

The background of the cover is a composite image. The upper portion shows a range of mountains shrouded in mist, with a soft, hazy light. The lower portion is an aerial view of a valley, heavily tinted with a vibrant blue color, showing a winding road and small structures. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

*The Philosophy  
of Zen Buddhism*

**BYUNG-CHUL  
HAN**



# The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism



Byung-Chul Han  
The Philosophy of  
Zen Buddhism

Translated by Daniel Steuer

polity

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## PREFACE

Zen Buddhism is a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism that originated in China and is strongly focused on meditation.<sup>1</sup> What is peculiar to Zen Buddhism is expressed by the following verse, attributed to its founder, Bodhidharma,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>



## 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’.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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’.<sup>3</sup> The ‘absolute’ – and in Hegel’s view this is a contradiction – ‘has to be worshipped in the immediate finite nature of a human being’:<sup>4</sup> ‘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.’<sup>5</sup> 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’.<sup>6</sup>

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*],<sup>7</sup> nor is it ‘at rest within itself and persists’.<sup>8</sup> 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'.<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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.'<sup>11</sup> 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'.<sup>12</sup> The fantastic religion, by contrast, does not involve this self-collection. In the fantastic religion, the 'One'<sup>13</sup> 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,