

ON HAVING NO HEAD

a contribution to zen in the west

D. E. HARDING



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1961

THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY

58 ECCLESTON SQUARE, LONDON, S.W.1

PUBLISHERS' FOREWORD

This booklet contains a brief account of a remarkable Zen experience. Now that there is much talk of Zen for the West, it is important as the record of an experience in the mind of a man who at the time had no knowledge of Zen Buddhism. Only in his search for an explanation did he stumble into this field, and find what he needed. These chapters will in due course form part of a larger book to be called *Zen Experience, a Western View*, or some such title, but in our opinion they should be made available to all interested with the least possible delay.

June, 1961.

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✓ The Buddhist Society.

First Published 1961

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Cover thy breast with nothingness, and draw over thy head the robe of non-existence. ATTAR

Give yourself utterly. . . . Even though the head itself must be given, why should you weep over it? KABIR

Behead yourself ! Dissolve your whole body into Vision ; become seeing, seeing, seeing ! JALALU'L-DIN RUMI

My soul has been carried away, and usually my head as well, without my being able to prevent it. ST. TERESA

“Now, I give you fair warning,” shouted the Queen, stamping on the ground as she spoke ; “Either you or your head must be off, and that in about half no time !”

Alice in Wonderland

Suppose a man were all of a sudden to make his appearance here and cut your head off with a sword !

HUI-CHUNG

‘I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter. T. S. ELIOT,

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

ON HAVING NO HEAD

CHAPTER I

VISION

THE best day of my life—my rebirthday, so to speak—was when I found I had no head. This is not a literary gambit, a witticism designed to arouse interest at any cost. I mean it in all seriousness : *I have no head.*

It was eighteen years ago, when I was thirty-three, that I made the discovery. Though it certainly came out of the blue, it did so in response to an urgent enquiry ; I had for several months been absorbed in the question : what am I? The fact that I happened to be walking in the Himalayas at the time probably had little to do with it ; though in that country unusual states of mind are said to come more easily. However that may be, a very still clear day, and a view from the ridge where I stood, over misty blue valleys to the highest mountain range in the world, with Kangchenjunga and Everest unprominent among its snow-peaks, made a setting worthy of the grandest vision.

What actually happened was something absurdly simple and unspectacular : I stopped thinking. A peculiar quiet, an odd kind of alert limpness or numbness, came over me. Reason and imagination and all mental chatter died down. For once, words really failed me.

Past and future dropped away. I forgot who and what I was, my name, manhood, animalhood, all that could be called mine. It was as if I had been born that instant, brand new, mindless, innocent of all memories. There existed only the Now, that present moment and what was clearly given in it. To look was enough. And what I found was khaki trouserlegs terminating downwards in a pair of brown shoes, khaki sleeves terminating sideways in a pair of pink hands, and a khaki shirtfront terminating upwards in—absolutely nothing whatever! Certainly not in a head.

It took me no time at all to notice that this nothing, this hole where a head should have been, was no ordinary vacancy, no mere nothing. On the contrary, it was very much occupied. It was a vast emptiness vastly filled, a nothing that found room for everything—room for grass, trees, shadowy distant hills, and far above them snowpeaks like a row of angular clouds riding the blue sky. I had lost a head and gained a world.

It was all, quite literally, breathtaking. I seemed to stop breathing altogether, absorbed in the Given. Here it was, this superb scene, brightly shining in the clear air, alone and unsupported, mysteriously suspended in the void, and (and *this* was the real miracle, the wonder and delight) utterly free of “me”, unstained by any observer. Its total presence was my total absence, body and soul. Lighter than air, clearer than glass, altogether released from myself, I was nowhere around.

Yet in spite of the magical and uncanny quality of this vision, it was no dream, no esoteric revelation. Quite the reverse: it felt like a sudden waking from the sleep of ordinary life, an end to dreaming. It was self-luminous reality for once swept clean of all obscuring mind. It was the revelation, at long last, of the perfectly

obvious. It was a lucid moment in a confused life-history. It was a ceasing to ignore something which (since early childhood at any rate) I had always been too busy or too clever to see. It was naked, uncritical attention to what had all along been staring me in the face—my utter facelessness. In short, it was all perfectly simple and plain and straightforward, beyond argument, thought, and words. There arose no questions, no reference beyond the experience itself, but only peace and a quiet joy, and the sensation of having dropped an intolerable burden.

The notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged ; this I shall do by . . . melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.—BLAKE.

“I think I’ll go and meet her,” said Alice. . . . “You can’t possibly do that”, said the Rose : “*I* should advise you to walk the other way”.

This sounded nonsense to Alice, so she said nothing, but set off at once towards the Red Queen. To her surprise, she lost sight of her in a moment.

Through the Looking Glass

As a beauty I am not a star ;
There are others more handsome by far.
But my face—I don’t mind it
For I am behind it ;
It’s the people in front get the jar.

Attributed to WOODROW WILSON

CHAPTER II

WORKING IT OUT

As the first wonder of my Himalayan discovery began to wear off, I started describing it to myself in some such words as the following.

Somehow or other I had vaguely thought of myself as inhabiting this house which is my body, and looking out through its two round windows at the world. Now I find it isn't like that at all. As I gaze into the distance, what is there at this moment to tell me how many eyes I have here—two, or three, or hundreds, or none? In fact, only one window appears on this side of my façade, and that one is wide open and frameless, with nobody looking out of it. It is always the other fellow who has eyes and a face to frame them; never this one.

There exist, then, two sorts—two widely different species—of man. The first, of which I note countless specimens, evidently carries a head on its shoulders (and by “head” I mean a hairy eight-inch ball with various holes in it) while the second, of which I note only one specimen, evidently carries no such thing on its shoulders. And till now I had overlooked this considerable difference! Victim of a prolonged fit of madness, of a lifelong hallucination (and by “hallucination” I mean what my dictionary says: *apparent perception of an object not actually present*), I had invariably seen myself as pretty much like other men, and certainly never as a decapitated but still living biped. I had been blind to the one thing that is always present, and without which

I am blind indeed—to this marvellous substitute-for-a-head, this unbounded clarity, this luminous and absolutely pure void, which nevertheless is—rather than contains—all things. For, however carefully I attend, I fail to find here even so much as a blank screen on which these mountains and sun and sky are projected, or a clear mirror in which they are reflected, or a transparent lens or aperture through which they are viewed—still less a soul or a mind to which they are presented, or a viewer (however shadowy) who is distinguishable from the view. Nothing whatever intervenes, not even that baffling and elusive obstacle called “distance”: the huge blue sky, the pink-edged whiteness of the snows, the sparkling green of the grass—how can these be remote, when there’s nothing to be remote from? The headless void here refuses all definition and location: it is not round, or small, or big, or even here as distinct from there. (And even if there *were* a head here to measure outwards from, the measuring-rod stretching from it to the peak of Everest would, when read end-on—and there’s no other way for me to read it—reduce to a point, to nothing.) In fact, these coloured shapes present themselves in all simplicity, without any such complications as near or far, this or that, mine or not mine, seen-by-me or merely given. All twoness—all duality of subject and object—has vanished: it is no longer read into a situation which has no room for it.

