

Christian-Buddhist Dialogue

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*The following pages are an extract from a recently published book entitled *New Mahāyāna: Buddhism for a Post-Modern World* 新大乘仏教のポスト・モダン (Tokyo, 1988, pp. 52–57, 179–205). Its author is a well-known and widely published Rinzai Zen monk-scholar, who is also one of the leading figures in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan. An annotated translation of the work with commentary is currently being prepared by Paul Swanson and James Heisig of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. The notes have been kept to a minimum here.*

Dialogue with other religions

I have spoken in other places of the new direction the Catholic Church has taken since the Second Vatican Council, recognizing that dialogue with other religions is a pressing need in our day, without which world peace is impossible. If Catholicism is believed to be the one and only truth for the human race, the only thing that remains to be said is, “Repent, you all, and become Catholic!” This closes the door to dialogue and in the end leads to a repetition of one of the great stupidities of human history: wars of religion.

The study of religion distinguishes between ethnic religions and world religions. Japanese Shinto belongs among the former. The former Japanese Empire that undertook the aggressive invasion of its neighbors under the high-sounding banner of the “East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” set up Korean shrines and Taiwan shrines and Shōnan Shrines for Shinto throughout the region. In fact, it was a completely ethnic religion they were spreading which was swallowed up in the final tragedy of the war’s end. I myself believe that there is much in Shinto — I exclude here State Shinto — that justifies classing it as a world religion, but that is athwart our concerns here.

To enter into dialogue with other religions and elevate the ideal of a religion of humanity does not mean the direct establishment of a single great religion for the whole human race. It aims only at promoting dia-

logue at present among like-minded world religions in the present world in order to uncover what belongs to a “common ground.” This is what I intend by the term “a religion of humanity.”

The English thinker Arnold Toynbee, reputed to be the greatest historian of our century, noted at the conclusion of a well-known speech that a thousand years hence historians will look back at the twentieth century and remember it not for the struggle between liberalism and communism but for the momentous human discovery of the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism. For Toynbee, his strong hope seems to be that through the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, between East, and West, that began in the twentieth century, humans can discover a deeper humanity that is held in common and this will guide the history of humanity for the next ten centuries.

The dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism is being conducted on a global scale today. Just two years ago, on a visit to prepare a triennial international conference on Buddhism and Christianity, Professor David Chappell from the University of Hawaii remarked apropos of the change in climate: “A decade ago there were only 30 or 40 universities in the United States offering courses on Buddhism, but now there are hundreds of them. To be awarded a doctoral degree in Christian theology, such courses are as a rule obligatory.”

Buddhism and Christianity have no doubt much in the way of common ground. The “Christ in me” of which Paul speaks when he says “It is not I that live but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20) may be considered to refer to the very same religious reality as “the true person of no rank” of whom Lin-chi speaks. For Paul “Christ in me” represents the true subject of the self; if not, one would have to think of him being “possessed” by Christ the way some people are possessed by animals. For me, the positing of an “original self” might serve as a common ground for true religion.

But the discovery of common ground does not justify the rushing to the conclusion that the two religions are saying exactly the same thing. When a Catholic priest practices *zazen*, for example, and claims to have accomplished the Great Matter,¹ this does not justify the conclusion that the same person is at one and the same time a Catholic priest and a Rinzai Zen master. In the last analysis, I have grave doubts about the consistency of such a posture. Or again, there is the question of drawing on the medieval Christian mystics to bring together the notions of “God” and “Absolute Nothingness.” But is not Meister Eckhart still held to be a heretic by the Catholic church, despite the talk about having the

condemnation lifted? In addition to searching for common ground between Buddhism and Christianity, therefore, it is the height of folly not to remain alert to their strict differences as well.

A Christian experience of Zen

Permit me to recount one Christian's experience of profound interest for Buddhists.

