



STATEMENT DB-550

## ZEN AND THE ART OF NOT KNOWING GOD

by Stephen H. Short

The alarm clock read midnight. I groggily swung my feet onto the knot-holed floor; it creaked as I felt my way through the darkness. Outside the window, the faint stars barely illuminated the encroaching forest. I lit a candle stuck to a plank of wood — my altar — and bowed deeply to the unsmiling Buddha next to it.

My knees ached as I positioned myself on a black cushion, legs folded beneath me, palms up, back straight. Before lowering my gaze to a spot on the floor, I caught the baleful stare of Bodhidharma, an early Zen Master whose fierce, bulging eyes screwed into me from a poster on the opposite wall.

The candle dripped and the night clung to its mysteries. The darkness seemed to close in on the small circle of light, buffeting it back and forth as if to squash it.

Suddenly, something passed over my head. I thought I was alone in this cabin deep in the Maine woods. Fear gripped my insides like a strongman's hand. It happened again. I could hear it coming closer with each pass.

Here was a chance to truly practice Zen. Despite my fear, I focused all my attention on the spot on the floor. I kept my mind clear and devoid of thought. I remained unmoved by any emotion. The passing thing came closer, like a whisper in my ear. Then something scaly brushed against my forehead. Unable to stand it any longer, the next time it passed I raised my eyes and found myself staring into the glinty eyes of a foot-long bat as it swept across my face.

How did I get here, I wondered? Where am I going? And can I get there from here?

I first began reading about Zen the day before I graduated from college. I wandered into a campus bookstore and asked for a good introduction to this curious, mystical philosophy I'd heard so much about. I was given Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen*.

The attraction was immediate. I was drawn to the mystery of it all. Watts claimed there was a knowing beyond knowing. But, no one could tell you about it; you had to discover it yourself. You did this by becoming still.

But it was the promised fruit of this discovery that was most fascinating to me. It seemed that this knowing — called enlightenment — released one from pain, suffering, and death. My attraction to Zen is perhaps best illustrated in a letter I wrote to the man who later became my Zen Master:

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One day, when I was very young, some friends and I decided to climb the roof of a large barn nearby. It was very steep and high, and we went out from the inside through a second story window. When my turn came, without really thinking about what I was doing, I climbed out the window and started up the roof. There was no problem; it was easy and fun. But when I got about halfway up, I suddenly looked down, realized where I was, and was filled with fear. I stopped. I couldn't move. I laid there and just tried to hold on. I couldn't go up and I couldn't go back down. I stayed that way for a long time. Finally, with my father offering words of encouragement from the ground, I fearfully inched my way back down to the window and safety.

My life since then has been one of confusion. I don't know what's ahead, and I don't understand what's behind. I don't believe in anything, and I don't know what to believe in.

I feel like I'm still halfway up the roof, unable to move, just trying to hold on.

*Zen promised a way out of this dilemma.* It promised freedom: freedom from confusion and freedom from fear, particularly that fear that seems to lurk behind all others — the fear of death. Those who attain enlightenment, I read, are *beyond* life and death. They are beyond every opposite, even "me" and "not me." This transcendence seems to give the enlightened almost godlike power and understanding.

After years of reading about Zen and its claims, I was driven to test them when my marriage broke up and I sank into a state of crushing despair. I stopped by a Zen center in my area and, by coincidence, a famous Zen Master was visiting that night. Compelled by my pain, I insisted on an audience.

Ushered into a muted, incense-laden room, I was confronted by the stare of a shaven-head Korean man, about 50, dressed in long, gray robes. His expression was completely impassive, as though he weren't really there. And his eyes looked straight through me, as though I weren't there, either. He seemed to know everything I intended to say, so I dared not conceal anything. All I could blurt out was, "Why am I so unhappy?"

"Because you don't understand your true nature!", he shot back without a pause. "Don't ask 'why.' 'Why' is a very bad word. You come to the Zen center, do hard training, and then you will understand your true nature."

I didn't know what he meant by my "true nature," but here was someone confidently offering a way to happiness. That was all I needed: I was ready to walk the path of Zen.

I began attending lectures at the Zen center. It quickly appeared that my chief obstacle to perfect freedom was my thinking. The solution is to have a nonthinking mind. The Master called this a "don't know" mind.

