

ZEN AND DEATH: JUNG'S FINAL EXPERIENCE

Michael Gellert

This lecture was delivered in the Public Programs of the C. G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles in 1996; at the Central Coast Jung Society, San Luis Obispo, California in 1998; the Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Pepperdine University, Los Angeles in 1999; and in the Analyst Training Program of the C. G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles in 2003. In the latter it was part of a series on mortificatio, the alchemical process of psychological or inner death inherent in such diminishing experiences as depression, illness, failure, aging, and dying.

“Death,” Jung wrote in 1945 not long after his heart attack, “is the hardest thing from the outside and as long as we are outside of it. But once inside you taste of such completeness and peace and fulfillment that you don’t want to return.” Jung was speaking here of his out-of-body, near-death experience, whose gripping effect indeed made it difficult for him to return to the world of everyday life even though he resiliently recovered from his illness. He remarked how “life has fortunately become provisional. It has become a transitory prejudice, a working hypothesis for the time being, but not existence itself.”

Well, Jung lived seventeen more years after this experience, making the most out of this life which he now saw so provisionally and transitorily. He produced some of his most important works, and had several insights further deepening his understanding of the psyche. When death did finally come to claim him, he was prepared. He knew his health was failing, as he had had two strokes shortly before, and he had also had two or three dreams announcing that the end was near. Indeed, he was looking forward to his death in a curious, almost eager way. The family and friends who were present during his final days all observed how peaceful and clear-headed he was. “Quick!” he said to his son when his housekeeper momentarily left the room the evening before he died. “Help me out of bed before she comes back or she’ll stop me. I want to look at the sunset.” Wishing to celebrate his passing as a special occasion, his last words to his housekeeper were, “Let’s have a really good wine tonight.”

The experience of dying as a conscious, creative act has become a focus of interest in recent times as people are more and more recognizing it as the final, culminating act of life itself, the crowning event for which one’s whole life has in a certain way been a preparation. How different this is from the attitude expressed by Woody Allen: “I have no problem with dying,” he said, “as long as I’m not there when it happens.”

Dying consciously brings up the related idea of living life with a consciousness of death. Becoming aware of our mortality in more than just the detached manner with which we usually tend to think about it can help us appreciate the here-and-now, the fullness of the moment—or indeed, whether this moment really is as full as it could be. This kind of contemplation sharpens us to the quality of our lives and the choices we make. As Dr. Johnson said, the prospect of death wonderfully concentrates the mind. For this reason do Thai Buddhist monks meditate in graveyards where the recently deceased are being cremated. Jung’s own experiences nearly dying and while dying—how *his* mind was concentrated—brought him to some interesting discoveries, and evidently, a revision of his views on Eastern religion and Zen in particular. This then brings us to our present topic, Jung’s Zen experience in his final days. To begin, it is

important to first have some understanding of what makes a Zen experience distinct from other kinds of religious experience.

* * * *

In the mystical traditions of all the major world religions, there have evolved disciplines that attempt to cultivate a state of mind in which the *mysterium tremendum*, or awe-inspiring mystery of the divine, can manifest and flourish. In Western religions, the predominant discipline has been prayer, though in alchemy, an underground current of Western religion, the chief method involved a meditation upon the transmutation of material substances (for example, turning lead into gold). Jung showed that this external focus was a psychic projection of inner transformation. In Eastern religion, the predominant discipline has been meditation directly focused on transforming the psyche itself. Though there are many schools and methods, their aims tend to be similar: to transcend the limitations of ego-consciousness and allow a deeper consciousness—a consciousness of the Absolute (regardless of which name it is known by)—to emerge.

In Zen, it is less important what the discipline is than what the *quality* of discipline *invested* is. This fluid attitude allows Zen practitioners to encounter the Absolute through a variety of disciplines—calligraphy, tea ceremony, pottery making, bamboo flute music, flower arrangement, *haiku* poetry, archery, and swordfighting—as easily as through *zazen* or sitting meditation, the most common form of Zen discipline. Though I should say that these disciplines are anything but easy. They usually take many years if not a lifetime to master. For what is involved is precisely the investment of a highly refined, focused quality of discipline, of concentration or what Zen Buddhists call “one-pointedness of mind.” If the one-pointedness of mind is strong enough, pure enough, and sustained for long enough, the Zen practitioner becomes so absorbed in the activity of his or her chosen discipline that the usual boundaries of the ego become extended. If they become extended enough, there comes a moment when the practitioner merges not only with the activity, but with the true self as it manifests through the activity.

