A Taste of Zen

A non-review of '*The Way of Zen'* by Alan Watts

Mike Arnautov

A brief, and inevitably inadequate attempt at 'pointing out' the flavour of Zen Buddhism – the most radical and interesting of all Buddhist schools. Quotes from Alan Watts' '*The Way of Zen*'.

First, an all-embracing keynote:

> Attributed to Buddha: "I obtained not the least thing from the unexcelled, complete awakening, and for this very reason it is called 'unexcelled, complete awakening'".

Or more down-to-earth, as expressed by a Zen master:

> "Before I studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters. But now that I have got to its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains and waters once again as waters."

The basic insight of satori (set against the background of seeking release from the Wheel of Life):

> In the moment of his satori Hakuin cried out: "How wondrous! How wondrous! There is no birth-and-death from which to escape, nor is there any supreme knowledge after which one has to strive!"

Or

> [...] the very life of the universe [...] is complete at every moment and does not need to justify itself by aiming at something beyond.

Extending this insight to ethics, and in a striking parallel to humanist understanding of ethics, only too often misunderstood as amorality in both cases:

> Zen lies beyond the ethical standpoint, whose sanctions must be found not in reality itself, but in the mutual agreement of human beings. When we attempt to universalize or absolutize it, the ethical standpoint makes it impossible to exist [...]

As for metaphysics:

> As "the fish swims in the water but is unmindful of the water, the bird flies in the wind but knows not of the wind", so the true life of Zen has no need to "raise waves when no wind is blowing", to drag in religion or spirituality as something over and above life itself. This is why the sage Fa-yung received no more offerings of flowers from the birds after his satori, for his holiness no longer "stood out like a sore thumb".

Or more directly:

> Zen masters are quite human. They get sick and die; they know joy and sorrow; they have bad tempers or other little 'weaknesses' of character just like anyone else, and they are not above falling in love and entering into a fully human relationship with the opposite sex. The perfection of Zen is to be perfectly and simply human. The difference of the adept in Zen from the ordinary run of men is that the latter are, in one way or another, at odds with their own humanity, and are attempting to be angels or demons.

Or, quite brutally, a poem by Ikkyu:

> We eat, excrete, sleep and get up;
> This is our world.
> All we have to do after that –
> Is to die.

And finally, Ikkyu again:

> My self of long ago,
> In nature non-existent;
> Nowhere to go when dead,
> Nothing at all.

Non-reviewer's non-comments

This piece is sub-titled 'a non-review' for a reason. To recommend to western readers any specific book or list of books on Zen is to mislead. A book can be read and re-read and studied and a meaning derived therefrom – it has no way of defending itself against such misuse.

Case in point...

"Before I studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. [...]"

This above quoted passage is easily misunderstood. Zen masters have a great aversion to speaking plainly. This is not because they wish to obfuscate some arcane knowledge, or the lack of same. The reason is much simpler: Zen masters do not consider the basic insight of satori to be communicable in words. They believe that attempting to provide a clear explanation is tantamount to deceiving the audience. The clearer the explanation, the more likely is the audience to fix onto the explanation and miss altogether that which it is attempting to explain.

The technique of Zen is instead to bypass the level of verbal explanation and to 'startle' the audience into a recognition of Reality. It is not surprising that humour – particularly the irreverent, mocking and self-mocking kind – is a well established weapon in a Zen master's armoury. This is in fact the very point at which Zen differentiated itself from other Buddhist schools. According to a Zen tradition, one day when Buddha's followers gathered for yet another lecture, without saying a word the All-Enlightened One merely showed the audience a flower and then indicated that the lecture was over. While the assembled pundits reacted with either a stunned silence or furious disputes over the deep meaning of this revelation, the First-Patriarch-of-Zen-to-be merely smiled, thus showing that he alone got Buddha's little joke. So was Zen founded.

Thus it is a mistake to seek in the above quotation any deep 'wisdom', even though such can, indeed, be found. The Master was mocking himself, and through himself all those of us who would seek a

meaning to his words deeper than the words may actually warrant. In that way his words embody a true wisdom.