This "don't know" mind, he explained, is totally empty and clear. It holds no beliefs or ideas. In fact, it holds no sense of a "me" that might have any ideas. "You must put it all down," the Master would say. "Put down "I," "my," "me." Don't hold anything, don't make anything, don't attach to anything. Only go straight — don't know!"

But, I wondered, if I put down "I," "my," and "me," what's left? How do I function if I don't think?

The Master explained that stripping our minds bare in this way reveals our true nature. This nature is like a perfectly clean mirror. It accurately reflects the things around it. A mind with ideas, on the other hand, is like a dirty mirror, distorting our perceptions.

With a clean mind-mirror, we are at last able to act "correctly." With a clear perception of each new situation, and no thought of self, we can respond according to our true nature. For example, if we encounter a man who is starving,

and our mind-mirror is perfectly clear, our response will also be perfectly clear — we will give him food. This is the unthinking and *hence correct* response. The "don't know" mind-mirror only reflects hunger and is not obscured by preconceptions, evaluations, or selfish motives. It is as if the observer himself is starving, for his mind is holding no idea of separation between "me" and "other."

I questioned, though, whether it is possible to have a truly "don't know" mind. Aren't we always holding *something*? If we feed the hungry man, for example, aren't we holding a value for human life? To a truly "don't know" mind — not attached to *anything* — whether the hungry man lives or dies shouldn't matter.

It made me wonder where the value for human life — or any impulse toward good — comes from. But I stopped wondering. If I'm to be a Zen student, I told myself, I must get rid of such thoughts and always keep a "don't know" mind — even when listening to the Zen Master extol the "value" of letting go of all values.

The vehicle for thinking is language, and the Zen Master dismissed this, too. "The sun never said, 'I am sun,' and the moon never said, 'I am moon.'" He wanted us to see that our names for things — and our thinking about them — get in the way of a pure experience of them, of their clear reflection in our mind-mirrors. But, I thought to myself, is language really so bad? I wondered if without language the correct response of the "don't know" mind is always possible. In the case of the starving man, would we always know what his needs were if he didn't tell us, "I haven't eaten in days. Please help me."? Isn't language a more precise and reliable way to transmit information than mere impressions?

But the Zen Master wanted us to *experience* life, not *think* about it. I became paralyzed on the barn roof as a child, he explained, because I stopped to *think*. He illustrated the importance of not thinking by recounting a childhood experience of his own:

When I was eight years old, I went to the mountains with my friends. We used a sickle to cut the grass...to make compost. I liked that job, so I cut a lot of grass, gathered it all in a bag, and went together with the other students cutting grass to go to school. At that time, one of my friends said to me, "You cut your leg!" Then I looked at my leg and saw the blood. I was bleeding very badly and the blood was making squishing sounds in my rubber shoe as I walked. As soon as I saw this, I fell to the ground in great pain and couldn't move.

I had already walked half a mile with no feeling — only very happy. Then I saw my leg. So I had a problem because I *checked* something. Before checking is called "go-straight" mind. [Then] there is no problem. *After* checking [came] the feelings, "I," "my," "me," and problems appear. I couldn't move. It [was] the same as [with] you. When you went out onto the roof, you had "go-straight" mind. Then you *checked* something and couldn't move and were afraid — "How can I get down?"

But, I pondered, if we only go straight ahead and don't think about such dangers to our survival as falling off a roof or bleeding to death, why bother to feed ourselves or the starving man? I asked myself if there were some trustworthy values we should hold onto, perhaps preserved somewhere in language. But I decided not to continue asking such questions.

Instead, in the true spirit of a "don't know" mind, I chose to "go straight" to the next step on the Zen path: living in a temple. Because I was also interested in writing popular songs, I decided to move to my Master's branch center in the Korean section of Los Angeles, a city well-known as a center for commercial music.

My pursuit of a worldly career like songwriting didn't seem to bother the Zen Master. What I *did*, he said, wasn't important — it was *how* I did it. "Whatever you do, do it completely. If you're drinking coffee, only drink coffee 100 percent. If you're playing tennis, only play tennis 100 percent. If you're sitting on the toilet, only do that 100 percent.

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Don't think about it — only *do* it!"

Any occupation was acceptable, it seemed, so long as I kept a "don't know" mind. Did this mean I could be a professional assassin? Presumably not, because the "don't know" mind allows only "correct" behavior. But, since a "don't know" mind assumes the absence of any values, what's to check my actions?

