ZEN AESTHETICS IN JAPANESE THEATRE

Prof. Shozo Sato

The effect of Zen philosophy on the Japanese theatre arts can best be understood in comparison with the western approach to the performing arts. Essentially the difference is that Western forms approach truth through reality, while the arts of Japan approach truth through fantasy.

Through many centuries artists of the western world have started with realism as a point of departure and have worked to distort reality in their own style (Dali's surrealism, Picasso's cubism, etc.) or else have shaped their art work as closely to the natural world as possible. Yet in performing arts many western masters have attempted to escape from reality into a world of fantasy. The history of western theatre is, in fact, cyclic: reality moves toward fantasy, the cycle comes full round, and there is a return to reality. In recent years the western theatre has passed a peak of realism, and now the trend is once again towards fantasy. However, even the efforts in the area of fantasy take realism as a point of departure in the western tradition. Examples of this are Peter Brook's *Mid Summer Night's Dream,* and the popular musical *The Man of La Mancha.*

Until western cultural ideas became influential in Japan during the past century, western realism was non-existent in the Japanese arts. The primary reason for this is that the Japanese religious philosophy, Zen, which permeates all Japanese life and arts, precludes the realism of western culture. This essential lack of realism is not generally understood by western youth in their attempts to study Zen. Consequently as Zen is presented in the West, the emphasis is often on mysticism. The reason for this is that the western student tends to abstract logical western conclusions from the Zen *koan,* which are like the Christian parables.

Westerners tend to see the Zen *koan* as interesting stories or tales, not as philosophical teachings. Consequently, western students study the *koan* as interesting stories, but their real purpose, enlightenment through sudden insight, is divorced from the details of the stories' circumstances.

In my youth I was associated with Zen philosophy and with the monks of Kamakura, a Zen mecca of sorts. My experiences there opened the eyes of my spirit. I came to understand that Zen is founded upon the personal discovery of the natural world in association with its underlying meaning. The natural world enables us to perceive the philosophical reality (not the physical reality) of life in cycles. The physical world of birth, ageing, and death reveals to us the philosophical reality of the continuing cycle.

A timely example of how such a philosophy functions can be found in a western situation. A student enrolls in university courses and pushes through them. Often there is no evaluation stage at the end of the course at which the student asks, "Why did I take this course?" If he asks himself at the beginning of the course, "Why am I taking this course?" he may indeed answer, "I need it to graduate," or "I think I'm interested in this." But when, if ever, does he look back and ask, "Why do I take this course?" Only *after* the experience can he truly answer, and only then can he see that there may be many answers to the question why. In Zen orientation the main objective is to have the individual clearly discover and experience the nature of reality from his own point of view. The experience *is* the reality, and in Zen, the surface experience is the core of truth for each individual.

Commitment to the core of truth, along with artistic discipline, permits the creative master to perceive that style (reality concept, structure, call it what you will) is not what is important. The surface details of life may indeed be cruel. Because of this the purpose of both philosophy and art in Zen is to provide a respite from reality and encouragement to go on with life. Thus to the Japanese artist, recreating reality in art becomes meaningless.

To the Zen artist, artistic exercise or practice is the combination of performing skills accompanied with the participation of total self presence and the innovative approaches unique to each individual. The true practice is to arrive at a willingness to let the creation happen through the artist; he is really a disciplined and intellectually aware medium of the created truth. Thus the reality sphere for the Zen artist lies in the art object created rather than in himself; but his point of departure is not the real, but the imagined.

Picture this concept as a continuum. At one extreme there are art objects which incorporate the maximum enrichment of the cultural stylization. At the other extreme is the category of

abstraction to the bare essence. To the western world, the basis of the continuum is reality; for the Zen artist, the continuum is an imaginitive one, aimed clearly and solely at creative purpose.

Let me give you some examples from Zen art forms. In Japanese literature, there are two extreme forms. *The Tale of Gengi* is not only the longest and most embellished of Japanese novels, but it ranks among the oldest and longest in the world. It is in the category of *e-maki-mono* (a hand-written script with illustrations). At the other extreme is the Haiku poetry, a form comprised of seventeen syllables.

In painting, the richest Japanese form is *kin-den-ga* (gold mud-painting). The gold paint is used as lavishly as if the artist were slinging mud. Examples of this style are found on sliding doors of castles or temples as well as on folding screens. The example of the minimal painting art is *sui-boku-ga* (water-black ink painting), or *Sumi-e.*

In architecture the maximum or most lavish example is the Toshongu Shrine in Nikko province, as opposed to the example of minimal architecture revealed in the tea ceremony room found in many houses.

In the performing arts the maximal lavish form is *Kabuki.* and the form of abstracted essence is *Noh.*

Whichever extreme the examples come from, they are recognized as outstanding cultural forms to connoisseurs of either the East or the West. The Zen artist arrives at his own point on the continuum through his philosophical training. His training encompasses underlying truth which enables him to see truth as expressed by other artists whose works with the minimum concept, such as *Noh,* he tries to extract unnecessary elements f theatre art. With the maximum concept *(Kabuki* for example) he gives much care to enriching details.

