

TON LATHOUWERS

More Than
Anyone Can Do

Zen Talks

*Translated by
Mical Goldfarb Sikkema*

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For Vrouwke, my *ibu angkat* and my “thou,” who, her whole life long, has shown me the way of wonder and faith, and for both my children: Wladimir and Ludmila.

As though such a stone wall really were a consolation,
and really did contain some word of conciliation...
Oh, absurdities of absurdities! How much better it is
to understand it all, to be conscious of it all, all the
impossibilities and the stone walls, not to resign yourself
to a single one of those impossibilities and stone walls...

F. M. DOSTOYEVSKY, *Notes from Underground*

Don't be astonished that gateless gates are so difficult and
that they call forth an intense rage within Zen monks!

Wu-men kuan (Mumonkan), concluding chapter

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Introduction to the English Edition

MICAL SIKKEMA

The Dutch Zen master Ton Lathouwers (Nijmegen 1932) is in a very real way as much an iconoclast as a traditionalist. The transmission he received in 1987 from the Chinese Linji Ch'an master Teh Cheng* is most important for him as an acknowledgment that he is situated within an official tradition. And in his personal embodiment of Zen Buddhism, as well as his manner of teaching, Lathouwers fulfills the traditional role of the Zen master or, as he prefers, Zen teacher. This includes introducing people to Buddhism and guiding them in *zazen* (sitting meditation), *koan* practice (a koan is a story, question, problem or statement inaccessible to rational understanding) and the recitation of *sutras* (Buddhist scriptures) and other traditional texts.

But the wellspring of Ton Lathouwers' practice and teaching goes deeper and reaches wider than Zen's traditionally circumscribed boundaries. His is a wholehearted commitment to illuminate the power of Zen practice as a way to deepen and expand the experience of faith and compassion within our modern everyday lives — even in the face of that which is unspeakably painful or terrifying. For Lathouwers, Zen makes explicit the ever-present possibility of a turnaround in one's life. In Sanskrit this complete turnaround is called *ashraya paravritti*,

* Teh Cheng was coordinator and head of the Sangha Agung Indonesia and highest authority of the Kong Hoa Sie denomination of Linji Ch'an Buddhism in Fujian, China. Teh Cheng was also known as Jinarakkhita Ashin.

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literally translated as the revolution of the fundamentals or the overturning of the very bases of consciousness. It makes possible even the impossibility of finding a way through an impenetrable wall, or of finding a place to stand where there is no place to stand. In other words, even the damned can be saved.

This commitment has its origins primarily in Lathouwers' own personal history, which includes childhood roots in Catholicism and the study, knowledge and teaching of Russian prose, poetry and religious themes in contemporary literature at the University of Leuven in Belgium. Further, it is grounded in his deep conviction — based on his own as well as others' direct personal experience — that literature and the telling and sharing of stories have a real, concrete influence in peoples' lives. This conviction has made Ton Lathouwers into a collector of stories that authentically give voice to the potency of Zen within our own Western frame of reference. With these stories, Lathouwers offers us the possibility of finding an opening in the impassable walls we encounter. He offers us a living Zen, with a real capacity to help us to remain open to a heart-to-heart meeting with whomever and whatever we encounter in our lives.

It is this focus that has also ultimately brought Lathouwers to what might be called his mission: to bring Zen practitioners in the Western world into contact with the dynamic principles expressed in Zen Buddhism through a language that is more familiar to us. Drawing on an inexhaustibly wide range of texts and anecdotes — ranging from classical Zen literature to stories in the Russian Orthodox tradition, from Dostoyevsky to T.S. Eliot, and from Søren Kierkegaard to Elie Wiesel — Lathouwers seeks to provide more than just a finger pointing at the moon. He wants to make explicit, in all possible ways, the implicit interconnectedness of all things. Deepening our awareness of this interconnectedness — that we ourselves form, along with all living things, the pulsing, boundless web of Indra that is life — allows us to live in a different way. It encourages us to recognize that in seeking to live the life of a Bodhi-

sattva, we must realize that it is the meeting from heart to heart that is most essential, in practical and concrete terms.

What stands central here is the gentle yet fierce reminder to carry one's practice of Zen beyond the *zendo* (meditation hall), beyond the meditation bench, into the streets and one's day-to-day interactions with everyone, everywhere in the world. The vows of the Bodhisattva are a living guide to how we are meant to make contact with each and everyone we meet. And the meeting from heart to heart is the means given to us to live out these vows in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary circumstances that we encounter, moment to moment, in every meeting, with every action we take.

Ton Lathouwers' mission, therefore, has nothing to do with an academic exercise in comparative religion. As a Zen teacher, he has taken on the fight against the pretensions of systematization and the arrogance of the "petrified" word: the fight against the idea that you can come to a convenient insight by way of a certain approach, philosophy, vision or instruction. While Lathouwers recognizes that one cannot escape using language in learning and teaching about ideas and the practices that flow out of them, he is first and foremost a man of the heart. He speaks of his earlier conversations with Masao Abe, Nanrei Kobori and Teh Cheng as "life-saving" for him, and carries on in much the same way — since his own authorization — in each meeting with another person. Whether it is in *dokusan* (private interview between Zen student and Zen master) or in simple conversation, Lathouwers insists that "a meeting from heart to heart is what is most important, for then you must drop your guard. And above all else, follow no method or protocol."

