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Alan W. Watts

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Alan W. Watts, "Zen"

May 3, 1966

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Transcribed by Carolee Harrison, August 2020

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ALAN WATTS: As one who talks to you on Zen Buddhism, I first want to make my position clear. I am not some kind of a missionary. I am not a Zen Buddhist in the same sense as you would say of somebody, "He is a Roman Catholic, an Episcopalian, or a Baptist." If I am asked in Japan whether I am a Zen Buddhist, I say yes, because I could say so in the same sense that in this culture I could say I am a physician, I am a physicist, I am a dancer, or an artist. Because Zen is a discipline and not a system of beliefs. It is not an ideology. It is not a partisan thing which you join as you join a religion in this culture, which means you belong to a special in-group of the saved, which identifies itself and knows itself in terms of an out-group consisting of the damned. They are not at all concerned with the matters with which religious people usually preoccupy themselves. It is not a theory about the world. It is a style of life, a way of life, and above all, a way of feeling your own existence.

The word "zen" is Japanese, and it's the Japanese way of pronouncing the Chinese word "chan." And this, in turn, is the Chinese way of pronouncing the Sanskrit Indian word "dhyana," for which there is no exact English equivalent. You may approximately translate "dhyana" or "zen" as "meditation," but when we talk about meditating, and say somebody is meditating, we always ask, "What is he meditating about?" because for us, the word "meditation" means "to think over, to ponder, to consider deeply, and dhyana is not that. Dhyana is a state of interior silence and stillness in which you open yourself to whatever there may be inside you and outside you, without thinking about it. You do not, in other words, fill your mind with a commentary about your experience. You simply experience, and you are quiet, and you are open to whatever is. And you will see at once, I think, that that is a state of consciousness

rather different from ordinary consciousness, because in our ordinary, everyday life, our minds are constantly preoccupied with judgements and with prejudices.

You see, the human being has two basic kinds of consciousness, and I will compare one of them to a spotlight and the other to a floodlight. The spotlight is what we call conscious attention. It is a method of—to use an electronic term—it is a method of scanning our environment in the same way that radar scans the environment. A bright, concentrated, narrow beam of attention, waving rapidly over the external world, and noticing this and that. The word “to notice” is connected with what is *notable*, that is to say with what is important, and with *notation*, that is to say what can be symbolized in words, images, or numbers. And the average civilized person is entirely preoccupied with his noticing consciousness. And therefore, he can see many many things which he doesn’t notice. You are at a dinner party, and you come home, and your mother says to you, “Was so-and-so there?” and you say, “Yes, she was.” “What was she wearing?” You haven’t the faintest idea, although you sat right opposite to her. You didn’t notice what she was wearing, because it wasn’t important to you. And so there are countless so-called things that you are looking at right now, which you are not noticing, very probably because you have no word for it, and it isn’t important to you. It doesn’t fit into your scheme of things.

But then, aside from this spotlight consciousness, we have a floodlight consciousness. And that is the consciousness of every single one of our nerve endings, which are receiving information all the time, both from inside our bodies and from outside our bodies. And our conscious attention is aware of a very, very small fragment of that total awareness. So if you become very quiet and very still, and you stop attending consciously to this and to that and the other, slowly you regain your floodlight awareness. You become one with it, instead of only with your spotlight awareness. And that becoming one with your floodlight awareness is meditation in the sense of zen or dhyana.

What is the importance of this? The importance of it is very simple. When you are aware of the world with your floodlight consciousness, it becomes absolutely obvious to you that you are one single stream of life with the entire universe. That you are not merely a center of awareness located inside of a bag of skin, which looks out upon an external world which is foreign and alien to you. And most civilized people feel themselves that way, whether they live in Asia, or Europe, or America, and our common speech reflects it. We say, “You must face reality,” as if it were something other than yourself. We say, “I came into this world.” You didn’t. You came out of it in the same way as a leaf comes out of a tree, or a wave comes out of the ocean. But we are brought up to feel that our essential self, our ego, is some sort of a stranger. Your father and mother provided a body, which was a complicated mess of tubes and

wiring, and somehow or other you got mixed up with it. You say, "I didn't ask to be born. It's your responsibility. Especially for giving me an Oedipus complex." And sometimes, if you admire a girl, and say to her, "Gee, you're beautiful," she is liable to turn back on you and say, "Well, that's just like a man. All you think about is bodies. I may be beautiful, but it is my parents who gave me my body, and I want to be admired for myself, not my chassis." And she defines herself, thereby, as a chauffeur. [laughter]