One of the leading Christians of Japan today is the scholar Yagi Seiichi. His father being one of the close disciples of Uchimura Kanzō,² from his early years Yagi was raised in a family of the No-Church Movement, and in his youth he experienced a coming to awareness in the faith. As a graduate student at Tokyo University he spent a period of study abroad in Germany. At the time the level of understanding of things Japanese was extremely low in Germany and he found himself continually being asked things like, "Do you have automobiles in Japan?" "How many meals a day do the Japanese take?" If he would reply to the last question, "Three," he would be told, "That is how it is here, too!" Subjected to this kind of ridiculous, childish exchange, Yagi prepared a set of about a hundred well-chosen slides and showed them to the Germans whenever the occasion presented itself. Naturally, pictures of temples, statues of the Buddha, and Zen gardens were among the slides, which would invariably prompt the question, "What kind of a religion is Buddhism?" To his embarrassment, Yagi found that, even though he had attended lectures on the intellectual history of the Orient and had read several books on Buddhism, he was unable to give a reply. Again and again he was faced with his own ignorance of things Buddhist. As a scholar from Japan, which is a Buddhist country, devoting himself to the study of Christianity, this was the first time he realized how little he knew about Buddhism.

With that, he borrowed a number of books on Buddhism from a fellow foreign student from Japan. At the time he felt closer to Zen than to Shin Buddhism. Despite the numerous similarities between the figure of Shinran in today's True Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity, for one who confesses Jesus as the "Christ," the idea of converting to a Buddha like Amida Buddha of the Shin tradition, someone who was not the Christ, was unthinkable. At the same time, he felt no resistance in going into Zen Buddhism, which was utterly different from Christianity. Among the several books he read at the time was Suzuki Daisetsu

Sensei's *On "No-Mind."* In that book, Daisetsu writes, "Put in Christian terms, 'no-mind' means 'Thy will be done.'"³ These kinds of statements were not unintelligible from a Christian standpoint, but the Zen *mondō* (exchanges between master and disciple) had him completely stymied. In the end he had not the slightest idea what Zen was trying to say.

In this state of mind Yagi went to call on Professor Wilhelm Gundert, who had gone to Japan as a missionary where he taught university and secondary school. He remembered hearing that the man might be a cousin of Herman Hesse, who had written the celebrated novel on the life of the Buddha, Siddhartha. When in Japan he had had contact with the No-Church of Uchimura Kanzō and become acquainted with Yagi's own father, who asked his son to visit the Professor while he was in Germany.

Professor Gundert had come to foster a deep interest in Buddhism from his experience in Japan. Upon returning to his native Germany, he took up a post as professor in Hamburg University's Department of Japanese Studies and later went on to become president of the university. After retirement, he moved to a house in the picturesque southern German town of Ulm on the banks of the Danube, where he devoted himself to a German translation of the *Hekiganroku*. Eventually he was to complete his translation of this important treasure of Japanese and Chinese Zen dating from the twelfth century has been called "the primary text of the sect," but when Yagi and another friend from Japan visited him in August of 1951, he was still in the midst of his labors.

It may have been on that first visit or perhaps on a later one that the old professor saw Yagi off to the station and presented him with an offprint of the translation of the first part of the *Hekiganroku*. Yagi himself thinks that it may have had something to do with the fact that the first time his father and Gundert Sensei had met in Japan, the latter had talked incessantly of Bodhidharma.

The offprint presented the original Chinese with its corresponding German translation on facing pages and included a commentary by Professor Gundert. After his traveling companion left the train at Mainz, Yagi boarded an express train for the return trip from Ulm to Göttingen. During the four hour voyage he read through the German translation of the *Hekiganroku*. Having read books on Zen by Suzuki with the feeling that he half-understood what Zen was about, Yagi threw himself into the work reflectively.

Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, “What is the supreme meaning of the noble truth [of Buddhism]?” Bodhidharma said, “Wide open, nothing noble.”⁴

He found it easy to read pensively as he was sitting alone in a four-seat section of the train. When he could not make sense of the Chinese he would turn to the German and vice-versa; and when he couldn't make sense of either, he would set the book aside and think. As he wrestled with the text, time passed unnoticed until in the end he was quite exhausted.

