

## The Development of Christian Zen

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Like a Christian who discovers that one of her grandparents was Jewish, I unexpectedly have found that I have a mixed religious identity. Only in my case my ancestry is not Jewish but Buddhist, and not by bodily but by spiritual DNA. If I had to say what my religion is, I might say Christian Zen. And that is not all—I have also found that I have some cousins out there.

I know the Christian side of my heritage well. I was raised a Roman Catholic Christian, and but for a half dozen years in my early adulthood have continued in the Christian tradition, studying the Bible, praying and engaging in other Christian practices. During that early hiatus, I explored other religions and took up the practice of meditation. Discovery of the contemplative tradition of Christianity (which utilizes meditation) led me back to my birth religion, but I continued to occasionally read about Buddhism or visit various Buddhist groups because of my interest in their experience of meditation. Two years ago I was listening to a cassette tape of a teacher from the Zen tradition, when something changed inside of me. This change has had a powerful effect on my life since then, one of the minor effects being that I am now deeply convinced that there is truth in both Christianity and Buddhism; thus my mixed identity.

That Zen teacher was Adyashanti, an American lay teacher from the lineage of Taizan Maezumi, the founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles. In exploring further into this lineage, I have discovered interlinking roots with a number of other Christian Zen practitioners, including several Catholic priests and members of religious orders who have been approved as Zen teachers. This essay traces that lineage and reveals those interconnections, and concludes with some thoughts about the meaning of all this for interreligious dialogue.

## 1. From the Buddha to Zen

“Zen” is a Japanese word that means meditation. It has become a shorthand phrase referring to elements of the Zen Buddhist religious tradition that modern Westerners have found attractive or intriguing. For example, a focus on meditation and the experience of enlightenment, the embrace of paradox, and a simple yet powerful style in arts such as painting and poetry.

Any Zen lineage must start with the Buddha himself, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in Northern India during the fifth century B.C.E.<sup>1</sup> According to the sutras (the Buddhist sacred writings), Siddhartha left home to become a spiritual seeker, trying many teachings and practices before he settled on his “middle way” of avoiding extremes. He became known as the Buddha (Enlightened or Awakened One) after attaining supreme enlightenment during a night of meditation, and in his subsequent career as a spiritual teacher drew primarily on his own experience rather than adhering to any previous tradition. The Buddha left behind memories of his example and teachings, as well as the monastic way of life he had organized.<sup>2</sup>

The Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma migrated to China about 470 C.E. and became the First Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. “Chan” is a Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit word for meditation; the Chan tradition emphasized meditation and “direct pointing into the mind” over study of the sutras and philosophical discussion. It holds that its teaching lineage ran from the Buddha through his disciple Mahakasyapa directly down to Bodhidharma.<sup>3</sup>

A key figure later in Chan was Hui-neng (638-713), the Sixth Patriarch of Chan and one of its most revered figures. In the *Platform Sutra* Hui-neng is depicted as a poor illiterate who came to enlightenment and then spent thirty-seven years teaching from his experience. One of the major themes of the *Platform Sutra* is that knowledge of the scriptures without wisdom is another source of delusion. (Christians should take note!) Inherent “Buddha-nature” is the

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<sup>1</sup> The exact dates of the Buddha’s birth and death are contested; Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11. B.C.E. means “before the common era,” which is an academic term for the time period commonly referred to as B.C. (before Christ); C.E. (common era) is the term used for the period commonly referred to as A.D. (*anno Domini*—the year of our Lord).

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 11-21, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 200-204. The traditional lineage may be found in Hui-neng, *The Sutra of Hui-neng, Grand Master of Zen*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), 77. Mitchell states that ancient manuscripts discovered in 1907 at the Chinese city of Tun-huang have cast the historicity of the traditional lineage in doubt (Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 178, 200-200-201).

source of wisdom, but it is obscured in most people because of attachment to thoughts, desires and other mental phenomena. By detaching yourself from such phenomena—not suppressing them as some taught—Buddha-nature reveals itself.<sup>4</sup> (This teaching is similar to that of Eastern Orthodox Christians and Western Christian mystics, who see the human soul as being created in the image of God but needing purification to fully develop “the mind of Christ” within.)

