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Early Kierkegaard and the Zen Koan: A Study in Religious Experience

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Early Kierkegaard and the ^{Zen} Koan:
/ ^
A Study in Religious Experience

by

Gregory R. Dell

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Introduction

Religious experience is a puzzling phenomenon. It has appeared extensively throughout the history of man as a primary element in shaping his culture. Many times it has proven itself to be an important motivating factor in man's search for "true" life such as in the Christian's search for "eternal life" and the Buddhist's quest for "enlightenment". However, the religious experience has also led man to wars, alliances, inquisitions, acts of pity, acts of justice, creativity and destruction. Yet, despite its longevity and unusual influence, it remains a great mystery.

One way of confronting the mystery is the Koan, a device of Zen Buddhism which allows a practitioner of Zen to attempt to participate in this mystery. It does not attempt to explain the mystery but it does give the person trained to use it an opportunity to experience that mystery. Similarly, the "leap of faith" which Søren Kierkegaard speaks of in his early works is an expression of the means by which a Christian might find "eternal life". [Eternal life in this case meaning, as it does above, the realm of religious experience.] However, the leap of faith does not explain the mystery of its goal any better than does

the koan. I believe that this lack of explanation is due not to oversight in the two disciplines but rather to a basic inability to adequately describe or express the content of the religious experience.

. . . (the concept of) the ineffable, does not really mean to imply that absolutely nothing can be asserted about the object of the religious consciousness; . . . though it eludes the conceptual way of understanding, it must be in some way or other within our grasp.¹

It is upon this assumption of Rudolf Otto that the following paper has been prepared. I will try to examine the nature of the religious experience as it is conceived by the existential theologian Søren Kierkegaard and the Lin Chi or Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism. Further, I hope to point out the similarities of their methods in attaining this level of experience.

Chapter I - The Koan

Even to begin to understand the nature of the Koan is a formidable task. For this reason, as much background as possible should be reviewed in order to understand at least its cultural setting. The history of the

¹Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy, New York, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 2.

development of Zen is especially significant in defining the Koan as a concept. There are at least two interrelating traditional stories of the origin of the Zen Buddhist movement. It is reasonable to assume that despite inaccuracies these stories provide essential background for the historical development of Zen. According to tradition, Mahakasyapa was the disciple and successor of Gotama Buddha in India. The most rudimentary form of Zen is traced by Zen Buddhists to the legendary conversation between the master and his disciple.

Sakyamuni was once engaged at the Mount of the Holy Vulture in preaching to a congregation of his disciples. He did not resort to any lengthy verbal discourse to explain his point, but simply lifted a bouquet of flowers before the assemblage, which was presented to him by one of his lay disciples. Not a word came out of his mouth. Nobody understood the meaning of this except old venerable Mahakasyapa, who quietly smiled at the Master, as if he fully comprehended the purport of this silent but eloquent teaching on the part of the Enlightened One. The latter perceiving this opened his golden-tongued mouth and proclaimed solemnly, "I have the most precious treasure, spiritual and transcendental, which this moment I hand over to you, O venerable Mahakasyapa!"²

This story is especially significant to an understanding of the history when contrasted with the next traditional chapter in the story of Zen's development.

²Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Zen Buddhism, New York, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956, p. 59.

Mahakasyapa, being the chief disciple of Sakyamuni, became the second patriarch of Buddhism. His successor twenty-six times removed was Bodhi-Dharma, the true "father" of Zen.

Some time in the 6th century, probably 520 or 526 A.D., Bodhi-Dharma arrived in Canton, China from India. The emperor at this time was WuTi of the Liang dynasty. The legendary story which gave prominence to Bodhi-Dharma and impetus to the Zen school, like the earlier tale, centers around an interview. Wu Ti's confrontation with Bodhi-Dharma as recorded by his followers is recorded as follows.

. . . when Bodhi-Dharma came to North China and established himself there, the emperor sent for him. In the course of the interview the renowned teacher was asked how much merit flowed from making imperial donations to the Buddhist order and continuing the translations of sacred books. "No merit at all!" the gruff monk replied, and went on to say to his shocked hearer that knowledge gleaned from reading is worthless; no merit flows from good works; only meditation that admits one to direct insight into the Buddha reality, only truth revealed to one's thought when one turns inward to see the Buddha in one's heart, is of any value. To demonstrate to the uncomprehending monarch what he meant, Bodhi-Dharma is said next to have retired to Mt. Su and to have sat meditating with his face to a wall for nine years.³

³John B. Noss, Man's Religions, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1963, p. 231.

Failing to persuade Wu Ti, Bodhi-Dharma is said to have gone on through Northern China teaching this approach to enlightenment. Thus, he founded the Ch'an or Zen school of Buddhism. His appointed successor Hui-K'o became the second patriarch of China and promulgator of the Zen School.⁴ Hui-K'o's succession as patriarch marks the end of the "traditional" story. While this story is sufficiently accurate for the purposes of this paper, one factor not explicitly presented in the "tradition" should be added to complete the necessary background for understanding the Zen basis of the koan. This factor is the difference between the enlightenment experienced by Mahakasyapa and that suggested by Bodhi-Dharma. This difference centers on the necessity of dhyana (meditation) for enlightenment to occur. While Mahakasyapa gained this "Buddhahood" in a flash of enlightenment, Bodhi-Dharma suggested a practice of silent, patient, introspective meditation. The tension between these two methods did not dramatically emerge until some time later. However, there is evidence to support the conclusion that the very emergence of that tension was not due merely to the idiosyncrasies of Bodhi-Dharma. That is, Bodhi-Dharma's dhyana practice is very similar to the method of Yoga which is another

⁴William A. Briggs, ed., Anthology of Zen, New York, Grove Press Incorporated, 1961, p. 7.

"path that one could follow to enlightenment. The essence of Yoga is described by Sir Charles Eliot in Hinduism and Buddhism.

In brief, it consists of various methods to regulate and control one's mind with the ultimate object of attaining the blissful state of equanimity and achieving supernatural powers of knowledge and action.⁵

There is a parallel which does not appear to be purely coincidental between this approach and that employed by Bodhi-Dharma in his legendary nine year meditation. It would be unusual if such basic similarities did not exist between the two. Yoga had been popularized in the Asian world at about the same time that the Buddha was practicing his search for enlightenment. Because it was rather widespread throughout China by the sixth century it would be reasonable to assume that its principles might have influenced the popular interpretation of Bodhi-Dharma's teachings. If it did, then whether or not Bodhi-Dharma sat meditating before a wall for nine years is irrelevant. It was the popular understanding of his actions which gave Chinese Zen the characteristic of contemplative discipline and it was this characteristic, not its origin, which gave rise to a later schism between those who practiced Zen for sudden enlightenment and those who practiced Zen for dhyana or gradual enlightenment.⁷

⁵ibid., p. 9.

⁶ibid.

⁷ibid., p. 13.

The beginning of the "enlightenment" schism must trace its inception to the first practical applications of the Zen way of life and teaching. In fact, the first rudimentary forms of the Koan are to be found in the early "class sessions" of the Zen masters and their students.

In the beginning of Zen history a question was brought up by the pupil to the notice of the master, who thereby gauged the mental state of the questioner and knew what necessary help to give him. The help thus given was sometimes enough to awaken him to realization, but more frequently than not puzzled and perplexed him beyond description, and the result was an ever-increasing mental strain or "searching and contriving" on the part of the pupil, . . . In actual cases, however, the master would have to wait for a long while for the pupil's first question, if it were coming at all. To ask the first question means more than half the way to its own solution, for it was the outcome of a most intense mental effort for the questioner to bring his mind to a crisis. The question indicated that a crisis was reached and the mind was ready to leave it behind. An experienced master often knew how to lead the pupil to a crisis and to make him successfully pass it.⁸

Thus, masters of Zen depended heavily on the intensity and power of questions to communicate enlightenment "attainment". These questions originally arose as responses to any situation at hand. They were framed to meet the demands of a particular confrontation between

⁸ Suzuki, op. cit., p. 135.

the searching student and his mentor. The structure of the question was adapted to the particular problem of a particular student at a particular time. However, because the principle the master was attempting to communicate (or elicit) was not merely a personalized judgment but rather part of the "immutable" principle of enlightenment, that communication could be valid for other men as well. From a questionable non sequitur argument it was assumed that not only was there value in the "message" of the question but that its structural organization had positive value in itself. Thus, the questions became more formalized as they became more popularized. The order of the words were recorded as diligently as their interpretations. Eventually, the questions were collected and published as the "words of the ancients".⁹ With their widespread use they acquired the name ko-an or "public records".

