

The Predicament of Man in Zen Buddhism and Kierkegaard

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Kierkegaard viewed himself as a revolutionary in the Christian tradition, and there has been at least some tendency for him to be viewed in this light by others. Therefore, it may seem somewhat less than surprising to find him unwittingly striking out a position that has much in common with Zen. To Kierkegaard, the Christian religion had come to be identified with speculative thought; even worse, past speculation had become ambiguous with the onset of social changes, and like a "toothless old man" Christianity had been "reduced to toothless twaddle." ^[1] "How low has Christianity sunk, how powerless and miserable it has become! It is reason that has conquered: reason that has tyrannized enthusiasm and the like, making it ridiculous." ^[2] Judged by the canons of nineteenth-century Denmark, Kierkegaard was no Christian.

Kierkegaard's rebellion against Christianity took the form of a rebellion against an over-intellectualization in Christianity. He hoped to rescue men from the "strings" of an "established order" ^[3] that was constituted by the patterns of feeling, thought, and behavior in which men tended to live and with which they tended to identify their own selves. He hoped to direct men to a resurrected inwardness wherein they might not so much rest as develop unexplored sensitivities amid the undifferentiated levels of felt quality. Every misunderstanding of Christianity, Kierkegaard thought, could be "recognized by its transforming it into a doctrine, transferring it to the sphere of the intellectual." ^[4]

One recognizes immediately that these are all central emphases in Zen. As Suzuki states it, Life, as far as it is lived in concreto, is above concepts as well as images. To understand it we have to dive into and to come in touch with it personally; to pick up or

[1]. Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, David F. Swenson, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 324-325.

[2] Alexander Dm, ed. and trans.. The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 341.

[3] Søren Kierkegaard, Training in Christianity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 91. Cf. Dru, op. cit.,

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cut out a piece of it for inspection murders it; when you think you have got into the essence of it, it is no more, for it has ceased to live but lies immobile and all dried up. [5]

Zen is what makes the religious feeling run through its legitimate channel and what gives life to the intellect. Zen does this by giving one a new point of view of looking at things, a new way of appreciating the truth and beauty of life and the world, *by discovering a new source of energy in the inmost recesses of consciousness*, ... by overhauling the whole system of one's inner life and opening up a world hitherto entirely undreamt of. This may be called a resurrection. [6]

The techniques recommended for helping people uncover this river of inwardness are indirect in both Kierkegaard and Zen. Men must be induced to rid themselves of present anchorages, and for this purpose suffering plays a positive role in salvation. Everything helps which coerces the individual to make his own search. The physical blows endured by disciples of Zen are intended to be just such a catalytic agent as the indirect methods of Kierkegaard. The charming tale retold by Suzuki about Black-nails and the flowering trees illustrates the invitation of Zen to "Throw them down!" meaning by "them," not the flowering trees which Black-nails dropped with dispatch, but the customary paraphernalia of thought, feeling, and action into which our energy is customarily poured. [7] The way Kierkegaard puts it, "communication at last becomes the art of taking away, of luring something away from someone." [8] His unforgettable figure of speech follows: "When a man has his mouth so full of food that he is prevented from eating, and is like to starve in consequence, does giving him food consist in scuffling still more of it in his mouth, or does it consist in taking some of it away, so that he can begin to eat?" [9]

As a final introductory remark, it is to be noted that human choice, while a psychological matter, reverberates for both of these interpretations of religion into the wide sweep of all human history and the cosmos. The significance of a religious decision is therefore not exhausted by mere psychological analysis. History gains significance through the choices men make, especially through the ruling loyalties they select. All that human hands have wrought and the total system of culture in which human life is caught up are primarily traceable to "our attachment to the habit-energy of discrimination which has been maturing since beginningless time on account

[5] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)* (London: Rider and Company. n.d.), p. 103. Cf. pp. 359-360.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 266. (Italics mine.)

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 172.

[8] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 245-246.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 246.

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of false imagination and erroneous speculation. . . ." ^[10] While there is noticeable in Zen a typical reticence and inability to envisage the extent of man's power to control and to transform considerable stretches of natural processes, the decisions issuing from the human will have nonetheless macrocosmic implications for both Kierkegaard and Zen.

