

A Zen Cloud?

Comparing Zen *Koan* Practice with *The Cloud of Unknowing**



DAVID LOY
BUNKYO UNIVERSITY
JAPAN

Profound similarities between Buddhist and Christian mysticism have often been claimed, but few detailed comparisons have been made. This is not surprising, for cross-cultural comparisons just multiply the hermeneutical difficulties which are already plentiful enough in each tradition. Nonetheless, it is regrettable, since each may shed valuable light on the other. In particular, such comparisons may be very helpful in the task of trying to evaluate mystical claims — a notoriously intractable issue, since both Christian mystical visions and Buddhist enlightenment experiences are usually said to be nonrational, bypassing conceptual thinking and therefore our normal means of evaluation. Because such experiences cannot be observed objectively or replicated at will, the claims deriving from them are not verifiable in the usual empirical manner. But if ultimate, most-cherished experiences for Christians and Buddhists seem to be essentially the same and have their most significant features in common, this would provide some important cross-cultural support for the thesis that the experience does in fact reveal what the mystic or enlightened person believes it to reveal.

Such a project may be inspiring but it is unrealizable. We cannot generalize about “the” Christian or Buddhist mystical experience in this way. Both religions are rich in a great variety of texts and schools, whose differences have been just as important in developing the tradition as their agreements have been in maintaining it. Eckhart’s sermons cannot be equated with the sayings of the desert fathers, and the eighth-century debate at bSam-yas between Tantra and Ch’an warns us not to

try the same thing with Buddhism. So in this paper I will attempt to make a more limited contribution to the subject by comparing two specific meditative *practices*. I shall examine the similarities between one method of *koan* meditation in contemporary Zen Buddhism, as I have practiced it and now understand it, with the technique of meditative prayer recommended in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the well-known fourteenth-century English manual of Christian practice.¹ The *koan* technique that I will describe is so distinctive that one might expect it to be unique; that *The Cloud* espouses such a similar technique is, as we shall see, very suggestive.²

¹ For more on the *koan* process, see D. T. Suzuki in *Zen Buddhism*, 2nd series (London: Rider, 1950); Miura Isshu and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Koan* (New York, 1965); and Philip Kapleau, ed., *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1966). Robert Aitken, the American Zen master living in Hawaii, has published a short working paper which lists "nine principle points of interchange" between the *koan* method and *The Cloud of Unknowing*: nonintellectual method; brevity of meditation theme; abruptness of experience; intimacy of experience; joy of experience; resoluteness after experience; avoiding sentimental devotion; don't falter; and longing. See "The Method of Meditation: Zen Buddhist and Roman Catholic," *Blind Donkey* (March-April 1979), reprinted in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 1 (1981), pp. 87-91.

² This similarity is all the more interesting because the contemporary school of Zen whose *koan*-method I describe has trained many Christian clergy. Zen master Koun Yamada, director of the Sanbo Kyodan, has made one of his main goals the establishment of a Zen tradition within Christianity, especially the Catholic Church. As of August 1987, five Catholic priests, five sisters, and one Protestant minister have completed *koan*-studies with him, and as far as I know, all of them have been qualified as Zen teachers. Seven more priests and five sisters are presently engaged in *koan*-study and will probably soon become qualified as teachers of Zen.

In order to obtain their views on the relation between Zen practice and *The Cloud*, I sent out questionnaires to these people, but the results were disappointing. Only four responded, plus one non-Christian Zen teacher. Of those, the replies were roughly divided between those who had found it a good introduction to Zen practice and those who found *The Cloud* opaque and not very satisfying. But everyone emphasized the importance of keeping the two paths separate in order not to confuse them, and the general sentiment was that a path as well developed as Zen has no need for such supplementation. The most interesting result of my inquiries was a division among Christian Zen teachers (most of them in Europe), between those who want to maintain a strong distinction between Zen practice and Christian practice, and those who see them as aiming at the same thing and therefore to be eventually united — which seems to mean using mostly Zen practice with Christian terminology. But evidently *The Cloud* has not figured in this debate.



We begin with a summary of the *koan* (Chinese, *kung-an*) method. Yet one cannot assume that there is a *koan* method for the reasons mentioned above: Ch'an/Zen itself is a rich tradition, with many schools and developments, and *koan* are susceptible to many applications. So it must be emphasized that what follows is my own personal interpretation of the *koan* technique utilized by contemporary Japanese Zen Master Koun Yamada, who is director of the Sambo Kyodan school. An advantage of this focus is that it concerns a method I myself have practiced. Nevertheless, there is nothing definitive about this interpretation, and it should be kept in mind that the way of Zen is actually to practice and not to reflect on how that practice works, for the latter may well hamper the former. Rather than subvert our comparison, this initiates it, for (as we shall see) *The Cloud of Unknowing* also urges us completely to immerse ourselves into the practice and not try to understand what is happening: "Be blind in this time and shear away desire of knowing, for it will hinder thee more than help thee."³

Essentially, a *koan* is a paradoxical problem that in principle cannot be solved by using our usual, rational method of analysis. In order to answer a *koan*, the student must bypass the conceptualizing faculty of his mind and "leap" to another type of understanding, which constitutes enlightenment: a glimpse into one's "Buddha-nature" or "true nature." This is consistent with the philosophical attitude that we do not normally experience the world as it really is, because our perceptions are distorted by desires, expectations, and concepts; enlightenment in Zen is when this fog of delusions evaporates, to reveal the world undistorted, in which case everything is experienced as "empty" (about which more later).