This "reputation of the heart," the driving force of Ton Lathouwers' message, is what led a group of people in Leuven, Belgium, to ask Ton to become their Zen teacher in 1985. This group eventually grew into the Maha Karuna Sangha, a liberal Ch'an community with approximately twenty groups in Belgium and The Netherlands, of which he is still the mentor.

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Ton Lathouwers also emphasizes some qualities of Zen present within this primarily Judeo-Christian culture. In this way, the more traditional Eastern aspects and the modern Western aspects of Zen come together to form the context for Lathouwers' teachings, with their points of connection and resonance illuminated. In the 1950s and early 1960s he found in the atheistic Russian literature another authentic expression of that which is deeply and fundamentally human, arising out of the existential desperation of people who have given up everything. He began reading Buddhist literature in 1968, the same year he was appointed professor. In 1971, at the nadir in his life, Lathouwers traveled without plans or expectations to Japan. This was a journey that he felt driven to make, even though he had little faith that things would ever turn out right.

In Japan, one of the first people he encountered was the philosopher and Zen scholar Masao Abe, and their conversation lasted three to four hours. The core of Abe's message to him was: "You are accepted just as you are right here, right now. What you feel in yourself, undeniable, irresistible, do it, be it. Even if the whole world is against you." These words later became one of the threads running through his own teaching.

In the Daitoku-ji monastery in Kyoto, Lathouwers continued his training with Zen master Nanrei Kobori. And then in 1975, while in Indonesia, he met and became the student of Ch'an master Teh Cheng. In the Chinese Ch'an Buddhism of Teh Cheng, with its particular emphasis on the Avatamsaka Sutra, stressing our task to save all beings without exception, and on the boundless compassion of Kuan Yin, he discovered what he had been searching for. The works of Masao Abe's Zen teacher, Shin'ichi Hisamatsu,* have been another important

* Hisamatsu (1889–1980) was the founder of the FAS Society, a lay (Zen) movement in Japan dedicated to breaking through the social and class divisions as well as the organizations of institutionalized Japan. The essence of its aim is an awakened way of life, everywhere, always and for everyone. The name is an acronym of the words Formless self, All humankind and Supra-historical.

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source for Lathouwers as well. In Hisamatsu's so-called 'fundamental koan' — When nothing works, what are you going to do? — Lathouwers recognized an articulation of the essence of the Zen practice.

Ton Lathouwers has found confirmation in Zen for the essential truths that he earlier intuitively recognized in the works of Russian writers such as Dostoyevsky and Shestov. One truth is that, in the end, there is nowhere to fall back on other than your own heart. For the truth that fear pulls us back, however, to fixed forms, which are familiar but also dead and have no solutions to offer us. And there is the truth that the spoken or written word often hardens into just such a deadened form. Lathouwers has also come to know that the logically impossible — the miracle — is truly possible, that the innocence, directly experienced in childhood, can return undamaged, and that compassion is all-embracing and universal. Yet we must never lose sight of the fact that, in the end and for the sake of everything, all certainty, concepts and methods — even these here — deserve to be smashed to pieces. For they can never replace the knowing of your own heart.

The ten teishos (Dharma talks) in this volume offer the reader a unique gateway into Zen. Together they provide an opportunity, each with its own stories and examples from all over the world, to enter into a moving encounter with the all-encompassing message of faith, compassion and redemption for all living beings that forms the heart of Ton Lathouwers' teachings.

Foreword

TON LATHOUWERS

The way of Zen is said to be a way beyond words. Zen should, more consistently than other religious paths, refer directly to the heart of things, or to one's own heart, which is the same thing. Words and ideas quickly take on an independent dynamic. They become a compelling framework for our ordinary, everyday experiences. It is all the more important for those moments in which our heart touches upon the mystery of existence.

Every Zen talk is, therefore, always a confrontation with a paradoxical task: attempting to express that which will never allow itself to be expressed in words. Such a talk can, at best, be a finger pointing at the moon. The reader is explicitly warned to look further than the words that are spoken here. For this reason, it bears repeating that we should constantly be on our guard against the danger that the deeper, intangible substance will congeal into concepts and pseudo-certainties.

What counts for the spoken word — in this instance in the form of a number of extemporaneous Zen talks, held during a *sesshin*, a ten-day meditation intensive in a Belgian monastery — applies all the more to the written account of it in a book.

While the spoken word always has something fleeting about it, the written word all too quickly suggests a certainty. This implied certainty is however — and I cannot emphasize this enough — in direct conflict with the hesitation and doubt that must accompany the articulation of our deepest experiences. That hesitation becomes only greater for me now that I see my own words here, in a printed and published form.

Every authentic spiritual way is a journey to the inexpressible heart of existence. Such a journey is founded upon inner perception, upon inner experience. This inner experience can

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never be realized through any intellectual argument or logical deduction. Nor through what can be read in this book either. Arguments and inferences can never precede someone's experience. And they can absolutely not be seen as a method or step in that direction. They are, at best, a careful attempt towards a vague reference afterwards. They are, at worst, an effort to manipulate experience that is doomed to failure. The reader must keep this warning in mind when opening this book.

