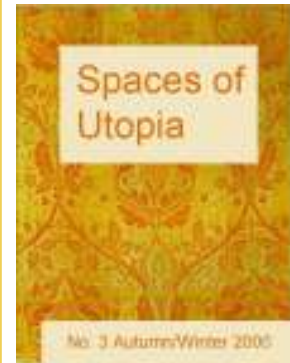


## Utopian Society of the Zen Buddhists

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### I. Introduction

The present natural and social crisis urges us to re-examine human nature from a totally new perspective. It seems significant for this purpose that we present here a medieval utopia characterized by Zen Buddhism in Japan. This is because a different point of view from the Western way, which has been mainly responsible for developing our present civilization, should be used to re-consider a new type of utopia.

Zen Buddhism, as a point of view on human nature and as a doctrine of a way of life, is distinguished by those aspects drawn out of Western rationalism. "Chado", a Zen discipline or "way" based around the ritualised preparation and serving of food and tea to guests, will be argued as a philosophy competent to form a new type of utopia. On one hand, Zen Buddhism itself is not able to form a sort of social theory, suggesting only how each person should live individually. On the other hand "Chado", which shows its physical expression in a tea gathering, has the possibility of influencing social activities.

### II. A History of "Chado", or the Way of Tea

The tea-plant was known in southern China as early as 3000 years ago. In the

middle of the eighth century, a Chinese scholar called Lu-Yu wrote his treatise, “Ch’a Ching” (as a sort of Holy Scripture of Tea), and formulated the first Code of Tea. Kakuzo Okakura, the early twentieth century author of *The Book of Tea*, explains that the Tea Ceremony began in the Zen monasteries of ancient China. A tea gathering was not to be a mere poetical pastime, but one of the important methods of self-realization and it would be transformed into a ritual called “Chado” meaning “The Way of Tea” (Okakura 1990: 5; Sen 1990: 4).

The Buddhists of the southern Zen sect, which incorporated so much of Taoist doctrine, formulated an elaborate ritual of tea. The monks gathered before the image of Bodhi Dharma and drank tea, sharing it from a single bowl, with the profound formality of a holy sacrament. It was this Zen ritual which finally developed into the Tea-ceremony of Japan in the fifteenth century. (Okakura 1990: 36)

Tea was imported in the late twelfth century by the priest Eisai (1141-1215), who had studied Zen Buddhism in China, as a means of propagating Zen Buddhism in Japan. At that time, the samurai class, which embraced Zen with its tenets of simplicity and living in the “now”, began to dominate Japan. The merchant class was also rising in prominence through trade with Sung Dynasty China.

With such social changes, the samurai and merchant classes developed an interest in the tea gathering as a tool for acquiring culture. Their enjoyment of Tea prompted its gradual secularization. Also Zen Buddhism, the most influential among the various Buddhist sects, had close relations with the political power base. With these processes the Zen Buddhist ideal became inevitably corrupted (Sen 1990: 5). Thus tea gatherings changed and became mere entertainment in which stakes were wagered and participants vied with one another to distinguish different teas by taste. At the same time, among the wealthy classes, the ornamentation of tearooms became more lavish and gorgeous.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the first opportunity came to engage with the Western world. Portuguese merchants suddenly appeared bringing with them more technically advanced Western goods, particularly guns; their trade

routes were also used by religious missionaries, especially the Jesuits, who introduced Christianity to Japan. The ruling classes were shocked by the emergence of this modern civilization. In a period of severe civil war, they wanted to import guns. Some feudal lords had contact with missionaries and were converted to Christianity.

The rise of the merchant class greatly influenced Japanese culture, as had happened in Renaissance Europe, and it developed into a brilliant and dazzling cultural era known as the Momoyama period. It is quite remarkable that the leading Tea Masters were from Sakai, a port city near Osaka, which was a municipal city governed by its citizens. There were many merchants of this city who thrived during the Civil War; these merchants could be called “bourgeois” in a modern sense. Like the merchants of other cities, they wished to collect expensive tea utensils and display them by holding tea gatherings.

However there were some Tea Masters who were repulsed by such ostentation. They considered such practices as frivolous and flippant in the progress of civilization. At some temples, tea drinking was developing into a solemn ceremony to pursue self-realization. In an appointed room, a picture of the Buddha was hung, flowers were arranged and incense burned (*ibidem*). “Chado” was devised by them to be held in a small room of only four-and-a-half tatami mats (nine feet square) with a limited number of guests. The room was in a tiny house called “Soan” or “thatched hut”. In this confined space they pursued the beauty of tea, using simple, imperfect Japanese utensils.