AFFIRMATIONS IN Zen AND KIERKEGAARD

A comparative appraisal of Zen and Kierkegaard is facilitated by the fact that both make four affirmations. ^[11] Both say, in the first place, that man cannot securely find salvation and realize his supreme fulfillment because he has an inveterate tendency to identify himself with some assortment or Other of the specific goods of this world, whether these goods be an existing cluster of ideas, or wealth, or power, or sensuous pleasures, or some instrumentality for exercising power over social and natural processes. The result of this propensity is that human living, left to itself, is always overtaken sooner or later by the defeat, cynicism, skepticism, or self-annihilation that attends these avenues of life. Both Zen and Kierkegaard think that this tendency lies at the core of the disasters man tends to visit upon himself and the major reason that human living misses the supreme goods that might otherwise be accessible. It is because of this native bent that man is incapable of delivering himself from the worst perils that befall him.

The second affirmation found in Zen and Kierkegaard alike is that there is a process or power operative in and upon man and, within the human personality, radically different from man's usual powers of control, which is capable of extricating man from his self-destructive tendencies. Zen and Kierkegaard do not agree as to how this reality shall be described; in fact, there is a striking tendency in both to affirm that it cannot be described at all.

The third affirmation which Zen and Kierkegaard make is that there are certain conditions man must meet if the saving reality is to extricate him from the human predicament. One of these conditions is that man must alter the direction and anchorage of his living so as to identify himself with this extraordinary reality. Man must serve and celebrate this reality and live in its keeping, so that it becomes the dominant allegiance of his life. We shall see below the different ways in which Zen and Kierkegaard describe these conditions.

^[10] D. T. Suzuki, trans., *The Lankavatara Sutra, A Mahayana Text* (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1932), p. 72.

^[11] These affirmations, originally formulated by Henry Nelson Wieman, will be published for the first time in a philosophy of religion text that Mr. Wieman is writing in collaboration with Alburey Castell and the present writer.

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The fourth affirmation is that when men provide the conditions just mentioned there is introduced into human living the greatest possible good that man can ever experience. With these affirmations as a basis of comparison, let us get before us the details in the Oriental and Occidental modes of thought.

THE FIRST AFFIRMATION

It is to Kierkegaard's great credit that he foresaw and warned us against the tragedy and nonentity that ensue in the wake of Western man's genius for placing all sensitivity and response under subservience to abstract cognition. It has taken more than a century for the implications of his warning to become clear. For both Zen and Kierkegaard this tendency to identify life with its abstractions is a major element in the problematic predicament of man. It is the tragedy at the root of all misplaced desire. For an Oriental view, this is probably not surprising, but for the European, with membership in a doctrinal confession, it is in many respects amazing. There have been rebellions enough against the over-intellectualization of life, but most of them, like those of Pascal and Rousseau, were offering, behind their obvious pose, only a different dictionary of abstractions with which men might and ought to identify their living. Kierkegaard is probably the most thoroughgoing exponent of a deep intellectual anarchy in matters of religious faith that Europe, at least, has ever seen.

The tendency of man to incarcerate all feeling and response in the forms of abstract thought is part of a universal and unavoidable direction that man as man (that is, as a culture-bearing and culture-creating animal) tends quite naturally to take. It is the "erroneous discrimination and false reasoning that has been going on since beginningless time," "attaching" men to the specific goods of this world. "What is meant by a worldly object of enjoyment? ... It means that which can be touched, attracted by, wiped off, handled, and tasted; it is that which makes one get attached to an external world, enter into a dualism on account of a wrong view, and appear again in the Skandhas, where, owing to the procreative force of desire, there arise all kinds of disaster such as birth, age, disease, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, etc. This is called the object of worldly enjoyment by myself and other Buddhas. This ... is the attainment of worldly enjoyments and not that of the Truth. It is materialism. ..," [\[12\]](#)

This is the root of suffering, that man discriminates one thing after another from all other possibilities of existence, and lives in and for these distinguish-

[\[12\]](#) Lankavatara Sutra, pp. 155-156.

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ables. The loss of possible qualitative richness is one aspect of this suffering; even more serious, to live for the perishable and changeable entities that we distinguish in our experience is to sacrifice the whole stream of personal becoming to the process of decay and death. Suffering is magnified to the degree that men live this way. All men, according to Zen and Kierkegaard, tend to select inadequate channels for thought and action.

