

TO FEEL WITH THE HEART OF ANOTHER: NOTES ON ADLER AND ZEN BUDDHISM

Published in the Adlerian Year Book 2005

Manu Bazzano

Dr. Pavlov in the Meditation Hall

In these exciting times of cultural cross-fertilisation, several inspiring attempts are being made in the realm of human development, particularly in the comparative work that brings together Eastern contemplative traditions and Western psychotherapy. Not all attempts are successful, but most seem to share a genuine aspiration to inform each discipline with the new life injected by a “foreign” perspective. The last few years have witnessed, among others, the creative blends of cognitive behavioural therapy and *vipassana* (or insight) meditation through the Mindfulness Programme; existential psychology and Zen practice; and Jungian ideas of *personifying* paired with the study of basic Buddhist psychology. The whole phenomenon caught like wild fire in the United States, and is now slowly spreading in Europe too.

Many of these experiments, however, occur solely within the context of the “self”, often confined within its imaginary walls. They succeed at times in adding a dignified, “Buddhist” coloration to the thriving industry of self-help, adding *gravitas* to its often childish and narcissistic claims. Elsewhere, Eastern contemplative practices are arbitrarily brought in and utilised within antediluvian, Darwinian structures and institutions, in the brave and hopeless attempt to convince good old Dr. Pavlov to wear saffron robes and sit cross-legged in an incense-drenched meditation hall ...

From Renunciation to Active Social Involvement: Rewriting the Buddhist Vows

The missing element in most of these experiments is that key Adlerian ingredient: *community*, a constituent that is also at the core of the teachings of the Mahayana School of Buddhism, to which Zen belongs.

Adler and Zen? No two approaches seem at first more irreconcilable than these too, but I shall attempt to point precisely in the opposite direction: one of mutual enrichment and resourceful dialogue, in the hope of contributing a new angle to the ongoing cultural experimentation of uniting East and West.

Taizan Maezumi Roshi (1931-1995), a seminal figure in the transmission of Zen Buddhism to the West, often talked of the importance of “taking refuge in the three Treasures” (2001). The three Treasures are the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* (the teachings), and the *Sangha* (the community of practitioners as well as the wide community of human beings). Early Indian Buddhism was a vivid manifestation of the first Treasure, the *Buddha*: not only through the life of the historical Buddha

Shakyamuni, but also through tremendous emphasis placed, during this phase, on great effort towards personal liberation and enlightenment. This is the otherworldly aspect of renunciation that we commonly identify with Buddhism to this day.

Like any living organism, Buddhism changed and evolved, creatively taking on the cultural influences of the places to which it travelled. By the time it reached China, and subsequently Japan, the second treasure, the *Dharma*, became predominant: less the domain of itinerant monks, spiritual practice became anchored within strong residential communities uniting monastics and lay people; an intense, demanding, and highly formalised practice developed.

The spiritual legacy of Chinese culture is essentially Zen or Ch'an Buddhism. The secondary spiritual legacy of China is in the aesthetics - the poetry and painting (Confucius, Lao-Tzu, and Chuang-Tzu are included in that; also Mencius, whose work will be appreciated more in time for its great human sanity, although it is deliberately modest in its spiritual claims). Ch'an Buddhism added to Indian Buddhism the requirement that everybody work: "a day without work, a day without food... .."

There are other things within the Ch'an administrative structures, within the monasteries, which are quite amazingly democratic when it comes to certain kind of choices. All of the monks - whether novices or elders - have an equal vote. That is a Chinese quality in that spiritual legacy. Another development that is Chinese, as far as I can tell, is group meditation. In India and Tibet, meditation is practised primarily in a solitary form. The Chinese and Japanese made group sitting a major part of their practice. There is a communalisation of practice in China, a de-emphasis of individual, goofy, yogic wandering around. For the Chinese monk, there is a phase of wandering, but it's after many years of practice/labour (Snyder, 1980).

When Zen Buddhism began to spread silently in the Western hemisphere, it was the third treasure, *Sangha*, or community, which became the crucial element. If early Indian Buddhism was steeped in the Hinayana Tradition, where the main characteristic is achieving individual liberation from the wheel of birth and death, the Mahayana tradition, to which Zen belongs, emphasises the *collective dimension*. A *bodhisattva*, an inspirational model for the Zen practitioner, works solely for the benefit of all beings. She is the Adlerian *genius*: a person, that is, whose chief characteristic is to be *supremely useful*. She vows *not* to enter nirvana until the last being on earth has achieved freedom from suffering. A bodhisattva is prepared to work endlessly for the welfare of others, whether she finds herself in heavenly or hellish realms. This is not the same as being a backslapping extrovert, nor necessarily implies an occupation as a social worker. There may be times when temporary exile from society is essential: reflection and contemplation are essential to spiritual practitioners, to artists and writers, and ordinary people like myself. However, Zen practice is essentially a *collective* endeavour. "The Buddha Way" is "realised together".

