

I. The Lives of John of the Cross and Dōgen

The conditions of a solitary bird are five:
the first, that it flies to the highest point;
the second, that it does not suffer for company,
not even of its own kind;
the third, that it aims its beak to the skies;
the fourth, that it does not have a definite color;
the fifth, that it sings very softly.

John of the Cross

a. John of the Cross

He is a man heavenly and divine.... He is truly the father of my soul.... He is very advanced in the ways of the Spirit; to very great experience he adds profound learning (Benedictines of Stanbrook, 1922:179).

I have found no one like him in all Castille, nor is there anyone who inspires souls with such fervor on their road to heaven. You should all recognize that you possess a priceless treasure in that saint. Our Lord has given him a special grace for such guidance (Benedictines of Stanbrook:180).

He has our Lord's own spirit (Benedictines of Stanbrook:181).

This approbation of John of the Cross comes from the pen of his friend/1/ and contemporary Teresa of Avila who, together with him, abides at the highest echelon of the Catholic mystical tradition. Naturally indebted to their theological predecessors they were, however, the first in the Catholic tradition to give a systematic and psychologically practical account of the contemplative way. Though of the two Teresa was a better writer and more encompassing in her concerns, John's sheer contemplative depth and psychological acumen is still considered unparalleled.

John of the Cross was born in 1542 at Fontiveros, near Avila, in Spain. He never knew his father, a member of a well-to-do family who was unfortunately ostracized therefrom when, for love, he married a poor silk weaver named Catalina Alvarez. A few months after John's birth, he died, leaving

Catalina and her three sons in dire poverty.

Though one son died and another married, Catalina's poverty grew to the point where she could no longer care for John. She gave him to an orphanage which, in addition to providing necessities, gave John an education. As a youth, his first employment as a convent sacristan led to a second in a hospital for hopeless syphilis cases. There an administrator eventually noticed not only John's quiet dedication but his supple intellect as well. Through him John was enabled to attend the local collegio recently opened by the Jesuits. There he remained from his seventeenth to his twenty-first year studying the Latin classics and, no doubt, theology. John was poised for the career of a priest and had a hospital chaplaincy before him, but, apparently, his yearning for the contemplative life had already grown irresistible. Leaving the hospital late one night in order to avoid the administrator's protestations, John begged entrance into the Carmelite priory and soon thereafter took the habit.

Under the wing of the Carmelites, John's education continued. We know little about the specific courses he took in theology, but in the last analysis, it matters little. What John acquired was a traditional theological grid upon which his naturally speculative mind could place the revelations of his inner life.

Nevertheless, one can surmise the general theological debt he owes to Augustine, Aquinas and that seminal mystical

writer, Dionysus the Areopagite. He absorbed the writings of the latter and thereby found the via negativa which he himself would mark out with such subtlety and thoroughness. Filled with Augustine's passionate love for God, he was also infected by Augustine's rather severe body/spirit dualism (Mallory:112-142). John agreed absolutely with Thomas' Catholic doctrine on the finality of God for the human soul, but differed on matters of the latter's potential, holding out for the possibility for a more immediate contact between the soul and its Principle. Thomas did not believe in the abandonment of images or sensory phantasms in the relation of the soul to God (Copleston:47-48), whereas John, in his translation of apophatic theology into a practical method of consciousness transformation, did. And it was through this thoroughgoing via negativa in consciousness that John felt a more immediate knowledge of God was possible--that one could ultimately "know creatures through God" rather than only "know God through creatures" (F4,5)/2/. It is because of John's theological departures from Thomism and his emphasis on the practical that one may speak of more specific influences stemming from Bonaventura, from the Victorines (especially Richard) and from the Germano-Flemish school (especially Tauler) (Benedictine of Stanbrook: passim).

No account of influences, however, could diminish the originality that comes to light in John's stress on methodical prayer and his unprecedented psychological insight into the interior life. Up until John's time, as we have mentioned,

the science of the interior life had been imperfectly and unsystematically developed. Unlike Buddhism, where philosophical and cosmological speculation has always been paced by a science of the interior life, the elaboration of medieval theology was hardly matched by the science of prayer and contemplation. Schematizations of the latter tended to be superficial and arbitrary; definitions of meditation and contemplation were hazy and overlapping (Benedictine of Stanbrook:3-12). All this changed with the arrival of Teresa and John, and after their contributions, says Poulain in his classic summary of the Catholic spiritual tradition, virtually nothing of essential import has been added to the completeness of their understanding. Among great Catholic thinkers of the present day, J. Maritain is perhaps the most outspoken champion of John's greatness and normativeness, making clear why John is often called the Mystical Doctor:

The doctrine of St. John of the Cross is the pure Catholic doctrine of the mystical life (quoted in de Bruno:xxiii).

Why is it that one does not see that it is essentially the same doctrine...in the perspective of the practical science of the spiritual life, [that] was taught...by S. Thomas and S. Bonaventure in the perspective of theology?.... By what blindness does one fail to recognize the testimony given by saints and spiritual writers, all through the Christian centuries, to that very experience of the depths of God whose states and degrees S. Teresa and S. John of the Cross only succeeded in describing in a more analytical and more explicit manner? (Maritain, 1960:71).

The reason for Maritain's rhetorical questions is that even twenty years ago some of the odium attached to John's name had still not been disengaged. John's psychological stress on emptiness and nothingness (Sp. nada) had earned him the ridiculous title Doctor of Nada. In his own life-span, the depth of his interest in contemplation and the insistence with which he called for it, got him into trouble. With the intensification of the inquisition in Spain around 1586, suspicion was cast on "illuminist" books. Though John was clearly critical of "illuminations" and all other pseudo-mystical phenomena professed by the Illuminists of his day (Brenan:16-25), he nevertheless became suspect. For his part in Teresa's Carmelite reform movement, he tasted further persecution, including a horrible prison experience. Other political turmoil within the Carmelites, in addition to all of the above, placed him, by the time of his death in 1591, in disrepute. His works, in fact, were not published openly until 1618 after an investigation by the Holy See testified to his orthodoxy. Over the centuries, however, both his originality and his orthodoxy have stood the test of time and in 1926 Pope Pius XI proclaimed him Doctor of the Church Universal.

The first fruits of John's student pen were corrections of certain errors made in regard to contemplation. Throughout his life, his intellectual abilities remained under the aegis of religious praxis and "perhaps no one ever had a vocation which drew him so irresistibly" (Brenan:83).

Until the time of his death John remained a devoted practitioner of contemplative prayer and a tireless guide of souls, though his life was hardly one of uninterrupted quietude. Through his biographers (Brenan, 1973; Christani, 1962; Crisogono, 1958; Peers, 1954, 1964) we glimpse a man who was on occasion overly pious or unnecessarily severe, yet the prevailing impression is that of a deeply compassionate man, tender in his care for others and in his own heart full of mystical passion. Contemplative teacher and writer Rev. W. McNamara says that he "know(s) of no one who, following Christ, has paved and marked the Way into the center more effectively and surely than John of the Cross" (1975:410). In addition to all this he was, in literary scholar Brenan's opinion, one of the greatest lyric poets of his or any century (3).

To form a just appreciation of most historical figures it is necessary to see them against the background and within the context of the time in which they lived and which colored and determined them. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule and, says Bede Frost, none more striking than John of the Cross. Though living in one of the greatest centuries of the Christian era and in the very center of greatness, "he plays no part, humanly speaking, in that immense and stirring drama." John was rather, a pilgrim of eternity, a man drawn irresistibly inward in his search for the reality of the Deathless.

O my God when will it be?
The time when I can say for sure
At last I live: I die no more /3/.

b. Dōgen

More than any other religious figure in Japanese history...Dōgen has evoked attention and admiration in modern times.... All schools venerate him as a bodhisattva.... Philosophers derive inspiration from the "incomparable depth of his thinking"/4/...the embodiment of the best elements of the Japanese genius.... The crucial element [in his writings] is his religious intuition, deeply convincing in its authenticity.... He belongs to the great creative figures of mankind (Dumoulin:151).

Dōgen was born in the year 1200. We know little of his family background and our record of him begins in 1213, the year of his entrance into Buddhist monastic life on Mt. Hiei near Kyoto. Though Zen had reached the Japanese mainland some two to three hundred years before, it had not yet become a major movement (Earhart:66), and Dōgen's early training was Tendai, the dominant sect of those clustered on Mt. Hiei.

Spiritually restless and dissatisfied by what he perceived as lack of depth in the teachings, the youthful Dōgen left Hiei after a year and spent the next two or three years visiting Buddhist teachers in various parts of the country. Later in life he would speak of these times as a regrettable mismatch between his profound yearning for Buddhahood and the questionable authenticity of his Japanese teachers. His adult teaching mission was to be characterized by an uncompromising critique of contemporary Buddhist 'sects' in an effort to propagate in Japan a truly authentic Dharma Way,

firmly based in contemplative discipline.

The first truly important and influential figure in the development of Japanese Zen was Myōan Eisai. Born sixty years before Dōgen, Eisai, too, received his monastic initiation on Mt. Hiei but found contemporary forms of Buddhism lacking. His own quest for true Buddhism drew him toward India, though China marked the bounds of his westward progress. There he came under the influence of a Lin-chi (Rinzai) sect of Ch'an and received comprehensive training. His return to Japan, with the Ch'an Dharma lineage, marked the formal birth of Japanese Zen Buddhism.

Around the time of Eisai's death in 1215, Dōgen entered the Kyoto Zen temple of Kennin-ji, over which Eisai had been presiding. Dōgen's own writings never mention a personal meeting with Eisai even though Soto historians have often stated that Dōgen received personal instruction from him (Waddell, October 1977:105). In any case, it was at Kennin-ji where Dōgen's dissatisfaction with domestic Buddhism confronted the splendid example of Eisai's two trips to China (trips across the China Sea were rough and rare) and created in him the desire to seek true Buddhism in the land of the Ch'an Patriarchs.