The point is simply that from a scientific point of view, any organism is not something separate in an environment, in a situation where the environment rules the organism or the organism manages to shove the environment around; from a biological point of view, from a physical point of view, every organism, together with its environment, is a single field or pattern of behavior. What happens outside you is as much you as what happens inside you, only we don't feel that to be so, although a scientist knows it to be so. We don't have a vivid physical sensation, as when you can feel something hard and know it's there; in that sense of the word, ordinary people don't have a vivid physical sensation of being their whole environment out as far as the most remote galaxies. So that your organism, with its bag of skin, is something that the whole entire cosmos is doing. As the ocean is waving when it waves. We don't know that that is so, we don't feel it is so, although it is perfectly clear theoretically.

And the reason why we don't know it to be so is that we have instead been conned into a sense of identity which is a purely social institution called the ego. There is no biological foundation for the ego, the feeling that I am a separate source of thought, consciousness, and action. This is a mythology, but everybody has been taught to believe it, because when you were a baby, society defined you that way. They told you, as a child, "You are a free, separate agent." And you *had* to believe that, because you couldn't resist the social pressure that made you believe it. You were, in other words, compelled to define yourself as separate and free. And they went on to say to you, "You are commanded to behave in ways that are acceptable, only if you do it voluntarily. You must love me. All nice children love their mothers. But of course, I wouldn't want you to love me because I say you should, but because you really want to." And so, as a result of that, the sense of "I," the sense of ego, is experienced as a sensation of chronic frustration; of being required to do voluntarily various things. You must go to sleep. You must have a bowel movement after breakfast. You must like doing what you are supposed to do. So then, if you are quiet, and you find a way of suspending your ordinary prejudices, your ingrained, taught feelings about life, and you become still and quiet, you see that this is not at all the case. That the world outside you and the world inside you is one and the same. And that is what Zen is about. The point of Zen is simply to experience your own existence as one and the same stream as everything else that there is. To shift the center of gravity which you call "myself" from being merely something inside your skin to the whole universe.

Now you see, that therefore has something to say to us in the Western world that is enormously important. The reason is this: that in the Western world has developed a technology of immense power. Nobody, hitherto, has had the power to move the environment around and to change it as we have. But this power is going to be very destructive and dangerous if it is used in a hostile spirit. And the attitude of a person who identifies himself with an isolated center inside the skin, which is foreign to everything outside, is necessarily hostile. And thus it is that we speak of the conquest of nature, the conquest of space, and that the two great symbols of this enterprise, today, are the rocket ship and the bulldozer. The rocket ship: a very aggressive, phallic emblem, compensating for the male sense of sexual inadequacy, to go "bomb!" at the sky, and conquer it. And the bulldozer: the heedless, blunt-fronted pusher-around of mountains and hills, to abolish hills, and to turn everywhere into tract lots. Now, as against the rocket ship, is radio astronomy. To become so sensitive to things beyond us that we let them come to us. That is the proper method to explore space, because you don't have to go into outer space, you're already there. Wherever you go! It won't do you any good unless you are sensitive. The sun is carrying this planet billions of miles an hour through space, and goodness knows what speed the galaxy is carrying us at. And all you have to do is travel, but become aware, become sensitive, and then you'll find out.

And so in the same way, if you want to live on this earth, don't foul your own nest. Say to the hills, "We would like to live on you. What kind of house would you like us to build?" and learn, as the Japanese have shown us, how to build in such a way that you are of one spirit with your surroundings. If we can learn that, we can only learn it through... not through theoretical instruction, through ecologists and conservationists getting up and preaching sermons to us. They will always fall on deaf ears so long as the individual himself does not have a new sense of identity, and does not know in his bones that he and the external world are one self, one single, eternal process. And that's who *you* really are.