The increased dependency of the Zen masters on these Koans and the corresponding decrease in the formulation of new Koans has been ascribed by one authority to two primary factors. These were:

. . . the decline in the high level of creative genius with which the earlier masters had been endowed, and the great increase in the number, with a corresponding decrease in

⁹ Isshu Miura and Ruth Miller Sasaki, The Zen Koan, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1965, p. 10.

the quality, of the monks and lay students who were now flocking to individual monasteries by the hundreds, even thousands, to be instructed by the more reputable masters.¹⁰

Whether these were the only two or even the two most basic factors is of little immediate significance; that they were present and that they were connected with the gradual formalization of the Koan is what is of immediate concern in understanding its development. For, with the introduction of a disciplined scriptural text the way would be open for doctrinal orthodoxy. Since the Koan was undergoing such a transformation, elements of intellectualization and structuralization began to make themselves felt within its practice.

By the end of the T'ang dynasty in the seventh century the recorded Koans were in wide use. The increase in their use led to some alteration of their purpose. The first incident of a Koan was not really a Koan at all in the newer sense. Originally, the koans were questions which had been created for immediate use (as explained above). In their newer use koans had literally become "public records"; they were formalized and generalized. However, the koan was not so narrow as to exclude the possibility of its use as an instrument leading toward meditation. As long as the formalization was not complete the Koan could remain

¹⁰loc. cit.

as a possible means leading toward dhyana. The essence of its value thus appears in part in its spontaneous nature. The object of the Koan of this period was not to be found in sudden enlightenment but rather in the sudden confusion resulting from the confrontation with the mystery of the nonsensical meaning of phrases. This confusion would result in the ability to meditate and find enlightenment.

The systemization of Koans had begun by the middle of the 10th century. The resulting collection of "old cases" consisted, in part, of

. . . questions the early masters had asked individual students, together with the answers given by the students; questions put to the masters by students in personal talks or in the course of the masters' lectures, together with the masters' answers; statements of formulas in which the masters had pointed to the profound principle, anecdotes from the daily life of the masters in which their attitudes or actions illustrated the functioning of the principle; and occasionally a phrase from a sutra in which the principle or some aspect of it was crystallized in words.¹¹

The other constituents of the "old cases" were the additions of alternate answers or verses which occasionally became incorporated as part of the old Koans.

The first to employ all the various trends of systemization was Fen-Yang Shan Chao, a Lin-Chi master

¹¹ibid., p. 11.

of the mid tenth century.¹² His work provided the impetus for subsequent collections and developments of the Koan. By the eleventh century men were reasoning and theorizing about the Koans, comparing and memorizing them and their answers in large numbers, and writing verses and explanatory statements about them.¹³ The process of intellectualization was drawing near to its completion. The eleventh century saw the Koans' most rigid structuralization in what is called the determinitive period. All of the tendencies instituted since the time of Fen-Yang found their culmination between 1090 and 1163.

However, for the first time a violent reaction to these tendencies was also felt. Ta-Hui Tsung-Kao, a Lin-Chi master of the 11th century, vigorously opposed the literary and intellectual approach to the Koan. While he advocated the continued use of the old Koans, he insisted upon a return to their original purpose. With the developments of the preceding century the Koans' modified purpose had undergone even more radical interpretation. There was an increasing tendency to treat the Koans as ends rather than means, as the embodiment of enlightenment rather than the guide to it. Ta-Hui taught a method of "concentrated

¹²ibid., p. 12.

¹³ibid., p. 13.

introspection of the Koan".¹⁴ Deliberation and contemplation were precisely excluded from his method as corrupters of the original purpose of the Koan. The zeal with which he attempted reform led to the actualization of the long developing schism mentioned above.

In the development of Zen to this point there was more or less a unity of purpose and direction despite the emergence of several "schools". These schools were not, for the most part, much more than groups especially faithful to one master and his writings or one particular method of achieving the immutable principle. Two exceptions to this generalization were the Lin-Chi and the Ts'ao-Tung Schools which had expanded to notable size and influence. One factor encouraging their growth was the difference in views they took toward the methods of achieving enlightenment. Ta-Hui was a leading representative of the Lin-Chi School. His counterpart in the great controversy was a representative of the T'sao-Tung School. Thus the essence of that controversy was not only between two men but between two important schools controlling Chinese Zen Buddhism. The following is one authoritative account of that controversy.

Now a famous controversy arose between Ta-Hui and Hung-Chih Ching-Chueh, a leading master of the T'sao-Tung School. Ta-Hui upheld the introspection of the Koan as the superior

¹⁴loc. cit.

method for attaining satori (enlightenment), while Hung-Chih advocated that satori be attained through sitting quietly and bringing the mind to a state of complete tranquility and emptiness. Ta-Hui was not against the correct practice of meditation or Zazen, in fact he was strongly in favor of it. It was primarily in zazen that the Koan was to be introspected. What Ta-Hui was against was the adherence to a quietistic type of setting that he felt could only result in passivity and lifelessness, never in the dynamic experience of true satori. And Hung-Chih, however strongly he may have championed "silent-illumination" meditation, did not himself dispense with the Koan. From this time on the Zen of the Lin-Chi School came to be known as k'an-hua ch'an (Kanna Zen), or "introspecting - the - Koan Zen", and the Zen of the Ts'ao-Tung School as mo'chao ch'an (mokusho zen), or "silent-illumination Zen".¹⁵

A decisive schism developed along the lines of this difference between the two schools. From this period to the present both schools have carried on separate literary activities uninterrupted. The Lin-Chi School, as will be seen, has always accepted the veracity of zazen as an authentic path to satori. The Ts'ao-Tung School, however, has shown increased tendency to ignore the value of the use of the Koan or at best to relegate that use to a position of inconsequence.

One final note on the development and history of the Koan deserves attention. During the Sung dynasty in China the Koan reached the height of its prominence and influence. Missionaries were sent out from the

¹⁵ibid., p. 14.

shores of China to Japan. The Lin-Chi School found fertile ground for its development on Japanese soil. Its offspring, Rinzai Zen enjoyed unprecedented success until World War II when most of the creative Japanese culture was destroyed. While Rinzai Zen was not an outstanding contributor to the development and evolution of Zen philosophy or method it had a significant impact on its own culture.

There is one respect in which Japanese religious history is probably unique, namely the development of the Zen sect. The influence of this school upon Japan has been so subtle and pervasive that it has become the essence of her finest culture. To follow its ramifications in thought and sentiment, in art, letters, and behavior would be to write exhaustively the most difficult and most fascinating chapter of her spiritual history.¹⁶

Having investigated the history and development of the Koan to a limited extent over the last few pages it is perhaps now appropriate to posit a working definition and discuss the elements crucial to a practical application of the Koan.

"The Koan is an illogical question, put to a student by a Zen Master."¹⁷ Ignoring, for a moment, the derivative history of the term, this simplified

¹⁶Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Zen and Japanese Buddhism, Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle Co., p. 9.

¹⁷Rev. Soyu Matsuoka, Sermon delivered Sunday, December 27, 1964, at the Zen Buddhist Temple of Chicago.

definition provides a basis from which to explore the implications of the meaning of the Koan and its associated concepts.

The crux of the Koan is its unreasonableness. To be truly effective a Koan cannot be sensible. For instance, in Zen realization there is a loss of self in order to find self. This transformation from reasonableness to unreasonableness, from loss of self to realization of self, is described by Aldous Huxley.

