

Lecture 10:

Zen Buddhism: The Sound of One Hand Clapping

I come now to our final session on the East Asian family of religions. In my last lecture I introduced you to the principal doctrines and methods of Taoism, a Chinese religion that serves as the esoteric complement of Confucianism. What Confucianism is to the outer and public life, Taoism is to the inner and spiritual life. I told you that Taoism began with a mysterious figure named Lao Tzu and that it's based in large part on the teachings contained in his little book the *Tao Te Ching*. *Tao* can be (very roughly) translated as "way", and it refers to the Way of ultimate Reality, to the Way of nature, and to the Way men and women ought to act. As for *Te*, it means (among many other things) power, and depending on the kind of power they seek, Taoists can be divided up into three major schools: philosophical Taoists, who search for contemplative power; religious Taoists, who work with ritual power; and yogic Taoists, who specialize in gaining control over physiological power. I then explained that all of these branches of Taoism have a common interest in the practice of *wei wu wei*, a phrase referring to the actionless action of willows, wheel-hubs, and water. I concluded our discussion with a quick glance at the Taoist forces of *Yin* and *Yang*. All reality, says Lao Tzu, is a synthesis of opposite, but complementary, qualities, which are expressed in the relationships between man and woman, sun and moon, solid and liquid, and good and bad fortune.

I've suggested more than once in my recent lectures that East Asia differs from South Asia in its greater concentration on the social question. But as we conclude our discussions of this family today, I wanted to point out another difference as well, one I'm hoping you'll have begun to discern for yourselves, though it's hard to find the right words to describe it. Speaking in very general terms, we could say that China differs from India in its greater *simplicity*. In using this word what I have in mind in part is the fact that Confucianism has no god, and even the religious school of Taoism has many fewer deities than the multitude we encountered in Hinduism. At the same time, of course, we need to remember that the multiplicity and theological complexity of Hinduism are exoteric. Esoterically, with respect to its teaching that the true Self is God—*Tat tvam asi*—Hinduism is also quite simple. So maybe a better word to use here in trying to capture the difference I'm thinking of would be *practicality*. As I hope you've noticed, there's a certain practical or down-to-earth character about the Chinese religions we didn't see in South Asia—an intuition for the deep meaning of ordinary things and events. I'm thinking, for example, of the

Confucian stress upon manners, the idea that simple acts of courtesy and propriety can have cosmic repercussions; and I also have in mind the Taoists' careful attention to the forms and movements of animals and other creatures of nature and their interest in cultivating a life of spontaneity. In traditional China, there's a keen sense that the routine of daily life has a power and a magic all its own, if only we had the eyes to see it. I'm reminded of a saying attributed to Albert Einstein: "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is the fact that it's comprehensible." There's a strong flavor of Taoist paradox in that line, but also a clear echo of the East Asian perception that the ordinary things of life are often the most extraordinary.

In this lecture I would like to pick up on this theme of the amazing normalcy of life by directing your attention to a third and final religion of East Asia. I've compared Confucianism and Taoism to two strands in one rope, but as a matter of fact the East Asian rope actually has three strands, the third being the religion of Buddhism. As I told you in Lecture 7, though Buddhism began in India it eventually spread to the North and East, coming to China in the first century A.D., and ever since, religious life in that part of the world has been characterized by a combination of two indigenous Chinese traditions, founded by Confucius and Lao Tzu, plus the tradition inaugurated by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. I've already given you a brief introduction to Buddhism, and what I want to do now is to provide you with some sense of the shape Buddhism took in the East Asian context. This is obviously a huge topic, covering a vast geographical space and very long time. When we speak of East Asia, after all, we're talking about an area that includes many different countries, and the time period in question is one stretching from the early centuries of the Christian era down to our own day. So clearly we can't even begin to try to deal with the whole subject. What I'm going to do instead is to focus on just one form of East Asian Buddhism, namely, a tradition called Zen, which flows (in good Taoist fashion!) from the convergence of Buddhism and Taoism. The assigned selection in *A Book of Saints* for this module—which I've taken from a spiritual autobiography called *Novice to Master* by Soko Morinaga (1925-95), a Zen Buddhist *roshi* or master—will have provided you with at least a taste of this tradition already. Let me lead into it gradually here, with a few reminders and some general comments.