As he looked up, the train was just passing through Kassel. He looked out the window and watched absentmindedly as the rugged terrain sped by with its forest and fields. The rain had lifted and the clouds began to move aside to make room for the bright blue sky. His mind turned from its intense concentration on the problem of the “Wide open, nothing noble” and emptied itself in the clear sky above. All of a sudden the words return to his mind's eye in a flash, “Wide open, nothing noble.” Without thinking he exclaimed aloud, “Aha!” and stood up from his seat. Sure enough, nothing had changed. Everything in the surroundings outside the window was exactly as it was before, and yet. . . it had become absolutely new. Things were different from what they were when he was staring absentmindedly a short while before. It was as if a shackles fixed about his head had suddenly split apart and fallen away. He calmed himself and fell back in his seat again, looking about on all sides. What happened, he asked himself, but could not answer.

The first words that came to his mind were these: “Up until now, I have always looked at trees as trees. Where did I go wrong?”

Yagi first spoke of this experience in the train at Kassel several decades later in a “Zen-Christian Discussion” held in eastern Japan to which he was invited by some friends from the United States. In attendance were the young Buddhist scholars Nara Kōmei of the Sōtō sect and Nishimura Eshin of the Rinzai sect, and Yagi from the Christian side. Among the senior members in attendance were Zen Masters Yamada Reirin, Chancellor of Komazawa University who was later to become the chief abbot of Eihei-ji, Yamada Mumon, President of Hanazono University who would later take over the leadership of Myōshin-ji, and the Chief Abbot of Nanzen-ji, Shibayama Zenkei.

Mumon Rōshi responded to Yagi's account by relating his own experience of awakening; He concluded, acknowledging Yagi's experience, "This is not something peculiar to me — Yagi said the same thing. It is an experience that touches the very foundations of religion."

After his experience in the train through Kassel, Yagi quickly came to an understanding of Buddhist thought and grew progressively close to Buddhism, leading him to publish an important book, *Points of Convergence between Christianity and Buddhism*.⁵ Later I was to meet Yagi through participating in these meeting and we were to author jointly several works on the theme of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Zen experience, Zen consciousness, Zen thought

What is "Zen experience"? Nothing more than the vigorous forceful aside of intellectual understanding. As the Zen saying has it, "Hot and cold are things you know." It is the realm where, as Dōgen says, quoting the Lotus Sūtra, "only a Buddha communicates with a Buddha," which is precisely why it makes no sense at all to people in society at large who are straying about aimlessly. To understand the Buddhist realm of enlightenment, one must oneself become Buddha. This is what is meant by saying that "only a Buddha communicates with a Buddha." And in the same way that it is not through talking about hot and cold but only when one has taken a drink of water can one know the difference between hot and cold, enlightenment or satori is a matter of experience. As long as one has not experience this intimately and of one's own, the satori that takes place in the head through the mere toying with words, one is no more than a "scholar" drawing inferences and writing them up in books. In the phrase of Dōgen, such one is a teacher-monk." It is only to be expected that the scholar begins by not knowing anything at all, and after dedication to a reading of the literature slowly a picture should emerge in his head. Since scholars are only persons with a generally good head on their shoulders, it only stands to reason that they should be able to make some sense of things by reading the literature. And then, applying their own powers of discrimination, they write it up. But the religionist begins with some experience. Lacking the power of expression or discursive thinking, they may not be able to write down what happened, or at least not write it very well. Hence the peculiar outcome that the books of clear-thinking scholars, who have had no experience of their own, sell.

“Religious experience” as something human that is closed off to the world of dogs and cats, can only occur in the realm of “consciousness.” *Zen experience* is always *Zen consciousness*. If it were only a matter of knowing hot and cold by experience, the dogs and cats could do it as well. But human experience, including the experience of Zen, engages consciousness. And once consciousness has been engaged it develops to the point of intellectual expression. This is why we must not only speak of Zen consciousness but also of *Zen thought*. Daisetsu Sensei’s notion of “the history of Zen thought” sees this process unfolding historically.

