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THE ZEN MASTER SOCRATES

In this short article I shall demonstrate that Socrates possesses crucial features and characteristics of the Zen¹ practitioner or Zen master and utilizes methods that may be perceived as also common to Zen. It may be difficult to show that Socrates was consciously practicing Zazen (sitting meditation), but isn't profound thinking of essential problems of human life a kind of meditation? And finally, I shall try to suggest, that in Zen, the enlightenment of an individual as a sudden or gradual experience has no meaning if it is not followed in consequence by the individual becoming a better person, that is by living a better, examined life.

I shall also try to clarify and describe a way of practicing philosophy that seems to be almost forgotten today or has extremely few followers and consider how it may be successfully applied, not only to philosophical, but also a religious endeavor. It is safe to say that among philosophers there is not a single person who would not know and respect Socrates as a paragon of a true wisdom seeker, but it is also surprising how few will agree with his way of practicing philosophy or would consider it as something essentially superior to what philosophy has become like today. It is unavoidable that any kind of human enterprise undergoes changes and evolves but it is also important to see the changes, analyze them, and try to evaluate the whole process. After Socrates the way of practicing philosophy has

¹ Since the analysis of Zen Buddhism is not the main agenda of this article we shall employ the shortened form of Zen as it is often referred to in English literature without using the Buddhism element. Also, with a few exceptions, we will use the term Zen even for denoting the Chinese Chan tradition.

changed dramatically, not only when it comes to the methods of doing it, but also in its purposes and the extend of its knowledge.

Philosophy after Socrates as well as Western Zen seem to be more about writing and reading books and articles, or speculating, than loving wisdom and experiencing reality. It is understandable in a way, since writing or reading is much easier than standing face to face with another human being and taking direct responsibility for what one says and how one behaves. Furthermore it also increases the risk that one's errors, mistakes and the gap between what one writes or says and how one lives might get exposed.

Zen and Philosophy

Here in the beginning of our argument we have to face two important problems, answers to which will have a great bearing on the rest of our reasoning. We need in the simplest and clearest possible way try to define what philosophy and Zen are, since both notions constitute the foundation of this article's concept. As we all know there is no single definition of philosophy and the same is true of Zen. Because of this factor we may be excused from giving a final and absolutely objective definition of both, but only try to clarify what both terms may mean just for the purpose of this article.

Now what about philosophy? We all know that modern philosophy is not seeking an enlightenment, nor is experience, or bettering philosophers life its prime purpose or aim. Sometimes it is defined as love of wisdom, according to the etymology of the word, but in fact it is more about theoretical speculation, in many cases, about topics that are of no concern to ordinary people. Bertrand Russell in his renowned book *A History of Western Philosophy* suggests very witty definition. "Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation. All *definite* knowledge – so I should contend – belongs to science; all *dogma* as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man's Land is Philosophy."² Calling philosophy "No Man's Land" and also defining it in the framework of theology and science, no

² Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), 13.

matter how comfortable it may feel, is based on the western cultural paradigm and would rather not apply to the philosophy of Socrates.

There are thousands of books³ that have been written about Socrates, which is an astonishing number given that he himself has not written anything that we know of. This fact itself tells us a lot about his philosophy and combined with what Plato has written about him, we can, to a certain extent, be allowed to deliberate on his views on philosophy and philosophizing itself. Socrates' philosophy is sometimes characterized as a turning point in Greek philosophy as a whole. "For the Greeks themselves the name of Socrates formed a watershed in the history of their philosophy. The reason they give for this is that he turned men's eyes from the speculations about the nature of the physical world which had been characteristic of the Presocratic period, and concentrated attention on the problems of human life".⁴ As we can see here, the scope of his philosophy is primarily set on something that has to do with human life, and to elaborate more, with the quality of life, and what are the things that constitute it. Now, as for the methodology of his philosophy it is quite clear that a dialog with a real person was the way he implemented his philosophical endeavors. So from the standpoint of the philosophizing subject we have a philosophy that is very much focused on here and now as directly experienced by the subject at a given time. As we shall elaborate more about it a little later, philosophy set as a dynamic dialog between persons also, based on the characteristics of the real dialog, does not rely greatly on written texts, though it may refer to them occasionally. It means that in ongoing dialog between two persons seeking knowledge and wisdom, what has been written in numerous texts has no direct bearing on it. Not what they could have known but only what they actually know, understand, and experience in the real time, is what matters.

To present a comprehensive definition of Zen is more complicated since here we can't limit it to a given Zen tradition or a Zen master. Furthermore Zen refrains from depending on writing and words so it also feels no need for defining itself.

