



*The Philosophy
of Zen Buddhism*

**BYUNG-CHUL
HAN**

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Preface](#)

[Notes](#)

[A Religion without God](#)

[Notes](#)

[Emptiness](#)

[Notes](#)

[No one](#)

[Notes](#)

[Dwelling nowhere](#)

[Notes](#)

[Death](#)

[Notes](#)

[Friendliness](#)

[Notes](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism

Byung-Chul Han

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PREFACE

Zen Buddhism is a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism that originated in China and is strongly focused on meditation.¹ What is peculiar to Zen Buddhism is expressed by the following verse, attributed to its founder, Bodhidharma,² a figure surrounded by legend:

A special tradition outside the scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Direct pointing at the soul of man;
Seeing into one's own nature,
and the attainment of
Buddhahood.³

This scepticism towards language and distrust of conceptual thought, so typical of Zen Buddhism, explains why Zen Buddhist sayings are so enigmatic and succinct. What is said shines because of what is not said. Zen Buddhist masters also make use of unusual forms of communication. They often respond to questions of the form 'What is ...?' with a blow of the stick.⁴ And where words do not get the point across, loud shouting might be used instead.

Despite Zen Buddhism's fundamental hostility towards theory and discourse, a philosophy of Zen Buddhism need not necessarily end up as a (paradoxical) epic of haikus, for it is possible to reflect philosophically on a subject matter that is not itself philosophy in the narrower sense. One may linguistically circle silence without thereby drowning it out with language. The present philosophy of Zen Buddhism is nourished by a *philosophizing about* and *with* Zen Buddhism. It aims conceptually to unfold the philosophical force inherent in Zen Buddhism. This undertaking is not,

however, altogether without its problems. The experiences of being or of consciousness that the practice of Zen Buddhism works towards cannot fully be captured in conceptual language. *The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism* tries to turn this linguistic difficulty around by using certain linguistic strategies to convey meaning.

The present study is designed as a 'comparative' one. The philosophies of Plato, Leibniz, Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger and others will be confronted with the insights of Zen Buddhism. The comparative approach is a method for disclosing meaning.

Haikus are frequently woven into the individual sections of the text. The intention behind this is not, however, to illustrate abstract matters with haikus, and still less is it to produce philosophical interpretations of haikus. The haikus and the individual sections of text relate to each other as neighbours. The quoted haikus aim to put the reader in the mood of the textual passages to which they relate. The haikus should be seen as beautiful frames that quietly talk to their pictures.⁵

NOTES

1. *Mahā* means 'large'; *yāna* means 'vehicle'. Thus, the literal translation of Mahāyāna is 'large vehicle'. Buddhism is a path to salvation that provides a 'vehicle' that is meant to lead living creatures out of their painful existence. The teaching of Buddha therefore does not offer a 'truth' but a 'vehicle', a 'means' that would become superfluous once the goal has been reached. That makes Buddhist discourse free of the compulsion to truth that dominates Christian discourse. As opposed to Hīnayāna Buddhism ('small vehicle'), which aims at self-perfection, Mahāyāna Buddhism strives for the salvation

of all living creatures. Therefore, the Bodhisattva, despite having reached complete enlightenment, lives among the suffering creatures in order to lead them to salvation.

2. It is said that he came to China as the twenty-eighth Indian patriarch in order to found the Chinese line of the Zen tradition.
3. Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, New York: Pantheon, 1963, p. 87.
4. See *The Blue Cliff Record (Bi-yan-lu)*, compiled by Ch'unghsien and commented upon by K'o-ch'in, trans. Thomas Cleary, Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1998: 'Elder Ding asked Linji, "What is the meaning of Buddhism?" Linji got off his seat, grabbed Ding, slapped him, then pushed him away. Ding stood there motionless. A monk standing by said, "Elder Ding, why don't you bow?" Just as Ding bowed, he suddenly was greatly enlightened' (pp. 171f.).
5. Transl. note: In many cases, there are several, often very different, English translations of a haiku. I have selected the ones that are closest to the German translations. In a few instances I have given, in footnotes, alternative translations that follow the German versions more literally. Where no reference is given, the translations are mine.

A Religion without God

See the great Buddha
he is dozing and dozing
all through the spring day.