Most *koan* are derived from dialogues between Zen masters or master and student. For example:

A monk asked Joshu: "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?" Joshu said: "The oak tree in the garden."⁴

³ Abbot Justin McCann, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 6th rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates, 1952), p. 50. All subsequent references are from this edition.

⁴ Case 37 of the *Mumonkan*.

This *mondo* (the record of a conversation) becomes a *koan* when a student is asked: What is the meaning of Joshu's reply? The student might answer, for example, that there was no reason why Bodhidharma came from the West; just as a tree has no meaning but *is*, so Bodhidharma just *came*. But such a reply would be rejected. The only way the student can come to understand Joshu's reply is by attaining the state of mind that Joshu was in when he made his remark; that is, by also having an enlightenment experience. The *koan* helps him or her to do this because no conceptual answer is acceptable. If the questioning process is continued in the proper way, the conceptualizing function of the mind becomes paralyzed and eventually bypassed.

Traditionally, three requirements or factors are essential to Zen practice, and this is especially true for *koan* work: great faith, great determination, and great doubt.⁵ The great (literally, "deep-rooted") faith necessary is not belief in any being or dogma that can "save" anyone but is that confidence which is necessary in order to practice: faith that the enlightenment of the Buddha (and Zen masters) is genuine, not a delusion or hoax; and faith that we too can realize this same thing since we are of the same "Buddha-nature." Great determination is the resolution that I too *will* become enlightened and that I will devote all of the energy of my being to that end.

The most interesting for our purposes is great doubt, which refers to the state of perplexity that is generated when one works on a *koan*. "Doubt" cannot be understood here in the ordinary sense, but refers to a particular state of "doubting," experienced both mentally and physically, which is what blocks conceptualizing:

When working on Zen, the most important thing is to generate the *I chin* (doubt-sensation). What is this doubt-sensation? For instance: Where did I come from before my birth, and where shall I go after my death? Since one does not know the answer to either question, a strong feeling of "doubt" arises in the mind. Stick this "doubt-mass" onto your forehead (and keep it there) all the time until you can neither drive it away nor put it down, even if you want to. Then suddenly you will discover that the doubt-mass has been

⁵ See Yasutani's "Introductory Lectures" in Kapleau, pp. 58-60.

crushed, that you have broken it into pieces. The masters of old said:

The greater the doubt, the greater the awakening.
The smaller the doubt, the smaller the awakening.
No doubt, no awakening.⁶

It is precisely here that great determination is necessary. "A Zen yogi should resolutely vow that he will never stop working until the doubt-mass is broken up," Po Shan said. "This is the most crucial point." It is important that one devote oneself completely to the search for a solution to one's *koan*. Shoichi Kokushi, the founder of Tofukuji, advised students to "think yourself to be down an old deep well; the only thought you then have will be to get out of it, and you will be desperately engaged in finding a way of escape; from morning to evening this one thought will occupy the entire field of your consciousness."⁷

This may be illustrated by considering what is probably the best-known of all *koan*, "Joshu's *Mu*, which is the first case in the *Mumonkan*, a famous collection of forty-eight *koan* by the thirteenth-century Chinese master Mumon Ekai:

A monk in all seriousness asked Joshu: "Has a dog Buddha-nature, or not?" Joshu retorted "Mu!"

The *koan* point — the problem to be solved — is: What is "mu"?

The monk of the story seems to have heard that, according to Mahayana teachings, all sentient beings have (or, as Dogen would put it, are) Buddha-nature, but he could not understand how, for example, a half-starved mongrel could have the same nature as the Buddha. Literally, *mu*, like the original Chinese *wu*, is a negative prefix, like the English "un-" or "non-"; in Chinese philosophy, it sometimes refers to the Void from which the universe originated. But it is a mistake to take Joshu's cryptic answer as denying the Buddha-nature of a dog, or as making any conceptual statement about Buddha-nature or the origin

⁶ All Po Shan quotations are from "Discourses of Master Po Shan" in *The Practice of Zen*, trans. and ed. Garma C. C. Chang, (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 94-102.

⁷ Quoted by D. T. Suzuki in *Essays in Zen*, pp. 71-72.

of the universe or anything else. The value of this dialogue as a *koan* is that, once this point is understood, little room is left for speculation. There is nothing left for the conceptualizing mind to try to grasp.

The importance of the doubt-sensation is evident in Mumon's commentary: "You must concentrate day and night, questioning yourself through every one of your 360 bones and 84,000 pores."⁸ But how is one to do that? In the old way of working on this *koan*, the Zen master repeatedly pressed the student for the correct answer, while rejecting all of his attempts. Eventually, the student would run out of replies, and then he might be encouraged simply to repeat the sound "Muuu ..." over and over again. Nowadays, the process is usually shortened. Students are informed at the beginning that all conceptual answers are unsatisfactory, and they are instructed to treat "mu" as a kind of *mantram*, to be repeated mentally in coordination with breath exhalations. The thought, or rather the internal sound of "mu," is used to eliminate all other thoughts. In his commentary on this case, Koun Yamada's teacher Hakuun Yasutani elaborates:

Let all of you become one mass of doubt and questioning. Concentrate on and penetrate fully into Mu. To penetrate into Mu means to achieve absolute unity with it. How can you achieve this unity? By holding to Mu tenaciously day and night! Do not separate yourself from it under any circumstances! Focus your mind on it constantly. . . . You must not, in other words, think of Mu as a problem involving the existence or nonexistence of Buddha-nature. Then what do you do? You stop speculating and concentrate wholly on Mu — just Mu!