In his book *Zen Comes West* Christmas Humphreys answers to the question; what is Zen? as follows. "It is a Buddha's Enlightenment, the Buddha's spiritual achievement attained as a guerdon of a thousand lives completely dedicated to that end. It follows that to know what is Buddhism, therefore Zen, one must achieve Buddha's experience. Anything less is less than Zen. The process of Enlightenment begins here, and now, with this, whatever is now in hand. The rest

³ Library of Congress Online Catalog returns about 2000 hits when searched with a keyword "Socrates".

⁴ W. K. C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 97.

is a process of a mind's expansion until consciousness becomes commensurate at will with that which lies beyond imagining".⁵

Another book describes Zen in the following manner. "Zen is not complicated. It doesn't involve any special knowledge. It doesn't involve equipment. In fact, in its way, Zen is antiequipment. Zen is like cleaning out your attic and dropping off all the stuff you don't need—your worries, fears, opinions, preconceptions, attachments—at the recycling bin. Because you really don't need them! Zen is for anyone, no matter his or her religious beliefs, country of origin, or lifestyle. Living Zen is simple. In fact, although many say Zen defies all definitions, we would define it with one simple, short word: *now*."⁶ The first quotation stresses on Zen as a part of Buddhist tradition and the ultimate purpose of Zen as achieving the Enlightenment in a manner that Buddha himself has. The second quotation however, does not even give mention of Buddha or Buddhism. The master Linji⁷ who is believed to have said that if you meet Buddha, then kill him! leaves no doubt that his Zen is not about believing in a given god or deity but what clearly shows us; that early in Zen tradition the worship or religious element was not that important. In the famous, *The Record of Linji*⁸ Linji's views are presented as follows. "Followers of the Way, don't take the Buddha to be the ultimate. As I see it, he is just like a privy hole. Both bodhisattvahood and arhatship are cages and chains that bind one. This is why Manjuśrī tried to kill Gautama with his sword, and why Aṅgulimāla attempted to slay Śākyamuni with his dagger."⁹ And later continues: "Followers of the Way, there is no buddha to be obtained. Even the doctrines [including those] of the Three Vehicles, the five natures, and complete and immediate enlightenment—all these are but provisional medicines for the treatment of symptoms. In no sense do any real dharmas exist. Even if they were to exist, they would all be nothing but imitations, publicly displayed proclamations, arrangements of letters stated that way just for the time being."¹⁰

To be a Christian requires more or less to believe in Christ; sometimes even to declare this belief, and being a good man or living a good life seems not to

⁵ Christmas Humphreys, *Zen Comes West, The Present and Future of Zen Buddhism in Western Society* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1977), 23.

⁶ Gary R. McClain and Eve Adamson, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Zen Living* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2001), 4–5.

⁷ Linji Yixuan (Jap., Rinzai Gigen) died 866 AD, founder of the Linji (Jap. Rinzai) School of Zen Buddhism.

⁸ Collected sayings and stories of master Linji.

⁹ *The Record of Linji*, trans. Ruth Fuller Sasaki, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 279.

¹⁰ *The Record of Linji*, trans. Ruth Fuller Sasaki, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 281.

be the most or sine qua non condition. With Buddhism and with Zen Buddhism in particular, the situation is quite different, what you confess or declare has less or no value at all, since Zen is not directed to any external deity that would demand sacrifices, prayers or declarations of faith, but concentrates on the individual enlightenment and becoming a better human being that should be the consequence of, not only reaching the enlightenment, but also the efforts one makes.

With Linji we see a quite radical version of Zen, but even though it is the version that comes closest to what Socrates was trying to do, we need to remember that there were also many schools that never could go as far as to reject their Buddhist affiliations. “Unlike the Buddha who could reject the pre-Buddhist doctrines and modes of life if they did not conform to his philosophy, the Zen masters were restricted by their Mahāyāna background and had to achieve the two goals discussed above, namely, rejection of speculation and restriction of the use of meditation, within the Mahāyāna framework. While the Buddha could reject the non-Buddhist metaphysical speculations regarding the nature of Ultimate Reality and adopt the powers gained by mind control for regulating his life, the Zen masters had to grapple with the metaphysical speculations of the Mahāyānists, especially of the Mādhyamika-Yogācāra syncretism, for they could not abandon this framework, it being Buddhist and not non-Buddhist. It is evident that the conception of an underlying reality, an Absolute, indescribable and indefinable, is at the back of all Zen practices. The nature of the *kōan* explicates this concept.”¹¹ As Kalupahana points out; to be a Zen practitioner or Master, it means to be committed or limited to a certain set of beliefs and methods of religious practice, but even then, that was not supposed to be the essential part of Zen.

