

## **The Sound of One Hand - Zen and Christian Spirituality**

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### **On the boundary**

It has been one of my great challenges and privileges in life that I for sixteen years lived in close contact with Buddhists and adherents to other Eastern religions. I was engaged in study and dialogue, and at the same time involved in a continuous reflection with Christians in Japan about what it means to be church in a culture that was formed by the rich spiritual traditions of the East.

My work was not only to study religion as an academic discipline but to be in contact with the life behind forms and rituals and doctrines. I was challenged to ponder whether Christianity had any message to people who travelled along other paths. I met friends who drew on springs I did not know, and wondered whether these were related to my own. How could one be faithful to Christ and at the same time care for the cultural riches that were formed by other religions?

Fortunately I belonged to a missionary tradition that encountered other religions and cultures with unreserved openness and empathy. Mission was not only to proclaim truth but to search for truth, a dialogical approach where one was expected to be a sort of pilgrim on the boundary where faith meets faith.

At times the journey on the boundary might bring me to a "no man's land of faith". It dawned on me that perhaps I was about to leave my way. At the same time, however, I was continually on my way to a deeper faith. At times I failed to find what I sought. God was hidden in cloud and darkness. But I was also bestowed with flashes of insight, when I glimpsed fragments of a divine reality so alive that I will always seek to see with greater clarity.

I have experienced inner conflicts. I have a message to share. I should guide people, give the right answers. But I am also a person seeking for answers. Some times I received truer answers by my Buddhist friends than from Christian brothers and sisters. Some times my explanations were meaningless because they responded to questions nobody asked.

I have experienced anxiety. In my dreams I have run naked through the streets searching for refuge. I have stood on the pulpit in my underpants desperately searching for a manuscript that was never completed. I was afraid of being exposed. I was afraid of being weighed and found too light.

I have met people who saw through the vacillation and hollowness of my life. That is always humiliating and hurting. But because they still trusted me and loved the potential for better things, such experiences created something new. It is my conviction that God is like that. Whatever I have of courage for dialogue is based on such a trust.

I shall never forget my first encounter with a Zen master in Kyoto in the early 1970s.

- Why do you come here? The master asked rather brusquely. - You Christians have also meditation and prayer, don't you!

I answered that he was right, but I was concerned about seeing Buddhism from within if that was possible. In addition, as a Christian I expected to learn something from Buddhism.

- Why in the world are you so concerned to learn about Buddhism or about Christianity for that matter?

He did not seem to be impressed. I have to concede that I was not particularly comfortable with the situation.

- It is raining tonight, the master continued after a while.

We sat quietly listening. The rain was falling softly at the moss and the herbs in the temple yard. The suddenly the impossible question:

- Is it Buddhism or Christianity that is raining?

My thoughts were rushing around in my mind, but the rain failed to give me an answer.

- It is simply raining, he finally said. - Here it is a question of being, and all your theories about Buddhism and Christianity separate you from the simple and basic question: to be.

It was the first time it dawned upon me that faith might actually separate me from life. Or rather -that speculations and pious explanations might build walls that shut out reality. Perhaps my faith had to break down before I could become a true Christian? If my encounter with Christ had not helped me to be in a true way, perhaps I had not really met him?

One day the master explained me how I should enter the meditation hall.

- When you enter the hall, you have to abandon all your thoughts, ideas, and concepts. Leave behind your theology. Forget God.

I pondered the question for some time. Is it possible? Is it right? I concluded that it was a paradoxical act that might be profoundly Christian. Buddhists also have to leave behind all their ideas and aspirations about Buddha, enlightenment, and liberation. They must so to say leave Buddha outside the meditation hall. The first thing they do when they enter the hall, however, is to bow respectfully to the Buddha statue there. They have to forget Buddha, but Buddha is there. Christians, likewise, may abandon their theology; take leave of God outside the meditation hall. But he is there when they enter - as near as breathing and heartbeat.

