THE TATHĀGATA-GARBHA AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

— A Two-Fingered Approach to Zen —

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I

In the past few years interest in Zen has sharpened among Western scholars. Nearly every issue of *Philosophy East and West*, for example, carries some discussion of Zen. But except for the articles by D. T. Suzuki most of the essays on the subject are stimulating but not particularly enlightening. At the philosophic level Zen seems especially elusive. Western philosophy—despite such promising tools as F. S. C. Northrop's "two-termed relation of epistemic correlation"—still lifts an awkward finger when it tries to point to the moon of Zen. To find a more accurate pointer in Western thought, we must leave philosophy and go to depth of psychology, specifically to the ideas and techniques developed by the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung. This paper will compare two concepts—the collective unconscious of Jungian psychology and the Tathāgata-garbha of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. It will argue that these two fingers—one Western and the other Eastern—apparently point to the same moon.

In many ways Jungian psychology forms a unique bridge to Eastern religion. Jung himself has made a deep study of both Western and Eastern religious experience. In fact, he owes an important part of his psychotherapeutic method to Meister Eckehart—perhaps the nearest thing in Western religion to a Zen master. Acknowledging his debt, Jung says: "The art of letting things happen, action in nonaction, letting go of oneself, as taught by Meister Eckehart, became the key to me with which I was able to open the door to the 'Way'. The key is this: we must be able to let things happen in the psyche."¹ Jung, moreover, unlike Freud and Adler, the two other big names in modern psychology, avoids a reductive technique. He works on the premise that the unconscious cannot be reduced to the terms of consciousness. In short, he represents a new departure in Western psychology—a shift from

the purely rationalistic viewpoint to an outlook embracing more of life. "If psychology remains only a science," he says, "we do not reach life—we merely serve the absolute aim of science."²

With this in mind Jung has developed a technique for reconciling mentally sick Europeans to life. This technique is described by one of his interpreters in these words: "Jungian psychotherapy is no analytical procedure in the usual meaning of this term, although it holds strictly to the medically, scientifically, and empirically confirmed premises of research in all relevant fields. It is a *Heilsueg*, a 'way of healing' in both meanings of the German term which signifies at the same time 'healing' and 'salvation.'"³ As a psychotherapist Jung emphasizes the healing experience—not the theoretic trappings. It is this practical approach—the subordination of psychological concepts to the central experience—that brings Jungian psychotherapy into close relation with the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and Zen.

In both Jungian psychotherapy and Zen Buddhism the central experience is by its very nature beyond words. In the Laṅkāvatāra the Buddha makes this clear in a passage often quoted by Chinese Zen masters: "From the night of Enlightenment till that of Nirvāṇa, I have not in the meantime made any proclamation whatever."⁴ Jung puts the same idea this way: "The ultimate core of meaning may be circumscribed but not described."⁵

II

In circumscribing the central experience Jung's key concept is the collective unconscious. It bears a striking resemblance to the Tathāgata-garbha—the key circumscribing concept in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. The Tathāgata-garbha (used interchangeably with the Ālayavijñāna in the Laṅkāvatāra) indiscriminately gathers up all the impressions and "memory seeds" (bīja) that are produced and left behind by our thoughts, feelings, and actions. It also does more, and this is where it coincides with the collective unconscious. It goes beyond individual experience; it holds—in potentia—every thing that has been experienced by sentient beings. In the Laṅkāvatāra this residue is called Vāsanā—"a super-sensuous energy (acintyā-vāsanā-pariṇāma) mysteriously emanating from every thought, every feeling, or every deed that one has done or does, which lives latently in the storehouse called Ālayavijñāna."⁶ "Storehouse of memory"⁷—one of the terms Jung uses to describe the collective unconscious—could pass as a translation Ālayavijñāna.

Vāsanā—in its superpersonal aspect—corresponds to Jung's concept of arche-

types. Jung regards the archetype as “an eternal presence” in the collective unconscious. “It is simply a question,” he says, “whether consciousness perceives it or not.”⁸ But Jung goes further; he emphasizes that even if perceived the archetype cannot be known in itself. “It has a potential existence only,” he points out, “and when it takes shape in matter, it is no longer what it was.”⁹ In the collective unconscious, then, what passes through time — from generation to generation — is the archetype potential — in other words, “tendencies that are ingrained in the nature of the psyche and are inherited only in the sense that the structure of the psyche is inherited.”¹⁰

Just as the archetype is indispensable to the understanding of the collective unconscious, Vāsanā is indispensable to the understanding of the Tathāgata-garbha. Suzuki, in his *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, calls Vāsanā “a new conception in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It come from the root *vas* meaning ‘to dwell, to stay,’ or ‘to perfume,’ and in the Mahāyāna sūtras it is used in the two senses combined; that is, in the sense of a perfuming agency that leaves its essence permanently behind in the thing it has perfumed.”¹¹ As in Jung’s concept of archetypes, we have here a strong sense of potentiality and of inherited pathways. In the Laṅkāvatāra there is a passage that brings the two concepts even closer: “O Mahāmāti, the Tathāgata-garbha contains in itself causes alike good and not-good, and from which are generated all paths of existence.”¹²