Such were the thoughts which followed the vision. To try to set down the first-hand, immediate experience in these or any other terms, however, is to misrepresent it by complicating what is quite simple: indeed the longer the postmortem examination drags on the further it gets from the living original. At best, these descriptions can remind one of the vision (without the bright

awareness, or invite a recurrence of it ; but they can no more convey its essential quality, or ensure a recurrence, than the most appetizing menu can taste like the dinner, or the best book about humour enable one to see a joke. On the other hand, it is impossible to stop thinking for long, and some attempt to relate the lucid intervals of one's life to the confused background is inevitable. It could also encourage, indirectly, the recurrence of lucidity.

In any case, there are several common-sense objections which refuse to be put off any longer, questions which insist on reasoned answers, however inconclusive. It becomes necessary to "justify" one's vision, even to oneself ; also one's friends may need reassuring. In a sense this attempt at domestication is absurd, because no argument can add to or take from an experience which is as plain and incontrovertible as hearing middle-C or tasting strawberry jam. In another sense, however, the attempt has to be made, if one's life is not to disintegrate into two quite alien, idea-tight compartments.

* * * *

My first objection was : my head may be missing, but not its nose. Here it is, visibly preceding me wherever I go. And my answer was : if this fuzzy, pinkish, yet perfectly transparent cloud suspended on my right, and this other similar cloud suspended on my left, are noses, then I count two of them and not one ; and the perfectly opaque single protuberance which I observe so clearly in the middle of your face is *not* a nose : only a hopelessly dishonest or confused observer would deliberately use the same name for such utterly different things. I prefer to go by my dictionary and common usage, which

oblige me to say that, whereas nearly all other men have a nose apiece, I have none.

All the same, if some misguided sceptic, over-anxious to make his point, were to strike out in this direction, aiming midway between these two pink clouds, the result would surely be as unpleasant as if I owned the most solid and punchable of noses. Again, what about this complex of subtle tensions, movements, pressures, itches, tickles, aches, warmth, and throbbings, never entirely absent from this central region? Above all, what about these touch-feelings which arise when I explore here with my hand? Surely these findings add up to massive evidence for the existence of my head right here and now, after all?

They do nothing of the sort. No doubt a great variety of sensations are plainly given here and cannot be ignored, but they don't amount to a head, or anything like one. The only way to make a head out of them would be to throw in all sorts of ingredients that are plainly missing here—in particular, all manner of coloured shapes in three dimensions. What sort of head is it that, though containing innumerable sensations, is observed to lack eyes, ears, mouth, hair, and indeed all the bodily equipment which other heads are observed to contain? The plain fact is that this place must be kept clear of all such obstructions, of the slightest mistiness or colouring which could cloud my universe.

In any case, when I start groping round for my lost head, instead of finding it here I only lose my exploring hand as well: it, too, is swallowed up in the abyss at the centre of my being. Apparently this yawning cavern, this unoccupied base of all my operations, this magical locality where I thought I kept my head, is in fact more like a beacon-fire so fierce that all things approaching it

are instantly and utterly consumed, in order that its world-illuminating brilliance and clarity shall never for a moment be obscured. As for these lurking aches and tickles and so on, they can no more quench or shade that central brightness than these mountains and clouds and sky can do so. Quite the contrary: they all exist in its shining, and through them it is seen to shine. Present experience, whatever sense is employed, occurs only in an empty and absent head. For here and now my world and my head are incompatibles: they won't mix. There is no room for both at once on these shoulders, and fortunately it is my head with all its anatomy that has to go. This is not a matter of argument, or of philosophical acumen, or of working oneself up into a state, but of simple sight—of LOOK-WHO'S-HERE instead of THINK-WHO'S-HERE. If I fail to see what I am (and especially what I am not) it is because I am too busily imaginative, too "spiritual", too adult and knowing, to accept the situation exactly as I find it at this moment. A kind of alert idiocy is what I need. It takes an innocent eye and an empty head to see their own perfect emptiness.

* * * *

Probably there is only one way of converting the sceptic who still says I have a head here, and that is to invite him to come here and take a look for himself; only he must be an honest reporter, describing what he observes and nothing else.

Starting off on the far side of the room, he sees me as a full-length man-with-a-head. But as he approaches he finds half a man, then a head, then a blurred cheek or eye or nose, then a mere blur, and finally (at the point of contact) nothing at all. Alternatively, if he happens to

be equipped with the necessary scientific instruments, he reports that the blur resolves itself into tissues, then cell-groups, then a single cell, a cell-nucleus, giant molecules . . . and so on, till he comes to a place where nothing is to be seen, to space which is empty of all solid or material objects. In either case, the observer who comes here to see what it's really like finds what I find here—vacancy. And if, having discovered and shared my nonentity here, he were to turn round (looking out with me instead of in at me) he would again find what I find—that this vacancy is filled to capacity with everything imaginable. He, too, would find this central Point exploding into an Infinite Volume, this Nothing into the All, this Here into Everywhere.

And if my sceptical observer still doubts his senses, he may try his camera instead—a device which, lacking memory and anticipation, can register only what is contained in the place where it happens to be. It records the same picture of me. Over there, it takes a man ; midway, bits and pieces of a man ; here, no man and nothing—or else, when pointed the other way round, the universe.

* * * *

So this head is not a head, but a wrong-headed idea. If I can still find it here, I am “seeing things”, and ought to hurry off to the doctor. It makes little difference whether I find a human head, or an ass's head, a fried egg, or a beautiful bunch of flowers : to have any top-knot at all is to suffer from delusions.

During my lucid intervals, however, I am clearly headless here. Over there, on the other hand, I am clearly far from headless : indeed, I have more heads than I know what to do with. Concealed in my human

observers and in cameras, on display in picture frames, pulling faces behind shaving mirrors, peering out of door knobs and spoons and coffee pots and anything which will take a high polish, my heads are always turning up—though more-or-less shrunk and distorted, twisted back-to-front, often the wrong way up, and multiplied to infinity.

But there is one place where no head of mine can ever turn up, and that is here “on my shoulders”, where it would blot out this Central Void which is my very life-source: fortunately nothing is able to do that. In fact, these loose heads can never amount to more than impermanent and unprivileged accidents of that “outer” or phenomenal world which, though altogether one with the central essence, fails to affect it in the slightest degree. So unprivileged, indeed, is my head in the mirror, that I don’t necessarily take it to be mine: as a very young child I didn’t recognize myself in the glass, and neither do I now, when for a moment I regain my lost innocence. In my saner moments I see the man over there, the too-familiar fellow who lives in that other room behind the looking-glass and seemingly spends all his time staring into this room—that small, dull, circumscribed, particularized, ageing, and oh-so-vulnerable gazer—as the opposite in every way of my real Self here. I have never been anything but this ageless, adamant, measureless, lucid and altogether immaculate Void: it is unthinkable that I could ever have confused that staring wraith over there with what I plainly perceive myself to be here and now and forever!

* * * *

All this, however clearly given in first-hand experience, is nevertheless wildly paradoxical, an affront to common-

sense. Is it also an affront to science, which is said to be only common-sense tidied up somewhat? Anyhow, the scientist has his own story of how I see some things (such as your head) but not others (such as my head); and obviously his story works. The question is: can he put my head back "on my shoulders", where common-sense says it belongs?

