

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 33 (1977)  
**Heft:** 5

**Artikel:** Zen is not a Philosophy, but...  
**Autor:** Abe, Masao  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878510>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 02.04.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Zen is not a Philosophy, but...<sup>1</sup>

Religion is something which is difficult to understand correctly and sufficiently in its depth and its subtle meanings. Zen is no exception. In one sense, Zen may be said to be one of the most difficult religions to understand because there is no formulated doctrine or theological system in Zen by which one may intellectually approach it. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find various forms of superficial understanding or misunderstanding of Zen among Westerners who are interested in Zen, but who have cultural and religious traditions entirely different from those in which Zen has developed.

### 1.

Zen often makes ordinary statements such as: “The willows are green; the flowers are red.” When he returned from China Dōgen, the founder of Japanese Sōtō Zen, said: “I return to my homeland with empty hands. What I learned in China is only that eyes are horizontal, noses vertical.” Observations as these are so self-evident and ordinary that the emphasis on them may puzzle some people.

But Zen also has such *paradoxical sayings* as, “a bridge flows, whereas water does not flow”, or “the blue mountains are constantly walking, the stone woman gives birth to a child in the night”, and “Lee drinks the wine, Chang gets drunk”. Indeed, Zen is full of such sayings which, in contrast to the above self-evident statements, are extremely illogical and unreasonable. And yet both modes of expression, self-evident and illogical, are present in Zen. Accordingly it is often said, “Zen is something enigmatic which is beyond intellectual analysis.” Zen is thus understood as a form of anti-intellectualism or a cheap intuitionism, especially when *Satori* in Zen is explained as a flash-like intuition.

Again, Zen often says, “When you are hungry, eat; when you are tired, sleep.” Thus Zen is understood as something amoral, something which you simply let flow from your desires or instincts just like an animal, without thinking of good and evil. At best, Zen is labeled an Oriental mysticism. However, what does “Oriental mysticism” really mean?

It is clear that Zen is not a philosophy. It is beyond words and intellect. Practice is absolutely necessary for the realization of Zen, but Zen is not a mere anti-intellectualism nor a cheap intuitionism, nor an encouragement to an animal-like spontaneity. It embraces a profound philosophy. Although our intellectual understanding cannot be a substitute for Zen’s awakening, practice without a proper and legitimate form of intellectual understanding is often misleading. An intellectual understanding without practice is certainly powerless, but practice without learning is blind. Therefore, in this paper I would like to clarify as much as possible that philosophy embraced by Zen.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised and enlarged version of a manuscript originally delivered at Princeton University in December 1976.

In this respect, the following discourse given by a Chinese Zen Master of the Tang Dynasty, Ch'ing yuan *Wei hsin* (Seigen Ishin), provides a key to our approach. His discourse is as follows:

“Before I studied Zen, to me mountains were mountains and waters were waters. After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to me are not mountains and waters are not waters. But after this, when I really attained the abode of rest, that is, enlightenment, mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters.”

And then he asked, “Do you think these three understandings are the same or different?” This question is crucial.

The first stage of understanding described here implies: “Mountains are mountains; waters are waters.” That was the Master’s understanding before he studied or practised Zen. But after he studied Zen for some years and came to an insight he understood that “Mountains are not mountains; waters are not waters.” This is the second stage. When he came to Satori, however, to him “Mountains are really mountains; and waters are really waters.” This is the third and final stage. At the first stage of understanding *Wei hsin* is differentiating the mountains from the waters and the waters from the mountains. “Mountains are not waters, but mountains. Waters are not mountains, but waters.” Thus he discriminates the one thing from the other. Here we have a differentiation. And in this way, he affirms mountains as mountains and waters as waters. So here we also have affirmation. When he comes to the second stage, “Mountains are not mountains; waters are not waters” here, there is no differentiation. And there is no affirmation, but only negation. Finally, however, when he comes to the third and final stage, “Mountains are really mountains; waters are really waters”, we do again have differentiation as well as affirmation.

## 2.

Many important issues are involved in this discourse. In his first understanding *Wei hsin* differentiates and affirms mountains and waters as two different entities. He objectifies mountains as mountains; waters as waters, thereby coming to have a clear understanding of them. So here we have objectification.

If we asked him, who is it that differentiates mountains from waters, he would of course answer, “It is I. I differentiate the mountains from the waters and I affirm mountains as mountains, waters as waters.” So in this first stage mountains are understood as mountains insofar as they are objectified by him or by us and not understood as mountains in themselves. Mountains are over there and we are standing here, looking at them from our viewpoint. “Mountains are mountains” only insofar as they are objectively looked at from our point of view and are not grasped in themselves. They are grasped from outside, not from within. The same is true with the waters. So there is duality of *subject* and *object* in this understanding. And when we differentiate mountains, waters, and such things around ourselves, we also differentiate ourselves from others. Thus we say, “I am I and you

are you: I am not you but I; you are not I but you.” So behind the discriminative understanding of mountains and waters there is the discriminative understanding of the self and the other. In this understanding, the “I” is the basis of discrimination, placing itself as the center of everything.

