

TRANSCENDING THE BUDDHAS AND PATRIARCHS:  
AWARENESS AND TRANSCENDENCE IN ZEN

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*AWAKENING AS TRANSCENDENCE INTO THE SENSES*

Zen has no concept of transcendence like that commonly found in the world of religion. Accordingly it has no concern with metaphysics or ontology. Metaphysical speculation about an invisible realm is regarded as a form of "delusory thinking" (妄念妄想 *mōnen mōzō*) in need of radical negation. Yet Zen recognizes that human reason tends to become dissatisfied with the visible world and strives to reach a point beyond worldly delusion. Thus the actual practice of Zen comes into conflict with reason and elicits a difficult crisis. The question of knowing in Zen does not have to do with metaphysical essences. It is rather concerned with reorienting the operation of our ability to know, such that, once reason has been experienced as failing in its vain attempts at discursive thought, the realm of the senses is expanded. It is this that is termed awakening 覺 or enlightenment 悟.

But, if we understand the term awakening *mm* in the sense of realization *m*, we may end up seeing it as a kind of cognized reality and land ourselves in a false conceptual realism. The crucial thing is to understand that awakening is an ongoing process of realizing (悟る *satoru*), not some fixed state of realization (悟り *satori*). The history of Zen is full of heated controversies on this issue, the final outcome of which was that the Southern School of "Sudden Awakening" in China, with its emphasis on realizing, gained the ascendancy over the Northern School, with its emphasis on realization. It is this tradition that has been handed down to us

today.<sup>1</sup> Realizing is a matter of personal experience; it is something actually lived. By contrast, realization is the objectified content of reflective knowing cognized as a generalized "truth."

Realizing is both an experience and a pattern of operating (用き *hataraki*) which does not allow verbal mediation to obviate the reality of the here and now. Realization is the goal toward which that experience ever moves; its ideal is wisdom. In this sense realization has something of a general or universal character. There have been those who emphasized wisdom over the operation of that wisdom, as for example one sect of the Ho-tse school which held that "the one word of wisdom is the source of the marvelous doctrine." But the Zen tradition has focused more often on the "pattern of operation" of wisdom, and it is precisely because it neglected and weakened the focus on the operation of wisdom that the Ho-tse school broke off from the mainstream of Zen.

The meaning of Zen is not an object of intellectual examination. This is what Lin-chi meant when he stated that "to speak of it as analogous to anything is to miss the mark." Genuine experience occurs only within actual encounter, in "sudden flashes, like sparks from iron striking flint." When explanations fall away, one must simply let be what is. The impossibility of explaining things arises from the absence of encounter, for two disparate realities cannot be brought together through words. Rather than explaining them away, one has simply to wait for the arrival of the opportune moment. In Zen the awareness of awakening comes about only within a web of causes and conditions (因縁 *innen*), in the absence of which one may pass an entire lifetime without ever coming to an occasion for awakening. In the Eleventh Chapter of *The Transmission of the Lamp*, we read an account in which Wei-shan (Isan, 771-853) tells his disciple Hsiu-yen (Kyōgan, d. 898):

I don't ask you about what you have learned from common scholarly pursuits or in the scriptures. But please tell me one word about your origin before you were born from your mother's womb and before you could distinguish east from west! That I would like to see!

Hsiu-yen tried different answers, but Wei-shan approved none of them. Finally Hsiu-yen pleaded, "Master, help me in some way!" But Wei-shan replied, "I can only explain my own understanding, which is of no use to you." Hsiu-yen went back to the meditation hall and tried to examine the sayings of the sages of old, but to no avail. Lamenting to himself, "To see a picture of a rice-cake does not alleviate hunger!" he gathered up all his books and burned them. "How could I go through life as a monk forever eating gruel and rice without understanding the Buddha Dharma," he exclaimed, and tearfully took his leave of Wei-shan. Later he came to the place where the remains of the famous master Chung-kuo of Nan-yang (Nan'yō Echū, d. 776) were located and remained there for a time. One day as he was tidying up around the mountain, he happened to toss away a piece of broken tile. It struck a stalk of bamboo, letting out a sound. On hearing it Hsiu-yen broke out in laughter and in a flash gained realization.

This story, which has come to be known as "the case of Hsiu-yen striking a bamboo," describes the web of karmic causes and conditions and helps us see how awareness occurs in Zen. In a moment a deadlocked intellectual conceptualization is reoriented through the senses to a penetrating intuition. Rational, speculative cognition is thus an obstacle to true awareness: as long as one clings to it, true awareness is impossible.

This breakthrough from concept to actuality, the return from intellect to the senses, is a process we may speak of as a Zen "transcendence." From this standpoint, "immanence" would make its ideal the permanent grounding of human existence in the sphere of reasoning, while transcendence would aim for emancipation from the bondage of reasoning to live freely in the world of actuality, firmly grounded in the senses.

Such an approach may seem to contradict what is usually meant by the term "transcendence" in religious discourse. But this is so mainly because of the Christian foundations of Western religious philosophy, which inherited a tradition from the ancient Greeks that elevates rationality above all else and thus reduced transcendence to the attempt to go beyond the world of the senses

by means of reason. The attractiveness of the approach is that it offers a conceptual escape from the actual world of suffering.

The claim that there may be a "transcendence" in Zen, heads us in the opposite direction, away from the abstract world of reason and towards the actuality of the senses. Such a transcendence runs counter to the desire for flight from the human condition and can thus be described as a process of returning "transcendentally" to a way of being human in the fullness of its concrete actuality. It is, we might say, a way for human beings to become truly human after having passed beyond their humanity. By refocusing on the order and *logos* pervading the actual world one can effect a "transcending" of mere imagination to actuality. This implies a transcending of the human capacity for transcendence itself, and it is precisely this difficult task that Zen is all about.

#### THE KŌAN ON "TRANSCENDING THE BUDDHAS AND PATRIARCHS"

In the *Blue Cliff Record* we find the following kōan, called "The Sesame Bun of Yun-men."

A monk asked Yun-men (Ummon, 864-949): "What is the teaching that transcends the Buddhas and patriarchs?" Yun-men said: "A sesame bun."

Yuan-wu Ho-hsiang (Engo Kokugon) composed a verse on this dialogue:

Talking about transcendence,  
Men come up with countless puzzles.  
Just look! All patched up,  
Full of holes.  
He stopped up the gaps  
With his sesame bun  
But problems still remain  
To torture you!<sup>2</sup>

In another account, the monk asks further:

"So what happens once you have swallowed it down in one gulp?"

Yun-men: "I enter into your belly."

Monk: "How can you enter my belly/"

Yun-men: "Come here and try to tell me your problem again!"

With that the dialogue ends. Yun-men seems frequently to have alluded to this theme of "transcending the Buddhas and the Patriarchs, but his answer was not limited to the "sesame bun." To go beyond the Buddhas and Patriarchs, there must be Buddhas and Patriarchs in the first place. Zen practitioners prostrate themselves before Buddhas and Patriarchs just as the adherents of other schools did. When Lin-chi (Rinzai, d. 867) says, "I do not pay homage to either Buddhas or Patriarchs," he is merely showing his deep reverence for Bodhidharma's *stūpa*. The Buddhas and Patriarchs are only symbols of the practitioner and as such their meaning goes beyond the meaning they have to deluded, common sense understanding. The practitioners direct their attention to Buddhas and Patriarchs in order zealously to strive to attain their level. In Zen this is called the way of ascent (向上, *kōjō*) the final stage of which is "the single step taken after reaching the top of a pole thirty meters high," a stage whose absolute nature is considered to be beyond the ability of even the holiest to describe. One who has reached this level becomes like the first creature in the universe "able to pierce the nostrils of everyone of earth, like a falcon catching a pigeon." Lin-chi describes it this way: "The one on the summit of a solitary peak has no way down." It is the point at which the whole world is negated entirely. If one remains in that state of mind, however, the world becomes meaningless. Even the "absolute" loses its field of action and is transformed into absurdity. Thus the transcended world needs to be transcended yet again. Such is the basic message conveyed by the claim that "one has to take one more step after reaching the top of the pole thirty meters high." This is Zen's doctrine of descent (向下 *kōga*) and is what is meant by going beyond the Buddhas and Patriarchs. If that descent is omitted, one who

reaches transcendence after much effort loses strength, "one's own nostrils come under another's control," and sadly he gets dragged about hither and yon. One becomes like a turtle hiding in its shell, with its limbs carefully tucked inside.

These images should not be understood to depict a gradual process of first ascending and then descending. Such a process would be similar to the Hegelian dialectic of "the negation of negation." As Kierkegaard noted in his critique, the theoretical emphasis of the Hegelian dialectic rests principally on quantitative change, and thus ends up in a perpetual evolution of relative values in search of "something more," for which the absolute remains forever beyond reach.