In the same way, as an experience becomes conscious and takes shape as Zen thought, the disposition, upbringing, education that one brings to an experience figure in as important elements. Thus the very same experience of its own lead to different intellectual expressions. Just as the Zen of Master Dōgen, Master Bankei, and of Master Hakuin are all three *Japanese Zen* and yet all three distinct, the “Zen experience” they share in some sense lead to versions of “Zen thought” that seem to head in opposite directions.

“I have seen the true suchness” — Yagi’s own explanation

The experience in the train in Kassel which Mumon Rōshi acknowledged as touching the very foundations of religion, for Yagi himself did not make any sense at first. But as he regained his composure, he was able first to find the words to express it in his *consciousness* and with the passing of time to come to an explanation in *thought*.

Yagi himself said: “The first impression to reach consciousness and be verbalized was ‘Up until now, I have always looked at trees as trees [probably due to the fact that he was looking out the window and the first thing that struck his eye were the trees]. Where did I go wrong?’” When he later tried to expand on this, Yagi came to the following explanation, clearly at the level of *thought*. I quote him at length:

Take a plum tree for example. The statement that “the plum tree is a plum tree” we take to mean that the subject of the statement is a real plum tree while the predicate refers to the general concept of a plum tree. The first subject, “the plum tree,” is a single, concrete reality but the appended words “is a plum tree” refers to a social convention, an abstract concept. This constitutes the predicate. For instance, peach trees and apricot-almond trees belong to the same genus of “plum tree.” In the spring they burst into the same bright, splendid red and white blossoms; their fruits can be pickled and dried or made into plum wine.

Everyone knows this and so it belongs to the conceptual content of what a plum tree is. This is the predicate, and it belongs to the general sentence expressed in the form, “S is P.” The predicate P represents the socially conventional notion in which the subject S is embraced. As a result of connotation and dissolution, P in fact has come to take predominance over S. When we say, “The plum tree is a plum tree,” the plum tree in the predicate, since it is a social convention, does not take the trouble to see the real plum tree as the “true suchness,” and since it has been given a connotation and dissolved into social convention, social convention takes preeminence.

As human beings we are born into a world of “words.” Unlike Adam and Eve in the biblical story, we do not first come into contact with “entities” around us and only then give them “names.” We begin by learning the “words,” then pick up their conceptual content, and finally know individual things like plum trees which are embraced in this conceptual content. Things were different for Adam, it would appear. As the first human being whenever he came in touch with an “entity” *for the very first time*, he gave it a “name.” This is probably what Buddhism means by “true suchness.” Not so for us, who are born into a world of words, hear them spoken, learn what they mean from our mother and father, and then know things like particular plum trees as things contained in the concept. As a result, the social convention P takes precedence over the individual entity S. In the example of the plum tree, we first learn about plum trees from our parents and only afterwards know a particular thing to be the sort of plum tree we have been taught about. In this way we are supposed to understand plum trees. But is this really the way to understand the concrete plum tree?

In this way, “conceptuality,” which is not equivalent to reality, decides the being of an “entity.” Consequently the true entity — its so-called true suchness — eludes our view. Plum trees are one thing, but what about fellow human beings? The Germans have one set of conventions about the Japanese. Then a Japanese shows up, and they think in terms of their conventions. Since the social conventions take precedence, they presume that the individual in front of them corresponds to their notion. And on that basis, as an individual who fits the mold of their conventions, they expect him to behave accordingly and even require it. Should it happen that the average understanding of the German for the Japanese is at a low level, the results are most peculiar.