I would like to call this type of I an “ego-self”. When an “ego-self” differentiates itself from some other self it understands itself by comparison with the other self. And thus it sometimes asks to itself, “Who am I?” This is a natural and inevitable question for the ego-self because it objectifies everything including itself. But to this question we must further ask, “Who is asking ‘Who am I?’ ” The ego-self may answer, “I am asking ‘Who am I?’ ” In this statement we have two “I”s. That is, an “I” which is asking and an “I” which is asked. Are these two “I”s the same or different? Could you answer? I would say they must be the same, and yet they are differentiated from one another because the “I” which is asking is the subject of a question but the “I” which is asked is the object of a question. The self is divided in two. In other words, here I am asking about “myself”, and “myself” is in this case not the subject but the object of my own asking. So far, “myself” is not the true “I” because it is already objectified and an objectified self is no more a living, subjective self. The living, acting, and subjective self is the “I” which is now asking. The “I” which is now asking – that is the True Self.

But how can we grasp this I? How can we realize our True Self? To do so, we may repeat the question “Who is the ‘I’ which is asking ‘Who am I?’ ” Now another “I” appears as a new subject and converts the entire situation into the object of a question. That is, “I” as the previous subject of a question is now objectified and becomes transformed into the object of a question. This means that “I” as the real subject, as the True Self, always stands behind. It moves backward step by step as we repeatedly ask about ourselves. This process is endless. It is an endless regression. And that which can be grasped is always nothing more than an objectified or dead self.

This is the reason why, referring to the realization of the True Self, Nan ch’uan (Nansen) says: “If you try to direct yourself toward it, you go away from it.” Lin chi (Rinzai) also says: “If you seek him, he retreats father and father away; if you don’t seek him, then he’s right there before your eyes, his wondrous voice resounding in your ears.” The endless regression implied in the objective approach precisely indicates the deadend of the approach itself.

So far, the True Self as a real subject cannot be attained by this mode of approach. After endless regression, therefore, we cannot help realizing that the True Self is unattained. No matter how many times we may repeatedly ask ourselves, our True Self always stands behind; it cannot be found in front of us. The True Self is not something attainable, but that which is unattainable. When this is existentially realized, the ego-self disappears. That is, the existential realization of the unattainability of the True Self culminates in a deadlock, the breaking through of which results in the collapse of the ego-self, and we come to the realization of no-self, no-ego-self. And when the ego-self as a subject disappears, then its object disappears as well. This means that the subject-object duality which underlies the

first stage of understanding is now eliminated. The result is that mountains are not mountains: waters are not waters. Now the differentiation of mountains and waters based on objectification is overcome. In other words, the veil which we projected on the mountains and the waters from our point of view is taken away. At the same time, the differentiation between the self and the other is also overcome, thus reaching the realization of no-self.

In this second stage occurs the negation of the first stage of understanding and we come to no-differentiation, no-objectification, no-affirmation, neither is there any duality of subject and object. Here we must say, everything is empty. This negative realization is important and necessary in order to disclose ultimate Reality, but if we would remain solely with this negative realization it would be a merely nihilistic view. Furthermore, although in this second stage, differentiation of mountains and waters, self and other, is overcome, another form of differentiation is still implied. That is a higher level of differentiation, namely, a differentiation between differentiation and no-differentiation. This higher level of differentiation must be overcome in order to reach genuine nondifferentiated sameness and to realize ultimate Reality. So we should go beyond the second stage. We should negate even no-differentiation, no-objectification. The negative view must be overcome. Emptiness must empty itself.

Thus we come to the third stage. Here we come to a new form of differentiation. It is a higher form of differentiation. Here we may say, "Mountains are really mountains, no more, no less: waters are really waters, no more, no less."

We have a negation at the second stage, and again another negation at the third stage. Logically speaking, we have the negation of negation. But what is the negation of negation? It is nothing but an affirmation. And yet, it is not a mere affirmation nor an affirmation in its relative sense, but in its absolute sense. It is a great affirmation. Now, in the third and final stage mountains are affirmed really as mountains and waters are affirmed really as waters. Emptiness empties itself, becoming non-emptiness, that is fullness.

With this great affirmation of mountains and waters, we have a realization of the True Self. As the result of endless regression in our approach of objectification we come to realize that the True Self is unattainable. With this realization we move from the ego-self to no-self. It is important and necessary to come to a realization of no-self, a realization that the True Self is unattainable. But this realization is still negative, entailing a dualistic view of the self and no-self. But when even no-self is existentially overcome the True Self awakens to itself. This is the most important turning point. It is a turning point from the realization that our True Self is unattainable to the realization that the unattainable itself is our True Self.

