

## SIDDHAS AND ZEN-BUDDHISM

### Lama Anagarika Govinda

When religion grows in age, faith turns into dogma, and experience is replaced by book-knowledge, virtue by adherence to rules, devotion by ritual, meditation by metaphysical speculation. The time is then ripe for a rediscovery of truth and a fresh attempt to give it expression in life.

This is what happened in the sixth century B.C., when the Buddha revived Indian religious feeling through a re-formulation of the ancient Dharma (for which the orthodox called him a revolutionary), and again a millenium later, when Buddhism had crystallized into so many philosophical schools and monastic institutions that the individual was in danger of getting lost in them, like a lone seafarer in the immensity of the ocean.

A new individualistic idealism sprang up then. It had its repercussions on the Chinese *Ch'an* School, which was called *Zen* in Japan, and on Indian Buddhist mystics whose records have been preserved in Tibet in the stories of the Eighty-Four *Siddhas* or Masters of the Mystic Path.

These *Siddhas*, as also the Masters of the ancient *Ch'an* or *Zen*, were as revolutionary in their ideas and methods as the Buddha had seemed to the orthodox of his time. They were equally insistent that experience was more important than book-knowledge, and that "truth" could not be handed out in any "solid" or clearly definable (and therefore limited) form, in which it could be preserved for an indefinite time.

The Buddha discovered that it is not the *results* of human thought, the "ideas", beliefs and formulas, the conceptual knowledge, that matter, but the *method*, the spiritual attitude behind them. True to this fundamental principle, the *Ch'an* in China and the *Siddhas* in India refused to put their experiences into philosophical systems or to crystallize their ideas into doctrines.

They preferred the paradox to logical formulations and laid more stress on the spirit of inquiry than on solutions. Their spiritual attitude was expressed in one word—*sunyata*—which literally means "emptiness", but has so many gradations of meaning that it can only be circumscribed. In the present instance it may be interpreted as complete absence of prejudice and pre-conceived ideas. It is the intuitive state of mind, which in the Indian system of meditation is called *dhyana* and from which the word *Ch'an* or *Zen* is derived.

There are as many ways of achieving this as there are thinking beings. So each of the Masters developed his own method and—what is more—made each of his pupils find his own particular way. This is what makes it so difficult to give a precise idea of what *Zen* or the *Siddhas* stand for, without over-stressing individual aspects or over-simplifying the problem by mere generalization.

They did not believe in verbal expressions of truth and only pointed out the direction in which truth might be experienced, since truth is not something existing in itself, not even as a negation of error, as Joka, a pupil of the Patriarch Eno (638-713 A.D.), sings in his hymn *Shodo-Ka*:

"I do not seek the truth,  
I do not destroy the error,  
Because I know that both are nothing,  
That both are no forms (of Reality),  
The Unformed is nevertheless not 'nothing',  
But also not 'not-nothing'."

And in the same hymn we find the words: "The empty shape of transitory illusion is nothing but the shape of truth." Tagore expresses a similar idea when he says: "If you close your doors against all errors, you exclude the truth."

All our logical definitions are one-sided and partial, since they are bound to their starting point: the judging intellect and the particular angle of vision. What people generally regard as truth is little more than a one-sided statement.

A fine example of this is the story of two Chinese monks who had a dispute about a flag moving in the wind. The one maintained that the flag was moving; the other, that it was the wind that moved. Eno (Hui-Neng), the sixth patriarch in China, who overheard their discussion, said: "Neither the wind nor the flag is moving; your mind moves."

But Mummon, a Japanese Patriarch of the thirteenth century, not satisfied with this answer, went one step further and said: "Neither the wind, nor the flag, nor the mind is moving", thus going back to the ultimate principle of *sunyata*, in which there is neither going nor coming, comprising both the subjective and objective aspects of reality.

This reality beyond the opposites, however, is not to be separated or abstracted from its exponents, the momentariness is not to be distinguished from eternity. The most perfect individual self-expression is the most objective description of the world. The greatest artist is he who expresses what is felt by everybody. But how does he do it?—By being more subjective than others. The more he expresses *himself*, the nearer he comes to the others, because our real nature is not our imaginary, limited ego. Our true nature is vast, all-comprehensive and intangible as empty space. It is *sunyata* in its deepest sense:

"Clear and unimpaired is the light of the spiritual mirror,  
Boundlessly penetrating the innumerable realms,  
Which are as countless as the sands of the sea.  
In its centre there is formed as a picture the whole world.  
It is a perfect light; it is unbroken:  
It is neither merely inside nor outside."

(Shodo-Ka)

It is the secret of art that it reveals the supra-individual through individuality, the "not-self" through the "self", the object through the subject. Art in itself is a sort of paradox, and that is why *Zen* prefers it to all other mediums of expression; for only the paradox escapes from the dilemma of logical limitation, of partiality and one-sidedness. It cannot be bound down to principles or conceptual definitions, because it exaggerates intentionally, and a literal interpretation is not possible. Its meaning is beyond the incongruity of words.

Paradoxes, like humour, are greatly dependent on the soil on which they grow. Thus there is a marked difference between the paradoxes which we find in the stories of the Indian Buddhist *Siddhas* and those of the *Zen* Masters in China and Japan. In the stories of the *Siddhas* the paradoxes take either the form of the miraculous, in which inner experiences are symbolized, or they show that the very thing by which a man falls, can be the cause of his rise, that a weakness can be turned into strength, a fault into an asset, if only we are able to look at ourselves like a stranger, without bias and prejudice, and upon the world around us, as if we had never seen it before.