In meditation according to the methods of Zen deverbalization of consciousness is achieved through the curious device of the Koan. The Koan is a paradoxical, even a non-sensical, proposition or question, upon which the mind is concentrated until, utterly thwarted by the impossibility of making sense out of paralogisms it breaks through into a sudden realization beyond verbalized thinking, there exists another kind of awareness of another kind of reality.¹⁸

The mind grapples with the Koan attempting to systemize it. However, it is thwarted in its attempts. The Koan is designed to admit of no conceptual organization. It cannot be made sensible for by definition it is a meaningless proposition. Involved in such an antithetical struggle the mind and self are overcome. The mind suddenly retreats as it finds it does not have the capacity to listen to the nonsense of the Koan. This period is called the "Silence". Nothing occurs

¹⁸Briggs, op. cit., p. 32.

for there is nothing which has not dissolved. The "Silence" is valued highly by both schools of Zen and is discussed in numerous references. One example:

Silence speaks a million words and a million words express nothing but silence.¹⁹

This feeling of silence - of the ineffable - is the one most commonly discussed in the Zen understanding of satori. It is possible, only to a limited degree, to even speak about satori. It simply cannot be expressed even though the feelings which accompany it are discussed. For this reason verbal expression is often disdained. The famous insight of the Tao Te Ching, "Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know",²⁰ has become the byword of Zen Buddhism.

Yet, it must not be assumed that deconceptualization is the only method that is used in attempting to confront the ineffable. On the contrary, most of Christian theology has been an attempt either symbolically or literally to express what it assumes is inexpressible. Zen not only recognizes the limitations of such conceptualization it also says there is a destructive influence inherent within its use.

¹⁹Nyogen Suzuki and Ruth McCandless, Buddhism and Zen, New York, Philosophical Library, 1953, p. 12.

²⁰Alan W. Watts, The Way of Zen, New York, Pantheon Books Inc., 1957, p. 83.

When answers fall into a pattern or a mold one is caught in "concept". . . having been caught, (one) is no longer free to become one with the freely blowing wind of Suchness.²¹

Thus, the Chinese Zen masters maintain that only through abandoning the consciousness, especially the verbal consciousness, can one approach readiness for satori. And, it must be remembered that all Zen, indeed all Buddhism, at whatever point it is observed is part of a complex approach to enlightenment. If we attempt another method which uses concepts we have not only strayed from the path but are being positively destructive to our own progress. Conce considered to be not only distracting but misleading as well.

As a result of the absence of concepts, the Koan is an instantaneous device. That is "one must see the point immediately or not at all".²² This immediacy of enlightenment, tun wu, does not necessitate preparatory activity although in practice such activity often accompanies it. It is tun wu which makes the Koan particularly open to mystical interpretation. By this concept the Koan becomes an isolated event which transcends the bounds of reason and consequential behavior. While a more detailed analysis of tun wu will be attempted below it must be noted that there is significant

²¹Briggs, op. cit., p. 34.

²²Watts, op. cit., p. 94.

relationship between the paradoxical and instantaneous natures of the Koan. Without the possibility of deliberation the mind is prevented from perceiving. That is, it is unable to analyze and construct. Lacking a conceptual structure, the paradoxical Koan eliminates that possibility of deliberation. Blocked from use of the perceptive process, the mind is opened to the possibility of apprehension - the sudden grasping of a totality. While the precise relating link between prevention of perception through confrontation with "nonsense" and establishment of apprehension is not susceptible to analytical examination, it seems apparent that a connection does exist and that it is significant in this study. Because of its similarities to nuances of Kierkegaardian thought, this process of apprehension will be examined in greater detail after his ideas have been introduced.

In summary, then, two essential factors are apparent in the effective use of the Koan - a wording not adaptable to conceptual organization and the presence of the apprehensive rather than perceptive cognitive process. These two principle constituents in practice are thoroughly implemented by a complex organization and ritual.

However, every Koan, implemented or not, is directed toward the accomplishment of satori or enlightenment.

"Zen is concerned with the root of the tree, not its leaves,"²³ and satori is certainly the root of the tree of life for the follower of Zen. Without developing the extensive philosophy which has been utilized to analyze the experience of satori, several rather general statements can be made about it.

1) Satori is an experience of totality. That person who experiences it realizes himself in his essence as part of the absolute mind.

2) Satori cannot be studied as an object. It is purely experience more closely akin to emptiness, sunyata,²⁴ than concept.

3) Satori is a personal experience. The fine distinction between loss of individual isolation and loss of personhood which is the essence of being has too often been blurred. The Zen Buddhist seeks only to lose his isolation, not his being.

Ultimately, enlightenment is inexpressible. It is for this reason that so much written about it has been futile. Its paradoxical nature is expressed best through means of "apprehension". The Koan and the

²³Zen Buddhist Temple of Chicago, October Activity Report, October, 1966.

²⁴Alan W. Watts, Nature, Man and Woman, New York, Pantheon Books, 1960, p. 101.

"poetic explanation" are two examples of these. In the "poetic explanation" it is possible to express directly what is best indirectly approached. For this reason the following example, while interesting, cannot compare in intensity to the Koan.

Zitt! I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but felt I was standing in the center of the cosmos. . . I saw people coming toward me, but all were the same man. All were myself. I had never known this world before. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was created, I was the cosmos, no individual . . . existed.²⁵

While the distinction is not extreme, the clarity of the Koan compared to the description above seems to weigh in its favor for communication. The Koan does not attempt direct expression; the poetic description attempts such expression with the knowledge of failure inherent in its attempt. Thus, while satori escapes the grasp of both the Koan and the "poetic explanation", its achievement appears more likely to occur with the use of the Koan. For this reason, with only perceptive knowledge of the possibility of satori, the Koan is fervently pursued especially by followers of the Lin-Chi School.

The method implementing the study of the Koan in this school is notable in understanding its practical

²⁵Huston Smith, The Religions of Man, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1958, p. 141.

use. Zazen or meditation plays an extremely important part. In the following excerpt the Lin-Chi use of zazen is precisely illustrated as is its relationship to the use of the Koan.

In this school, zazen is, first of all, the preliminary practice by means of which mind and body are forged into a single instrument for realization. Only the student who has achieved some competency in zazen practice is, or should be, permitted to undertake the study of a Koan. Proficiency in zazen is the basic ground for Koan study. During the practice of zazen the Koan is handled. To say that it is used as a subject of meditation is to state the fact incorrectly. The Koan is taken over by the prepared instrument, and, when a fusion of instrument and device takes place, the state of consciousness is achieved which it is the intent of the Koan to illumine and in this instant the Koan is resolved. This experience may take place during formal zazen practice; it may as well be under any condition and at any time of the day or night.²⁶

It can be seen that learning about the Koan is not as intrinsic a part of training as is learning to be involved with it. This type of education cannot employ doctrines for informative purposes. It cannot by its nature depend on the interpretation of its premises. Any orthodoxy is handed down "from Buddha mind to Buddha mind".²⁷ To take advantage of such a situation one must be actively involved with it. This involvement can take a more or less prescribed course. Such

²⁶Muir, op. cit., XI.

²⁷Briggs, op. cit., p. 178.

a course is more often used by the serious Zen student following the formulated path of Zen. The first step in that path is the assumption of the four vows. These vows incorporate not only the Koan practices but the ultimate goal of all Buddhism.

Sentient beings are numberless;
 I take a vow to save them.
 The deluding passions are inexhaustible;
 I take a vow to destroy them.
 The Gates of Dharma are manifold;
 I take a vow to enter them.
 The Buddha - way is supreme;²⁸
 I take a vow to complete it.

One outstanding feature of these vows not mentioned before is their emphasis on the value of life. Zen is intent on enlightenment and this enlightenment is the apogee of existence. It is the consummation and realization of the essence of existence. As such the vows are undauntedly optimistic. However, their realistic realization of life's finitude and fallibility provide a necessary practical check. Not all life is "supreme", only that purged and existent in the "Buddha-way".

The realization of this implication as well as the other factors inherent in the vows lead the Zen student to the threshold of kensho.

When we Zen students enter the Zendo, needless to say our first aim is to attain the state of kensho, that is, "to attain insight into our own real nature". If you ask me the question, "what is kensho - what is this seeing into one's own real nature?" I am afraid I can give you no other answer than

²⁸Muira, op. cit., p. 36

to say: "Kensho is just kensho, nothing more."²⁹

Kensho, as might be easily deduced, is inexorably bound to the concept of satori. Satori achieves kensho through its illuminating, self-expanding, characteristics. Because the Koan leads to satori it becomes logically necessary to master the Koan before kensho may be realized.