At its briefest and plainest, his tale of how I see you runs something like this. Light leaves the sun, and eight minutes later gets to your body, which absorbs a part of it. The rest bounces off in all directions, and some of it reaches my eye, passing through the lens and forming an inverted picture of you on the screen at the back of my eyeball. This picture sets up chemical changes in a light-sensitive substance there, and these changes disturb the cells (they are tiny living creatures) of which the screen is built. They pass on their agitation to other, very elongated cells; and these, in turn, to cells in a certain region of my brain. It is only when this terminus is reached, and the particles of these brain-cells are affected, that I see you or anything else. And the same is true of the other senses; I neither see nor hear nor smell nor taste nor feel anything at all until the converging stimuli actually arrive, after the most drastic changes and delays, at this centre. It is only at this terminal point, this moment and place of all arrivals at the Grand Central Station of my Here-Now, that the traffic system of my universe springs into existence. For me, this is the time and place of all creation.

There are many odd things, infinitely remote from common-sense, about this plain tale of science. And the oddest of them is that the tale's conclusion cancels out the rest of it. For it says that all I can know is what is going on here and now, at this terminal brain centre,

where my world is miraculously created. I have no way of finding out what is going on elsewhere—in the other regions of my head, in my eyes, in the outside world—if, indeed, there *is* an elsewhere, an outside world at all. The sober truth is that my body, and your body, and everything else on Earth, and the Universe itself—as they might exist out there in themselves and in their own space, independently of me—are mere figments, not worth a second thought. There neither is nor can be any evidence for two parallel worlds (an unknown outer or physical world there, plus a known inner or mental world here which mysteriously duplicates it) but only for this one world which is always before me, and in which I can find no division into mind and matter, inside and outside, soul and body. It is what it is observed to be, no more and no less, and it is the explosion of this centre—an explosion tremendous enough to fill Heaven and Earth.

In brief, the scientist's story of perception, so far from contradicting my naive story, only confirms it. Provisionally and common-sensibly, he put a head on my shoulders, but it was soon ousted by the universe. The common-sense or unparadoxical view of myself as an "ordinary man" doesn't work at all; as soon as I examine it with any care, it turns out to be nonsense.

* * * *

And yet (I tell myself) it seems to work out well enough for all everyday, practical purposes. I carry on just as if there actually were, suspended here, plumb in the middle of my universe, a solid eight-inch ball. And I'm inclined to add that, in the uninquisitive and truly hard-headed world we all inhabit, this manifest absurdity can't be avoided: it is surely a fiction so convenient that it might as well be the plain truth.

In fact, it is always a lie, and, often an inconvenient lie at that : it can even lose a man money. Consider, for instance, the designer of advertisements—a man nobody would accuse of fanatical devotion to truth. His business is persuading me, and one of the most effective ways of doing that is to get me right into the picture as I really am. Accordingly he must leave my head out of it. Instead of showing the other kind of man—the one with the head—lifting a glass or a cigarette to his mouth, he shows my kind doing so : *this* right hand (life-size, held at precisely the correct angle in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture, and more or less armless) lifting a glass or a cigarette to—this gaping void, nowhere. This man is indeed no stranger, but myself as I am to myself. Almost inevitably I am involved. No wonder these loose limbs arriving out of nowhere into the corners of the picture, with nothing in the centre to animate or connect them—no wonder they look perfectly natural to me : I never had any other sort ! And the advertiser's realism, his uncommon-sensible working knowledge of what I am really like, evidently pays off : when my head goes, my sales resistance is apt to follow. (However, there are limits : he is unlikely, for instance, to draw a pink cloud just above the glass or the cigarette, because I supply that piece of realism anyhow. There would be no point in giving me another transparent nose shadow.)

Film directors, also, are practical people, much more interested in the telling re-creation of experience than in discerning the nature of the experiencer ; but in fact the one involves some of the other. Certainly these experts are well aware (for example) how feeble my reaction is to a film of a vehicle obviously driven by someone else, compared with my reaction to a film of a vehicle

apparently driven by myself. In the first instance I am a spectator on the pavement, observing two similar cars swiftly approaching, colliding, killing the drivers, bursting into flames—and I am mildly interested. In the second, I am the driver—headless, of course, like all first-person drivers, and my car (what little there is of it) is stationary. Here are my swaying knees, my foot hard down on the accelerator, my hands struggling with the steering wheel, the long bonnet sloping away in front, telegraph poles whizzing by, the road snaking this way and that, the other car, tiny at first, but looming larger and larger, coming straight at me, and then the crash, a great flash of light, and an empty silence. . . . I sink back onto my seat and get my breath back. I have been taken for a ride.

How are they filmed, these first-person sequences? Two ways are possible: either a headless dummy is photographed, with the camera in place of the head; or else a real man is photographed, with his head held far back or to one side to make room for the camera. In other words, to ensure that I shall identify myself with the actor, his head is got out of the way: he must be my kind of man. For a picture of me-with-a-head is no likeness at all: it is the portrait of a complete stranger, a case of mistaken identity.

It is curious that anyone should go to the advertising man for a glimpse into the deepest—and simplest—truths about himself; odd also that an elaborate modern invention like the cinema should help rid anyone of an illusion which very young children and animals are free of. But in other ages there were other and equally curious pointers, and our human capacity for self-deception has surely never been complete. A profound though dim awareness of the human condition may well

explain the popularity of many old cults and legends of loose and flying heads, of one-eyed or headless monsters and apparitions, of human bodies with non-human heads, and of martyrs who (like King Charles in the ill-punctuated sentence) walked and talked after their heads were cut off—fantastic pictures, no doubt, but nearer than common-sense ever gets to a true portrait of *this* man.

* * * *

My Himalayan experience, then, was no mere poetic fancy or airy mystical flight. In every way it turned out to be sober realism. And gradually, in the months and years that followed, the full extent of its practical implications and applications, its life-transforming consequences, dawned upon me.

For example, I saw that this new vision must transform my attitude to other men, and indeed to all creatures, because it gives me perfect insight into their real nature—themselves as they are to themselves. For I must believe that what is true for me is true for all, that they are in the same condition—reduced to headless voids, to nothing, so that they may contain and become everything. This small, headed, solid-looking man I pass in the street—*he* is the product of fancy, the airy phantom, the heavily disguised one, the walking opposite and contradiction of the real man whose capacity and extent are infinite: and my respect for him, for every living thing, should be infinite too. Now I know exactly who he is, I know how to treat him.

In fact, he is myself. While we had a head apiece, obviously we were two. But now we are headless voids, what is there to part us? However hard I try, I can find no shell enclosing this void which I am, no shape or

boundary or limit : in other words, it really is void, and therefore cannot help but merge with other voids.

Of this merging I am my own perfect specimen. I don't doubt the scientist who says that, from his observation point over there, I have a clearly defined head consisting of an immense hierarchy of clearly defined bodies such as organs, cells, and molecules—an inexhaustibly complex world of physical things and processes. But I happen to know (or rather, to be) the inside story of this world, and it completely contradicts the outside story. Right here, I find that every member of this vast community, from the smallest particle to my head itself, has vanished like darkness in sunlight. No outsider is qualified to speak for them : only I am in a position to do so, and I swear they are all lucid, simple, empty, and one, without trace of division.