We are blind to Reality, because we are so accustomed to our surroundings and to ourselves that we are no more aware of them. Once we break the fetters of habit by the power of a paradoxical situation or by a flash of intuition, everything becomes a revelation and everyday life turns into a wonder. In the stories of the Tantric Mystics this wondrous experience which follows the great spiritual change, is symbolized by miracles and extraordinary psychic powers (*siddhi*). In *Zen* Buddhism with its refined psychology, the scene of activity is entirely located in the human mind and the paradoxes are of a more complex nature.

Perhaps it was this difference in treatment and style which prevented scholars up to now from recognizing the inner relationship between *Zen* and *Siddhas*, though thousands of miles and hundreds of years may have separated them.

The following story, which might be aptly entitled "The Man who met with himself", may serve as an example. It is found in the Tibetan biographies of the Eighty-Four *Siddhas* (*Grub-thob brgyad-cu-rtsa-bzili mam-thar*), who flourished between the seventh and the eleventh century.

The story runs as follows: There was once a hunter, called Savari. He was very proud of his strength and his marksmanship. The killing of animals was his sole occupation, and it made his life one single sin.

One day, while he was out hunting, he saw a stranger approaching him from afar, apparently a hunter. "Who dares hunt in my territory?" he thought indignantly, and walking up, he found that the stranger was not only as big and sturdy as himself, but—what surprised him still more—he looked exactly like himself!

"Who are you?" he demanded sternly.

"I am a hunter", said the stranger, unperturbed.

"Your name?"

"Savari!"

"How is that?" the hunter exclaimed, taken aback. "My name is also Savari! Where do you come from?"

"From a distant country", the stranger said evasively.

Savari regained his self-confidence.

"Can you kill more than one deer with the shot of a single arrow?"

"I can kill three hundred with one shot", the stranger answered.

This sounded to Savari as tall talk, and he only wished for an opportunity to expose his rival's ridiculous claim.

However, the stranger—no other than the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who had assumed this shape, because he felt pity for Savari—immediately created a herd of five hundred deer through his magic power. Savari was delighted when he saw the deer emerge from the forest at not too great a distance, and he asked gleefully: "Will your arrow be able to go through all those deer?"

"It will go through all five hundred" the stranger replied. But Savari suggested: "Let your arrow miss four hundred and kill one hundred only."

The stranger accomplished this feat with the greatest ease, but now Savari began to disbelieve his eyes.

"Fetch one of the deer", said the stranger, "if you have any doubt." And Savari went as he was told.

But, alas! When he tried to lift one of the deer, he found it so heavy that he could not move it from the spot.

"What?" exclaimed the stranger, "you, a great hunter, cannot even lift a deer!" And he laughed heartily.

Now the hunter's pride was completely broken. He fell at the stranger's feet and asked him to be his teacher.

Avalokiteśvara agreed. "If you want to learn this magic shooting art", he said, "you must first purify yourself for a month by not eating meat and by meditating on love and compassion towards all living beings. I will then return and teach you my secret."

Savari did as he was told, and when the teacher returned, he was a changed man, though he did not know this yet. He asked the Guru for his promised initiation into the secret art of shooting.

The teacher drew an elaborate *maṇḍala* (a concentric diagram, used as an aid in meditation), decorated it with flowers and told Savari and his wife to look at it carefully.

Since both of them had seriously practised meditation for one full month, they gazed with undivided attention upon the *maṇḍala*, and lo!—the ground below it seemed to become transparent, and it was as though they looked right into the bowels of the earth. There was smoke and fire, and agonizing shrieks pierced their ears.

"What do you see?" asked the Guru.

The hunter and his wife were unable to utter a word. But when the smoke had cleared away, they saw the eight great hells and the agony of innumerable human beings.

"What do you see?" the Guru asked again. And when they looked closer, they recognized two painfully contorted faces.

"What do you see?" the Guru asked for the third time. And suddenly, full comprehension came over them like a flash, and they cried out: "It's ourselves!"

They fell at the feet of the Guru, imploring him to show them the way of liberation. But they entirely forgot to ask for the initiation into the secret

shooting art.

Savari continued to meditate on love and compassion and became one of the Eighty-Four *Siddhas*.

It is interesting and instructive to see the main features of this story in the garb of *Zen*, as related in Chuan-teng Lu and translated by Prof. D. T. Suzuki in his "Essays on Zen Buddhism" (vol. II, p. 94 f.):

Shih-kung was a hunter before he was ordained as a *Zen* monk under Ma-tsu. He strongly disliked Buddhist monks, who were against his profession. One day, while chasing a deer, he passed by the cottage where Ma-tsu resided. Ma-tsu came out and greeted him.

Shih-kung asked: "Did you see some deer pass by your door?"

"Who are you?" asked the Master.

"I am a hunter."

"How many can you shoot down with your arrow?"

"One with one arrow."

"Then you are no hunter", declared Ma-tsu.

"How many can you shoot with one arrow?" asked the hunter, in his turn.

"The entire flock, with one arrow."

"They are living creatures, why should you destroy the whole flock at one shooting?"

"If you know that much, why don't you shoot yourself?"

"As to shooting myself, I do not know how to proceed."

"This fellow", exclaimed Ma-tsu, all of a sudden, "has put a stop today to all his past ignorance and evil passions!"

Thereupon, Shih-kung the hunter broke his bow and arrows and became Ma-tsu's pupil.

When he became a *Zen* Master himself, he had a bow with an arrow ready to shoot, with which his monks were threatened when they approached him with a question.

San-ping was once so treated. Shih-kung exclaimed: "Look out for the arrow!"

Ping opened his chest and said: "This is the arrow that kills; where is the one that resuscitates?"

Kung struck three times on the bow-string. Ping made a bow. Kung said: "I have been using one bow and two arrows for the past thirty years, and today I have succeeded in shooting down only a half of a wise man."

Shih-kung broke his bow and arrows once more, and never used them again.