The complexity of the satori attainment hinges to some extent upon the introduction of the principle of karma. Karma is the past history of an individual that isolates him from others. It includes "habits", "conditioned behavior", and idiosyncrasies, all of which "cling" to the individual. To realize personhood, karma must be "wiped" away.

When the power of kensho - the power of seeing into our own true nature - is weak, we cannot alter the Karma clinging to us from the past that hinders our attainment.³⁰

Thus, kensho is not merely the logical consequence of satori - it is a power necessary to its assumption. This paradox of one factor (kensho) being simultaneously preliminary to and resultant from the existence of another factor (satori) presents the student with yet another failure of conceptualization. This rationale is not begging the question to the extent which might at first seem

²⁹ibid., p. 37.

³⁰ibid., p. 51.

apparent. The ancient masters often employed nonsensical teaching plans to frustrate the student into receptivity. When a student thought he had mastered a procedure for understanding a Koan such as the formula presented above, the master would insert a contradictory set of circumstances to break the concepts thus formed.

One day when the monks were gathered in the masters room, En Zenjii asked Kaku this question: "Shaku and Miroku (ie Gotama Buddha and Maitreya, the future Buddha) are the slaves of another. Who is this other?"

Kaku answered: "Ko Sho san, Koku Ri shi." (which means, "the third sons of the Ko and Sho families, and the fourth sons of the Koku and Ri families", a piece of nonsense signifying that the capacity to become identified with suchness exists in every human being and that Gotama and Maitreya are what they are in virtue of being perfectly "the slaves" of that imminent and transcendent Buddha-Nature).

The master accepted his answer.

At that time Engo was the head of the temple. The master related to him this incident. Engo said, "pretty good, pretty good". But perhaps he hasn't yet grasped the real point. You shouldn't have given him your acknowledgement. Examine him again by a direct question."

When Kaku came into En Zenjii's room the next day, the Zenjii asked him the same question. Kaku replied: "I gave the answer yesterday."

The master said: "What was your answer?"

"Ko Sho san, Koku Ri shi", said Kaku.

"No, no!" the master cried.

"Yesterday you said 'yes'. Why do you say 'No' today?"

"It was 'yes' yesterday; but it is 'No' today", replied the master.

On hearing these words Kaku was suddenly enlightened.³¹

The search for satori, then seems to be an unbounded continuum. The orthodox path - meditation to Koan to satori to kensho - breaks down when it is discovered that before satori can be realized the power of kensho must work within the individual. Without that power karma will obstruct the path to "Suchness" as it did to Kaku in the illustration above (the manifestation of karma in this case being memory and habit). However, kensho is not made manifest without satori.

While the cycle is never ended it can be broken, "not by striving but by a sudden jolt".³² That "jolt" comes through the koan. To break from the circle it is necessary to become involved with it. And, to become involved with it means primarily to live it. Thus, the orthodox cycle - meditation, koan, daily life is completed.

To live the koan, however, means to be familiar with its forms. There are five basic types arranged in order of insight or depth. Each has significance for particular levels of development of the individual.

³¹ Briggs, op. cit., p. 34.

³² John Lewis, The Religions of the World, Garden City Books, 1960, p. 49.

These five are the hosshin, kihan, gonsen, nanto, and toyan goi.

1) The hosshin koan is the most basic to Lin-Chi practice. It is designed to express a principle - the Dharmakaya. Dharmakaya is the realm of the insightful experience. It is the illumination which enables the transcending moment to be experienced. As the Zen Master Rinzai expressed it, "The pure light in each instant of thought is the Dharmakaya Buddha within your own house."³³ Since enlightenment is, in actuality, the essence of being, the realm of Dharmakaya is really the original home of our personhood. Because our search is for the realization of that personhood we must explore Dharmakaya.

The realm of the Dharmakaya is undifferentiated. Being the "form" of the "formless" satori it is especially complex. To express its seemingly contradictory, "formless-form", nature, the hosshin koans were developed.

When Ammon was asked, "what is the pure Dharmakaya?" he replied: "The flowering hedge (surrounding the privy)".

When the cows of Eshu are well fed with grain, The horses of Ekishu have full stomachs.

Empty handed, yet holding a hoe, Walking, yet riding a water buffalo.³⁴

³³Miura, op. cit., p. 48.

³⁴ibid., p. 49.

When these are understood without the use of common sense or conjecture the Dharmakaya is accomplished.

2) Having mastered indifferentiation the student must next grapple with differentiation. Differentiation is the concept of the interlocking personhoods of reality. Where the hosshins destroyed the isolated individualism of "Suchness" the kikan koan accomplished personhood. To do this the essential differences are drawn to view.

"Seijo the Chinese girl," observed Goso, "had two souls, one always sick at home and the other in the city, a married woman with two children. Which was the true soul?"³⁵

Nansen saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. He seized the cat and told the monks, "If any of you say a good word, you can save the cat."

No one answered. So Nansen boldly cut the cat in two pieces.

That evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him about this. Joshu removed his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked out.

Nansen said, "If you had been there, you could have saved the cat."³⁶

These differences, it will be noticed, destroy the individualism separating the persons but they also establish differences of Suchness or personhood (e.g. the transcendental answer to a pragmatic question).

³⁵Paul Reys, Zen Flesh, Zen Bones, New York, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1961, p. 118.

³⁶ibid., p. 101.

3) The gonsen koan can be considered either a step backward or forward from the kikan. Within differentiation, principles are expressed without concepts. The gonsen koan expresses concepts without principles. That is, it uses words with no point intended. The "mystery of words" expresses negatively what the kikan and hosshin have attempted positively. There is no connection necessary for meaning. The gonsen koan does not mean anything, it establishes mystery and leaves the mind quivering. The "Three Pivotal Words" of Haryo Osho is an exemplary incidence of gonsen.

1. A monk asked Haryo Osho, "what is the Daiba Sect?"

"Filling a silver bowl with snow",
Haryo replied.

2. "What is the Blown Hair Sword?"

"The tip of each branch of coral supports the moon."

3. "What is Tao?"

"A bright-eyed man falls into a well."³⁷

4) Nanto means "difficult to pass through" and the nanto koans, from all indications, have an apt title. Having broken the confines of karma with hosshin, established personhood with kikan, and broken into the mystery of words and the intricacies of Dharmakaya with

³⁷Miura, op. cit., p. 55.

gonsen, the student finds himself far from being totally involved in satori. To accomplish this he must penetrate the nanto koan. One of the most notable of nanto koans was expressed by the master Goso.

When a buffalo goes out of his enclosure
to the edge of the abyss, his horns and
his head and his hoofs all pass through,
but why can't the tail also pass?³⁸

For the first time the "self" is "transcended". The insight gained from previous koans is abandoned to settle the nanto koans. But their solution embodies satori and a merging with Buddhahood. In the nanto koans the paradox dissolves into enlightenment.

Again, they make their resolution in a jolt, without concepts. Rather than slicing away the folds of mystery the nanto koan dematerializes them.

I have a certain thing; it has no head or
tail, no name or symbol, no back or front.
Anyone know what it is?³⁹

What is the meaning of the First Patriarchs
coming from the west?

Ask the post over there
I do not understand you.
I do not either, any more than you.⁴⁰

5) The last form of the koan is the Tozan goi, the five Ranks. Goi are highly prized and in the Rinzai School in Japan were transmitted only in secret.

³⁸Reps, op. cit., p. 119.

³⁹Reginald Horace Blyth, Zen and Zen Classics,
Vo. I, Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1960, p. 119.

⁴⁰Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Manual of Zen Buddhism,
New York, Grove Press, 1960, p. 106.

They are concerned primarily with the distinction between the apparent and the real, even within the bounds of satori. Their use is restricted to application after Buddhahood has been realized. The goi is useless without the experience of satori. With that experience the goi becomes an indispensable asset.

