratio in Psalm 41*)

And being by them (that is, by the Platonists) admonished to return to myself, I entered even to my inmost self, Thou being my guide. I entered and beheld with the eye of the soul, above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light unchangeable . . . And Thou didst beat back the weakness of my sight, streaming forth Thy beams of light upon me most strongly, and I trembled with love and awe. (*Confessions* vii, 16; translations taken from Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism*, pp. 22, 31)

The intellectual and Platonizing speculations of St. Augustine put us in a very different experiential climate from what we have just discussed in Zen, and it is therefore not easy to say where to place the “inmost self” of which Augustine speaks. There is always a possibility that what an Eastern mystic describes as Self is what the Western mystic will describe as God, because we shall see presently that the mystical union between the soul and God renders them in some sense “undivided” (though metaphysically distinct) in spiritual experience. And the fact that the Eastern mystic, not conditioned by centuries of theological debate, may not be inclined to reflect on the fine points of metaphysical distinction does not necessarily mean that he has not experienced the presence of God when he speaks of knowing the Inmost Self.

Merton, Thomas; Shannon, William H.. *The Inner Experience* (p. 7-13). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.