Perhaps I should add that the challenge and inspiration from the East has followed me also in Norway as a professor of theology at the University of Oslo, as a preacher, as a Christian searching for a language for my own faith that I can identify with. It is really a privilege to prepare lectures or sermons and at the same time ponder over Buddhists scriptures and listen to voices from outside the Christian tradition.

### **The sound of one hand**

The specific background for this lecture is my recent translation into Norwegian of representative Chinese and Japanese texts from the Zen tradition: *Zen - lyden av en hånd* (Zen - The Sound of One Hand). Some of you also know my more popular book *Hvem kan stoppe vinden? Vandringer i grenseland mellom O'st og Vest* (Who can stop the wind? Wanderings on the boundary between East and West), which has remained as a long-seller for more than ten years.

Some of you are familiar with the expression. "The sound of one hand" is one of the many paradoxical Zen sayings that is entering our language. Paul McCartney has made a melody called "The Sound of One Hand Clapping." In "Enlightenment" Van Morrison sings, "What's the sound of one hand clapping?" referring to Zen as an art of life - to be in the moment, to discover the greatness of simple things and actions, like carrying water and cutting wood. Other jazz and pop groups do the same. At Lillehammer there is a cafe named "The Sound of One Hand".

Now what exactly is that one hand clapping?

The starting point is the Japanese Zen master Hakuin (18th century) who wanted to give the monks a mental provocation. "What is the sound of one hand?" he asked. If you clap both hands there will be a sharp sound. But if you only lift one hand there is neither sound nor smell. How is the echo from this sound that never was? The question should shatter the traditional ways of thinking, provoking them to see and sense reality in a new way. When reason gives up and the words reach their limit, you may break out of the cave of ignorance, Hakuin comments. When the precious sound of one hand penetrates your ear, you will obtain the heavenly ability to hear all the sounds of the universe, from gods and Buddhas, from heaven and hell and all that has life. At the same time your sight is purified and the entire cosmos is penetrated by light.

Hakuin's question was a new formulation that is still used to guide people who want to break through mental barriers. But he belongs to a long tradition of masters who systematically used such insoluble riddles and paradoxes in their spiritual guidance. They are called *koan* - riddles or questions. Some ask: Does a dog have Buddha nature? Others ask: How can you climb further up from the top of a pole that is a hundred feet tall? How can you enter through the barrier of a gate that does not exist? Show me your face as it was before you were born. How can truth be explained when all words are meaningless? A man is about to fall down from a tree unable to find a hold for hands and feet, only held by his mouth holding a little twig with his teeth. A man stands at the foot of the tree, desperately asking him about the meaning of life. If he opens his mouth to answer him, he will fall down and be killed. If he does not answer, he betrays both himself and the desperate man down there.

All these riddles and questions originally belong in a monastic context, a community of monks or nuns, who are searching for inner liberation. The questions are not conceived as smart and funny formulations to play with, but belong in a strict rhythm of meditation and guidance, ritual life and hard work. The puzzling questions were intended to force people out of the rational mode of seeing things, to shake the ordinary mind, to entice them to seek the very essence of things: What does it mean to be? Who am I really? The riddles are described as pieces of tile the seeker uses to beat the gate which one day may open for the liberating wisdom.

Jesus also spoke about knocking at the door in order to enter. He knew that there was a lot of seeing without understanding. Puzzling and paradoxical expressions are not alien to the Bible. He used what we might call Biblical *koan*: A camel going through a needle's eye, the poor who are blessed, to lose one's life in order to gain life, the grain of wheat that must fall into the ground in order to bear fruit, an almighty and loving God in a world where there is so much pain. Are the expressions easily explained? The moment we think we have a rational answer, they become absurd. But if we don't answer, that is also a problem. One of my friends describes Jesus himself as "the supreme *koan*". We might translate it as "the highest paradox" or "the perfect riddle". If theology is to reflect upon the divine mystery, we are really dealing with insoluble riddles and questions we may never penetrate. Christian reflection will never end dealing with the riddle Jesus, the supreme *koan*.

