

In Zen Buddhism there is no such thing as vows or oaths taken in the presence of witnesses such as are to be found in the Christian monastic orders but this does not mean that Zen does not have their equivalent. The primary difference between the two is one of intuitive understanding rather than stated fact. This is because the Zen Buddhist has thought out the meaning of spiritual poverty to its logical conclusion, recognising that it contains and transcends physical poverty, thus discovering not only its meaning but its spirit, rather than being stuck with obedience to a specific "Rule" as is the case in Christianity. The more I read the Rules of St. Augustine and St. Benedict the easier it becomes to see how this unfortunate state of affairs came about. For a start the Christian postulant was thrown entirely upon God for his assistance rather than having it hammered into his head that the only help he could get was that which he would give to himself. It is extremely difficult to believe in a God of which, at least when entering a religious community, one has little or no direct knowledge; the Zen Buddhist on the other hand, has at least an inkling that there is something within him that he knows can be developed and, when told to search within himself, does not begin to have the same problems of faith that the Christian has. And yet the Zen Buddhist needs faith; faith that the Buddha Nature lives in everything around him and especially within himself. It is a fault in the method of teaching Christianity, and not of the religion itself, that has caused Christian monasticism to decline in the last decade whilst Buddhist monasticism flourishes with ever greater popularity. "The kingdom of heaven is within you" is something that the average Christian priest is very loath to explain, frequently trying to argue it away, whilst the Buddhist will gladly and happily admit the absolute truth of the quotation "Look within thee, thou art Buddha." There is nothing wrong with Christian monasticism that doing a little about its teaching methods could not cure; however, the average Christian diehard would get worried if he were told to believe "I have said, ye are Gods" as literal truth.

The above may seem a long way away from my subject of poverty, chastity and obedience but, in fact, it is the very core of its explanation. Eckhart\*, when writing on the subject of the Beatitudes, says the following, "And a man shall be free, and as pure as the day he entered into his mother's womb, when he has nothing, wants nothing and knows nothing; such a one has true spiritual poverty."

Now it is exactly this state of mind that the Zen trainee aims at when he is sitting in meditation; a state of mind in which he is undisturbed by anything, having no desires whatsoever to which he is attached. Herein lies one of the basic differences between Zen monasticism and Christian, for, if we are to believe the books we read on Christian monasticism, the average person in a Christian religious order is constantly vying with every person in his monastery to outdo them in keeping the Rule - which means that they end with an attachment to holy poverty, chastity and obedience, a state of mind just as far removed from the goal of spirituality they seek as is worldly obsession with wealth and everyday physical comforts. The Christian monk or nun has failed to realise that in swinging to the absolute opposite of affluence, he is still stuck in duality and gripping tightly onto perfection which binds him ever more tightly to his Rule instead of freeing him to go on to ever deeper depths of spirituality. It was with good reason

\* Meister Eckhart was a Christian mystic who lived in Germany in the fourteenth century.

that the Buddha taught the Middle Way, the middle path between the two extremes, for only in such a place can be found that state of which Eckhart speaks, that place where one has nothing, wants nothing and knows nothing. So long as there is a striving after poverty there is a wanting thereof - and there is also a rejection of the world. It is not possible to reject the world and remain spiritually healthy. It is by means of the world that we understand heaven and transcend both. The world has to be embraced and transcended, not rejected and discarded as evil. The attitude of mind must be positive and not negative. For there is nothing that is of itself intrinsically evil. There are circumstances, usually of our own creation, that affect us adversely and which we blame upon the world but, if we took the trouble to look a little more deeply and do something about our attachments, we could easily deal with them. I know that the reader will instantly disagree with me upon this matter but if he thinks out the true meaning of attachment instead of the usual superficial one that most of us are content with, he will get my meaning very clearly. In Dogen's "Uji" is the following, "the problem of daily life is will, words are its key." This could be extended thus, "the problem of heaven is the world; how to live is its key." Looked at from this positive angle, rather than the negative one of rejection practiced by the Christian monastics, the world becomes a beautiful place in which to learn true spirituality.

Why then the reader may well ask do Shasta Abbey and other Buddhist monasteries exist? The answer is a simple one. Unlike Christian monasteries, Zen ones are not places into which a person retires for the rest of his life. It is implicit in the training that a Zen trainee will return to the world when he has discovered his own religious potential for the benefit not only of the world but also of himself. It is understood that, whilst in the monastery, he shall still keep one foot very definitely in the world outside so that he shall not become out of touch therewith. The only reason for which he goes into the monastery is because he is not satisfied with himself in the state he is in and wants to do something about it, that is, find his own religious potential. But it is perfectly possible to find that potential whilst still living in the world if he truly wants to do so; monasteries exist because the average person is too lazy to work upon himself without what he considers to be the right environment and circumstances - an idea which has to be trained out of him. It is lack of willpower that makes monasteries necessary; not the evil of the world.

Now because the Zen Buddhist knows that true spiritual poverty comes only as a result of doing something about himself within his inmost being and that any vow, however sincerely made, implies the rejection of the vow's opposite, that he makes no actual vow of poverty but his every action is an attempt to reach that state in which he wants nothing, has nothing and knows nothing. So by not taking an actual vow he lives that vow at every turn of his life without attachment thereto. Chastity and obedience are implicit within poverty. If one truly deals with attachment to self then one also deals with sexual problems thus obviating an actual separate vow of chastity. Obedience is also implicit within poverty since a man with no desires of his own does that which has to be done without ever taking a vow to obey anyone and, in so doing, obeys his teacher utterly simply because there is nothing else for him to do, fully recognising the Buddha Nature, or god-head equivalent, within his teacher without having to be given directives.

From the above it can be clearly seen that all three vows are embraced within the one vow, if it is truly understood and, in addition to this, a vow, as such, is rather an impediment than an asset since it implies the rejection of an opposite. In the modern

world, when true freedom of mind is sought, any Rule that binds rather than frees the spirit is bound to be found wanting by religiously minded people all over the world.

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