II. THE UNCONSCIOUS IN ZEN BUDDHISM

by D. T. Suzuki

(Erich Fromm, D. T. Suzuki, et al. *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*)

What I mean by "the unconscious" and what psychoanalysts mean by it may be different, and I have to explain my position. First, how do I approach the question of the unconscious? If such a term could be used, I would say that my "unconscious" is "metascientific" or "antescientific." You are all scientists and I am a Zen-man and my approach is "antescientific"—or even "antiscientific" sometimes, I am afraid. "Antescientific" may not be an appropriate term, but it seems to express what I wish it to mean. "Metascientific" may not be bad, either, for the Zen position develops after science or intellectualization has occupied for some time the whole field of human study; and Zen demands that before we give ourselves up unconditionally to the scientific sway over the whole field of human activities we stop and reflect within ourselves and see if things are all right as they are.

The scientific method in the study of reality is to view an object from the so-called objective point of view. For instance, suppose a flower here on the table is the object of scientific study. Scientists will subject it to all kinds of analyses, botanical, chemical, physical, etc., and tell us all that they have found out about the flower from their respective angles of study, and say that the study of the flower is exhausted and that there is nothing more to state about it unless something new is discovered accidentally in the course of other studies.

The chief characteristic, therefore, which distinguishes the scientific approach to reality is to describe an object, to talk *about* it, to go *around* it, to catch anything that attracts our sense-intellect and abstract it *away* from the object itself, and when all is supposedly finished, to synthesize these analytically formulated abstractions and take the outcome for the object itself.

But the question still remains: "Has the complete object been really caught in the net?" I would say, "Decidedly not!" Because the object we think we have caught is nothing but the sum of abstractions and not the object itself. For practical and utilitarian purposes, all these so-called scientific formulas seem to be more than enough. But the object, so-called, is not all there. After the net is drawn up, we find that something has escaped its finer meshes.

There is, however, another way, which precedes the sciences or comes after them, to approach reality. I call it the Zen approach.

1.

The Zen approach is to enter right into the object itself and see it, as it were, from the inside. To know the flower is to become the flower, to be the flower, to bloom as the flower, and to enjoy the sunlight as well as the rainfall. When this is done, the flower

speaks to me and I know all its secrets, all its joys, all its sufferings; that is, all its life vibrating within itself. Not only that: along with my "knowledge" of the flower I know all the secrets of the universe, which includes all the secrets of my own Self, which has been eluding my pursuit all my life so far, because I divided myself into a duality, the pursuer and the pursued, the object and the shadow. No wonder that I never succeeded in catching my Self, and how exhausting this game was!

Now, however, by knowing the flower I know my Self. That is, by losing myself in the flower I know my Self as well as the flower.

I call this kind of approach to reality the Zen way, the antescientific or metascientific or even the antiscientific way.

This way of knowing or seeing reality may also be called conative or creative. While the scientific way kills murders the object and by dissecting the corpse and putting the parts together again tries to reproduce the original living body, which is really a deed of impossibility, the Zen way takes life as it is lived instead of chopping it to pieces and trying to restore its life by intellection, or in abstraction gluing the broken pieces together. The Zen way preserves life as life; no surgical knife touches it. The Zen poet sings:

> All is left to her natural beauty,
> Her skin is intact,
> Her bones are as they are:
> There is no need for the paints, powders of any tint.
> She is as she is, no more, no less.
> How marvelous!

The sciences deal with abstractions and there is no activity in them. Zen plunges itself into the source of creativity and drinks from it all the life there is in it. This source is Zen's Unconscious. The flower, however, is unconscious of itself. It is I who awaken it from the Unconscious. Tennyson misses it when he plucks it from the crannied wall. Basho has it when he looks at the shyly blooming *nazuna* by the wild hedge. I cannot tell just where the unconscious is. Is it in me? Or is it in the flower? Perhaps when I ask, "Where?" it is nowhere. If so, let me be in it and say nothing.