Dōgen's fateful trip did not take place, however, until 1223. In the intervening years, he remained at Kennin-ji practicing the koan Zen of the Rinzai (Lin-chi) lineage under Eisai's successor, Butsujōbō Myōzen. Dōgen's first two years in China also were spent under the aegis of the

Lin-chi sect. But in 1225, Dōgen began his two year tenure under the Ts'ao-t'ung (Soto) Master Ju-ching, and it proved to be decisive. Early on, Dōgen came to an enlightenment experience. The rest of his life would be spent deepening his insight and sharing it with others.

Ju-ching was everything Dōgen could have wanted in a teacher. Traditionally, the Lin-chi lineage was critical of the Ts'ao-t'ung for its contemplative piety. When Dōgen arrived in China, however, his uncompromising religious nature was often shocked by the laxity in the Lin-chi monasteries; zazen practice was often quite casual (Waddell, October 1977:109). At the time Dōgen met him, Ju-ching was the leading representative of the Ts'ao-t'ung lineage in China, admired throughout the country for his deep devotion to Buddhism and the strict training he gave to those in his care. Because his own training had included instruction in the koan (Waddell, October 1977:112), it seems that his virulent criticism of the Lin-chi schools was not motivated by sectarian considerations. Rather, the only question for Ju-ching was the depth of commitment of religious practice, a quality he apparently felt contemporary Lin-chi lacked.

It is said that Ju-ching had a "veritable passion for zazen (Waddell, October 1977:112). "Though in his sixties he sat with his students every night until eleven o'clock and then awoke at two-thirty or three and sat again until morning" (Waddell, October 1977:113). The passion, it seems, was contagious. When Dōgen returned to Japan, the nucleus

of his Zen ministry became a tireless exhortation to zazen, most clearly evidenced in his Shōbōgenzō zuimonki (Masunaga, 1971). Laced between all of Dōgen's subtle turns of phrase and philosophic insight, are constant urgings to the quiet contemplation of shikantaza, the liberating core of Buddhist praxis, without which conceptual subtleties were but seeds sown on uncultivated ground. Like his master, Dōgen warns that one should not argue the superiority or inferiority of doctrine, for what truly matters is the depth and authenticity of practice (Dōgen's Bendōwa in Waddell and Abe, May 1971:140).

In 1227, in the season of the cherry blossoms, Dōgen returned to Japan with Ju-ching's Certification of Transmission. It verified that he was "fully conversant with the authentic realization of the buddhas and patriarchs," Ju-ching's Dharma heir and the 51st patriarch of the Ts'ao-t'ung line in direct descent from Sakyamuni Buddha. Neither Eisai nor his predecessors had been granted this accolade. Dōgen was the first Japanese monk of any line to be so honored (Waddell, October 1977:114-115).

"As soon as I arrived [back in Japan]," writes Dōgen, "I vowed to spread the Dharma for the salvation of all beings; it was like carrying a heavy burden on my shoulders" (Dōgen's Bendōwa in Waddell and Abe, May 1971:130-131). Given the state of Japanese Buddhism, Dōgen's profound experience built atop an already uncompromising nature, karmically cast him into the role of a reformer. This did

not sit well with those on the receiving end. Pressured by those in power to change his ways or soften his approach, Dōgen chose exile rather than capitulation (DeBary:359). By the time of Dōgen's death in 1253, the Soto 'sect'--Dōgen's teaching--had begun to flourish. However, it was not until a few generations later, with Keizan Zenji (b. 1267), that Dōgen's teaching began to be accepted throughout Japan.

In one of his sermons (Cyōji, Cook, 1978:196) Dōgen quotes Zen master Huai-jang with approval:

Though you may talk about the realm of great enlightenment, words cannot reveal reality, for language is just concepts. The realm of great enlightenment is real; it is experience. That realm was acquired for the first time [by Sakyamuni] after eight years of continuous practice.

"Continuous practice," Dōgen goes on to say, is what we all should aspire to. And if anything becomes clear in studying Dōgen, it is his own dedication to such continuous and all-inclusive practice. His conceptual upaya--striking, unique, catalytic--remains, by his own admission, secondary. Even his critique of existing forms of Japanese Buddhism cannot obscure his more fundamental traditionalism. His own self-image is plain: a link in the long chain of Truth-transmission that began with Sakyamuni and continued with the Chinese Patriarchs. Consequently, our primary involvement has not been with Dōgen the philosophical thinker but with Dōgen the religious doer. We seek his beauty, and

thereby Zen's, not primarily in his conceptualizations, but in the existential commitment of his whole bodymind to the heroic religious project: entering the realm of great enlightenment, "acquiring the essence" (Raihai Tokozui, Cook: 148), willing to cast off body and mind for the emancipation of all sentient beings.