Now then, of many, many different disciplines in Asian cultures, various forms of yoga, the Chinese philosophy of Taoism, all sorts of disciplines; Zen is one which is a way of acquiring this new sense of identity, and it has certain peculiar features that make it stand out as a rather unusual and fascinating way of so doing. Zen does not have any special doctrine. I have been talking to you thus far rather philosophically, and saying that the true self is the whole universe, which is a sort of philosophical idea. And I may say it to you and you'll not understand it at all; that is to say, you may get the idea of what I'm talking about, but you don't feel it. So in Zen, they developed a technique of getting people to feel and sense it directly rather than merely thinking about it, and this involved some rather surprising developments. That is to say, when a teacher of Zen is asked a philosophical question: "What is the fundamental principle of

Buddhism?” he is liable to answer, “It’s a nice day, isn’t it?” Or perhaps not even to say any word, but to offer you a cigarette or to scratch his nose, and you think you haven’t been answered, but you’ve been answered very directly, because what he has done is instead of talking, instead of putting out a set of symbols, he has drawn your attention to the immediate here and now. He has got you, in other words, beginning to center yourself, because meditation means not only stillness, but also centering, to be centered.

For example, we live between the past and the future. And you will find, if you consider what you think about most of the time, is that you think about the past and you think about the future. You very seldom are here. And that’s absurd, because, for example, if you make plans for the future, you have no business making any plans for the future, unless, when the time comes that your plans mature, you are capable of enjoying them. But you can’t do that unless you know how to live in the present, and very few people do. Now, it is characteristic of people trained in Zen, as I know them in Japan, that they live totally in the present. That doesn’t mean that they never make any plans for the future. They do, because they are able to make plans for the future. There is some point in their making plans for the future, because they are able to live in the present. But you get a sensation, with Zen-disciplined people, that when you talk to them, they are completely here. They look you straight in the eye, but without embarrassing you, and give a sense of being ready, available for you right now. A kind of concentration, a kind of balance.

You know, the founder of Zen was a character by the name of Bodhidharma, who was supposed to have brought this practice of meditation from India to China shortly after 400 A.D. And every Japanese toy shop has a figure of Bodhidharma as a legless, Shmoo-type object. Like a pear. It’s a head and a base. And it’s so weighted that you can knock it down and it always comes upright again. That’s the point I mean, *centered*. And you have, with all Zen people, this particular sensation of centeredness. They learn, for example, much of the discipline of Zen is learning how to sit down. They have a saying in Zen—two sayings. “When hungry, eat. When tired, sleep.” The other: “Walk or sit as you will, but whatever you do, don’t wobble.” So when you walk, walk. When you sit, sit. So they have a way of teaching those Zen students to sit. And the idea is, when you sit, sit, and be there! Instead of being distracted with thoughts wandering off about this that and the other thing, be simply present. They have all sorts of techniques for teaching one to do that, and they also have a technique for teaching you to walk when you walk. You know when a cat crosses the street? You always know that a cat is really with itself. Cats aren’t like dogs. Dogs are a bit vague, like human beings. But when a cat goes across the street, it just goes, like that. It is the same way when a Zen student walks. He has the same attitude as a cat. When he walks, he walks; when he sits, he sits. And he is *there*.

And this is an enormous advantage, because a lot of people don't know they're there, and they do the funniest, weird things to find out that they are. For example, a lot of people don't know that they exist unless they read about themselves in the newspaper. [laughter] And an enormous amount of juvenile crime is a result of people wanting to get their name in the paper so as to know they are there. Other people don't know they exist unless they are sitting on a spike. Other people don't know they exist unless their clothing is so tight that it scrambles them all together. You know, you put on corsets and pulleys and girdles and a necktie that is a symbol of slavery, that is a noose around your neck, and you pull it tight—eechhhw—like that and you know you're there! Whereas if you were wearing some kind of a loose garment, you... most Western people would feel untidy, sort of undressed, unpresentable, because there's not something squeezing them and telling them you are there. That's what we have to do, because we don't know how to be there. We are not centered; we are not concentrated.

So, the person then who is centered, who is concentrated, realizes like this. You don't say, for example, "I beat my heart." Or "I grow my hair." But you do say, "I walk, I talk, I think." That is because we associate "I" only with those activities of our organism that we do voluntarily. We don't... all those other things, like your heart beating, is interpreted as something that happens to you, rather than something that you do. So your heart beating happens to you in the same way that the sun shining or the rain raining happens to you; you assume no responsibility for it. And therefore, your getting born is interpreted as something that happens to you. You assume no responsibility for it. So one of the great problems that is given to students of Zen is, "Who were you before your father and mother conceived you?" Who is this person that got born? That is the hapless victim of circumstances, and is caught up in this world? Find it out. Who is it who has a problem? Who is it who comes to the teacher and says, "Please help me," or the psychoanalyst, and says, "I have a problem, Doctor"? Who is it who asks the question? Who is the separate "I" that is the victim of circumstances? Produce it.