It is as though the two extreme concepts are embodied in identically shaped cubes which are mirror images of each other. Potentially, each concept is equal, and each must be utilized with equal care. The material of the idea cube is the concept of "fine art." If you mis-use or mistreat the cube, it shatters. You can't substract too much when working with abstracted essence or there is no art; you can't add too much of the wrong detail when working with the lavish concept or there is no art. The delicacy with which either concept is exercised is one of artistic choice. Man's intellect determines the dimensions of the cube he creates. Time judges his creation.

Thus the difference between western and Zen artists goes something like this: For the western artist, the created dimen-

sions of fantasy are brought to his sense of reality, which he retains throughout the creative act whether he works at the lavish or essential extreme of the spectrum. The Zen artist, in grasping the extremes, is part of the underlying truth those extremes illustrate. For him, his reality is non-existent at the moment of creation. He is part of the continuum and seeks to find truth in the circumstance of the moment. For him, the truth can be untrue and fire can be cold. Untruth can be true, and ice can be on fire. Such elasticity or versatility which derives from Zen philosophy allows the artist to use his intelligence to create either maximum or minimum art with total involvement of the self in his creation. He becomes a part of it. The reality exists only in what he creates.

A final comparison is the contrast between two social customs of the East and West, the tea ceremony and the cocktail party. The purpose of going to a cocktail party is to be recognized and to recognize others. The purpose of the tea ceremony is to deny you who are outside the tea room. The tea room thus becomes a cube exemplifying the minimal end of the artistic spectrum.

The Zen aesthetic in Japanese theatre permits great creativity in dramatic expression because the artistic continuum is based upon imagination rather than reality. However, the reason that this concept is often difficult for western-oriented students to grasp is that they look more closely at the more accessible social structure rather than the Zen philosophy underlying the structure. This philosophy necessarily makes of the arts an expressive and imaginative experience.

Again, to make my statement clear, to find the aesthetic roots of Japanese theatre, the environment of Japanese arts and their background and philosophy must be understood. For example, the Japanese society is itself somewhat like a Zen monastry. Many incidents which take place in daily life are related to a Zen point of view. Most Japanese are unaware of this deeply ingrained Zen point of view because it is culturally too close to be identified. Only a small number of intellectuals recognize the existence of this Zen philosophy in Japanese society. They seek further understanding and discipline on a purely philosophical plane, which eventually leads to becoming a Zen philosopher under the direction of Zen masters. When facing adversity, the Japanese with his disciplined mind will attempt to accept the inevitable and make the best of the situation by seeing it in context of an entire picture which reduces complaints and negativism. Simple old sayings may have deep philosophical points of view which resemble a Zen *koan*. Here are a few examples of old Japanese sayings and their relationship to the Zen point of view:

> "A person's mastery of one art immediately opens the door to undertanding all arts." (This is exactly the same as reaching enlightenment in Zen discipline.)

"Too many words reduce pure meaning." (This saying states the basic idea behind the Zen *koan,* to crystalize thoughts in one word. The approach of *Noh* drama, which crystalizes expression in the smallest possible movement, is the same.)

"The eye speaks more than the mouth." (This is the basis of *Kabuki* acting. Acting is based on the spirit and is expressed by the eyes.)

An understanding of, not the exotic element of Zen, but the true spiritual Zen is a necessary prelude to understanding Japanese art forms.

The famous *Kabuki* actor Onoe Kikugoro VI studied Zen under a famous Zen master. After many steps of the discipline of the *koan,* the key to his reaching enlightenment was the following *koan,* "Can you hide behind the sound of the temple bell?" At that time he lived in Kamakura, where he heard temple bells morning and evening. One morning he heard the temple bell when he was about ready to get out of bed. He said to himself, "Here is a temple bell." At that moment he felt that he had become transparent. In this way he reached enlightenment as an actor.

A comment made by Nakamura Shikaku II, a famous *Kabuki* actor of today, is about abstract elements and is similar to a Zen *koan.* It is written on the diploma the master of *Noh* drama gives to his students. When the student opens the diploma, which is a hand scroll, he finds many feet of blank paper.

Finally, he finds one sentence, "Concentration on the little finger." These are simple examples to show the relationship of Zen to the performing artist as an individual.

The great Zeami, the founder of *Noh* drama in the fourteenth century, was already relating Zen to the philosophy of the performing arts. In his famous sacred book of the *Noh,* the *Kaden-Sho,* h quotes the famous seventh century Chinese Zen monk's poem:

If there are many seeds in the mind
When the rain falls copiously from Heaven
All the seeds will sprout

If you understand the mind of flowers
You will understand Bodhi
Supreme enlightenment

The basic meaning of this is that enlightenment cannot be reached only by meditating, but by total physical and spiritual discipline, especially in the performing arts.

Prof. Shozo Sato is an eminent creative artist of Japan. He is a Grand Master of the Tea Ceremony, a leading authority on Ikebana, his book on flower arrangement being the standard work on the subject, he is a sculptor of merit and a sumi-e painter. Above all he is a highly gifted Kabuki actor and director. At present he is at the Krannert Centre for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois, U.S.A. Prof. Sato visited India in July-August, 1972.