This principle expresses the central idea of Zen, the Doctrine of No Mind. No Mind is also called “Mind,” “Buddha-mind,” “Zen Mind,” “Big Mind,” the “Self” or “true self,” the “Void,” the “Unconscious,” and “It.” The “It” here is not the “It” of Nietzsche or the “id” of Freud (*id* in Latin means “it”), but the transpersonal Self. As for the Zen usage of the term “Unconscious,” it is of special interest.

That Zen is first and foremost a way of understanding the unconscious is overlooked by many people. As the renowned Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki writes, “the concept of the unconscious is the foundation of Zen Buddhism.” One may find it discussed at length in the teachings of early Chinese Zen masters such as Hui-neng and Shen-hui, both of whom lived in the 7th century. However, the Zen conception of the unconscious clearly differs from that of most Western psychology, and is remarkably close in key regards to Jung’s conception. As Suzuki comments, “in Zen Buddhism the unconscious is not a psychological term either in a narrower or in a broader sense. . . . [It is] fundamentally different from the psychologists’ Unconscious. It has a metaphysical connotation. When Hui-neng speaks of the Unconscious in Consciousness, he steps beyond psychology.” The Unconscious in Zen is, simply put, the mind of the cosmos. Suzuki on occasion calls it the “Cosmic Unconscious.”

Eugen Herrigel offers an illustration of the Zen Unconscious in action in *Zen in the Art of Archery*, his book about his years of arduous training in this martial art. He recounts an incident

in which his teacher told him how he hits the target without using his eyes. When Herrigel scoffed at this, the master, to prove his point, allowed Herrigel to set up the target in a practice hall that was brightly lit but in which the target area was pitch-black, thus making it impossible for one's vision to adjust to the darkness and delineate the target. Herrigel writes: "[The master's] first arrow shot out of dazzling brightness into deep night. I knew from the sound that it had hit the target. The second arrow was a hit, too. When I switched on the light in the target-stand, I discovered to my amazement that the first arrow was lodged full in the middle of the black [bull's-eye], while the second arrow had splintered the butt of the first and plowed through the shaft before embedding itself beside it." Explaining his precision, the master said, "It is not 'I' who must be given credit for this shot. 'It' shot and 'It' made the hit." "It" here is spelled, again, with a capital "I." Of course, the true goal of any martial art practiced in the Zen spirit is not to achieve spectacular feats but to attune oneself to the Unconscious, to "It"; winning against one's opponent or hitting the target is only a by-product of this inner attunement.

In Herrigel's account, we see certain distinct features typical to the Zen experience: a merging of the inner with the outer, a merging of the ego with the Unconscious or the Self, and, very significantly, the occurrence of all this while one is fully awake and alert as opposed to being in a visionary, dream, or trance state. There is one other crucial feature that makes Zen distinct from many other kinds of religious experience. Together with oneness there occurs the experience of emptiness, what in Buddhism is called the Void. When the universe is perceived as a single, infinite expanse with nothing separate in it or beside it to quantify or contrast it to, it has the sensation of being nothing at all and is hence experienced as a Void. If you think of the universe as a single sheet of steel, for example, with nothing else in it, well, soon it has the quality of being like air, empty. Oneness makes possible emptiness, and vice versa. But one cannot arrive at this truth merely intellectually. In Zen it must be experienced on a crisp, perceptual, visceral level; it must be a living experience. Listen to my former Zen teacher Yamada-roshi describe his own enlightenment experience, his encounter with the Void. This is from a letter he wrote in 1953 before he became a roshi, that is, a Zen master. It is addressed to the famous Zen master Nakagawa-roshi with whom he briefly visited:

The day after I called on you I was riding home on the train with my wife. I was reading a book on Zen by Son-o, who, you may recall, was a Soto Zen master at the end of the 17th century. As the train was nearing Ofuna station I ran across this line: "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."

I had read this before, but this time it impressed itself upon me so vividly that I was startled. I said to myself: "After seven or eight years of zazen I have finally perceived the essence of this statement," and couldn't suppress the tears that began to well up. Somewhat ashamed to find myself crying among the crowd, I averted my face and dabbed at my eyes with my handkerchief.

. . . . [It] was after 11:30 before I went to bed. At midnight I abruptly awakened. At first my mind was foggy, then suddenly that quotation flashed into my consciousness:

“I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains, rivers, and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.” And I repeated it. Then all at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared.

Instantaneously, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up in me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed loudly and wildly: “Ha ha ha, ha ha ha! There’s no reasoning here, no reasoning at all! Ha ha ha!” The empty sky split in two, then opened its enormous mouth and began to laugh uproariously: “Ha ha ha!”