Lacking from the outset contact with actual reality, their social conventions determine what reality should look like in advance. And if the one who has been so determined objects at the stupidity of it all, he will find himself alienated from personal communication. In such circumstances, “interpersonal communication” and the like collapse. When *social convention* takes precedence over *existence*, there are distortions. Thus the existential reality of the “original self” of human beings is not something to be grasped and determined by way of such conceptions. This was the first time I had reflected on what it means to understand “reality” from given “ideas.”

What my eyes were opened to was the immense error of trying to understand things by beginning with something like a social convention. In the case of Christianity, also, to understand things by beginning from the scriptures, the words of the scriptures take precedence over the facts. On the grounds that “The bible says so,” one looks at the world in a determined way. One must see clearly what it means to take rather the ineluctable existential “fact” of “human existence” as prior to “words.” Heretofore the concept has taken precedence over the reality and then turned around to determine what reality is. Is this not a topsy-turvy illusion? Is not the idea that words are prior to things precisely what the *Heart Sūtra* means when it talks of “thought-coverings.”⁶

Mumon Rōshi's Religious Experience

Yamada Mumon Rōshi, when a student at Tōyō University, practiced under Kawaguchi Ekai, known as the first to have transmitted Tibetan esoteric Buddhism to Japan. Since his elder brother had died of tuberculosis, it seemed as if the home in which he was raised had been infected. In his own case, the disease broke out as a result of nutritional insufficiencies accompanying life in a temple where the vinaya was followed strictly. In any event, it was a life of rising early in the morning to do the cleaning and make preparations for the meal, going to university and returning only late to face more household chores and a night of study.

Kawaguchi Ekai Rōshi's mother secretly told the young Mumon from time to time, “Choyan (Mumon Rōshi nickname), please use this money to buy some fish to cook and eat, but don't tell my son about it.” Ekai Rōshi kept the vinaya of the Tibetan esoteric tradition strictly. The young Mumon Rōshi thought to himself. “The pure monk is lacking in filial piety.”

In such a severe life the young Mumon contracted a serious case of tuberculosis. Forsaken by the doctors, he left the hospital to convalesce at home. At the time, the idea of taking a cure at home was equivalent to waiting to die.

On one occasion, probably sitting on the porch, a cool wind crossed his fevered cheeks and he thought to himself, "What is this thing we call the wind That's it — the wind is air. And if that is the case, it was the air that passed." He continued in this vein. "I had completed forgotten about it, but the wind has been with me from the moment I was born, giving me life." Without air, humans die. This all-important air has been there all along, silently giving life. And not only the air. Water and food and sun, too.

"I had thought I was living by myself, but actually I live by being kept alive," it struck him. This was the first time that Mumon Rōshi awakened to the world of religion. He realized the existence of the "individual" and the "super-individual."

There is an autobiographical novel by Kurata Hyakuzō entitled *Cosmic Life*. Although the work pales by comparison with his play about Shinran, *The Monk and his Disciples*, praised by Romain Rolland (1866-1944) as the greatest piece of religious literature in the twentieth century, I would like to draw attention to something Kurata says near the outset of the work:

If you want to understand the fact that you cannot live on your own power, that your strength alone is not enough to keep alive, you need only look at the baby.

If no one does nothing when a baby is dropped into the world at birth, it will certainly die of cold and starvation. Its parents are there to raise it, and even if they are not, someone will step in to take care of the child so that it does not die. In addition, since we cannot live without air and food and water, the idea of someone living "on their own" is out of the question.

Zen is often said to be a religion for oneself alone, and I have to agree. But whoever got the idea that Zen is a religion of "self-power" is wrong. As long as religion is religion, it must not be a religion of self-power. For one cannot live on one's own . . .

Mumon Rōshi, on coming to the realization that it is not that he had been living all along but that he had been being kept alive, composed the following short verse:

Something great there is that gives me life,
The chill of the morning wind has taught me.

This was Mumon Rōshi's first experience in religion.