#### *Echo from a sound that never was*

Are there any links between "the sound of one hand" and our own Christian reflection and spiritual life? Can we enter a meaningful dialogue with "the echo from a sound that never was"?

Let me first give a warning and say that mutual understanding is not a matter of course. The search for truth in Zen and the Christian search for understanding often seem to be two different modes of being, and may even move in different directions. Our ways of doing theology tend to be intellectual work, while Zen is an existential search for meaning that really begins seriously when the intellect collapses. The point of departure for theology is a historical event that has been manifested in people's lives as stories, experiences, devotion and ways of life. Theology is the systematic reflection - we might even use the Norwegian expression *ettertanke*, "after-thought" - attempting to understand and interpret the historic events and their implications for one's own life, for the community and the world. The starting point for Zen is a philosophical understanding of being human,

but this understanding has no meaning unless it is transformed to inner experience. We might say that theology seeks intellectual understanding - *fides qucerens intellectum* - about a divine reality outside us to which we relate, while Zen is to let all intellectual frameworks crumble in order to allow the inner reality, which has been there all the time, shine through. In the formulation of a Zen monk I knew, the problem is all our theories. Our explanations prevent us from understanding. Translated into theological terms: Theology puts God in the shadow.

In spite of distance and differences, however, I think the ways are crossing each other, that we may even benefit from walking together for a while and see what happens. What follows here is, therefore, are pieces of a dialogue with the echo from the sound of one hand. But then I have to say a little more about Zen, at least a few glimpses.

### *Meditation alone*

The most central feature of Zen is undoubtedly the one-sided concentration on meditation as the essential Buddhist practice. Meditation is the Buddha way, a systematic mental training leading to quietude, mental awareness, and insight/wisdom. Meditation is the opposite of seeking truth out there. It is to return to oneself. "No words can exhaust its praise," Hakuin wrote in a hymn to sitting meditation - all good works and religious practices are concentrated in this one point, to meditate. The mind of one who meditates is often compared to what happens to a muddy pond. It is muddy and dirty because it is because it is stirred all the time. When it is allowed to be in peace, the mud will sink down, and the water will become perfectly clear. Awakening is not a certain type of knowledge to be obtained, but clarity.

### *The inner treasury*

The basic philosophical precondition for meditation is the conviction that wisdom is not primarily to be found outside the human person, but is inherent as a give quality. People don't know how near it is and seek it far away, Hakuin wrote, but that is like crying for thirst when you are in the middle of the water.

The awakened mind is the original nature of humankind. It is given from the beginning, but is covered by dust, hidden in the mental mud, darkened by greed and ignorance. That is why Zen meditation is so one-sidedly concerned about emptying the mind for all thoughts and concepts that conceal the real.

A famous Chinese Zen master, Ma-tsu (8th century) met a fervent young monk. "What are you seeking?" Mat-su asked. "Enlightenment," the monk answered waiting eagerly for guidance. "You have your own treasure house," he said. "Why do you search in other places?" "What is my treasure house?" he asked. Ma-tsu responded: "What you ask about is your treasure." Then the monk woke up, it is told. And the rest of his life he guided other people saying, "Open your own treasure house and use the treasures you have!"

### *The insight beyond words*

Not only thoughts and conceptions darken our minds, also our words lead astray. No words are able to express the real thing. Buddha himself rejected a lot of theoretical questions with a "thundering silence," because people's curious intellectual questions just led them astray from the real issue. There was only one monk who understood Buddhas message when he was going to give a great speech to the monks, but only sat in silence lifting a lotus flower between his fingers. Everybody was waiting eagerly for his golden

wisdom, but not a word comes from his mouth. Only Mahakashyapa understood. Neither had he said a word, only a broad smile in his wrinkled face showed that he had taken the message. He was the one who was chosen to transmit the light of the lamp to new generations.