Three Zen Traditions

Conceptualization, systematization and formal organization of conceptual structure happens to any developed philosophical or religious thought that at some point in its development experiences any kind of authority derived from emerging need for their safeguarding. Although the good news, if they are genuinely good, should have nothing to do with being obscure or secret and should be available for any human being without any limitations whatsoever; it seems

¹¹ David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1996), 172.

that the philosophical or religious knowledge soon becomes quite a profitable product to sell. Philosophy before Socrates, in a way practiced by Sophists, and later especially with the development of Universities and philosophy as a mainly academic discipline, became a source of income and of making a living for philosophers, becoming something quite distinct from genuine love for wisdom and the pursuit of truth. Buddhism at its beginnings and Zen in some of its forms was a religion or a way of living that could free itself from the ritualism and conventionism that hits all religious movements sooner or later. Zen had a sufficient potential to become a philosophy of good living based not on any specific revelation or divine help; but thanks to the influence of Chinese social morality and humanitarism; could come closer to philosophy as practiced by Socrates, than to religion that Buddhism has developed to become.

There are three main traditions that may be distinguished in the development of the Zen school of Buddhism: the Chinese tradition, the Japanese tradition, and the Western tradition. Each of these traditions may be distinguished based on some unique features they have developed.

The Chinese Zen tradition shows lots of influences of native Chinese philosophies, religious systems and the political and historical conditions of the times the Zen (Chan) tradition was transplanted to the Chinese soil. Due to persecutions of Buddhists schools that developed in big political and cultural centers, the Chan school remained mainly in the rural areas where peasants were not interested much in theoretical discussions about the deities; the essence of consciousness, or the transcendental basis of morality. They seem to have been interested more in making their everyday lives better, which did not mean changing them completely, but just making them more fulfilling, more satisfying mostly with what they already had. So Chan seemed not to be so much about acquiring any special knowledge or skill, or making offerings and praying to the deities, but more about deepening and in a way celebrating the experience of everyday life.

Japanese Zen may be said to have kept Zen alive while the certain decline of its predecessor in China could be seen through centuries. It is said that the founder of Japanese Tendai School of Buddhism Saichō¹² and also the founder of Japanese Shingon School of Zen Kūkai¹³ have learned Zen when they visited China (during the Tang dynasty) but the significant transmission of Zen as an independent school started in 12th and 13th centuries with such names as Eisai¹⁴, Dōgen¹⁵ and

¹² Saichō (最澄) called also Dengyō Daishi, founder of the Japanese Tendai Buddhist School.

¹³ Kūkai (空海) also called Kōbō Daishi (774–835), founder of the Japanese Shingon Buddhist School.

¹⁴ Eisai (栄西) (1141–1215), Japanese Zen master of Rinzai School.

¹⁵ Dōgen (道元) (1200–1253), Japanese Zen master of Sōtō School.

a few centuries later with Ingen¹⁶. The history of Zen in Japan was also quite a complicated one and independent from its Chinese predecessor. In the beginning it associated itself with a group of laymen, precisely speaking with the class of samurai warriors and probably to this, it owes keeping its simplicity in the form and contents of its teaching. Since there is a significant bibliography concerning Japanese Zen in western languages, mainly due to its importance as the basis for Western Zen tradition we shall not dedicate any more place to it, but only point to one more characteristic which is influencing cultural development that goes far beyond it. Development of original swordmanship; calligraphy, or painting, are only a few to name¹⁷.

Now the third, Western Zen traditions seem to have been created mainly by theoretical and academic work. Suzuki Daisetz, the man to be blamed for introducing Zen Buddhism to the West and creating great interest and demand in the western cultures, was not a Zen master and a Dharma tradition holder in the strict meaning of the word. He was first of all academic and his Zen, even if not meant to be so, was an academic one. Starting with the three series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* published between 1927 and 1934; many articles and books in English, including *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), *Living by Zen* (1949), *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959), dedicated to the subject followed. Needless to say, that most scholars and practitioners in the West were looking for Suzuki's authority for expertise, explanation, and guidance, in most topics related to Zen. In the foreword to his book *Zen and American Thought* Van Meter Ames writes as follows; "Zen is vast. I am quite aware of limitation in speaking of it, beginning with ignorance of Oriental tongues. But Professor Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki has written so much about Zen in English as to have made English another Zen language, from which he is being translated into Japanese. [...] I have at least learned that Zen 'does not depend on words and letters', since it is 'a special transmission outside the scriptures'; also that it is not necessary to attain or accept all that Zen is, or is said to be, in order to benefit from it"¹⁸. As Ames correctly points out Suzuki has written a lot and being almost a sole Zen preacher his influence on the formation of Western Zen tradition was second to none. What is also quite interesting in the quotation is mentioning the two basic laws of Zen; it is not depending on words, and letters and the gravity of transmission outside the scripture. Both percepts of central importance for Zen seem to get their acknowledgement, but seldom are

¹⁶ Ingen (隠元), Chinese: Yinyuan (1592–1673), founder of Japanese Ōbaku School.

¹⁷ More about the topic may be found in a book by Daisetz T. Suzuki *Zen and Japanese Culture* published by Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokyo 1988.