At first you will not be able to pour yourself wholeheartedly into Mu. It will escape you quickly because your mind will start to wander. You will have to concentrate harder — just "Mu! Mu! Mu!" Again it will elude you. Once more you attempt to focus on it and again you fail. This is the usual pattern in the early stages of practice. . . . Upon your attainment to this stage of purity, both inside and outside naturally fuse. . . . When you fully absorb yourself in Mu, the external and internal merge into a single unity.⁹

⁸ See Yasutani's "Commentary on Mu" in Kapleau, p. 71.

⁹ Ibid.

Notice what is *not* encouraged here. One should not cultivate blankness of mind, which is quietism; nor should one try to push away thoughts, which creates a division: that which is pushing away is separated from the thoughts that are pushed away. Po Shan writes, "Some who suppress distracted thought and stop its arising consider *this* to be Buddhism. They, however, are going astray by using delusory thought to suppress delusory thought. It is like trying to press down the grass with a rock or to peel the leaves of a plantain, one after another — there is no end." Instead, the principle is to concentrate on one thing — in this case, "Muuuu ..." — in order to become absorbed into it and literally become it. This process was also described by Dogen: "To study Buddhism is to study oneself. To study oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to perceive oneself as all things. To realize this is to cast off the body and mind of self and others."¹⁰ Putting all mental energy into "Muuuu ..." and cutting off all thoughts with "Muuuu ..." undermines the sense of self. At the beginning of my practice, I attempt to concentrate on "Muuuu ..." but am distracted by other thoughts; later I am able to focus on "Muuuu ..." and not wander away from it. The stage of ripeness and purity, when "both inside and outside naturally fuse," is when there is no longer the sense of an "I" that is reciting an objective sound; there is only "Muuu ..."¹¹ This stage is sometimes described by saying that now "mu" is doing "mu": it is "mu" that sits, walks, and eats.

If one perseveres, there sometimes arises the sensation of hanging over a precipice, dangling by a single thread. Hakuin has said that "Except for occasional feelings of uneasiness and despair, it is like death itself."¹² The solution is to throw oneself completely into Mu:

Bravely let go on the edge of the cliff
 Throw yourself into the abyss with decision and courage
 You only revive after death! [Po Shan]

¹⁰ In "Genjo-koan," the first fascicle of Dogen's *Shobogenzo*.

¹¹ Yasutani, in Kapleau, pp. 79-80. This method is usually followed during a *sesshin*, a secluded and intensive meditation retreat, when all distractions can be reduced to a bare minimum.

¹² Hakuin, as quoted by D. T. Suzuki in *Zen Buddhism*, ed. William Barrett (New York: Anchor, 1956), p.148.

At this point, the Zen master may help by cutting the last thread: an unexpected action, such as a blow or shout or even a few quiet words, may startle the student into "letting go."¹³ According to Hakuin, "All of a sudden he finds his mind and body wiped out of existence, together with the *koan*. This is what is known as 'letting go your hold.'"¹⁴ Many of the classical Zen stories tell of how a student was enlightened by some action. In one instance, a student was enlightened by the sound of a pebble against a bamboo. What happens in such cases is that the shock of the unexpected pain or noise causes it to penetrate to the very core of a student's being – that is, it is experienced nondually. One lets go, dies "the Great (Ego) Death," and realizes the emptiness of all experience. "It is as though an explosion has occurred. When this happens you will experience so much!" Yasutani says. "With enlightenment you see the world as Buddha-nature, but this does not mean that all becomes as radiant as a halo. Rather, each thing *just as it is* takes on an entirely new significance or worth. Miraculously, everything is radically transformed though remaining just as it is."¹⁵



The anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* is the product of a very different tradition, medieval Christianity. The theological gap is considerable: in place of the Buddha-nature that all sentient beings *are* and which the Buddha merely shows us how to realize, Christianity usually emphasizes the distance between the creator God and his sinful creatures; salvation is achieved by faith in Christ, God's incarnation on earth. But *The Cloud* contains few references to Christ; the goal of the method described is to attain "with a loving stirring and a blind beholding unto the naked being of God himself only."¹⁶ I shall now try to demonstrate that the *koan* process described above and *The Cloud* method or experiencing "the naked being of God" are strikingly similar.

The Cloud of Unknowing takes its title from the meditation method that it recommends. One who wants to experience God should wrap

¹³ Dogen himself became enlightened when he heard his teacher say: "Body and mind must fall away."

¹⁴ Hakuin, in Barrett, p. 148

¹⁵ Yasutani's "Commentary on Mu" in Kapleau, p. 80.

¹⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 19.

herself in "a darkness or a cloud" which "treads down" all thinking.

Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean himself and none of his goods. And thereto look that thou loathe to think on aught but himself, so that nought work in thy mind nor in thy will but only himself.