Later Mumon Rōshi was cured of his tuberculosis by a Zen monk who applied the "loquat-leaf cure," which freed him to become a student at the Rinzai sect's Hanazono University in Kyoto. On the rōshi's own account, he wavered back and forth in his heart between Christianity and Buddhism, and wearing the robes of a young Buddhist novice he would even go to church on Sunday. So fervent was he that it seems he was even allowed to preach in the pastor's place.

Mumon Rōshi's Zen Experience

Being a Zen university, there were occasional periods set aside for *sesshin*, which consisted of living for a week in a monastery and practicing *zazen*. Outside of Kyoto in a place called Yahata stands the Zen temple of Enpuku-ji which is used for such concentrated Zen sessions. The president of Hanazono University at the time was Kōzuki Tesshu Rōshi. Practice in the Rinzai sect involves not only *zazen* but also the practice of the *kōan*. Having received a *kōan* from one's spiritual director, one enters the room of the rōshi for a question-and-answer form of "Dharma-debate." This form of discipleship is called "solitary visit" "entering the room." The disciple's answer is found wanting, and the rōshi sounds a small hand bell. This signals the end of the interview. The disciple retires from the rōshi's room to the Zen hall where he returns to *zazen* to ponder again a response to the *kōan* he has received. Sitting in contemplation "single-minded and undisturbed," the disciple devises a new response to the *kōan* and returns to the rōshi's room to report. Most of the time the response is flatly rejected by a tinkle of the bell and the disciple must return once again to *zazen*.

Young Mumon, still suffering from his malady, was sitting in contemplation. Directly across from him a student was seated solemnly meditating. Seeing this, the young Mumon felt his competitive temperament well up and, not to be outdone, exerted all his energy into meditating. When it was time for a recess, everyone got up from contemplation to stretch their legs and move about. The solemnly seated student did not budge, but stayed there motionless throughout the recess. This young man would later become Shirōzu Rōshi, master of the Heirin-ji Zen hall. Prior to entering Hanazono, he had practiced at a Zen temple in Kyushu. With the help of this school friend, the young

Mumon was able to make great progress in dhyāna or Zen contemplation. To this day Mumon Rōshi stresses, “A friend is a blessing.”

On one occasion, having just left the room of Kōizuki Rōishi and walking along the corridor that leads back to the contemplation hall, the sound of the bell of rejection still ringing in his ears, young Mumon noticed a ginkgo tree in the garden. When his eyes fell on its bright yellow leaves the young Mumon felt himself enter the realm of the “dropping off of body-mind.” He experienced himself as becoming one with the yellow ginkgo leaves. It was an impressive awakening to the realm where “things and I are one,” a self-awareness of what Zen calls the person of no rank.” This was the real beginning of Mumon Rōshi’s entry into Zen.

He had been commuting back and forth between the master’s bell and pondering his kōan in dhyāna, but it was when he was enlightened to the “formless self” where “self and other are not two” by becoming one with the yellow ginkgo tree back in the garden that he realized Hakuin’s Great Matter: that the trans-individual and the individual are not divided but of one body. Individual and trans-individual can be distinguished but not separated; that is, they are unidentifiable but inseparable. He had walked through the Dharma gate of “non-duality.” For the first time Mumon Rōshi became a Zen disciple awakened to the Original Self — what I call “in one breath, a trans-individual individual.”

Experiencing the very foundations of religion

In the first “Zen-Christian Dialogue,” Yamada Mumon Rōshi spoke of his experience in this terms:

This is not something peculiar to me—Yagi said the same thing. It is an experience that touches the very foundations of religion, quite apart from one’s being Buddhist or Christian.

What does this “experience that touched the very foundations of religion” mean? When Mumon Rōshi looked at the yellow leaves of the ginkgo tree and Yagi looked out the train window in Kassel at the woods, they both awakened to something. What did the two of them see?

Let us first recall briefly what Yagi had to say in the last chapter:

I had seen ‘true suchness.’... Until then, I had always thought “A tree is a tree,” but now for the first time I understood how wrong I had been.

