

***WORLD AS INTERRELATIONAL:
A DISCUSSION OF THE
ZEN NOTION OF CO-ARISING***

Charles J. Sabatino¹

There would seem to be an unbridgeable chasm dividing Christian thinking from what we find in Zen Buddhism. Christian thinking affirms the reality of God: the higher power who transcends the world as the ultimate source and sustainer of all that is. On the other hand, the reality of a greater power is at least problematic within Zen Buddhism. It refers to ultimate reality as Emptiness or Nothingness. Nevertheless, in spite of this apparent contradiction, I would like to examine the possibility that the negation central to Zen thinking could help qualify and refocus what we seek to affirm when we speak of God.

I would begin this task with a discussion of a notion central to Zen's interpretation of the Ultimate: Pratitya Samutpada (Contingent Co-origination, also referred to as co-arising). The more obvious, though hardly simple, meaning of this term is that nothing is sufficient unto itself. That is to say, everything exists within an inter-dependent context of mutually involving relationships and not as independent. It is not as separate, but as part of the world, that each of us exists, even in our individuality.

One further aspect of this inter-dependent world which is fundamental and quite unique to Zen thinking is that each arises out of and implies a form of emptiness. Usually, we consider emptiness strictly as a negative. However, the Zen notion of co-arising draws upon the Taoist insight which considers emptiness

¹ Charles J. Sabatino is an Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy and Religion, Daemen College, Amherst, N.Y.

from a positive perspective (Cf. Chapter 11 of the Tao). To appreciate this, we might consider emptiness as a form of need (suggested by the German: empty: nee: need). At first glance, need would also seem to indicate something negative: What is needed is missing, lacking, and thus denied presence. However, there is another way of looking at this; for something needed, precisely as missing, makes its presence known, and thus is affirmed rather than denied. It is not unusual to experience this in personal relationships where a need for another person acts not to deny but affirm and confirm the reality of that person. Furthermore in the midst of our own needing, it is often the case that we suddenly experience that we too are needed; and it is in being needed, perhaps more than in any other way, that we begin to experience our own personal sense of worth. Thus, in allowing one another to feel needed, which is something friends implicitly do all the time, we are building on a form of emptiness; and yet we do so as an enrichment of human life. Thus the paradox: fullness and emptiness somehow occur together and mutually involve one another.

This term “involve” (in-volve: in-volvere: enroll within) can help us understand some of the implications brought by the interdependency of our co-arising. Involvement suggests a process of enrolling something in the sense of incorporating it as part of oneself. Furthermore, to involve also suggests to implicate; and what is implicated is inter-woven and meshed in a way that makes separation or extrication most difficult (again, note the etymology: implicate: implicare: inter-weave). Accordingly, if I am the individual person I am today through and within a whole context of relationships which have involved others, then others are indeed implicated and integrally interwoven within the being of my own person. No matter how much I develop and grow and give shape to a life that is personally and uniquely my own, nevertheless, that involvement and implication of others remain an essential aspect of my being. At times, it is even difficult to draw a clear line separating our personal self from all those influences of others (influence: in-fluere: in-flowing). Some persons become such an integral part of our personal life that even one's most personal self

reflects and carries an imprint of those relationships. Thus, others, and as we shall see we must include nature here as well, participate in the person I am and vice versa.

Inasmuch as at least aspects of who we are arise out of a world we share with others such as friends, we can say that we, in a way, receive the self we are through and within those relationships. Indeed, it may well be the case, though seldom noted, that at some level the lines which appear clearly to divide and separate us actually blur and fade, at least in certain of our relationships. The reality is that we do live in many ways mirrored by and mirroring one another; and thus we participate in the person that each grows to be. It is not that we determine one another's person, but that we do participate and share in the person each is; and we do so through a sharing of self. This does not mean that the self does not exist, but simply that it does not do so by itself.

Perhaps this can be clarified a bit by recognizing that especially where there is a mutual sharing of world, those we include within our own personal lives include us as well. In such relationships, each is touched and changes much more deeply than merely on the surface of things. This takes place often as though behind our backs, in those everyday relationships that form a great deal of our lives, especially with those we consider friends. While friendships do vary in degree of closeness, the closer we are to others, the more of one's self we are expected to share. In certain instances, this closeness reaches deeply and touches at the very core of one's being. This is expressed well by the term we reserve for those relationships that are more intimate in nature. The term itself is most interesting: intimate, *in-timere*: en-frighten; frightening. Those who approach closely do indeed enter a frightening realm, glimpsing aspects of self we often prefer to keep hidden, even from self. Thus, once again, however we assess the self, one is not by oneself; and that is what co-arising means to say.