You'll recall, first of all, that Buddhist teaching consists essentially in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The basic aim of this religion, we learned, is to assist us in overcoming *tanha* or selfish craving and to lead us to a state called *Nirvâna* by rectifying, simplifying, and concentrating our minds. Now in order for us to understand Zen I need to add to

this basic picture a few comments about the different branches of Buddhism. My primary aim in this course, as you know, is to stick to the essentials that define entire traditions, but from time to time it's important to realize that, like Christianity, most of the world's religions can be subdivided into distinct "denominations", as we've seen already with both Hinduism and Taoism.

Broadly speaking, scholars distinguish between two major branches of the Buddhist religion. The first is called *Theravada*, meaning the "way of the elders"; it's the earliest or most ancient form of Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is distinguished above all by the claim that in order to attain *Nirvâna* a person must be willing to follow the example of the historical Buddha by completely renouncing his former life and undertaking a monastic vocation. Laymen and laywomen, who continue to lead normal lives in the world—getting married, having jobs and families, and so forth—are perceived in Theravada as being in a less spiritually advantageous position than celibate monks and nuns. Whatever spiritual benefits the laity may receive are understood to come from their association with those who have dedicated their whole lives to spiritual practice, and from the good *karma* that may accrue to them through their financial and other support of Buddhist monasteries. Basically, the idea is that while a layman may make some progress on the spiritual Path, nevertheless he will inevitably be reborn, and at some point—in some future life—he's going to have to become a *sannyâsin* or renunciate in order to reap the full fruits of the Buddha's teaching. The reason in part for this claim is that the techniques of concentration one finds in Theravada Buddhism generally require the very special conditions provided by the life of a monk or hermit, resembling in many ways the methods of the *yogis* in Hinduism. Perhaps I should add that the Theravada branch is sometimes referred to as "southern" Buddhism because it's typically found today in the countries of southeastern Asia, notably Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Viet Nam, and Cambodia.

The second major form of Buddhism is *Mahâyâna*. The word *Mahâyâna* means "the great vehicle"; in this form of the Buddhist religion the possibility of attaining *Nirvâna* in—or at the close of—our present life is held to be open to everyone. A "vehicle" is something that serves for transportation, and in this case the word is being used metaphorically to describe the means by which a person may be transported or carried toward salvation. *Mahâyâna* is "great" or "large" precisely because of its breadth or amplitude. Unlike the *Hînayâna* or "little vehicle", which is how Mahayanists describe Theravada, this second branch of Buddhism is large enough to transport everyone across the waters of this suffering world to the far shore of perfection. As these Buddhists

see it, it's not necessary to become a celibate monk or nun or to live the life of a solitary. It's not necessary in other words to be a clone of the Buddha or to slavishly imitate the life of the "elders" or earliest Buddhists, who like their master were all renunciates. The *Mahâyâna* Buddhists say instead that anyone can reach the ultimate spiritual state, regardless of whether he's married or not, and regardless of whether he has a job in the world or is living in a cave somewhere. Of course, an intense striving and rigorous discipline are still required. *Nirvâna* isn't automatic and must still be struggled toward. But the techniques for this struggle are available (they say) to all of us. There's also this distinguishing feature: According to the *Mahâyâna* form of Buddhism, as we "struggle" we can rely on the personal help of those who have successfully followed the path before us. In Theravada, it's basically every man for himself, and salvation (to use Christian terms) is a matter of "works" or self-effort. But according to the *Mahâyâna* we're not on our own in the spiritual journey: we're aided by *Bodhisattvas*, who offer us their celestial help. (As you may remember, I used this term *Bodhisattva* in connection with the Dalai Lama in YouTube Lecture 7.) These are beings, formerly human like us, who have reached enlightenment and thus become like the Buddha, but who have deliberately renounced *Nirvâna*, postponing the enjoyment of its indescribable bliss until, through their assistance, all other people—indeed all other "sentient beings", including even (as they say) "the last blade of grass"—have been liberated from their ignorance too. Thus *Mahâyâna* Buddhism contains what a Christian would call an element of "grace".