¹⁸ Van Meter Ames, *Zen and American Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1962), VII.

paid proper attention that would in consequence lead to refraining from analyzing and writing countless accounts of what Zen Buddhism is and what each and every experience we may have practicing it means for us; for philosophy; for psychology; psychiatry, or any defined branch of knowledge. Needless to say, that the Zen language of Western tradition is not any more symbolic and sometimes irrational. The western Zen language is based of language usage as seen in Western philosophy, Christianity or any other scholarship. This type of scholarly narrative is present in most of Suzuki's writings. There is no need to criticize it, as there is no need to look at the changes that Zen Buddhism underwent on the verge of forming a new tradition; but it is good to be clear about simple fact that each of these traditions should be considered as a separate entity based on different ontology, methodology, practice and consequently developing towards different aims and purposes.

Zen without words, the *furyumonji*¹⁹ tradition

No matter how we define what Zen experience is, there is no way to grasp it all. One may be proud of his literary and philosophical gift of skillfully handling beautiful expressions and notions that create an illusion of explaining what the Zen experience is or should be; but it also seems that as long as one fills a need for such definition, he is still far away from the experience, since the experience itself, if being true, should not seek any kind of confirmation of words. The early Zen masters were quite aware of what danger clinging to words may cause and how far away from the true understanding and enlightenment they may lead us. Quite soon in the history of early Zen the idea of freeing oneself not so much from limitations of language but more of the written texts, their exegesis and static understanding of the teaching and Enlightenment.

The stress on Enlightenment through experience, and understanding not based on rational analysis, and set of reasoning toward a set goal created a need for developing a new usage of language that will free the adept from the limitations of notions and understanding carried by words and conventions, and enable

¹⁹ In Japanese, *furyumonji* (不立文字) is seldom used outside Zen and even in Zen itself seems to be sometimes neglected or interpreted in a way, that diminishes its radicality or importance. It also seems not to have a standard English translation. *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991) explains the term as not depending on sacred writings, but taking in consideration another basic percepts, it is quite probable that the term applies not only to sacred but to any form of written tradition.

the person to experience whatever there is, not relying on the language framework. This kind of language utilizes fables, parables and also what in Zen is called *koans*, the short dialogs, stories or sentences that are supposed to influence the interlocutors understanding and prompt not a rational thinking but a sudden realizing the hidden message.

The importance of experience and understanding of dangers of language abuse, desire to break free from the conventions of written Buddhist traditions and need to make the teaching understandable to the Chinese mind, which is seldom comfortable with transcendental notions and void of practical application thought; Zen had to undertake quite radical measures. One of these measures is called *furyumonji*, not depending or even negating the value and importance of a written text.

There is an extremely interesting book by D. T. Suzuki called *The Primary Purpose of Western Zen*²⁰ that was first published in Japanese in 1914 by Heigo Press and then later by Heibonsha in 1963 and 2011. The book actually begins with explaining the meaning and importance of not depending on the written texts, *furyumonji*. It may seem a strange choice, since the characteristics themselves are supposed to negate the very effort of any form of book writing as being essential for understanding or transmitting Zen thought, all the more scholarly articles or treatises. So why has he decided on writing after all? And another question we shall consider later: Why has Socrates not decided to write though he could find enough reasons to do so only if he had wished to try? Suzuki is sharply aware of the contradiction facing an author trying to write something about Zen and says that if Buddha or Bodhidharma could have been called from the past they would surely have scolded him for what he is trying to do. But also he finds some reasons that would justify his going against one of the most important percepts of Zen. The reasoning is based mainly on assumptions that using language is a natural human behavior; that it may be useful for fulfilling a main purpose of Buddhism, and furthermore that the language was successfully employed in Chinese thought and Christianity. Of course this simple explanation does not give justice to his argument for writing after all, but only shows roughly what directions it had followed.

It is safe to say, that what Suzuki did was going beyond collecting and editing sayings or fables of Zen masters or creating some by himself. Instead he started to analyze and explain Zen utilizing Western methods of research employed in most humanities. To be able to do that, the justification for both; going against Zen,

²⁰ The original Japanese title 禪の第一義 (*Zen no dai'ichigi*) is slightly different and means rather something like the first principle, basic or fundamental principle or something of greatest importance of Zen.

and accepting Western reasoning should be produced; but unfortunately we have not enough information to judge, if his justification was really valid or sufficient.

