

The Meaning of “Zen”

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IN THIS ESSAY I WOULD like to offer a brief explanation of my views concerning the meaning of “Zen.” The expression “Zen thought” is not used very widely among Buddhist scholars in Japan, but for my purposes here I would like to adopt it with the broad meaning of “a way of thinking that emphasizes the importance or centrality of *zen* practice.”¹ The development of “Ch’an” schools in China is the most obvious example of how much a part of the history of Buddhism this way of thinking has been.

But just what is this “zen” around which such a long tradition of thought has revolved? Etymologically, the Chinese character *ch’an* 禪 (Jpn., *zen*) is thought to be the transliteration of the Sanskrit *jhāna* or *jhān*, a colloquial form of the term *dhyāna*.² The Chinese characters 定 (fixed concentration) and 靜慮 (quiet deliberation) were also used to translate this term. Buddhist scholars in Japan most often used the compound 禪定 (*zenjō*), a combination of transliteration and translation. Here I will stick with the simpler, more direct transliteration “zen” and the original Sanskrit term *dhyāna* itself.

Dhyāna and the synonymous *samādhi* (concentration), are terms that have been used in India since ancient times. It is well known that the terms *dhyāna* and *samāhita* (entering *samādhi*) appear already in Upaniṣadic texts that predate the origins of Buddhism.³ The substantive *dhyāna* derives from the verbal root *dhyai*, and originally meant deliberation, mature reflection, deep thinking, or meditation. In the age just prior to the rise of Buddhism, when the trend toward asceticism had become prevalent, the meaning of *dhyāna* seems to have shifted away from mature reflection or deep thinking to take on a sense closer to a simple concentration or settling of the mind.

According to early Buddhist texts, Śākyamuni mainly cultivated *dhyana* and ascetic practices during the time leading up to his enlighten-

ment. After enlightenment he rejected ascetic practices but kept dhyana as an efficacious practice. Accordingly the precepts (*śīla*), the practice of concentration (*dhyāna*), and the attainment of wisdom came to be regarded as the three pillars of Buddhist learning and practice. It should be noted, however, that the place of dhyana in this scheme is only that of a means for attaining wisdom. It was never itself meant to be the purpose or goal of Buddhism. Dhyana served to settle and concentrate the mind so that one might attain a correct understanding of the Buddha’s teaching. The attainment of wisdom remained the purpose and goal of Buddhism.⁴

One does not have to step very far into the history of Buddhism to see that dhyana has not always been limited to the role of a mere means. Quite the contrary, it seems more often to have been the case that dhyana itself, rather than wisdom, was elevated to the position of the final goal. The development of the Ch’an schools in China is a classic example of this kind of thinking. If that is indeed so, then we are clearly dealing with a deviation from the original standpoint of Buddhism.

I have said that dhyana or zen is a mere means to attain wisdom, but I hasten to add at once that it is also an extremely difficult way to arrive at wisdom. The very word “zen” or “dhyana” implies a fundamental orientation towards the negation or denial of wisdom. Simply put, I see zen as synonymous with the cessation of conceptual thinking, its aim being to induce the suspension of thought. If this is true, and if we grant the obvious point that wisdom is the fruit of conceptual thought, then the only conclusion we are left with is that Zen thought is the negation or rejection of wisdom.

No doubt some will object that the wisdom at which Buddhism aims is not a form of conceptual knowledge or a state of awareness reached through conceptual thinking, but rather a kind of “nondiscriminatory cognition” (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*) that transcends even the distinctions between subject and object. At least in terms of early Buddhism, such an interpretation can only, at best, be called a popular misrepresentation of Buddhist doctrine.

In early Buddhism, wisdom (*jñāna*, *prajñā*) always meant a conceptual cognition or awareness of certain clear assertions and propositions, such as the Four Noble Truths or the teaching of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*). Nothing was ever taught about a nondiscriminatory cognition “free” of concepts or the thinking subjects—again, at least not in early Buddhism. The term “nondiscriminatory cognition” and the way

of thinking it represents only found explicit expression at a later stage in the development of Buddhism, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, and moreover was a development that took place under the influence of an anti-Buddhist, Indian monism.⁵

Although the expression “nondiscriminatory cognition” belongs to the history of Mahayana Buddhism, the way that led to it—which I am calling “Zen thought”—has appeared frequently throughout its long history. It might even be said that Śākyamuni himself, by including the practice of dhyana with its aim of suspending conceptual thinking, introduced an element into Buddhism that fundamentally denies the wisdom that is the very goal of Buddhism.