He(the student) will have to polish again each facet of his spiritual jewel (encounter with satori), which he has cut so laboriously and painstakingly. But in doing so, he will see for the first time the total inclusiveness, perfect symmetry, and matchless beauty to which it has been brought under the training devised by the old masters.⁴¹

The goi is especially deceptive, however; it often appears to have simple symbolic meaning unless it is understood in the light of progress through the other four koan forms. To explain these examples would be superfluous. Their words have relative meaning only in light of the satori experience. Yet, because their form is decidedly unique they must be included.

The Real within the Apparent:
A sleepy-eyed grandam
Encounters herself in an old mirror.
Clearly she sees a face.
But it doesn't resemble hers at all.
Too bad, with a muddled head,
She tries to recognize her reflection.⁴²

The apparent within the Real:
In the third watch of the night
Before the moon appears,

⁴¹Miura, op. cit., p. 63.

⁴²ibid., p. 69.

No wonder when we meet
 There is no recognition!
 Still cherished in my heart
 Is the beauty of earlier days.⁴³

With the use of all five categories the student becomes acquainted with the koan. In a state of understanding he has the capacity to use this device as the effective tool for which it was designed. History, method, doctrine, orthodoxy, are all transcended, freedom is attained, and escape from karma made possible. Its significance for the Chinese Zen Buddhist is stated in the following excerpt:

The koan is a torch of wisdom that lights up the darkness of feeling and discrimination, a golden scraper that cuts away the film clouding the eye, a sharp axe that severs the root of birth-and-death, a divine mirror that reflects the original face of both the sacred and the secular. Through it the intention of the patriarchs is made abundantly clear, the Buddha mind is laid open and revealed. For the essentials of complete transcendence, final emancipation, total penetration, and identical attainment, nothing can surpass the koan.⁴⁴

Chapter II - Kierkegaard's Leap of Faith

Having developed the idea of koans to this extent, some understanding of their background, use, and implications should be possible. It is appropriate then,

⁴³ibid., p. 67

⁴⁴ibid., p. 7.

that a similar attempt be made with the theology of the existentialist Søren Kierkegaard. Before plunging into the task several stipulations should be made clear.

It must be remembered that the ultimate goal of this attempt is to establish a basis for a comparison. For this reason only that part of the Kierkegaardian theology which has particular relevance to such a comparison has been included. Secondly, Kierkegaard is to be understood as a Christian but not as the spokesman for "Christianity". His work Attack Upon Christendom should dispel any conjecture to the contrary.⁴⁵ Kierkegaard was not interested in Christian orthodoxy except in its perverting influence upon man's attempt to commune with the Ultimate. His religious views are striking, however, both in their internal consistency and relevance to the search for the religious experience.

Finally, the extensive account of Kierkegaard's psychological and familial background included in most accounts of his philosophy has been ignored in the following presentation. These factors do not have the relevance or interest to this paper to merit their inclusion here.* What does have relevance is the content of his philosophical theology which has reformulated the concept of man's approach to God and existence. This theory

⁴⁵Søren Kierkegaard, Attack Upon Christendom, Boston, Beacon Press, 1956.

has not only proven valuable to Western philosophy and theology but because of the similarities to be examined it is also valuable as a bridge between Eastern and Western thought. (The most convincing evidence of this being his partial recognition by Oriental scholars).^{47,+}

*The most devastating destruction of the importance of these factors came from Kierkegaard himself when, quoting a Latin saying in his Journal he said, "There never existed great genius without some madness": Nullum Exstitit Magnum Ingenium Sine Aliqua Dementia.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death, New York, Doubleday and Company, Incorporated, 1954, p. 14.

⁴⁷Steve Bartlett, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, July 10, 1964.

⁺It would indeed be a naively unfortunate oversight if some vital facts of his background were not included. These facts should serve to locate Kierkegaard in history and culture for the reader. Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, during the year 1813, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard spent his youth and later life in the city of his birth. His only extended absence from Copenhagen came after his graduation from the University of Copenhagen where he studied theology. During that absence he spent two years traveling in Germany and studying the philosophy of Hegel. Three of his most significant works were written during the year following this time spent in Germany; Either/Or written from June, 1842, to February, 1843, Fear and Trembling and Repetition written from May, 1843, to July, 1843. The incredible speed with which he wrote did not appear to hamper his genius, the latter works being acclaimed in spite of being only two months in the working as "his most perfect poetical production".⁴⁸

His death in 1855 marked the end of his short, physically frail life. Tortured by unrequited love and misunderstood genius he would have labeled himself, if not happy, vigorously alive.

⁴⁸Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling. . .op. cit., p. 9.

Simply stated his philosophical position was that of a theologian looking at the world with an existential attitude. Rebelling against the dialectic of Hegel yet faithfully consistent to Socrates he stressed the importance of "authentic", meaningful life beyond the pragmatic. He was acutely aware of the limitations of uninspired existence. He looked futilely for the break in the viciousness of its captivating grip upon the individual. Kierkegaard was not so much interested in physical death (which at times he most certainly would have welcomed due to his frail condition) as he was with the "spiritual death" which most men live and do not realize. The examination of life, then, became his chief concern. The genius with which he accomplished this examination was a genius which exposed the pragmatic and neatly packaged systems of his contemporaries as shams in the light of authentic existence.

His first procedure, for our purposes, was analytical. In order to posit a more meaningful existence it was first necessary to explore and understand the composition of the uninspired one. Categorizing these he proposed three general, interrelating phases or kinds of existence: the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious. None of these categories is mutually exclusive. They are, in practice, distinctions of emphasis rather than exclusive function.

The first and most basic of these is the esthetic.

The child is an example of the individual who lives almost exclusively at the esthetic level. For the child, all choices are made in terms of pleasure and pain, and experience is ephemeral, having no continuity, no meaning, but being merely a connection of isolated, non-related moments.⁴⁹

The esthetic is the level of the hedonist. He who is led by his passions is condemned to the superficial, finding no meaning and no continuity he is subjected to the whims of his environment.

What is a poet? An unhappy man who conceals profound anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so fashioned that, when sighs and groans pass over them the sound is like beautiful music. His fate resembles that of the unhappy men who were slowly roasted by a gentle fire in the tyrant Phalaris' bull -- their shrieks could not reach his ear to terrify him, to him they sounded like sweet music. And people flock about the poet and say to him: do sing again, which means, would that new sufferings tormented your soul, . . . and the critics join them saying: well done, thus must it be according to the laws of aesthetics. . . Behold, therefore would I rather be a swineherd of Amager, and be understood by swines than a poet, and misunderstood by men.⁵⁰

Battered about in such a manner he soon may feel dissatisfaction with his plight. He may choose at such a

⁴⁹S. E. Frost, Jr., Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophies, New York, Doubleday and Company, Incorporated, 1962, p. 264.

⁵⁰Lee M. Hollander, translator, Selections from the Writings of Kierkegaard, New York, Doubleday and Company, Incorporated, 1960, p. 35 (in Either/Or).

junction to remain this kind of poet, niggardly pre-serving his seldom satisfying, superficial pleasures. Or, he may look beyond this rather primitive level.

Should he choose this latter course he will be confronted with several immediate problems. Confrontation with these actually constitutes an initiation into this second level of existence; for the ethical is the category of decision. To make the decision to be confronted or not be confronted is an ethical decision. Thus, the man in the aesthetic realm within the very moment of dissatisfaction becomes involved in the ethical.

It soon becomes apparent that all men participate, to a greater or lesser degree, in the ethical category. Man seems to be basically rational and his rationality not only enables but compels his conceptualization and systemization of the universe and of his participation within it. Such contemplation, if limited, is as surely limited as the passions of the esthete. The dissatisfaction is perhaps more subtle but, if so, all the more damning.

Let others complain that the times are wicked.
I complain that they are paltry; for they
are without passion. The thoughts of men
are thin and frail like lace, and they them-
selves are feeble like girl lace-makers.
The thoughts of their hearts are too puny
to be sinful. . . Their lusts are staid and
sluggish, their passions sleepy; they do
their duty, these sordid minds. . . Fie
upon them! It is therefore my soul ever

returns to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare. There at least one feels that one is dealing with men and women; there one hates and loves; there one murders one's enemy and curses his issue through all generations -- there are sins.⁵¹

It should be noted at this point that the ethical was a category not to be disdained. Even before Kierkegaard abandoned his categorical view of existence he realized the positive value of the "ethical life". In Fear and Trembling the knight of infinite resignation was certainly a "knight". He was placed in an honored position because of his realization and accomplishments within the limitations of his own powers. He had overcome the tremendous difficulties of superceding the esthetic and he had used the abilities available to him to give his existence the meaning which he could not find elsewhere. This individual is to be saluted on his insightful capacity. But despite the honor of the knight of resignation and his monumental accomplishments his position as "high man" in the ethical and esthetic categories does not leave him fulfilled. For Kierkegaard this final stage was left to the realm of the religious.