In any case—to circle back to our main topic—it's the *Mahâyâna* form of Buddhism that became influential in the more northerly countries of Asia, including Tibet, China, Japan, and Korea, and it's to this category of Buddhism that Zen belongs.

The word *Zen* is Japanese; it's the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word *Ch'an*, meaning "meditation", and it refers to a particular style of meditation and to a distinctive set of methods for approaching *Nirvâna* that first developed among Buddhist monks in China, but later reached their full flowering in Japan. As I've already mentioned, Zen results from the confluence of two distinct spiritual streams. The first of these streams can be traced back to the Buddha, specifically to his reticence concerning speculation and abstract philosophy. You'll remember that the Buddha refused to define *Nirvâna* and regarded questions about the ultimate nature of reality and the origin of the universe as "not tending to edification" (hence the "a-theistic" character of his teaching). His approach was instead very concrete and practical. He was like a physician, I

said, who diagnoses a disease based on its symptoms and seeks to provide the most efficient remedy. Down through the centuries, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Zen has been a similar reluctance on the part of its masters to elaborate their teaching in lectures or philosophical systems. On the contrary, they're very careful to stress that true enlightenment is direct and concrete, not a matter of theories and rarefied concepts. Actually this stress on direct experience is characteristic of Buddhist teaching in general, but Zen tends to highlight this feature even more than other schools. As for its affiliation with the *Mahâyâna* branch in particular, this comes through above all in the Zen masters' claim that anyone can achieve enlightenment. While there are in fact Zen monks and nuns—Soko Roshi describes what daily life was like in his own monastery, the famous Japanese community of Daitokuji in Kyoto—taking monastic vows and living the highly programmed life this entails are to be understood as aids or supports, which can be of use to some people, not as something absolutely essential for all. As the Zen teachers see it, the ultimate state of spiritual presence or wakefulness has a way of sneaking up on a person; it's always sudden and altogether unexpected, and it may occur in the midst of doing the dishes just as readily as during formal meditation or a temple ceremony.

In addition to these clear marks of its Buddhist lineage, you can perhaps also see that Zen owes a great deal to a second spiritual stream, namely, the religion of Taoism. The selection in *A Book of Saints* is particularly helpful in showing how profoundly Zen shares in what I've called the "down-to-earth" quality of the East Asian religions, and you'll have noticed (I hope) that it's especially like Taoism in the stress it places on the supreme importance of being natural and in its careful attention to the ordinary, seemingly hum-drum facts of life. The chapter called "There is No Trash" (pages 57-60) is especially revealing in this regard. As he begins the rather painful process of discerning what the subtitle of his autobiography calls the "extent of my own stupidity", one of the lessons the young novice must learn is that even the most seemingly trivial or insignificant things, like a pile of leaves in a garden, are in fact brimming with value and meaning. Each can be a revelation for those who have the eyes to see, each a testimony to the fact that everything contains the Buddha nature—that everything is what it should be, absolutely perfect.

All of these various points come together most forcefully in the primary goal of Zen Buddhism, which is a sudden, direct, lucid, and utterly transformative experience of Reality. A common word for this experience is the Japanese *satori*, which is derived from a term meaning "knowledge". *Satori*, they say, was the experience of Siddhartha himself upon becoming the

Buddha, the original awakening behind the whole Buddhist religion. Unlike certain other schools of Buddhist thought—and unlike most forms of *yoga* in India—Zen likes to stress the suddenness or instantaneity of this enlightenment, rather than thinking in terms of a gradual ascent through a series of phases or stages. Its methods are designed to produce this sudden *breakthrough* by breaking *down* our habitual patterns of thought. Zen masters aim to call into question virtually everything we've ever thought about the world, and in the midst of the mental paralysis and spiritual emptiness thus created their plan is to throw open a door to the blinding light of the Real. There are numerous ways that Zen adepts attempt to achieve this effect, but I'm going to mention just two of them in this lecture. The first method makes use of special puzzles or riddles called *koans*, and the second involves the linking of meditation and attention to such everyday activities of life as gardening and drinking tea, as well as to specific arts like painting, flower arranging, swordsmanship, the martial arts, and archery.

