

SHAKESPEARE IN JAPAN'S ZEN PHILOSOPHY:  
THE PLAYS OF NOTHING AT THE THEATRE OF NOTHING

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**I**

Shakespeare and his colleagues built the Globe Theatre in 1599 with the wooden materials removed from the Theatre at Shoreditch. The first play performed on the stage of the newly built Globe is said to be *Henry V*. At the beginning of this history play, Chorus appears and asks the audience to exercise their imagination, as there is nothing in 'this Wooden O' but Shakespeare's words, words, words. In other words, Shakespeare's poetry is all on the stage of the Globe with only sunshine as natural stage lighting. Without sunshine, their performances were impossible. The sun is everything while the play is on, and nothing when the play is done. Moreover the Globe itself, like a Japanese Noh stage, was a bare stage without decorative or realistic stage settings.

Thus, in his 34 lines, Chorus emphasises the importance of the imaginative power of the audience. He apologises to the audience for daring 'on this unworthy scaffold to bring forth / So great an object' and says:

O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
Attest in little place a million;

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 49	p.143-157	jul./dez. 2005
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And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
 On your imaginary forces work.  
 And he goes on saying:  
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
 Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,  
 Turning th' accomplishment of many years  
 Into an hour-glass.

On the stage of the Globe, Shakespeare's words, as spoken by Richard Burbage and his company, the 'imaginary forces' of the audience and a very few stage properties were all that was necessary. Moreover 'O' in "this wooden O" or "a crooked figure" means zero as well as "the spherical globe." Therefore Shakespeare's Globe may be called the Theatre of Nothing. And 'nothing' is the key word of Zen.

What about Shakespeare's plays? Can we call his dramatic works 'the plays of Nothing'? The answer is affirmative. The plays of Shakespeare are the things wherein we'll catch the spirit of Zen. Think about *King Lear*. The cause of Lear's tragedy was his failure to understand what his dearest daughter Cordelia said. His anger came from his foolish misunderstanding of Cordelia's one-word answer, "Nothing." Lear, infuriated by Cordelia's terse answer, said: "Nothing will come of nothing." But through his terrible experiences on the moor in the raging storm with nothing to wear and nobody except Kent, Edgar and Fool to help him, Lear realises at last the true meaning of "Nothing." Nothing is everything and everything is nothing. Life is everything and life is nothing. This is the essence of Zen. When Cordelia dies, Lear says:

She's gone for ever.  
 I know when one is dead and when one lives;  
 She's dead as earth. *King Lear* ( 5. 3. 259-261)  
 And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!  
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
 And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
 Never, never, never, never, never. *ibid* (5. 3. 305-308)

Lear reaches enlightenment at the end of the play, that is to say, he realises that Everything comes of Nothing. Life is Everything and Life is Nothing. Lear understands the paradox of life. He understands the spirit of Zen.

Think about Macbeth, his most famous lines called the 'Tomorrow speech.'

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time.  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Life signifies nothing. That is enlightenment Macbeth attains. This is Shakespeare's philosophy of life. And that is Zen. Life is nothing and life is everything. That is Zen. According to the Zen and Haiku specialist Reginald Horace Blyth (1898-1964), Zen is poetry and poetry is Zen. The "Tomorrow Speech" is Shakespeare's best poetry, in other words, his best Zen lines.

In Jaques' speech in *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene vii, Shakespeare humorously depicts the seven ages of human beings, beginning with an infant and ending in "second childishness and mere Oblivion; / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." Life is nothing and life is everything. These lines and the lines quoted above from *Macbeth* express the essence of Zen.

## II

What is ZEN? I don't know. Kenneth Clarke, at the beginning of his well-known book *Civilisation*, asks himself what civilization is and his answer is that he doesn't know but that he can see it when he stands

on the Pont des Arts in Paris, looking at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Like Kenneth Clark, I can see something like Zen whenever I visit Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto to see the Stone Garden, or look at the Miroku-bosatsu statue at Koryuji Temple in Kyoto. Furthermore, every time I read Shakespeare, I can find something like Zen in his plays. R.H. Blyth, in the preface of his first Zen book, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (1942), wrote about Zen as follows:

Zen is the most precious possession of Asia. With its beginnings in India, development in China, and final practical application in Japan, it is today the strongest power in the world. It is a world-power, for in so far as men live at all, they live by Zen. Wherever there is a poetical action, a religious aspiration, a heroic thought, a union of the Nature within a man and the Nature without, there is Zen.

According to the definition of R.H. Blyth, "Zen is poetry and poetry is Zen." He says in the preface of *A Survey of English Literature*, "Poetry, whether in verse or prose, in thoughts or deeds, is the only thing that makes life worth living." Shakespeare's works are poetry and the poetry of Shakespeare is Zen. Therefore Zen is Shakespeare and Shakespeare is Zen for Blyth. In Chapter XXIII, "Shakespeare," R. H. Blyth wrote:

Of course, Zen is not enough to make Shakespeare. We require also extreme sensibility, and power to express it, but the absence of self, of prejudice, of moral judgements, is the prime essential. Here again it is worth noting that this state of Zen, this God-like condition of mind does not imply absence of attraction and repulsion either in Shakespeare or the reader. It only implies lack of condemnation, lack of the apportioning of praise and blame. Good is good and bad is bad, but both are necessary; the acceptance of this is the secret of Zen, the secret of Shakespeare. If this acceptance is with the mind only, if it is half-hearted and with reservations, formal religion

becomes necessary to fill up the meaningless blanks that our cowardice has made. We need a God to interfere, to rectify the balance, we need a future life to complete the defects of this one. But while we look at *Hamlet* or *Othello*, while we are Hamlet or Othello, God and immorality are useless encumbrances, not even necessary as stage effects. If therefore we are asked for the Zen of Shakespeare we can only point to the plays and say, "There it is!"... We find all through his plays, references explicit and implicit to the acceptance of life, the freedom of selfishness, the equality of all things and all men and all occasions, the hereness and nowness of Heaven and Hell.

Acceptance of everything on the globe is the essence of Zen. Acceptance of "Fair and Foul," "Good and Bad," "Virtue and Vice," "Seven cardinal virtues and seven deadly sins" is the spirit of Zen. Like Zen, Shakespeare accepts everything in this world. So we can perhaps say that Shakespeare's way of life is the way of Zen.

### III

Now, with what R. H. Blyth said about Zen in mind, I'd like to examine Shakespeare's two greatest characters, comic and tragic, Falstaff and Hamlet and try to find the spirit of Zen in these characters. First, let's think about Falstaff.

Shakespeare created his first small Falstaff in his first history play *Henry VI, Part One*. Sir John Fastolfe is a liar and coward. He was banished from the court. The second middle-sized Falstaff is Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*. He is a reveling drunkard, enemy of good deeds. Finally Shakespeare invented the greatest vice of all in the world drama, Sir John Falstaff, in a series of three history plays and a farcical comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Falstaff says in his famous 'honour speech' (*Henry IV, Part 1*, 5.1.135-7):

What is honour? A word. What is in that word? Honour. What is that honour? Air.

Honour is nothing. This is Zen. Falstaff describes himself as follows in *Henry IV, Part 2*:

I am not only witty myself, but the cause that wit is in other men. (1.2.10-12)

This sort of detachment is the spirit of Zen. Moreover in his boastful speech in 2.4.455-463, there is something like Zen:

If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked! If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damn'd; if to be fat be to be fated, then Pharaoh's lean kine are to be loved. No, my good lord: banish Peto, banish Bardolph, Banish Poins; but, for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff—and therefore more valiant, being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff banish not him thy Harry's company, banish not him thy Harry's company. Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

Sir John Falstaff has become the globe itself. He is "spherical, like a globe" (*The Comedy of Errors*, 3.2.113-4). Falstaff engulfs every thing, vice and virtue, all desires, even the world. He is Nature itself. But he is nothing. This is Zen. Think about his genuine friendship for Prince Hal. When Hal becomes Henry V and discards his old friend, Falstaff still trusts in the king and says, "I will be as good as my word. This that you heard was but a colour. ...I shall be sent for soon at night" (*Henry IV, Part 2*, 5.4.86-91). Falstaff never complains of anything. He accepts everything as it is. This is Zen. Again think about his death depicted indirectly, but beautifully by Hostess in Act II, Scene 3 of *Henry V*. Falstaff has come back to his simple and pure "second childhood." He returns to Nature. He was everything in his life, but he has become nothing at his deathbed. This is Zen. Hostess says:

'a parted ev'n just between twelve and one, ev'n at the turning o' th' tide; for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and upon his fingers' end, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbl'd of green fields. 'How now, Sir John! quoth I 'What, man, be o' good cheer.' So 'a cried out 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hop'd there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So 'a bade me lay more clothes on his feet; I put my hand into the bed and felt them and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, so upward, and all was as cold as any stone.