The Chan tradition subsequently developed various schools, two of which are of particular importance. The Lin-chi school developed a system utilizing *kung-ans*, paradoxical statements meant to trigger enlightenment. In the late twelfth century Lin-chi was introduced to Japan, where it became known as Rinzai Zen (Zen is the Japanese form of the word Chan; *koan* the Japanese form of *kung-an*). The Ts’ao-tung school of Chan emphasized *zazen*, sitting in silent meditation; this school was introduced to Japan in the thirteenth century, where it became known as Soto Zen.<sup>5</sup> The aim of both these schools was to foster the experience of *kensho* (“insight into one’s True Self”) and the deepening of this insight into full enlightened living.

## 2. The Harada-Yasutani lineage

Lay practitioners have been around since the beginning of Buddhism, and periodically there have been teachers who have worked to make monastic practices more accessible to lay people. However, the involvement of the laity in Japanese Buddhism changed dramatically in the Meiji period (1868-1912), during which the government was attacking the Buddhist clergy as corrupt at the same time that Western intellectual influences were spreading in Japan. As a result, some Buddhist religious leaders attempted to modernize and reform Buddhism in order to meet these challenges and increase lay support.<sup>6</sup>

Harada Daium (1871-1961) was one of these reformers. Although he received *inka* (certification as an heir within a teaching lineage) from a Rinzai master, he had studied with both Rinzai and Soto teachers and in his career as a Zen master sought to bring both traditions together. Despite his reputation as a strict disciplinarian, his retreats attracted numerous monks from both lineages as well as Japanese and foreign laypeople. Unlike many other Zen teachers,

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<sup>4</sup> Hui-neng, *Sutra of Hui-neng*.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 204-206.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Sharf, “Sanbokyodan Zen and the Way of the New Religions,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22 (1995): 434-435; Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 279-280.

he believed *kensho* was within reach of anyone, layperson or monk, who was motivated enough in their practice.<sup>7</sup>

One of his disciples was Yasutani Hakuun (1885-1973), who received Dharma transmission (again, a certification as heir within a lineage) from a Soto master but like Harada had studied under a number of teachers and actively sought to integrate the Rinzai and Soto traditions. Although ordained as a priest, Yasutani married and worked as a school teacher for several years before obtaining a position at a small temple. Around that same time he met Harada, and a few years later attained *kensho* at one of Harada's retreats. He received *inka* from Harada in 1943.<sup>8</sup>

Yasutani's Zen teaching had become more and more aimed at laypeople, and eventually he broke with the official Soto institution and formed Sanbokyodan, an independent religious organization. Like Harada, Yasutani's emphasis was on students experiencing *kensho*, and he was increasingly critical of the Zen establishment for allegedly letting ritual and intellectualizing get in the way of the attainment of awakening. He travelled widely and trained many foreigners, among them the later-to-be prominent American Zen teachers Philip Kapleau and Robert Aitken. Despite his break with Soto, Yasutani gave *inka* to several students, among them Yamada Koun (1907-1989), a layperson who was to succeed him as the head of Sanbokyodan in 1970, and Taizan Maezumi (1931-1995), the founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Christian Zen teachers

Yamada Koun, like his teacher Yasutani, travelled widely, teaching and giving retreats. Interest in Zen Buddhism among Westerners had spread throughout the twentieth century, fed by the migration of Zen teachers to the West and the influence of writers such as the famous Catholic monk, Thomas Merton. Under Yamada the lay orientation of Sanbokyodan grew even stronger, and among his many foreign students were a number of Catholic priests and religious (both male and female). Sanbokyodan training dispensed with most of the ceremonial aspects of monastic training, retaining primarily *koan* study and *zazen* practice, and presented attaining and then deepening *kensho* as the "true Zen" which could be practiced within any religion. Short,

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<sup>7</sup> Sharf, "Sanbokyodan," 419-420.

<sup>8</sup> Sharf, "Sanbokyodan," 420-421.