The religious category is largely a realm of mystery. For Kierkegaard it is the answer to the dilemma of rationality versus sensuousness. It is where truth,

⁵¹ibid., p. 36.

meaning, and purpose are to be found. These qualities are discovered in a tension between the essence of the individual's personality and a "transcendental nature" beyond him. They are actualized through self-awareness.

At the religious level, one experiences a commitment to oneself, and an awareness of one's uniqueness and singleness. To live at the religious level means to make any sacrifice, any antisocial gesture that is required by being true to oneself.⁵²

Where the individual feels his passions and analyzes objective truth he becomes the religious. That is, he is transformed by his participation until he becomes one with himself. The similarities between this religious realization and Zen Buddhist "satori" necessitates further expostulation on the nature of the experience be postponed until the time when the comparison may be developed more extensively.

Entering the religious realm requires acceptance of the absurd by the aesthetic-ethical individual. Having experienced both of these preliminary existential levels, he must resign himself to the hopelessness of achieving any fruitful results from their employment. Such resignation is the first vital step toward recognition of the goal and the only step self-executed. To become resigned is an ethical act and is totally within the capabilities of the individual.

⁵²Frost, op. cit., p. 264.

To go beyond this state, however, involves what Kierkegaard calls the leap of faith. That knight who goes beyond resignation to faith is aptly called the knight of faith.

He makes exactly the same movements as the other knight, infinitely renounces claim to the love which is the content of his life, he is reconciled in pain; but then occurs the prodigy, he makes still another movement more wonderful than all, for he says, "I believe, nevertheless, that I shall get her (meaning for existence), in virtue, that is, of the absurd, in virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible." The absurd is not one of the factors which can be discriminated within the proper compass of the understanding: it is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen.⁵³

At the moment when he proclaimed, "I believe" the knight has already made his leap and is in the realm of faith. At the instant of his reconciliation he is resigned but has not made the leap. It is virtually impossible to pin down the moment of transition and certainly meaningless to discuss its contents which by definition are ineffable. Indeed the only verifiable comment that can be made is that such transformation does take place and the leap of faith is real, although not in the sense of any conceptual explanation. Its reality is discovered only through examination of its results -- the attitudes and life of the knight of faith.

⁵³Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling. . . , op. cit., p. 57.

The difficulty in this approach, however, is in discerning that individual who has surmounted the difficulties. While his characteristics are certain, his appearance is variable.

He takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things . . . No heavenly glance or any other token of the incommensurably betrays him; if one did not know him, it would be impossible to distinguish him from the rest. . .⁵⁴

Thus, the very certainty of the possibility of such a "leap" can easily be called into question. There are no living, concrete, exhibits which man may weigh and contemplate. At best men who are not within the religious realm have only momentary glimpses of its quality, glimpses which may be easily confused with full realization by the "esthetic" individual. Only the knight of resignation is in a position to take advantage of his glimpses, should they occur, in order to participate in the transformation. Preceding his decision he may subscribe to existential nihilism; following the transition he may draw parallels with knights who have preceded him such as the heroes of the Old Testament, but ultimately he is on his own, since for the first time he is his own in the highest and most selfless interpretation of that concept.

⁵⁴ibid., p. 50.

Chapter III - Comparison

The "leap" of the knight of faith leads us to the major premise of this paper. There are basic similarities transcending cultural boundaries which allow the Kierkegaardian philosophy and Chinese Zen Buddhism to coexist in a complementary relationship. It would be virtually impossible and fruitless to develop every point of similarity. Obviously, many of these similarities will imply the existence of many others. In this comparison those parallel situations, key to an understanding and appreciation of the basic similarity between the two approaches, will be presented.

Because Kierkegaard's system is better organized the comparison will follow his approach except where material which is intrinsic to the totality of the study cannot be accommodated to systemization.

Kierkegaard's first two categorical levels of existence are not extensively developed in Zen literature. This is due to what I consider to be a primary cultural difference. From the research herein presented the inference may be drawn that a fundamental attribute of the "Oriental" attitude is ~~this~~ receptability to the illogical. Lacking the Western Socratic heritage the Zennist does not necessarily hold rational verification to be the exclusive means to truth. Conversely, as

Kierkegaard so vociferously contended, man is intricately bound up in his own conceptual schemes. He demands analysis, organization, and verification. This contention that I have expressed concerning the similarities claims for its only evidence the results of the confrontation between the minds of East and West. Those results seem to indicate that there is a basic cultural difference between the positions which accounts for emphasis on certain levels of existence found in one to be missing from the other. There are some instances where the two positions agree in their emphasis. The novel approach of Kierkegaard could conceivably be considered quite Oriental by some Western authorities. Similarly, even within Zen there is some evidence for verification of Kierkegaard and Socrates' tenet that man is basically a rational creature (although, for Kierkegaard at least, this does not imply that man's greatest potential lies within the rational). In fact, Zen yields to rational argument most often in its refutation of the critiques of the Koan. This is especially true when charges are made that the koan belongs to a particular category of the sort which Kierkegaard posits.

An example is its brief refutation of those who would limit the koan to the esthetical realm exclusively by saying it was an ecstatic experience. This would imply that the path of Zen was basically aimless.

Ecstasy is the suspension of the mental powers while the mind is passively engaged in contemplation; the Zen state of consciousness, on the other hand, is the one that has been brought about by the most intensely active exercises of all the fundamental faculties constituting one's personality. They are here concentrated on a single object of thought. . .⁵⁵

Having rejected the confines of one category, Zen quickly rejects the second.

It goes without saying that Zen is neither psychology nor philosophy, but that it is an experience charged with deep meaning and laden with living, exalting contents. The experience is final and of its own authority. It is the ultimate truth, not born of relative, knowledge, that gives full satisfaction to all human wants. It must be realized directly within oneself; no outside authorities are to be relied upon.⁵⁶

Thus, the preliminary categories (the esthetic and the ethical) are dismissed by both Kierkegaard and the koan as being inconsequential in light of the possibilities in enlightenment. Neither position sees enough significant possibility in either the aimless wanderings of the ecstatic aesthete or the functional didactic approach of the "ethical" individual to have more than disinterest for the "religious" man.

This contention leads logically to the question, "Exactly what position has that interest?" The first truly significant parallel between the two approaches

⁵⁵Suzuki, Zen Buddhism, op. cit., p. 150.

⁵⁶loc. cit.

exists in the similarity of the answers given to this question. These similarities might best be explored if the components of both satori and the realm of faith are exposed. The similarities between them are striking enough to coerce one of the more adamant critics of Christian-Zen comparisons to grudgingly admit that "the main characteristics of satori and Sudden Conversion are the same."⁵⁷

The first factor to be considered certainly lends credence to the above proposition. It is the basis for the remainder of comparisons since it involves the method of attainment. Resignation, it will be remembered, is the first part of that method in Kierkegaard's approach. This "teleological suspension of the ethical"⁵⁸ is highly dependent on the act of leaving behind the influences of the ethical and the esthetic. These influences are similar to the concept of karma in Zen. The elimination of their influence is at least as essential to Zen as they are to Kierkegaard's position. Further, there is recognition in both systems that the final divorce with these influences will be dependent on the accomplishment of the realm of faith or enlightenment

⁵⁷Alan Watts, The Spirit of Zen, New York, Grove Press, Inc., 1958, p. 79.