In explaining this, Yagi adds:

When we look at an actual “plum tree,” we do not see its “true suchness.” It has been dispersed into social conventions which takes then precedence over the actual tree itself.

Imagine a plum tree. When we say “The plum tree is a plum tree,” the words *the plum tree* which form the subject of the proposition refer to the actual tree itself, while the words *is a plum tree* are the predicate which refer to one of our social conventions. “S is P” thus means that S is wrapped up in P and dissolved in it. We no longer see the actual tree in its true suchness when we see with our social conventions. This is the way Yagi made rational sense of the consciousness of his experience.

What does this all mean? If I can put it in my own words, it is because the seeing *subject* is the ego that this takes place. Social convention refers to the discriminating ego. In the experience of *dhyāna* — an experience referred to variously as no-ego, no-mind, or *samādhi* — the ego is dropped off and the world of discrimination it fashions is left behind, so that a world is opened up in which the “true person” (the new subject or Original Self) *sees* “true suchness” (completely new existence, the true face of the dharmas). This is the experience of transcendence or self-awareness called no-ego, no-mind, Original Self, in which what is seen by the Formless Self or true person is the “as-it-is-ness” of reality. Thus to speak of religious experience is to speak of an appropriation of a dropping-off of ego and an awareness of the Original, Formless Self. In other words, it is the true person that is seeing and hearing true suchness. This is what Bashō celebrates in his image of the splash of water as the frog leaps into an old pond or in the following verse:

Look closely, you will see
The flower on the hedge
Of mother’s-heart is blooming.

It is that of which the Christian scripture says:

Behold, all things are become new! [2 Cor. 5:17]

All of this point to the opening of the world of true suchness. This is what Mumon Rōshi means by “an experience that touches the very foundations of religion, quite apart from one’s being Buddhist or Christian.”

Who gives things names?

Yagi, we recall, spoke of the problem of language. Like social conventions, the proposition itself, “The plum tree is a plum tree,” is also words. Human beings are born into a world of language. From the very beginning ours is a world of language. In the Old Testament story, the things that the first man and woman came into contact with were completely new. The Garden of Eden was already filled with things — in Buddhism we would call them dharmas — like mountains and rivers, trees and sky and clouds, when Adam came on to the scene. God then brought him his new creations one by one “to see what name he would give them.” Adam looked at *completely new things* — in Buddhist terms, we would say he looked at their true suchness — and gave them each a name.

With us it is different. As bearers of the original sin for which paradise was lost, we are born into a world of words. First we learn the words, then their conceptual meaning, and only *know* through the medium of those concepts what a “plum tree” is. Adam, as the first man, first contacted things in their raw newness and then gave them names. This raw, original novelty is what Buddhism calls true suchness; it is also what Adam saw in the Garden of Eden. The “first man” of the Judeo-Christian tradition, or what Zen Buddhism calls the “true person,” has no ego and therefore does not discriminate. For he had not yet eaten of the tree of “knowledge.”

But the first man sinned. The woman was first tempted by the serpent, a messenger of the devil, and the man followed to eat of the “forbidden fruit.” By eating of the tree of knowledge, human beings became an ego that discriminates — they became bearers of original sin.

“Which is more important for you, God or me?” Faced with this question from Eve, Adam must have thought to himself, “But of course, God is more important,” but his answer was rather, “You are.” After the woman had been deceived Adam was led astray and the human race was burdened with original sin. Though they were supposed to see things in their complete newness, once they had eaten of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, the names they affixed to things were no longer attached to the true suchness of things.

This is what Buddhism refers to as *vijñāna* or discriminating knowledge. This is in the final analysis the work of the ego. As a result, when we think that we are coming into contact with things in their complete

newness or true suchness, we have not left the realm of the ego's discriminating. So long as we cannot part from the discriminations of the ego that have piled up from what we learned at our mother's knee, at kindergarten, through primary school, high school, and university, *satori* cannot open up and we are closed off from the non-discriminating wisdom of *prajñā*.