This is the death of Falstaff. He accepts everything, all things in this world. 'He made a finer end,' according to Hostess. Falstaff is always true to himself. That is the spirit of Zen. He appreciates every moment of his life. "Carpe diem" is his belief and his way of life. This is the true spirit of Zen. All is well everyday. That is Zen.

Next, let's think about our greatest tragic hero, Hamlet. Suddenly, within two months in the midst of his 30<sup>th</sup> year of life, he has to face his dear father's death and his mother's remarriage to his detested uncle, Claudius. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates his suicide.

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon against self-slaughter!—(1.2.129-132)

He fears death. He cannot accept life as it is. "Frailty, thy name is women!" He cannot accept his mother's remarriage and Ophelia's sincere love for him. But in the course of his tragic life, he learns many things through his experiences. Finally he reaches enlightenment after killing Polonius and facing the death of Ophelia. At last he has become a man who can accept everything, including death.

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is Earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,  
 Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.  
 O, that that earth which kept the world in awe  
 Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw!—(5.1. 203-210)  
 There's a divinity that shapes our ends  
 Rough-hew them how we will.—(5.2.10-11)  
 And a man's life's no more than to say 'one'.—(5.2.74)  
 We defy augury: there is a special providence in the fall of a  
 sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be  
 not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will  
 come—the readiness is all. Since no man owes of aught he  
 leaves, what is't to leave  
 betimes? Let be.—(5.2.211-216)

This is the spirit of Zen. Zen absorbs all. All is nothing. Nothing is all. Falstaff accepts all. Hamlet accepts all. Through these two gigantic Shakespearean characters, comic and tragic, Shakespeare expresses the essence of Zen.

#### IV

In Shakespeare's early comedies, for example, in *The Comedy of Errors*, all characters doubt nothing. They accept everything as it is. Without their acceptance of all that happens, the comedy of "errors" would never work. Therefore all mistakes are not mistakes and all ends well.

In his mature comedies, for instance, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola is a typical example of a Zen character. After experiencing life and death in the stormy sea, she safely lands at Illyria and serves love sick Duke Orsino. She disguises herself as a man and loves Orsino. She never changes her mind.

I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth.—(3.1.155)  
And I, most jocund, apt, and willingly,  
To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die.—(5.1.126-127)  
After him I love  
More than I love these eyes, more than my life,  
More, by all mores, than e'er I shall love wife,  
If I do feign, you witness above  
Punish my life for tainting of my love.—(5.1.127-132)

Viola loves Orsino with “one heart, one bosom, and one truth.” She accepts things as they are. She is a good example of the woman who reaches enlightenment. She embodies the spirit of Zen.

In his last plays, especially in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare depicts the essence of Zen through the character of Leontes. The king of Sicilia is suddenly mad with jealousy and doubts everything.

Is whispering nothing?  
Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?  
Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career  
Of laughter with a sigh?—a note infallible  
Of breaking honesty. Horsing foot on foot?  
Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift;  
Hours, minutes; noon, midnight? And all eyes  
Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,  
That would unseen be wicked—is this nothing?  
Why, then the world and all that's in't is nothing  
The covering sky is nothing; Bohemia nothing;  
My wife is nothing; nor nothing have these nothings,  
If this be nothing.—(1.2. 284-296)

Leontes is possessed by a monstrous delusion. He thinks everything is nothing, his country is nothing, his wife is nothing. When he comes to his senses, he realizes that after the passage of 16 years, nothing is everything. Time tries all. Time heals everything. Time is

nothing and time is everything. This is true and that is Zen. Like King Lear, patience is all for Leontes, and patience is time and time is patience. This is true and it is Zen.

In *Henry VIII*, Wolsey realises at the end of his life that everything is nothing, and nothing is everything. He says:

I know myself now, and I feel within me  
A peace above all earthly dignities,  
A still and quiet conscience. (3.2.378-340)

Wolsey reached "Peace of Mind." He reached enlightenment. The final goal of Zen is Peace of Mind, in other words, Enlightenment.

The spirit of Zen is beautifully expressed in the song in *Cymbeline*. The following is, as it were, a Zen Song.