A famous sutra tells about a great test where prominent monks should answer an intricate philosophical question (Vimalakirti nirvesha sutra, the sutra about the layman Vimalakirti).<sup>1</sup> Everybody offered intelligent answers betraying their deep insights. But only one, the layman Vimalakirti, offered the perfect solution when he bowed in reverence before Buddha and remained silent. Those who take the word "Buddha" in their mouth, must cleanse the mouth for three days, a Chinese master commented when somebody had tried to explain the essence of Buddhahood. When Zen takes this to the extreme it is probably because of its close contact with Taoist philosophy, which is radical in its resistance to words: "One who knows, does not speak. One who speaks, does not know," as it is formulated in Tao Te Ching (chapter 56).

One of my first experiences with Zen in Japan exposed my own problems relating to the dimension beyond words. I was trained to search words, argument through words, and define faith in conceptual language. I was doing meditation under a Zen master in Kyoto, and had several dialogues with him in the process. He was well acquainted with the Bible, and one day he put me to the test.

- It is written in the Bible that we should not worry for the day tomorrow, he said. - What does it mean?
- In my innocence I thought I finally had an opportunity to witness to my faith, and began telling about God's care for us. He is like a father looking after his children.
- I know all that stuff, he interrupted, but what does it mean? I tried to be more concise. - We trust in God's providence. We have nothing to fear. Jesus compared it to the lilies of the field and the birds of heaven...
- Yes, I know all that, he repeated. But what does it mean?

All my explanations were mildly but mercilessly peeled off. They were only theology, theories and empty words. He was not interested in explanations, but in the issue itself, the actual reality. How could I express my trust without words?

Nobody had really taught me that lesson. During years of study I had been trained to use words and concepts which were put together into a theological whole. It was a house with beautiful facades. But the furniture was borrowed, taken from the home of my childhood, from churches and meeting places, theological reading rooms and lecture halls, and from books. I had built a house for others I only partly inhabited myself. Good Lord, what a heart-rending simple-mindedness to expect that I could give a testimony to this Buddhist master about total trust in God's providential care! He looked through me and knew that my words only lived in my brain and partly in my heart, but not in kidneys and bowels, heartbeat and breathing!

It was, nevertheless, a good experience. For the master was not interested in exposing me or undermining my Christian faith. He only wanted to unmask my pretensions and cut away the empty words and pious explanations. He wanted to penetrate to the marrow, uncover the naked heart, and asked for the real thing beyond words.

To cling to words in order to seek insight, said the Chinese master Wu-men (Jap. Mumon), is like using a stick to beat at the moon, or like scratching one's feet with the shoes on.

### *No external authorities*

If insight is originally given, it is only natural that Zen has a critical attitude to all forms of external authority, whether it is represented by sacred scriptures, doctrinal systems, or teachers and masters. Zen is often described as "a special transmission outside scriptures, independent of words and letters." There is no final authority apart from yourself when you open your eyes. You are your own refuge. That is expressed in numerous anecdotes about monks who burn sutras, and even Buddha statues, or in warnings like, "If you encounter Buddha, kill Buddha. If you meet a master, kill the master." In our own tradition we might rephrase it saying, "If you meet a theologian, kill the theologian." That did not imply that they did not have a deep respect for both the tradition and the masters. They went on pilgrimages searching for masters to instruct them, they read the sutras with deep devotion and honoured the master with deep devotion. The point was that no one - not even the Buddha or anything exalted or sacred - should separate them from their own insight and experience.

One aspect of this scepticism to external authorities is the realization that knowledge and intelligence is not the same as insight or wisdom. Great learning and broad reading is not enough, said the very learned master Dogen (13th century), "Cut it out and give it up!" I have mentioned Mahakashyapa, Buddha's disciple who became the first patriarch after Buddha. His opposite pole is Ananda, Buddha's closest associate who had perfect knowledge. According to the tradition he could recite all the speeches of Buddha by heart - Buddha had taught continuously for 49 - and mastered all his 84000 teaching. But the same tradition reveals that he was not really awakened until his old age, a long time after Buddha's death. That happened when Mahakashyapa one day told him that now it is time to lower the banner. The banner is hoisted in the monastery every time somebody is teaching. By saying that he should lower the banner Kashyapa suggested that it was due time for Ananda to let go of his learning, abandon all the proud ambitions about theoretical mastery. Then finally he was awakened, it is told.