Cease not, therefore, but travail therein till thou feel list. For at the first time when thou dost it, thou findest but a darkness, and as it were a *cloud of unknowing*, thou knowest not what, saying that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. This darkness and this cloud, howsoever thou dost, is betwixt thee and thy God, and hindereth thee, so that thou mayest neither see him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel him in sweetness or love in thine affection. And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after him whom thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt see him or feel him, as it may be here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness.¹⁷

A later passage clarifies what the term "cloud" means:

When I say darkness, I mean a lack of knowing: as all thing that thou knowest not, or hast forgotten, is dark to thee; for thou seest it not with thy ghostly [spiritual] eye. And for this reason it is called, not a cloud of the air, but a *cloud of unknowing*, which is betwixt thee and thy God.

And if ever thou shalt come to this cloud and dwell and work therein as I bid thee, thou must, as this *cloud of unknowing* is above thee, betwixt thee and thy God, right so put a *cloud of forgetting* beneath thee, betwixt thee and all the creatures that ever be made ... also all the works and conditions of the same creatures. I except not one creature, whether they be bodily creatures or ghostly; nor yet any condition or work of any creature, whether they be good or evil. But, to speak shortly, all should be hid under the *cloud of forgetting* in this case.

Yea, ... in this work it profiteth little or nought to think of the kindness or the worthiness of God, nor on our Lady, nor on the saints or angels in heaven, nor yet on the joys of heaven.... For although

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

it be good to think upon the kindness of God, and to love him and praise him for it: yet it is far better to think upon the naked being of him, and to love him and praise him for himself.

But now thou askest me and sayest: "How shall I think on himself [God], and what is he?" Unto this I cannot answer thee, except to say: know not."

For thou hast brought me with thy question into that same darkness, and into that same *cloud of unknowing*, that I would thou wert in thyself. For of all other creatures and thy works – yea, and of the works of God himself – may a man through grace have fulness of knowing, and well can he think of them; but of God himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think. For why, he may well be loved, but not thought. By love may he be gotten and holden; but by thought neither. And therefore, although it be good sometime to think on the kindness and the worthiness of God in special, and although it be a light and a part of contemplation: nevertheless in this work it shall be cast down and covered with a *cloud of forgetting*. And thou shalt step above it stalwartly, but listily, with a devout and a pleasing stirring of love, and try to pierce that darkness above thee. And smite upon that thick *cloud of unknowing* with a sharp dart of longing love; and go not thence for aught that befalleth."¹⁸

The Cloud is fond of quoting St. Denis: "The most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing."¹⁹

The method recommended in these extraordinary passages suggests a comparison with the "doubt-sensation," which is similarly used to halt and bypass conceptual thinking:

When working on Zen, one does not see the sky when he lifts his head, nor the earth when he lowers it. To him a mountain is not a mountain and water is not water. While walking or sitting he is not aware of doing so. Though among a hundred thousand people, he sees no one. Without and within his body and mind nothing exists but the burden of his doubt-sensation. This feeling can be de-

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 12-14.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 93. Many Zen stories make the same point — e.g., Mumonkan cases 19, 34.

scribed as "turning the whole world into a muddy vortex." [Po Shan]

"Turning the world into a muddy vortex" sounds less elegant than "wrapping oneself in a cloud of unknowing" (presumably, the former sounds better in Chinese), but the function appears to be the same. If so, the "doubt-block" must incorporate both the cloud of unknowing and the cloud of forgetting, since no distinction is made between them in Zen. The difference is due, I think, to the Christian dualism between God and his creatures; creatures must be put *below* us if we are to experience the God *above* us. Zen doctrine makes no such separation; rather, because we perceive all things through a fog of our delusions about them, we do not realize their Buddha-nature; and to experience that "empty" Buddha-nature is to realize that there are actually no sentient beings—there is only Buddha-nature. So the Zen goal is to experience the true nature of the world, including its creatures, not a God that created the world.

But there is a more significant difference between the *clouds* and the doubt-sensation. The doubt-sensation arises in trying to solve one's *koan*: "Let all of you become one mass of doubt and questioning." The experience of the clouds seems to involve no such questioning. Instead, *The Cloud* espouses *love*: "By love may he [God] be gotten and holden; but by thought neither . . . smite upon that thick *cloud of unknowing* with a sharp dart of longing love; and go not thence for aught that befalleth."

Here it is tempting to infer that this difference reflects a general difference between Christianity and Buddhism; but of course there are many devotional elements within Buddhism, especially Mahayana. Instead, let us notice what seems to be a significant difference between the paths of theistic *bhakti* and nondualistic *jnana*. Theism, which conceives of the Absolute as a personality, involves a more emotional path than those nondualisms that understand the Absolute to be impersonal and so emphasize understanding, although a "non-conceptual" understanding. The theistic mystic conceives of Christ, Amida, Krishna, and so forth as an infinite but self-aware personality with whom he or she wants to unite, through love; the nondualist wants to realize his Buddha-nature, Brahman, Mind, and so forth. The reason for this difference often appears to be rooted in a divergent understanding of human

faculties; *The Cloud* exemplifies much of theistic mysticism in giving man two "principle working powers":

All reasonable creatures, angel and man, have in them, each one by himself, one principle working power, which is called a knowing power, and another principle working power, the which is called a loving power. Of the which two powers, to the first . . . God who is the maker of them is evermore incomprehensible; but to the second . . . he is, in every man diversely, all comprehensible to the full. Insomuch, that one loving soul alone in itself, by virtue of love, may comprehend in itself him who is sufficient to the full ...²⁰

According to this, the knowing power can be only an obstacle, and God can be known only through love. One must reject the first faculty and work with the second. The Zen Buddhist has a different understanding of the intellect: granted, conceptualization is a problem, perhaps the fundamental one, but conceptualizing is not the only function of the intellect. There is another, more nondual functioning, which in Mahayana is usually termed *prajnaparamita*: "transcendental wisdom."

