

When the saints go marching in

There are two depicting ways of involvement in problems which, not being either materialistic or technical, neither fantastic nor strictly pathologic, regard what in the Western World is labeled as “religion”.

Even though Simone Weil¹ was referring to Christianity alone, I will, for brevity, borrow her effective representation of these two ways: *there's the mystics' religion, and the other one.*

“Mystics' religion” is intended as the direct experience of the divine. With “the other one” we mean all else that remains. As is well known, Buddhism arises as an answer to the perception of misery, that is the pain of living that persists in us even if we are innocent, just because we are born and raised in this world, or it is the sorrow we feel when we are not, indeed, innocent.

This religious path then develops itself in real life, neither imaginary nor linked to us sticking to an ideal, and consists in the dissolution of this pain of living, that is to say, dissolution of misery.

Neither in another life, in another time or somewhere else. But in everyday life, transformed from the inside.

A life in which everything remains unchanging: we grow old, we fall sick and die; around us our loved ones fade in death, and the ones we do not want in our life...are still around; we lose the people and the things we love one by one and we cannot reach the ones we desire... but inside us the poisoning bitterness does not sprout, and if it does it disappears in a blink.

Then, day after day, by learning how to immerse in good – a “good” so detached from temporal goods could be capitalized – and even through hard times, time goes by without harming us and, when we are wounded, the healing time is not one of sadness.

Using the expression “to immerse in good” I convey the experience of zazen; quietly sitting in a living, still silence. It is a practice both fundamental and an end in itself which characterizes, without being restrictive, the “Zen” area of Buddhist religion.

To expand, “Zen” is the modern name of that part of Buddhism which, since the beginning, tries to adhere to the way above described as “personal experience of the divine”. However, in our life the still, living silence of zazen when we quietly sit for “good”, is not all our time. There is much more where we interact with people and objects that constitute our life.

Therefore, to be effective, our proposition of “good” and misery dissolution has to include also the time of relationships, work, recreation and rest, otherwise it cannot be functional.

Buddha's teachings – remembering that they have the proposition to guide and keep us on the path of misery dissolution – rely on four pillars:

- An ethical life
- Awareness of impermanence
- Zazen practice
- The backing of faith

¹ Simone Weil, *Lettre à un religieux*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951. In English: Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, Taylor & Francis Ltd., GB 2013.

Let us have a brief look at each of these four elements. With *ethical life* I mean a background of parental behavior towards reality, inside and outside us. Being mothers and fathers of every situation, we actively interact with and, more extensively (at different levels of involvement), every person and thing we have contact with. The distinctive feature of a parent is being caring, attentive, fully welcoming towards his, her children. Hence I use the *parent* metaphor: the ethical approach proposed by Buddhism is that of who is taking care.

The second point is the one I define as *awareness of impermanence*. It's not about happily thinking of our own death or those of our loved ones. Considering the reality of impermanence is different from nihilism. Rather, it means developing the tranquil consciousness that we, people around us, objects, everything have a limited lifespan and sooner or later will disappear. It is not, then, some sort of pessimism or masochism, but it is rather opening our eyes to a life reality which poses ourselves in a correct position with respect to time, and thus the values we refer to while living.

The third element, the one which characterizes the zen school the most, is the practice called *zazen*² in Japan. Simplifying at top, we can say that *zazen* consists in sitting still, silently, in front of a wall. This is all we need to know; however, since it is normal to feel uneasy with an unusual and mostly unknown practice, we will dedicate some time to this topic.

If we go back to the iconographic account of Siddharta Gautama's biography of his first 36 years, we see that in the act of becoming the Awakened One, i.e. Buddha, he was sitting, silent, still, under a tree. That sitting is then the human form of awakening, as long as it is *that* sitting, in the same way Buddha did. That us with a straight back, crossed legs, hands on the heel, a relaxed gaze and a spontaneous, quiet breathing.