### *The critical phases of guidance*

Even if insight is given, even if no external authority can awaken on your behalf, guidance is desperately needed. The ideal in Zen is a transmission of wisdom directly from mind to mind, or from heart to heart. The role of the master is to be a finger pointing directly at one's mind, challenging the disciple to see his or her nature, and be awakened. That usually happens through talks to the monks, interviews under four eyes, and through happenings in the daily rhythm of work and meditation. Zen is full of anecdotes about masters who lure and threaten, encourage and scold.

Some traditions developed rather militant ways of guidance, a tough male spirituality that used mental shocks to shatter traditional ways of thinking: ridicule and irony, rejection and expulsion, beatings and physical violence. But there are also more caring ways. One of the greatest Japanese masters, Dogen, argues that even unsuitable monks should be educated with the compassion and tenderness of a grandmother.

These two aspects of guidance are expressed in different images of the process. The guidance of the master is sometimes described as "a sword that kills". The sword is used

to cut away layer upon layer of ambitions, selfish dreams, illusions and perverted ideas. All fixed theories and explanations must go. But when his destructive work is completed and the naked heart exposed, the killing sword is transformed to "a life-giving sword."

Another symbolism which stresses the tenderness in the guidance describes the relationship between the master and the disciple as the relationship between a hen and the chicken in the egg. One speaks about the "simultaneity of pecking." A chicken is about to be hatched. The mother hen pecks from outside, and the chicken is pecking from inside. The pecking is necessary from both sides, it is said. But it is a critical process, for the pecking must be synchronized. Is the hen too eager, a premature chicken may come out of the egg? Is the pecking is delayed; the chicken may rot in the egg. The guidance of the master must be adapted to the maturing process of the other. Ultimately it is a question of life and death.

#### *To dialogue with the sound of one hand*

We have had a few glimpses of experience and insight from the Zen tradition. I have tried to highlight some aspects that has inspired and challenged me - there are many aspects that I don't like and even might reject - and have already suggested some implications for Christian theology and spiritual life. Let me conclude by some further reflections about the dialogue that may result from listening to the sound of one hand. Most of my response will be limited to brief shorthand suggestions, but I expect that every-one of you may continue that dialogue when the last word is said.

#### *Christian faith as intellectual process and as meditation*

Buddhism at its best - also Zen - is a unique combination of intellectual analysis and inner experience. But ultimately intellectual endeavour is useless unless it is incarnated in the individual as experience. You may be able to have a complete mastery of Buddhist philosophy without understanding anything, for true understanding - or wisdom - is only when knowledge transforms the mind, including thoughts, emotions, attitudes and the entire way of life.

Now I am a teacher of theology, and this may not apply to all types of learning the Christian way, but there is a tendency to see the Christian way as a process where one accepts the Christian message and devote oneself to deeper knowledge. Students are expected to read Bible texts and have knowledge about the Biblical world, church history, ethics, and dogmatics. We try to remember what happened, to digest the books, to memorize what the great theologians thought about faith - Bultmann and Barth, Ebeling and Rahner, feminists and liberation theologians, modern and post-modern thinkers. We have to account for what we have learned.

The encounter with Zen is a reminder about the meditative dimension of faith. By meditation I here understand the quiet withdrawal, the discipline which gives the mind peace and quietude to see things in greater clarity. Ultimately we cannot depend upon the great thinkers and theologians, not even Matthew or John or Paul. We have to answer ourselves. Memory is not enough.

*Meditation* in the Christian tradition is the quiet reflection. It may be an intellectual and analytical process, or a more intuitive presence. It is nurtured by the sacred texts, by worship and active study, but is also what we might call "the silence after words" as the Norwegian poet Rolf Jacobsen formulates it. It is the quiet reflection after the readings,

after the activities, in a quiet expectation that important things become visible when the ambitions about acquiring and mastering knowledge are put aside.