- Shiki

In his lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel says that the subject matter of religion is 'God and nothing but God'.¹ Buddhism being no exception, Hegel simply equates the central concept of Buddhism, 'nothing', with God:

nothing and not-being is what is ultimate and supreme. It is nothing alone which has true independence; all other actuality, all particularity, has none at all. Out of nothingness everything has proceeded; into nothingness everything returns. Nothing, nothingness is the One, the beginning and the ending of everything.... That man should think of God as nothingness must at first sight seem astonishing, must appear to us a most peculiar idea. But, considered more closely, this determination means that God is absolutely nothing determined. He is the Undetermined; no determinateness of any kind pertains to God; He is the Infinite. This is equivalent to saying that God is the negation of all particularity.²

In other words, Hegel interprets Buddhism as a kind of 'negative theology'. The 'nothing' expresses the negativity of God, the fact that He escapes any positive determination. Following this controversial account of the Buddhist concept of nothingness, Hegel voices his bewilderment: 'God, although actually conceived of as nothingness, as Essence generally, is yet known as a particular immediate human being', by which he means the Buddha. That 'a man

with all his sensuous needs should be looked upon as God, as He who eternally creates, maintains, and produces the world', Hegel holds, is a 'conjunction' that 'may appear to us the most offensive, revolting, and incredible of all'.³ The 'absolute' - and in Hegel's view this is a contradiction - 'has to be worshipped in the immediate finite nature of a human being':⁴ 'A human being is worshipped, and he is as such the god who assumes individual form, and in that form gives himself up to be revered.'⁵ Within this 'individual existence', he says, the Buddha is the 'substance' that is responsible for the 'creating and maintaining of the world, of nature, and of all things'.⁶

In his interpretation of Buddhism, Hegel makes use of ontotheological concepts such as substance, essence, God, power, domination and creation. This is problematic, as these concepts are all incompatible with Buddhism. The Buddhist 'nothing' is anything but a 'substance'. It is not 'existing in itself' [*in sich seiend*],⁷ nor is it 'at rest within itself and persists'.⁸ Rather, it is *empty within itself*, so to speak. It does not *flee* from being determined in order to retreat into its infinite inwardness. The Buddhist nothing is not that 'substantial Power which governs the world, causes everything to originate and come into being in accordance with rational laws of connection'.⁹ The nothing rather indicates that *nothing rules*. It does not reveal itself to be a *master*. No 'rule' and no 'power' emanates from it. Buddha *represents* nothing. He does not embody an infinite substance in a separate individual form. Hegel illegitimately entangles the Buddhist nothing in representational and causal relations. His thought, which focuses on 'substance' and 'subject', is not capable of grasping the Buddhist nothing.

The following koan from the *Bi-yan-lu* would seem outlandish to Hegel: 'A monk asked Dongshan, "What is the

Buddha?” Dongshan said, “Three pounds of flax.”¹⁰ Hegel would be equally bewildered by the following words from Dōgen: ‘When you talk about the Buddha, you think the Buddha must have various physical characteristics and a radiant halo. If I say that the Buddha is broken tiles and pebbles, you show astonishment.’¹¹ In response to these Zen sayings, Hegel might claim that, in Zen Buddhism, God does not appear as an individual but rather unconsciously ‘staggers’ through various things. For Hegel, Zen Buddhism would therefore constitute a regression from ordinary Buddhism, because the latter’s ‘advance’ over the ‘fantastic’ religion consists precisely in the fact that God’s ‘chaotic stagger’ is ‘reduced to a state of rest’, that the ‘arid disorder’ is returned ‘into itself and into essential unity’. For Hegel, Buddhism is a ‘religion of Being-within-itself’. In such a religion, God collects Himself into Himself. All ‘relation to another is now cut off’.¹² The fantastic religion, by contrast, does not involve this self-collection. In the fantastic religion, the ‘One’¹³ is not with itself; rather, it ‘staggers’. In Buddhism, however, God is no longer dispersed into countless things: ‘Thus, as compared with the previous stage, there is an advance made here from fantastic personification split up into a countless multitude of forms, to a personification which is enclosed within definite bounds, and is actually present.’ This God, who has collected Himself into Himself, appears ‘in an individual concentration’, namely in the form of a human individual who is called Buddha.¹⁴

Hegel’s interpretation of Buddhist meditation also fails to grasp Buddhism’s spiritual attitude. According to Hegel, in meditative contemplation the goal is ‘the stillness of being-within-itself’.¹⁵ In this ‘being-within-itself ... all relation to another is now precluded’.¹⁶ Thus, in ‘meditation’ man ‘is occupied with himself’;¹⁷ he is ‘returning into himself’.¹⁸

Hegel even talks of 'self-absorption' [*An-sich-selbst-Saugen*].¹⁹ The aim is a pure, absolute inwardness of being-within-itself that is completely free of another. One immerses oneself in 'abstract thought in itself', which is 'active substantiality' and constitutive of the 'creation and preservation of the world'.²⁰ The 'holiness of a man consists in his uniting himself in this extinction, in this silence, with God, with nothingness, with the Absolute'.²¹ In this state of nirvana, Hegel says, 'man is without gravity, he has no longer any weight, is not subject to disease, to old age, to death; he is looked upon as God Himself; he has become Buddha'.²² In the state of nirvana, man reaches an infinity, an immortality, that represents infinite freedom. This freedom Hegel imagines as follows:

The thought of immortality is implied in the fact that man is a *thinking* being, that he is in his freedom at home with himself; thus he is absolutely independent; an 'Other' cannot break in upon his freedom: he relates himself to himself alone; an Other cannot assert itself within him.