The qualifying aspect is that even though this is nothing but sitting, it is natural that, as soon as we have put ourselves comfortably onto the cushion, straightened our back and crossed our legs, a thought will likely arise in our head. Since we are not sitting to think of our own business, we wake up to our present, we straighten our back again and... almost immediately we are following another thought.

As soon as we realize it, we have to exit our daydreaming... and on and on we have to keep doing it: without giving in to the temptation of elaborating on our thoughts, or escaping into the dream of the moment. The scope, however, is not to shush our thoughts: the important thing is to stay awake, and keep being awake every time we get lost in dreams. To avoid dreaming it is necessary to wake up and let dreams go, hence we talk about letting thoughts go without following them. This is *zazen*.

The fourth and last element is the backing of faith. A faith different from the usual meaning we give to this term. To describe it we can say that *faith* in Buddhism has the opposite meaning of what, in Christian culture, is called *idolatry*. With a little gloss: every object of faith is to be called an idol. Therefore *faith* in a Buddhist context does not mean to believe "to" neither to believe "in", but just to believe. Buddhist faith is the simple expression of a faithful heart.

² Untranslated term used in Western vocabulary, literally "zen sitting". Each Buddhism has its own vocabulary albeit there are some differences; see e.g. *samatha-vipassanā* (literally "to inhabit deep vision-peace") for *Theravāda* and *dzogchen* (literally "great perfection") for *Vajrayāna*, commonly called "Tibetan Buddhism".

There are those who defined this attitude as “ontological optimism”, and its purpose is to back us into dealing with the thousands of difficulties we find along our religious path. A faithful heart is not discouraged, it renews itself and looks forward. But faith according to Buddhism is not certainty nor is it a “demonstration of things which are not seen”, as we find in the Pauline *Epistle to the Hebrews* (11,1). It is a feeling, just a step over hope, it is crossed by doubt and nourished by experience. This is why faith and experience have to come along together, because one sustains the other.

According to Buddhism, the reality of faith has a completely personal economy, it does not rely on anything outside us, and neither is it transmitted to others as if it were a belief, being indeed not a belief. We can find the verbal form which tradition gave to this surge of spirit in the most ancient sutras: “Do not even believe my words, seek shelter in nothing but yourselves.”³ It is a pure way to consider faith, it overcomes the need for an object or for content, remaining a positive act of spirit. However, since every lecture about what has no content runs the risk of artificially creating content. It is better –for now- to stop here.

If we observe the four elements I created, we see that they all have a point in common: they base themselves on not-grasping, or from another point of view, on gratuity. It is gratuitous indeed, the ethical approach we defined parental. If it weren't gratuitous it would not be that kind of care. If it had a concealed profit, a price to earn, we could not define it in that way: a parent who nurtures a child for profit is an egotist. It means to act for good without aiming for a turnover, even when that good blatantly goes against us.

Such a behavior has to be backed by gratuity, but also by the non-negation of the existence of suffering on the other, or it would be nonsense. Experience allows to affirm that even sufferance is an illusory state: impermanence gives no allowance⁴, but when the illusoriness of pain is not realized⁵, pain is true. The intervention between people and things, even though *pro bono*, is involvement in the struggle of the world, it puts ourselves on the line between the waves of good and evil, it means temporarily grasping and thus, somehow, will make us suffer. Hence, from a subjective (relative) point of view, it is a mistake. It is however a necessary mistake, forced towards a reality demanding us to be human among humans: it is taking care of life, all life, notwithstanding our own will. It is the price a man pays to be fully human.

The same trait of gratuity, then, is found in the conscience of impermanence, that is the conscience or radical transience and temporary nature of our world and life: if it is lived with clearness, this conscience brings us to not grasp, not rely on people or things since everything is unstable and mortal: possession is not a good on which it would be

³ See e.g.: «Be an island for yourselves, seek shelter in yourselves and not in anything else», cf. *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta (The Great Discourse of [entering] definitive nirvana)*, sect. II, v. 33. Or: «our own self is in truth our own shelter», cf. *Dhammapada (Words of dhamma)*, 12.4 (160).