Based on the importance of practice and experience in Zen, one may conclude that cumulating knowledge and information that is essential to most scholarly work does not have a stand here. It seems to be obvious that such learning like philosophy, for instance, develops through history building on the achievements of the predecessors that are passed mostly in writing from one generation of philosophers to another. No need to say that thanks to that none of us has to start from the beginning, trying to solve the questions that someone has already solved. There is some truth in it, but we should also be careful here for at least two reasons. The one is that as far as we know no solution presented by past philosophers is absolutely true and even we try to build on someone else's solution we need to rediscover it for ourselves anyway, since taking it for granted would be quite risky. So Zen says that if the enlightenment has to be experienced by the individual and that experience is not so much dependent on accumulating information and knowledge, writing has no meaning, on the contrary it may even, in some cases, become an obstacle. We also need to remember that Enlightenment is not achieved automatically by reading a certain number of books or solving a set number of koans, nor one becomes wise only by reading books written by past and present philosophers.

Philosophizing as a direct interpersonal dialog over writing or reading texts

One might think that the society of Athens and the modern society of any developed country are quite different relative to acquired knowledge and the level of enlightenment but is it really the case? It seems that when it comes to the skill of rational thinking and logical reasoning, there are no sufficient proofs that will clearly show that the difference exists.

In spite of more than 20 centuries that have passed, it is still quite clear that Socrates' work has never been done, that his vision of philosophy and life is really seldom followed and, at present, is of interest only for a few academics who try to write more books or articles on a subject that probably can't be meaningfully stretched any further.

In the introduction to a new translation of Plato's *Phaedrus*, Robin Waterfield writes "So the problem may not be with writing *per se*, but with a particular use of writing. In the context of the dialogue, Socrates may simply be warning *Phaedrus*, the inveterate speech-lover, not to put speeches on too high a pedestal.

How sharp, then, is the paradox with which Plato is teasing us? On the face of it, something extremely puzzling is going on. Plato, a prolific writer, condemns writing – and does so in a written work! Moreover, the Thamous–Theuth story, which commands us not to take written material seriously, is itself written down. If we are not to take written material seriously, it follows that we are not to take the story seriously either. This looks like a pretty paradox, and many scholars have read the passage as self-referential, so that Plato is condemning his own writing along with everyone else’s.”²¹ Here the translator interprets the problem of writing and analyses it from the standpoint of Plato as an actual writer. However in spite of his critique being quite valid if we consider it from the standpoint of Socrates, it presents itself in quite different light.

What about Socrates then? We may elaborate here on two facts. One is that in fact we have no records showing that he has actually written any philosophical dialog and another is the fragment of Plato’s *Phaedrus* depicting Socrates clearly criticizing and warning us against putting too much faith into writing.

The fact that we have not a single text left that has been written by Socrates himself or any texts that mention his writings, had not been given a proper consideration. One reason might be that nobody has thought that it could have any significant meaning.

In his book *Lives and Opinions of Prominent Philosophers* Diogenes Laertius²² mentions that according to some accounts, Socrates might have composed a poem, but according to other testimonies, it probably was not his and that he had composed a fable, but not a very good one. So although Socrates was able to read and write, for some reasons he has chosen not to commit himself to writing philosophical dialogs or treatises. To search for the explanation let us look closely at Plato’s dialog *Phaedrus*. Although *Phaedrus* usually is not considered as dialog of great importance, it includes some relevant insights concerning Socrates views on writing. In the dialog Socrates tells the story about the Egyptian god Thamus before which an inventor Theuth appeared to present letters as one of his new inventions. “‘This invention, O king,’ said Theuth, ‘will make the Egyptian wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered.’ But Thamus replied, ‘Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power

²¹ Robin Waterfield, trans. *Plato Phaedrus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), XXXVIII–XXXIX.

²² Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Prominent Philosophers* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd, 1915), 73.

the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.”²³ As we can see, Socrates seems to think that writing not only does not help the memory of an individual person, but on the contrary will contribute to forgetfulness. But what is more important is the fact that writing will lead to reading without instruction which causes the illusion of knowing while being still ignorant and not being or becoming wise but only appearing wise.

In any developed society no sane person would ever deny the value of writing and reading. The enormous importance of cumulating knowledge can never be overstated but here we need to look at the problem of writing and reading from the standpoint of an individual, particularly one seeking real wisdom. The importance of writing appears in quite a different light as does the unrepeatable philosophical dialog and instruction. Since philosophy should pursue not appearing wise but being wise, it can't rely on writing alone. And the dialog with Phaedrus continues: “Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.”²⁴

The dialog between two persons is essentially different than putting some information or knowledge in writing to be read mainly by people one has no personal relationships with whatsoever. While in dialog or even elenchus where the main aim of the argument seems to be a refutation of the interlocutors views, there is a personal relationship between individuals engaged in the argument that war-

²³ Harold N. Fowler, trans. *Plato with an English Translation. Eutyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus* (London: William Heinemann, 1928), 563–565.

²⁴ Harold N. Fowler, trans. *Plato with an English Translation. Eutyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus* (London: William Heinemann, 1928), 565–567.

rants the meaning and purpose of the dialog itself and sets it in the framework of interactive pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. With writing the situation changes completely. The writer states what he considers as knowledge and although there is a reader, usually the relationship has no bearing on the contents of what is conveyed as truth. It is more like a report of writers investigations and findings that not only transcend any human relationship but also aim at reaching objectivity that will probably make the knowledge impossible to apply in most real life situations.