They have a system, a real great system, about this. Because you see, when you start to study with a teacher of Zen, he doesn't encourage you to study with him. He says, "I have nothing to teach; go away." But you say, "But you have students around here." "Yes, but they are too many of them already, and we are very poor here, we don't have enough rice to go around, and I'm not taking on anybody else." "But you said you had nothing to teach, and you still have students around you." And so you have to persist and persist, and you have to wait, and you have to stick your neck way out and put yourself *in statu pupillari*, in the situation of the pupil, to such an extent and with such vigor that you can't very well withdraw without losing face irreparably. So then he faces you, when he finally accepts you as a student, he faces you with a question: "Who were you before your father and mother conceived you? And I don't want any

theories about this. I want to be shown the real you. Now go away and meditate, and find out who you are.”

So you come back, day after day, to the teacher, who says to you, in effect, “Be genuine. Show me the real self.” And you, of course, are in the position of somebody who is told by a teacher of dramatics that on stage you should be less self-conscious. Now, act un-self-consciously, will you? And the teacher says, “No, that won’t do at all. You’re still thinking about it.” In India they have a superstition that if while taking medicine, you think of a monkey, the medicine won’t work. So the problem is to try not to think of the monkey while taking the medicine. [laughter] So, try to be unselfish, try to be un-self-conscious, try to be sincere—are you really sincere? Why are you trying to be sincere? What’s your game? Oh, so you want to get one up on everybody and on the universe itself, that’s the whole point? Try to do something without wanting to be one up. You see? Try to do something that isn’t self-centered. The more you try, the worse it is. So he traps the student in this way, until the student gets completely desperate.

I had a friend who was studying Zen in Japan, and he was trying to answer this problem about “Who are you really?” and he... all, all his answers, everything had been a failure. And one day he was on his way to an interview with a master, and he went through the garden that joined the students’ quarters with the masters’ quarters, and there was a big bullfrog there. Japan is full of bullfrogs, and they are quite tame. So he picked up the bullfrog and dropped it into the sleeve of his kimono. When he got in front of the Zen master to answer the question, he produced the bullfrog, and the master shook his head and said, “Uh-uh. Too intellectual.” [laughter] In other words, too contrived. Too artificial.

So you, eventually, when you work with this discipline, you get to a point of extreme desperation in which you find out that there is nothing which you can do which is the right answer, and worse still there is nothing which you can *not* do which is the right answer. Both your activity is wrong and your passivity is wrong. And you are thereupon described as being in the situation of a mosquito biting an iron bull. That is to say, it is the nature of a mosquito to bite, and it is the nature of an iron bull to be unbiteable. As we say, the irresistible force has met the immovable object. And so the moral, the conclusion of finding that there is nothing you can do to solve this question and there is also nothing that you can not do, what you realize through understanding that is that there is no separate “you” who could either do something about it or not do something about it. You realize at that point that the separate ego is a fraud. Because it is a social institution, it has no more concrete existence than such another social institution as the equator, which while being a valuable fiction for purposes of navigation is not anything that anybody will trip over on his journey to the South Pole. So, in this way, the

fantasy of the ego, the separate self distinct from the whole of the rest of the universe, is overcome on the principle of *reductio ad absurdum*.

If somebody insists that the world is flat, and there's no way of arguing him out of his hallucination because he can see that it's flat, the only way to convince him is to get him to act consistently on the basis of his hallucination. So you say to him, "Let's go and look over the edge of the world. Wouldn't that be fun?" So then you say, "Well, now, we must be very careful if we are going to look over the edge of the world, that in looking for the edge we don't go around in circles, because obviously if we do we'll never get there. So we'll have to go due west." So you convince him that he's going due west, and then you return to the place you started from. And he knows, now, that the world is at least cylindrical. And he may take it on faith that if you go due north you will also get back to the same place. So this is the method of *reductio ad absurdum*. In the same way, a person who firmly believes or is under the power of the hallucination that he is a separate ego, he can only be taught that this is not so by acting on the premise that that's what he really is, but doing it in a consistent way. Therefore, if you are a separate ego, please be spontaneous! Let's see you. Show. And when you find out that you can't, you know that's not what you are.