However, we must go even further and note that the notion of co-arising also implies that there is an aspect of one's self that

implies a sense of Emptiness; for who I am is nothing if taken by itself. That is to say, without the context of mutual involvement, we are really nothing. Not only is there the experience of emptiness referred to earlier in terms of the need which finds us reaching out toward others. Even further, there is a deeper emptiness which each carries within: the emptiness we are in that strictly speaking nothing stands there simply by itself, that strictly left to oneself, nothing is left.

Another way of looking at this rather paradoxical sense of the self which we find in Buddhism is how we find our real self by looking away and setting the self aside (Note that we find the same paradox in Jesus' statements as well.). At least some clarifying light might be shed on this paradox by reflecting briefly on the Buddhist metaphor which speaks of the Larger or Original Self as opposed to the smaller self. Small Self represents what we might refer to as the mere shadow self. It is the self which is thought to be separate, apart from, and independent of all else. In contrast to this, the Larger Self represents the self which is part of its world, not apart from it. It represents the world as intrinsic to the self and not as separate from who we are. In other words, the Larger Self represents the way in which each individual, however unique, co-arises and thus participates in a mutuality of including and being included in so much more than one's self. Larger Self is another way of referring to the inter-relatedness through which we each become who we are, but not by one's self.

It might be helpful to offer examples which could help us realize what this Larger Self is. However, in a manner of speaking, the Larger Self is not something we can realize. Rather, the Larger Self realizes itself, especially in certain moments of experience (or are they non-experience?) when of a sudden it appears. Those are moments which find us taken up and carried away from ourselves, leaving us as though not there, even while we may still be quite intensely there. These moments of the Larger Self's appearance can occur just about anywhere. Nevertheless, it might be helpful to offer clues. One example that might not be uncommon would be in music, where one is as

though transported out of oneself. Another experience of Larger Self could occur in sports where the athlete is as much played as player in the game. These represent moments in which one's life is enriched by becoming lost: in a walk, a conversation, even a thought. However, it is a strange kind of lostness, for they can also be times when one is most vibrantly oneself. These are times when one is often taken beyond oneself, from deeply within oneself. Accordingly, these are times we are both most ourselves and least ourselves. Indeed, they are times when time itself goes by, and oneself along with it. Interestingly enough, these are often referred to as our better times, our good times, although of course, always after the fact.

We might say that the Larger Self occurs to the extent that we are in tune with the world around us, even to the point that it is no longer around. In other words, it occurs when the world around and the world within mutually include one another such that there really is no longer a within versus a without. The Japanese philosopher Seiichi Yagi presents an instance from the realm of nature which can further help us think through the meaning of the Larger Self. He presents us with a single tree, in all its uniqueness and majesty; and he asks us to consider how that one tree embodies and is sustained by all of nature. From one point of view, the tree is nothing other than nature, for it represents one place and one manner in which nature channels and manifests itself. As Yagi says, it takes not only all of nature, but indeed, the whole universe, for the single tree to be. To the extent that this is so, then the being of the tree includes and has belonging to it all that nature is.

Building on this image of the tree, we can acknowledge that in all that we do each of us manifests and is sustained by much more than our mere individuality. In all our uniqueness, we belong to and can own as part of ourselves the potential and richness of all that has been human. Each of us experiences the human in its hopes and fears, its limits and meanings; we share a world which we ultimately offer and receive from one another. No less than the tree reveals nature do we also belong to and manifest the human,

even in refusing it and if in no other way than in showing its needfulness.

The Larger Self occurs in and as the co-arising or interdependent manner of all that exists. As such, it occurs in and as our own co-arising; thus we would need to say further that even the Larger Self also co-arises. In fact, drawing upon the thinking of the Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe, we would say that since the Larger Self occurs in the mutual openness which joins all as part of a shared world, then the Larger Self represents and is the event of openness itself. As such, however, it does not exist in itself, but rather occurs in and as the mutual participation of each in each within the possibility which is world. Thus, while the Larger Self represents the fullness of being which each receives and manifests even in its own uniqueness, nevertheless, it represents this fullness as a form of self-emptying which itself retains nothing. In other words, even the Larger Self exists by the power of what it is not. In this case, this means by the power of all that exists (which in turn manifests within itself the power which is the Larger Self.).

This brings us to the very core of Buddhist thinking, with Emptiness — Sunyata — as its most basic truth. To those of us who live and think in the West, it seems to make little sense to place emptiness, a form of nothingness, at the foundation of things. That seems to contradict everything we value. Nevertheless, we must recall the Taoist sense of emptiness which is understood as a way of making room for..., allowing for..., giving place to. Looked at from this perspective, Emptiness is a form of pregnancy. Consider the pregnant silence which occurs in conversation. Such silence is not the breaking off of dialogue, but an invitation to go deeper, a momentary pause which allows a re-collecting of thought. Out of those pregnant pauses can come moments of great insight and awareness which finally see the point (*e.g.*, consider therapy). Even in everyday conversations we must stop talking if we are to hear what is being said. If, in fact, there is so little real listening among us, it may well be because this clearing or emptying of the mind is so very difficult.