While the scientist murders, the artist attempts to recreate. The latter knows reality cannot be reached by dissection. He therefore uses canvas and brush and paints and tries to create out of his unconscious. When this unconscious sincerely and genuinely identifies itself with the Cosmic Unconscious, the artist's creations are genuine. He has really created something; his work is not a copy of anything; it exists in its own right. He paints a flower which, if it is blooming from his unconscious, is a new flower and not an imitation of nature.

The abbot of a certain Zen monastery wished to have the ceiling of the Dharma Hall decorated with a dragon. A noted painter was asked to do the work. He accepted, but complained that he had never seen a real dragon, if such really existed. The abbot said,

“Don’t mind your not having seen the creature. You become one, you be transformed into a living dragon, and paint it. Don’t try to follow the conventional pattern.”

The artist asked, “How can I become a dragon?” Replied the abbot, “You retire to your private room and concentrate your mind on it. The time will come when you feel that you must paint one. That is the moment when you have become the dragon, and the dragon urges you to give it form.”

The artist followed the abbot’s advice, and after several months’ strenuous strivings he became confident of himself because of his seeing himself in the dragon out of his unconscious. The result is the dragon we see now on the ceiling of the Dharma Hall at the Myoshinji, Kyoto.

Incidentally, I want to mention another story of a dragon’s encounter with a Chinese painter. This painter wished to paint a dragon but, not having seen a live one yet, he longed for a good opportunity. One day a real one looked in from the window and said, “Here I am, paint me!” The painter was so overtaken by this unexpected visitor that he fainted, instead of looking carefully at it. No picture of a live dragon came out of him.

The seeing is not enough. The artist must get into the thing and feel it inwardly and live its life himself. Thoreau is said to have been a far better naturalist than professional ones. So was Goethe. They knew nature just because of their being able to live it. The scientists treat it objectively, that is, superficially. “I and thou” may be all right, but we cannot in truth say that; for as soon as we say it then “I” am “thou” and “thou” art “I.” Dualism can hold itself only when it is backed by something that is not dualistic.

Science thrives on dualism; therefore, scientists try to reduce everything into quantitative measurements. For this purpose they invent all kinds of mechanical devices. Technology is the keynote of modern culture. Anything that cannot be reduced to quantification they reject as not scientific, or as antescientific. They set up a certain set of rules, and things that elude them are naturally set aside as not belonging to their field of study. However fine the meshes, as long as they are meshes some things are sure to escape them and these things, therefore, cannot be measured in any way. Quantities are destined to be infinite, and the sciences are one day to confess their inability to inveigle Reality. The unconscious is outside the field of scientific study. Therefore, all that the scientists can do is point to the existence of such a field. And that is enough for science to do. (inveigle: literally to blind; figuratively to obtain something by ingenuity or flattery)

The unconscious is something to feel, not in its ordinary sense, but in what I would call the most primary or fundamental sense. This may need an explanation. When we say, “I feel the hard table,” or “I feel chilly,” this sort of feeling belongs in the domain of the senses, distinguishable from such senses as hearing or seeing. When we say, “I feel lonely,” or “I feel exalted,” this is more general, more totalistic, more innerly, but it still belongs in the field of relative consciousness. But the feeling of the unconscious is much more basic, primary, and points to the age of “Innocence,” when the awakening of consciousness out of the so-called chaotic Nature has not yet taken place. Nature,

however, is not chaotic, because anything chaotic cannot exist all by itself. It is simply a concept given to the realm which refuses to be measured by the ordinary rules of ratiocination. Nature is chaotic in the sense that it is the reservoir of infinite possibilities. The consciousness evolved out of this chaos is something superficial, touching only the fringe of reality. Our consciousness is nothing but an insignificant floating piece of island in the Oceanus encircling the Earth. But it is through this little fragment of land that we can look out to the immense expanse of the unconscious itself; the feeling of it is all that we can have, but this feeling is not a small thing, because it is by means of this feeling that we can realize that our fragmentary existence gains its full significance, and thus that we can rest assured that we are not living in vain. Science, by definition, can never give us the sense of complete security and fearlessness which is the outgrowth of our feeling of the unconscious.

