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## LOVE IN CHRISTIANITY AND ZEN BUDDHISM:

### A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Recently when I was talking to a Japanese-American couple, the American husband was describing some of the various stresses that they had together in their life and relationship. He concluded his description by saying, “As long as we love each other, we can make it through all of this.” Then I asked his Japanese wife if she thought that love was what would get them through all of these stresses. She was horrified at the thought and said, “You can’t depend on love. It’s too changeable.” So I asked her what she could depend on. She said she didn’t know how to express it, but it wasn’t love.

This exchange represents in my work experience common attitudes towards love in America and Japan. These attitudes are rooted in the religious and cultural traditions of each country. In this article I will briefly examine the Christian and Zen Buddhist roots of these attitudes in their respective countries and consider the psychological significance of these roots.

### LOVE IN CHRISTIANITY

In Christianity love is equated with God. It is through love that human beings can know and be with God in this life. Of the numerous examples of this in the Bible (1962), one example is chapter 4 of I John. Verses 7-8 of this chapter

read, “Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (p. 1147).

In Christianity in this life in relationships love is considered to be the fundamental factor for a healthy relationship. In this same chapter of the Bible (1962), verses 20-21, it reads, “If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (p. 1147). Love is the imperative, that which human beings must do, in relationships. If a person loves another, then that person is able to transcend their limitations, their self-centeredness, their psychological faults, and truly be in relationship with the other. The assertion is that if a person allows love and does not let other things to get in the way of love, love is enough. A person in order to live with God should always turn to love. The Christian view is through love true life is possible.

In the West it has often been believed that it is only through love that a person can truly be in relationship with another. In psychology an example is Victor Frankl (1959), founder of Logotherapy, who writes, “Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him” (p. 116). The assertion here is that love is the *only* way. All other ways are incomplete. Through love one is able to understand, empathize, endure, believe, hope, transcend. Again, from the Bible (1962), I Corinthians 13: verses

4-8, “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (p. 1078).

I think it is useful to note that in psychological terms love is an emotion. Perhaps it could be said in the context of this discussion that love in Christian terms is an emotion that is not tainted by egotism or selfishness. It is believed that through the emotion of love that the narcissistic tendencies of human beings disappear. In terms of the body in Christianity love is associated with the heart. The heart is considered to be the key function of mind. St. Paul writes in the Bible (1962), Colossians 3:14-15, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (p. 1107). According to Christianity it is through the heart that human beings harmonize psychologically and are able to be healthily in relationships.

This view of the heart and emotion in Christianity as being the key function of mind may be one of the factors that has influenced parts of psychology in the West to emphasize emotions in their clinical methodology. James Hillman (1992), for example, writes “the main substance of therapeutic analysis since its inception with Freud are emotions” (p. ix). This emphasis is based on a belief, often an unexamined belief, that it is through emotions that psychological healing occurs. The emphasis in Zen Buddhism, which I will discuss next, is quite different than this and challenges this belief.

## LOVE IN ZEN BUDDHISM

The view of love in Zen Buddhism is approximately opposite the Christian view. Rather than a way to transcend oneself, it is a way to become ensnared and trapped in self-delusion. Love is considered to be a *bonno* (煩惱), an illusion that disturbs the mind. Specifically love is viewed as a kind of covetousness, a self-centered attachment to wanting something or someone. Yasunaga Sodo Roshi (安永祖堂老師), priest of Shounji Temple (松雲寺) in Ikeda (池田), explained to me in an interview, “Love is the worst attachment in Buddhism. Love originally meant being thirsty. So we say 渴愛(*katsu-ai*). 渴 means thirsty. So thirsty ones covet, really need and want water. The word love has a very, very negative connotation. So this Chinese character 愛 means that there is someone who wants something like a food or a drink on the table in front of them, but they have to leave. They cannot get. They want, but cannot have” (interview, May 8, 2001, p. 2).

In Zen Buddhism there are two primary ways through which mind becomes unhealthy, mentally through illusion and emotionally through attachment. Attachment is narcissism, greed, protection of self, a kind of holding on when letting go is appropriate. Love is considered a kind of attachment.

In another sect of Buddhism in Japan, the Shingon sect, there is a deity named Aizen Myo-o (愛染明王), whose function is to “dye” or color love. Aizen Myo-o is one of a type of deity that changes something, in this case one that changes bad love to good love. This is an entirely non-Christian view of love. The idea that love can be bad love and needs the help of a deity to be changed to good love does not occur in Christianity. According to Christianity love is love

and bad love is not really love. This idea can only occur in a system of thought like Buddhism in which love is considered to be a changeable and undependable function of mind that is subordinate to other functions of mind. Love in Zen Buddhism is not believed to be the fundamental or key function of mind as it is in Christianity. Rather, in psychological terms in Zen the key function of mind is the ego. In Zen it is through clarification of the ego that the possibilities that Victor Frankl describes are actualized. Love, as an emotion, is considered to function according to the ego, to be subordinate to the ego. Emotions in Buddhism are viewed as always having a judgmental quality, either good, bad, or neutral. They are a type of evaluation by the ego of experience. If the ego likes something, it feels good; if it doesn't, it feels bad; and if it has no evaluation, it feels neutral. Love occurs when the ego really likes something.