This equality with myself, 'I', this self-contained existence, this true Infinite, is what, according to this point of view, is immortal, is subject to no change; it is itself the Unchangeable, what is within itself alone, what moves itself only within itself.²³

Accordingly, infinity as freedom consists in a pure inwardness that is in no way entangled with anything external or other. In this immersion in pure thinking, human beings are wholly with themselves, only relate to themselves, only touch themselves. Nothing external disturbs this self-referential contemplation. In Hegel's version of Buddhism, God is characterized by this pure 'inwardness' of the 'I'. We shall see later that in fact the Buddhist nothing is opposed to inwardness.

According to Hegel, the God of all religions, and especially the God of Christianity, is not only 'substance' but also 'subject'.²⁴ God is to be imagined, like the human being, as a subject, a person. However, the Buddhist nothing, according to Hegel, lacks subjectivity and personality. Like the Indian God, it is not 'the One Person' but 'the One in a neuter sense'.²⁵ It is not yet a '*He*', not a *master*. It lacks 'exclusive subjectivity'.²⁶ It is not as exclusive as the Jewish God. The figure of the Buddha compensates for this lack of subjectivity. The 'absolute' is personified and 'worshipped' in an empirical, finite individual. However, as we have already seen, for Hegel the fact that a finite human being is considered to be God 'may appear to us the most offensive, revolting, and incredible of all'. For Hegel, it is a contradiction to imagine the absolute in the form of a finite individual. But Hegel's view rests on a misinterpretation of Buddhism. Hegel declares the Christian religion to be the final form of religion, and for Christianity the figure of the person is constitutive. Hegel projects Christianity onto Buddhism, and this leads him to believe that Buddhism is lacking. He thereby fails to recognize the radical alterity of Buddhist religion. The Zen master Linji's demand that one should 'kill the Buddha' would be wholly incomprehensible to Hegel: 'if you meet a buddha, kill the buddha.... Then for the first time you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go.'²⁷

The Buddhist nothing's lack of 'exclusive subjectivity' or 'conscious will' is not a 'deficiency' but a strength of Buddhism.²⁸ The absence of 'will' or 'subjectivity' is precisely what constitutes the peacefulness of Buddhism. Further, because the category of 'power' is an expression of 'substance' or 'subject', it does not apply to the Buddhist nothing. 'Power' that 'reveals' or 'manifests' *itself* is alien to the nothing, which lacks substance and subjectivity. The

nothing does not represent an 'acting, effective power'; it does not 'effect' anything.²⁹ The absence of a 'master' further distances Buddhism from any economy of domination. Because 'power' is not concentrated in a *name*, Buddhism is non-violent. There is no individual who represents a 'power'. Buddhism's foundation is an empty centre that does not exclude anything, that is not occupied by a holder of power. This emptiness, this absence of 'exclusive subjectivity', is what makes Buddhism friendly. Its nature is incompatible with 'fundamentalism'.

Buddhism does not allow for the invocation of God. It does not know the divine inwardness into which such an invocation would delve, nor the human inwardness that would require such an invocation. It is free of the *urge to invoke*. The 'immediate impulse', 'longing' and 'instinct of spirit' that insists on God being concrete and concentrated 'in the form of a real man' (i.e. Christ) is alien to Buddhism.³⁰ In God in human form, the human being sees *himself*. In God, the human appreciates *himself*. Buddhism, by contrast, does not have a narcissistic structure.

The Zen master Dongshan would shatter 'God' with his 'sword that kills'.³¹ Zen Buddhism leads the Buddhist religion towards strict immanence in the most radical way: 'Vast and empty. Nothing holy!'³² The Zen sayings about Buddha being 'broken tiles and pebbles' or 'three pounds of flax' indicate the orientation towards immanence in the spiritual attitude of Zen Buddhism. They express the 'everyday mind' that makes Zen Buddhism a *religion of immanence*.³³ The nothing, or emptiness, of Zen Buddhism is not directed at a divine *There*. The radical turn towards immanence, towards *Here*, is a reflection of the Chinese, or Far Eastern, character of Zen Buddhism.³⁴ Like Linji, the Zen master Yunmen urges the *destruction of the holy*. He seems to understand what *peace* depends upon: