

ZEN

by Thomas W. Dow

OHAN IS THE Chinese word for meditation; in Japanese, it is zen. Contrary to all appearances, college students do meditate. Confucius once said, "At fifteen my mind was directed to study, and at thirty I knew where to stand." A psychologist would agree that as children we are too ego-centered and full of vitality to be aware of life's seriousness. But sooner or later we are forced to face life and attempt to solve its riddles. This awakening usually comes at some time during adolescence, when the arousal of sexual love causes a split in the ego, making it turn outside itself. We start to seek the meaning of things. We want to know what life is, what we ourselves are, what it means to exist. In this search students beat out ever newer and more interesting pathways.

The rationalistic faith in the physical sciences which had begun during the Enlightenment was still strong at the beginning of our century. In the preceding century Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Marx had made their inroads for the cause of anti-intellectualism, but the trend was not yet dominant. It remained for the physical scientists themselves to shatter their own faith. In exploring the microcosm, they came upon Heisenberg's "Principle of Uncertainty." In the world of the atom there was no inexorable law of cause and effect. They were troubled by the mysterious Planck's constant. In studying the real world, they distorted its workings by the very process of their observation. They could prove that at the same time light was both wave and particle. Einstein's theory of relativity

ty destroyed the possibility of any fixed points. His further postulation of a universe based on non-Euclidean geometry destroyed even the certitudes of traditional mathematics.

Thus many students gave up on the physical sciences and turned toward the social sciences in the thirties. Freud completely destroyed the basis for the rationality of man. Communism and fanatically nationalistic socialism won followers by the legion. Yet again the students were disillusioned by the genuine horrors of World War II and by the huge gap between the real and the ideal communism.

From France, the reaction of existentialism quickly spread throughout Europe. Moral freedom was seen to be the main concern of the individual man; and the importance of the individual in contrast to the group was emphasized. Experience rather than analysis was subscribed to—thus many existentialists were novelists and playwrights. The failure of existentialism sprang from its attitude of pessimism and despair. The existentialist has an overdose of existential anxiety, and he sees no purpose in life. All he finally achieves is a burden of sadness.

Thus there have been recent intellectual reactions against existentialism. The most important movement in this country has been the Beat Generation. Lacking unity and a coherent statement of its doctrines, "beat" characterizes a certain attitude of a limited artistic and literary circle. However, the importance of the movement may be proved to lie in its preoccupation with an exotic philosophy called Zen Buddhism. Previously, Eastern thought had not been totally neglected. Schopenhauer and Goethe had enjoyed the fruits of Buddhism many years ago.

The Buddha was Siddhartha Gautama of the Sahyas, the "Enlightened One." The trend of thought he developed has been called Christianity minus a Supreme Being. Just as there have been Christian existentialists, there are existential elements in Buddhism. The Buddha didn't claim to be God. He didn't involve himself in speculations about what comes after death, or what the nature of infinity is.

Buddhism was a reaction against Hinduism. The Buddha was the prince of a rich Indian state about five hundred years before Christ. Dissatisfied with the Hindu answers to man's plight, he gave up wife and wealth to seek

an answer. Wandering about India, after many adventures, he sat down under a bodhi tree until he became enlightened. Then he spent the rest of his life attempting to ease others along the difficult path he had trod. In many ways, his wisdom and his compassion resemble that of Christ.

THE BUDDHA'S APPROACH to life is embodied in his Four Holy Truths. The first of these is that life is suffering. The second is that the cause of this suffering is desire. The third is that the cure for suffering lies in overcoming desire. The fourth is the way in which this cure can be accomplished, the Eightfold Path. The latter consists of right knowledge, right aspiration, right speech, right behavior, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right absorption. Thus we have diagnosis and treatment.

After the death of the Buddha at an advanced age, his movement gradually changed and split into two main bodies, Theravada and Mahayana. Mahayana spread from India into China, where it was influenced by Taoism,

and thence to Japan. During the course of these centuries, Zen became a distinct school of Mahayana. Much of the character of Zen is due to the fact that it became institutionalized in the form of a school of monks or masters, and students or apprentices. The koan, which is essentially a paradox, was the method used in teaching. The theory was that by transcending logic, the student would be elevated to a higher plane on which he could more easily reach enlightenment. The student had to master the koans individually by meditation. The master provided only problems and whippings. Enlightenment was to be arrived at through direct intuition. However, this enlightenment transcends all means of expression; therefore it is foolish to attempt to describe it.

Zen is actually a form of Eastern mysticism. Once the practitioner of Zen has attained enlightenment, he sees life in a new perspective. He transcends time and eternity, truth and falsity, good and evil. In short, he sees all life as one.

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