If this is true of my head, it is equally true of everything I take to be "myself" and "here"—in brief, of this total body-mind. What is it really like (I ask myself) to be here? Am I shut up in what Marcus Aurelius called this bag of blood and corruption (and what we might call this walking zoo, or cell-city, or chemical factory), or am I shut out of it? Do I spend my life embedded inside a solid, man-shaped block (roughly six feet by two by one), or outside that block, or perhaps both inside and outside it? The fact is : things aren't like that at all. There are no obstructions here, no inside or outside, no room or lack of room, no hiding place or shelter : I can find no home here to live in or to be locked out of, and not an inch of ground to build it on. But this homelessness suits me perfectly—a void needs no housing. In short, this physical order of things, so solid-looking over there, is always soluble without residue here.

And I find this is true, not only of my human body,

but of my total Body, the universe itself. (Even from the outsider's viewpoint, the distinction between these embodiments is an artificial 'One': this little body is so united functionally to all other things, so dependent upon its environment, that it is non-existent and unthinkable by itself; in fact, no creature can survive for a moment except as that one Body which alone is all there, self-contained, independent, and therefore truly alive.) How much of this total Body I take on depends upon the occasion, but automatically I feel my way into as much as I need. Thus I may with perfect ease identify myself in turn with my head, my six-foot body, my family, my country, my planet (as when I imagine it threatened by another), and so on endlessly, without ever coming up against any limit or barrier. And however great or small my temporary embodiment—this part of the world that I call mine and take to be here, that I am now thinking and feeling for, that I have for backing, whose point of view I have adopted, into whose shoes I put myself—it invariably turns out to be void, nothing here in itself. In fact, I can discover no opacity anywhere: all is lucid and open. I know my way in and out of the secret inmost heart of every creature, however remote or repulsive it might seem to the outsider, because we are all one Body, and that Body is one Void.

And that Void is *this* void, complete and indivisible, not shared out or split up into mine and yours and theirs, but all of it present here and now. This very spot, this observation-post of mine, this particular "hole where a head should have been"—*this* is the divine Ground of all existence, the one Source of all that appears (when projected "over there") as the physical or phenomenal world, the one infinitely fertile Womb from which all

creatures are born and into which they all return. It is absolutely Nothing, yet all things ; the only Reality, yet an absentee. It is my Self. There is nothing else whatever. I am alone.

Does not purification consist in the separation of the soul as far as possible from the body?—PLATO

The soul has now no further awareness of the body and will give herself no foreign name, not man, not living being, nor anything at all.—PLOTINUS

After the body has been cast off to a distance like a corpse, the Sage never more attaches himself to it.—SANKARA

If one opens one's eyes and seeks the body, it is not to be found any more. This is called : In the empty chamber it grows light. Inside and outside, everything is equally light. That is a very favourable sign.—*The Secret of the Golden Flower*

Vow to achieve the perfect understanding that the illusory body is like dew and lightning.—Zen master HSU YUN (on his death-bed, in 1959, at the age of 120)

CHAPTER III

ZEN

IN the years that followed my original experience of headlessness, then, I tried very hard to understand it, with the results that I have very briefly described. The character of the vision itself did not change during this period, though it tended to come more easily when invited, and to stay longer. But its working out, its meaning, developed as it went along, and was of course much influenced by my reading. Some help and encouragement I certainly found in books.

Discussion, on the other hand, proved almost invariably quite fruitless. "Naturally I can't see my head," my friends would say. "So what?" And foolishly I would begin to reply: "So everything! So you and the whole world are utterly transfigured. . . ." It was no good. I was unable to describe my experience in a way that interested the hearer, or conveyed to him anything of its quality or significance. He really had no idea what I was talking about—for both parties an embarrassing situation. Here was something perfectly obvious, immensely significant, a revelation of pure joy and delight—to me and nobody else! When people start seeing things others can't see, eyebrows are raised, doctors sent for. And here was I in much the same condition, except that mine was a case of *not* seeing things. Some loneliness and frustration were inevitable.

This is how a real madman must feel (I thought)—cut off, unable to communicate.

An added reason for dismay was the fact that, among my acquaintances, it was often the more cultivated and intelligent who seemed specially unable to see the point : as if headlessness were an infantile aberration which, like thumb-sucking, one should have grown out of and forgotten long ago. As for writers, some of the most brilliant positively went out of their way to tell me I was crazy—or else they were. Chesterton, in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, ends his ironical list of science-fiction wonders with the crowning absurdity : men without heads ! And the great philosopher Descartes (reckoned great because he starts his revolutionary enquiry by asking what is clearly given) goes one better : he actually begins his list of certainties—of things which are “true because perceived by the senses”—with the astonishing announcement : “Firstly, I perceived that I had a head”. Even the man in the street, who should know better, says to me : “Why, it’s as plain as the nose on your face !” With all the world of obvious things to choose from, he had to pick that !

I still preferred the evidence of my own senses to all hear-say. If this was madness, at least it wasn’t second-hand madness. In any case, I never doubted that what I saw was what the mystics saw. Only the odd thing was that so few seemed to have seen it this way. Most of the masters of the spiritual life appeared to have “kept their heads” ; or if, as was surely the case, they were not unaware of their headlessness, few thought it worth mentioning. And certainly none of them, so far as I could discover, included the practice of headlessness in any curriculum of spiritual exercises. Why was such an

obvious pointer, such convincing and ever-present demonstration of that nothingness which no spiritual teacher tires of proclaiming, so neglected? After all, it is absurdly easy ; there's no escaping it. If anything hits you in the face, this does. I was puzzled : even, at times, discouraged.

And then—better late than never—I stumbled upon Zen.

* * * *

Zen Buddhism has the reputation of being difficult anyhow, and almost impossibly so for Westerners, who for this reason are often advised to stick to their own religious tradition if they can. My own experience has been exactly the other way round. At last, after more than a decade of largely fruitless searching everywhere else, I found in the words of the Zen masters many echoes of the central experience of my life : they talked my language, spoke to my condition. Many of these masters, I found, had not only lost their heads (as we all have) but were vividly aware of their condition and its immense significance, and used every device to bring their disciples to the same realization. Let me give a few examples.

The famous *Heart Sutra*, which summarizes the essence of Mahayana Buddhism and is daily recited in Zen monasteries, having begun by stating repeatedly that the body is just emptiness, declares that there is no eye, no ear, no nose. Understandably, this bald pronouncement perplexed the young Tung-shan (807–869) ; and his teacher, who was not a Zenist, also failed to make

much of it. The pupil surveyed the teacher carefully, then explored his own face with his fingers. "You have a pair of eyes," he protested, "and a pair of ears, and the rest; and so have I. Why does the Buddha tell us there are no such things?" His teacher replied: "I am incapable of helping you. You must be trained by a Zen Master." This advice was taken, and in the end Tung-shan became a noted Zen master himself.²¹

Evidently this was just the kind of insight which a promising student might hope to gain after some years with a Zen master—the art of losing one's human, familiar face, complete with nose and eyes and ears, exchanging it for an absolutely featureless void. In fact, a century or more before this incident, Hui-neng (637–712), the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, had given his famous piece of advice on the same subject. He counselled his brother-monk Ming to stop all his craving and cogitation, and *see*: "See what at this very moment your own face looks like—the face you had before you were born." It is recorded that Ming thereupon discovered within himself that fundamental reason of all things which hitherto he had sought outside. Now he understood everything, and found himself bathed in tears and sweat. Saluting the Patriarch, he asked what other secrets remained. "In what I have shown you," replied Hui-neng, "there is nothing hidden. If you look within and recognize your own 'original face', secrecy is in you."²³