A wealthy Sakai merchant named Sen-no Rikyu (1522-1591) respected as the greatest Tea Master, made a fortune there as a fishmonger and became Tea Master to the two War Lords who unified Japan, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1581) and his successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598); Rikyu promoted the simple way of preparing and drinking tea in a “thatched hut”.

Sen-no Rikyu was very creative in building the independent thatched tea hut with walls of wattle and daub, separated from the mansion house. He

eventually established a style of “Chado” called the “tea of quiet taste”. This is clearly symbolized by the guests’ entrance. It is a small aperture, approximately 75 cm square which forces all guests to crouch and enter in a humble manner. If a guest were a samurai, he had to leave his sword on the rack outside before entering, due to Rikyu’s strong intention that all the guests should be treated equally. To leave his sword outside, which was symbol of his rank, meant that the samurai temporarily gave up his social position. In other words, Rikyu wished that social distinctions between the samurai (ranked higher) and the citizen (ranked lower) should be denied. His aim should be clearly accepted that the inside of the tearoom was a revolutionary change from the class-ridden society of the outer world. Rikyu might be said to be a pioneer of the bourgeois revolution; nevertheless he was a premature figure in a premature age.

Although both unifiers, Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, learned the “tea of quiet taste” under Rikyu’s instruction, they often preferred to have huge gatherings in order to flaunt their collections of precious and rare tea utensils. Apparently their taste for lavishness and glitter was to create a dilemma, which would be fatal for Rikyu in Hideyoshi’s age.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a despot, not only held an enormous tea gathering to which several hundred tea practitioners were invited, but also ordered Rikyu to design a golden tearoom in which only utensils of gold, such as a golden kettle, brazier, tea bowl and so on, were to be used. In his last few years, Hideyoshi conceived an incredible delusion to establish a great empire by occupying Korea and China. Indeed his troops did invade Korea but were soundly defeated.

The conflict between Hideyoshi and Rikyu was getting more severe, as predictable. As Rikyu’s philosophy grew more and more towards simplicity and equality, Hideyoshi ordered Rikyu to commit suicide by “hara-kiri”. Mystery still cloaks the nature of his crime and why he went without an appeal for mercy. It may be said that he proudly displayed his own position as a citizen by his resolute death (*idem*, 6-7).

### III. Zen Buddhism and Taoism: A Religious and Philosophical Background

As mentioned above, the spirit of “Chado” was inspired by Zen Buddhism and the origins of the Tea Ceremony were devised in Zen temples. Sen-no Rikyu, at the beginning of his memorandum (*Nanporoku* [Japanese]), confirmed that the “tea of quiet taste” should be mastered through training grounded on “the Buddhist way” before everything. Although “the Buddhist way” he pointed to here did not mention Zen, it obviously implied it. Before considering Rikyu’s idea of “Chado”, Zen Buddhism, much influenced by Taoism, will be explained (Rikyu 2003: 9).

Zen Buddhism originated in China around the sixth century AD as a mixture of the Greater Vehicle of salvation, which is the fundamental idea of Mahayana expounded in the Prajnaparamita, a development in Indian Buddhism in the first century BC, and Chinese Taoism, being a form of naturalism founded by Lao-Tzu as early as the fourth century BC. In other words, the idea of “Emptiness”, the essence of Prajnaparamita, and the idea of “Nothingness” of Taoism are combined in Zen (Suzuki 2004: 4).

A famous twentieth-century Zen philosopher, Daisetsu Suzuki, denied that Zen is a religion in the common sense, describing its features as follows: it has “no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined and no soul (...) whose immortality is a matter of intense concern with some people” (Suzuki 2004: 9).

#### ***Emptiness***

The key concept of Zen is the “Emptiness” of Mahayana. It is directed that people who wish to practice “the profound perfection of wisdom” should perceive things in the following way: “form is empty; emptiness is form. ‘Emptiness’ is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling, discrimination, conditioning factors, and consciousness are empty” (Lopez 1996: vii). Buddhists believe that all human beings would be salvaged if “they rely on and abide in

perfection of wisdom; because their minds are without obstruction, they have no fear" (*ibidem*). It is difficult to understand. Even Zen monks must endeavour earnestly to recognize "the perfection of wisdom" by a peculiar method of training or meditation, called the "Dhyana".

Although meditation is a strict and rigorous discipline, they are not directed spiritually by any transcendental *persona* such as God or the supernatural agency, but they carry it out by their own unaided conscious efforts to attain "the perfection of wisdom". An old priest said, "I am willing to help you in every way I can, but there are some things in which I cannot be of any help to you. / It will be nobody else but yourself that will carry your body along this highway" (Suzuki 2004: 60).

### ***Individualism in Zen***

Therefore Zen has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual logic and analysis; nor has it any set doctrines (*idem*, 10). According to Daisetsu Suzuki, "[t]he foundation of all concepts is simple and unsophisticated experience". Because "the human tongue is not an adequate organ for expressing the deepest truths of Zen" (*idem*, 2-3).