The focus in Zen Buddhism psychologically speaking is on the ego. Through clarifying the ego function of the psyche a person is able to function optimally in life and have compassion, the word used in Buddhism instead of love, for others. From a Zen perspective it is egotistical attachments that are the cause of suffering. In terms of the body the ego is centered in the navel area, the *hara* (腹), which is considered to be the balance fulcrum of the body. Thus, in Zen Buddhist practice it is the navel rather than the heart as in Christianity that is the focal point. Clarifying the ego is selflessness or no-self in Zen terminology. In no-self a person is able from a Zen perspective, as Frankl writes, to “grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality” (p. 116). From the Zen Buddhist point view it is *only* through no-self, rather than love, that this is possible.

In Zen compassion is often spoken about as a way to be in relationship with others. One Zen priest, Nakajima Gikan Roshi (中島義観老師) of Tadakouji Temple (多田幸寺) in Nagahama (長浜) explained what compassion is. He spoke in terms of the small self as the limited ego and the great self as no-self, “The difference between the great self and the small self is that the small self is the selfish concept, the very self-centered concept. The great self is to think about others than oneself. We call it compassion in Buddhist terms. Compassion is love without the self-centered concept” (interview, June 26, 2001, p. 5). Nakajima Roshi explained, “For example, the parents and their children are so close to each other. In our language we say the pain of the children is the pain of the parents and the pleasure of the children is the pleasure of the parents. So this kind of sympathy is expanded to everything” (interview, July 10, 2001, p. 4).

For psychology this emphasis in Zen on clarifying the ego presents an alternative to many Western psychological methodologies. It is different from an emotionally-oriented methodology, cognitive-behavioral, a methodology that emphasizes the unconscious, or many of the transpersonal approaches. A Zen approach views all of these – emotion, cognitive, the unconscious, or the higher consciousness - as being subordinate to the ego. In Zen the ego is the key to healing. Study of this different methodology of Zen presents alternatives and a broadening of methodology for psychology.

## LOVE ZEN STYLE

I have found the attitude about love of the Japanese member of the couple I presented at the beginning of this article to be common in Japan. It appears to me that

Japanese people consider love to be dependent on conditions and that love can easily change to another emotion, such as hate or anger, if conditions change. This is a view that is similar to the Zen Buddhist view that I have discussed, but very different from a Christian view.

As an American I am then very curious about how Japanese people understand the way that an intimate relationship endures. If relationship does not endure through love, then how does relationship endure? When I have asked Japanese people what this is, I have gotten answers like bond or tie to others (柵), respectability or decency in society (世間体), trust or belief in the other (信頼), being able to receive kindness from the other (甘える), communication (コミュニケーション), or a child being the pledge or cementing of affection of the parents (子はかすがい).

While I am only an explorer of the Japanese sensibility, in Zen Buddhist terms the working thesis that I have developed from my explorations so far is that continuity of relationship occurs through a respect for or trust in a connection to another person, *en* (縁) in Japanese. *En* in Zen Buddhism is part of the law of cause and effect (縁起), the part that is the various contributory causes rather than the direct causes to any effect. Causality, the law of cause and effect, is fundamental to Zen. It is how all things, events, and relationships occur in this world. Causality is the conditions of this world, upon which in Zen terms love is dependent. No-self, which I have defined as the clarified ego, is the healthy way psychologically to participate in causality. Through living no-self a person is able to have compassion for all conditions that arise.

In Japanese *en* has taken the meaning of relationship or connection to another person. *En* is something that a person lives within, is their situation in life, and is not

something that a person controls or knows beforehand. However, a person can recognize when they have a durable and trustworthy *en* with another person. As long as a person has a sense of being connected, then they are able to endure whatever stresses arise and give themselves selflessly to the relationship. My sense is that in Zen Buddhist terms, rather than love, it is a kind of honoring or trusting of the conditions within which one is that bonds a relationship.

### CONCLUSION

In Christianity love is what tempers and clarifies the ego, while in Zen Buddhism love is viewed as subordinate to the ego. In Zen the ego must temper itself and become no-self. I believe that both through love and no-self it is possible to transcend selfishness and the various petty attachments that humans tend to get so wrapped up in and to be healthy psychologically. Perhaps the end result of Christian and Zen Buddhist practices is the same. However, the path is quite different and so are the aspects of a person's psychology that get developed along the path. In Christianity the emotions and the heart get emphasized, with by-products such as great creativity and lots of social welfare activity. In Zen Buddhism the ego and the navel area of the body get emphasized, with by-products like clean (rather than egotistical) actions and deep sensitivity to others. From a Christian point of view Zen can be dry and lacking in emotion while from a Zen point of view Christianity can too subjective and prone to emotional pulls. Both perspectives can be true and each type of self-cultivation can learn from the other. This kind of examination is a direction I believe that is valuable for psychological cross-cultural studies to proceed further.

## REFERENCES

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