When enlightenment (*buddha*) is attained, the profane is transcended in transcending the Buddhas and Patriarchs; but when enlightenment (*buddha*) is negated once more, this second negation remains within the relative world, if one does not move beyond the relativity of opposition between Buddha and the profane. Thus going beyond the Buddhas and Patriarchs cannot simply be a negation of the Buddhas and Patriarchs. To adopt Kierkegaard's terminology, we may describe it as a principle of contradiction between the Buddhas and Patriarchs on the one side and our unenlightened state on the other. The choice between "this or that" would be the actualization of transcendence. In other words, to see enlightenment and unenlightenment as contradictories, to go beyond the Buddha signifies an "absolute" option for unenlightenment, which as such effects an immediate transformation into enlightenment in virtue of the dialectical structure.

In any event, Zen attempts to avoid the vain efforts of discursive thinking. Thus to say that when the profane goes beyond the profane it becomes enlightenment or that when enlightenment negates itself it becomes profane is to operate on a reasoning grounded in discriminative thinking, not on actuality. Enlightenment is enlightenment and the profane is the profane. In clear awareness (insight into suchness), enlightenment transcended is profane and the profane transcended is enlightenment, and so both enlightenment and the profane can appear in actuality as non-dual. This is what is meant by "sudden enlightenment." The word

"sudden" does not signify a temporal rapidity, but the theoretical sequence in which awakening is realized. Enlightenment is the source for an awareness of the profane, and the profane is the source for an awareness of enlightenment, since it is the ground that enables enlightenment to exist. It is this simultaneous grounding that is called "sudden." It is not a movement from the profane to enlightenment or from enlightenment to the profane. This is the sense of "gradual," a term indicating a process of conceptualization, an underlying principle of an idealism, far removed from the principles of Zen, or, for that matter, from the principles of the Mahāyāna understanding of the bodhisattva path.

Thus "to go beyond" ultimately means "not to go beyond." This coincides with the Pure Land teaching on birth in the Pure Land (往生 *ōjō*) and return to the defiled world (還相 *gensō*). These terms have no reference to any temporal or spatial sequence of going or coming back. The notion of a "crosswise leap" (横超 *ōchō*) can be understood in a similar fashion. The teaching on this crosswise (or horizontal) leap is said to enable one to enter directly into the great, unsurpassed cessation without passing through the gradual stages of the bodhisattva path. In the *Songō-shinzō meibun* it is said that *mm* means crosswise, which means that, in placing one's faith in the vows of the Tathāgata, even without any intention on the part of the believer, one spontaneously surpasses the five bad destinies in which enlightenment is unlikely and eliminates the four symptoms of samsāric life (birth, aging, illness, and dying). This is also called Other-power (他力 *tariki*). It is referred to as a crosswise (or horizontal) leap to set up a contrast with the vertical and distant holy path of self-power (自力 *jiriki*). The terms crosswise and leap express the true meaning of the true Pure Land teaching on Other-power.

In the *Kaijashō*, the Zen and Pure Land explanations of this process are strikingly similar:

Men and women, even though common worldlings of good will, have an original form that is as yet inoperative. Yet in virtue of the mystery of the primal vow, even persons who should not have been born, by the very fact of their

birth, are able humbly to listen to the teachings of the true path called "the crosswise leap."

Here the teaching of the path of self-power is considered to progress vertically, as practice attests. But one of the basic insights attained through that practice is that at a certain point the Mahāyāna path of the bodhisattva renders the distinction between self-power and Other-power meaningless.

#### THE PRACTICE OF EMPTINESS: TRANSCENDENT AWARENESS

Zen is usually considered to proceed from delusion to awakening. By aiming at awakening, however, opposition is set up between awakening and delusion and that in effect substantizes it as a speculative entity. When this happens, it is no longer awakening, but reverts to delusion. It is this kind of transcendence that Zen practitioners reject. Hisamatsu Shin'ichi has pointed out the distinction between "awakening" and "the awakening of awakening."<sup>3</sup> If that "awakening from being awakened" is an objective state of being awakened, then true awakening is impossible. This is not true awakening, but an awakening fallen into a discriminatory mode of thinking that Zen considers delusion. The awakening that occurs originally, as a given, is completely absent here.

What then is awakening that has gone beyond all dualistic distinctions? It is certainly not a thing of the physical world. Hisamatsu called it "the imageless self," but he left us wondering just what the content of such a "self without imaginable form can be?"