It is interesting to speculate further about the differences between a spiritual path that works with the emotions and one that works on the intellect. Love as ordinarily experienced is dualistic in always distinguishing the lover from the beloved; the emotions require a "personalized Other" on which to focus. The intellect, in contrast, requires an "empty," qualityless impersonality because *samadhi* involves "letting go" of all mental phenomena, emotions as well as concepts. Can we then understand the difference in *goals* as due to the difference in *paths*, rather than the usual vice versa?

But what the Zen Buddhist and *The Cloud* do have in common — where they meet again — is the longing and the intensity of practice: the desperate need of the Zen student to solve his *koan* is matched by the intense desire of the *Cloud* practitioner to experience "the naked being of God." "All thy life now must always stand in desire if thou shalt advance in degree of perfection."²¹ In both cases, it is this longing that generates the mental energy necessary to cut through the deluding web of thoughts and feelings. Significantly, the actual *questioning* aspect of

²⁰ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pp. 9-10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the doubt-block is not emphasized by all Zen masters, and this is true for Koun Yamada. What is stressed by all is the intensity with which one must try to unite with Mu. "When working on Zen, it is important not to lose the right thought. This is the thought of *tsen*, meaning 'to bore into.' If one loses the thought of *tsen*, he has no alternative but to go astray."²²

With "mu" too there is a significant parallel in *The Cloud*:

And if thou desirest to have this intent lapped and folden in one word, so that thou mayest have better hold thereupon, take thee but a little word of one syllable, for so it is better than two; for the shorter the word, the better it accordeth with the word of the spirit. And such a word is this word GOD and this word LOVE. Choose whichever thou wilt, or another: whatever word thou likest best of one syllable. And fasten this word to thine heart, so that it may never go thence for anything that befalleth.

This word shall be thy shield and thy spear, whether thou ridest in peace or in war. With this word, thou shalt smite down all manner of thought under the *cloud of forgetting*, Insomuch, that if any thought press upon thee to ask thee what thou wouldst have, answer with no more words but this one word.²³

"Mu" is used in exactly the same way: to "chop off" all other thoughts as they arise. *The Cloud* abounds in admonitions against entertaining thoughts:

And therefore the sharp stirring of thine understanding, that will always press upon thee when thou settest thee to this blind work, must always be borne down; and unless thou bear him down, he will bear thee down.

Therefore say: "Go thou down again"; and tread him [any thought] fast down with a stirring of love, although he seem to thee right holy, and seem to thee as if he would help thee to seek him [God].

²² Chang, p. 98. The Japanese term *zan-zen* means "to bore into the work of zen."

²³ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 16. Tennyson claimed to have been able to induce mystical experiences by reciting his name: Tennyson, Tennyson, Tennyson, ...! More significant parallels are found in the Vedic "Om" chant and the "Prayer of the Heart" used in the Eastern Orthodox church.

For peradventure he will bring to thy mind divers fair and wonderful points of his kindness, and say that he (God) is full sweet and full loving, full gracious and full merciful ... So that at the last, ere ever thou knowest, thou shalt be scattered thou knowest not where.²⁴

Compare the following, from Yasutani's "Commentary on Mu":

You must melt down your delusions with the red-hot iron ball of Mu stuck in your throat. The opinions you hold and your worldly knowledge are your delusions. Included also are philosophical and moral concepts, no matter how lofty, as well as religious beliefs and dogmas, not to mention innocent, commonplace thoughts. In short, all conceivable ideas are embraced within the term "delusions" and as such are a hindrance to the realization of your Essential-nature. So dissolve them with the fireball of Mu!²⁵

"Delusions" here encompasses all mental phenomena, emotional as well as intellectual, including visions and hallucinations. As the mind ripens through meditation practice, one may experience *makyo* (literally, "devil world"), which is a general term for various types of illusions and other psychic phenomena, whether blissful, frightful, or indifferent. In Zen, it is emphasized that such temporary experiences are neither good nor bad in themselves and are not significant unless one clings to them, in which case they become an obstacle.²⁶ In contrast, saints in all religions have often valued such experiences highly; but *The Cloud* is aware of the danger in this: "Such a blind stirring of love unto God for himself, and such a secret setting upon this *cloud of unknowing*; ... thou wert better to have it and to feel it in thine affection ghostly, than to have the eye of thy soul opened in contemplation of beholding

²⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pp. 20, 15. Eckhart: "The moment you get ideas, God fades out and the Godhead too. It is when the idea is gone that God gets in ... If you are to know God divinely, your own knowledge must become as pure ignorance, in which you forget yourself and every other creature." Ruysbroeck: "If we desire to taste God in ourselves, we must pass beyond reason ... We must remain despoiled and free of all images."

²⁵ Kapleau, pp. 79-80. Po Shan agrees: "When working on Zen, the most harmful thing is to rationalize, conceptualize, or intellectualize the Tao with one's mind. If one does so, he will never reach Tao."