Now, let us recall the question Wei hsien raised at the end of his discourse, that is: Do you think these three understandings are the same or different? The third stage is quite similar to the first stage, because both of them speak of affirmation and differentiation of mountains and waters. They are, however, essentially different. For the first stage speaks of a merely uncritical affirmation prior to the

negation realized in the second stage; but the third stage speaks of a great affirmation after and beyond the negation realized in the second stage. It is clear that the second stage is different from the first and the third. So all of them are different from each other. Are they, however, simply different from each other? This must be carefully examined.

The first stage cannot include the second and the third. The second stage cannot embrace the third either. On the other hand, the third and final stage can include both the first and the second stages. This means that the second stage cannot be fully understood on the basis of the first stage and the third stage on the basis of the first and the second stages. There is no continuity, no ascending bridge to reach a higher stage from a lower stage. There is a complete discontinuity or interruption between each stage. A great leap is necessary to reach the higher stages. Discontinuity here indicates negation or emptying. The second stage is reached by negation of or emptying of the first stage. The third stage is reached by negation of or emptying of the second stage. In short, the third stage is realized only through the negation of negation, i.e. the great negation. And as I said before the great negation is nothing but the great affirmation. They are dynamically identical. Accordingly, the third stage is not a static end to be reached continuously from the lower stages, but the dynamic whole which embraces great negation and great affirmation at once. It is really the dynamic whole in which you and I are embraced and from which nothing is excluded.

Accordingly, to the question raised by Wei hsin as to whether these three understandings are the same or different, we may answer: "They are different and yet not different; they are the same and yet different at once."

Herein, it must be noticed that although we have used the term "stage" in analysing Wei hsin's discourse, the term is inadequate or even misleading for the understanding of the real meaning of his utterance. For the "third stage" is, as mentioned above, not a static end to be reached continuously from the lower stages, but the dynamic whole which embraces the lower stages, both affirmative and negative. It is more than the third and final stage. It is a standpoint from which not only the process, but even the very notion of "stage" as well as its implication of temporal sequence, is overcome. "Mountains are really mountains; waters are really waters" is realized in a thoroughly nonobjectifiable way in the absolute present which is beyond and yet embraces past, present and future. The dynamic whole which embraces all three stages is precisely realized in this absolute present. From this point of view an approach based on the idea of "stage" is illusory, as is the notion of temporality linked with the idea of "stage".

In Zen the total reality of mountains and waters (and with them everything and everyone in the universe) is actualized through the double negation of the temporal sequence implied in the idea of "stage". It is through the negation of no-temporality implied in the "second stage" as well as the temporality implied in the "first stage" that the absolute present is completely disclosed.

Accordingly the realization of everything being really just as it is, the realization which takes place in the absolute present, is not merely the final stage or an

end of an objective approach in time, but, being beyond time, is the ground or the original basis on which the objective approach can be properly established and from which temporal sequence can legitimately begin. The “three stages” in time, which were illusory in so far as they lacked the ground of the absolute present, come to be revived as something real here in this realization. It is also the ground or basis on which everything and everyone are realized as they are without losing their individuality and yet not opposing each other.

Thus, in the Zen Awakening attained by Wei hsin, on the one hand, (1) mountains are really mountains in themselves – that is, everything in the world is real in itself –; and yet, on the other hand, (2) they do not hinder each other: they are equal, interchangeable, and interfusing – thus we may say: “Mountains are waters; waters are mountains.” It is here in the Awakening in which great negation is great affirmation that Zen says, “A bridge flows, whereas water does not flow”, and “Lee drinks wine, Chang gets drunk.” It is here again in the Awakening that Zen says: “When you are hungry, eat: when you are tired, sleep.” This is not an animal-like activity which may be seen in the “first stage”. Instead, your eating and sleeping are sustained by the realization of bottomless nothingness. When you are hungry, there is nothing behind being hungry. You are just hungry, no more, no less. When you eat, there is nothing beyond eating. The eating is absolute action at that moment. When you sleep, again there is nothing behind sleeping – no dreams, no nightmares, just sleeping – sleeping is completely realized at that moment.

Again in this Awakening we may say: “I am not I, therefore I am you; and yet I am really I.” “You are not you, therefore you are me; and yet you are really you.” There is no hindrance between us and yet everyone has his complete individuality. This is possible because the True Self is no-self. As there is nothing behind us, each one of us is thoroughly just as he is, and yet each one is interfusing with every other without obstruction. Hence, Lee drinks wine; Chang gets drunk. A bridge flows, whereas water does not flow. This is not an enigma, but an expression of the interfusing aspect of Zen which is inseparably connected with the aspect of each independence and individuality – whether person, animal or thing – as expressed in the formulations: “The willows are green, the flowers are red”, and “Eyes are horizontal, noses vertical.”