The Master, in fact, had fought against the communist North Koreans. His "don't know" mind told him this was "correct" because the enemy was antireligious and bent on destroying Buddhism. How was he different from the North Korean soldier who fought for his own equally idealistic and selfless reasons?

As I boarded the plane in Boston for Los Angeles, I knew I had to banish such idle speculations. I was about to begin committed Zen practice.

The midnight flight descended into the thick smog, which hazed over what light existed in the blackness. After a long drive over the enshrouded freeways, we arrived at the Zen Center just in time for "morning practice."

Morning practice began every day with a 4:30 a.m. wake-up, followed by 108 deep prostrations (starting in a standing position and ending on the knees with face to the floor), chanting, and meditation. This took about two hours. Evening practice was about the same. We went through this routine every day, and for one three-day weekend per month, we were "on retreat" within the walls of the center — sitting in meditation for about ten hours a day.

The residents, made up mostly of Americans of both sexes, ate all their meals together in silence, and maintained the building and grounds. Some commuted to outside jobs during the day; everyone was responsible for his or her own modest rent and board.

Zen Center life was designed so the students would be forced to see how bound they were to their opinions and ideas. As the Master explained, "Zen Center is like washing potatoes. In Korea, we wash potatoes by throwing them all in a pot of water and stirring them with a stick. As they rub against each other, they soon become clean." The idea was that through intimate interaction, the ideas and values to which we clung would be forced to the surface as they rubbed up against and conflicted with those of the others. Once we saw them, each of us would know what we had to let go of.

This was difficult for me. I had always sought out tranquil, isolated environments. Now I was sharing a room with a man who spent his days trying to sweat out many years' accumulation of antipsychotic drugs, and listening all night to the roar of Los Angeles County's second busiest intersection, only thirty feet from our window.

In my misery, I quickly saw my attachment to refined companionship, quiet, and fresh air. These, and all other desires, I would have to let go. But I wondered if *some* desires aren't valuable, such as the desire to resolve confusion and uncertainty with peace and truth. Don't we need such a desire to motivate us? Zen teaches that if we let go of all desires, peace and truth will stand revealed. I considered whether there might be truth *beyond* Zen that I would never find because *through* Zen I had lost all desire to look for it.

Watching my desires and attachments appear and trying not to hold on to them, I also watched my attention becoming more and more focused on myself. Though we students bowed, chanted, meditated, ate, and slept together, we might just as well have been alone on a mountain top. Everything outside of us was to serve only as devices for monitoring our internal reactions. Zen is the ultimate religion of self-reliance; the road to enlightenment must be walked alone. "If the Buddha himself were to reappear and sit down beside you for eternity," the Master would tell us, "he couldn't help you."

The irony of becoming *wrapped up* in the self in order to *lose* the self was not lost on me. We were told that bringing our attachments to awareness was a prerequisite to letting them go. Might not increased awareness subtly lead to increased attachment? Were we trading bondage to desire for bondage to self-absorption?

What about the needs of others? What about the world's suffering? "I've already saved all beings from suffering," the Master would answer. He meant that the experience of enlightenment is somehow *beyond* all suffering, one's own and others'. Still, I mused, what about that starving man we would feed if we had a "don't know" mind? Would we ever really encounter him, spending our days and years sitting in the Zen Center, turning inward, observing our own likes and dislikes? But such speculation, I reminded myself, was all *thinking*. "I must cut it off if I am to ever find relief from my own suffering."

Every morning we prostrated ourselves before the Zen Master. And on retreat weekends and other times, we went to him for personal interviews. These interviews were both guidance sessions and tests where we were challenged with the infamous Zen *koans* (questions): "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" "What did your face look like before your parents were born?", and so forth. Because they were impossible to answer by thinking about them such questions were supposed to help us *stop* thinking.

By our answers, the Master gauged the progress of our "don't know" minds. The validity of our answers was subject to his judgment alone. In fact, the whole of our efforts in our practice depended on his direction. He represented the only returned traveler we knew from a place we desperately wanted to go ourselves.