. . . . Suddenly I sat up and struck the bed with all my might and beat the floor with my feet, as if trying to smash it, all the while laughing riotously. My wife and youngest son, sleeping near to me, were now awake and frightened. Covering my mouth with her hand, my wife exclaimed: “What’s the matter with you? What’s the matter with you?” But I wasn’t aware of this until told about it afterwards. My son told me later he thought that I had gone mad, that my laughter had sounded inhuman. When I calmed down I apologized to the rest of the family, who had come downstairs frightened by the commotion.

That morning I went to see Yasutani-roshi and tried to describe to him my experience of the sudden disintegration of heaven and earth. . . . Patting me on the back he said: “Well, well, it is rare indeed to experience to such a wonderful degree. It is termed ‘Attainment of the emptiness of Mind.’ You are to be congratulated!”

As one can gather from Yamada-roshi’s account, the experience of the Void—or as he calls it, empty oneness—is not the nihilistic emptiness of existentialists such as Sartre. Although it is framed in the Doctrine of No Mind as a negation—hence the “No” element of No Mind—it is a pregnant emptiness. In the Kabbalah, the experience of God in this way is described as the absolute or mystical “Nothing.” St. John of the Cross refers to it as *todo-y-nada*, infinite totality and emptiness. Meister Eckhart, too, qualifies the fullness of God as emptiness. And last but not least, Jung intuited the essential nature of the Self as empty even before his final death experience: “The whole course of individuation is dialectical, and the so-called ‘end’ is the confrontation of the ego with the ‘emptiness’ of the center. Here the limit of possible experience is reached: the ego is dissolved as the reference-point of cognition.” Jung defines emptiness as “something unknowable which is endowed with the highest intensity,” “not as absence or vacancy.” However, with his death experience, he probably would have no longer insisted that it was unknowable.

In order to convey a more crisp sense of what this emptiness is, I would like for the next few minutes to move off the discursive, conceptual level of language. In order to convey a more crisp sense of what this emptiness is, I’m going to play a piece of shakuhachi flute music, a Zen art developed by the Fuke school of Zen Buddhism in the practice of *suizen*, or blowing

meditation. The shakuhachi flute is made from bamboo and the art of playing it comes from merging the mind and body with the wood. The piece you will hear is called “Shingetsu,” or “The Moonlit Soul,” by the Zen master Watazumi Doso. Listen to its emptiness.

[Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBbho2NMPVQ>]

* * * *

In addition to the element of empty oneness, there are a variety of features one can attribute to the Zen experience, or at least to the process that leads up to it. Not everybody experiences all of them and there is certainly no qualification check list or properly correct form. The features I will focus on here for our purposes are those connected with *mortificatio*, or inner, spiritual death.

The first feature I'd like to highlight brings us to Yamada-roshi's inhuman laughter. It is, for lack of a better term, Zen madness. This is not clinical or pathological madness, i.e., insanity, but the madness that comes from confronting the paradox of the human condition, namely, that we are mortally limited and human in form, and yet empty and cosmic in essence, and all at the same time. The experience of empty oneness can be a maddening, *mortificatio* experience. To realize the profound and infinite hollowness of the cosmos on an experiential level takes the ground out from under one's feet. This aspect of the *mysterium tremendum* sends one into a sort of existential free-falling, and one doesn't know where and if there is a safety net. As Nietzsche said, “When you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.” And yet, the very thing that makes this experience so maddening or unnerving is what also makes it humorous, for to discover that our basic conception of reality is an illusion has a kind of cosmic joke about it. This is what accounts for the humor of Zen with its pithy and paradoxical koans or riddles.

Another typical feature is the *mortificatio* of depression. One may not immediately associate Zen enlightenment with depression, but one can be sure that many Zen practitioners have had their share of darkness as part of their journey of awakening. Certainly, the Buddha could not have been too happy about the years he spent as an ascetic only to discover that ascetic practices did nothing to advance enlightenment other than reveal that such ego-driven practices do not work. Zen depression, like Zen madness, is existential rather than clinical or biochemical, revolving around a sense that life is meaningless and hopeless. It stems from an awareness of what in Buddhism is called *dukkha*, the suffering that is intrinsic to life. Indeed, the First Noble Truth of the Buddha is, “Life is suffering.”

One should thus not be too surprised that depression figures into Zen in this sort of way. Furthermore, the very process of the ego awakening to emptiness—what is referred to as enlightenment, *satori*, or *kensho*—involves an annihilation of that which the ego holds most dear: its belief in its self-importance. Contrary to what some believe, *satori* is *not* the dissolution or abolishment of the ego. We need an ego—and a well-developed one—in order to survive and thrive. But *satori* is the disillusionment or transcendence of the ego's *perspective* of itself as sovereign master of the world, and as other than the world. *Satori* is the realization that the ego, too, is empty. Depression can bring us to this realization precisely because it sinks us—gradually and increasingly—into emptiness. It helps eat up our narcissism and kill our sense of self-importance. The *mortificatio* of depression bottoms us out into the emptiness of the cosmos. One may say that coming to enlightenment through depression, as through any form of Zen *mortificatio*, is an experience of the Void gnashing its teeth.