Buddhism would have us appreciate emptiness, not as a negation, but as pregnant with possibility, as the openness through which fullness (fulfillment) arrives. The full implication of emptying as fullness is clarified at least somewhat when we relate self-emptying to Karuna: Compassion. In Buddhism, compassion comes with the awareness of one's Co-arising. Karuna or compassion occurs in and as that openness to one another and thus manifests the truth of world as shared, as offered, and received one to another. Understood in terms of Karuna, the openness we have been discussing implies as well the mutual affirming and confirming wherein by taking care we afford one another and the world meaning. In light of Compassion, we see the world as a possibility entrusted into our hands, and us entrusted to the responsibility of one another.

However, even this Compassion, as the mutual empowering which sustains the world, thus as a power we might refer to as the very soul of the world, also co-arises. It exists not in itself, but through and as the myriad ways in which we learn to care. While on one hand this Compassion represents the highest power that is, yet in another manner of speaking, as a form of self-emptying, it is nothing powerful at all. As the manner in which we include and are included in one another's worlds, as the way in which we reach out in need and in turn find ourselves needed, that is, as the mutual inter-relatedness of all that is, Compassion and its care necessarily co-arise. It exists not unto itself, but in and as those many ways in which, by taking care of one another and the earth, the world, day by day, takes on meaning as a possibility we offer and receive one to another.

If we do speak of this highest power as God, nevertheless, we still need to say within this frame of reference that God as well co-arises. Thus, there is a way in which God, as well, is not. However strange this may seem, such an approach may well be consistent with the Christian notion of God; for in Christian thinking, God is to be approached not through God-self, but through the self-giving person of Jesus. Perhaps we can say that,

as Christ, the person Jesus uniquely symbolizes the God presence which we now are called to affirm in and as all that exists.

Thinking this through under the auspices of co-arising, we would consider not so much that God loves the world (which retains a dichotomous frame of reference) but rather that God, as the love — or as Karuna, self-emptying, self-giving — out of which world emerges, is the inter-dependent binding together in care through which all share in the possibility of world. If so, then to believe in God is not to believe in one named God. Rather, it is to believe in that possibility in which God also is invested, even to the point of being self-divested. It is to believe in the world, and in the human as the possibility emerging out of and carrying forth God's own self-emptying.

References

ABE, M.

1985 *Zen and Western Thought*, W. LaFleur (Ed.), Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.

COBB, J. and IVES, C. (Ed.)

1990 *The Emptying God*, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books.

CORLESS, R. and KNITTER, P. (Ed.)

1990 *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, New York, Paulist Press.

HICK, J. and ASKAR, H. (Ed.)

1985 *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, Brookfield, VT, Gower Press.

NISHITANI, K.

1982 *Religion and Nothingness*, J. VanBragt (trans.), Berkeley, University of California Press.

SUZUKI, D.T.

1964 *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, New York, Grove Press.

YAGI, S. and SWIDLER, L. (ED.)

1988 *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, New York, Paulist Press.

YOSHINORI, T.

1983 *The Heart of Buddhism*, translated by J. Heisig, New York, Crossroad.

SOMMAIRE

LE MONDE COMME RÉSEAU DE RELATIONS: DISCUSSION DU CONCEPT ZEN DE CO- DÉPENDANCE

Il semble qu'il y ait un abîme qui sépare la pensée chrétienne, qui affirme l'existence de Dieu, et le bouddhisme zen, qui parle de l'Absolu en termes de Néant (*Nothingness*). L'examen de cette négation qui se situe au centre de la pensée zen peut néanmoins nous aider à recerner ce que signifie l'existence de Dieu pour nous. Notre discussion commencera par l'examen d'un concept fondamental dans l'interprétation zen de l'Absolu: *Pratitya Samutpada*, ou loi de la production conditionnée, connue également sous le nom de la loi de co-dépendance. Par ces mots, le zen affirme que rien ne se suffit à soi-même et que tout ce qui est existe à l'intérieur d'un contexte d'inter-dépendance et de relations mutuelles.