We cannot all be expected to be scientists, but we are so constituted by nature that we can all be artists—not, indeed, artists of special kinds, such as painters, sculptors, musicians, poets, etc., but artists of life. This profession, "artist of life," may sound new and quite odd, but in point of fact we are all born artists of life and, not knowing it, most of us fail to be so and the result is that we make a mess of our lives, asking, "What is the meaning of life?" "Are we not facing blank nothingness?" "After living seventy-eight, or even ninety years, where do we go? Nobody knows," etc., etc. I am told that most modern men and women are neurotic on this account. But the Zen-man can tell them that they all have forgotten that they are born artists, creative artists of life, and that as soon as they realize this fact and truth they will all be cured of neurosis or psychosis or whatever name they have for their trouble.

2.

What then is meant by being an artist of life?

Artists of any kind, as far as we know, have to use one instrument or another to express themselves, to demonstrate their creativity in one form or another. The sculptor has to have stone or wood or clay and the chisel or some other tools to impress his ideas on the material. But an artist of life has no need of going out of himself. All the material, all the implements, all the technical skill that are ordinarily required are with him from the time of his birth, perhaps even before his parents gave him birth. This is unusual, extraordinary, you may exclaim. But when you think about this for a while you will, I am sure, realize what I mean. If you do not, I will be more explicit and tell you this: the body, the physical body we all have, is the material, corresponding to the painter's canvas, the sculptor's wood or stone or clay, the musician's violin or flute, the singer's vocal cords. And everything that is attached to the body, such as the hands, the feet, the trunk of the body, the head, the viscera, the nerves, the cells, thoughts, feelings, senses—everything, indeed, that goes to make up the whole personality—is both the material on which and the instruments with which the person molds his creative genius into conduct, into behavior, into all forms of action, indeed into life itself. To such a person his life reflects every image he creates out of his inexhaustive source of the unconscious. To such, his every deed expresses originality, creativity, his living personality. There is in it

no conventionality, no conformity, no inhibitory motivation. He moves just as he pleases. His behavior is like the wind, which bloweth as it listeth. He has no self encased in his fragmentary, limited, restrained, egocentric existence. He is gone out of this prison. One of the great Zen masters of the T'ang says: "With a man who is master of himself wherever he may be found he behaves truly to himself." This man I call the true artist of life.

His Self has touched the unconscious, the source of infinite possibilities. His is "no-mind." Says St. Augustine, "Love God and do what you will." This corresponds to the poem of Bunan, the Zen master of the seventeenth century:

> While alive
> Be a dead man,
> Thoroughly dead;
> And act as you will,
> And all is good.

To love God is to have no self, to be of no-mind, to become "a dead man," to be free from the constrictive motivations of consciousness. This man's "Good morning" has no human element of any kind of vested interest. He is addressed and he responds. He feels hungry and eats. Superficially, he is a natural man, coming right out of nature with no complicated ideologies of modern civilized man. But how rich his inward life is! Because it is in direct communion with the great unconscious.

I do not know if it is correct to call this kind of unconscious the Cosmic Unconscious. The reason I like to call it so is that what we generally call the relative field of consciousness vanishes away somewhere into the unknown, and this unknown, once recognized, enters into ordinary consciousness and puts in good order all the complexities there which have been tormenting us to greater or lesser degrees. The unknown thus gets related to our mind, and, to that extent, unknown and mind must be somehow of the same nature and cherish a mutual communication. We can thus state that our limited consciousness, inasmuch as we know its limitation, leads us to all sorts of worry, fear, unsteadiness. But as soon as it is realized that our consciousness comes out of something which, though not known in the way relative things are known, is intimately related to us, we are relieved of every form of tension and are thoroughly at rest and at peace with ourselves and with the world generally. May we not call this unknown the Cosmic Unconscious, or the source of infinite creativity whereby not only artists of every description nourish their inspirations, but even we ordinary beings are enabled, each according to his natural endowments, to turn his life into something of genuine art?