⁴ Although what we can call “impermanence” does not exist, we find that: «The non-existence of what exists is the result of impermanence », cf. *The Lankavatara Sutra. Translation and Commentary*, R. Pine, Counterpoint, Berkeley CA 2012, p. 228. See also: «What appears is neither permanent nor impermanent. Why? Because external existence cannot be determined», *ibid.*, p. 231

⁵ To realize the illusoriness of pain, of unhappiness, is not a reflection, a reasoning, it is a spiritual activity, possible when our life's rhythm is timed with zazen practice.

convenient to invest, since it is destined to failure. The sense of not owning, of not hoarding, is one of the faces of gratuity.

Let's have a look at "quietly sitting", or zazen, as it is named. That is a moment of complete letting go:

- the hands are not touching anything, hence we renounce touching
- we choose a silent place, hence we renounce hearing
- we light an incense to have an unvarying scent, hence we renounce smelling
- the tongue leans against the palate, hence we renounce tasting
- there is a wall in front of us, hence we renounce having any view
- legs are crossed, hence we renounce to mobility
- during zazen there is silence, hence we renounce words.

The most sensitive point is that during zazen we renounce enacting any thought and feeling; staying awake, and going back to staying awake as it implies abandoning dreams. Even the tiniest part of our being, ceasing to grasp, accepting surrender, in a gratuitous way since it is not reaching any goal. It is the way out of being human.

Lastly, the practice of the empty faith: without any profit, the backing of faith shows its gratuity in the complete absence of an object or a thinkable content. It allows me to be what I am and follow my path, nothing more, without even offering me the consolation of a... Consoler.

In front of such a minute, selfless program, which in the case of "taking care" is even disadvantageous, it is easy to think: if I do not profit from any of these conditions, the ethical one, the cognitive one, zazen, for what is it worth? Why should I commit to this path? Right here, to make the following step, the backing of faith –firmness of a faithful soul- plays its role.

Indeed, the answer to why dedicating time to things that do not earn recognition is entrenched in the root motivation, the instance which brought to life this religious path: the problem Buddhist religiosity offers solution to is not a material one, is not a matter of hoarding –neither physical nor spiritual- neither is it a matter of achieving a social condition or of acquiring a group identity.

The development of the Buddhist path stems from the problems of unhappiness, existential suffering, synthesized in the six classical examples⁶:

- The suffering of seeing our own energy, vital potentialities drain in old age
- Terror and pain growing from the refusal to acknowledge our and others' deaths
- The anguish of sickness
- The pain of loss
- The pain of non achieving
- The pain of having to coexist with people or situations that make us suffer

This, and nothing else, is the field of action of Buddhism and thus, if we question it, we test it, these are the promises we have to require it to keep.

And a small, but big surprise is added, unexpected at first when we approach religious practice, or it would not be a surprise: the dissolving of existential suffering is

⁶ Cf. *Dhammacakkapavattanasutta (The Discourse on The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma)*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 56.11.

not the achievement of nothing, or a simple emptying which brings us to a life without anguish, but lacking of vitality.

Realization through the Buddhist teaching leads towards a form of fulfillment which is natural, not generated and conditioned by the conquering and hoarding of earthly things. For this reason, at the beginning I talked about “direct experience of the divine”: not to involve a theistic aspect –since in Buddhism we never talk about God- but to convey the fruition of a good external from any mundane aspect, not tied to any profit or achievement.

A good that is generated by tying our own heart to the increate, to use the traditional term. By talking about it, however, a problem arises: what I just defined as fulfillment easily becomes an aspiration, a prey to hunt, annihilating its chance to be since that fulfillment manifests itself right into not desiring, not grasping.