One of the gravest aspects of this bondage to abstractions and specific things is that personal development is not only ignored but imperiled. The individual who lives this way is not at all identical with other individuals, yet all ignore their uniqueness for the sake of common abstractions, common standards, common goods. What they see, feel, know, dream, imagine, and do, with reference to themselves, to other people, and to their world in general, is always severely limited by the nature of the abstractions and things. Worlds of possibility and unimaginable stretches of personal experience and development are sacrificed to these Procrustean beds. Both Kierkegaard and Zen are acutely aware of the great 'personal loss that attends this way of organizing sensitivity and response. The former calls our abstractions a network of "strings" that constitute an "established order" which serves to "imprison life." [\[13\]](#)

Other recent exponents of freedom for the individual have made the same point. Berdyaev, for example, contended that the rediscovery of the individual was the essential theme of modern Christianity, a theme which k has largely forgotten, and that "in society man is invariably an actor, he lives up to the standard of conduct imposed upon him by any given social position, and if he acts his part too well, he has some difficulty in rediscovering his essential Ego." [\[14\]](#) "Objective and impersonal modes of thought are the greatest obstacle to the individual's emergence from his self-confinement. . . ," [\[15\]](#)

The resemblance between Kierkegaard's warning about the strings of an established order and the view of karma found in Zen is not only obvious but profound. The ancient text says,

The ignorant cling to names, ideas, and signs; their minds move along these channels. ... As karma is accumulated again and again, their minds become swathed in the cocoon of discrimination as the silk-worm... [\[16\]](#)

This triple world resembles a hair-net, or water in a mirage which is agitated; it is like a dream, Maya. . . . Like a mirage in the springtime, the mind is found bewildered; animals imagine water but there is no reality to it. ... Since beginning-

[\[13\]](#) Dru, op. cit., p. 190.

[\[14\]](#) Nicholas Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society* (London: Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary Press, 1938), pp.202-203.

[\[15\]](#) *Ibid.*, p.28.

[\[16\]](#) Lankavatara Sutra, pp. 194-195.

less time, the ignorant are found transmigrating through the paths, enwrapped in their attachment to existence. ... A world of multitudes is a hair-net, a vision, a dream ... if is a wheel made by a firebrand, a mirage. . . . Like a mirage in the air, so is a variety of things mere appearance; they are seen in diversity of forms, but are like a child in a barren woman's dream. [\[17\]](#)

There are other issues touched upon here as well, but nothing could more clearly indicate the suspicion with which Zen views what Kierkegaard called the "strings of an established order."

One reason why personal development is imperiled when men identify their living with cognitive generalizations lies in the nature of abstractions as such. Part of the native and unavoidable propensity of man as a culture-creating animal, the organization of sensitivity and response under the control of abstractions, according to Suzuki, commits men to live amid ignorance. The "fundamental condition of cognition" is such that "there is Ignorance clinging to its every act. When we think we know something, there is something we do not know. The unknown is always behind the known, and we fail to get at this unknown knower, who is indeed the inevitable and necessary companion to every act of cognition." [\[18\]](#) The roots of ignorance of both self and the world, as well as ignorance of the avenue whereby the self may be enriched, lie deep in our misunderstanding of concepts and our propensity for identifying our living with them. This is the deeper ignorance with which the Buddha wrestled. "So long as Ignorance is understood as logical inability to know, its disappearance can never bring out the spiritual freedom to which even the earliest known literature of Buddhism makes so frequent and so emphatic allusions." [\[19\]](#)

The major reason for the opposition to habitual patterns of thought and desire that we find both Zen and Kierkegaard expressing, however, is their obstruction and misguiding of personal development. Kierkegaard's aphorism, "first death, then life," has this deep significance behind it, that it is an invitation to come out from the entire cluster of attitudes, dispositions, and behavior patterns which constitute our "world" as a meaningful entity and an object of desire. No other meaning seems possible or credible for Kierkegaard's use of the term "world" than the sum total of what we think, feel, and do about our existence and about ourselves as a result of the systems of symbolic representation in which we have been induced to view ourselves. Bultmann takes the position that the primitive Christian eschatology intended the same thing insofar as there was any meaning in the invitation to be born again or to be resurrected into life with Christ. Early

[\[17\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

[\[18\]](#) Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (Pint Series), pp. 126-127.

[\[19\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Christians felt the necessity of dying to the world as seen and known in order that they might be

raised in and beyond this death into sensitivities and responsivenesses engendered by God. [\[20\]](#)

What is at stake here, as well, is the issue of where the individual deposits his central loyalties and anchorage. Even for dominant forms of Christian orthodoxy the invitation has been prominent to adopt a certain system of doctrines and view one's relationships with die Creator through the spectacles of these conceptual forms. Kierkegaard represents an unusually illuminating revolt against all this, a revolt based on an awareness of the role of patterns of culture in blocking the unique individual from the path of his own maximum development. The dominant loyalties and anchorage of one's life can never become either a system of doctrine or even the reality to which such doctrine is intended to refer. The relationships of an individual to the source of his fulfillment must be individual relationships, fashioned in the crucible of personal experience.

In interpretations that strikingly parallel one another, we may say, in summarizing the first affirmation, that Zen and Kierkegaard view the normal predicament of man as abstract on all sides, as well as one-sided in its attachment to things, tending always to give the individual into bondage to generalizations and specific goods that trim from his life all that is distinctively his, and hence distinctively good. A loss of individuality and high quality ensues from which man is unable to extricate himself. We shall see in our third affirmation the steps man can take to aid in his own deliverance.

THE SECOND AFFIRMATION

The second affirmation that both Zen and Kierkegaard make concerns the nature of the reality that delivers man from the predicament just described. Here, these Oriental and Occidental interpretations of life urge upon us very forcibly one of the important paradoxes in our present understanding of man. On the one hand, man develops and matures his potentialities only as he expresses himself objectively; yet, on the other hand, potentialities for new growth emerge only as he relaxes his preoccupation with powers already matured.

Basically, men cooperate in the strengthening of their talents for appreciating the world in the same general way that they strengthen their muscles—through exercise. Without exercise, no capacity for judgment, evaluation, appreciation, love, envy, hate, or jealousy is ever developed into its full potential power, range, and depth. The exercise of our powers pro-

[\[20\]](#) Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma und Mythos, Ein theologisches Gespräch* (Hamburg: Reich & Heidrich, 1948).

ceeds via interaction with people and things within an existing manifold of concrete relationships, and without such interchange not only growth but life itself is impossible. Out of the hidden,

indeterminate areas of personality, out of the blind spots where we are unresponsive, new sensitivities emerge, in responding to which new capacities are matured for seeing, knowing, and having objective interchange with the world in new ways. These novel responses, developed in a process of reciprocal freeing of people from their own past structures, enable the individual to transcend himself so that he relates himself for the world in new ways, each of which has its own peculiar reward and saturation point in what can be seen, known, felt, or done.

At the same time, no talent already matured can accomplish one iota to bring a new capacity across the threshold from the dark area of indeterminate potentiality into which both Zen and Kierkegaard invite man to move for his salvation. The most that man's maturing responses can do is to guide him to the threshold and leave him there alone, powerless, stripped of habitual ways of handling the world. They can lead him only to the threshold, across which by mastering certain conditions to be described in our third affirmation he may learn to fling himself. If man is unwilling to be left in this position; if he is unwilling to be left powerless and void of all matured responses; if, upon being led to the threshold of the new, he insists upon continuing in perspectives and attitudes already developed in him, in the company and exercise of which he may feel confident and secure and respectable; if he is loath to be left thus disarmed and utterly at a loss to know what to say, feel, think, or do—then, like the vast majority who struggle ignorantly against the conditions of their own self-transcendence, he is utterly lost and alienated from the sources of his own emerging good. "The uncertainty is the criterion, and the certainty without the uncertainty is the criterion for the absence of a God-relationship." ^[21] "The negative is the mark by which the God-relationship is recognized, and self-annihilation is the essential form for the God-relationship. . . . Religiously it is the task of the individual to understand that he is nothing before God, or to become wholly nothing and to exist thus before God; this consciousness of impotence he requires constantly before him, and when it vanishes the religiosity also vanishes." ^[22] "Face to face with God man is without standards and without comparisons," ^[23] just because in this relationship all distinctions as to right or wrong, good or bad, important or trivial, large or small, black or white, etc., are stripped from man. This we take to be a realistic analysis of the

^[21] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 407.

^[22] *Ibid.*, p.412.