So then, in the place of feeling that one is a skin-encapsulated ego, one comes to feel instead that you are one process with, one life with everything else. It's a marvelous feeling. When you walk up a hill, you don't feel you are fighting the hill. You feel, yes, that the effort of your walking up is the same thing as the hill lifting you. You see that what is outside your eyes is not something away from you, it's inside you. It is, neurologically. Everything you are looking at is a state of the nervous system in your head. That's how you know. In other words, what you see out there is how it feels inside your head, from a purely neurological point of view. Because, you, too, your head is something out there. You don't realize that often, but it is. See, all that's out there is inside the head, but the head is something out there; it goes together. And if it weren't for creatures with eyes, of course the sun wouldn't be light. And if it weren't for ears, waves in the air wouldn't make any noise; because when you hit a drum with no skin, there's no sound. What is the sound of one hand?... that they ask in Zen. Silly question gets a silly answer.

So there is, through this discipline of stillness, called zazen, "sitting zen," the acquiring of a consciousness of the individual as not something in the world, facing the world, strange to the world, but as you being simply a particularization of what there is and always has been and always will be. Yeah, you may die, and you may forget a lot of things, but you don't need to remember everything to go on. You don't remember how in the course of evolution you first learned to grow fingernails, and yet you still do it. You don't remember how you got born, but

after you're dead it's a cinch you can do it again. It's like the leaves always come back on the tree. It's like the story of a German fisherman, kind of a German humor, he's putting worms on the line, on the hook, you know, and somebody said to him, "Isn't that an awful, cruel thing to do with the worms?" He said, "But they are used to it." [laughter] And he had the point, you see. Everybody who feels "I am I..." everybody does. It's the same "I." It's all one. So that after you die, there will be other babies in the world coming again, and they will each one be you. Each one will know it is "I," just like you know you are "I" now. You won't experience nothing at all forever. There's no way of doing that. You will just be another baby. Any baby, all babies, but each one feels it's "I," so that's you.

Because it's in secret, all one; as they say in Zen, one mind is at the basis of it all, playing hide-and-seek with itself, because that's the only game there is to play. What are you going to do with life, with existence? There's only one thing to do with it, and that is to get lost and pretend you aren't there, and then discover again that you really were there all the time, and then get lost again. That's what... that's the nature of life. It's just like light is vibrating, so the Chinese say all existence is fundamentally yang and yin, the positive and the negative. The male and female, the there and the not-there, the existence and the non-existence; and they imply each other all the time, but we fool ourselves into thinking that non-existence might win. We say, "Oh, that would be awful. Supposing the black side won, and the white side didn't turn up again? Well, that would be terrible," and we goose ourselves with that idea, and get real frantic about it, and forget—this is part of the fun, you see—we forget that when the dark gets as far as possible, and we go as far as possible as we can into non-existence, it goes "brrrpt" like that and you're back in existence again! It's the only way there is, you see, it's sort of a trap. Only the point is to forget that it's a trap and think there's a way out! [laughter]

Well, now, as a result of this, you see, Zen acquires a sort of a funny style to it that if, when you ask me about matters philosophical, and come on with a lot of words, I reply to you with something pragmatic. And in the attempt to get your mind centered on the here and now instead of on all this speculation about it, because I know if I get you to be really here, you will be at the same time everywhere. Once you get living truly in the moment, you realize that you are the whole cosmos.

So, as a result of taking that attitude, the art forms that Zen Buddhism has inspired are not like religious art forms. They don't look like icons. There are, of course, styles of Buddhist and Hindu art which are definitely religious, whether they are meditating Buddhas covered with all sorts of lotuses and wheels and oriels and seven hands and all these other things, and they are very religious in style. But the icon of Zen is not a figure of the Buddha, but a rock and some grass beside it, or a bird. And the poetry of Zen is not religious poetry, although, you know, in the

Japanese Buddhist churches in San Francisco, and I suppose up here too, they are today singing, "Buddha loves me, this I know, for the Sutra tells me so." [laughter] But Zen poetry, as preeminently expressed in the form of haiku, in Japanese, says, "The sea darkens. The voices of the ducks are faintly white. In the dense mist, what is being shouted between hills and the boat? The old pond. A frog jumps in: plop." That's Zen poetry. See, it doesn't say anything about philosophy, but it is smack! right [brings hand down on table] back to here and now. No explanation. It doesn't need an explanation. People who want an explanation for the universe are saying, "We've seen the dinner, thank you, but we would rather eat the menu." [laughter] Because what you are trying to do with an explanation is just as if you were trying to drink a lake with a fork. Because words can only describe things bit by bit by bit by bit by bit. But it is the sensuous encounter with life that really explains it. It doesn't simply translate it into words. That's only one way of understanding anything, and it's a very slow way and a very clumsy way, even though I've spent great efforts to try and explain things in words that can't be explained at all. It's fun.