Hui-neng's "original face" is the best known and for many the most helpful of all Zen anecdotes: over the centuries in China it is said to have proved a uniquely effective pointer to enlightenment.⁵ Mumon (13th C.) has this comment:

You cannot describe it or draw it,*
 You cannot praise it fully or perceive it.
 No place can be found in which to put the original
 face ;
 It will not disappear even when the universe is
 destroyed.¹²

One of Hui-neng's successors, the Zen master Shih-t'ou (700–790), took a slightly different line. "Do away with your throat and lips, and let me hear what you can say," he commanded. A monk replied: "I have no such things." "Then you may enter the gate," was the encouraging reply.²² And there is a very similar story of a contemporary of Shih-t'ou's, master Pai Chang (720–814), who asked one of his monks how he managed to speak without throat, lips, or tongue. It is, of course, from the Void that one's voice issues—from the Void of which Huang Po (d. 850) writes: "It is all-pervading, spotless beauty; it is the self-existent and uncreated Absolute. Then how can it even be a matter for discussion that the real Buddha has no mouth and preaches no Dharma, or that real hearing requires no ears, for who could hear it? Ah, it is a jewel beyond all price."⁹

As an aid to such a realization, Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of Zen, is said to have prescribed a good hammer-blow on the back of the head.³ Tai-hui (1089–1163) was equally uncompromising: "This matter (Zen) is like a great mass of fire: when you approach it your face is sure to be scorched. It is again like a sword about to be drawn; when it is once out of the scabbard, someone is sure to lose his life. . . . The

But you can hint at it in a drawing, as I have done on the cover of this book: the original face is, so to say, only just out of the picture.

precious vajra sword is right here and its purpose is to cut off the head.”²⁰ Indeed this beheading was a common topic of conversation between Zen master and pupil. For instance, this 9th century exchange :

Lung-ya : If I threatened to cut off your head with the sharpest sword in the world, what would you do?

The master pulled in his head.

Lung-ya : Your head is off !

The master smiled.²⁴

Evidently master and pupil, both headless, understood each other well. How well, also, they would have understood the advice of the Mohammedan Jalalu'l-Din Rumi, Persia's greatest mystical poet (1207-1273) : “Behead yourself !” “Dissolve your whole body into Vision : become seeing, seeing, seeing !”¹⁶

* * * *

“I have learned from Him,” says another great mystical poet, the Indian Kabir (b. 1440), “to see without eyes, to hear without ears, to drink without mouth.”¹⁰

However could I see, if I had no eyes here to see with? Or, for that matter, how could I see *that* I have no eyes here to see with?

As we have already noted, modern science itself agrees that I do not really “see with my eyes”. They are merely links in a long chain stretching from the sun, through sunlight and atmosphere and illuminated objects, through eye lenses and retinae and optic nerves, right down to electron-dotted space in a region of my brain, where at last my seeing really occurs. In effect, says the scientist, this Centre is the only seer and hearer,

the sole experiencer. And this is just what the old Zen masters say. "The bodi" Rinzai (d. 867) tells us, "does not know how to discourse or to listen to a discourse. . . . That which is unmistakably perceivable right before you, absolutely identifiable yet without form—that is what listens to the discourse."²¹ Here the Chinese master is echoing the *Surangama Sutra* (a pre-Zen Indian scripture) which teaches that it is absurd to suppose that we see with our eyes, or hear with our ears: it is because these have melted together, and vanished into the absolute emptiness of our "original bright and charming face", that experience of any sort is possible.

Still earlier, the Taoist Sage Chuang Tzu (c. 300 B.C., a Zen master long before his time) draws a delightful picture of this featureless face or empty head of mine. He calls it "Chaos, the Sovereign of the Centre", contrasting its utter blankness here with the familiar seven-holed heads out there: "Fuss, the god of the Southern Ocean, and Fret, the god of the Northern Ocean, happened once to meet in the realm of Chaos, the god of the Centre. Chaos treated them very handsomely and they discussed together what they could do to repay his kindness. They had noticed that, whereas everyone else has seven apertures, for sight, hearing, eating, breathing and so on, Chaos had none. So they decided to make the experiment of boring holes in him. Every day they bored a hole, and on the seventh day Chaos died."²⁸

No matter how much I fuss and fret, however, my always-renewed attempt to murder the Sovereign of the Centre, by superimposing my human seven-holed features upon Him, can never succeed. The mask out there can never touch my original Face here, much less

disfigure It. The Face of all faces is forever immaculate. No shadow can fall upon haos, the unbodied and eternal King.

* * * *

In Zen literature we find many eloquent descriptions of the moment of satori, or sudden illumination, including the most vivid accounts of the total dissolution of the body. I quote a few examples.

Yengo (1566-1642), writes of Zen: "It is presented right to your face, and at this moment the whole thing is handed over to you. . . . Look into your own being. . . . Let your body and mind be turned into an inanimate object of nature like a stone or a piece of wood; when a state of perfect motionlessness and unawareness is obtained all the signs of life will depart and also every trace of limitation will vanish. Not a single idea will disturb your consciousness, when lo! all of a sudden you will come to realize a light abounding in full gladness. It is like coming across a light in thick darkness; it is like receiving treasure in poverty. The four elements and the five aggregates (your entire bodily make-up) are no more felt as burdens; so light, so easy, so free you are. Your very existence has been delivered from all limitations; you have become open, light, and transparent. You gain an illuminating insight into the very nature of things, which now appear to you as so many fairylike flowers having no graspable reality. Here is manifested the unsophisticated self which is the original face of your being; here is shown all bare the most beautiful landscape of your birthplace. There is but one

straight passage open and unobstructed through and through. This is where you surrender all—your body, your life, and all that belongs to your inmost self. This is where you gain peace, ease, non-doing, and inexpressible delight.”²⁵

The characteristic lightness which Yengo refers to was experienced by the Taoist Lieh-tzu (c. 400 B.C.) to such a degree that he seemed to be riding on the wind. This is how he describes the feeling: “Internal and external were blended into a unity. After that, there was no distinction between eye and ear, ear and nose, nose and mouth: all were the same. My mind was frozen, my body in dissolution, my flesh and bones all melted together. I was wholly unconscious of what my body was resting on, or what was under my feet. I was borne this way and that on the wind, like dry chaff or leaves falling from a tree. In fact, I knew not whether the wind was riding on me or I on the wind.”⁷ And twenty-four centuries later, a contemporary Zen writer (Lu K’uan Yu) uses practically the same language: “One will experience utter purity and extreme lightness. When the meditator succeeds in putting an end to all his thoughts, he will step into ‘the stream’ or correct concentration, in which his body and its weight seem to disappear completely and to give way to a bright purity which is as light as air; he will feel as if he is about to be levitated.”¹¹