The Indra's Net of Interdependence, or the Illusion of Ichgebundenheit

There is a great deal of talking - in New Age and pop psychology circles -, of finding one's "true self". Here is what Dogen (as cited in Taizan Maezumi, 2001), a 13th century Zen Master, had to say about the elusive notion of the self:

“.....

When, in Zen meditation, we look deeply at the nature of the self, we do not find its *intrinsic* existence. What we call *I* exists solely in relation to other components and to others. What we do find is a profound inter-connectedness between all living beings, what in Buddhism is known as *Indra's net*.

Unless rooted in social interest, even a spiritual path can become entangled in what Adler called "self-boundedness" (*Ichgebundenheit*). Self-development is not only a contradiction in terms: it is also counter-productive.

“The self-bound individual forgets that his self would be safeguarded better and automatically the more he prepares for the welfare of mankind, and that in this respect no limits are set for him” (Adler, cited in Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 112).

Self-improvement carries meaning if the self is to contribute in some way to society, for there is no development *in vacuo*.

“If an individual, in the meaning he gives to life, wishes to make a contribution, and if his emotions are all directed to this goal, he will naturally be bound to bring himself into the best shape. He will begin to equip himself to solve the three problems of life (behaviour toward others, occupation, and love), and to develop his abilities. If we are working to ease and enrich our partner's life, we shall make of ourselves the best that we can. If we think that we must develop personally *in vacuo*, without a goal of contribution, we shall merely make ourselves domineering and unpleasant” (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p.113).

Solitary enlightenment is just another form of delusion (albeit a *spiritual* delusion), and it is not in tune with sound Buddhist practice. Even the person working in solitude dedicates the fruit of his labours to the wider humanity *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity (Adler, 1964, p.295). When the historical Buddha achieved enlightenment, he declared: "I and all beings are enlightened". He did not say, "I alone have become enlightened"; he did not become all of a sudden some special, divine being, but realised his inter-connectedness with others.

Active Adaptation and Effortless Effort

The fictionally teleological notion of enlightenment assists, in true Adlerian fashion, the practitioner in focusing his energies; he strives hard in what Zen calls

“effortless effort”, and even this striving, no matter how sharply individualised, is, in Adler’s words, “ultimate adaptation” (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher, 1956-1964 pp. 106-107). In other words, freedom requires tremendous discipline; acting “spontaneously” is no other than to behave in accordance with the dictates of the “outer world”, or “active adaptation”.

“We must connect our thought with a continuous active adaptation to the demands of the outer world if we are to understand the direction and movement of life” (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 106).

Such adaptation, however, is not a form of manipulative passivity, but on the contrary an active capacity for flexibility, for gently curbing the ego’s unreasonable demands.

“An adaptation to immediate reality would be nothing other than an exploitation of the accomplishments of the striving of others, as the picture of the world of the pampered child demands ” (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 107).

In the same way, non-doing (*wu-wei*), the core of Zen and Daoist activity, is far from mere indolence, but constitutes instead meaningful, vibrant action; the only difference is that as the ego is no longer the main actor, such activity naturally serves the higher good and wider communal interests.

To Be At Home on this Earth

The sceptic will argue that hidden behind such noble altruism is a desire for self-preservation, a Darwinian concept that Adler refutes for it stems from the decadent, anomalous look of an ailing organism, and not from the more balanced drive towards co-operative activity.

Such stress on social interest or community feeling never reaches, however, metaphysical validation; we are to consider communal life *as if* it were the absolute truth. It is also “more than a feeling”, for it represents “an evaluative attitude towards life”, much more than an “acquired way of life”. For the Zen student, as for the Adlerian practitioner, it is paramount

“to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another”. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 135).

This *ability to identify*, Adler teaches us, *must be learned*. He found it in writers as disparate as Herder (cite), Novalis (cite) and Jean Paul (cite).

"One must sense that not only the comforts of life belong to one, but also the discomforts. One must feel at home on this earth with all its advantages and disadvantages.....

To hear, see, or speak 'correctly' means to lose one's self completely in another or in a situation, to become identified with him or with it. The capacity for identification, which alone makes us capable of friendship, love of mankind, sympathy, occupation, and love, is the basis of social interest" (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 136).