### 3.

This is the philosophy realized within Zen. Some may feel it is not so different from *Hegel's* philosophy. There is certainly a great similarity between Hegel's philosophy and the philosophy implied in Zen – especially in terms of the negation of negation being a great or absolute affirmation. We should not overlook their essential difference, however. Emphasizing “negation” as the vital notion in his account of the dialectic, Hegel grasps everything dialectically through the negation of negation. But this dialectical process is understood as the self-development

of the absolute Spirit (absoluter Geist) as the ultimate Reality. As an individual is regarded in Hegel somehow as an instrument of the absolute Spirit via a “trick of reason” (List der Vernunft), an individual is not fully grasped as an individual, that is, one who is paradoxically identical with the absolute.

An individual may be identical paradoxically with the absolute only when the absolute is grasped as non-substantial – only when there is nothing substantial whatsoever behind or beyond the individual in terms of the “absolute”. In Hegel, an individual is not fully grasped as an individual because there the absolute is not the absolute nothingness, but the absolute Spirit which is in the final analysis something substantial. It is not accurate to say that Hegel’s notion of the absolute Spirit is simply something substantial. For it is an extremely dialectical notion which is actualized only through the negation of negation. In as much as this is the case we must say it is not substantial. And yet, when we take his notion of a “trick of reason” into account, we are forced to think that there is something behind the individual and that the individual is somewhat manipulated by that something – that is, the absolute Spirit.

On the other hand, in Zen by which the absolute is grasped as “mu” or absolute nothingness an individual is thoroughly realized as an individual and as such is paradoxically identical with the absolute. There is nothing whatsoever behind or beyond an individual. It is not manipulated by anything whatsoever – including the absolute Spirit or God. In Zen’s realization of absolute nothingness an individual is determined absolutely by nothing: it is determined by itself in its particularity without any determinant, and yet this is equally true of every individual. Hence, through the realization that “mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters”, both the realization that “mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters” and the realization that “mountains are waters, waters are mountains” simultaneously take place. These two realizations are simply the two aspects of one and the same realization of the dynamic Reality which is entirely unobjectifiable and nonsubstantial.

Although being extremely dialectic, Hegel’s notion of the absolute Spirit, in comparison with Zen’s notion of the absolute nothingness, is not completely free from “somethingness”. As a result, in Hegel, the negation of negation is realized in the framework of the self-development, however dialectical it may be, of the absolute Spirit. In Zen, however, there is not such a framework. Everything is empty. Emptiness is reality. Thus, the dialectical nature of the “negation of negation” is fully realized. The negation (true emptiness) is at once the affirmation of affirmation (true fullness of wondrous beings) without the slightest discrepancy whatsoever. This is precisely Reality realized in the absolute present as the dynamic whole in which a development in time as well as a relation between individuals are properly grasped.

The aforementioned difference between Hegel and Zen is not unrelated with the difference in their understanding of philosophy and religion. In Hegel, philosophy stands for the absolute knowledge (absolutes Wissen) to which religion, being not yet free from representation (Vorstellung) in its form of faith (Glaube)



in God, must be subordinate. Such a difference or different evaluation of philosophy and religion is understood in Hegel as a process of the self-development of the absolute Spirit. As opposed to this, Zen, based on the realization of the absolute nothingness, is neither philosophy nor religion in Hegelian sense. In Zen, religion is not subordinate to philosophy as seen in Hegel, nor is philosophy subordinate to religion as seen in Christianity. In the dynamic realization of the statement “mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters” which is paradoxically inseparable from the realization of “mountains are waters, waters are mountains”, wisdom and compassion, philosophy and religious solution, are equally implied. This is the reason why Zen is neither absolute knowledge nor salvation by God, but self-awakening. In the self-awakening of Zen each individual – whether person, animal or thing – manifests itself in its particularity as expressed in the formulation “the willows are green, the flowers are red”, and yet each is interpenetrating harmoniously as expressed in the formulation, “Lee drinks wine, Chang gets drunk.” This is not an end but the ground on which our being and activity can be properly based.

The philosophical structure of the negation of negation being a great affirmation as discussed above is contained within Zen. When Lin chi (Rinzai) shouts, it implies that philosophy. When Te shan (Tokusan) uses his stick, it contains that philosophy. Zen is not an anti-intellectualism nor a cheap intuitionism nor an animal-like activity, but includes a most profound philosophy, although Zen in itself is not a philosophy.

*Masao Abe, Kyoto, Japan*