²⁶ See Kapleau, pp. 38-41.

of all the angels and saints in heaven, or in hearing of all the mirth and melody that is among them in bliss."²⁷

In wrapping oneself in the cloud, one should abandon all desire to understand what is happening. One should not try to control the process but rather one should try to lose oneself in it:

Let that thing do with thee and lead thee wheresoever it willeth. Let it be the worker, and thou but the sufferer; do but look upon it and let it alone. Meddle thee not therewith as though thou wouldst help it, for dread lest thou spill all. Be thou but the tree, and let it be the carpenter ... Be blind in this time and shear away desire of knowing, for it will more hinder thee than help thee.²⁸

The Cloud urges complete devotion to this practice:

But although the shortness of prayer be greatly commended here, nevertheless the oftness of prayer is not therefore restrained ... if thou ask me what discretion thou shalt have in this work, then I shall answer thee and say, "Right none!" For in all thine other doings thou shalt have discretion, that they be neither too much nor too little. But in this work thou shalt hold no measure: for I would that thou shouldst never cease from this work the whiles thou livest.²⁹

It is the same single-minded determination that Zen masters encourage: "You will never succeed if you do zazen only when you have the whim to, and give up easily. You must carry on steadfastly for one, two, three, or even five years without remission, constantly vigilant."³⁰

The purpose of the *koan* process is to eliminate the sense of self in order to realize one's true nature. By concentrating wholeheartedly to become one with Mu, and thus "beating down" all other thoughts, those habitual thought patterns that sustain the sense of self are gradually attenuated. *The Cloud* concurs: its forty-third chapter is entitled, "That all knowing and feeling of a man's own being must needs be lost, if the perfection of this work shall verily be felt in any soul in this life." Buddhism views the problem as delusion, but the Christian emphasis on human *sinfulness* gives a different slant: "Thus shalt thou do with thy-

²⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pp. 20-21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 57-58.

self: thou shalt loathe and be weary with all that thing that worketh in thy mind and in thy will, unless it be only God. For otherwise surely, whatsoever it be, it is betwixt thee and thy God. And no wonder if thou loathe and hate to think on thyself, when thou shalt always feel sin a foul stinking lump, thou knowest never what, betwixt thee and thy God: the which lump is none other thing than thyself."³¹ In accordance with their different understanding of human faculties (discussed above), Christianity generally understands the source of the problem to be found in man's will; Buddhism finds the source in man's understanding. But in practice the problem is essentially the same:

And therefore break down all knowing and feeling of all manner of creatures, but most busily of thyself. For on the knowing and the feeling of thyself hangeth the knowing and feeling of all other creatures; for in regard of it, all other creatures be lightly forgotten ... thou shalt find, when thou hast forgotten all other creatures and all their works-yea! and also all thine own works-that there shall remain yet after, betwixt thee and thy God, a naked knowing and a feeling of thine own being: the which knowing and feeling must always be destroyed, ere the time be that thou mayest feel verily the perfection of this work.³²

How may this "feeling of thine own being" be eliminated? The habitual thought patterns that sustain the sense of self are weakened by meditation practice, but the ego persists, although feeling increasingly uncomfortable and threatened. The problem is that the ego wants to be there to "become enlightened" or to observe and enjoy God; this is why in Zen the ego must be tricked or startled into "letting go" and being wiped out of existence. The ego cannot destroy itself, however much it may want to, any more than a man can lift himself into the air by pulling on his shoestrings. Something else is necessary, which *The Cloud* calls grace:

But now thou askest me how thou mayest destroy this naked knowing and feeling of thine own being. For peradventure thou thinkest that if it were destroyed, all other hindrances were destroyed: and

³⁰ Yasutani's "Commentary on Mu" in Kapleau, p. 80.

³¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 60.

³² *Ibid.*

if thou thinkest thus, thou thinkest right truly. But to this I answer thee and say, that without a full special grace full freely given by God, and also a full according ableness on thy part to receive this grace, this naked knowing and feeling of thy being may in nowise be destroyed.³³

The concept of "grace" is not common in Buddhism. Excepting the "transfer of merit" that bodhisattvas are able to do, the closest equivalent in Mahayana is the conception of the Dharmakaya as radiating compassion and assistance to all beings. But the Dharmakaya is impersonal and does not discriminate in its radiance; all beings share in it according to their receptivity, whereas the concept of grace seems dependent upon that of a God who grants it.³⁴ Yet, again, that is perhaps more significant than the doctrinal difference is the phenomenological similarity: both experiences-of God and Buddha-nature-are not subject to the will. Nor do they occur by passively sitting back and waiting for "it" to happen. *The Cloud* goes on to discuss what is necessary in order to develop "a full according ableness on thy part to receive this grace":

And this ableness is not else but a strong and a deep ghostly sorrow. But in this sorrow thou needest to have discretion, in this manner: thou shalt beware, in the time of this sorrow, that thou strain neither thy body nor thy spirit too rudely, but sit full still, as it were in a sleeping device, all forsobbed and forsunken in sorrow; and well were it to him that might win to this sorrow. All men have matter for sorrow; but most specially he feeleth matter of sorrow that knoweth and feeleth that he is ... And who has never felt this sorrow, let him make sorrow; for he hath never yet felt perfect sorrow. This sorrow, when it is had, cleanseth the soul, riot only of sin, but also of pain that it hath deserved for sin; and also it maketh a soul able to receive that joy, the which reaveth from a man all knowing and feeling of his being.³⁵

Such "sorrow" is little discussed in Zen literature, but that does not mean it is not experienced in Zen practice; certainly despair and tears

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ However, according to Eckhart (and, later, Swedenborg) God's grace (influx) must flow into us once the obstacle of self-love is removed.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

are not rare during *sesshin* (intensive meditation retreats). Notice that the passage enjoins excesses of expression that might strain body or mind; one should sit still and simply endure the sorrow of realizing that one's ultimate problem is "the knowing and feeling of his own being." It is the suffering itself that somehow purifies and enables one to receive grace, when it occurs.