<sup>9</sup> Sharf, "Sanbokyodan," 421-422, 443-444.

intensive retreats with little study of Buddhist texts or philosophy was ideal for attracting the participation of laypeople and foreigners. The stress on the attainment and deepening of *kensho* went so far as certifying Christian priests and religious as “Zen” teachers who had never taken any Buddhist precepts (the ceremony of formal commitment to Buddhism).<sup>10</sup> According to Robert Sharf,

By the end of Yamada’s life approximately one quarter of the participants at his Kamakura *sesshin* were practicing Christians, and they were provided with a separate room during morning chanting in which to celebrate the Eucharist. . . . Today, the majority of authorized foreign Sanbokyodan teachers are members of Catholic orders, and they lead affiliate Zen groups in the Philippines, Singapore, India, Europe, Australia, and Japan.<sup>11</sup>

Taizan Maezumi was ordained a Soto priest at an early age, received Dharma transmission from his father in 1955, and was later approved to teach by Rinzai lay teacher Koryu Osaka as well as Yasutani. He thus stood within three lineages, although his teaching style owed a great deal to Yasutani. He emigrated to Los Angeles in 1956 to serve at a Japanese-American Zen temple, and by 1967 formed the Zen Center of Los Angeles to serve the many non-Asian Americans he was teaching. Maezumi gave transmission to twelve successors, many of whom affiliate with the Soto headquarters in Japan. One of his Dharma heirs, Bernard Glassman (founder of the Zen Community of New York), gave Dharma transmission to the Catholic Jesuit priest Robert E. Kennedy in 1991.<sup>12</sup> (Maezumi also gave an American laywoman, Arvis Joen Justi, permission to teach, who in turn later gave permission to the American lay teacher Adyashanti, mentioned at the beginning of this essay.)<sup>13</sup>

The proliferation of Christian Zen teachers and practitioners will inevitably continue as

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<sup>10</sup> Sharf, “Sanbokyōdan,” 423-424, 426-434, 437-438, 440-441.

<sup>11</sup> Sharf, “Sanbokyodan,” 439.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 225, 258; Sharf, “Sanbokyodan,” 425 n. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Adyashanti, interview by anonymous, 7 March 1999, *When I Awoke: Tales of Awakening in Various Nondual Traditions*, <http://www.wheniawoke.com/Sages/Adyashanti.pdf>, Internet, accessed 1 Dec. 2004, 9-10, 20-22, 28, 30; Stephan Bodian, “The Taboo of Enlightenment: Do We Really Believe We Can Awaken?” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 44-45.

current teachers give approval to others. For example, the aforementioned Jesuit priest and Zen teacher Robert E. Kennedy has named five Dharma successors already.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Christian Zen and interreligious dialogue

What do these developments mean for interreligious dialogue? For one thing, they demonstrate the difficulty of determining who is a “genuine” representative of a particular religious tradition. Sanbokyodan teachers have been very active in Christian-Buddhist dialogue conferences and retreats around the world, and Sharf alleges that “sometimes one and the same foreign disciple of Yamada would find him or herself representing Christianity one day, and Buddhism the next!”<sup>15</sup> As farcial as that sounds, there are now numerous people who can claim to be both ordained clergy and/or vowed religious within an established Christian tradition, and certified Zen teachers within a lineage going back to recognized Buddhist teachers. Are they Christian, are they Buddhist, or are they yet something else? What are the criteria for a genuine representative of a religious tradition?

Another question involves the aim of interreligious dialogue. Insofar as some participants already have or are creating blended religious identities, those who want to preserve separate and distinct identities for different religions will at some point find their aims diverging.<sup>16</sup> Improved mutual understanding and peaceful relations between religions is a fine goal that most everyone can subscribe to, but entering into dialogue carries risks as well. Discovering similarities between traditions can create a pull toward blending and merging them, while identifying differences challenges adherents to defend their tradition against such blending tendencies. Conflict within traditions between those in one camp or the other may very well be sharpened.