In the Zen tradition coincidentally, there are highly esteemed teachers who have never spoken a word, but have limited communication to a gesture and a cry, which was sometimes enough to instantly wrest students out of their habitual ways of thinking and their emotional treadmills. It is less coincidental that the East — but also the Jewish mystical tradition of the Chasidim — has a form of communication (*darshan*) which does not involve the spoken word, but rather presence, a meeting from heart to heart: the inspiration from a teacher and from each other that has nothing to do with words.

The deep realization that ultimately every word is inadequate to express the most extraordinary things must not stop us from trying once again. "For us, there is only the trying, the rest is not our business" (T.S. Eliot).

Finally, my words of thanks. In the first place, I wish to name Riet or "vrouwke," my foster mother. She is my "nearest" and "the answer to my prayers": my prayers to become freed from my inner isolation and to be permitted to meet another, a "thou," heart to heart. It was especially in the last year of our being together in this worldly life that I was graced so very intensely with that experience.

But she was also in many respects my first guide on the path which later brought me to Zen. Through her, starting in high school, I began to understand that there was another possible attitude towards life than the one in which I was imprisoned. Her remarks offered a first glimpse of possible liberation. These were remarks such as: "let it go," "it is not yet the time," "don't force it," and especially the endlessly repeated "have patience."

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I sensed in those remarks something like a childlike, primeval trust in life.

She was the one who, leading by her example, taught me to be amazed by ordinary things. And I learned, particularly from her, what the joy of life is, and what it means to be accepted.

Through this she also taught me to accept myself, my existence, my past, my amazement, and my failures.

And she always — and that especially means so much now — made me a partner in her deep and unshakeable belief that love and life extend beyond death. Her death on December 3rd, 1999, shortly after I had read the text of this foreword aloud to her, was for me not a parting, but rather a transition, a liberation, and an entering into the Great Light.

Furthermore, I give very special thanks to my teachers on the Zen path, Nanrei Kobori rōshi from the Daitoku-ji monastery in Kyoto, Professor Masao Abe, the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn and especially the Chinese Ch'an master Teh Ching who, during a time when I was nothing but a despairing question mark, invariably answered me with so much wisdom, silence and dedication. The depth of gratitude that we owe to our predecessors and pioneers can only be repaid by following in their footsteps and continuing their work for the liberation of all living beings. They lived as an example, to show us all that this vow is neither hollow rhetoric nor an overestimation of oneself stemming from childish fantasies of omnipotence, but the commitment and result of the faith of our heart. I can only express the hope that this will increasingly become the reality for us all.*

* For the reworking of the cassette-recorded Zen talks to a readable text, I owe great thanks to both editors of the Dutch edition, Geert Mortier and Dick Verstegen. It is to their remarkable credit that, in their translation of the spoken word to written text, they have known how to preserve both the passion as well as the silence that guided what was said. Truly no minor accomplishment. If I would have had to do the transcribing to a written text myself, I am afraid that this book would never have come into being.



TON LATHOUWERS *Switzerland, July 2013*



Zen Talks

1

The original face
is infinite
faith and trust

信心

FAITH

ANYONE GOING ON A RELIGIOUS JOURNEY — AND THE way of Zen is first and foremost a religious one — unavoidably comes into contact with texts. Written fragments of intensely personal, sometimes also painful, experiences. Despairing articulations of what someone sensed very deeply — almost inescapably — at a certain moment in his or her life. Often it is not so much a question of simply wanting to say something, but more of having to find the words to communicate one's experience; a sort of sacred "must" such as Luther expressed in the words: "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."

And evidently, that individual outpouring must also express a deeply universal human intuition. For those "speeches" become known, become public property and take on a life of their own. They are sung or recited and ultimately become part of what constitutes a body of sacred writings that is nothing other than a petrified reproduction of the original cry from the heart. That is the difficulty with words, even the most beautiful and deeply meaningful ones; they immediately solidify into lifeless representations.

Life, the living breath of the living heart, of the living experience, flows out of them and is gone. What remains of the warm, living breath in the most favorable of circumstances is a splendid flower of frost upon the window. That frost-flower can be truly beautiful, but it also impedes the view to the free horizon outside. There is a great risk that what has been articulated no longer opens our perception to the reality hidden behind the words, but instead closes off that vista. What had been meant as testimony about something that is open and unfettered produces something shut down, locked up, and blocked. And what remains are words that are dead, which in turn are echoed in other words that are also dead. The risk increases that you will lose your way in a palace of mirrors that continues

infinitely, reflecting everything. But despite this considerable reservation, I will still talk, and we will still recite texts in the coming days.

In fact, this brings us to the fundamental question which concerned contemporary Zen master and philosopher Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, as he sat meditating. Out of that question he formed a fundamental *koan*, or "Zen riddle" (one that is not to be solved with logic): "Precisely here and now, when nothing works, what are you going to do?" Talking does not work for it immediately creates mental representations that take on a life of their own. Remaining silent doesn't work for the same reason. Sitting *zazen* doesn't help. *Koan* training doesn't help. Aspiring to a highly principled, moral life doesn't help. Studying doesn't help. Nothing works. Maybe you recognize this experience yourself. It is also my own experience in every respect, and the story of my life.