Un autre aspect de cette inter-dépendance, est que toute chose apparaît à partir d'une certaine forme de vacuité et la suppose. La vacuité est toutefois considérée à partir d'un point de vue positif, et non négatif. Par exemple, le besoin constitue une forme de vacuité. Comme c'est souvent le cas cependant, et tout particulièrement dans les relations personnelles, le besoin que nous éprouvons des autres peut, en fait, faire ressortir la signification inhérente à chaque personne. Nous devrions donc regarder notre monde comme un réseau d'individus ayant besoin les uns des autres et dont les autres ont besoin. D'où ce paradoxe: la plénitude implique la vacuité, et vice versa.

Dans la mesure où nous sommes concernés par beaucoup plus que nous-mêmes, chacun de nous constitue un individu qui se situe à l'intérieur d'un réseau de relations, réseau où les autres se trouvent présents à l'intérieur même de l'être de notre propre personne. Les frontières qui semblent nous diviser et nous séparer s'estompent en fait et disparaissent. Chacun de nous participe à la personne qui est l'autre. Cette affirmation, sans pour autant nier l'existence de l'individu, accentue plutôt le fait que l'individu n'existe pas par lui-même. Chacun de nous est donc vacuité en ce que, laissé strictement à soi-même, il ne reste plus rien.

Nous pouvons clarifier davantage cette conception paradoxale de l'individu en réfléchissant à la métaphore zen du Grand Soi par opposition au petit soi. Le petit soi représente simplement l'ombre de soi, qui est perçu comme une entité séparée et indépendante de tout le reste. Le Grand Soi apparaît au-delà de ce dernier et particulièrement dans certains moments où nous nous trouvons soulevés et transportés hors de nous-mêmes. En tant que Grand Soi, nous sommes comme si nous n'étions pas, même si nous pouvons être intensément présents. En perdant notre vie dans de tels instants, nous la rendons plus riche, que ce soit à l'occasion d'une promenade, d'une conversation, d'un jeu ou même d'une pensée. C'est à ces moments que nous sommes à la fois le plus nous-mêmes et le moins nous-mêmes, lorsque le temps lui-même disparaît et nous avec lui.

Le penseur japonais Seiichi Yogi donne un exemple tiré du domaine de la nature et qui peut nous aider à préciser ce qu'est ce Grand Soi. Il nous demande de considérer comment un simple arbre, même pris dans son individualité, renferme toute la nature et en est nourri. Non seulement l'arbre fait-il partie de tout ce qu'est la nature, mais encore, tout l'univers est présent en lui.

De plus, nous devons comprendre que le Grand Soi lui-même est conditionné. En faisant appel à la pensée de Masao Abe, nous constatons que le Grand Soi se présente dans l'ouverture mutuelle qui relie toutes choses en tant que parties d'un monde qui leur est commun. Dans ce contexte d'ouverture, le Grand Soi représente la plénitude de l'être que chacun reçoit et exprime en tant que partie du monde de l'autre. En tant que tel, il représente la plénitude au sein de l'extinction (*emptying*) du moi, qui ne conserve rien.

Nous sommes ainsi conduits au coeur de la pensée bouddhique et de sa vérité la plus fondamentale: la Vacuité (*sunyata*). La vacuité n'est cependant pas comprise dans le sens négatif occidental habituel mais plutôt dans le sens taoïste d'une sorte de «gestation qui tient compte de...» Nous pouvons quelque peu préciser toutes les conséquences qui découlent de la vacuité en tant que plénitude en pensant à la signification de la *karuna*, soit la compassion. Comprise en terme de *karuna*, l'ouverture implique une affirmation et une confirmation mutuelles par lesquelles, en nous préoccupant les uns des autres, nous leur donnons un sens, comme nous en donnons un au monde.

La compassion elle-même toutefois, comprise comme l'énergie réciproque qui maintient le monde et comme son âme même, est, elle aussi, conditionnée. Elle n'existe pas en elle-même, mais elle existe plutôt dans les multiples façons par lesquelles, en accordant attention aux autres, nous donnons une signification au monde en tant que possibilité d'offrir et de recevoir les uns des autres. Si nous en parlons en termes de Dieu, alors on devrait dire que Dieu lui-même est conditionné et donc, pour ainsi dire, qu'il ne l'est pas non plus. Aussi étrange que cela puisse paraître, cette affirmation peut être compatible avec la pensée chrétienne qui aborde Dieu à

travers la personne de Jésus qui se donne lui-même. Peut-être la personne de Jésus en tant que Christ ne symbolise-t-elle que la présence de Dieu au sein de tout ce qui existe, Dieu étant lui-même tout ce qui existe.

Dans cette perspective zen, croire en Dieu peut signifier croire en la possibilité de prendre possession de Dieu jusqu'au point où il se dépouille lui-même. Autrement dit, cela signifie croire au sens du monde en tant que possibilité qui jaillit de l'auto-néantisation de Dieu et qui la projette.