In fact, the body not only seems to vanish: the masters are quite sure it does not exist. “There is no body in which enlightenment is to be realized, and no mind by which enlightenment is to be realized,”—this passage from the *Vimalakirti* (c. A.D. 200) is a favourite quotation of theirs.²¹ Huang Po declares: “No bodies and no minds—that is the Way of the Buddhas!”⁹ And Tao-hsin (d. 651), the Fourth Patriarch: “Reflect on

your own body and see what it is. It is empty and devoid of reality like a shadow . . . There is nothing there to take hold of.”²¹ The 16th-century master Han Shan says of the enlightened man that his body and heart are entirely non-existent: they are the same as the absolute void. Of his own experience he writes: “I took a walk. Suddenly I stood still, filled with the realization that I had no body or mind. All I could see was one great illuminating Whole—omnipresent, perfect, lucid, and serene. It was like an all-embracing mirror from which the mountains and rivers of the earth were projected . . . I felt clear and transparent.”³ “Mind and body dropped off!” exclaims Dogen (1200–1253) in an ecstasy of release. “Dropped off! Dropped off! This state must be experienced by you all; it is like piling fruit into a basket without a bottom, it is like pouring water into a bowl with a hole in it.”²¹ “All of a sudden you find your mind and body wiped out of existence”, says Hakuin (1685–1768): “This is what is known as letting go your hold. As you regain your breath it is like drinking water and knowing it is cold. It is joy inexpressible.”²⁰

All agree that the distinction between mind and body, subject and object, knower and known, is abolished in the great Mirror-Void; seeing into one’s self-nature is seeing into nothingness, into no-soul, no-mind, no-body; and this seeing is the never-failing delight and solace, far surpassing all earthly happiness.

* * * *

Dr. Suzuki himself puts the matter in a nutshell for us: “To Zen, incarnation is excarnation; the flesh is no-flesh; here-now equals emptiness (*sunyata*) and

infinity.”²⁶ Outside Zen, it is not easy to find statements quite so clear, and so free from religiosity, as this. However, parallels can be found in other religious traditions, as soon as one searches for them. And this is only to be expected: the essential vision must transcend the accidents of history and geography.

Inevitably the closest parallel is to be found in India, the original home of Buddhism. Sankara (c. 820), the great Sage and interpreter of Advaita or absolute non-duality, taught that a man has no hope of liberation till he ceases to identify himself with the body, which is a mere illusion born of ignorance: his real Self is like space, unattached, pure, infinite. Confusing the unreal body with this real Self is bondage and misery. This doctrine still survives in India. Its last great exemplar, Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), would say to enquirers: “Till now you seriously considered yourself to be the body and to have a form. That is the primal ignorance which is the root cause of all trouble.”¹⁴

Even Christianity (which, as Archbishop Temple observed, is the most materialistic of the great religions) sometimes admits that genuine illumination must dispel the dark opacity of our bodies no less than of our souls. “When thine eye is single,” said Jesus mysteriously, “thy whole body also is full of light.” This single eye is surely a Hebrew version of the precious third eye of Indian mysticism, which enables the Seer to look within at his absolutely pure and luminous nature, his original face. Again, it is the priceless gem which (according to Eastern tradition) we search everywhere for but here on our foreheads, where we all wear it. The metaphors of the Here-Now are endless.

Christian mystics seem particularly apt to find complications where none exist: they rarely appear content

just to look within, like the Zen masters, and in all simplicity take what they find. Augustine Baker (1575-1641) is perhaps an exception: "At length he cometh to a pure and total abstraction; and then he seemeth to himself to be all spirit and as if he had no body. But a long way and a tedious journey it is. . . . The purer and perfecter such abstraction is, the higher is the man ascended to perfection." This is a comment upon a well-known passage in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th-century mystical work which teaches that a vivid awareness of our non-existence is the prerequisite of true joy: for "all men have matter for sorrow: but most specially he feeleth matter of sorrow that knoweth and feeleth that he *is*."⁴ But of course this indispensable self-naughting (whether joyful or sad) is a favourite theme of all Christian mysticism. No one describes its two sides more boldly than St. Bernard (1091-1153): "It is no merely human joy to lose oneself like this, so to be emptied of oneself as though one almost ceased to be at all; it is the bliss of heaven. . . . To become thus is to be deified. . . . How otherwise could God be 'all in all', if anything of man remained in man?"²

It is certainly true that Christian mystics have all along seen the flesh as the great obstacle to the spirit. They consistently echo the words of their pagan predecessor Plotinus (205-270): "The true getting up is not bodily but from the body; in any movement that takes the body with it there is no more than a passage from sleep to sleep, from bed to bed; the veritable waking is from corporeal things."¹³ Wise words, but scarcely eloquent of direct seeing into one's nature. Only occasionally in the West do we find a "showing" like Gerlac Peterson's (1378-1411), "so vehement and so strong that the whole

of the interior man, not only of his heart but of his body, is marvellously moved and shaken. . . . His interior aspect is made clear without any cloud.”²⁷ His spiritual eye is wide open. Instead of remaining (as Shakespeare so admirably puts it)

Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence,
he sees into its utmost depths, into the very heart of Reality.

* * * *

Traditionally, the attention of the West is fastened upon the physical world, whereas the East sees through it. We regard our little human bodies as opaque and divided from our total Body, the universe, which as a result seems equally opaque and divided. A few of our poets, however, are not so tricked and taken in, but instead take in all things and revel in their transparency. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote of his friend :

For these, these shadowy vales and waving grasses
And streams of running water were his face ;*

but was not content thus to dissolve the human body : his declared mission was “to render the earth we live on, and by extension the universe, invisible, and thus to transform it into a higher plane of reality.”¹⁵ For Rilke, this ever-present Void, our original face, has no boundaries. • As Traherne discovered :

The sense itself was I.
I felt no dross nor matter in my soul,
No brims nor borders, such as in a bowl
We see. My essence was capacity.

**Sämtliche Werke i*, (1955) p. 495

And, in a better-known passage : "You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars."

In the West, this is poetry. In Zen, it is either direct realization or empty words. At the moment of satori there is an explosion, and a man has no body but the universe. "He feels his body and mind, the earth and the heavens, fuse into one pellucid whole—pure, alert, and wide-awake," says master Po Shan :

The whole earth is but one of my eyes,
But a spark of my illuminating light.³

In numerous texts we are told how the enlightened man as if by magic engulfs rivers, mountains, seas, the great world itself, reducing them all to the Void here, to nothing at all ; and then, out of this Void, creates rivers, mountains, seas, the great world itself.¹⁹ Without the slightest discomfort, he swallows all the water in the West River, and spews it up again. He takes in and abolishes all things, produces all things. He sees the universe as nothing else but the outflowing of his own profound nature, which in itself remains unstained, absolutely transparent.²⁰ Now he is restored to himself as he really is : as the very heart of existence, from which all being is made manifest. In brief, he is deified. Established at the unique Source, he cries : "I am the centre, I am the universe, I am the creator!"²³ Or : "I am the cause of mine own self and all things!"⁶ In Zen jargon, the mangy cur has become the golden-haired lion roaring in the desert, spontaneous, free, energetic, magnificently self-sufficient, and *alone*.²⁶ Arrived Home at last, he finds no room for two. Our own Traherne once more echoes the language of the Zen masters when he exclaims : "The streets were mine, the

temple was mine, the people were mine, their clothes and gold and silver were mine, as much as their sparkling eyes, fair skins and ruddy faces. The skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the World was mine ; and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it.”

