

## @ THE INTERSECTION OF ZEN & SCIENCE

By Taiun Michael J. Elliston

Matsuoka Roshi would often declare Zen has no conflict with the findings of science, which is one of the marks that distinguishes it from certain religions. However, the larger category, or philosophy, of rationalism, of which science is a member in good standing, may propose some hypotheses with which Zen would find reason to disagree. In a manuscript I am preparing for publication one day, I set Zen against the opposing fields of Rationalism and Theism for purposes of contrast, and clarifying differences with Zen, as I understand it, in particular.

<u>FIELDS:</u>	<u>RATIONALISM</u>	<u>THEISM</u>	<u>ZEN</u>
<u>Dimensions:</u>	<u>Attributes:</u>		
1. Questions asked:	How?	Why?	What?
2. Problems defined:	Chaos	Sin	Ignorance
3. Attitudes nurtured:	Perseverance	Faith	Doubt
4. Entities trusted:	Evidence	Savior	Self-Nature
5. Methods used:	Experiment	Prayer	Meditation
6. Truths claimed:	Verification	Belief	Identification
7. Goals pursued:	Knowledge	Salvation	Vow
8. Conclusions drawn:	Evolution	Creation	Co-arising

By the time this MS is published, if ever, the above comparison chart will probably undergo some modification, but it will serve our purposes here. Setting aside for now any discussion of Theism, or religion writ large, let us focus on the eight Dimensions between Rationalism and Zen. One caveat: I am not, and do not pretend to be, an expert or authority on Rationalism or Theism, but owing to my practice-experience in Zen, can speak with some confidence as to the importance of the dimensions attributed, and how and where Zen differs.

### THE QUESTION ASKED

The first dimension I feel important to examine is the question that each Field attempts to address. Generally, philosophies and religions tend to seek answers to the great Why questions: Why do we (and the Universe) exist? Why me, Lord? etc. But some wag insisted that in Zen, we do not try to answer the Why questions.

The questions that Science in particular, and Rationality in general, approach are more in the How category: How do things work? How did things get to be the way they are? How can we accurately predict future behavior (of things in the physical realm, of people in the “soft” sciences). Though sometimes these are explained as Why answers, which is just an example of imprecision of language, or semantics.

I contend that Zen does not place its emphasis on either the Why or the How,

other than in very general terms, such as how to practice zazen, and why we prefer it to the other meditations on offer. Rather, Zen focuses on the What: What is this so-called reality? What are we (not Who, which presupposes a personal entity)? And above all, What to do about it? Zen is a school of action. The greatest action we can take, in the face of the unknowable, according to Soto Zen, is zazen.

In this, Zen is more scientific than religious, coming down on the side of Rationalism, and certainly not promoting a “Who” answer to the ultimate conundrum of existence, as does Theism. The What question was raised by Huineng when first meeting his ultimate successor: “What is it that thus comes?”

Our attitude in zazen is more What than Why, or even How, once we are past the newcomer instruction stage, which deals with the practicalities of How to do Zen. What is it that we are doing, actually? What are we facing in zazen? and What does it all mean?

#### THE PROBLEM AS DEFINED

Again side-stepping the Problem of sin for this essay (buy the book!), Chaos as defined in Science and Rationality, and Ignorance as defined in Zen, have some close parallels. The choice of Chaos for Science reflects its generalist application to external issues of survival in a threatening world, its can-do attitude which sets aside personal issues for the sake of objectively identifying and solving crises as well as daily problems of the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

Most of these solutions consist of management of resources toward greater efficiency and sustainability. And they tend to define the world environment as a set of givens, which are ever-changing in detail, but are not dependent upon a particular observer. One goal of science is predictability, the ability to know the most probable outcomes of a given approach to, say, raising crops in the desert, so that not a lot of time is wasted upon solutions that will not work.

Zen differs in that Ignorance is a personal issue. For this reason, the observer is never left out of the equation, from the very beginning of Buddha’s discourse. The whole point is to overcome or transcend our personal ignorance, which incidentally also plagues the scientist striving to come to objective solutions to problems. The uncertainty principle, particularly in its popular understanding as the effect of the observer upon that which is being observed, captures this technical koan.

But defining The Problem as Chaos, uncontrollable and unpredictable reality; and Ignorance, as those blinders that get in the way of our seeing reality; are really just opposite sides of the same coin of sentient being. A being cannot really be separated from its environ, just as the environ cannot be perceived by other than a being. The two are intricately interconnected, as Matsuoka Roshi would put it.

## THE ATTITUDE NURTURED

Perseverance and Doubt are used to describe two legs of the Zen stool, the third being Faith, though the latter is more a matter of trust, or confidence, in the teachings of Buddhism, and in our lineage teachers, than that of blind faith in something or some belief for which we cannot produce evidence.

Perseverance and Doubt—as attitude adjustments entering into and sustaining Zen practice—reflect that whatever the What of Zen is, it cannot be known a priori, but is a matter of experience, and observation.

This is similar in Science. Assumptions about outcomes are not helpful in either endeavor, and can even get in the way of seeing, and consciously registering, data stemming from the study.

Perseverance in scientific endeavors suggests dogged adherence to principles of the scientific method, as well as a willingness to postpone gratification until sufficient detail and peer review confirm the initial “Eureka” moment of the project.

Doubt in Zen provides a similar palliative to the tendency to hope for, and cling to, any premature indication of some kind of insight into the effects of zazen, or the teachings of Zen. Buddha himself is attributed with warning against Fifty States that may arise in meditation, an appendix to the Surangama Sutra, in which he addresses this all-too-human syndrome.

Perseverance in the face of Doubt, evolving to become Great Doubt, is one of the key catchphrases in Zen, summarized by Matsuoka Roshi’s “Don’t give up!”

## THE ENTITY TRUSTED

Evidence for rationalist endeavors such as Science, and Self-Nature in Zen, may seem to be very different categories. But Evidence, technically, is that which can be replicated by others in like experiments, or verified as personal testimony by experts in legal disputes, for example.

That there is something called Self-Nature, Original Nature, or Buddha Nature, likewise, can only be verified by personal experience. This is a slippery slope for some, as this type of Evidence does not usually rise to the level of that required by Science, in that it may be measured, and independently verified by others.

Of course, the argument may be offered that even scientific experiments, yielding hard and verifiable Evidence that can be demonstrated by others, are not ever exactly the same. It is literally impossible to create the exact same conditions in any two experiments. But here, we accept rules-of-thumb, such as “close enough for jazz.” Which is not a slam on jazz improvisation, nor on scientific observation. For purposes of predictability, close is often good enough, as in horseshoes.

In Zen, the point of exploring the possibility that we do not really know ourselves is not to be able to prove something to others. If it works for me, it works. If it does not work for me, I have to be honest about that. Until it does. This is why in Zen we say, "Only you will know for sure." Though your teacher may have some inkling.

Zen is "round and rolling, slippery and slick," as my teacher used to say. Even if we do come to know our Self-Nature in some undeniably genuine way, it is said that "Don't-know mind" is the original mind. Or "Not knowing you know is best!" as some Master lost to memory commented. To know what it means to not know, and be happy with that, is one of the central koans of Zen.

#### TO BE CONTINUED

The latter four Dimensions: Methods Used; Truths Claimed; Goals Pursued; and Conclusions Drawn; will be the subject of next month's Dharma Byte. If you have any questions concerning the above, or aspects of the next four, please do not hesitate to send them to me. I will do my best to address your concerns.