In short, the question of “Zen thought” comes down to this: if zen (dhyana) means the cessation of conceptual thought, then Zen is a denial of Buddhism itself. If zen does not involve the suspension of conceptual thought, then it has significance for Buddhism. In the following pages I will take this up in further detail, drawing attention in particular to the examples of Mo-ho-yen and Shen-hui, prominent representatives of the Zen tradition who typify the rejection of conceptual thinking.⁶



The essence of Zen thought is the denial of conceptual thinking, or, perhaps better, the cessation of conceptual thinking. Restrictions of space prevent me from laying out the evidence for this position in early Buddhist texts.⁷ I shall content myself with a statement of my basic position regarding Zen thought.

As I see it, the core of the problem revolves around two words that both mean “thinking”: *saṃjñā* and *manasikāra*. There is no doubt that Mo-ho-yen denied the validity of *saṃjñā*, and taught that the goal or ideal was *a-saṃjñā*. The following passage is typical of his position:

Question: What is wrong with conceptualizing [*saṃjñā*]?

Answer: Conceptualizing is a defect because it obstructs the wisdom of omniscience (*sarvajñajñāna*) inherent in all sentient beings, with the result that they continue to transmigrate for eons in the three evil destinies. This is what is wrong with it. The *Diamond Sutra* says, “One who is free of all conceptions is called ‘Buddha’.”

Leaving aside the quote from the *Diamond Sutra*, I would like to focus on the point that “conceptualizing” (*saṃjñā*) is considered to be a

defect.⁸ In a word, Mo-ho-yen considers the root of all evil to lie in “conceptions” or “conceptualizing.” The sense of the above quote is that transmigration in samsara is the result of conceptualizing, and that to become a Buddha one must be liberated from this conceptualizing. Mo-ho-yen is not alone in this view. It is the very essence of Zen thought.

Some of the early Buddhist texts contain references to various types of dhyana such as *naivasamjñānāsamjñāyatana* (concentration that is neither conceptual nor nonconceptual), *samjñā-vedita-nirodha* (the cessation of conceptions and sensations), and *animitto cetosamādhī* (concentration of the mind without marks, or complete cessation). Each of these types of dhyana involves a denial of conceptualizing (*a-samjñā*).⁹ The dhyānic practices were eventually organized in early Buddhism into the nine progressive stages of the four dhyana trances, the four concentrations of non-form, and the final concentration of the mind without marks (complete cessation). But what is important for our purposes here is to recognize that the practice of dhyana, and Zen thought, are fundamentally opposed to conceptualizing or thinking (*samjñā*), and have as their goal its complete surcease.

In weighing the significance of Zen thought we need to recall, as mentioned above, that Śākyamuni practiced dhyana meditation before he attained enlightenment, which means that the practice predates Buddhism. Legend has it that prior to his enlightenment Śākyamuni practiced under the two masters of dhyanic practice, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. The states of dhyana aimed at in these practices were called “the concentration of nonpossession” and “the concentration that is neither conceptual nor nonconceptual.”¹⁰ But there is some difference of opinion as to whether these two types of dhyana originated outside of Buddhism or not. Fujita Kōtatsu comments on this question:

However one looks at it, it is clear that the so-called “system of four dhyana trances” contains at least some elements from outside of Buddhism. The same could be said, more specifically, of the four concentrations of no-form. A reference to “the concentration of nonpossession” and “the concentration that is neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” can be found in ancient verses contained in the early Buddhist texts; and each of the four “concentrations of no-form” were originally taught separately and, one can presume, brought together into a single system at a later time....

There is no disputing the fact that these teachings contain elements from outside Buddhism. Jainism emphasizes the notion of “nonpossession.”... It is said that Āḷāra Kālāma taught the concentration of nonpossession and Uddaka Rāmaputta taught the concentration that is neither conceptual nor nonconceptual. Whether or not one accepts the legends at face value, they indicate that already from ancient times it was acknowledged that the four concentrations of no-form contained elements from outside Buddhism.¹¹

Aside from supporting the view that the practice of the “four concentrations of no-form” are non-Buddhist in origin, Fujita draws an important connection between the “concentration of nonpossession” and the Jain idea of “nonpossession.” Jainism teaches an extremely simple body-mind dualism—that human beings have a pure spirit that is covered by an impure physical body. For the Jains, therefore, ascetic practices such as fasting and the like serve to liberate the spirit (atman) from the body by diminishing and finally extinguishing the functions of the body. Here we have a clear instance of dualistic thought inspiring a practice whose aim is to free spirit from body.

The Jain idea of nonpossession is also grounded in this dualism. It distinguishes between atman (the spirit) and that which is not atman, and teaches that one must let go of attachments to the latter. Home, fields, valuables, family, and even one’s own body are not atman and need therefore to be renounced because they are the cause of suffering. One must abandon such things and cultivate a state of “nonpossession” and “independent existence.”