Also endless multiplying of philosophical articles and treatises or religious scriptures and commentaries of such has a very limited meaning when considered from the stand of an individual person. One can't deny their value as intellectual enterprise or entertainment, but there can't be any illusions that a single individual would be able to access in his lifetime, even he would do nothing but read all the time, all the knowledge accumulated in the form of written texts. Of course it does not mean that they don't contain any knowledge that will be useful for the individual, but rather that whatever that knowledge is, for any given individual it can only serve as a reference for his own endeavors.

Furthermore it is probably possible to lead an enlightened and wise life without reading any single book in the lifetime. Philosophy based solely on producing writings has nothing to do with loving or looking for the true knowledge as seen in the case of Socrates, but is limited to stating what the writer thinks to know and sometimes reasons for that. It is seldom an invitation to the reader for a dialog, which can't be realized due to obvious limitations that writing and reading creates. It is, if we want it or not, a one way street and probably also a reason why so many people come for meetings with prominent writers to gain an opportunity to ask some questions, even though they are supposed to know anyway what the writer wanted to say from the book.

As seen in Plato's dialog *Phaedrus*, Socrates feels that writing is not as good for philosophy, but it can be for other areas of human scholarly and academic activities. If history, literature, rhetoric and so on, need to rely on language and producing and utilizing written texts then why not philosophy? Those other areas seem to be based on accumulating, organizing, interpreting and transferring of knowledge; philosophy on the other hand, should be more concerned with transferring and conveying understanding. Socrates had to be aware of the fact that wisdom is not directly proportional to knowledge an individual may have. It means that the more information you have the wiser you are, may not be the case.

Similarly to Socrates, Zen does not negate words or language itself but seems to make it clear what words stand for and what is their proper doing, that it is to say, they may convey something about experience and reality, but are not able to become a substitute, nor grasp it in its full extent.

Zen *koan*²⁵ and the Socratic method

As we have mentioned earlier not only early Zen but also Socrates refrained from creating written texts, but as we also came to know, later Zen followers and philosophers after Socrates could not withstand the temptation of writing and started to produce countless treatises and commentaries to almost every imaginable subject. The knowledge accumulated in a written form is so extensive now, that there has been probably something written about everything. Now, if all knowledge we may require is already available in a written form, what do we need Zen masters or philosophy teachers for? We can presume that any Zen or philosophy adept could be referred to proper written resources for any instruction he could desire. But again there seems to be a reason that we still have schools, colleges and universities with human teachers. It means that we; sometimes unconsciously, feel that there is some difference between direct knowledge acquired from another person and knowledge acquired from text or any other similar medium. Direct guidance seems to be able to better convey skills and rules of knowledge acquisition based on individual predispositions and also helps to ensure proper understanding and usage of the acquired knowledge. For both Zen and philosophy there are two crucial differences between transmitting knowledge or information and transmitting understanding, one is the possibility of adjusting the method and contents according to the interlocutor's capacity, background knowledge, and the philosophical or religious stand; and the other one is a chance of confirming the degree of overall understanding or understanding on each step before advancing the transmission further. In Zen *mondo*²⁶ as a form of dialog is supposed to be a wonderful tool helping a Zen adept to deepen his understanding and find his way to enlightenment. Nowadays it has become a formal ceremony in a way, but together with earlier mentioned *koans* it serves as an essential form of dialog between the master and the student or occasionally even between students. For westerners the problem with Zen *mondo* appears to be one, that the answer should be anything but rational and there is no need for any particular logical connections between parts of the dialog, thus what is conveyed here is not specific information but a kind of unique understanding. Although in philosophy writing itself became more a goal than a method, and philosophizing became depended on creating a wider and wider set of definitions containing more and more newly

²⁵ 公安 (*koan* in Japanese) a term that is used to refer to a public notice, but in Zen denotes tales or phrases that were developed to help with Zen realization.

²⁶ In Japanese term 問答 (*mondo*) means literally questions and answers. 禪問答 (*Zen mondo*) refers to a form of practice based on questions and answers that are supposed to lead the practitioner to enlightenment (in Japanese 悟り (*satori*)).

created concepts, Chinese and Japanese Zen managed to sustain their independence from written texts pretending to be something grasping the ultimate and absolute truth. Various analects and collected sayings of past masters remained in their original dialog forms not being transformed to narratives of logical chains of reasoning but it has changed dramatically in the Western tradition of Zen due to adaptation to western mind requirements.