The Zen approach to depression is to work with it the way one works with a koan. There are different methods of working with koans. In the Harada-Yasutani school of which Yamada-roshi was the abbot, one does not attack koans in the traditional way of persistently trying to penetrate their meaning. Rather, one carries one's koan lightly, to quote Aitken-roshi, a Zen master in this school. This means to carefully attend to it and let it brand itself into one's consciousness until it unveils itself in an illuminating, experiential way. Accordingly, one stays with the "Is" of the depression in a resigned, nonresistant, but curious way. The depression may be deadening but is to be coupled with a one-pointedness of mind from focusing on it in this koan-like manner.

I should add here that this way of working with depression is, obviously, not incompatible with the Jungian way or any other school of psychology that genuinely embraces and goes *with* the *pathos* rather than against it. Only its emphasis on eventually seeing *through* the suffering into its empty Buddha-nature differs in accord with Buddhist phenomenology. But the notion of immersing oneself into the unconscious, penetrating the substrata of the depression, and coming through the other side as a somehow transformed being is similar to the process depicted in the Rosarium pictures of alchemy; it too is an inner alchemy. In my practice with depressed patients, I work their depression with them in such a focusing, concentrating way, going into it deeper and deeper and surrendering to its mystery. Regardless of whether they are interested in Zen or whether they will ever have a Zen experience, this meditative approach goes well with the analysis of their psychic material. If anything, it promotes tolerance of pain and acceptance of oneself as one is, depression and all. I believe this is extremely important in psychotherapy, for depression alone never kills anyone. It is lack or loss of such tolerance and acceptance that leads to suicide.

* * * *

Let's discuss one final and very typical *mortificatio* feature of the Zen experience. It is the *mortificatio* of doubt—profound, existential doubt. It is referred to as *taigi*, literally, the "Great Doubt." In the West, St. John of the Cross knew this as the "Dark Night of the Soul," and, as is the case in Zen as well, it is often merged with the *mortificatio* of depression. It is a condition of disillusionment, confusion, and thirst for enlightenment that was demonstrated *par excellence* by the Buddha himself in his journey of self-realization. The doubt revolves fundamentally around the question, "What is Buddha-mind?" The Zen patriarch Hakuin believed that the greater the doubt, the more intense the experience of enlightenment, and he knew how to push his disciples to the extremes of nagging doubt. It is a state of suspended judgment fostered by *zazen* and particularly by the koans which so bewilder and defeat the rational mind or ego. But amidst the suspended judgment there occurs one-pointedness of mind. These two together—suspended judgment and one-pointedness of mind—make possible the breakthrough of empty oneness.

The Zen practitioner is encouraged to surrender him- or herself to this tantalizing, gripped state of mind, the Great Doubt. He or she is told, "You must reach the point where you feel as though you had swallowed a red-hot iron ball that you cannot disgorge despite your every effort. Thus, the *mortificatio* of Zen has a fiery, *calcinatio* edge. This deadly, hot, razor-sharp edge that the ego *itself becomes* is what pierces the Void and releases the latter into consciousness. A key part of Zen training consists of *sesshin*—a week-long intensive immersion into *zazen*. The student wakes up at 4:30 in the morning and sits on the cushion till 9:00 at night, seven days nonstop except for meals, clean-up, and a half-hour afternoon rest. In the *sesshins* I undertook in

Japan, Yamada-roshi used to encourage us with admonitions to attain the Great Doubt, which he described as the “fire of concentration.” He said we must become like the Buddhist monks who protested against the South Vietnamese and other tyrannical regimes. Many of you might recall the photograph or film footage of the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Quang Duc sitting in the lotus posture at a busy intersection in Saigon, lit on fire in full public view and dying consciously in a blaze of meditation. Quiet, dignified, enduring his pain fully awake. No trance state here. Such acutely focused concentration is thus extremely peaceful but extremely intense at the same time. It is an act of watchful surrender. Death by fire. In the Great Doubt, one burns off the illusory forms of body and mind, whether one does so concretely as these monks did or inwardly as Zen practitioners do everywhere in the world.