But I began to question if we should ever put such faith in another person. He was a Master only because *his* Master said he was; *his* Master had been approved by his Master, and so on, supposedly back to the Buddha. But what if there were a weak link in this chain, compromising every successor? One Los Angeles Zen Master was known to be an alcoholic, and another to be having sexual relations with young female students. When did a Zen Master's human fallibility end and his perfect enlightenment begin? It made me wonder if there were someone somewhere I could truly depend on. But the Master said that ultimately you can depend only on your own "don't know" mind, so I stopped wondering.

Over time, the rigorous training began to chip away at my sense of self. I learned to ignore the demands of my body. To sit for long periods in one position without moving is unnatural for the human organism, even in sleep. The long hours of seated meditation, often brutally painful, taught me how to disengage myself from the needs of my physical being.

Moreover, many tangible signs of individuality were eliminated. We were encouraged to cut our hair short or completely off, and we wore identical robes during practice. Many of us took Buddhist names which were impersonal references to Zen practice; mine was "Path to Enlightenment." Ritualistically performing all actions together further minimized the self, as *self* became absorbed into the *group*.

We seized every opportunity to deny our self-wills. Our model was an elderly Zen Master who came to live at the center for a while. He had just spent five years in a small cell that, by his own directive, had been bricked up from the outside.

Zen involved as much surrender as denial. Conditions were designed to help us relax our self-wills. The meditation hall was quiet inside, the lighting subdued, the air heavy with incense. During the hours we spent there we were isolated from stimuli, from the world of conflicting ideas — including those that might challenge the underlying presuppositions of Zen. Even our meditative posture seemed to symbolize surrender: the arms encircled and exposed the vitals, while the palms and soles of the feet — the most sensitive parts of the body — lay open and upward.

Meditation always was practiced before a black and gold Buddha statue. As I would bow before it, I wondered if I were merely trading my self-will for *another's* will. In emptying myself, was I moving toward neutrality and freedom, or was *another* value system rushing in to fill the void?

During this time, my mind was confronted with questions about the Buddhist rituals we routinely took part in. What is the effect of prostrating oneself before a religious idol? In our chanting, why do we call out to Buddhist "deities" and ask them to influence us? For example: "...May the future Buddha Maitreya be present and serve as our acharya, our instructor; may all the Tathagatas of the ten directions be present and serve as our companions in our study; and may Shakra, Indra, and all the deities be present and serve to protect and adorn our practice." And why, at the start of each practice session, would we strike bells, light incense, and place fresh flowers and a water bowl on the altar — all actions traditionally intended to attract "spirits"? Were these beings real? If so, what power did they have, and what were we authorizing them to do?

One morning, a young Korean student, called Student Park, rushed over to me drained of color and nervously asked if we could talk. He told me that the previous night he dreamed that a "ghost" floated out of the ground behind the center's garage, opened the back door, and drifted into his room. At that moment, he woke to find a gauzy figure violently strangling him. He screamed, and it vanished before his eyes. Upon investigation, we discovered that the back door had been mysteriously unlocked, and that our building had once been a school of chiropractic. The school, we learned, buried body parts used for dissection behind the garage.

The Zen Master reassured the terrified Student Park: "Only go straight — don't know — then demons are no problem! Many years ago in Korea, I was on a 100-day retreat alone in the mountains. At night, horrible dragons and monsters would appear and try to frighten me. But I only kept chanting — I only kept my 'don't know' mind. Soon they stopped coming, and instead, Kwan Seum Bosal [a Buddhist deity] came and comforted me."

Again, he seemed to be proposing that suffering can be transcended by taking refuge in the "don't know" mind. But he also seemed to be acknowledging a real world of contending spiritual forces, one seeking to harm us and the other to help us. If there are "good" and "bad" spirits, I asked myself, what are we doing when we relax our wills, root out our discrimination, and let go of conceptual thinking? We're trusting that the empty mind is an impenetrable refuge, or, if it's not, that only beneficent spirits can have access to it.

At cynical moments, I even questioned whether there *were* beneficent spirits. In the Master's story, both the demons and Kwan Seum Bosal had the *same* effect on him — to drive him deeper into his "don't know" mind. In the case of the demons, it was to find escape; the comforting Kwan Seum Bosal, on the other hand, seemed to reward his perseverance and encourage him onward. Could they actually be in league, both seeking to preserve an open door and an empty vessel?

During my stay at the Zen center I would frequently awaken at night and sense something standing over my bed, watching me. This being elicited an instinctual terror — a chilling, nameless dread. It was a true moment of no thinking or "don't know," yet I felt no transcendence. Instead, there arose in me a clear, unthinking cry for someone to protect me.