⁵⁸Hollander, (Fear and Trembling) op. cit.

as the case may be. There is a complementary relationship, then, in both schools between dissolution of karma and enlightenment realization. That is, the knight of faith during the duration of his religious experience has an attitude of disinterest toward the concerns which affected his previous life. For example, Abraham in contemplating the murder of his son is concerned not with the "rightness" or "beauty" of his act; he is concerned only with the religious implications of that act for himself. "Dissolution" of Karma is the "dissolution" of the influences of the past life. However, such an act is dependent on the attainment of enlightenment. This presents a paradox since "dissolving" karma is also a prerequisite in approaching enlightenment. Without going into the subtleties of that paradox here I hope it will be sufficient to see that abandoning the "habits" of the old life is a characteristic similar to both positions although the precise approach to this act is different for each.

Enabled through this abandonment of old life to approach the brink of the leap of faith or koan involvement the adherent must take stock of his next act of participation. Both the "leap" and "koan" are blind jumps into the absurd. This has already been amply

illustrated in Kierkegaard's thought although the exact nature of the act has not been considered. In Zen the process is described as follows.

When there is nothing to think about and the faculty of thinking has come to an end. . . you all of a sudden throw yourself into chaos.⁵⁹

This, of course, has been related before as the incident of confrontation with the point of the koan. Here it can be seen as the precedent to the same type of realization Kierkegaard posited for the realm of faith.

A second similarity in the act of departure from the known into the unknown is the presence of the recognition of the reality of fear.

But the Zen student is not afraid, he will leap and jump into the infinite.⁶⁰

Kierkegaard says that fear, which he regards as a very important religious phenomenon, is connected with the awakening of spirit. . . that (fear) must be overcome if realization is to occur.⁶¹

This final factor of attainment which bears mentioning is the length of time necessary for the chasm of chaos to pass. In the presentation of the koan it has already been ascertained that enlightenment is almost instantaneous. The mind is set free from karmic

⁵⁹Briggs, op. cit., p. 4.

⁶⁰loc. cit.

⁶¹Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, op. cit., p. 51.

influence by the nonsense of the koan's structure and the mind becomes enlightened. The closest approximation to a direct statement of the instantaneous nature of the knight's transformation from resignation to faith occurs in Fear and Trembling.

He constantly makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it, and there is not a second when one has a notion of anything else. It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a dancer to leap into a definite posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture, but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that posture. Perhaps no dancer can do it -- that is what the knight does.⁶²

It is possible by extended metaphor to draw these several factors together.

A man wanders through the plain of life aimlessly. His initial conscious reaction to his indeterminate action is happiness. As the novelty wears thin of "placing a foot where it will fall", happiness degenerates into contentment and, after a period, into dissatisfaction. He has the option of directing his steps or continuing in his present manner for the sake of the scarce moments of what is now, little more than uneasy complacency. Being an adventurous sort, he chooses the former. With determination he sets his stride for a goal in the distance. He intends to make use of his period of travel

⁶²Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, op. cit., p. 51.

upon the plain. Dedicatedly he walks onward carefully noting and conquering obstacles. His path carries him a great distance before he realizes that he really is achieving nothing significant. All of his energy and vitality have gone into calculation to achieve goals that are merely points on an unreachable horizon. All of his powers have gone into rationalizing obstacles to either get around or over them, always avoiding confrontation with them directly.

Our man longs for the carefree days of his aimless wandering but realizes that not only do they not hold the subject of his search but with his new conditioning, are unattainable. It is impossible to backtrack, but it is impossible to go on. His unseen, unknown goal seems more precious and more distant with each passing thought of his desperate struggle.

Finally, with the knowledge of the futility of his past efforts, he becomes resigned to his position. He sits down determined to forget his previous training because there seems to be no other alternative to alleviate his frustration. At that very moment he comes to the edge of the plain.

He can see nothing before him except, far in the distance, a blurry outline. The outline is so indistinct and the absence of anything corporate so extensive that he shrinks back in horror.

At this point our friend has three distinct alternatives if our metaphor is to be consistent. He may sit down again never to rise or he may, should this possibility distress him, recognize one of two features of the chasm. One is a plaque inscribed with the names of celebrated individuals from history upon it. Below the names are the details of their similar search through the barren plain and how, upon arriving at the brink, they jumped out knowing that the blurry outline must have reality, because. . . just because. The other feature was a coiled rope of ~~unknown~~ length, but plainly marked "several feet short".

If he chooses to leap he cannot depend on his own capabilities for jumping. If he chooses to swing on the rope he cannot depend on its strength or length as a sure formula for success. Whatever choice he makes, the indistinctness of the goal and the great expanse must be taken into account. If his frustration was sufficient and his resignation and forgetting successful he will overcome the fear of the ambiguities. Although he sees no sense in attempting the chasm because it cannot be conquered in any way which makes sense, i.e. wandering across or jumping straight ahead, he will attempt it and if Kierkegaard and the koan have any truth at all will conquer it.

What should our man find if, using the Zen rope or the existentialist leap, he should arrive at that indistinct outline? In deciding which method to use he should of course realize their basic similarity. Both depend upon commitment to something totally unreliable from any "pre-leap" perspective and both provide some small token of incentive and "good faith". However, besides this fundamental realization he should accept the ultimate goal as being common to both methods.

From our perspective several common factors of that goal might be mentioned though, of course, it makes relatively little difference to the individual involved whether the similarities are provable or not. That is, satori and the realm of faith are existential realms with little more than academic peculiarities to those not involved with them in some way.

In correlation to this is the fact that both Zen and Kierkegaard aim at realms which are ineffable. Little can be said of them, from the "experience" point of view, yet much can and is said about them. Unfortunately, this is more true of Zen than of the Christianity espoused by Kierkegaard. The concept of the realm of faith can be dismissed as a mystical interpretation of the concept of eternal life.

. . . the kind of religious experience that is capable of reaching ultimate reality. . . is of an ineffable sort; that is, just as

ultimate reality itself cannot be described by words or concepts, so the experience of it is inward and direct, independent even of the meditation of thoughts, let alone description in words. Now Christians need to be reminded that the mystical tradition is not unknown in their own faith, though it is obscure and almost meaningless to most contemporary Christians.⁶³

In fact, both the enlightened Zen Buddhist and the knight of faith are struck dumb by their experience. Words belong to the conceptual realm -- to the karmic and ethical. To express this new experience in words is more than putting "new wine in old skins"; it is more like trying to draw a square circle -- it is meaningless to attempt it. It is the age old problem of explaining three dimensional objects to the "flatlanders" (people who live in a two dimensional universe). We, ultimately must be left without words.

An attempt must be made, however, to express, categorically, where satori or faith are, even if we are unable to express what they are. The primary element in this search is the value placed on sentient life. The four vows which the student of Zen must undertake before he is even allowed to seriously approach the koan are strong indication of the extent of the value the Buddhist places on life. Further, however, and more basic to suppositions about either position's

⁶³Winston Lee King, Buddhism and Christianity, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1962, p. 30.

attitude is the inescapable fact that without life being considered an ultimate treasure there would be no use at all in the two methods under consideration. If they express attitudes which are transcendental, it is only because such attitudes show the way to the fullest expression of life. Far from being life-denying, each system is life-giving. From the standpoint of the enlightened or the knight of faith there is no complete life until the crucial step has been taken. Both the Koan and Kierkegaard are looking for the vitality in life, not the metaphysical outlines and patterns. For this reason it can be safely said by either without fear of blaspheming:

the God of the Christians is an absurdity in terms of Zen. If He is good then He must be evil; if He is only good He is opposed to evil; in which case there are two things in the Universe, evil and God. If, on the other hand, God is a term for the Absolute, Ultimate All, why chatter about it?⁶⁴

This was written in terms of the orthodox faith and with some reservation. Kierkegaard and Zen could accommodate this position with little difficulty. This is the existential assumption of both -- that life in its fullest sense has a supreme value.

A necessary corollary to this is the primary goal of enlightenment, self-realization. As has been stated,

⁶⁴Christmas Humphreys, Zen Buddhism, New York, MacMillan Company, 1962, p. 44

all of satori results from and leads to the highest self-realization which is self-transcendence to personhood. Kierkegaard is not as explicit in his denunciation of individual isolation, but the problem can be considered one of simple semantics when the implications of his concept of self-realization are examined. Superficial research will indicate only that

Kierkegaard is very much like his great hero Socrates, whose wisdom consisted in the knowledge of his ignorance, whose imperative was "know thyself".⁶⁵

While this indicates an important ingredient in Kierkegaard's thinking (that of the knowledge of self-limitation), it expresses the goal of self-knowledge purely within the realm of the ethical. A more precise account is given by Kierkegaard himself in Sickness Unto Death.