* * * *

Let us turn now to Jung’s *mortificatio* experience, and particularly, its Zen character. Jung struggled with the issue of the *mortificatio* of the ego in its resignation to the Self his entire adult life. Indeed, he is among those religious geniuses of the ages and the first modern thinker to clearly define it as a principle of human development or individuation. “[The] experience of the self is always a defeat for the ego,” he famously said in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. If the experience of the Self does not come easily due to the obstinacy of the ego, how much more difficult is that more rarefied and sublime form of self-realization, the experience of empty oneness? It almost invariably requires a profound *mortificatio*, either in the form of near-madness, depression, great doubt, near-death, or death itself.

Certainly, Jung had his fair share of exposure to near-madness and depression in his lifetime, the former during his reclusive years of confrontation with the unconscious after his break with Freud, and the latter on-and-off throughout his life and even well into his advanced years. But his encounter with emptiness seems to have occurred mostly in relation to his near-death and dying experiences. The connection between the experience of empty oneness and near-death and dying experiences is probably to be expected. Death is the final, absolute release, and in Zen circles there are stories of people who have had enlightenment experiences while dying and who lived long enough to report them. Both Zen practice and the process of dying, or nearly dying, inspire a one-pointedness of mind and involve a transformation of the ego that makes it possible for the experience of empty oneness to emerge.

In Jung’s case this is especially evident. To be sure, it needs to be acknowledged that in his better known writings on Eastern religion Jung was generally not a great believer in the viability of *satori*, at least for the Westerner, and he seemed to question the accuracy of its description as conveyed even by Easterners. He gave it credence as a subjective experience, but doubted its veracity as an objective indication of absolute knowledge. Listen to what he said about it in 1939 in his commentary on *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*: “The experience of “at-one-ment” is one example of those ‘quick-knowing’ realizations of the East, an intuition of what it would be like if one could exist and not exist at the same time. If I were a Moslem, I should maintain that the power of the All-Compassionate is infinite, and that He alone can make a man to be and not to be at the same time. But for my part I cannot conceive of such a possibility. I therefore assume that, in this point, Eastern intuition has overreached itself.”

In the same year, Jung wrote a foreword to D. T. Suzuki’s *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. There he is more open to the *satori* experience, but not on its own terms or the terms of the Zen masters. A careful reading reveals that he attempts to explain it mechanistically and somewhat reductively. He concludes, “Could any of us boast that he believes in the possibility of a

boundlessly paradoxical transformation experience?,” and he warns the Westerner of taking on a method that for various reasons is only suitable to the Eastern mind. I imagine that Suzuki, the monk and scholar first and most responsible for bringing Zen to the West and at that time the sole figure doing so, humbly accepted Jung’s foreword in order to give his work some authority and exposure, but I also imagine that he didn’t agree with everything Jung said.

I have written elsewhere extensively about the reasons underlying Jung’s reticence to accept the *satori* experience on its own terms, so I won’t say too much about that here. Suffice it to say that these reasons include: (1) His epistemological orientation as influenced by Kant, who asserted that the “thing-in-itself,” and by extension the unconscious-in-itself and the transcendent-in-itself, cannot be directly perceived or known. It is, Jung claims, “only by indirect means” such as dreams, fantasies, and visions that the unconscious and transcendent can be known. (2) Jung’s reticence was influenced by his psychiatric orientation which upholds that without the center of an ego, the contents of the unconscious will invade and extinguish consciousness and likely lead to a psychosis. The Jungian and Freudian views here are basically two sides of the same coin, the former attributing the experience of oneness to an ego overreaching itself and the latter reducing it to the ego’s regression to the oceanic womb state; the one sees this experience as beyond the ego and the other as before the ego. Although both agree with the Buddhist view that in oneness the ego returns to its essential, original condition of unity with the unconscious, they do not accept, as Buddhism does, that the ego—the ego that is strong and well-developed, that is—can endure this without dissolution. And, finally, (3) Jung’s initial position on *satori* was influenced, naturally, by the *Weltanschauung* or worldview of Western civilization, which is rooted in a fundamental schism or split between man and God as conveyed through the biblical fall of Adam.

Things began to shift with Jung’s 1944 heart attack and brush with death. Firstly, there was the vision Jung had during the episode itself. He saw himself, on a huge meteor-like rock in outer space, enter the antechamber of a seemingly Eastern temple with a black Hindu sitting silently in lotus posture to the side of the antechamber’s entrance. He writes: “I had the feeling that everything was being sloughed away; everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence, fell away or was stripped from me—an extremely painful process. . . . This experience gave me a feeling of extreme poverty, but at the same time of great fullness. There was no longer anything I wanted or desired. I existed in an objective form.” Clearly, this was a *mortificatio* experience, happening in an Eastern imagistic context. The diminishment or impoverishment had a Zenlike emptying character, and thus the emptying in turn led to fullness.