Who then can truly give the things of existence their proper name? Not the ego who is the subject of *vijñāna*, but only the Original Self who is the subject of *prajñā*. Only a new Adam and Eve, true persons who have regained the paradise lost, can do so.

After his experience in the train at Kassel, Yagi came to appreciate these things and came to a good understanding of Buddhism, and brought the "eye of the heart" (the wisdom-eye of *prajñā*) to bear on his own study of Christian theology.

In the past ten years I have become close friends with Yagi and have continued the Christian-Buddhist dialogue. On one occasion, I put question to him, "What is the most important thing you as a Christian have learned from Buddhism?" Yagi did not have to give the matter a second thought. "The 'not relying on words' of Zen."

What can it mean for a Christian to accept Zen's claim of a direct transmission from mind to mind not relying on words? The meaning of Yagi's religious experience in the train at Kassel consists in an *awakening* to the fact that the idea of seeing and understanding "things" by first having the "words" by means of which a "conceptuality" out of touch with reality (social convention, discrimination) inverts "existence" (the true face of dharmas, their true suchness) is a grave error. When the Christian takes the Bible as a foundation for understanding things, words takes precedence over things. It means looking at the things of life in the light of what "the scripture tells us." In a strong protest against this sort of faith and theology, Yagi has continued to insist that the ineluctable existential *facts* of human existence take precedence over *words*. Let us look for a moment at how Yagi understands the meaning of theology in the intellectual history of the world.

Heretofore concept has been prior to reality and words have turned around to determine facts. Is this not what the *Heart Sūtra* means by "mind-coverings"? In the words of the Zen rōshi Mumon Ekai:

Words do not expand on things; language adds nothing to an event.
Those who accept the words lose out; those who get arrested by the phrasing have gone astray.

For Yagi and me, Zen has rediscovered in “not relying on words” the most important meaning of religion. What would happen if Christianity were rethought in these terms? As Okamoto Kanoko says:

The plum flower blooms on the plum tree—
It is no simple matter
To know what things truly mean.

In an earlier chapter I alluded to the problems posed by Toynebee and Jaspers regarding “the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism” and “the unity of the knowledge of the West with the wisdom of the East.” As to the former, I believe we have gone a long ways towards realizing the dialogue. We have been able to arrive at a clear and mutual appreciation of the common foundations the two religions share. The problem from here on is to take the next step of debating together what is fundamentally different between the two religions in order that through a union of the knowledge and wisdom of East and West we may come to a common pledge to undertake together the discipline and hard study needed to inaugurate a new future for humanity.

If I may restrict myself to one of the major points in this process, I would single out Yagi’s notion of the “position of thought” and the problem of “speaking from the position of the trans-individual” as an existential religious possibility. From my own Zen standpoint, which stresses “in a single breath, the trans-individual individual,” I cannot allow for pronouncements from such a position. Here I see an important point of divergence between Christianity and Buddhism. But all of this awaits later discussion.

NOTES

1. The Great Matter is a stock phrase referring to the attainment of the goal of Buddhist practice. In Japan, especially in the Sōtō Zen school, it refers to having received a sign from one’s master that one is ready to receive the most profound teachings of the Buddha.
2. Uchimura Kanzō (1861-1930) was one of the most prominent and influential Japanese Christians of the early twentieth century and the founder of the No-Church Movement.
3. Contained in vol. 17 of the Japanese edition of Suzuki’s *Collected Works* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978), pp. 115-303.
4. T. 48, 140a 13-14. The passage recounts the famous encounter between Emperor Wu and Bodhidharma which opens the *Hekiganroku*. See *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, trans. With commentaries of Katsuki Sekida (New York: Weatherhill, 1977), p. 147. Translation adjusted.

5. Kyoto: Hōzōokan, 1975.

6. T. 8, 847C19, in the translation of Kumārajīva. See Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sūtra, the Heart Sūtra* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p.53.

(Translated by James W. Heisig)