Despite my fears and doubts, the "don't know" mind represented my only present hope for peace and protection. Perhaps I wasn't committed enough. I decided to plunge ahead and take the vows of a Zen priest.

While I was in San Francisco for the initiation ceremony, I met "the Snake Woman." This young lady loved serpents and kept a 10-foot python in her room at the local branch center. She would sit with it wrapped around her shoulders during group meditation. The other students, apparently unable to keep "don't know" minds, finally complained to the Zen Master.

He was furious, not because there was a snake in the meditation hall, but because of all the bad karma the Snake Woman was producing for herself. Karma is the effect of previous causes. If I rest my hand on a hot plate, I get burned; the burn is the consequence of my decision to place my hand on that location — it is my karma. Buddhists believe that karma will determine conditions in the next life as well as the present one. The Master summoned the Snake Woman and told her to get rid of her pet. If she didn't, in future lives she would have to suffer the same gruesome death as every single mouse she had fed the snake.

"What a system!", I thought. I know there are consequences to our actions, but who determines what they are in a case like this? After all, the Snake Woman was only feeding her hungry pet as she would the starving man in the Master's example of the "don't know" mind. If *this* is karma, I thought, I'll never be free of it. I could meditate for a thousand years (meditation, we were told, "burns off" karma), and still be its slave for swatting a mosquito.

I confronted the Master: "Does Zen free you from your karma or not?"

"Oh, no," he laughed. "I am still pulled around by my previous karma. The Buddha himself died from eating a piece of rancid pork. That was his karma."

Even the Buddha was in chains to karma! The freedom we were promised meant only that the chains somehow didn't matter; once we attained enlightenment (or the "don't know" mind) we would somehow experientially transcend the self and its attendant karma. Ironically, it was our individual karma that had supposedly brought us to the only means of transcending it: Zen practice. "Don't lose this opportunity," the Zen Master said. "Finding Zen is the result of very auspicious and very rare karma." Nonetheless, it bothered me that we were all at the mercy of a cosmic law that apparently took no account of motives (the Snake Woman had no malicious intent in feeding her pet), and that seemed to perpetuate suffering (if she had to die like every mouse she fed her snake, then presumably so must those who would feed her to their pets, and those who would feed them, etc.).

On the one hand, I yearned for the freedom promised by enlightenment. I worried that my karma would catch up with me before I escaped it. On the other hand, I shrank from the surrender of self which enlightenment required. "Finishing Zen is like stepping off a thousand foot cliff," the Master would say. I recoiled as I peered over the edge into the yawning abyss of "don't know." I wondered if there were someone — or some force — somewhere with an alternative solution; one who could *both* take away my karma *and* preserve my life. Perhaps there was some intelligence behind karma, one capable of conceiving and administering such a complex system. Could I appeal to this karmic controller directly? But *would* I, when I was always striving to keep an empty mind that, by definition, held no idea of doing so? I finally resolved to go the way of Zen and let go of all this *thinking*.

We assembled for the priests' initiation ceremony. One priest placed a small coil of incense on my arm, and another lit it. Watching the flame move down my skin, I found myself resisting this symbolic burning of my karma, of my self. For, as hard as I tried, I couldn't get rid of the idea that I was burning up something I would need if I was to ever find the truth.

Back in Los Angeles, the Zen Master urged us on. "You must believe in yourself — one hundred percent!" Of course, he was referring to the *true* self, not the *thinking* self. The harder I practiced, though, the more my confidence eroded. I appeared strong on the outside: impassive, unemotional, rock-like. But inside, I was wracked with the many questions I had either suppressed or ignored: Will I ever attain "don't know"? Can I trust it if I do? Or will it then be too late to matter? I knew further that I was not truly self-reliant, for I depended on the daily practice. It was the only means by which I could escape suffering and death. If I ever stopped, there was no hope for me.

I also realized with a start one day that after years of Zen training, I was the same old me inside. A middle-aged

female student had decided to take on the role of Zen Center mom. She did the laundry and shopping and began picking up after us, complaining about our leaving the shoe rack a mess. For some time, she had been nagging me to paint the Master's room. When she reminded me again one day, something snapped and I burst forth in a torrent of rage, detailing the history of her officious meddling in my life.