Ma Yuan, "Facing the Moon," circa 1200.
chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-ma-yuan-1.php

So you see, you derive from this point of view an art form, A, in which what we would call secular subject matter is of the profoundest spiritual significance; and B, in which one sees that the human being is not standing over against the natural world as something confronting it and alien to it. For example, in one of the great paintings of Ma Yuan, of a poet observing the moon, you have a gorgeous landscape in front of you and it is only after a little while that you locate the poet. He is a tiny creature, involved in the landscape, sitting at a table drinking sake and admiring the moonlight, because he is subordinate to the landscape; he is part of it. You don't get a system of perspective in which everything, the further it gets away from the observer the smaller it is. That is to say, the less important. You have a system of perspective, rather—this is oversimplifying it, but—in which that which is further away is simply higher up on the painting, and that which is close is near the bottom. Because this is the way of looking at things of somebody who doesn't feel that the external world is out there; that he knows that he is one being with it.

You may say that's not the way things really are. Don't you realize that our convention of perspective is simply a social institution? It isn't the way things really are. We faked our camera lenses so that they will put everything that way, because we made the lenses follow our conventions of optics. So it all depends how you conceive the world, as to how you see it; because seeing is not believing. Believing is seeing. According to your belief, so you see. If you believe, for example, that Negroes are an inferior race, they will always look to you slightly animal, and you won't be able to understand how other people don't see that to be so. If you believe that Orientals are all unemotional, impassive, inscrutable people, they will all look alike, and you won't know the differences between them, because they are expected to look like inscrutable Orientals. And they, on their side, will look at us, and they believe that we are all prying, nosy monsters, and therefore all of us appear to have enormous noses and staring, sunken eyes, and ought to be exactly like goblins.

So the whole art of Zen is to have an empty mind. Not in the sense of being stupid and unintelligent, but in the sense of the philosopher Chuang-Tzu when he said, "The perfect man employs his mind as a mirror; it grasps nothing, it refuses nothing; it receives, but does not keep."

Now, if you have questions, I'll be very happy to try and answer them.

Yes? [question in background, off microphone] Excuse me, you must talk a little louder; I can't hear you. [...] "Why is the East trying to imitate the West?" Well. You must realize that the point of view called Zen or whatever has always been, in Asia, a minority affair, in rather the same way, as let's say in the West, how many great physicists has the West produced? Very few, compared with the rest of the population. Well, so in exactly the same way, there have been very few great Zen people in Asia. And everybody in Asia is of course just raring to put the Western technology to use. They didn't have an industrial revolution. They didn't invent technology, and there are special reasons why they didn't, or couldn't. But once this thing came along, everybody wants it. Now some of us know, we have had technology for quite a while, and we know something about its limitations and what not to expect from it; they don't. Not yet. But they will, of course, find out, and become somewhat disillusioned with it, but it will take a number of years for that to happen. In the meantime, of course, I know. Japan has the fastest trains in the world, and the most extraordinary architecture, and the beaches are completely covered with plastic sun lotion bottles, sandals, and birth-control appliances for miles all down the beach of Japan! I mean, it's just like a travesty of Coney Island. [laughing]

Yes. [question in background] Your question is whether I would comment on the role of violence in Zen. You must see that Zen is a discipline which is like the acquisition of any power or skill. Let's say the control of electricity requires a certain skill and a certain discipline. And when you've got control of electricity, you can use it for all sorts of different purposes. You can use it to save and to slay. And in exactly the same way, the Zen discipline can be used beneficently or aggressively. Therefore, historically, Zen was studied by Japanese samurai to give them courage in war and expertise in killing. So you can argue this way. Let's suppose that we are going to have soldiers. Let's not shilly-shally about this: are we going to have them, or are we not? OK. If we decide we *are* going to have soldiers, let them be good. If you are going to cut off somebody's head, all right. Don't do it halfheartedly, because if you do, you will be unmerciful, and you will make this person suffer through having a half-cut-off head. So if you are a true samurai, you learn to cut off heads with lightning efficiency, so that they don't even know what hit them. Which is more merciful, you must admit.