First of all, *koans*. The word *koan*—again a Japanese term—refers to a sort of conundrum or puzzle whose methodic use is virtually unique to Zen Buddhism, especially the Rinzai school. Let's say that you're a spiritual seeker in traditional Japan, and your aim is to become the disciple of some noted master so as to receive his direction and come to enlightenment. You're tired of going around in a daydream, and you want to wake up to the Real. So you set off to visit the training center where this master teaches. The time-tested pattern you follow is summed up by Soko Roshi in "The Meaning of Courage" (pages 65-69) and "What Am I Doing Here?" (pages 69-70). Assuming the master's disciples let you in at all, you'll probably first be required to perform menial chores as proof of your sincerity: doing the laundry, cleaning the latrines, or sweeping the walk, and this might go on for a number of weeks or even months. At first you'll be rebuffed and ridiculed, but after a time—if you've shown yourself humble and worthy—you'll be given the privilege of an audience with the master himself. After some preliminary questions and perhaps some additional mockery, by means of which he attempts to determine your present spiritual state, a Zen *roshi* will often assign you a *koan*, and then he'll dismiss you, telling you to give this puzzle your full and undivided attention during several lengthy sessions of daily meditation.

At this point you'll begin spending a prescribed number of hours each day doing *zazen*, or "just sitting", as the Zen Buddhists say, sitting (to be precise) in the lotus *asana*, or posture, that the Chinese and Japanese copied from the Indian *yogis*, with your feet folded on top of their

opposite thighs. And in this position—back straight, head erect, eyes half-closed and looking at a point on the floor in front you, hands joined together in your lap in the specific way the master instructs—you begin to consider your riddle. Once or perhaps twice a day you'll be obliged to report back to the master in a very formal, highly ritualized meeting called *sanzen*. Entering his room, you prostrate yourself before him, bowing your head low to the floor, and then rising up on your haunches you explain to him what you've learned from your *koan*, what you think it might mean. The chapter called "Routine in the Monastery" (pages 72-83) contains a beautiful—if frightening!—description of what this encounter with the master involves.

So what exactly are these puzzles like? *Zen koans* actually take a number of forms: some are questions, some are expressed as imperatives or commands, and still others are presented in the form of little parables or fables. Whatever form they might take, however, they're all alike in being highly paradoxical and elliptical. One of the best-known "question" *koans*, for instance, is the query: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" A standard "imperative" *koan*—Soko Roshi uses this example—is the command: "Show your original face before the birth of your mother and father." As you can see, neither of these seems to make any sense. I can hear *two* hands clapping, but one on its own can't make a sound; and as for my face, how could I possibly consider its appearance before I, let alone my ancestors, had begun to exist? These would obviously be our ordinary, very logical, very rational responses. I can promise you, though, that it would be a *huge* mistake to return to a Zen master with these sorts of replies. We hear of such disciples being instantly chased away, or—if not so completely dismissed—being shouted at, slapped, struck with the *roshi's* staff, or sent to the kitchen to peel the potatoes. For the whole point of meditating on a *koan* is to reach a point beyond the usual logic. Our ordinary thinking is meant to explode, as it were, and when it does so (according to Zen) we'll instantly *hear* the clapping of the single hand, and we'll *see* our face as it has always truly been, and all this without the mediation of rational deductions and conclusions. Some of my own favorite *koans* take the form of short stories, in which you can see very clearly how the aim of Zen is to dig beneath our assumptions and provoke a sudden confrontation with our real situation. I'll tell you a few of these stories in my YouTube lecture.