Luther talked about "knocking at the words". The expression is probably related to Jesus' words about knocking at the door expecting it to be opened. But in the background is also the story about Moses who was told to knock with his staff at the cliff, and seeing the water flowing out as a fresh spring. The meditative waiting expects fresh spring to issue forth from unknown sources. The patient knocking at the words leads sometimes to surprising answers and insights. But time is needed.

I am not saying that this is absent from our traditions. When I was a child, Bible reading, prayer and "the quiet time" was still a prominent feature in Norwegian pietistic traditions. There are retreat movements, meditation groups, and many individuals who are searching to reclaim meditation. But traditional church life and theology are fairly active. There is certainly need for a more passive, contemplative, and theology as well.

### *The limits and potentials of language*

I have already commented on the sensibility for the limitations of language in Buddhism. The real thing cannot be expressed fully in adequate words, but must be grasped in the moment awakening. We may describe the taste of water, but only by drinking we really know its cool and quenching freshness. To search insight only through words is like scratching one's feet with the shoes on.

This is not new to Christian spirituality. We know that the divine mystery cannot possibly be exhausted in our words and concepts. All our theological systems are imperfect, we see in a mirror, dimly. Nicolaus Cusanus called it *docta ignorantia*, "the learned ignorance." So the rejection of words and letters in Zen is primarily a reminder of things we already know, or should know. But Zen still adds something to what we know. It seems to be more radical, and has an extreme awareness of the critical process that goes on in the search for meaning, with words and without words.

First of all, the awareness of the limits of words and concepts is not the beginning of wisdom. It is rather a realization that comes after a long struggle with concepts and thoughts. The Zen monks, who finally burned their scriptures and left their masters, had been searching for years. They had studied the teachings, mastered the sutras, meditated and questioned their teachers in a continuous search for meaning.

One classical example is the Chinese monk Te-shan, who came with all his scriptures and commentaries to the master Lung t'an. He wanted to grasp things intellectually, and visited the master's room with all his questions. One time he was going on with his questions late in the night, the master said, "It is late in the night. Why don't you leave?" Te-shan bade farewell and lifted the curtain to leave. When he saw the darkness out there he turned and said, "It is dark out there." The master lit a paper lantern and gave him. The student was about to take it when the master blew out the flame. In that very moment the disciple had a sudden awakening and bowed in deep reverence. The master said, "What happened?" Te-shan answered, "From now on I shall not doubt the speech of any master in the entire world." But the next day he took all his commentaries and scriptures, put them on fire with a burning torch and said, "Even if you penetrate all the most profound teachings, it is like a strand of hair in the universe. Even if you master all the arts in the world, it is like dripping

a drop in an enormous abyss." So he burned all his notes, bowed in reverence to the master and left.

What happened? He had been seeking intensely and mastered all the teachings, but had finally discovered that his lamp was quenched. With all his learning he did not know the real thing. But that was the end point. Had he burned his books before he started his journey he would have remained in his spiritual darkness? Had he started saying that learning was just like a strand of hair in the universe, he would never have awakened.

As Christians we also have to struggle, at least some of us, for we have different gifts. Language, words and concepts, is our most important tool. Faith lives by language and is expressed in language, searching for words and structure and meaning. But sooner or later there will be periods of frustration and even crisis. The words crumble the structures collapse like a house of cards. One has to grasp the meaning beyond words. There are a lot of theological traditions that realize that silence is the most adequate language of faith. At least there must be a silent dimension behind all our words.

But the radical awareness of the limitation of language may also lead to a new awareness of the potential of language. In Buddhist traditions one speaks about two truths: the absolute and the relative truth. Absolute truth can never be expressed adequately within the framework of language. The relative truth is imperfect, preliminary and limited, but may still speak in truth about reality, especially when one is aware of its limitations. Language may collapse and die, but resurrect to new life in the moment it becomes symbols and signals and pointers toward the unseen reality beyond words. And then it also functions as an invitation to others to investigate and experience the reality towards which the words point.

