What is Zen? Many people have answered this question in many different ways, seeking many different things. To the anthropologist, Zen is “a unique blend of Indian mysticism and Chinese naturalism sieved through the rather special mesh of the Japanese character” (Ross, 139). To the theologian, Zen is viewed this way, “While Buddhism is a religion, Zen surely is not” (Radcliff, 3). To followers of Zen, its meaning is expressed thus:

“When one looks at it, one cannot see it;
When one listens for it, one cannot hear it.
However, when one uses it, it is inexhaustible.”—ancient Zen poem

To the average layperson who is unacquainted with Zen, “Zen is an elephant copulating with a flea,” as one Zen master put it. Zen is filled with mystery, meditation, and paradox, but rarely mastery. Zen is an attempt to clear the head of reason and to understand one’s own ontological state to a degree beyond words. Zen is very different from what is familiar to Western, Lutheran, Christian thinkers.

In order to converse properly about Zen, we must agree on a common vocabulary. In this case, it works best to keep the Japanese words, as all of our English words already have connotations attached to them, whether deliberately or not. Many more terms and nuances are involved with the umbrella concept of Zen than I can capture after having only studied it and never actually experiencing it. Therefore, let us highlight the language-captured ideas that are most basic in building a frame in which to view Zen.

**Zen:** We have already glimpsed at what *Zen* is, and throughout our discussion we will arrive at a more mature idea of what Zen really is and of what Zen really is not.

**Buddhist Zen:** Not to be confused with Zen, *Buddhist Zen* is a Buddhist sect dating back to the sixth century A.D.; it is an application of Zen, but is not synonymous with Zen as we are speaking of it.
**Satori:** Satori refers to the all-important concept of “enlightenment.” This is the state of being where body, mind, and spirit become one. Satori is the latent goal of all Zen practice: in order to gain it one must not consciously desire it (Johnston, 22).

**Samadhi:** A predecessor to satori, samadhi is the meditative state of mind that allows satori to take place. This can be characterized by a blank, open mind—contemplation without an object; it means “detachment from everything, even oneself” (Johnston, 17).

**Roshi:** A roshi is a Zen master, in charge of up to twenty pupils. He is looked up to for his wisdom and monitors the progress of his pupils towards satori. A roshi’s status also involves overseeing the monastery where he and his pupils live, whether temporarily or permanently. Thus, the roshi’s pupils are Zen monks, as is the roshi himself.

**Zazen:** Sitting in meditation, staring at a blank wall, is zazen. This is one of the staple practices of Zen, as it combines control of body and control of mind, thereby gaining control of spirit, creating samadhi and working towards satori. Zazen is “without thought, without images, without desire, in interior unification and peace” (Johnston, 30).

**Sesshin:** The sesshin is a Zen retreat, lasting from days to months, where zazen is emphasized. It is common for participants to remain in silence while in attendance and to avoid eye contact with anyone else, lest their meditative state be disrupted and the chance to obtain satori lost.

**Soto:** Soto is a school of Zen that promotes gradual steps towards enlightenment, emphasizing zazen and quiet contemplation.

**Rinzai:** Rinzai is a school of Zen that promotes sudden enlightenment, utilizing such tactics as striking, yelling, and koans to rid the head of reason.
Koan: The *koan* is a paradoxical problem, a Lewis Carroll-like riddle kept in the core of the person, “the pit of the belly,” until it is solved (Johnston, 57). A *koan* is given to Zen disciples by a *roshi*, especially in the *Rinzai* school, in order to confound reason, force the one meditating to abandon reason, and in this way open the connection between mind, spirit, and body and allow *satori* to be reached.

*Mu:* The word *mu* means nothing. The word *mu* is often used as a *koan*, either as the “question” or the answer. Persons involved in Zen meditation may also repeatedly say aloud *mu* while they are ridding their mind of all content, and promoting *satori*.

*Gedo Zen:* Literally “the outside way of Zen,” *gedo Zen* refers to Zen as it is adopted and practiced by religions other than Buddhism. It is not looked at as being inferior, as Zen is “found everywhere and in all true religions,” but it is still differentiated (Johnston, 6).

After surveying the basic concepts and ideas involved in Zen, it’s time to ask the question(s): **Why** are we learning this at all? **So what** if I can answer some trivia question now? **Why** is this worth my time?

These questions are important to address, and our guide through this set of interrogations is William Johnston’s *Christian Zen*. In his rather short book, Johnston, an Irish Catholic priest himself, explains his own experience with and affinity for Zen, but more importantly, he sets forth the proposition that Christianity can be edified by incorporating some of the Zen mindset into our approach to our own faith. Whether or not we totally agree with him is still open for debate.

However, the issue of exploring a Christian’s place in our multicultural society with respect to the Great Commission is timely and relevant. Therefore, this volume is a
good starting place for the conversation. I believe we can learn something from talking with each other about these issues. I am attempting to introduce an unfamiliar perspective so that we, as Christians, can grow in our ability to bring the Gospel to people who are different from us. Let us open our minds and begin the evaluation.