Back in my room, I sheepishly faced the fact that the years of hard training had not touched the tendencies within me that were a source of shame. Nor had they touched those of the other students: shortly thereafter, I saw a Zen monk with shaven head throw this same woman against a wall and threaten her.

As my inner confidence continued to crumble (in spite of my efforts to avoid it by not thinking), a strange thing happened. I began praying. I told myself that perhaps it would help me as a songwriter if I prayed for success. (Of course, I also told myself that it didn't really matter one way or another — I wasn't attached to success.) To whom or what was I praying? I don't think I had any idea. I just needed to reach out. I needed help.

One night another Zen student burst into my room without knocking and discovered me on my knees. I had been caught. I leapt up, red-faced. Both he and I knew that what I was doing challenged Zen to its roots: by praying, I was expressing a *desire* for something from an *external* source about which I held *hopes* and *beliefs*. He turned away and said nothing, probably in his own effort to hold no opinions.

As I continued praying, the Object to which I prayed — at first so nebulous — began to take on form over time. It became a soft wind blowing through the chambers of my heart, calling me.

I began to remember things I had learned earlier about the Christian God, and how His Son was said to control everything. I could control nothing. During this time, I seemed to be drawn to books and TV shows that talked about how Christ could "save" you. I knew I couldn't save myself.

Battle lines formed inside me. Thirteen years of Zen study and practice told me to hold on: "Don't panic, your breakthrough to freedom is just around the corner. Wait for your great experience and all your doubts and thinking will be as mist. The death of your self, which you fear, is the beginning of life."

"The most important thing," the Master shouted, "is don't quit the journey." I asked him about God. "GOD?!" he exclaimed. "Show me God." I couldn't answer. "To understand God, you must first understand your true self. Your true self is before thinking. Attain your true self and you will understand God." Attain a "don't know" mind, he insisted, and you'll know God. But the slightly more influential voice blowing through my heart murmured, "Attain a 'don't know' mind, and you'll *never* know God."

The Zen Master took a Bible from his bookshelf. "The Christian Bible says, 'I am the way and the truth and the life.' 'I' is your true self, your 'don't know' mind. Your true self, the self that is before thinking, is the way and the truth and the life."

I obtained a Bible so I could look up John 14:6-7 for myself. I saw that it was Jesus Christ, *referring to Himself*, who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." And Jesus went on to say, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well."

He was talking about *knowing!* The way to know this God is to know Jesus Christ, not to "don't know." Could this God, I pondered, be the One who controlled cause and effect, and who could protect me from what I feared?

I decided to return to the East coast, but resisted the impulse to move into my Master's Zen center there. Instead, I tried to continue Zen practice on my own. When the Master visited, I would go see him, but his words didn't hold me



as before. I retreated into the Maine woods one summer in an attempt to rekindle my fire for enlightenment. But only my will remained surrendered to that goal. My heart was listening to another voice.

As Zen's grip on me loosened, I became attracted to the occult. In one last attempt to attain spiritual truth through my own efforts, I began studying the hidden or "mystery" teachings and sought to develop my psychic powers. But through it all, there was always this Jesus. At a spiritualist colony, I found myself searching its library for references to Christ and occultic interpretations of His life. One day on television I saw an ex-pimp and his prostitute tell how they had left their old life, gotten married, and now lived to serve Jesus. Something, I marvelled, had swung their lives around 180 degrees, while I couldn't move mine one degree.

I also developed an interest in the various occultic claims about apocalyptic or end times, and thought it would be interesting to compare them with fundamentalist Christian interpretation. I found a book from that perspective, and in it I saw explained for the first time the clear differences between the claims of Christianity and other religions. I now had to accept that either Christianity was wrong and some or all of the others right, or only Christianity was right and therefore all the others wrong.

Simultaneously, I began to discern two movements in my life. One was a sense of *sinking* into an unfathomable darkness, impelled by hopelessness from Zen's failure to meet my needs and the inability of the occult to satisfy. The other movement was a feeling of being *pulled up* toward some promising light. This motion was fueled by hope.

I also perceived that I was drawing near to a crossroad, some point of resolution. I sensed that I would soon have to make a choice and that once made, there would probably be no return. I could continue *down* with myself, or *up* with Jesus. One had proved empty, but was familiar. The other offered hope, but was unknown.