The unexamined life is not worth living.—PLATO

To understand others is to have knowledge ;

To understand oneself is to be illumined.—LAO TZU

It is an extraordinary blindness to live without investigating what we are.—PASCAL

I will see if I have no meaning, while the houses and ships have meaning.—WHITMAN .

To understand everything except oneself is very comical.
KIERKEGAARD

CHAPTER IV

IN PRACTICE

I HAVE said enough about Zen to show how it confirmed, and helped me to understand, the peculiar experience of headlessness or voidness which other schools and sects largely ignore. (Any attempt to survey Zen in general is quite beyond the scope of this essay, not to mention my capacity.) There remains the all-important question of practice, the day-to-day working out of one's insights, and their development. It may be of some use if I now revert to autobiography, mentioning a few of the practical aids which so far (after too much trial and error, and time wasted up blind alleys) I have found workable. Of course, my way will not do for everybody: the essential thing is to find your own true path and refuse to be sidetracked by me or anyone. All the same, it is often interesting and can be time-saving to listen to other travellers' tales, when by devious and unfamiliar routes they are making for the same goal—or rather (Zen would say) are already with you at the goal, whether they know it or not.

My own point of departure was a boyhood feeling of cosmic wonder and astonishment, a sense of the improbability of anyone or anything whatever existing. What an irregularity, what an outrage to common-sense, what an impossibility this is! Here's something indeed worth celebrating. Here's a considerable achievement on Somebody's part: not merely to exist, but to be the

only thing that exists, to have conjured oneself out of nothing, to be one's own Author, to be Alone. How deserving of my congratulations this Someone or Something is ! It seemed to me then (and still does) that this is *the* Mystery, *the* Delight, the one matter for awe and perennial rejoicing ; and that all other mysteries and delights are quite secondary, if not actually trivial. After the initial achievement of existence, anything can and probably will happen (what are a few billion universes more or less?) and all of it is bound to be rather an anticlimax.

In so far as I existed, I shared in this supreme mystery, and some of my surprise was diverted to myself. What am I? Increasingly it seemed to me a most miserable thing to live without asking this question all the time. So long as I find all other things remarkable, not to be taken for granted, demanding full investigation—all, that is, except this investigator himself—then surely I am hardly alive at all, let alone wide awake. What's more, I'm missing life's finest pleasure—the intuition of an immense unknown, of heights and depths just glimpsed, of tremendous meanings just breaking through—and all mine, or inseparably bound up with my being.

What, then, am I? An infinite mystery, certainly. Nevertheless some kind of answer, if not a very profound one, could doubtless be discovered. My best chance of finding it seemed at that time to lie in a combination of methodical study with direct self-inspection : for years, almost every moment I could spare or steal was spent in this two-sided effort of enquiry. I read every book—many hundreds of them, not all good ones—that promised to bear upon the real nature of man : or, more explicitly, upon the nature of man-in-the-universe and the universe-in-man, for evidently man by himself is an unreal

abstraction. I filled shelf after shelf with books, and drawer after drawer with notes—extracts, hunches, schemata, brilliant ideas, nonsense. There were months when I worked all day and half the night, seven days a week, and scarcely ever left the house. If ever a man was obsessed, it was this one.

Of course the programme that, with youthful enthusiasm, I had set myself, was from one point of view quite impossible. The more physics, chemistry, biology, sociology and astronomy I managed to absorb, the more I needed; and the deeper I dug in the fields of psychology, epistemology, and logic, the less hope remained of uncovering any real answers at all. From another point of view, however, this intense and long-drawn-out effort proved well worth while, if not indispensable for me. I picked up a useful habit of one-pointed concentration; I enlisted, by conscious endeavour, the co-operation of those deeper layers without which no real work is done upon oneself; and I certainly found myself more fabulously improbable, mysterious, and unknowable than ever. And, oddly enough, this negative result, instead of frustrating, satisfied. I came to feel (rather than merely to know) my total ignorance; and it dawned upon me that this ignorance, paradoxically, was in fact true knowledge of my being. And so the result of this intellectual work of mine was practically the intellect's self-destruction: ever-growing complexity and doubt and confusion issued in a certain simplification or clarity. Others may get beyond thought by not thinking, but not me.

* * * *

Though my reading as a young and fairly young man included a number of standard works of Western

mysticism, with a few Indian scriptures, I was by no means religious, or even virtuous. My effort of self-enquiry was a search for knowledge, not for salvation, or liberation, or spiritual attainment of any sort. I did not worship, or pray, or practise any kind of meditation or discipline, except as these arose naturally out of the work itself. As for behaviour, I was only average, and on occasions well below average. I spare the reader any detailed confession, but assure him that I speak the truth.

Nor can I pretend that my aim of self-discovery involved no self-seeking. I doubt whether, if I had been a Crusoe with a vast library but no hope of rescue and recognition, I should have worked so hard, or with any sense of urgency. Of course I told myself that I must communicate, must help others by systematizing and publishing the results of my inquiry,* and that this was no bad motive; and perhaps in fact mine was no worse than other respectable ambitions, such as making a fortune, or climbing to the top of one's profession, or trying to become a saint. However, it did have one advantage over many other forms of egotism: from the very start it incorporated its own self-destroying device, its built-in time-bomb with the fuse all set for an explosion one day. For the more I sought my real Self the more I saw it as void, beyond all seeking or knowing, all improvement or deterioration; and the more I sought my pseudo-self, that empirical ego whose vanity was fed by the very seeking, the more I saw it as something to be humbly accepted for what it is—by definition selfish, by nature beyond any radical reform.

*These results eventually appeared as *The Hierarchy of Heaven and Earth, A New Diagram of Man in the Universe* (Faber and Faber, London) in 1952, some years before I came across Zen.

This was what it was like to be a man ; and rebellion against the inevitable human condition could at best only be repression, at worst suicide, and in any case no way to enlightenment. The essential thing, then, was to go on seeking to *understand* rather than *change* myself. Any worthwhile improvement would flow naturally from the clear perception of one's real nature as void, and detachment from one's false nature as body. In short, this method of intense self-investigation still seemed to be the right one for me, impure motives notwithstanding.

Certainly it was interesting, later on, to find that Ramana Maharshi always advocated self-inquiry as the one infallible and direct means of liberation. He taught that as soon as we start asking the question "Who am I?" the process of inner transformation is set up, though its end—involving complete detachment of the Self from the body—may be long delayed.¹⁴ Again, it was particularly interesting to learn that the essence of Zen training is earnest inquiry into one's self-nature, without ever letting go, and to the point of obsession.

By comparison with these more direct approaches, my own secular, amoral, and largely intellectual way, with its dubious motives, may have been unnecessarily roundabout and slow : a properly directed course of spiritual instruction and exercises might have produced results more quickly. I just do not know ; but I do believe that if we Westerners, instead of feebly abandoning our peculiar objectivity, our freedom from pious axes to grind, were to push it to the limit, we should find ourselves at the heart of Zen. However that may be, it is clear that most of us do not, in fact, begin by asking what we are. More often it is unhappiness which drives us to look for help from a particular religion, whose teachings must then be learned, understood, and applied.