There is no way to know for certain whether or not Āḷāra Kālāma actually taught the “concentration of nonpossession” as the Buddhist legends say. What we do know is that practices like the Jain idea of nonpossession did exist prior to the time of Śākyamuni’s enlightenment. Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, was a contemporary of Śākyamuni, which seems to suggest that Jainism is not older than Buddhism. In fact, however, Jainism developed as a reformation of the older Nigaṇṭha school, making it clear that ascetic discipline and ideas such as that of “nonpossession” are pre-Buddhist. The fact that Śākyamuni practiced asceticism before his enlightenment bears further witness to this. It should also be pointed out that “ascetic practice” and dhyana are not always separate, but are often merged into a single practice. Jainism is characteristically ascetic in its practice, but it also taught the practice of

dhyana. It is simply unthinkable that Śākyamuni would not have cultivated dhyana during his six years of ascetic practice prior to his enlightenment. We can even go so far as to say that in the years before his enlightenment, Śākyamuni was engaged in Jain-like practice.

In this broader perspective, it seems clear to me that the teaching of dhyana in the early Buddhist texts has a non-Buddhist origin. Nakamura Hajime, however, disagrees:

The idea of “nonpossession” was attributed to Āḷāra Kālāma, and the idea of “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” was attributed to Uddaka, the son of Rāma. But Buddhism developed a new way of thinking, not unlike the way Mahayana would later arise in opposition to Hinayana.

This is why the explanation offered in the *Majjhimanikāya* sees the teachings of “nonpossession” and “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” as teachings deriving from outside Buddhism, even though in reality they were originally Buddhist teachings. Eventually they were organized under the structure of the “four concentrations of no-form,” as the third and fourth levels.¹²

Simply put, Nakamura’s claim is that these teachings were originally Buddhist but came to be considered non-Buddhist because tradition attributed these teachings to Śākyamuni’s teachers Āḷāra and Uddaka. Nakamura bases his argument on the fact that the teaching of “nonpossession” and “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” are found in the *Suttanipāta*.¹³ He elaborates on the teaching of “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual”:

The idea of “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual,” which was said to have been taught by Uddaka, the son of Rāma, was also taught in the very earliest period of Buddhism. We can find this in one of the oldest sutras, the *Suttanipāta*, where it is presented as a teaching of Śākyamuni. The question is raised:

What practice leads a person to get rid of form? And how can suffering and pleasure be extinguished? This is what I want to know.

Śākyamuni replies:

Without ordinary conception, without mistaken conception, not without conception, and not with the extinction of conception—one who practices in this way will extinguish form. A [mistaken] consciousness of the world arises from conceptions.¹⁴

The idea of “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” is clearly taught in this passage. Uddaka may have been awakened to a special state that was

“neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” owing to his practice of *dhyāna*, but this passage also teaches that one can realize a state of mind that gets rid of “consciousness of the world” (*papañcasamkhā*) by getting rid of conceptions (*sañña*) through the practice of *dhyāna*. Thus a teaching of Buddhism in its very earliest period was in later texts attributed to Uddaka.

Of course the opposite inference, that such ideas taught originally by Ālārā and Uddaka were taken in by early Buddhism and reflected in sections of the *Suttanipāta*, is also possible. But I find it unthinkable that the thought of two teachers that Śākyamuni had rejected would be incorporated *as is* into his teachings after his enlightenment.¹⁵

Nakamura thus argues that because the ideas of “nonpossession” and “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” appear in the *Suttanipāta*, these were originally Buddhist ideas. I prefer his “opposite inference”—that they were originally non-Buddhist.

But I repeat: Śākyamuni certainly practiced dhyana before Buddhism was established. Explanations of dhyanic meditation in the early Buddhist texts show that dhyana was seen as identical to yoga. In the *Yoga Sutra*, “yoga” is defined as “the cessation of the activity of the mind” (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*). Hence there seems no way to avoid the conclusion that the dhyana practiced by Śākyamuni involved a “cessation of thinking.” It is further likely that this “cessation of thinking” was concretely taught as a denial of *saṃjñā* (conceptualization).

Nakamura considers it “unthinkable” that the ideas of two of Śākyamuni’s former teachers would find their way, as such, back into his teachings. Yet surely there is nothing unusual about ideas originating from outside of Buddhism being reassimilated and then reflected in Buddhist texts. What is more, the *Suttanipāta* that Nakamura uses in support of his position is a rather peculiar Buddhist text, containing ideas that are not to be found in the more orthodox documents of the *Four Āgamas*. In other words, Nakamura’s method for studying “early Buddhism” is based on taking “verse texts” such as those in the *Suttanipāta* as representing the oldest stratum of Buddhist texts. I do not favor this approach.