Two more quotations — one from an interpreter of Jung and the other from the Laṅkāvatāra — will suffice to underline the similarity of the two concepts. In *Jung’s Psychology and Its Social Meaning* Progoff says: “The fundamental hypothesis on which Jung works is the idea that the potentialities within the individual personality are not left unaffected by the developments of history, and that what happens in time leaves its marks not only on the psyche of the individual, but also on the continuity of the human race.”¹³ The Laṅkāvatāra puts the idea more succinctly: “What transmigrates, Mahāmāti, is the Tathāgata-garbha, which is the cause of Nirvāna as well as that of pleasure and pain.”¹⁴

Another quality that the collective unconscious and the Tathāgata-garbha share is this: both give rise to consciousness. “Our individual conscious psychology,” says Jung, “develops out of an original state of unconsciousness and therefore of non-differentiation.”¹⁵ In the Laṅkāvatāra the concept that corresponds to the consciousness is *Manas*. With the six other differentiating *Vijñānas* it evolves out of the Tathā-

gata-garbha and establishes a dualistically conditioned world. Self-realization—in both Laṅkāvatāras and Jungian psychotherapy—means breaking through this net of opposites and experiencing original self-identity. This experience—called Praty-ātmagocara in the Laṅkāvatāra and Individuation by Jung—is the moon to which both the Tathāgata-garbha and the collective unconscious point. It is because of the Tathāgata-garbha (or its Western counterpart, the collective unconscious) that the breakthrough is at all possible.

III

How is the breakthrough induced? In both Jungian psychology and the Laṅkāvatāra the process begins with a shift of direction—a turning away from the external world. The Laṅkāvatāra would lead the truth-seeker to self-realization through quiet meditation. Since the Tathāgata-garbha contains “causes alike good and not-good,” he must somehow bring them to consciousness and differentiate them. He is warned of the tenacity of Vāsanā: “Those who train themselves in tranquillisation are not always conscious of the subtlety of the working of their habit-energy, and they imagine that they enter into a perfect state of tranquillisation by annihilating all the Vijñānas. But the fact is they have not annihilated the Vijñānas though they may be in a state of tranquillisation, for their seeds of habit-energy are not fully destroyed.”¹⁶ And so the truth-seeker keeps dredging the Tathāgata-garbha until he reaches the final stage—“a state of imagelessness.”¹⁷

A similar principle operates in the Individuation process. But the point of departure is quite different. Jung’s patients usually start the treatment because they have come to the end of their rope. But with them, too, the road back leads through the personal unconscious to the collective unconscious. Jung’s technique, very briefly, is to reactivate the unconscious through conscious suspense and to integrate each new compensatory reaction in the unconscious with consciousness. As psychic energy regresses deeper, it taps deeper resources of the psyche. The archetypal images—the depth markers in Jung’s process—gradually take on a more primordial cast. Finally, after experiencing every stage of the process and understanding it at least intuitively, the conscious frees itself from the pull of one of the most persistent archetypes of all—the *mana* personality. “The dissolution of the *mana* personality through conscious assimilation of its contents,” says Jung, “leads us, by a natural route, back to ourselves as an actual, living something, poised between two world pictures and their darkly discerned potencies. This ‘something’ is strange to us and yet so

near, wholly ourselves and yet unknowable, a virtual centre of so mysterious a constitution that it can claim anything—kinship with beasts and gods, with crystals and with stars—without moving us to wonder, without even exciting our disapprobation.....I have called this centre the *self*.”¹⁸ Jung makes it clear that “the *self* has as much to do with the ego as the sun with the earth. They are not interchangeable.”¹⁹ The goal of Individuation then is “transformation; not indeed a predetermined, but rather an indeterminable change, the only criterion of which is the disappearance of I-ness.”²⁰

And so the tired traveler, in both the Eastern and Western ways of self-realization, returns home again—only to find that he has never been away.

IV

Does all this add up to Zen? It is true that both Suzuki and Jung use similar expressions in trying to put across an inherently indescribable experience. “Most of us stand at the periphery and attempt to survey the whole.” Suzuki says; “this position the Zen master wants us to change; he who sits at the centre of the eternal harmony knows well where we are bound, while we at the furthest end remain bewildered, perplexed, and quite at a loss how and where to proceed.” But this, Suzuki adds, is how the logic-ridden mind would interpret the orientation of the Zen master. “As for the Zen master himself, things may appear quite in another light. He may say that there is no periphery besides the centre, for centre is periphery and periphery is centre.”²¹

Jung resorts to the same paradox: “The *self* is not only the midpoint but also the circumference, taking in consciousness and the unconscious; it is the centre of psychic totality as the ego is the centre of consciousness.”²²

We have here then a verbal correlation of a high order. But, of course, it is not Zen. What we see are two fingers apparently pointing at the same moon. We have merely compared two approaches to “the other shore”—one a relatively new method developed in the West and the other an old one explained in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, a Buddhist text closely linked with the early history of Zen in China but which later, at the time of the fifth patriarch, gave way to the simpler Vajracchedikā. But if we know where the approaches are, we can perhaps bring the jump-off point—or more accurately, the let-go point—a little closer to “the other shore.”

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