Socrates also has based his method of philosophical investigation on questions and answers and often utilized fables and stories. It is to say that his philosophy was not based on sole speculation of a philosopher recorded in a form of written text, but on a dialog between real persons and in real time. Since he was sharply aware of the fact that there is a great difference between knowledge and wisdom, the dialog presented him with the opportunity to probe the interlocutor's, and at the same time, his own opinions.

As Guthrie points out in his book; *The Sophists* "Often adduced as a cause of the new humanism, is the widening of horizons through increasing contacts with other peoples, in war, travel and the foundation of colonies. These made it increasingly obvious that customs and standards of behavior which had earlier been accepted as absolute and universal, and of divine institution, were in fact local and relative".²⁷ Socrates understood well the relativity of knowledge and never has stressed that his own views were the absolutely true, but on the contrary, the dialog was also for him a way of pursuing the truth, whatever it may be. The great tolerance and not presuming the existence of only one true answer was what made him a great philosopher. It should be added, however, that ability to do this is a complicated process influenced by countless conditions. As a contrary example of immunity to changes and evolution we may point to Christianity; of great sea voyages of the 16 and 17 centuries, when the believers had so many chances to see that their religion and morality is not as universal as they have thought it to be; they seldom had the courage or willing to see its relativity, and in most cases it seems, they have chosen not to see.

The Enlightenment, self realization and living the examined life

When we think about Socrates and Zen we immediately try to grasp it, among others, through the difference between philosophy and religion. However I think that in this case it is quite unsubstantiated. Socrates was not under the

²⁷ W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 16.

authority of any religious group and was practicing philosophy freely, and even thought religious authority may lead to gaining various kinds of political, moral, economic etc. powers, since in Zen there is no sole authority on orthodoxy, the practice and philosophy of Zen, as in the case of Protestant Christianity, is left to free interpretation, without any objective criteria that would clearly favor one and condemn all other ways of understanding and practicing, we may say that the distinction is not essential in our case.

Zen should have any sense only when the practitioner lives according to his beliefs. That should also be true in regard to philosophy. Being a Zen theoretician seems to be a contradiction. In philosophy though, nobody seems to care anymore what kind of life a philosopher lives.

Western tradition of Zen is not based so much on experience as on the analysis of the experience to seek objective or absolute confirmation of it somewhere outside the experience itself. In another words the western tradition of Zen does not, as Socrates did, look for transcending the limited knowledge though acknowledging ignorance, but clings to rationalizations and absolutizations of experiences it feels, for various reasons, should not be left as they are.

Suzuki D. T. in the second series of his *Essays in Zen Buddhism* writes as follows. "The distinction between mere learning or mere philosophizing and self realization, between what is taught and teachable in words and what altogether transcends one's verbal expressions as it is to be inertly experienced – this distinction which is fundamental has been strongly insisted upon by the Buddha; and all his followers have never forgotten to emphasize this distinction so that the state of self-realization which they desired would never be lost sight of. They have, therefore, been taught to be always intensely vigilant over themselves as if their heads were on fire, or as if a poisonous arrow had deeply penetrated into their flesh. They have been urged strongly to endure what is unendurable, to practice what is the most difficult to practice in the life of an ascetic, in order that they may thus finally come to the realization of the highest truth which liberates them from the bondage of existence."²⁸ Here he distinguishes sharply between learning as acquiring knowledge as is philosophizing and self realization, between what can be taught utilizing words and language and what can be experience. It is interesting to notice, that Suzuki himself, and, I presume, most of his contemporaries thought of philosophy as something merely theoretical, through which one is not able to obtain self realization, nor can be taught anything more valuable than the inner experience. Perceiving philosophy as something that in fact has almost nothing to do with the lives of ordinary people seems to be a prevailing view nowadays as

²⁸ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism Second Series* (London: Rider and Company, 1970), 23.

well, not only among general population but also among people who undertake philosophy professionally. Here is not the place to look for who is to blame for this situation, but it is important to remember that for Socrates, philosophy was quite different from what it has become now; not so much in regard to the contents, but more in relation to its methods and purposes.

Now, let us ask here again what is the purpose of Zen and what is the purpose of philosophy then? If an Enlightenment or acquiring certain knowledge would be the ultimate purpose of all human efforts what would happen after we have reached the enlightenment line or learned the secret knowledge that would make us the perfect philosopher? In most cases, if we would not die on the spot, we would have to continue on living.