This invites comparison with more limited cases, in which the similarity to Buddhism is clearer. Accepting that, for example, I have character traits that I myself? The answer is that I usually can't. Attempts to perfect oneself — "I will stop ... " — are usually self-defeating, for in consciousness too each action tends to generate an equal and opposite reaction. Another way to explain this is that deep character traits are an integral part of the ego which the ego is unable to exclude without some equally objectionable compensation occurring; as may be said of thoughts in general, to try to eliminate them is to give them power over you.³⁶ But people do sometimes change; how then does that happen?

The answer is revealing: It is awareness itself, and the mental anguish that we feel along with it (its emotional counterpart?), that eventually changes us in most such cases. The change is due to awareness, not will; the effort necessary is directed toward gaining understanding, not forcefully overcoming some tendency. That is why we should appreciate our depressions as much as our joys; such sorrows are often growing pains, due to noticing certain patterns of behavior and seeing through the corresponding rationalizations. The awareness of the fault is what changes us, but the problem must be deeply felt, in which case it is accompanied by pain. It is as if the pain "burns up" the habit, finally freeing us from it. *The Cloud* describes this process on the larger scale, where the problem is no longer what I *do* but that I *am*—yet that process is unmistakably Buddhist, too, given the *anatta* "no self" doctrine (in Zen, the *mushin* "no mind" doctrine) and the emphasis on awareness. However, there is a difference (to which we shall return later), for the goal in Zen is not so much to perfect ourselves as to realize that perfection which has always been and which we have always been; once there is that awareness, change occurs more naturally and effortlessly.

One prepares for "the naked being of God himself" by following the

³⁶ This is Jung's concept of "the shadow," which is an autonomous splinter personality composed of everything that the ego tries to exclude.

path we have thus far outlined; but the experience itself comes at the disposition of God, in various degrees and ways according to one's "ableness in soul."

Some think this matter so hard and so fearful that they say that it may not be come to without much strong travail coming before, nor conceived but seldom, and that but in the time of ravishing. And to these men will I answer as feebly as I can, and say: that it is all at the ordinance and the disposition of God, according to their ableness in soul that this grace in contemplation and of ghostly working is given to.

For some there be that without much and long ghostly exercise may not come thereto; and yet it shall be but full seldom and in special calling of our Lord that they shall feel the perfection of this work; the which calling is called ravishing. And some there be that be so subtle in grace and in spirit, and so homely with God in this grace of contemplation, that they may have it when they will in the common state of man's soul: as in sitting, going, standing, or kneeling. And yet in this time they have full deliberation of all their wits bodily and ghostly, and may use them if they desire: not without some difficulty, but without great difficulty.³⁷

The term "ravishing" well expresses the suddenness and even violence of the experience: "For if it be truly conceived, it is but a sudden stirring, and as it were unadvised, speedily springing unto God as a sparkle from the coal."³⁸

This too accords with the Zen experience: enlightenments, when they occur, vary greatly in degree, from tip-of-the-tongue *kensho* to deep *daigo tettei*. The depth of one's experience usually accords with the length and intensity of one's practice, but not always. Some of the greatest Zen figures, such as the Sixth Patriarch, seem to have come to enlightenment almost without effort.³⁹ "Ravishing" also characterizes the Zen experience, which, in contrast to the arduous practice, is always sudden: "'Bursting into enlightenment' requires but an instant. It is as though an explosion has occurred."⁴⁰

³⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 94.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁹ Buddhism can explain this as due to practice in previous lifetimes.

⁴⁰ Yasutani's "Commentary on Mu" in Kapleau, p. 80.



Our comparison of two spiritual methods concludes by bringing us back to the comparison of their spiritual goals. We cannot avoid the obvious question: If these two spiritual techniques are indeed very similar, musn't their results also be similar? Are then "God" and "Buddha-nature" only different ways of describing the same nondual experience?

I shall not presume to answer this question, but we finish with two reflections that pertain to any answer. Both refer to aspects of the Zen enlightenment experience that seem to contrast with the theistic experience of God.

First, we should remember that the "true nature" which is realized in Zen is *nondual* in at least two ways: there is no duality between subject and object, nor between phenomena and Buddha-nature. My Buddha-nature is also the true nature of this world, when it is experienced as it really is. Dogen expressed this beautifully: "I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars."⁴¹

The Cloud accepts our oneness with God in the mystical experience, but this is understood as grace overcoming man's basically sinful nature:

Beneath thy God thou art: for although it may be said in a manner that in this time God and thou be not two but one in spirit—insomuch that thou or another that feeleth the perfection of this work may, by reason of that oneness, truly be called a god, as scripture witnesseth—nevertheless thou art beneath him. For he is God by nature without beginning; and thou sometimes were nought in substance; and afterwards, when thou wert by his might and his love made aught, thou willfully with sin madest thyself worse than nought. And only by his mercy without thy dessert art thou made a god in grace, one with him in spirit without separation, both here and in the bliss of heaven without any end. So that, although thou be all one with him in grace, yet thou art full far beneath him in nature.⁴²

⁴¹ As quoted in Kapleau, p. 205.