The following story may illustrate to a certain extent what I mean by transforming our everyday life into something of an art. Dogo of the eighth century was a great Zen master of the T'ang dynasty. He had a young disciple who wished to be taught Zen. He stayed with the master for some time but there was no specific teaching. One day he approached the master and said, "I have been with you for quite a while, but I have had no instruction. Why so? Please be good enough to advise me." The master said, "Why! I

have been instructing you in Zen ever since you came to me." Protested the disciple, Pray tell me what instruction it was." "When you see me in the morning you salute me, and I return it. When the morning meal is brought, I accept it gratefully. Where do I not point out the essence of the mind?" Hearing this, the disciple hung his head and seemed to be absorbed in deciphering the meaning of the master's words. The master then told him, "As soon as you begin thinking about it, it is no more there. You must see it immediately, with no reasoning, with no hesitation." This is said to have awakened the disciple to the truth of Zen.

The truth of Zen, just a little bit of it, is what turns one's humdrum life, a life of monotonous, uninspiring commonplaceness, into one of art, full of genuine inner creativity.

There is in all this something which antedates the scientific study of reality, something which cannot be scooped up in the meshes of the scientifically constructed apparatus.

The unconscious in its Zen sense is, no doubt, the mysterious, the unknown, and for that reason unscientific or antescientific. But this does not mean that it is beyond the reach of our consciousness and something we have nothing to do with. In fact it is, on the contrary, the most intimate thing to us, and it is just because of this intimacy that it is difficult to take hold of, in the same way as the eye cannot see itself. To become, therefore, conscious of the unconscious requires a special training on the part of consciousness.

Etiologically speaking, consciousness was awakened from the unconscious sometime in the course of evolution. Nature works its way unconscious of itself, and the conscious man comes out of it. Consciousness is a leap, but the leap cannot mean a disconnection in its physical sense. For consciousness is in constant, uninterrupted communion with the unconscious. Indeed, without the latter the former could not function; it would lose its basis of operation. This is the reason why Zen declares that the Tao is "one's everyday mind." By Tao, Zen of course means the unconscious, which works all the time in our consciousness. The following mondo (question-and-answer) may help us to understand something of the Zen unconscious: When a monk asked a master what was meant by "one's everyday mind," he answered, "When hungry, I eat; when tired, I sleep."

I am sure you would ask: "If this is the unconscious you Zen-men talk about as something highly mysterious and of the greatest value in human life as the transforming agent we cannot help doubting it. All those 'unconscious' deeds have long been relegated to our instinctive reflexive domain of consciousness in accordance with the principle of mental economy. We should like to see the unconscious connected with a much higher function of the mind, especially when, as in the case of a swordsman, this is attained only after long years of strenuous training. As to these reflexive acts, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, etc., they are shared by the lower animals as well as by infants. Zen certainly cannot value them as something the fully matured man has to strive to find meaning in."

Let us see whether or not there is any essential difference between the "instinctive"

unconscious and the highly "trained" unconscious.

Bankei, one of the great modern Japanese Zen masters, used to teach the doctrine of the Unborn. To demonstrate his idea he pointed to facts of our daily experience such as hearing a bird chirp, seeing a flower in bloom, etc., and said that these are all due to the presence in us of the Unborn. Whatever *satori* there is, it must be based on this experience and no others, he concluded.

This seems to point superficially to the identification of our sense-domain and the highly metaphysical Unborn. In one sense the identification is not wrong, but in another sense it is. For Bankei's Unborn is the root of all things and includes not only the sense-domain of our daily experience but the totality of all realities past, present, and future and filling the cosmos to the ends of the ten quarters. Our "everyday mind," or our daily experience, or our instinctive acts, as far as they are considered in themselves, have no special value and significance. They acquire these only when they are referred to the Unborn or what I have called the "Cosmic Unconscious." For the Unborn is the fountainhead of all creative possibilities. It then so happens that when we eat it is not we who eat but the Unborn; when we sleep, tired, it is not we who sleep but the Unborn.

As long as the unconscious is an instinctive one, it does not go beyond that of animals or of infants. It cannot be that of the mature man. What belongs to the latter is the trained unconscious in which all the conscious experiences he has gone through since infancy are incorporated as constituting his whole being. For this reason, in the case of the swordsman, as soon as he takes up the sword his technical proficiency, together with his consciousness of the entire situation, recede into the background and his trained unconscious begins to play its part to the fullest extent. The sword is wielded as if it had a soul in itself.

Perhaps we can say this: the unconscious as far as it is related to the sense-domain is the outcome of a long process of evolution in the cosmical history of life, and it is shared alike by animals and infants. But as intellectual development takes place, as we grow up, the sense-domain is invaded by intellect and the naïveté of sense-experience is lost. When we smile, it is not just smiling: something more is added. We do not eat as we did in our infancy; eating is mixed with intellection. And as we all realize this invasion by the intellect or the mixing with intellect, simple biological deeds are contaminated by egocentric interest. This means that there is now an intruder into the unconscious, which can no longer directly or immediately move into the field of consciousness, and all deeds that have been relegated to biologically instinctive functions now assume the role of consciously and intellectually directed acts.

This transformation is known as the loss of "innocence" or the acquirement of "knowledge" in the usage of the Biblical myth. In Zen and Buddhism generally it is called "the affective contamination (*klesha*)" or "the interference of the conscious mind predominated by intellection (*manovijnana*)."

The mature man is now asked by Zen to cleanse himself of this affective contamination

and also to free himself of the intellectual conscious interference if he sincerely wishes to realize a life of freedom and spontaneity where such disturbing feelings as fear, anxiety, or insecurity have no room to assail him. When this liberation takes place, we have the "trained" unconscious operating in the field of consciousness. And we know what Bankei's "Unborn" or the Chinese Zen master's "everyday mind" is.

3.

We are now ready to hear Takuan's advice to his swordsman disciple Yagyu Tajima-no-kami.

Takuan's advice is chiefly concerned with keeping the mind always in the state of "flowing," for he says when it stops anywhere that means the flow is interrupted and it is this interruption that is injurious to the well-being of the mind. In the case of a swordsman, it means death. The affective taint (*klesha*) darkens the mirror of man's primary *prajna*, and the intellectual deliberation obstructs its native activity. *Prajna*, which Takuan calls "immovable *prajna*," is the directing agency of all our movements, inner as well as outer, and when it is obstructed the conscious mind is clogged and the sword, disregarding the native, free, spontaneous directive activity of the "immovable *prajna,*" which corresponds to our unconscious, begins to obey the consciously acquired technical skill of the art. *Prajna* is the immovable mover which unconsciously operates in the field of consciousness.

When the swordsman stands against his opponent, he is not to think of the opponent, nor of himself, nor of his enemy's sword-movements. He just stands there with his sword which, forgetful of all technique, is really only to follow the dictates of the unconscious. The man has effaced himself as the wielder of the sword. When he strikes, it is not the man but the sword in the hands of the unconscious that strikes. There are stories in which the man himself has not been aware of the fact that he has struck down the opponent—all unconsciously. The working of the unconscious is in many cases simply miraculous.

Let me give one instance: the Magnificent Seven.

There is a Japanese film, recently introduced to American audiences, with a scene where the unemployed samurais are given a trial of their swordsmanship. This is fictitious, but there is no doubt that it is all based on facts of history. The leader of the whole enterprise contrived a certain way whereby each swordplayer was to be tested. He placed a village youth behind the entrance which must be passed by every comer to the building. As soon as a samurai tried to step over this threshold, the young man was to strike him suddenly with a stick and see how the newcomer behaved.

The first one was caught and received the stick coming down on him with its full force. He failed to pass the test. The second one dodged the blow and in return struck the young man. He was not thought good enough to pass. The third one stopped at the entrance and told the one behind the door not to try such a mean trick on a fully seasoned warrior. For this one sensed the presence of a secret enemy inside even before he actually detected

him who was securely hidden. This was due to the long experience this samurai had had to go through in those turbulent days. He thus proved to be a successful candidate for the work that was to be carried out in the village.

This sensing of an unseen enemy seems to have developed among the swordsmen to a most remarkable degree of efficiency in those feudal days when the samurai had to be on the alert in every possible situation that might arise in his daily life. Even while asleep he was ready to meet an untoward event.