Concerning true awakening, we may only say that it is the result of surpassing any conceived notion of awakening. In Chapter 28 of the *Transmission of the Lamp* Ma-tsu Tao-i (Baso Dōitsu, 709-788) says that "being in delusion is consciousness, while being in awakening is wisdom." And Ta-hsiu Hui-hai (Daishu Ekai) notes further:



Insight into one's nature is not a matter for common worldlings; one suddenly realizes the superior vehicle and passes beyond the profane and the sacred. Deluded people discourse on the profane and the sacred, but awakened people go beyond *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Deluded people try to explain phenomenal appearances and truth, but awakened people simply display the unlimited range of their great practice. Deluded people seek for release and authentication, while awakened people seek neither. Deluded people wait for aeons, but awakened people understand all of a sudden.

Clearly delusion is being linked here to a discriminative consciousness that distinguishes between the sacred and the profane, between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, between phenomenal appearances and truth, and thus aims at "getting" something or realizing something. But that quest goes on forever, without ever coming to term. In contrast, the wisdom of awakening transcends the sacred and the profane, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and functions as the great practice of "the *samādhi* integrating phenomenal appearances and truth."

In other words, awakening is constantly in the present, and does not concern itself with things of the future. This is expressed in Buddhism through the term "suchness." Suchness is not only the true countenance of existence, but also the true nature of awareness. It expresses the fact that there is no interval between subject and object. Thus awakening is also termed "true understanding of the suchness of reality (如実智見 *nyojitsu chiken*). The true nature of awareness that sees things as they really are, and the actual operations of that awareness here constitute a single whole. At this level of awareness human beings are emancipated from (that is, they transcend) the triple world of suffering.

The terms suchness and emptiness are interchangeable; suchness is equivalent to true emptiness (真空 *shinkū*). As the true aspect of existence emptiness is one with the understanding of emptiness as the true awareness of existence. It is an awareness of the oneness between existence and awareness that is termed

emancipation, and this we might call a "transcendence to actuality." But this does not mean that we are to subject emancipation to a discriminative analysis. Zen remains thoroughly grounded within the actual world. From this perspective the main difference between Zen and the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō is that Nishida held it to be necessary for the identity of the contradictory self as the true aspect of the actual world to go beyond itself to a discriminative theory of general existence. Transcending the Buddhas and Patriarchs signifies the overcoming of such dualities as enlightened and unenlightened, sacred and profane; but when the very dialectic process that overcomes these dualities itself becomes fixed, when this "third position" becomes substantized, it too must be negated. Calling this third position "place" (場所 *basho*), as Nishida does, it must be understood as entirely the field of practice. If it is not so understood, Nishida's notion of "place" becomes a Buddhist "devil's cave" drawing all into its depths.

Mahāyāna Buddhism developed the Middle Path in great detail, holding it up as the state reached by abandoning all prejudices. But Zen says that even to get trapped in the standpoint of the Middle Path is to fall into a pit of illusions. If the philosophy of emptiness be reduced to pure discourse or speculation, it loses all force in practical living. It is as the root of everyday living that Zen emphasizes the need for transcendence and awareness to infuse all practice and activity. Although they honored the same Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, the practitioners of Zen were striving to apply emptiness and the Middle Path to their lives.

The present theme of transcending the Buddhas and Patriarchs comes to a head in the question of the practice of emptiness. If one takes transcendence as a negative breakthrough, the negation of Buddhas and Patriarchs reveals itself as a quest for the source from which Buddhas and Patriarchs arise. And this source is held to be the one source of the absolute. As we see, for example, in Eckhart's mysticism, any standpoint of "the one that surpasses the one beyond the one" has to assume the character of a source from which all things emerge. In Eckhart's case it is obvious that he conceived of this in terms of a transcendent substance. This is the final point that mystics must reach in order to return to the

foundation of the self by making a breakthrough to the interior of the self, but it is also the fate of those who immerse themselves in abstract speculation.

It is different with Zen, which restricts its standpoint to the physical aspect of the self and accomplishes transcendence within that sphere. That is what Lin-chi means when he says:

On your lump of red flesh is a true man of no rank who is always going in and out of the face of everyone of you. Let those who have no proof of it look! Look!

This question should be examined in terms of the notion of emptiness. For example, *The Heart Sutra* says that "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." The transcendent standpoint that engenders this dialectic, it is expressed in the preceding passage: "Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, deeply practicing the perfection of wisdom, . . . ." As long as such awareness cannot be put into practice, the standpoint of emptiness (transcendence) cannot become manifest.