Chang Chuang Yuan in the introduction to his book *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* says that "For the Ch'an Buddhist, being and non-being, life and death, right and wrong, are mutually identified; they all emerge from this original face. Man is real insofar as he is rooted in this ground; he is not real as an isolated individual. Therefore the goal of man is to reach this ground of life, and it is there that he attains the highest level of consciousness. It is here that absolute reality unfolds itself, that light emerges from darkness, that freedom casts off the last of its bonds and limitations. The man who attains this is called by the Ch'an Buddhist *chu*, or "Master of His Own". When one is truly his own master, his actions are spontaneous and he draws freely upon his own endowments and potentialities. His life and his actions emerge directly from the center of his own being. Therefore, self-realization is the essential principle in the teachings of Ch'an."²⁹ Because of western or Christian view of man as a quite imperfect creature, it is quite difficult to truly accept the Zen Enlightenment as something that doesn't make us perfect after we die and unite with the divine but may happen to us when we still are alive. Furthermore affirmation of the possibility of everybody leading the life of saints also presents a great difficulty to accept. But what Zen Buddhism teaches us is exactly that. From this experience of Enlightenment flows what we can call examined life which is, as Chang points out, based on our true being not being limited not only by our selfishness or ignorance, but also by the fallacies imposed on us by the language.

There is no doubt that Enlightenment if true, has a very visible bearing on the life, behavior, the way of thinking and the system of values of the individual. That also may be described as a state that brings us close to Socrates' thought, where knowledge becomes practice, becomes good.

²⁹ Chuang Yuan Chang, trans. *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), XI.

About the mere knowledge that philosophy had become, Suzuki writes as follows. “It is not enough to ‘know’ as the term is ordinarily understood. Knowledge, unless it is accompanied by a personal experience, is superficial and no kind of philosophy can be built upon such a shaky foundation. There are, however, I suppose, many systems of thought not backed by real experiences, but such are never inspiring. They may be fine to look at but their power to move the readers is nil.”³⁰

And now let us go back to Socrates. In the dialog *Apology* he says: “...I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet and saying to him after my manner: You, my friend, – a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, – are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all?”³¹ Socrates suggests what for him was probably quite obvious, that philosophy should be about wisdom, truth and taking care of soul (*psyche*). Let us point out here that the wisdom he is talking about may be understood as knowledge accompanied by a personal experience, as Suzuki has put it in words. Socrates suggests action like caring, taking thought for wisdom and truth, and soul to make it better. It is not mere learning or acquiring knowledge just to know, but to become a better person. And furthermore the important thing here is that his philosophy was not so much about himself, but about helping others to care for their psyche. Guthrie in a previously mentioned book says that “In brief, what Socrates thought about the human psyche was that it was the true self. The living man is the psyche, and the body [...] is only the set of tools or instruments of which he makes use in order to live. A craftsman can only do good work if he is in command of his tools and can guide them as he wishes, an accomplishment which demands knowledge and practice. Similarly life can only be lived well if the psyche is in command [...] of the body.”³² If the interpretation of psyche as a true self can be somehow substantiated, we may say that taking care of the self to make it better counts as a kind of self-realization that is essential to Zen pursuit. Thus here again we come to the point that the central themes of Socrates’ philosophical life and Zen meet.

³⁰ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London: 2002), 32.

³¹ B. Jowett, trans. *The Dialogues of Plato. Translated into English with Analyses and Introductions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 123.

³² W. K. C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 149.

Conclusions

In the conclusion we may say that when looking at Socrates' philosophy and Zen Buddhism we notice some astonishing similarities not only concerning the aims and purposes of the philosophical and religious efforts and investigations but also in the employed methodology that seems to point to the universality and effectiveness of the approach. There is no way to reasonably prove any direct historical connections between Socrates and Zen and yet among numerous philosophical and religious systems they seem to stand out because of their genuine and uncompromised desire to make the individual a better person and the world a better place not based on any future, after death reward or a transcendental being but quite the contrary, relying solely on what we can know and experience here and now.

The enormous interest in Zen Buddhism in the West shows clearly that more and more people are not satisfied with the answer that the Western culture supplies and are looking for the wisdom of the East. Unfortunately quite often the East is seen through the western philosophical framework and prized for its oddity and form, but the fact that our human experience, when we treat it with utmost sincerity and purity, does not have to surrender itself to the East-West distinction. I am quite confident that following Socrates' way of philosophy and practicing his way of examined life can lead a person to a kind of enlightenment and awareness that Zen Buddhism pursues, without the need to adopt any exotic practices. Moreover we also know, that Socrates is an extremely rare example of a person that was not afraid to die for what he thought was right, not in expectation of getting any future rewards in heaven for his martyrdom but for the sole courage to stand by his opinions. And what better proof of his mastery and truth and genuinity of his teaching and intellectual pursuit one could expect.

Summary

In intercultural comparative studies there is a tendency to emphasize differences in the development of solutions to similar problems; but in this short article I am trying to present a stand, where the actual pursuit of truth based on the innermost experience of our lives transcends the limitations of a particular culture, and enables us to benefit; not from the alterity of different forms, but the unity of genuine philosophical endeavor. Based on that, we may notice an alternative; such that instead of westernizing Zen, we may as well try to understand and follow Socrates; a great master who we already have in our tradition; to help us appreciate what genuine Zen is about.

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