And yet there is the other side: there can be unlimited trust, life itself is limitless faith, boundless openness. The truth is also that this limitless faith is already a basic intuition of living. Hisamatsu's "Nothing works" does not eliminate this boundless faith, instead it implies it and is even, in essence, the experiential basis of it. This points to a paradoxical insight that is certainly not limited to Zen alone. And it does not belong, totally and exclusively, to the world of thinking. It is primarily a living experience. An experience that is unconditional, and can take place anywhere and anytime. The possibility of being touched in one's heart is certainly not reserved for those who practise Zen. Let us make that clear from the start.

Recently, I re-read *An Interrupted Life* by Etty Hillesum, a profound Jewish woman who was gassed in Auschwitz in 1944. In the journals and correspondence she left behind, she writes things that can touch you intensely. The tragic circumstances of her people and her time slowly break through the walls of her protected life and, in the end, leave nothing whole. Suddenly, without preparation, she stands in the midst of that terrible tragedy, embodying it herself, and arrives precisely at

the place Hisamatsu speaks of with his: “When nothing works, what are you going to do?” Yet at the same time, in the midst of that tragedy, Hillesum expresses a deep cheerfulness and an unconditional faith that is unwarranted by circumstances. From out of this paradox, she acts, speaks, and entrusts things to paper, because she doesn’t know what else to do with them. And we are left wondering what made it possible for her to reach such depths, and under those circumstances. Had she done fifteen years of Zen meditation or *koan* training? Had she followed an extremely strict moral code? Not at all.

In my life, I have met people with no specific Zen training who nevertheless touched me deeply with their profundity. Does this mean we should train less? No. On the contrary, we should do more, but “more” in the spirit of Luther’s “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.” This means for us: here I train. I have my discipline. I do it, but I have no guarantee that it will bring me to one of those visions that I imagine as I read all kinds of texts, such as Hakuin’s “Song of Meditation,” which is recited in scores of Zen monasteries worldwide.

I want to talk about the very first line from that “Song of Meditation,” which seems to come out of the blue: “All beings are Buddhas from the very beginning.” Exactly as they are. How can that be? That goes against everything you know, against the whole process as you had imagined it, consciously or unconsciously: first, very hard meditating — many lives even, if you follow an Indian cosmology — and then *it* happens. Hard studying results in a diploma, hard meditating results in enlightenment — *that* is what we are used to: the “reward” comes after hard work. But not for Hakuin, who delivers a warning with this resounding opening sentence: “All beings are Buddhas from the very beginning.”

Now try to make sense of that as an act of faith and belief. Take the story of Hakuin’s life into consideration. As an impressionable child, he was terrorized by the animated, vivid description of the Buddhist Hell told to him by an overzealous Buddhist priest. That image of a hellish ordeal became even

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more real, and that torment became imprinted in his young mind quite literally, when his mother place him in a scalding Japanese bath. It was the fear of failing, and of burning in Hell, which drove him finally to the path of Zen. And I definitely recognize that fear of complete failure. It may be very familiar to many people of my generation: that vague, underlying feeling that you have failed and are guilty, even without knowing what you have failed at, or what you are guilty of. And that sense of guilt only increases with everything you undertake — through your unremitting shortcomings, through all the rules you break, and through all the sins you commit.

My teacher, Han Fortmann, has repeatedly spoken about the disastrous influence of churches that burden people with an unbearable sense of guilt. He tries, time and again, to make it clear that in this way people are brought to feel failure and hopelessness, and so become damaged in the deepest way possible, down to their very souls. Perhaps something like this happened to Hakuin in his youth.

This does not necessarily have to do with your traumas in the past and during your upbringing. It concerns something so fundamental that it is beyond all psychology; something that cannot be neutralized by any good deed or any personal effort, no matter how desperately you try, no matter what way of salvation you follow. For there, inescapably, stands Hakuin's opening sentence: "All beings are Buddhas from the very beginning."

The boundless faith that radiates forth from this sentence, and also through Etty Hillesum's writing, was totally foreign to me during a long period of my life. Sometimes I think that absolutely nothing in my genetic makeup could have given rise to such an infinite faith. For although I had long been convinced that everyone could become enlightened or redeemed, at the same time I believed that there were people for whom this did not hold true. Moreover, I felt certain that I was one of those poor unfortunates. Yet, in the end, what I had suspected for

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half a lifetime proved not to be true — and that remains a miracle to me to this day.

It is remarkable how often in my life I have, seemingly accidentally, stumbled upon expressions of this limitless faith. This happened in my first meeting with a Zen teacher, a certain Professor Nara, whom I encountered after much rambling and seeking in the Japanese port city of Yokohama. Stammering, I told him that I had come from the West and that I was desperately seeking the answer to a question which had long held me in its grip — a question about being saved or being lost. He laughed and immediately said in his broken English: “All must be saved, all will be saved.” Sometime later, I encountered this phrase again in the words of the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Once more that same faith, seemingly based upon nothing, appeared so totally in contradiction to what I had experienced in my own life and had seen in the lives of so many others. This kept happening until I met Masao Abe in Kyoto.