Mother & Child: Towards a Feminine Economy

Interconnectedness - the opposite of self-boundedness - is also emphasized in the mother-child relation, reduced by Freud to dark impulses and duly restored by Adler to its aspect of mutual love.

Mother and child do not relate as self/other. They do not experience competing interests of quantifiable exchange of commodities. According to Helene Cixous (The Newly Born Woman, 1975, pp. 84-88) mothers naturally experience what she calls the "not me within me". In Vajrayana Buddhism, the mother/child model is used in meditation to overcome the separation of self and other. Every sentient being is visualised as having been our mother in a previous life. Whether we appreciate this teaching literally, its efficacy in meditation practice is amply verified.

Whereas a late 19th century's sensibility would appreciate this way of understanding, relating and exchanging as *noble*, aristocratic, opposed to a reactive, acquisitional, ultimately *inferior* mode, contemporary thinkers such as Cixous use the term *feminine* for the former (based on gift, giving, non-separation, exuberance), opposed to a *masculine*, conquering mode (based on unchallenged Aristotelian assumptions and bound by fear).

Masculine-feminine polarities are also modes of interpretation in understanding possible forms of economy. A feminine economy would *contain*, and provide a creative implementation for masculine exuberance and strength. On the other hand, the same strength inflates, in a coarse and self-aggrandising masculinist economy, to the point of self-destruction. When rooted in more "feminine" practices, giving is performed without expectation of return, and the depropriation of oneself is done without self-interest. Feminine economy is based on the exchange of *gifts* and masculine economy on the exchange of *commodities*. Commodity exchange establishes objective quantitative relationships between the objects transacted, while gift exchange establishes personal qualitative relationships between the subjects transacting. (Gregory, 1982)

In our individualist cultures, we have all been misled towards self-boundedness and this, in turn, has been translated into dysfunctional societies. The task of education, according to Adler, is to be re-oriented towards the common welfare.

“Self-boundedness is an artefact thrust upon the child during his education and by the present state of our social structure. The creative power of the child is misled towards self-boundedness. Teachers, ministers, and physicians must be freed from their own self-boundedness and, together, with all those who want to work honestly for the common welfare, must prevent these seductions of the child” (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 138).

Education is a double-edged sword, for the true educator is herself transformed in a process of endless refinement that calls into question the way we conceive success and failure in our societies. Isolated, forced development in the hothouse of insulated and competitive careers is ultimately sterile. Its fruitful counterpart must then be *osmotic* development (no matter if ultimately “fictional”) and interaction with our fellow human beings, rooted in the experience of *interdependence* and *gratitude*.

“A man is called good when he relates himself to other humans in a generally useful way, bad when he acts contrary to social interest. When the educator and especially the psychotherapist frequently come to the erroneous conclusion that man is evil by nature, this is because it is more common for them to observe bad drives and destruction drives than to take note of man’s other side” (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 139).

Who is the Other?

In the Rinzai school of Zen, *koan* study is an essential part of a practitioner’s training. A *koan* (literally a “public case”) is often given to a student, and he or she must come up with a satisfying presentation in *dokusan*, the private interview with the teacher. They often depict events - or dialogues between teacher and student - from the history of Zen. They are all insoluble riddles, effective in exhausting the dualistic rational mind and in prompting more direct, existential responses from within the crucible of one’s experience. All *koans* relate to one’s own life, and some of these can be more vividly personalised and made to relate to one’s life directly. We often experience life as unfathomable, and a *koan* brings forth that element with unflinching directness.

Here is an example of a traditional *koan*:

A monk asked Tung Shan, “When cold and heat come, how can we avoid them?”

Shan said, “Why don’t you go to the place where there is no cold or heat?”

The monk said, “What is the place where there is no cold or heat?”
Tung Shan said, “When it’s cold, the cold kills you, when it’s hot, the heat kills you.”

(Case 43. The Blue Cliff Record) (as cited in Cleary, 2001, pp. ??)

What is your understanding of the above dialogue? Your answer will show something about you at this moment in time. I could share my personal understanding, but that will not do. I could say, for instance, that when it is hot, I allow myself to be drenched in sweat, and when it is cold, I will rattle my teeth. I could say that when it is hot, it is just hot: why the fuss? And when it is cold, it is freezing cold – big deal, and so on... In front of a teacher, I would have to *demonstrate* my understanding with the totality of the body/mind. It’s no good that I can make use of dialectics and eloquence: these will not help me a tiny bit “when the Lord of Death comes knocking at my door”.

And here is an example of what Dogen Zenji (as cited in Cleary, 1992) calls *genjo koan*, the riddle of everyday life:

Who is the *other*?