^[23] Dru, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

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God-relationship, rather than a psychologically abnormal urge submissively to yield one's individuality and potential for development and integrity. "Thus constantly to be in the process of becoming is the elusiveness that pertains to the infinite in existence. It is enough to bring a sensuous man to despair, for one always feels a need to have something finished and complete;

but this desire does not come from the good and needs to be renounced. The incessant becoming generates the uncertainty of the earthly life, where everything is uncertain." [24]

Men cooperate with their own process of personal becoming when they relax all illusions and even reliable cues about themselves and the world, giving themselves unreservedly and unobstructedly to the dark indeterminateness of inwardness from whence the transformative power is exercised upon their lives. Zen, too, resurrects one from his recurrent identification with established patterns of response. Zen gives one "a new point of view," discovers "a new source of energy in the inmost recesses of consciousness," working "miracles by overhauling the whole system of one's inner life and opening up a world hitherto entirely undreamt of [25] "Not knowing how near the truth is, people seek it far away,—what a pity!" [26]

It is this source of the individual's progressive fulfillment that both Zen and Kierkegaard criticize their age for having forgotten. It is this basic forgetfulness that has estranged man from the source of his own self-transcendence. He identifies himself with what he already knows and does, so that he is lost in a net of karma from the knowledge and experience that life is pre-eminently a process of personal becoming. This is the meaning of Kierkegaard's contention that the age has forgotten what it means to exist, and what inwardness is. It has lost faith in the truth that inwardness makes the apparently scanty content richer, while a change in externals is merely a diversion sought by the life-weary and the life-empty. It is for this reason that the existential tasks are rejected. One learns to know in passing what faith is, and so that is known. . . . Another day astronomy is brought up, and so we gad our way through all the sciences and all the spheres, without ever living. [27]

In Zen, the interpretation is essentially the same. Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one's own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom. By making us drink right from the fountain of life, it liberates us from all the yokes under which we finite beings are usually

[24] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 79.

[25] Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (first Series)*, p. 266.

[26] Robert O. Ballou, ed. *The Bible of the World* (New York: Viking Press, 1939). P. 365 (from "Hakuin's Song of Meditation").

[27] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 255.

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suffering in this world. We can say that Zen liberates all the energies properly and naturally stored in each of us, which are in ordinary circumstances cramped and distorted so that they find no adequate channel for activity. . . . This is what I mean by freedom, giving free play to all the creative and benevolent impulses inherently lying in our hearts. . . . Zen . . . wants us to open a

"third eye," as the Buddhists call it, to the hitherto undreamed-of region shut away from us through our own ignorance. [28]

Behind the different symbolisms in Zen and Kierkegaard, one can see that their central purpose is to relate the individual directly to the source of his own fulfillment. This fact should be firmly noted, lest what they say about the saving reality mislead us. Notice, indeed, even the striking similarities in the way they treat this reality! There is in both an almost absolute reticence to refer directly to this reality, lest they contradict themselves. Both either use only dramatic and oblique references or stand literally speechless before the process of self-transcendence. Man must take leave of his paraphernalia of abstractions and cross the threshold alone, *moving backward, so to speak, into the experience of being reborn*.

[The Enlightenment experience of Zen] is not seeing God as he is. ... Zen has from the very beginning made dear its principal thesis, which is to see into the work of creation and not interview the creator himself. . . . When it grasps the reason of living a life, it is satisfied. . . . Whereas with the God of mysticism there is the grasping of a definite object, and when you have God, what is not God is excluded. This is self-limiting. *Zen wants absolute freedom, even from God. . . . It is not that Zen wants to be morbidly unholy and. godless, but that it knows the incompleteness of a name.* [29]

But what is this unknown something with which the Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion, with the result of unsettling even man's knowledge of himself? It is the Unknown. It is not a human being, in so far as we know what man is; nor is it any other known thing. So let us call this unknown something: God. It is nothing more than a name we assign to it. The idea of demonstrating that this unknown something (God) exists, could scarcely suggest itself to the Reason. [30]

Whenever the common reliances and anchorages are laid out for burial and renounced, man's inward passion collides with his own ground of being.

What is encountered across the threshold into which one moves powerless and alone? Zen conies close to saying that what man encounters at the end of this way is Nothing. What else is suggested in the following poem by Bodhidharma?

[28] Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (first Series), p. 11.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 261. (Italics mine.)

[30] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical fragments*, David F. Swenson, tram. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), p. 31. (Italics mine.)