I was plagued with the fear of being let down again. I knew I wouldn't be able to cope with another disappointment, and my only remaining choice would be death if Jesus also proved false. But the alternative was certain hopelessness. I had to move in the direction of hope.

After years of trying to develop a "*don't know*" mind, I now wondered how you get to *know* someone. I figured you first have to meet him. So one day, I decided to take a chance and call out to Jesus, wherever He was, and ask Him to meet me so that I might come to know Him. I asked Him to save me, for I needed help and was very afraid.

In response to my plea, I was hoping for some transcending insight or blinding manifestation. But that was what Zen and the occult had promised. Instead, I went to bed that night with a calm sense that everything was all right now. Sometime in the middle of the night, I was awakened and heard the words spoken in my mind, "You will know Me by faith." But I had no idea what "faith" was; my entire previous spiritual search had relied upon tangible personal experience. Perhaps a part of this "faith" was the gentle assurance I now felt, that I could count on the promises of this God to whom I had called.

It was the beginning of a relationship. To know someone, you need to communicate with him and be able to think clearly about him. You must have a self that relates to *another* self. Everything Zen had urged me to destroy was necessary in order to know God.

Though he seeks to eliminate the self, the Zen student has, paradoxically, only himself to rely on. By retaining my self as a new child of God, I could entrust it to Him, the One who made me. Before, I appeared strong on the outside, but was full of doubt on the inside. Now I felt calm and secure on the inside, which became a source of strength for facing the insecurities of life I encountered on the outside.

Knowing the value of what I had found, I was anxious to share it with the Zen Master. I learned that he was soon to

give a public talk at his Boston branch center and decided to take advantage of this opportunity to see him. As I filed into the meditation hall with the other students, I was consumed with fear — remembering the power he once held over me. But I was no longer alone. I asked the One who was with me, whom I now *knew*, to help me stand up for Him.

After the Zen Master gave a brief talk, someone asked him a question about "stillness" of mind. "You know," he began, "the Christian Bible says, 'Be still and know that I am God.' 'I' is your 'don't know' mind. Your 'don't know' mind and God are not different. Only in complete stillness will you find God. Only if you let go of all ideas."

I raised my hand and spoke up loudly: "Honorable Zen Master, that is not what the Bible says. In that verse, God is saying He stands alone!"

"You don't understand God," he said. "Christians say God is everywhere."

I knew exactly where he was leading. He would then say, "If God is everywhere, then He is the same as you."

What sprang from my mouth then, I don't believe originated from me. Before he could finish, I asked: "Are you God?"

The room became very quiet and the Master hesitated for several long seconds. Finally he replied, "No. I am Buddha."

He ignored me thereafter and went on talking about God, but I believe the real God had intervened and made His point: He stands alone. Even the Zen Master could not bring himself to say, "I am God."

But the Master persisted. "Near one of our temples there is a sign that says, 'You need God.' But this sign is a big mistake. To 100 percent believe in God you must have no ideas, no opinions, no mind at all. If you 100 percent believe in God, then 'don't know' mind or 'love' mind appears. The Christian Bible says, 'God is love.' So, God needs our 'love' minds. The correct sign should read: 'God needs you.'"

In those last moments with him, I was filled with sadness, for I knew how much this poor man — as I had — really needed God. How alone he seemed then; how fragile and vulnerable in his solitary self-reliance.

Out of this concern over his own great need I wrote the Zen Master one last letter, hoping that somehow, something I said might make a difference. I concluded with the following thoughts:

Zen teaching denies people access to the living God. You say to "always keep a 'don't know' mind."  
But, a "don't know" mind is impossible. We always keep some idea, such as the idea that a "don't know" mind is desirable. And, having a "don't know" mind doesn't stop us from sometimes doing wrong things that hurt other people.... ..

By keeping a "don't know" mind, we are denying that there's any separate Being beyond our "don't know" minds. Hence, we don't bother to call out to Him. We don't even think that He's there to call out to.

Honorable Zen Master, you always say, "Don't make opposites." As a result, I believe you're trapped in "don't know." You need to make one big opposite: God and you.

Call out to Him. See why He sent His Son to earth. He'll tell you in His own words in His Bible.

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I probably haven't explained this very well. But I'd be glad to talk with you about it further — anytime.

I forgive you for teaching me "don't know," and pray that you someday teach "know God."

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