Fear no more the heat o' th' sun,  
Nor the furious winter's rages;  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o' the' great;  
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke.  
Care no more to clothe and eat;  
To thee the reed is as the oak.  
The scepter, learning, physic, must  
All follow this and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash,  
Nor th' all-dreaded thunder-stone;  
Fear not slander, sunsure rash;  
Thou hast finish'd joy and moan.  
All lovers young, all lovers must  
Consign to thee and come to dust.

No exorciser harm thee!  
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!  
Nothing ill come near thee!  
Quiet consummation have,  
And renowned be thy grave! (4.2.258-281)

"Quiet Consummation" is the goal of Zen. All the tragic characters reach this state of mind, "quiet consummation" at the end of Shakespeare's tragedies. All the characters in Shakespeare's comedies reach understanding, cooperation, concession and harmony.

They are just on the way of "quiet consummation" or "enlightenment." All in all, Shakespeare's plays have the essence of Zen. Perhaps Shakespeare himself reached "quiet consummation" on his deathbed like his characters in his plays.

## Conclusion

Is Zen in Shakespeare? Yes, it is. Here it is! "Fair is foul and foul is fair." This is the beginning of *Macbeth*. This is a paradox. Fair and foul are nothing, and nothing is everything. This is true, and this is Zen. 'Fair, kind, and true' is all my argument. That is what Shakespeare said in his Sonnet No. 105. Fair is true and true is fair. True is everything and true is nothing. It is true and this is Zen. Kind is true and Love is true. Kind and Love are everything and everything is nothing. It is true. This is Shakespeare's faith. And it is Zen. Love is hatred and hatred is love. That is a paradox. Love and hatred are everything, and they are nothing. This is true and this is Zen. "To thine own self be true"—(*Hamlet*, 1.3.78).

That is what Shakespeare said. To fair be true. To kind be true. To love be true. This is Zen. You cannot be true to yourself after death. Be true to yourself while being here on earth. This is the essence of Zen. *Carpe diem*. "Take the present time"—(*As You Like It*, 5.3.28). This is the true spirit of Zen. "All's well that ends well". "All's well that begins well". "All's well everyday". This is Zen. In Zen, this is supremely important. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and

women are merely players. (*As You Like It*, 2.7.139-140). That is what Shakespeare said.

Men and women become nothing when they die. Players become nothing when the play is done. "All the world is a stage". That is what Shakespeare said. The world is a stage and a stage is the world. The Globe is the world and the world is the Globe. That is true. The Globe will be nothing when the play is done. That is also true. This is Shakespeare. This is Shakespeare's Globe. This is Shakespeare's plays. And that is Shakespeare's ZEN.

Shakespeare expresses the essence of Zen in his last play, *The Tempest*. Prospero, as his creator Shakespeare, says:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherits shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.—(5.1.148-158)

Shakespeare erased everything. He erased the great Globe itself. All the players disappear. Nothing remains except his eternal poetry.

The greatest philosopher of Zen Buddhism, Daisetz Suzuki (1870-1966) said that the only truth in the world is Nothingness, and that Zen is that truth. His Zen Buddhism message is: "To do Good is my religion. The World is my home." According to R. H. Blyth, one of the spiritual disciples of Daisetz Suzuki, Poetry is Zen and Zen is Poetry. That is all. Blyth said that the world's two greatest Zen poets are Shakespeare in the West and the Haiku poet Basho (1644-1694) in the East. But I think Shakespeare is greater than Basho,

because his works engulf everything, human beings, races, religions, -isms, ideas, even the globe itself. He absorbs everything in the world so that there is nothing left. His poetry will exist as long as the English language exists. His poetry will go on "to the last syllable of recorded time."

Finally, I would like to quote Blyth Zen once more. R. H. Blyth said: "Zen is the essence of Christianity, of Buddhism, of culture, of all that is good in the daily life of ordinary people".—(*What is Zen?* Preface). So is Shakespeare!

Again, Nothing is Zen and Zen is Nothing. So everything about my paper on "Zen in Shakespeare" will be NOTHING when my writing is done at this moment. Because Zen is living. Zen is now and now is Zen. This is the true spirit of ZEN. *Carpe diem*. Zen is life and life is Zen. Without your life, there is no Zen.

## Postscript

The first draft was completed on 30 March 2004. The revised and polished version was presented to the seminar on "Foreign Shakespeare" chaired by Professor José Roberto O'Shea, at the Thirty-first International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford-upon Avon on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.

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