The ultimate end of things where they cannot go any further, Is not bound by rules and measures:

The mind in harmony with the Way is the principle of identity In which we find all doings in a quiescent state;

Irresolutions are completely done away with,
 " And the right faith is restored to its native straightness;
 Nothing is retained now,
 Nothing is to be memorized,
 All is void, lucid, and self-illuminating,
 There is no stain, no exertion, no wasting of energy—
 This is where thinking never attains,
 This is where the imagination fails to measure.

In the higher realm of True Suchness There is neither "other" nor "self." When a direct identification is asked for, We can only say, "Not two." [\[31\]](#)

But if this intimation of nothingness be seen in relation to the suspicion against existing involvements, there is little doubt that "the realm of True Suchness" of Buddhism and the "hidden God" of Kierkegaard refer to an area that is indescribable and for this reason is a superior concentration of reality, pulsing in pure undifferentiated aesthesis, refreshing, regenerating, and resting. "If an Arab in the desert were suddenly to discover a spring in his tent, and so would always be able to have water in abundance, how fortunate he would consider himself—so too when a man who qua physical being is always turned toward the outside, thinking that his happiness lies outside him, finally turns inward and discovers that the source is within him; not to mention his discovering that the source is his relation to God." [\[32\]](#) How similar the Christian flinging himself forlorn upon the mercies of God, with such a practitioner of Zen as Hui-nêng, who, according to Suzuki, "wanted to grasp something which lay at the foundation of all his activities mental and physical, and this something . . . must be the source of energy and knowledge." [\[33\]](#) "No-birth and no-annihilation, this I call Nirvana. By Nirvana, Mahāmati, is meant the looking into the abode of reality as it really is in itself; and when, along with the turning-back of the entire system of mentation . . . there is the attainment of self-realization by means of noble wisdom ... I call it Nirvana." [\[34\]](#)

There are a multitude of references in both Kierkegaard and Zen that

[\[31\]](#) Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (First Series), pp. 194-200.

[\[32\]](#) Dru, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

[\[33\]](#) Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (First Series), p. 221.

[\[34\]](#) *Lankavatara Sutra*, p. 172.

converge toward deep similarity in their allusions to the process or power that is able, as man is not, to deliver him from the evils into which he tends naturally to fall. For both, the reality that saves

is hidden from all man sees, knows, and does, hidden behind and deeper than all distinguishables; this reality is the source of man's supreme good, happiness, and transcendence. Terminology may differ in different religions, and in satori (the name given to the opening or awakening of the "third eye") there is always what we may call a sense of the Beyond. . . . The individual shell in which my personality is so solidly encased explodes at the moment of satori. Not, necessarily, that I get unified with a being greater than myself or absorbed in it, but that my individuality, which I found rigidly held together and definitely kept separate from other individual existences, becomes loosened somehow from its tightening grip and melts away into something indescribable, something which is of quite a different order from what I am accustomed to. The feeling that follows is that of a complete release or a complete rest—the feeling that one has arrived finally at the destination.... As far as the psychology of satori is considered, a sense of the Beyond is all we can say about it; to call this the Beyond, the Absolute, or God, or a Person is to go further than the experience itself, and to plunge into a theology or metaphysics. Even the "Beyond" is saying a little too much. ... I have called it elsewhere the Unconscious, though this has a psychological taint. [\[35\]](#)

Elsewhere Suzuki argues that the experience of being assimilated in this primordial source of fulfillment "goes much more penetratingly into the depths of one's personality" than to be understood "as a mere psychological phenomenon." [\[36\]](#)

In the light of these fundamental similarities in Zen and Kierkegaard, we shall need to look farther than the first two affirmations they make if we are to discover something of major significance separating one approach from the other.

THE THIRD AFFIRMATION

Some elements of the third affirmation made by Zen and Kierkegaard—that man must meet certain conditions if the saving reality is to extricate him from the human predicament—have been foreshadowed in discussing the first two. For example, in our discussion of the predicament and the reality that saves, there are intimations of what man can and must do if he is to co-operate in his deliverance. Mere intimations, however, are insufficient even to suggest the import of the last two affirmations. A discussion of the third one is incomplete, for instance, without considering the special role

[\[35\]](#) Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (Second Series)* (London: Rider and Company, 1950), pp. 31-32.

[\[36\]](#) Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)*, p. 155.

of suffering and the labor of inwardness to which it urges us. We shall also need to sharpen our

notion of what responsibilities the human mind can be expected to accept as the nature of the God-relationship becomes more important to modern research. A struggle against an over-intellectualization of life must not be construed to mean that the power of the mind is discredited.