Shortly after this episode, Jung had a dream that seemed to pick up where his near-death experience left off, for in the above vision, he never in fact entered the temple because his doctor, or the image of his doctor, came to bring him back to life. In this dream, Jung was on a hiking trip and came upon a small chapel which he entered. He writes: “I saw that on the floor in front of the altar, facing me, sat a yogi—in lotus posture, in deep meditation. When I looked at him more closely, I realized that he had my face. I started in profound fright, and awoke with the thought: ‘Aha, so he is the one who is meditating me. He has a dream, and I am it.’ I knew that when he awakened, I would no longer be.” Needless to say, this dream has profound implications. The yogi is both Jung’s alter ego—no pun intended—and the Self. In typical Eastern fashion, the dream conveys the Hindu and Buddhist idea that the Self alone is real, and the ego but a passing mirage. Jung’s piercing statement, “I knew that when he awakened, I would no longer be,” works with both forms of *mortificatio*, the form of living consciously with

death on a day-to-day basis, and the form of actually dying. The person in whom the Self has become awakened and who lives life in a more or less awake state knows that the ego no longer exists the way it was originally conditioned, that is, as an isolated, separate entity and identity unto its own. And of course, the person who is dying may well be predisposed or inclined to soon discover the same in a more complete and ultimate manner.

* * * *

It was either during his final encounter with death or approaching it that Jung's most transformative experience vis-à-vis Eastern religion seems to have occurred. Of course, this experience happened too late for him to write about. What we know is that on his deathbed, Jung was reading Charles Luk's *Ch'an and Zen Teachings: First Series*. This is the first of a series of three highly sophisticated books. Luk was a Chinese monk and scholar involved in keeping alive one of the few remaining Zen or Ch'an sects in China in the last century. He studied under the renowned master Hsu Yun. Included in the book are Hsu Yun's discourses to the monks in the monastery of which he was abbot. These discourses were given during an intensive retreat like the kind I mentioned earlier. If one is in a state of Great Doubt or some other form of *mortificatio*, and has one-pointedness of mind such as the kind ushered in when one is dying, a master's poignant discourse—the way he says something or emphasizes a certain phrase—can itself be a trigger for *satori*. Very likely, however, Jung, a master in his own right, may have already at this point been familiar with the *satori* state, and he may have been merely reading and reconfirming what he already knew. He was, after all, not only dying, but concluding a most astounding and historic journey of consciousness, much of it couched, no doubt, in the language of alchemy, but a significant part of it, as the above vision and dream illustrated, in the wisdom of the East.

And what tells us that Jung was already familiar with *satori* if not actually in a *satori* state? He does. Too weak to write anything himself, he asked Marie-Louise von Franz, who was among the few at his bedside during this time, to write Luk a letter. Von Franz wrote: “. . . he was enthusiastic. . . . When he read what Hsu Yun said, he sometimes felt as if he himself could have said exactly this! It was just ‘*it*!’” “It” is in italics and also with an exclamation mark, apparently connoting the Unconscious of Zen. When Jung met at this same time with his friend Miguel Serrano, he told him the following, and I quote Jung from Serrano's notes: “I have just finished reading a book by a Chinese Zen Buddhist. I felt as if we were talking about one and the same thing and were simply using different words for it. The use of the word ‘unconscious’ is not the decisive thing; what counts is the Idea that lies behind this word.” Can Jung here be referring to anything else but the central Idea of Zen, the Doctrine of No Mind, the Void? Clearly, these reflections occurring in Jung's final days convey a sense of enthusiasm and conviction absent in his earlier writings on the East.

* * * *

Let us now turn to the Oxherding Pictures, Zen's counterpart to alchemy's Rosarium pictures and an itinerary, so to speak, to the Zen experience of *mortificatio*. Although to be accurate, it should be said, as is the case with the Rosarium pictures, the Oxherding Pictures are about inner death *and* rebirth. It must be emphasized that the Oxherding Pictures are ultimately about being reborn into a life that is lived with the living knowledge of empty oneness. It is not just about the

initial enlightenment experience or awakening to empty oneness, i.e., *satori*, which is usually a peak experience that settles, but about the practical life one can then lead in the aftermath of integrating that experience. Seeing emptiness is thus only the beginning; leading a life in accord with emptiness is another matter, and the true goal of Zen.