In this sense, Zen depends more on intuition perceived by individual sensibility than on logical recognition conceived by language and reason. Supporting Suzuki's idea, Kitaro Nishida says: "To experience means (...) to know in accordance with the facts". He used the term "pure experience" as the foundation of "intellectual intuition" (Nishida 1990: 3). That is, "[i]ntellectual intuition is an intuition of ideal", as in one of artists or people of religion. He continues: "It is a grasp of life, like having (...) the aesthetic spirit, / it is actually the state of oneness of subject and object", for "[i]ntellectual intuition underlies thinking" (*idem*, 30-32).

Thus Suzuki with Nishida is proud that Zen understands things in the synthetic and comprehensive conception attained through human sensitive intuition, seeing a limitation of words or language (*idem*, 27). However Zen is too

individualistic to form a communitarian utopian or social theory, being weak in thinking logically.

It should be noted, though, that it is quite separate from speculative mysticism or spiritualism, which is a common misunderstanding. Zen meditation leads to a mental state which is not suspended, or at a standstill, nor is it trance inducing, but instead allows the participant to gain an insight into the “self” after long training. That is, a means to penetrate into the relationship between the human being and nature itself as Dogen, the greatest Zen priest in the twelfth century, emphasized. Here is a reason why the deeper the crisis of the natural environment becomes, the more Zen attracts our attention (Dogen 1996).

However there is a dangerous aspect to accepting everything without distinguishing between “goodness” and “badness”. For example, both Zen philosophers, Daisetsu Suzuki and Kitaro Nishida, setting their starting point of method not on the recognition by reason but in the conception by intuition, were utilised to justify Fascism by the super-nationalists before the Second World War. To avoid such a danger, it is significant to consider its connection with Taoism.

### **Nothingness**

The Taoism of Lao Tzu asserts that the source of the universe is the “Tao”, in Chinese meaning literally “the Way” as expressed in his book, *Tao Te Ching*. A translator, Ralph A. Dale, terms it “the Great Integrity”. It is neither God on the outside of the Universe, nor a certain idea directed by the transcendence, but a paradoxical concept. It is described that “[t]he Great Integrity is an endless abyss, yet, it is the inexhaustible fertile source of the universe” (Tzu 2002: 4th verse). Having an aspect of critical argument to Confucianism, that directed principles of “doing” as a governor of virtue, Lao Tzu suggests the best leader should take a simple and natural way that “[w]hatever is done happens so naturally that no one presumes to take the credit!” (*idem*, 17th verse). He advocates “what is not over what is”, that is, not doing over doing (*idem*, 11th verse).

“Nothingness” is one of the most important terms of the “Tao” in his idea. Nevertheless, it does not mean the absence of content, but rather the absence of aggressive doing. “Allow the heart to empty itself of all turmoil! Retrieve the utter tranquility of mind from which you issued” (*idem*, 16th verse). This idea, similar to the concept of “Emptiness” in Mahayana, is expected to bring tranquility recovering a process that sociologists call alienation. Therefore, “[t]o know tranquility is to embrace all. To embrace all is to be just. Justice is the foundation for wholeness. Wholeness is the Great Integrity” (*ibidem*). However Taoism is not asceticism, but notes clearly how to promote a happy life, pursuing positively, in a simple and natural way, as follows: “If you know when you have enough, you are wealthy. / If you find your roots and nourish them, you will know longevity” (*idem*, 33rd verse).

Thus, criticizing all kinds of progressivism and preceding Romanticism, it suggests returning to the primitivism of ancient times. As a matter of course, Lao Tzu remarks more on the intrinsic value than the appearance of things, calling our attention to the inner compared with the outer, the essential compared with the superficial. Also he warns us to be distrustful of language, a concept inherited by Zen Buddhism, saying that “Those who know don’t lecture. Those who lecture don’t know” (*idem*, 56th verse).

#### **IV. Rikyu’s Chado**

It is clear that the ideas of Lao Tzu are effective antitheses to modernization, which are directed by the works of reason, increasing competition in the market economy and the continual promotion of industrial engineering. In the workings of the Japanese mind and culture, there is something calm, quiet and traditionally silent, crystallized in Zen, and in particular in Sen-no Rikyu’s “Chado”.

In a tea gathering, called a “Chaji”, a host invites a few guests to spend a few hours in an intimate atmosphere of peace and mutual respect. The tearoom, devoid of rank, is without ornamentation except for that which may be placed in it



to satisfy some aesthetic and spiritual need of the moment. The setting is conducive to reflection and introspection. The first object to be viewed, once inside, is the scroll, usually containing a Zen phrase, which is intended to awaken the viewer to some reality of life (Sen 1990: ch. 5).

Each guest will silently approach this sanctuary passing along the garden path, which leads from the gathering place to the tearoom, signifying the first stage of meditation. Called “the dewy path” (a Buddhist reference), it is intended to break the connection with the mundane world and to produce a mental state conducive with the full appreciation of aestheticism in the tearoom itself (*idem*, ch. 2).

If it is winter, the host first lays charcoal under the kettle in the fire-pit, then serves a light meal followed by a sweet. (In summer, due to the heat, a small brazier is used with smaller pieces of charcoal, which are laid before the sweet is served.) After a brief interval the guests return to the tearoom and notice that the scroll has been replaced by a simple flower arrangement. The ephemeral nature of the flower reminds the guest of the briefness of life and the importance of living each moment. With total concentration the host prepares one bowl of thick tea, which is shared by all the guests. Then, in a more relaxed atmosphere, individual bowls of thin tea are prepared for each guest in turn.

The ceremonial sharing of a bowl of thick tea is the most important moment in a Chaji and is conducted in a quiet yet attentive atmosphere. Before making a bowl of tea, the host purifies the bowl and other utensils with a small silk cloth in a ritualized way. Certain aspects of this process of purification and sharing seem similar to the rituals of the Catholic Mass, in which a single cup is shared, but so far there is no evidence to support any direct influence (Sen 1990: 118-129).

Some soft sounds, especially during the preparation of thick tea, serve to heighten the guests' awareness of the moment, such as the ladle hitting the lid-rest or the “singing” of the kettle. This sound in particular is likened to “the wind in the pines”, a Zen phrase. It is also a symbol of hospitality. Immediately before

the preparation of thin tea, which concludes a Chaji, more charcoal is laid under the kettle. This is not for the practical purpose of ensuring the water is hot enough for the thin tea but so that the kettle is still boiling well when the guests take their leave, meaning that they are welcome to stay longer should they so wish. For the kettle to become silent whilst the guests are still there would be the equivalent of telling them to leave! Such are the considerations of the host (*idem*, 102-109).

## V. Conclusion

Sen-no Rikyu eventually suggested an ethical and aesthetic way of life in “Chado” in which many Zen ideas and principles are contained, such as “simple”, “natural”, “asymmetric”, “profound and subtle”, and “tranquil”. Rikyu especially set forth the principles of tea stating that the host and guests should create a community in which “harmony”, “respect”, “purity” and “tranquillity” are their guides, even if only for a few hours. Soshitsu Sen summarized these tenets as Principles of Chado as follows:

Harmony is the oneness of host and guests, which follows the rhythms of nature. The harmonious atmosphere of a tea gathering depends upon the union of host and guests – a union that must be absolutely sincere and truthful.

Respect is the sincerity of heart that allows one to have an open relationship with the other participants, humbly recognizing their dignity.

Purity is removing the dust of the world from one’s heart and mind. Cleaning in preparation for a tea gathering, the host also establishes order within himself.

Tranquillity comes with the constant practice of harmony, respect and purity in everyday life. In this state of mind, having found peace within oneself, a bowl of tea can truly be shared with another (*idem*, 3-4).

With Rikyu’s guidance, his legacy, called the “tea of quiet taste”, lives on in the millions of tea practitioners in Japan and now, thanks to the work of the fifteenth Grand Master of Urasenke, overseas.

Over the centuries the aesthetic tastes of the Tea Masters have greatly influenced the arts, crafts and architecture of traditional Japan. Minimalism is a

good example. Should you buy a set of plates or bowls, more often than not the box contains only five items as this is the maximum number of guests recommended for a tea gathering. Often Japanese ceramics appear, at first glance, to be primitive or rough to Western eyes. However, upon closer inspection, an individuality and aesthetic beauty emerges which required some intellectual work on the part of the viewer to appreciate. This too is the result of the Tea/Zen aesthetic taking root in everyday culture.

It could be said that such a small society is a petit utopian world as the civic and egalitarian changes it espouses were revolutionary in the hierarchical society in which Chado emerged. We have had many utopian thinkers, historically, and they have presented their idealistic and fantastic ideas up to the present time. Many of them aimed at more or less forming a kind of communitarian scheme. Nevertheless, in today's enormously complicated society with its highly advanced engineering, it is difficult for such a scheme to avoid confrontation. A breakdown has occurred as if a miscarriage were predestined.

Even in the face of difficulties, the significance of a utopian idea should not be neglected. The concepts and practices represented by Tea/Zen demand that we be harmonious and show respect to each other. It may be effective to pursue "self-realization" in tranquillity, when many around us wish to behave individualistically, and to seek enlightenment without distinctions of race, religion, gender, economic or political class

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