#### *Great faith - great doubt - new life*

Let me add a second point, which is closely related to what I have said about the critical struggle with concepts and language. In Zen guidance there is a cute awareness of the critical process in spiritual search. The entire process starts with "the great faith". You need a great faith in order to be motivated and to endure. The great faith is a deep confidence in what you have heard. It is a trust in the insights of earlier generations, an expectation that there will be guides who help you, and that you will be able to grasp it by your own experience.

Great faith is needed because one knows that all these external help ultimately will collapse. That experience is called "the great doubt" or "the great death." The Zen master Hakuin describes this as a process where everything is tangled together in a compact ball of doubt. When the great doubt is there, you will be surrounded on all sides by an empty and unlimited space. It is like being frozen in vast armour of ice. Like a fool one forgets to stand up when one sits, and forgets to sit when standing. Everything is concentrated on the insoluble riddle. It is like floating in the air... Then suddenly one day the armour of ice is shattered. Is there any joy in heaven and earth greater than this? After the great faith and the great doubt comes the breakthrough to new life. Hakuin concedes that the great doubt is frightening and unpleasant, but if you are to break out of the accumulated confusion and delusion, crisis and pain is inevitable.

If we had more time, we might have referred to traditions in Christianity where this is not strange. There are theologians and mystics, old and new, who have made similar

experiences. I even think it is not alien to the experiences of some of you. The challenge from Zen is the open affirmation of crisis as a natural and even necessary element of spiritual ways. In our guidance we tend to be timid. We are afraid of crisis and try to help people avoid anything that threaten faith, instead of realizing that crisis may be necessary in order to grow spiritually and to deepen faith.

I am not saying that crisis is always a good thing, or that everyone has to go through such stages. There are persons and situations when people need to be protected from their own struggles, and I am convinced that there are many ways of being a Christian. But I certainly miss some of that courageous honesty in Zen which challenges more people to accept spiritual struggle and crisis as a good thing. I still remember one of my teachers when I was a student of theology in the 1960. He said that for some serious theological search was a sort of vicarious suffering. On behalf of the church and the greater community a real theologian takes on the pain it is to take the questions seriously and not being quite sure whether one would come out with one's faith and mind in good shape.

### *A true person without rank*

Let me conclude with some reflections about the search for the true self, which is the ultimate centre of Zen. Zen is nothing but a finger pointing to the mind of person, or to the person's heart. This is a point where it is easy to point at radical differences between the two religions, but in a paradoxical way the search for the self is one of the central meeting points between them. When Buddhists from time to time describe the awakened person, or when they describe their saints, they seem to be quite similar to the person who is described as a real follower of Christ. In Buddhism the true self only appears when the illusive and selfish ego is abandoned.

The Chinese master Lin-chi once spoke to the monks with the following words: "In this lump of red meat there is 'a true person without rank'." All the time it goes out and in of the pores of your faces. Those who have not yet understood, see! See!" A monk who wanted a theoretical discussion stood up and asked: "What is really 'a true person without rank'?" The master grabbed him and said, "Tell me! Tell me!" When the monk again pondered to find an intelligent answer, he threw him away in anger and left the room.

Why? Perhaps the monk was so preoccupied with his intellectual games that he did not see the real issue. For the true person without rank, the true personality is not a product of our imagination or reflection, not the facades and masks we show the world. The true person is there when we forget the selfish self, when the pretensions are gone and the ambitions break down, when we abandon our concepts and explanations. It is there from the beginning. One of the most common names for this true person is "the original face," often expressed in questions like "Show me your face as it was before you were born." The true self does not exist in isolation, but is a true self only as totally interrelated with other selves and all sentient beings. The true state of being human is, in the words of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, "interbeing".

The Buddhist search for the true self or the original face is developed in a philosophical context that is radically different from Christianity, but if the Buddhist description of such a true person has so much in common with Christian ideals, there should be ample opportunity for mutual learning. How is the relationship between the "original face" in Buddhism and the Christian teaching about being created in the "image of God"?