Salvation from the predicament wherein life is poor and imperiled does not come by taking thought. This both Zen and Kierkegaard affirm. Salvation is not a turning of the mind alone. It is, on the contrary, a reversal in one's total life-direction, a conversion of every drift of feeling, desire, sensibility. Salvation, moreover, is possible only through struggle, a struggle of the whole man which each must carry on by and for himself in every cell and organ of his being. Deliverance is "a good which is not distributed wholesale, but only to one individual at a time." [37] The struggle is basically "the labor of inwardness." [38] It is a struggle too exacting to be undertaken by children.

[39]

The condition that outweighs all others in effecting man's deliverance is a condition men provide more unwittingly than by deliberate intent. It is a fact of life, through a proper appraisal and understanding of which man supplies one of the conditions for his salvation. This is the fact of suffering. Although there appears to be less emphasis in Zen than in primitive forms of Buddhism upon the fact of suffering, for reasons not entirely clear, suffering looms large for both Zen and Kierkegaard. It is unmistakable in Kierkegaard, and somewhat less so in Zen, that whoever would be delivered must not only have a proper understanding of suffering but must himself have suffered. Pain dislodges affections which would not otherwise be easily relaxed. Suffering warns one away; it pries the individual loose from habitual patterns of interest. Suffering results when the entities in which we find support decay and disintegrate. It advertises for all who have eyes to see that life is not lived successfully in the paths of least resistance, the paths we normally pursue. Suffering is a catalytic agent awakening man to the necessity for new direction, new wisdom, new loyalties.

Because suffering functions in this way, it plays a positive role in man's deliverance. It figured large in the Illumination of Gautama. For Kierkegaard, it is an essential experience that must be encountered as a presupposition for salvation. For both, it leads one to become concerned in a way that prosperity never can. Concern turns finally into a concern for self, and self-concern is a gateway to salvation. Man must be thrown off balance. Suffer-

[37] Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 116.

[38] *Ibid.*, p.536.

[39] *Ibid.*, p.523.

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ing persuades us that the seeming stability and goodness of any avenue of truth, goodness, or beauty in which we may have lost ourselves is only a facade, and that all man's normal ways are tinged with an infinite pathos born of the fragile nature of all that men tend naturally to do. "Decay is inherent in all component things' Work out your salvation with diligence!" [40] "To lead a really

spiritual life while physically and psychically healthy is altogether impossible. One's sense of immediate well-being at once runs away with one. In one sense, the spiritual life is the death of the immediate. That is why suffering is a help." ^[41] "The majority of men live all too safely in life, that is why they learn to know God so little. They have safe jobs, they never make the greatest effort possible." ^[42] Each has an accent of its own, but for both Zen and Kierkegaard suffering and the disenchantment of the world with which we have habitually come to terms coerce men into relaxing and relinquishing identification with specific goods and patterns of thought, sensibility, and action.

Man must do more, however, than suffer. Man is not condemned to suffer helplessly. He can learn to provide conditions different from the ones that it is his native tendency to provide. When we take into consideration all, rather than a few, random remarks that Zen and Kierkegaard make about man's learning capacities, it seems certain that they expect further explorations of the conditions of man's salvation to help retire from all human living the propensities toward evil that have overshadowed man's life thus far. They probably anticipate the discovery of new knowledge which should further illuminate the general direction that they surmise in the affirmations under discussion. It is mainly when man's mind is pushed into functions for which it is unsuited that men are victimized by their own intellect. The mind has no hidden access to the secrets of the universe as many European and Eastern philosophers have taught. But "the realm of faith is ... not a class for numskulls in the sphere of the intellectual, or an asylum for the feeble-minded." ^[43] "Because an individual gives up his understanding for faith and believes against the understanding, he should not think meanly of the understanding, nor suddenly arrogate to himself a glittering distinction within the total compass of the understanding; for after all a higher understanding is also an understanding." ^[44] There is a process of learning, then, that must be considered as one of the primary conditions men must supply if the reality affirmed as accessible to man is to work in a saving way upon his predicament.

^[40] Ballou, op. cit., pp. 240-241 (from "The Life of Buddha").

^[41] Dru, op. cit., p. 326.

^[42] I bid., p. 192.

^[43] Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 291.

^[44] I bid., p. 501.