But if you go on in your study of the art of swordsmanship, and really perfect your Zen way of doing it, you will enter what is called the "no sword school," because the highest form of swordsmanship is never to have to use the sword. In ancient days in Japan, there were two great swordsmiths, whom I will call Mr. A and Mr. B. And it was generally felt that Mr. A was the better of the two, but people weren't quite sure, and they decided to put it to the test. They took the two blades made by Mr. A and Mr. B to a stream, and they first put Mr. B's blade into the stream with the edge facing upstream, and they set a piece of paper afloat. And it came down, and as it hit the blade it simply separated and then joined together on the other side of the blade and then went on down the stream. So they said, "Well, that was pretty hot. Let's take Mr. A's blade and see what will happen there." I don't know how you can improve on that. So they set the piece of paper afloat towards Mr. A's blade, but just before it reached it, the paper moved to one side, avoided it, and went on down the stream. So it was judged superior. So the "no sword school" is where the real master of the art never has to use the sword.

Then, you must understand that Zen is a form of Buddhism, and that ultimately Buddhism is compassion. Buddhism is to realize that all other creatures are you, and that even a fruit fly is a human being from its own standpoint. That is the middle way. Every creature finds itself in the middle, between things littler than it is and bigger than it is, less successful, more successful, less powerful, more powerful. Human beings find themselves bugged by tornados and earthquakes and thunderstorms and enormous oceans, and fruit flies find themselves bugged by human beings. But each creature, from its point of view, is human. It occupies the same position you do; it says "I." You can put it down and say, "Well, a fruit fly isn't much of a show. It hasn't got much," but that's because you're not looking at it closely enough. If you really got

out your microscope on one of those things, you'd find it was just as complicated as you are. And it knows about all the creatures that are smaller than it is, and you don't even see them unless you are really looking. And it knows about all those people down there, and their complicated things, and says, "Thank god I'm not like *those* people." And it only lives for a short time, you say, but it experiences as much jazz in that short time as you do in your short time, as compared to the tortoise. This relativity doctrine is fundamental to Taoism and Buddhism, and it says everybody is a human being and everybody is in the same position. So if you wake up and understand that, then you naturally are compassionate. That is to say, you have *com-
passion*, you *feel with* all other beings.

Yes? [question in background] Are there special problems for Westerners studying Zen as distinct from Orientals? Well, yes, in the ordinary way, there are. The main problem for a Westerner who goes to study Zen in Japan is language. And what I would call the static set up by the difference between Japanese culture and American cultures. All kinds of things that neither side understands. You know, Americans go over there naively thinking, "Here's the great Zen master who understands everything," and he doesn't! He is as mixed-up as you are about a whole lot of things, because he doesn't understand your cultural signals. So he doesn't understand you any more than you understand him. So in order to study with an old-style Japanese Zen master, either he has to become amazingly familiar with English and with American culture, or you have to study Japanese very thoroughly, and furthermore become acquainted with Japanese mores. Or you won't understand what's going on at all. Quite aside from the strictly Zen disciplines and the Buddhist philosophy, this is a very serious problem; but fortunately we're now getting people who have been through all this, and who are now Western people, Americans, who are qualified Zen teachers. They are beginning to come into this country, and so we will have less difficulty.

Yes. [question in background] Well, when a teacher strikes a pupil, this is a way of jolting him into his senses, but it has to be done at an absolutely critical moment. It's like trying to cure somebody of hiccups by slapping them on the back. It's got to be a surprise; if it isn't, it won't work. How do you surprise yourself? You can't surprise yourself, because you always know in advance when you are going to say "boo." But you don't know in advance when the master is going to say "boo." If he says "boo" at the right moment, then he will awaken you; he will use that blow or that shout to bring you suddenly to your senses, to live completely here and now. But it's a very skillful matter to know how to do that. It's like knowing how to crack a diamond open; you have to be very, very skillful to do that. So with the Zen master, he knows exactly the moment when the student is psychologically balanced so that the blow or the shout will bring him out of his illusion. You see, it's like waking somebody up from hypnosis. The supposition of Buddhism is that everybody is going around hypnotized. That's why Buddhism, the word

“Buddha,” means “the one who is awakened.” Everybody is under a hallucination, a kind of post-hypnotic suggestion derived from our acculturation as children that each one of you is alone and separate from everything else. What has really happened is this: that you’ve been bamboozled out of realizing that all so-called pairs of opposites are poles. You can’t have the back without the front; they go together. They are inseparable.

[audio cuts out; program ends]