For our purpose of illuminating this journey, I will offer here only a brief sketch of these pictures, without the traditional poetry and commentary that accompany each one. I will use the most popular set by the 12th-century Chinese Zen master Kuo-an Shih-yuan, or Kakuan Shien in Japanese, though a modern ink-and-brush (in contrast to woodblock) version painted by Zen Master Gyokusei Jikihara. It is, however, noteworthy that earlier sets in China show the ox gradually turning from black to white, signifying that the ultimate goal of Zen is the realization and increasing integration of emptiness. The gradual progress of this is emphasized by the Soto school of Zen, while the Rinzai school focuses on the immediate, sudden moment of awakening. In Jungian language, one could say that this whitening represents a progressive diminishment of shadow—shadow not in the sense of the dark side of the personality, but as the darkness the ego is in due to its blindness to emptiness. Also, other sets present each picture as a circle within a square, suggesting that the Unconscious must be integrated into consciousness—a principle known in alchemy, with some subtle variations in nuance, as “squaring the circle.”

The first picture is called “Seeking the Ox”:



The ox represents the seeker’s true nature, that is, Buddha-nature or Buddha-mind. It is probably because of the ox’s sacred nature in ancient India that it came to symbolize man’s primal nature or Buddha-mind. The oxherder here, however, knows himself only as a small mind, as an ego. He sets out in search of the truth, but in fact, his original nature has never gone astray—he just

can't see it. What blocks his vision is the defilements of the ego—its desires, fears, and delusions of duality. As someone once said, “The ego sees what is not there, and does not see what is there.” But herein lies the paradox: If the oxherder doesn't see the ox, how does he know it even exists? How does he even know to seek it? It is the true self from the very beginning that seeks itself, that inspires the urge to realization. The whole process occurs under its auspices.

Picture Two is entitled “Finding the Tracks”:



This picture is more or less self-explanatory. To borrow an image from a modern Western story, we may say that here Dorothy is on the Yellow Brick Road to Oz. At least on an intellectual level, the ego knows that there is such a thing as the true self, similar to the early phase of analysis in which the patient is seeking and trusting that something will help them but does not know what it is.

The third picture is called “First Glimpse of the Ox”:



This picture indicates the threshold of *satori*, the point at which one-pointedness of mind is so strong and clear that there are real hints of Buddha-mind. Emptiness is glimpsed, but not yet fully experienced and crystallized in consciousness. This is a peculiar, in-between state, and often the Zen practitioner thinks they have realized emptiness when in fact, as the picture illustrates, they are perceiving it in an obscured way.

Picture Four is called “Catching the Ox”:



This picture celebrates the experience of *satori*, the moment of awakening. Emptiness is clearly perceived and apprehended by consciousness. But it is not yet fully comprehended, not yet integrated into everyday life. Grasping emptiness is thus tantamount to realization, but not actualization, at least not as yet. The aim of Zen is to embody emptiness in one's daily existence. This picture marks the culmination of the initial phase of Zen training.

Picture Five is “Taming the Ox,” the beginning of working with one’s realization in a practical, applied way:



This picture portrays the struggle to integrate empty oneness into everyday life. One wrestles with one’s thoughts and desires. But even they arise from Buddha-mind, and it is only because the delusions of the ego still persist that they are imagined to be real. The process of working through this subjective state of delusion is undertaken via the study of the *Mumonkan*, the forty-eight koans that comprise the main text of Zen training.

Picture Six is “Riding the Ox Home”:



Kakuan’s commentary nicely captures the meaning of this picture: “The struggle is over, ‘gain’ and ‘loss’ no longer affect [the oxherder]. He hums the rustic tune of the woodsman and plays the simple songs of the village children. Astride the Ox’s back, he gazes serenely at the clouds above. His head does not turn [in the direction of temptations]. Try though one may to upset him, he remains undisturbed.”

Picture Seven is called “Ox Forgotten, Self Alone”:



The reference to “self” here refers to the true self. The true self is no longer “other”; the Ox has disappeared. The Unconscious comes more fully into consciousness. At this stage, the relations between the ego and the true self begin to be transcended, unveiling the nondualistic condition of empty oneness. The true self, and what occurs now and henceforth, is beyond two-ness. The oxherder has integrated emptiness; he has, so to speak, made it his own. If the first six pictures are about the relations between the ego and the Unconscious, the latter four represent the movement toward sheer emptiness. In them the oxherder loses even his awareness of emptiness, for any such awareness can only be from a distance and hence separated from empty oneness.