Inquiry into the religion comes first ; inquiry into the self comes later, as a part of instruction and practice, with a view to spiritual growth and the end of suffering.

Though it has obvious practical advantages, this specifically religious approach is, again, clearly not free from impure motives. Of course it is only sensible to desire to suffer less, and for that reason to discipline body and mind ; it is the noblest of ambitions to desire the end of all suffering and the attainment of Nirvana, and for that reason to meditate systematically upon such prescribed topics as one's self-nature, using the prescribed techniques. Thousands of years of profound experience are gathered up in this precious store of practical wisdom, and if we will profit by it ultimate success is no doubt assured. True enough : only it is necessary at once to add that this success is failure, the defeat of all ambition (which, however spiritual, is still ambition) ; it is the realization that there is nothing to be achieved, that all is well here and now, that we have never for an instant left the goal we are striving to reach one day. Our bondage is not failure to win our liberation, but to see it. In fact, it is our aim that stands in the way of its realization ; it is our anxiety to arrive at perfection in the unreal and unrealizable future which hides the Perfection which is at this very moment staring us in the face.

It seems that in no case—whether we take the road of self-knowledge, or of deliberate spiritual training, or any combination of the two—can we dispense with the driving power of motives which are time-ridden and therefore ego-promoting, and so in a real sense take us away from our goal. It is the sustained earnestness, the do-or-die determination to get there anyhow, which is indispensable, and perfect purity of motive (which means absence of motive) is a counsel of perfection best for-

gotten till it comes unbidden as part of the goal itself. Possibly a few religious geniuses may from an early age avoid this contradiction, and egolessly enjoy the infinite riches of the present, unobscured by the memory and anticipation which are the ego itself at work. But for myself and most others it is necessary to set off prepared for a very long and hard journey, as if only the most strenuous efforts could see us Home.

* * * *

Anyhow it is only of my own experience that I am qualified to write. I have already mentioned that my long labour of self-investigation involved no meditation as such. And I still find (after having given systematic practice a fair trial) that my best course is to avoid set times and topics and postures of meditation, and indeed any deliberate spiritual discipline. For me, it is enough to attend to the Void as it is given, as often and as long as happens to be convenient.

LOOK WHO'S HERE ! This presence of mind is very natural, unspiritual, and down-to-earth : in fact, it only comes when thinking goes. It is so natural that from outside it is unobservable (unless, perhaps, the observer knows what to look for), and therefore can be enjoyed anytime and anywhere. Also it is not hard : if effort is needed, it is rather the effort to hold effortlessness. It comes when invited. Often it arrives uninvited, and may stay for perhaps half an hour with little attempt to hold it. Contrary to expectation, withdrawal from ordinary life is no help : in fact, it tends to hinder. For the purpose of this awareness, open eyes are better than closed eyes, sitting up is better than lying in bed, walking in the garden is better than sitting indoors, and

walking in the crowded street can be best of all. After a time, it becomes the easiest thing in the world, to cease seeing one sort of human being, and instead to see two sorts everywhere: the plural, headed, solid bodies walking by, and this singular, beheaded, empty body floating here—this absent presence which feels so transparent and unsubstantial that it's a wonder people don't walk clean through it.

The more one wears the cap of invisibility the better it fits. One gets so used to impersonating a gust of wind blowing down the street, or a cloud hovering and gliding above the pavement, that it seems more natural than walking (as indeed it is) and much less effort. And the secret of this magic—this combined vanishing and levitation trick—is an open one: once learned, there's nothing in it. One has only to turn round (so to say), looking in as well as out, and see that there is no pedestrian here, that this piece of pavement is quite unoccupied. This does not mean that one is dangerously unconscious of what's going on. Quite the reverse: the chances of getting run over are lessened, because one's thoughts are no longer elsewhere. (In the last resort, all unawareness of the present Void is absent-mindedness, and more or less dangerous.) Equally, when one is driving, this mindless attention or recollectedness can be an excellent safety precaution, to say nothing of good practice: a car driven by nobody is well driven. Even when reading, writing or talking, this peculiar awareness—this vivid realization of the Void, through what arises in it—is not always difficult. It is true there are occasions—when one is doing hard physical work, perhaps—which remain especially Void-obscuring, but even then an undercurrent of awareness can often be detected.

There is no mistaking this awareness for ordinary

presence of mind, or attention to the task in hand. An indescribable quality (clarity, brightness, and so on, are only its metaphors) marks it. It has a quiet joy of its own which knows neither agitation nor boredom: no waiting about is tiresome, no chore a waste of time, no street mean and dreary, no man ugly; nothing is common or unclean; a gentle but unmistakable light bathes all. Meanings and uses go; distances fold up; colours glow strangely. Besides, there are physical indications. These include a curious limpness, as if one were a doll whose sawdust had just run out; a drooping of hands and arms, and a relaxation of facial and neck muscles; a slowing-down of breathing, with rather deep exhalations held for longer than usual; a slight breathlessness; and a stillness—even a fixity—of the whole body. Sometimes the physical counterpart (for instance, in an emergency) precedes the mood; at other times the mood (for instance, when it is deliberately evoked) brings on the physical counterpart.

Apart from these incidental accompaniments, it is vision which dominates. The other senses play very little part. This is largely due, no doubt, to one's particular temperament and training. But it is not for nothing that so many of the metaphors of mystical religion are derived from sight, and that Zen monks, even at the highest level, meditate with open eyes. Nevertheless hearing is for some the main door to the Self: they listen without ears to the Silence behind all sounds, rather than see without eyes the Invisible behind all sights. Turning inwards, they *bear* the Self-nature. Which sense-door it is that one enters by, however, is not the vital thing: all that matters is that somehow one gains access to the inner Void, yet without losing touch with the outer world. For the mere

Void, the inner world by itself and unexpressed, Nirvana without Samsara, is vacuity, a false abstraction, to be lost in which is the trance of death.

* * * *

So, at least, it seems to me. Each of us must find out by experiment his own best method of working, or absence of method, and as far as possible refrain from judging others. On the whole, words are unprofitable, and argument positively harmful. One can talk, and talk, and talk a man's head off, without loosening it by a hair's-breadth—unless he happens to be already on the point of losing it: in which case one's help is a very small thing indeed.

If comparisons are odious, spiritual comparisons are specially so. In the last resort, they are also absurd. Satori in all its degrees, Enlightenment, Liberation, Union—these grand words applied to you and me are, frankly, nonsense. I am not an inch ahead of you on the path to perfection, nor an inch behind. My spiritual attainments, like yours, are quite mythical. For we have certain crippling defects:—our complexions are not perfectly clear and bright; we are burdened with heads, eyes, ears, noses; we have names and addresses; we have birthdays and deathdays; there are two of us, not to mention others besides; comparisons can be made and distinctions drawn between us; credit can be apportioned; we are not Alone; we do not exist. . . . There is no end to our disabilities, any one of which would be enough to bar us for ever from Enlightenment. Our case is absolutely hopeless.

However, this need cause no alarm. It is all peripheral, elsewhere. Here, the Sovereign of the Centre reigns. Here is one that exists Alone, and alone Exists, though infinitely beyond aloneness and existence. Who could attain to This except itSelf, and what need to attain?

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