Both of these issues are grounded in a more fundamental question raised by the modern

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<sup>14</sup> *Morning Star Zendo*, <http://kennedyzen.tripod.com>, Internet, accessed 20 December 2004. One can find a number of “Christian Zen” teachers on the World Wide Web, usually evidencing a connection with the Harada-Yasutani lineage. See for example, *High Mountain Crystal Lake Zen Center*, <http://www.highzen.com>, Internet, accessed 20 December 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Sharf, “Sanbokyodan,” 439. This seems to me more like ventriloquism than dialogue!

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, apparently even among the Christian Zen teachers from the Harada-Yasutani lineage there is a division between those who wanted to maintain a distinction between Zen practice and Christian practice, and those who aim at an eventually unity of the two traditions. “Christian Contemplation and Zen Enlightenment: Are They the Same?” *Inner Explorations*, <http://www.innerexplorations.com/ewtext/cc.htm>, Internet, accessed 20 December 2004. The webpage cites David Loy in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1989): 53 n. 2.

encounter of different religions, and highlighted by Sanbokyodan's activities, which is the relation between religious forms and religious experience. Do religious forms—institutions, texts, teachings, practices—have value in themselves, or are they only of importance insofar as they lead people to some type of religious experience? Do religious forms help distinguish true from false, or shallow from deep, religious experience; that is, do they have authority over religious experience? Or is religious experience the authority, giving licence for reformers to reshape and perhaps even jettison religious forms?

### 5. Conclusion

The questions raised by this examination of the development of Christian Zen are both extremely important and very difficult, so I would not presume to attempt a definitive answer to them, if such a thing is even possible. However, I cannot avoid having a position on them due to my own experience. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, I have had dual (or even multiple) religious influences on my own spiritual life. The context of my experiences has made it impossible for me not to privilege experience over form, but it has also forced me to see the relation between them as more complex than that might imply.

Shortly after I first began practicing meditation, during my 'hiatus' from Christianity, I had some "awakening" experiences which were difficult for me to interpret due to my standing outside of any particular religious tradition. (I had learned meditation initially from a book about how to improve your eyesight, and subsequently took a weekend seminar that used guided imagery meditation but did not have any clear religious affiliation.) Later on, after reading about and speaking with people of different traditions, I found that my experiences seemed to have common features with both the *kensho* experience in Zen Buddhism and the "born again" experience of evangelical Christians. The experiences left me with an unshakable sense of there being a reality larger than my "self," and in other circumstances might very well have made me either a committed Buddhist or a committed Christian depending on the context.

As it turned out, I met a spiritual teacher not long after that who introduced me to the Christian contemplative tradition, and I came to accept the central Christian teachings about the identity and mission of Jesus Christ. But it still seemed to me that there was something valid in the experience of other religions such as Buddhism. If I had committed to the Christian tradition first and had the experiences afterwards, I might have seen the experiences as confirming the

tradition, and been less open to other possible interpretations. But even as I immersed myself within my home tradition of Christianity, I remained open to the idea of other religious traditions being important vehicles of religious experience.

About twenty-five years later, still a practicing Christian, I was at a point of personal crisis related to a sense that my spiritual life had become stuck against some insurmountable barrier. That was the point at which hearing the Zen teacher Adyashanti caused a dramatic internal shift to what I can only describe as a new form of consciousness. As a Christian I might interpret this change one way, but because it was seemingly instigated by a Zen teacher I could also interpret it another way. In short, it is impossible for me to accept either tradition as the religious form uniquely responsible for that experience.

While these experiences have made it impossible for me to think of religious form as having ultimate authority over religious experience, they have also impressed upon me how complex the relation between the two is. The earlier experience gave me a sense of having a superior vantage point from which to judge religious forms, but the later experience was more significant and I do not think it would have come to pass without both the subsequent years of shaping in a particular tradition and the stimulus of a teacher who also had been shaped by a tradition—although not the same tradition!

In sum, religious forms serve both to provoke an initial religious experience, and to deepen it into a more mature stage of development. On the one hand, if a religious form has come to impede religious experience, or if it is being given ultimate value apart from religious experience, reform is clearly needed. On the other hand, attempts to reshape a time-tested religious form based only on an initial religious experience are in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Ironically, Sanbokyodan may prove to have served more for a revitalization of Christian spirituality, than for its intended reform of Buddhism.

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