Indeed: who *is* the other? The answer will not arise from *thinking* as we know it, but perhaps from what Max Wertheimer called “productive thinking” (1982), a thinking that goes *beyond* intellectual operation:

Generally speaking, it is an artificial and narrow view which conceives of thinking as only an intellectual operation, and separates it entirely from questions of human attitude, feeling, and emotion – “because such topics belong to other chapters of psychology.”...But even seemingly mere intellectual processes involve a human attitude - that kind of willingness to face issues, to deal with them frankly, honestly, and sincerely” (Max Wertheimer, *Productive Thinking*, 1982. p. 179).

Who is the other? Are we looking for an answer? Or are we instead learning, in Rilke’s footsteps, to ask the right questions and to probe into them intensely, unwaveringly? Proper thinking naturally propels us out of self-boundedness, into the domain of service, whether through art, science, or psychotherapeutic work.

“The role of the merely subjective interests of the self is, I think, much overestimated in human action. Real thinkers forget themselves in thinking. The main vectors in genuine thought often do not refer to the *I* with its personal interests: rather they represent the structural requirements of the given situation” (ibid. p. 180)

The Fourth Eye

Not only the core practice of Zen (*zazen*, or sitting meditation), is oriented towards the other (how can I bring this same peace to fellow human beings?): recent forms of *socially engaged Buddhism* point towards what author Ken Jones (2003) calls *the opening of the fourth eye*.

Traditionally, *the opening of the third eye* refers to a spiritual awakening. But such an awakening cannot afford to be culture-blind and socially illiterate. Thus, *to open the fourth eye* is to be aware and knowledgeable of the social and cultural contexts of the *Dharma* - and particularly the ethical implications of those contexts. The opening of that fourth eye is the gift of modernity to the traditional spiritualities. (Jones, 2003).

Of that modernity, Adler is a key exemplar, albeit often an unacknowledged one, for Adlerian “common sense” is the ideal complement to the transcendental wisdom associated in Buddhism with the *Bodhisattva Manjushri*. And the fundamental triad of love, work and community provides the perfect match for meditation and introspection; in fact the very testing ground able to assess the soundness of any meditative practice. As a truly modern thinker, and in spite of his leaning towards positivism and idealism, Adler seems to share with Buddhist thought a spontaneous distrust towards metaphysics. From the *fictional nature of the goal*, notwithstanding the highly teleological nature of his therapeutic work, to the admitted influence of Vaihinger’s thought in shaping his own ideas, to the relative value he attributes to *meaning* (essentially self-created), we find in Adler all those crucial elements that later were to crystallise in the shape of modern perspectivism; *minus* - and this is a crucial point - the cynical, anything-goes extremism of later philosophical developments. Adler’s innate moderation is due to his genuine concern for the health of the individual *within* the welfare of the wider community.

A similar concern colours Buddhist thought: some have accused the philosophers and sages of the *Madhyamika* School, which was later to influence Zen, as being nihilists and perspectivists, of not offering an ontological basis to their claims. What these critics fail to see is the tremendous commitment in every serious Buddhist practitioner to act for the benefit of all sentient beings; a motivation that constitutes the anchor in the great sea of uncertainty, in the ocean of life-and-death. The first of the four *Bodhisattva* vows states:

“Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them”.

Salvation has many meanings, and not all of them imply transcendence. One of them, inherited by Spanish chivalrous literature, is the ability to inscribe one’s own experience in the wider context of humanity as a whole. Whatever the case, the aspiration is to be of help, to contribute, to offer one’s labour to all fellow human beings. Precisely what Alfred Adler has done through his life and work.

References:

- Adler, A. (1964) *Superiority and Social Interest*. H.L. Ansbacher & R.R. Ansbacher (Ed.). New York: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc..
- Ansbacher, H.L. & Ansbacher, R.R. (1956/1964). *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selection from his Writings*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Cixous, Helen *The Newly Born Woman* Manchester University Press 1975
- Cleary, T. (Trans.). (1998). *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues*. Boston, MA: Shambala Publications.
- Cleary, T. (Trans.). (1992). *Rational Zen: The Mind of Dogen Zenji*. Boston, MA: Shambala Publications.
- Gregory C. A. *Gifts and Commodities* London Academic Press 1982
- Jones, K. (2003). *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Snyder, G. (1980). *The Real Work. Interviews and Talks 1964-1979*. New York: W.W. Norton & co.
- Maezumi T. (2001). *Appreciate your Life: The Essence of Zen Practice*. Boston, MA: Shambala Publications.
- Wertheimer, M. (1982). *Productive Thinking*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.