A second typical Zen technique is to link meditation to physical action, whether ordinary activities like cooking or serving tea or gardening, or special disciplines like the martial arts and archery. But the purpose is just the same as it is with the puzzles. Here too the primary aim is to

break the chains and pierce the shell created by our habitual thought-patterns. As I'm sure most of you know from your own experience, there's something about the immediacy and flow of orderly physical movement that can put us into a state of alertness and concentration. Many athletes speak of this sort of experience—certain “peak” moments on the field or the court—when they suddenly lost all track of time and space and were just moving with the flow of an invisible current or energy; it was as though the keenness of their perception and the speed of their motion had both increased, and everything started just happening on its own: basketballs going through hoops, footballs into the hands of receivers, and so forth. You've all heard about this sort of thing, and some of you who are athletes may have had a taste of it yourselves. Zen attempts to capitalize on this possibility by a deliberate and methodical use of certain physical activities as a foundation for insight or contemplation, pushing the disciple to a point where his alertness is no longer fleeting and fragmentary but permanent and complete.

One of the best-known accounts of this aspect of Zen can be found in a little book called *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel. I highly recommend it. The author was a German philosophy professor who spent time in Japan between the two World Wars studying traditional archery (*kyudo*) under the tutelage of a famous Zen master named Kenzo Awa. Herrigel had long been interested in mysticism and esoteric spirituality, and he was looking for a personal confirmation of what he'd heard about Zen's ability to produce (what he calls) an “immediate transfer of the spirit” from master to disciple. The reader follows Herrigel over the course of a four- or five-year period as he passes through various stages in his study. First, he's taught how to hold the bow, then how to draw it, then how to breathe so as not to disturb his concentration, and then how to loose the arrow. And throughout the whole process there's a constant refrain from the master: “Relax. Let go. Wait. Be patient. Stop trying. Don't force things.” The narrative repeatedly returns to the idea that archery is an “artless art”, whose mastery demands a kind of actionless acting, a purposeless purposing, and an effortless intensity, along the lines of the Taoist *wei wu wei*. Even though the practice of each component of archery requires at first an incredibly frustrating and muscle-wrenching struggle, Herrigel is constantly reminded that the whole art is to be experienced as a game or dance. For the real goal is not to teach people to hit a bull's eye. Instead, in the service of Zen the art of archery—like the martial arts of self-defense or the arts of painting or flower arranging—is actually a pretext for the much more profoundly spiritual art of detachment. Think back to the Buddhist concept of *nirodha* or cessation. The whole point of

archery and other similar arts is that in their demanding concreteness they can help to cut through and break down the resistance of *tanha* and the forces of egotism, allowing us to “cease” from our clinging, controlling attitude toward the world. Thus in Herrigel’s book the master is always stressing the importance of being like a little child and of acting—this is one of my own favorite analogies from the story—like a “bamboo leaf”, which lets slip its weight of snow with no thought.

The narrative concludes with what is doubtless one of the most remarkable moments in all spiritual literature. The author, in a rather cynical mood, is ready to give up; he has had enough of all the frustration and pain, and he complains to the master that *if* indeed a true archer is not supposed to *do* anything—if it’s rather the case (as Kenzo Awa has told him repeatedly) that the arrow “shoots itself” and doesn’t really need the controlling force of the archer’s own ego—then the old *roshi* should be able to prove this theory by hitting a target blindfolded. Herrigel’s words are a sort of dare, which the master, after a few moments of reflection, decides to accept, and the resulting episode shows in striking fashion the extraordinary power of *wei wu wei*. It’s nighttime as they go to the practice hall. The target is set up in its usual position 28 meters away, and then in the darkness, unable to see what he’s doing, the Zen master archer lets fly two arrows with his usual effortlessness. When a bewildered but also humbled Herrigel goes to inspect the result, he finds that the first arrow had hit the bull’s eye dead center while the second arrow (even more miraculously) had split the shaft of the first.

One realizes that this was, for the author, a moment of *satori*. We who read the story are offered the opportunity to experience for ourselves at least something of this sudden opening up of the Real.