Picture Eight, “Both Ox and Self Forgotten,” is then true empty oneness:



Here even the act of emptying and the sense of emptiness have been thrown out. Now that's really empty! The ego has been bottomed out, and only the bottomless Void remains. Of this end to egocentricity, Kakuan writes, “If hundreds of birds were now to strew flowers about [the oxherder's] room, he could not but feel ashamed of himself.” What a humility and “poverty of spirit,” as the Christian mystics call it, this statement reveals. In Zen, there are three levels of awakening. The first is dropping off body and mind. Pictures One to Seven correspond to this. The second level is dropping off dropping body and mind. This corresponds to Pictures Eight and Nine. And the final picture is dropping off dropping off. Picture Eight then denotes the peeling process that razes the ego down to nothingness. Notice its resemblance to the primordial image of the ouroboros, the serpent or dragon swallowing its tail, signifying eternity and the cyclical process of death and renewal:



(A drawing by Theodoros Pelecanos, 1478, with an alchemical tract attributed to Synesius.)

To give up not only the attachments of the body and mind but even the attachment to the rewarding feeling of giving up involves a real alchemical *mortificatio* or inner death. As Bob Dylan sings, “When you think that you’ve lost everything, you find out you could always *loooze* a little more. . . . I close my eyes and wonder if everything is as hollow as it seems.”

Picture Nine is called “Returning to the Source”:



Here the oxherder has himself simply become what is. He has returned to the origin of all, not in any particular form or state of distinctness, but simply as what naturally exists in the form of life itself, just as it is. As he nears the final stage of his Zen journey, he finds himself back at the beginning, but with a new consciousness. This process is conveyed in the Zen saying that Donovan made famous when he sang, “First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.” One sees the world, then one realizes one does not see the world, then one sees the world. And seeing the world exactly as it is, endlessly changing and with nothing to strive for, including awakening, the oxherder is able to fully yet selflessly enter it.

Picture Ten is thus called “Entering the Market With Helping Hands”:



Representing the *summum bonum* of Zen practice and its process of inner death and rebirth, the oxherder is here transfigured into the jovial or laughing Buddha. Understanding the true nature of the world, he moves about in it as a free spirit at one with it. He is fulfilled and completely at rest in his emptiness. He is also a paragon of individuation as Jung understands this: he is an “*in-dividual*,” undivided and complete within himself. Unlike the cloistered monk or the yogi who remains in his cave in permanent retreat from the world, the Zen bodhisattva returns to the world to help his fellow beings, inhabiting it now as easily as he dwelled in his hut in Picture Seven. Zen teaching warns against sinking into a state of emptiness that becomes static, that becomes fixed in some ritual form or methodical formula for living. “True Zen does not smell of Zen,” the sages tell us. It has no odor of lofty sanctity. True Zen is ordinary, not extraordinary. Chop wood, carry water, pay the bills. This is the way of the Buddha.

* * * *

To conclude our presentation, there is a parable of somebody who knocks on the door of God’s private chamber. God says, “Who’s there?” The person responds, “It is I.” God says, “Go away.” The person goes away. Sometime later he returns and knocks again. God asks, “Who’s there?” The person says, “It is Thou.” God replies, “Come in.” It would seem that what has occurred here in this parable, between the person’s two visits to God’s chamber, is the *mortificatio* in which the ego dies in its sense of separateness from the Self. I say “*sense*” of separateness because, as Zen teaches, the ego in fact never was or is separate from the true self; it only *thinks* it is. So the question then becomes, What is it that goes through a *mortificatio* if all that really

dies is an illusion to begin with? In true Zen spirit, the topic of this paper has been about nothing at all. I hope you didn't expect more. Thank you.

References

Laurens van der Post, *Jung and the Story of Our Time* (letter to Kristine Mann), Hogarth Press, London, 1976.

D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, Anchor Books, New York, 1963.

Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Vintage Books/Random House, New York, 1971.

Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*, Doubleday/Dell Publishing Group, New York, 1980.

St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, ICS Publications/Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C., 1973.

Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney, Harper & Row, New York, 1941.

C. G. Jung, letter to Walter Bernet (June 13, 1955), *C. G. Jung Letters*, eds. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé, trans. R. F. C. Hull, vol. 2, 1951-1961, Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XCV, Princeton, New Jersey, 1975.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886), trans. R. J. Hollingdale, in *Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche*, vol. 43 of *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 1994.

Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Enlightenment: Origins and Meaning*, Weatherhill, New York, 1979.

C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy* (1955-56), vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1963, 1970.

C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1958, 1973.

Michael Gellert, *Modern Mysticism: Jung, Zen and the Still Good Hand of God*, Nicolas-Hays, York Beach, Maine, 1994.

C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage Books/Random House, New York, 1961, 1965.

Gerhard Wehr, *Jung: A Biography*, Shambhala, Boston, 2001.

Bob Dylan, "Trying To Get To Heaven," *Time Out of Mind*, © Sony Music Entertainment, Columbia Records, New York, 1997.

Donovan Leitch, "There Is a Mountain," Epic Records, CBS Studios, 1967.