Let us consider briefly the subject of that awareness, the act of being aware, and the content of such awareness, which is presented concisely at the beginning of that scripture. Avalokiteśvara is the subject of emptiness. The phrase, "deeply coursing in the perfection of wisdom" points to the act of emptiness. The phrase, "perceived that all the five aggregates were empty and delivered from suffering" indicates the content of emptiness. The bodhisattva who is the subject of emptiness is called Avalokiteśvara, which in the Chinese 觀自在 means "contemplating being in itself." Thus the aspect of subjective awareness is represented by pure contemplation. But seen in terms of practice, the alternate Chinese translation of 觀世音, which means "contemplating the sounds of the world," must be used. This means that the creative turnabout taking place from epistemological contemplation to practical contemplation is not gradual but sudden. It is not a reversal, but a creation that we may speak of as the occurrence of transcendence. In Buddhist doctrine there are two stages in such a creation (transcendence): the stage of faith and the stage

of authentication. Both of these stages require a transcendence from speculation to practice.

Hence the contemplation of emptiness on the bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna is not only an awareness of the true countenance of things, an awareness characterized as the Hīnayāna contemplation of an analytic emptiness, but also a practical contemplation of an embodied emptiness which aims at going beyond the emptiness of things. This latter "unlimited emptiness" contrasts sharply with the merely analytic content of Hīnayāna emptiness.

What does it mean when *The Heart Sutra* speaks of "practicing the perfection of wisdom?" Mahāyāna thought divides wisdom into literal wisdom (the recorded words and deeds of the Buddhas and patriarchs), contemplative wisdom (meditative thinking), and the wisdom of the true actuality (an experience of clear and uninterrupted understanding). Master Tōrei Enji (1721-1752) in his *Commentaries on the Heart Sutra* made the following comment:

[Deep wisdom] means at once to have the assurance of faith and the direct encounter with fundamental ignorance, aware that the very essence of ignorance is the basic wisdom of the Tathāgata. It engenders innumerable vows; it sees phenomena and truth as non-dual; it penetrates into the realm of interpenetrated unobstruction. It overcomes the obstacles of attachment to doctrine and removes defilements from the path that leads to insight into one's nature. It means practicing deeds of great compassion with mastery over the hidden and manifest meanings of the texts. It means entering villages with hands outstretched to bring happiness to everyday life through the radiance of practice fulfilled.

This text sees the content of deep wisdom as a form of practical wisdom that implies the practice of great compassion. This was what we meant above by claiming that awareness in Zen is actually transcendence, and that transcendence is a reorientation from speculation to practice, from the world of the intellect to the world of the senses. Among the masters of the T'ang dynasty, Nan-

hsien (Nansen, 748-834) or Ch'ao-chou (Jōshu, 778-897) placed great stress on the "everyday mind" (平常心 *p'ing-ch'ang hsin*) and "entering into the midst of people of different lineages (異類中行 *i-lei chung-hsing*), that is, even descending to the destiny of the animals, thus masterfully expressing the meaning of transcendence in Zen.

The act of emptiness is not a movement toward some object called emptiness, but the subjective working of emptiness itself. Being the state of what is contemplated, emptiness is described as "the absolute other-shore which empties emptiness itself,"<sup>4</sup> namely, subjectivity itself. "Absolute" denotes the thoroughness of the negation of being, that one is "outside being" on "its yonder shore." Because the yonder shore is absolute, the manifestation of emptiness takes place in the very midst of being. An awareness of transcendence in Zen is always a paradoxical transcendence. \*

#### NOTES

1. See the articles by Suzuki Daisetsu in *Zenshisōshi kenkyū* 禅思想史研究 [Studies on the History of Zen Thought], Chapters 3 and 4.
2. See *Two Zen Classics: Mumokan and Hekiganroku*, transl. Katsuki SEKIDA, p. 349.
3. See *Kaku to shūkyō* 覚と宗教 [Awakening and Religion], HISAMATSU Shin'ichi 久松真一 and YAGI Seiichi 八木誠一.
4. See NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治, *Religion and Nothingness*, transl. Jan van Bragt, 1982 Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 99.

\*This article is a partial translation, prepared with the assistance of Michel Mohr, of an essay entitled "Chōbutsu osso no dan: Zen ni okeru ninshiki to chōetsu" 超仏越祖の談：禅における認識と超越, which appeared in *Ninshiki to chōetsu* 認識と超越 [Knowledge and Transcendence], ed., Inagaki Fujimaro 稲垣不二麿 and Hase Seitō 長谷正常, Tokyo: Hokuju, 1981, pp. 71-89.