Even if one grants that the *Suttanipāta* was transmitted within the Buddhist community, I consider the ideas expressed in this text to be non-Buddhist. I further consider the text itself to belong to a genre of “ascetic literature” that was popular in the India of the time. The reason I have come to this conclusion is that the text contains Jain-like teachings

such as asceticism, dhyanic meditation, and the idea of a substantial self (*ātmavāda*). For this reason, it is hardly to be wondered at that such a text would attribute the idea of “neither conceptual nor nonconceptual” to Śākyamuni himself.

To continue, Fujita has the following to say about *saṃjñā-vedita-nirodha* (the cessation of conceptions and sensations=*nirodha-samāpatti*):

The four concentrations of no-form is an arrangement of theories on dhyanic meditation designed to make them correspond to the different levels of the realm of no-form. The “concentration of complete cessation” is a state in which all senses are “pure” and only life (*āyu*) and warmth (*usmā*) are left to distinguish it from death. In the perspective of early Buddhism, the attainment of this state cannot be said to have been considered important.¹⁶

Fujita’s conclusions concerning the “concentration of complete cessation” is entirely coincident with Kamalaśīla’s criticism of Mo-ho-yen. Kamalaśīla pointed out that “if one can become a Buddha just by ‘not thinking’ (*amanasikāra*), then even unconscious or comatose people are also Buddhas.” If the cessation of thinking—the complete cessation of concepts—is the goal, then how is this different from the body just before it dies, when one’s thought processes have already ceased?

The idea of “the cessation of thinking” is also basic to the theory of the four stages of dhyana trance, which endorses the cessation of “intellectual activity” (*vitarka, vicāra*).¹⁷ I will spare the reader the details on this theory here, but I would like to point out that there is no teaching of dhyana meditation whose fundamental aim is not the cessation of conceptual thinking. My personal view is that “Buddhism is the teaching of dependent arising” (*pratītya-samutpāda*), and that therefore the enlightenment that Buddhism proffers is nothing other than thinking correctly about the teaching of dependent arising. I cite from the opening section of the *Vinaya Mahāvagga*:

At that time the Buddha, the World-Honored One, dwelt in Uruvelā on the banks of the Nerañjarā river, at the foot of the Bodhi Tree, and for the first time realized supreme enlightenment (*abhisambuddha*). Then the World-Honored One stayed at the foot of the Bodhi Tree for seven days, sitting in a full lotus position, savoring the bliss of liberation (*vimuttisukha*). At that time, in the first watch of the night, the World-Honored One considered (*manasākāsi*) forwards and backwards (*anulomaapaṭilomam*) that which is dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*),

i.e., “From the cause (*paccaṃyā*) of ignorance, volitional activity arises. From the causes of volitional activities, consciousness arises. From the cause of consciousness, name-and-form arises. From the cause of name-and-form, the six senses arise. From the cause of the six senses, contact arises. From the cause of contact, sensations arise. From the causes of sensations, passions arise. From the cause of passions, attachments arise. From the causes of attachments, existence arises. From the cause of existence, rebirth arises. From the cause of rebirth, decay-and-death, travail, sorrow, suffering, pain, and anguish arise together (*sambhavanti*). Thus there is the arising (*samudaya*) of this heap of pure suffering. However, if this ignorance is extinguished by becoming free of craving (*asesavirāgaṇirodha*), then there is the extinction of volitional activities. From the extinction of volitional activities there is the extinction of consciousness.... From the extinction of existence, there is the extinction of rebirth. From the extinction of rebirth, there is the extinction (*nirujjhanti*) of decay-and-death, travail, sorrow, suffering, pain, and anguish. Thus there is the cessation (*nirodha*) of this heap of pure suffering.”¹⁸

If we accept what is written in this Buddhist text, then we must say that “awakening” (*satori*) or enlightenment (*abhisambodhi*) means “to consider dependent arising” (*pratītyasamutpāda-manasikāra*).

It is impossible to draw Śākyamuni’s teachings directly from the pages of the Buddhist canon. This is the limitation of purely textual research. But from the perspective of “intellectual history,” I conclude that the extraordinarily profound and almost unbelievable idea of “dependent arising” is not to be found in India prior to Śākyamuni’s founding of what we call Buddhism. The idea of atman was pervasive before the time of Śākyamuni, but the idea of dependent arising is its diametrical opposite, its direct contradictory. The only possible explanation for how this completely new idea “dependent arising” appeared is, as Buddhists have traditionally believed, that a single individual named Śākyamuni “awakened” to it. “Dependent arising” is a way of thinking conceived by Śākyamuni.

I choose to believe what is written in the passage quoted above from the *Vinaya Mahāvagga*: that Buddhism is the teaching of dependent arising, and that there is no “awakening” or “enlightenment” other than reflecting on or considering (*manasikāra*) dependent arising. If this is true, then it is clear that any “Zen thought” that teaches the “cessation of thinking” (*amanasikāra, a-samjñā*) is anti-Buddhist.

[Translated by Paul L. Swanson]