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self.⁶⁶

⁶⁵Carl Michalson, ed., Christianity and the Existentialists, New York, Carl Scribner's Sons, 1956, p. 27.

⁶⁶Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling. . . , op. cit., p. 146.

The experience of faith is that which makes man a "self" as the experience of satori is that which makes man a "person". The process is to go from non-being to being, from superficiality to meaningfulness. Life is understood in terms of being. If man is to live at all he must live for Being -- to know the fullness of existence and escape the karma and resignation of uninspired life.

Before concluding this summary of the comparisons between satori and the realm of faith, one commonly-assumed misunderstanding must be investigated. While there may be many misunderstandings about the similarities between Zen and Kierkegaardian thinking, so are there many real differences. These cannot and probably should not all be assumed to be fallacious interpretations although in many instances they are precisely that. In light of the preceding discussion it would seem rather naive to assume that

The divergencies between Buddhism and Christianity are more numerous than their similarities. If we examine the essence of Zen Buddhism in particular, we find ourselves faced with radical incompatibilities.⁶⁷

This statement was probably aimed at orthodox Christianity. Yet, Kierkegaard's exegesis of the Christian life must be kept in mind in the face of

⁶⁷Robert Linssen, Living Zen, New York, Grove Press, Inc., 1960, p. 223.

any such rash generalization. The many ways in which Kierkegaard diverged from the Christian faith are not so distinct that he may be assuredly classified as either atheistic or pagan. The similarities presented thus far probably would not allow such a hasty conclusion.*

It is, in this case, the confusion concerning the place of "nothingness" which draws our attention to the incidence of misunderstanding. It has been proposed that Zen bases its enlightenment on "emptiness" while existentialism bases its "nihilism" upon the same criterion. Thus, it would seem from a superficial approach, that what is the element of fulfillment for Zen is the signal for defeat to Kierkegaard; actually, however, as with many similar contradictions of this nature the primary opposition is semantical rather than actual. That is, the words may be used in special or technical senses which may give them meanings other than what are commonly held for them. If this is the case then certain statements may not mean what they appear to mean. Thus statements which appear contradictory may not be contradictory at all if they are constructed from terms used in different special senses.

*The question must remain, at the very least, open to other research and other discussion.

This would first be suspected because of the inconsistencies that contradiction would present for the remainder of the system as presented. If the same concept were the necessary ingredient for the realization of one position and the state of befuddlement for the other, then either Kierkegaardian enlightenment is actually nihilism or enlightenment is, in fact, not similar for both approaches. However, both of these possibilities seem to belie the actual fact that enlightenment is very similar in these positions.

All of the evidence thus far presented has exhibited a marked tendency to support the conclusion that there are significant similarities between the use of the koan and the leap of faith; and further, that the results of these release activities have undeniable parallels. The answer to the problem may not lie in the implications of the proposition if this evidence is correct. Rather, it may be, as suggested above, in its construction.

The construction is perhaps best understood by examining its terms. The most essential term in the proposition is "emptiness". From all indications "emptiness" for the existentialist means the absence of the fulfilling properties of existence. To be empty is to suffer the "melancholy of nothingness".⁶⁸

⁶⁸Hollander, op. cit., p. 181.

It is, in fact, what it would seem -- the nihilistic state of resignation without hope or yearning.

Examining the Buddhistic interpretation of emptiness provides some insight:

To name or symbolize the joyous content of this emptiness is always to say too much, to put, as they say in Zen, legs upon the snake. For in Buddhist philosophy emptiness (sunyata) denotes the most solid and basic reality, though it is called empty because it never becomes an object of knowledge. This is because, being common to all related terms -- figure and ground, solid and space, motion and rest -- it is never seen in contrast with anything else and thus is never seen as an object.⁶⁹

With this clarification it becomes apparent that sunyata is not "emptiness" in the same sense in which Kierkegaard uses it. The term is closer to what Kierkegaard would call the characteristic state of the ineffable. Emptiness in this redefined sense becomes an adjective describing, not absence, but presence of that which is beyond words.

Thus, it is possible for Zen to base its enlightenment on "emptiness" and for existentialism to base its defeatist nihilism on "emptiness". But the terms are not the same.

It should be apparent from examination of this problem and its resolution that similar contradictions

⁶⁹Allan W. Watts, Nature, Man and Woman, New York, Pantheon Books, 1960, p. 101.

might easily be assumed which could thoroughly dissolve in the face of careful investigation. This is to be expected when mind-sets of different heritages are involved.

The final factor in the comparison of satori to the category of the religious is the permanence of the experience. The evidence in this situation can be gathered and balanced only by inference since neither position is explicit on this subject. There are seventeen hundred individual koans but they are arranged in progressive order for developmental enlightenment. Still, we are reminded by one monk that as many experiences of satori should be accomplished as possible. Yet, if satori is an isolated event why not experience it as wished? If there were no relatively permanent states of enlightenment, it would not seem necessary to encourage increased attempts since they would be, in that case, their own justification.

Kierkegaard would perhaps like to say that there is a general progression from the esthetic to the religious; but he refrains from saying that and says instead that there are no fixed periods for the duration of any state of the categories including the religious. Further, the very construction of any one of the categories implies the possibility of at least one of the stages being absent from the development of a particular individual.

These factors seem to indicate a degree of permanence in the enlightened state from either approach. With the exception of the inclusion of the universality of original sin, and thus frequent "falling from faith", the Kierkegaardian approach seems to emphasize the realm of faith as a more permanent level of existence. The koan seems inclined to view it as something to be tasted by repeated encounters until the individual's system builds a storehouse and a base level of enlightenment living is established which can be increased and excited by repeated confrontation with the resolution of increasingly difficult material.

One similarity bears mention before the conclusion of the work, if for no other reason its surprising novelty. This similarity concerns style. The realm of mystery has largely been restricted at least stylistically to Zen. It was rather pointedly illustrated that an identifying characteristic of the koan was its failure to inform conceptually. It restricted its expression to short verse and senseless question. The following critiques and expressions of Kierkegaard's work need little exposition to reveal some characteristics of style which he was at least occasionally given to.

Kierkegaard wrote in the style he called "indirect communication", which is his way of saying that he avoided propositions contrived to inform. It was rather

his mission to write in such a way as to make his readers exist, to put them through experiences which his readers. . . would much prefer to define, memorize, and thereby terminate.⁷⁰

S. K. (Søren Kierkegaard) did not expect to be understood, he did not wish to be.⁷¹

As if in response to these gentlemen and the demands of the empirically incredulous observers, Kierkegaard seems to have attempted a type of koan for his own in a section of Attack Upon Christendom.

In the magnificent cathedral the Honorable and Right Reverend Geheime-General-Ober-Hof-Pradikant, the elect favorite of the fashionable world, appears before an elect company and preaches with emotion upon the text he himself elected: "God hath elected the base things of the world, and the things that are despised" -- and nobody laughs.

"Had the Apostle Paul any official position?" "No, Paul had no official position." "Did he then earn much money in other ways?" "No, he didn't earn any money in any way." "Was he at least married?" "No, he was not married." "But then Paul really is not a serious man." "No, Paul is not a serious man."⁷²

While these certainly could not be considered of the rank of nanto koans their sharp irony could classify them among the rudimentary forms of hosshin. At any rate, these examples indicate not only similarity of style by coincidence but similarity of mind and purpose.

⁷⁰Michalson, ed., op. cit., p. 4.

⁷¹Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, op. cit., p. 12.

⁷²Kierkegaard, Attack Upon Christendom, op. cit., p. 181.

Chapter IV - Conclusion

In taking a final overview several factors should be mentioned.

1) There are similarities between the position of Søren Kierkegaard's early theology and the Lin-Chi or Rinzai School of Zen Buddhism.

2) These similarities are especially impressive because of the cultural differences under which they were nurtured and promulgated.

3) The most singular similarity in the comparison, as indicated thus far, is that finally in expressing the religious experience:

*

*Gongo dodan -- words fail.

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