⁴² *The Cloud of Unknowing*, pp. 89-90.

This contrasts “the over-abundant love and worthiness of God in himself” with “the filth, the wretchedness, and the frailty of man, into the which he is fallen by sin, and the which he must always feel in some degree the whiles he liveth in this life, be he never so holy.”⁴³ Zen, in contrast, teaches that our true nature/Buddha-nature has always been pure. The “Great Cessation,” a term for deep enlightenment, is a “designation for the state of mind flowing from a deep realization that, since inherently we suffer no lack, there is nothing to seek outside ourselves.”⁴⁴

But, again, this presupposition of man’s basically sinful nature—which would be called a delusion in Zen – does not necessarily refer to a difference in the nondual experiences, for it may rather describe a difference in the way that experience is understood. Ironically, in recent Christian-Buddhist dialogue, Zen proponents have often been the ones emphasizing fundamental ignorance and karmic obstructions (requiring strenuous practice) more than Christians, who have been more trustful of God’s grace and the goodness of creation.⁴⁵ Perhaps both aspects are essential and we should speak rather of a difference of emphasis; for until I myself *realize clearly* that there is no lack, the sense of a lack is important in order to motivate the practice necessary to realize that there is no lack.

The second reflection refers to another aspect of the Zen experience: that it reveals the “emptiness” (Japanese, *ku*) of phenomena—not only of the subject, but of all experience, of everything experienceable. Koun Yamada, in a lecture entitled “Zen and Christianity,” singled this out as the most important aspect of Zen experience: “The most important matter in Zen practice is to come to a clear and unmistakable *experience* of the fact that all things of the phenomenal world, myself included, are totally void. . . . This is *satori*.”⁴⁶ Nagarjuna, the second-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, used the original Sanskrit term *sunyata* to characterize the true nature of reality — or, more precisely, to deny that anything is real, that anything has any essence or self-existence. Thus, in using terms like “Buddha-nature,” we must be careful not to grab that snake by the wrong end, for referring to Buddha-nature is actually a way

⁴³ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁴ Kapleau, 208 n. 1.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to Professor David Chappell of the University of Hawaii for this information and for other comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

⁴⁶ Koun Yamada, “Zen and Christianity” (Berkeley, August 1987; typescript).

of denying that anything has any "own-nature," any permanent nature at all-including God. One might argue that this is equivalent to asserting that no created thing has a self-subsistent nature apart from God, but Nagarjuna's radical critique of self-subsistence leaves nothing to play that role. The only other alternative, it seems, is to suggest that somehow emptiness is God.

In the same lecture, Koun Yamada discusses the comments of several of his Christian Zen students on this matter. He asked one Catholic sister (who is now teaching Zen in Germany): "What is the relation between Emptiness and God?" Without the least sign of trepidation she answered, "Emptiness is God. God cannot be thought of as other than emptiness." Another Catholic priest (now teaching Zen in India) presented him with a position paper on "Zen and Christianity," which emphasized that all religion comes out of the experience of Emptiness, and found the Christian equivalent for this in "Mystery": "The word in Christian theology which points to this is 'Mystery.' God, world, man, everything 'comes out of' Mystery, abides 'in' Mystery, is Mystery."⁴⁷ Koun Yamada was surprised by such a position. He concludes: "My new discovery of Christianity is a source of great joy to me."

This may be a fruitful direction for future Christian-Buddhist dialogue,⁴⁸ but, in the interests of sharpening that encounter, let me end with a question about the practical – that is to say, practice-oriented – differences between emptiness and God.

The "Great Death" necessary in Zen practice is to "let go" of all attachments and ego-identifications, to which we cling for security, in order to realize the only possible security: the security of no-security in an "empty" world of radical impermanence. One of the most important aspects of this emptiness, as it pertains to our existence, is *groundlessness*: "Buddha-nature," properly understood, does not provide us with a ground but rather denies that there is any such ground. However, I wonder whether the *psychological* function of God for virtually all theists is just the opposite: God as the Great Security. This is usually metaphorized into a stern yet loving cosmic parent, but even an Ultimate Reality toward which one is striving can serve the same reassur-

⁴⁷ A. M. A. Samy, "Zen and Christianity" (typescript).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

ing role — it gives us an emotional handle” to hold.⁴⁹ Does faith in such a Reality make it easier to let go of everything else? Or, on the contrary, does such a faith make it much more difficult to let go of *everything*? If God is related to as the Great Security Blanket, isn't that a great attachment, which must be overcome?

⁴⁹ Of course, insofar as Zen students relate to “Buddha-nature” in the same way, the same criticism is applicable. To that extent, my comment does not so much distinguish between Zen and Christianity as point to a common difficulty in both paths. The problem with conceptualizing one's goal is well known; the problem of thus emotionalizing” one's goal is less so. As terms like “the Great Death” imply, the Zen path involves a full encounter with the existential “limits” of death, isolation (“I am the only one in the whole universe”), meaninglessness, etc. The ego is that which fears and denies them; to face them leads to ego-death, which is what opens us up to the possibility of other, more nondual experience.

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