THE FOURTH AFFIRMATION

The fourth affirmation Zen and Kierkegaard make is that when man provides the conditions described above he is delivered from the predicament wherein his life moves amid peril, and there

is introduced into human living the greatest possible good. The nature of this supreme good in Zen and Kierkegaard has been suggested repeatedly in the foregoing pages, A few summarizing remarks at this point may help to bring this concluding affirmation into sharper clarity.

The experience of this highest good is an inexpressible happiness, "an exalted state of bliss, . . ." [45] It is "a state of mental concentration which is attained when one realises states of emptiness, egolessness, suffering, and impermanence, and the truth that is free from passions and is ever serene; when one annihilates notions belonging to the externality of things . . . and when one has an insight into reality as it is." [46] It is "a positive state of mind In which lies hidden an inexhaustible reservoir of possibilities; it is a unity in which a world of multitudinosity is lodged." [47] It is "taking hold of the not-thought which lies in thoughts. . . ." [48] "The relation to God is clearly a good of such tremendous weight and blessedness that if only I can grasp that fact my happiness is absolute in an absolute sense. . . ." [49]

What is this concentrated state of bliss, this positive state of mind that grasps what is behind all thought? While other interpretations of this somewhat dramatic language are obviously possible, it is in keeping with the general trend of Zen and Kierkegaard that they depict the greatest good as the fullest possible expansion and vivification of all aesthetic richness of which an individual's experience is capable. Four points in particular suggest the nature of this experience. In the first place, it is not the dissolution of life that is indicated here, but the dissolution of habit-structures that dominate man's life. These habit-structures are broken in order to set free the emergence of qualitative meaning. Second, the individual's own distinctive experience is not lost in an ocean of nonentity; on the contrary, the individual's experience is enlivened in all its capacities for feeling hitherto unfelt qualities. Such vivification of feeling ensues to the extent that the individual is assimilated, without at the same time losing his identity, into a deeper than cognitive process of becoming wherein all consciousness of meaning and high quality is both broadened and deepened. In the third place, the individual is ushered into the only avenue wherein he may live,

[45] Lankavatara Sutra, p. 77.

[46] I bid., p. 52.

[47] Suzuki, Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series), p. 143.

[48] Ballou, op. cit; p. 366 (from " Hakuin's Song of Meditation"),

[49] Dru,op. cit., p. 196.

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not in and by borrowed perspectives, but in and for his deeper process of selfhood. His ordinary self is broken and assimilated into an ocean of energy, not in order to be rendered senseless, but in order to be freed for the maximum expansion, deepening, and vivification of every possible point of sensitivity and responsiveness. This is probably what Suzuki means when he says that Zen "liberates all the energies properly and naturally stored in each of us ... giving free play to all

the creative and benevolent impulses inherently lying in our hearts." ^[50] It is what Kierkegaard means by saying that "the individual becomes infinite only by virtue of making the absolute venture. ... In making the absolute venture he becomes another individual." ^[51]

Finally, the mind reverses itself, discarding all distinguishables, leading us into what might be more properly called an all-encompassing submental threshold of relatively pure aesthesis that lies at the heart of all human living, It is in order to bring the individual into relation to this reality that Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, "protests against every form of objectivity; it desires that the subject should be infinitely concerned about himself." ^[52] When this concern turns the self inward it collides with a limitless expanse of qualitative richness; by continuing in this relationship hidden resources are exploited to the fullest extent. The result destroys the conceptual self; it places the social self in the background; and the result is the purer, undifferentiated, qualitative self from whence every potential for feeling, thought, and action issues forth. This is reality, then, in its fullest measure. This is Nirvāṇa.

SUMMARY

We have indicated some of the lines of convergence in the way that Zen Buddhism and Kierkegaard deal with the predicament of man and his salvation. In our interpretation of these lines of agreement, we have viewed Zen through the eyes of its famous exponent, Suzuki, and we have allowed Kierkegaard as much as possible to speak for himself. Divergences there certainly are in these two modes of thought; since they issue from two widely separated areas of the earth and distinct cultural streams, no one would expect anything else. " With their divergences, however, we have not been concerned. It has not been our intention to relate everything in Zen. to everything in Kierkegaard, but only to find where they resemble one another in the four affirmations they make about the predicament of man and his deliverance from the worst perils of his life.

^[50] Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)*, p. 11.

^[51] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 379.

^[52] *Ibid.*, p. 116.