I have often spoken about the tears of emotion that filled my eyes when, in response to my personal story of despair and confusion, Abe said to me: “You are accepted, just as you are, right here and now.” He did not quote any doctrinal article. Instead, his words were a simple, honest and extremely personal testimony arising out of the depths of that infinite faith. And that was the beginning of the Zen way for me.

Perhaps it would be better to leave this individual context and return to the classical texts. In the renowned *Lalitavistara Sutra* we find the story of the final night vigil of the Buddha. It is the story about the deepest despair and complete hopelessness. The Buddha sees before his mind’s eye a never-ending coming and going of forms: one intricate tangle of living beings who are born, make a lot of fuss, suffer and die, again and again disappearing into a hopeless obscurity. At that moment, there is no ray of salvation, no glimmer of rescue that

still seems possible to him. Then, suddenly, just a couple of hours later, that picture changes completely, and there is what we so inadequately call “the awakening.”

But we must be very careful here. We have the tendency to take that sequence in time — from the utmost darkness to the highest enlightenment — and quickly convert it into a causal relationship. As if after many lives of preparation, after years of asceticism and meditation — and now after the hours of despair — suddenly there is the reward: light, liberation, and awakening. We do the same, if we are not careful, with the life of Christ, seeing the turnaround and the brilliant, liberating surrender of “Into Your hands I commit my spirit” as the reward, the effect, of the desperate moments of Gethsemane and his “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?” We are so inclined to be distracted by making a cause-and-effect relationship out of it, and thus a system.

The Zen way — but not only the Zen way — entreats the student to follow the way of great doubt and then to break through that doubt. The temptation is great to think that this is what we must go through and then, as the prize, there is the awakening. But that isn’t how it works. In fact, it is a reversal of what the Buddha says. We always place things *after* and *opposite* each other: first the darkness and then the light, first the despair and then the liberation, as if after taking a step upwards. That isn’t it at all. Instead, it is precisely about what that first line of Hakuin’s song says and what the Buddha himself emphatically stresses at the moment of his awakening: “All living beings are now, with me, fully enlightened.” Even with the mess in my life? The junk? All that is damaged in me? My wounds? Everything that will never be healed in my life and in the lives of those countless others, from time immemorial and all the universes? Yes, absolutely! And it does not just begin with all that exists at this moment. For whatever was before, from the very beginning, is now also enlightened. All beings are Buddhas from the very beginning; all beings are now, together with me, fully enlightened.

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But how do you communicate this? How do you make it clear? The Buddha himself didn't know. Witness the weeks and months after his awakening that he remained silent before finally setting in motion "the wheel of the teachings", as it is called. Those months must have been a time of great hesitation and doubt. And then something happened to him, something that also happened to Christ when he was in the desert: he was tested. For the tempter also appears on the scene before the Buddha, in the form of Mara, a very intelligent seducer with knowledge of many things. Not the folkloristic devil with goat's hooves and the scent of sulfur, Mara is a well-spoken heir of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Yes, Mara is a clever fox, who speaks with the whispering voice of our own suspicion. The great spirit of temptation goes to work on the Buddha, in exactly in the same way he appealed to Christ in the desert. The most important passage of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* is devoted to the temptation of Christ. Nowhere else in the world literature is it revealed how deeply the wish for certainties, for "the solid ground" of "unshakable" truths under the feet, is embedded in human nature. A person will do absolutely anything to find an authority that provides those certainties. The great spirit of the desert tries to convince Christ of this, in the well-known three temptations, and to show him that precisely because of this, his message of limitless inner freedom will never be understood.

And it is the same with Mara, who sets about his temptation of the Buddha quite intelligently. In the Hindu pantheon, Mara was not originally known as a negative figure, but as a deity — the god of forms, of knowledge, of everything that one can grasp and tie up in a definition. But here, facing the Buddha, he manifests the shadow side of his being. Mara knows how to voice the words of the Buddha's own doubt and whispers them into his ear — and those words also contain their own kind of liberating message (see *Samyutta Nikaya* 4): Oh recluse, what did you actually think you were doing? You want to send a

message to people. Isn't that so? Go ahead, babble on a while yet. Keep trying; it won't work. For each word that you speak hardens instantly in their minds, falls dead immediately. It becomes imprisoned in the web of thinking, in the web of finite forms and pseudo-certainties. Go confidently along your way, but everything that you say or do will instantly harden into dead concepts. And then it is mine. Then, immediately, it belongs to my kingdom. There is no way out, recluse!

The Buddha himself must have realized the risk that all words imply. But calling on the earth and everything on it as his witness, he says without any shadow of a doubt (see *Majjhima Nikaya* 36): Where I am, Mara, you cannot come. You say that everything becomes caught in your web. But what I am speaking about here can never truly be captured in words. And finally the Buddha speaks the renowned words: "There is, monks, an unborn, a something not become, not made, un compounded, and if it were not so, monks, for this unborn, not become, not made, un compounded, no escape could be shown here for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded. But because there is, monks, an unborn, a something not become, not made, un compounded, therefore an escape can be shown for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded." (*Udana Nikaya*, 80-81) It is one of the few times that the Buddha allows himself to speak so clearly about that.

And yet, even what the Buddha puts into words here about that inexpressible experience can and will also be immediately caught in Mara's web. That is undeniably true. It is a real danger that everything that is made explicit becomes stuck, even all the words of the Buddha himself. And nevertheless he speaks, stating most emphatically that there is something else, something ineffable that precedes knowing and not-knowing, that is never to be captured in words, and that is much more fundamental than all the words and all that is known put together. He speaks from the depths of a bottomless not-knowing, a great obscurity, a dark, deep abyss, emptiness. There are so many negative terms to express it and, therefore, so many

traps. For just before you truly understand them, these words harden into pictures as well.

That brings us back again to Hisamatsu and his impossible question. That is actually what Mara whispers to the Buddha: “Nothing helps, everything you say or do is totally doomed to failure. Everything you would tell your students will petrify more quickly than the time it will take for you to express it.”

Yet you must do something. You must begin somewhere. The question is how? That was the explicit plea of a young American who despairingly asked Hisamatsu: “What can I do? I know no teacher, I live a far distance from everything; if I want to meditate with other people, I have to drive a couple of hundred kilometers.” Hisamatsu was already old then, with a long white beard, and I imagine looked at the questioner with cheerful eyes. Although Hisamatsu had always been a rather serious man, when he was older, he had a good sense of humor. He would certainly have laughed at the American’s question. But he also took it very seriously and answered: “Nevertheless, you have everything, don’t you? You have the impossible, essential question: ‘Whatever you do, it doesn’t work — what are you going to do?’ Always the same; that is an assignment for your whole life. What are you going to do? That is it. And that alone.”

Most probably, the questioner was taken aback. And then Hisamatsu adds something of essential importance. Just like Hakuin in his “Song of Meditation,” Hisamatsu now bears witness to a “very deep, unshakable faith in the Unborn and the Everlasting.” He repeats, literally, the positive testimony of the Buddha: the faith in that which is everlasting, where Mara cannot come, which forms and answers can never touch. He points to that through which everything transcends, that which the most fundamental precepts in Buddhism are truly talking about: precepts such as “perpetual change,” “transitoriness,” “impermanence.” What Hisamatsu expresses here unconditionally is that deep faith in the Unborn: that which you might also call “our original state,” also called “the origi-

nal face or the true self — or the true person without status,” as Lin Ji (Rinzai) named it.

And consider that this faith is not foremost the outcome of a lifelong training for Hisamatsu, or the outcome of many years of intensive work with a teacher and a collection of *koans* from many Buddhist books. His infinite faith in the Unborn is as much the beginning as the end, the alpha as the omega. It is the music that accompanies all the efforts, from a beginning without beginning to an end without end. This testimony of faith and hope is so much stronger because people such as Hakuin, Hisamatsu and Masao Abe all had to manage, to endure, for so long without experiencing this faith.

Can this really exist, this pure faith based upon nothing, just like that of a child who doesn't know any better? “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” it says in the Gospel. Perhaps this comes very close to what it is all about: infinite faith of which you do not have to be conscious and that asks for no proof. It is a faith that gradually gets buried, as many negative experiences deposit their sediment. So much uncertainty and fear have made timid adults of us. We eat of the tree of knowledge, and the fruit tastes bitter. And yet we continue to eat, we continue to seek more of a grip, we long for everything that gives us solid ground under our feet in that continuous stream of events, changes, and sorrow that is life. And every so often we find a temporary foothold on a narrow ledge, for now perhaps. But it remains precarious, because another landslide is already on the way, to knock that certainty out from under us once again.

The discipline of *zazen* works directly in opposition to that. It is a discipline that helps us break that mechanical habit of seeking something to hold onto. We remain in the not-knowing. And we know least of all what it is we are actually here to do. Maybe you can do absolutely nothing at all with those comforting words of the Buddha, of Hakuin, of Hisamatsu, with that affirmation of the certainty that everything is good, that

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our original face is always everlastingly present under all the wretchedness and brooding.

In the classic Zen literature there is a famous Chinese saying: Even if the universe passes away, your original face never perishes. Can you do something with that? I can only continue to say that it is so, letting it echo from the bottom of my heart. I repeat it, although with much hesitation and diffidence. For before you know it, this also hardens into a representation once again. And yet, this is the only thing that every religion tries to say, cutting across all the cultural silt and forms.

And not just religion. I remember a poem from the nineteenth-century Russian poet Tyutchev, written at a time when many in Russia were in the grip of the possibility of manipulating happiness, fascinated by the development of science and technology in the West. In opposition to this, Tyutchev posited the apocalyptic vision that everything is ultimately going to be lost again. He gave his poem the title "The Last Deluge," an image that is recognizable for everyone, although each person will have a different interpretation of it, according to his or her fears. Tyutchev sketches a picture of the Earth as it is at the end of its existence, exactly as it was in the beginning: lifeless, naked and covered with water. All is washed away. And then suddenly, reflected in the water, the face of God becomes visible, or our original face, or the face of the untouched child in us, as the Dutch poet Nijhoff calls it in a poem that has much in common with Tyutchev's verse. But look out! I cannot speak those words without all sorts of images intruding. For now, it seems as if humankind and all of its creations must be washed away before this other can surface, untouched and new. And yet, that is not what Tyutchev's story is saying at all. It is speaking about the original face that is *always* there, as Hakuin makes clear for us in his first line. Whether the whole universe vaporizes or becomes swallowed up by water or not, that original face is always there. Not dying, not lost, not born.

And, I must immediately add in warning, without reaching for any method, any technique or gimmick. For that is what we

always do reflexively — as things disappear or blow away, as everything is lost to us, in the throes of all the fears, we try to find something new to hold onto, a new pretense of certainty that seems to offer safety and reassurance. However, “nothingness” immediately resurfaces each time, after each pretense of certainty, as its counterpart. But we are so frightened of the leap of faith and its unlimited freedom that we would rather accept “nothingness” as reality and capitulate before it than risk that leap. Although this “nothingness” evokes just as much fear, it still seems to offer us more guarantees than the faith and freedom of our original face.

Fear of *nothingness*. Or better: Fear of a *nothingness* that becomes *something* before which one then capitulates. It seems like abracadabra at first sight, as it is stated here. But this is exactly what happens, and this is how the original face with its infinite faith and boundless freedom becomes indiscernible. The warning about this fatal reversal is found in the story of “The Four Portals of Chao Chou” in the *Pi Yen Lu* (Hegikanroku): “Free in all directions, you will never cling to nothingness and establish it as something.”

Perhaps it seems that I am talking about something else here — namely, about the Buddhist emptiness that must not be reduced further to a knowable “something.” But I am talking about an event that is much more radical than such a reduction. I am talking about the fall from the infinite freedom of the original face.

Here we touch upon the deepest secret of the human heart. In our Western tradition, it is Kierkegaard who has written most penetratingly about this. Shestov, who knew the value of Kierkegaard’s words on this subject like no other, writes (I quote from different sources):

What is this dread before nothing? Here Kierkegaard’s experience, which breaks through all the prohibitions laid upon our thinking by reason and morality, reveals to us astonishing things. ‘Dread,’ he says, ‘can be likened to dizziness.

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He whose eye chances to look down into a gaping abyss becomes dizzy... This dread (of man in the state of innocence) is the dizziness of freedom... In this dizziness freedom succumbs. Further than this psychology cannot and also does not wish to go. At that very moment everything is altered, and when freedom again arises it sees that it is guilty... Dread is an [...] impotence in which freedom swoons. Psychologically speaking, the fall into sin always occurs in impotence. [...] As soon as the actuality of freedom and of the spirit is posited, dread is abolished.' Kierkegaard [...] rejects the Greek idea that the ethical is the highest, as well as the Greek certainty that freedom is the possibility of choosing between good and evil. Such freedom is the freedom of the fallen man, it is slavery. True freedom is possibility. [...] Kierkegaard varies in all kinds of ways the ideas expressed in the extracts just quoted which culminate in his assertion that dread before nothing leads to the swoon of freedom, that man becomes powerless after the loss of freedom and in his impotence accepts fate as an omnipotent necessity and is convinced of this all the more the sharper his mind and the more powerful his talent is. [...] Kierkegaard's second thesis, that this fear is fear of Nothingness, is one of the most profound insights into the mystery of the Fall. However, if the omnipotence of God was able to create the world out of Nothingness, it was the limited nature of man, and the fear inspired in him by the serpent, that transformed Nothingness into an enormous, all-destroying, all-consuming, annihilating force. Nothingness ceased to be nothingness, ceased to be nonexistent. It came into being and, together with its lack of being, established itself and took root in all that exists—although there was absolutely no need for it to be. Nothingness has cast a spell over everything and everyone: the world seems asleep, frozen still, even dead. Nothingness has become Something, but a Something permeated by Nothingness. The terrible monster Nothingness holds us in its power. We know, we feel with our whole be-

ing, that this is Nothingness, i.e., that there is nothing to it, and yet we cannot fight against it, just as if it were not impotent Nothingness, but omnipotent Something. Of all that our experience of life reveals to us, this is the most incomprehensible and enigmatic. Hardly less mysterious is the dull, indifferent resignation with which we all accept the power of Nothingness, as well as our unaccountable and ineradicable fear of it. [...] The heartless or indifferent power of Nothingness seems terrible to us, but we do not have the strength to partake of the freedom proclaimed in Scripture. We fear it even more than Nothingness. We take this to be arbitrariness, we think that the limited certainty of Nothingness is still preferable to the limitlessness of divine possibilities.

Note that this pithy and striking citation comes from our own Western tradition. It places the mysterious words of “The Four Portals of Chao Chou”: “Free in all directions, you will never cling to nothingness and establish it as something,” immediately in the right context. And at the same time, it throws a new light on that puzzling statement in the “Heart Sutra” that the Bodhisattva knows neither boundaries nor fear.

In contrast to falling *out* of freedom, through fear and immobility, stands a totally different sort of falling, a falling *into* freedom through faith and surrender. You see, therefore, how treacherous language is and how the same word “falling” can have two diametrically opposed meanings. This other falling, a liberating falling, is beautifully illustrated through the Zen story of the butterfly that becomes trapped inside a bronze clock. Flying desperately and with all its might, the butterfly keeps smashing itself repeatedly against the hard wall of the clock. In the end, it must give up the attempt to rely on its own strength to break through that wall and lets itself fall. And then it falls, as a matter of course, into the light, into life and into the boundlessness of freedom.

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This is, actually, a very liberating image: a bottomless abyss out of which you cannot fall, and within which you can fall and not be smashed to smithereens. And don't forget: all of a sudden, this bottomless falling is no longer falling at all, but moving, an endless flowing in a life current without boundaries. That is the stream of *prajna paramita* — or wisdom beyond all wisdom — and we are scared to death of it. That is why we like to cling to a master, a guru, a pope, a Grand Inquisitor. The way of liberation lies precisely in the other direction, however — precisely when we go deeper and deeper into the darkness, *sunyata*, the emptiness, the void or whatever other name it is given. All of these words carry the meaning of leaving us nothing to grab onto. Here faith offers the only possibility — infinite faith or primeval faith, like that of a child. If you no longer have solid ground under your feet, if you cannot walk anymore, you must fly, according to Shestov.

Faith in what, then? If you can name the object of your faith, it is no longer faith. Faith involves scaling down the image. The faith towards which Hisamatsu and all the others point us is increasingly less nameable, becomes continually less construable, as its power deepens more and more: a deep, unflinching faith. But if you want to try to find words for it, how about these: faith in the original face that never perishes. Time after time the Zen tradition sends us back again to that essential not-knowing — beginning with Bodhidharma, the Indian who brought Zen meditation to China, according to tradition. After Bodhidharma pulls the religious forms out from under the feet of the devout Chinese emperor, who believed he would find certainty there, the emperor asks, "Who is it that now stands before me?" And Bodhidharma responds with an economy of words, "I don't know." And when Bodhidharma receives his first student after nine years of "sitting facing the wall," he proves to be wrestling with the very same question. This Hui K'o (Eko) says literally what so many of us after him will say, "My mind has no rest. Please help me." In response,

Bodhidharma asks him “to take out his mind, so that he can bring it to rest.” But that is exactly what Hui K’o cannot do. And then, precisely there, with the confession that it is totally impossible, liberation happens in a complete reversal: “I can’t get a grip on my mind and that frightens me” becomes “I know nothing and that is my salvation.”

But here again, I repeat my earlier warning. It could seem that you *must* first undergo a desperate period of preparation in order to push through to the other side, to the Promised Land. And that isn’t so. The truth is still deeper, still more fundamental, still more encompassing: that desperate period “before” also belongs, now, fully to the whole. And not only as a condition for what follows, but also ultimately as something wholly valuable and full of light *in itself*. Our original face is infinite faith, an infinite knowing with the heart, that all will be well, that everything was good and that everything is good, however much that seems to contradict what our reason whispers to us. Reason argues that it is absolutely impossible that all will be well, that everything and everyone will be saved, or yet deeper, that everything and everyone is already saved. Such a certainty, so full of light, goes against all the evidence. It goes far beyond the wall that seems so impossible for us to breach, despite all of our attempts, and before which we find ourselves surrendering.

Therefore, the temptation to seek something to hold onto is great. Shouldn’t I have something solid on which to stand? Hisamatsu once said to Masao Abe, “Go stand on the place where there is no place to stand,” echoing the teaching of the “Heart Sutra” of *mu ke ge*, that there are no boundaries. Or, in regular language, that everything is possible. “True freedom is possibility,” as Kierkegaard phrases it. And the words of the famous Nagarjuna are just as emphatic, “And everything is possible for him, for whom the Emptiness is possible. Nothing is possible for whom the Emptiness is not possible.” It is only by living out of this impossible position that the existential fear dissolves.

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But the dissolution of existential fear does not mean that you no longer experience ordinary fear. Psychologically conditioned fear of life, fear of death, fear of people, and so on, remain what they were before. I remember a story about a car ride with Father Lassalle. He seemed to be sleeping, but later admitted that he had just been pretending. When I first heard that story, I didn't understand it. And then later, after reading an excerpt from his published journal, I understood that he suffered from a fear of people, and this made him feel constrained in the company of others. It may sound rather contradictory for someone like him, who had overcome the existential fear of which the "Heart Sutra" speaks. For that same shy man bore witness to a boundless optimism, rooted in pure and deep faith as rock-solid as that of a child. Here, in the complexity of such a story, the uniqueness of the individual person reveals itself. And we are reminded to leave all judgments behind.

This is truly the effort of this exercise, this meditation — kicking the habit of judgments, of pictures. Breaking habits. Breaking the habit of passing judgment, of words, of everything that we think we know about all sorts of things, including Buddhism, Christianity, and psychology. Breaking habits and letting go of all of those apparent certainties and things to hold onto, of all of our ideas about our own Zen practice and how we stray from it. But also letting go of our conceptualizations about enlightenment, mystical experiences, and breaking through. Until they are all gone, leaving us with: "Here I sit with nothingness, open-minded, not knowing, like a child. I sit as did Bodhidharma, facing the wall, not knowing. With all of the fragments of my mangled life, with the whole of existence, with everything and everyone in a profound solidarity. And at the same time with the paradox, as Hisamatsu expressed it, with on the one hand the fundamental: *nothing works, what are you going to do?* And on the other hand, simultaneously, with an infinitely deep faith in what I do. In this sit-

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ting, here and how, for example.” And furthermore, in what is never born and never dies. For once again: even if the universe passes away, our original face never perishes.