I do not know if this sense could be called a sixth sense or a sort of telepathy and therefore a subject for parapsychology, so-called. One thing at least I wish to mention is that philosophers of swordplay ascribe this sense acquired by the swordsman to the working of the unconscious, which is awakened when he attains a state of selflessness, of no-mind. They would say that when the man is trained to the highest degree of the art he has no more of the ordinary relative consciousness in which he realizes that he is engaged in the struggle for life and death, and that when this training takes effect his mind is like a mirror on which every thought that would be moving in the opponent's mind is reflected and he knows at once where and how to strike the opponent. (To be exact, this is not knowledge but an intuition taking place in the unconscious.) His sword moves, mechanically as it were, all by itself, over an opponent who finds defense impossible because the sword falls on the spot where the opponent is not at all on guard. The swordsman's unconscious is thus said to be the outcome of selflessness which, being in accord with the "Reason of Heaven and Earth," strikes down everything that is against this Reason. The race or the battle of swordsmanship is not to the swiftest or to the strongest or to the most skillful, but to the one whose mind is pure and selfless.

Whether or not we accept this interpretation is another question; the fact is that the master swordsman possesses what we may designate the unconscious and this state of mind is attained when he is no more conscious of his acts and leaves everything to something which is not of his relative consciousness. We call this something or somebody; because of it being outside the ordinary field of consciousness we have no word for it except to give it a negative name, X, or the unconscious. The unknown, or X, is too vague, and as it comes in connection with consciousness in such a way that X avails itself of all the technical skill acquired consciously, it may be not inappropriately designated as the unconscious.

4.

What is the nature of this unconscious? Is it still in the field of psychology, though in its widest sense of the term? Is it somehow related to the source of all things, such as the "Reason of Heaven and Earth," or something else which comes up in the ontology of Eastern thinkers? Or shall we call it "the great perfect mirror knowledge (*adarsanajnana*)," as it is sometimes called by Zen masters?

The following incident told of Yagyu Tajima-no-kami Munenori, a disciple of Takuan, the Zen master, may not be directly related to the unconscious described in the preceding

part of this lecture. One reason is that he is not actually facing the enemy. But it may not be a matter of indifference to the psychologist to find that a faculty which may almost be called parapsychic can be developed by going through a certain form of discipline. I may perhaps add that the case of Yagyu Tajima-no-kami has, of course, not been tested in a scientific way. But there are a number of such cases recorded in the annals of Japanese swordsmanship, and even in our modern experiences there is reason to believe in the probability of such "telepathic" intuition, while I must repeat that this kind of psychological phenomenon has probably nothing to do with the unconscious of which I have been talking.

Yagyu Takima-no-kami was one spring day in his garden admiring the cherry trees in full bloom. He was, to all appearances, deeply absorbed in contemplation. He suddenly felt a *sakki* (air of murder) threatening him from behind. Yagyu turned around, but did not see any human being approaching except the young boy attendant who generally follows his lord carrying his sword. Yagyu could not determine the source from which emanated the *sakki*. This fact puzzled him exceedingly, tor he had acquired after long training in swordplay a kind of sixth sense whereby he could detect at once the presence of *sakki*.

He soon retired into his room and tried to solve the problem, which annoyed him very much. For he had never made a mistake before in detecting and locating definitely the origin of *sakki* whenever he sensed its presence. He looked so annoyed with himself that all his attendants were afraid of approaching him to ask what was the matter.

Finally, one of the older servants came up to him to inquire if he were not feeling ill and in need of their help in one way or another. Said the lord, "No, I am not ill. But I have experienced something strange while out in the garden, which goes beyond my understanding. I am contemplating the matter." So saying, he told him the whole incident.

When the matter became known among the attendants, the young one who was following the lord came forward tremblingly and made this confession: "When I saw your lordship so absorbed in admiring the cherry blossoms, the thought came upon me: However skillful our lord may be in his use of the sword, he could not in all probability defend himself if I at this moment suddenly struck him from behind. It is likely that this secret thought of mine was felt by the lord." So confessing, the young one was ready to be punished by the lord for his unseemly thought.

This cleared up the whole mystery that had been troubling Yagyu so very much and the lord was not in the mood to do anything to the innocent young offender. He was satisfied by seeing that his feeling did not err.

Erich Fromm, D. T. Suzuki, et al. *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, N.Y., Harper Colophon Books, 1960 (pp. 10-24).