We can start by seeing why the author penned his collected thoughts, seeing if his reasons for writing are the same reasons we have for reading. In his book, Johnston observed aloud that preaching Christianity in Asia without being willing to learn Asian culture has become a roadblock to sharing Christ with them (J., 3). Perhaps closer to home, Johnston notes that people of current (written in 1971, but still very true today) society are seeking a form of mysticism, even within our own Western culture: if Christianity doesn’t give it to them, they will go somewhere else (J., 9). When speaking of life-as-we-know-it, the author writes:

“Western civilization has become horribly one-sided and unbalanced, so much so that serious people cannot see the distinction between a computer and a man. When this happens, when the contemplative dimension existing in every man becomes starved, then people go berserk and do crazy things” (J., 19).

Yet more reasons listed for this topic’s relevance deal with forces prevalent in our cultural mind: both Freud’s psychoanalysis and the effects of illegal drugs have worked, in different ways, to bring the power of the mind to our attention (J., 35). Because all cultures are manmade and imperfect, we all have an incomplete worldview. Therefore, not only can (and should) we work to understand another worldview, but we can (and should) also strive to learn from it and be edified by it (J., 49). Johnston maintains that we Christians need to be reminded of what an “earth-shaking, soul-stirring revolution” God’s revelation to us is, and that we can learn anew this sense of awe and humility through acquaintance with Eastern thought (J., 103). Basically, Johnston feels that
studying Zen facilitates the spread of the Gospel by removing cultural barriers and
enhances our own appreciation of what God has done for us. Sounds like a winner!

Even with all this in mind, can the Christian truly benefit from this type of Eastern
thought, this mysticism mindset? Yes. Christianity, especially in America, primarily
places value on itself by attending only to what can be seen: counting the filled seats in
the pews, meeting the current year’s offering goal, maintaining as many church
organizations as possible. This Western mindset is summarized well by the bumper
sticker that reads: “Jesus is coming … LOOK BUSY.” Perhaps looking 180 degrees
towards the East can help mold our priorities in going back to the common bit of
wisdom, “It’s what’s on the inside that counts.” Zen takes a closer look at the inside.

One of the issues that William Johnston addresses deals with the spiritual
direction given by spiritual leaders. According to Johnston, Zen roshi seek not to assist
those under their care in the mere matters of corporeal living, but instead concern
themselves with looking out specifically for their spiritual welfare (J., 6). In other words,
Zen’s spiritual leaders focus on spiritual issues. Perhaps we Christians could concentrate
on training our pastors--our most highly recognized spiritual leaders-- less in counseling
skills for non-spiritual day-to-day issues, thereby allowing them to be fully present to
those who are in spiritual anguish and pain, fully present to the issues that address their
bailiwick. I am not saying that non-spiritual issues cannot benefit from counseling, but
simply that this should ideally come from someone other than a pastor. Enable spiritual
leaders to focus on spiritual issues: this is one attitude to be gleaned from Zen.

Johnston also suggests that people of today have become bombarded by “words,
words, words” in our age of communication and technology. As the Zen saying goes,
“Words are the fog one has to see through.” In this case, we should seek to pray not with words, which are overused and under-appreciated, but with reverent silence and contemplation (J., 16). Please note here that the author is not advocating that we eliminate words altogether, but that a balance of using both words and silence should be sought (J., 27). In our churches, we tend to teach people to pray, yes, but not how to pray. From this angle, I can see where advocating more than one form of prayer would be of great advantage to Christians, both to those for whom words are a vehicle of expression and also to those for whom finding the “right” words is a struggle. Especially for those who find verbal communication to be difficult, what a relief to be taught that words are not always necessary! Indeed, this is reinforced to us in Romans 8:26, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” So, words are not necessary for God to hear us—what comfort! It does appear that we can learn from Zen practice how to encourage each other better with this message. In the same way, though, when the words do come, we can be just as thankful, knowing that we are not slaves to these words.

Another point that should be expounded upon lies in the whole idea of satori. To the person practicing Zen from an Eastern mindset, satori means doing zazen and tracing the psyche down into the very depths of being, tuning out everything until all things are one, so theoretically only you exist, and then going beyond even yourself to feel the presence of nothing at all. How can Christianity possibly gain anything here? The answer lies in Who lives in you. When setting up the hypothetical scenario of a Christian in zazen, consider this: “One way to describe meditation is taking the time to remember
who we are in complete silence” (Carlson, 3). So, you have this Christian sitting in the half-lotus position, doing *zazen*. This is where it is important to remember that the Christian would be practicing *gedo Zen*, not *Zen*, so this person is likely not seeking *satori* in the same sense as *Zen* has previously defined it. If this Christian, doing *zazen* makes the spiritual journey down to the point where he/she is at the very core of his/her being, what will he/she find there? Not some fantastic, profound human being, but God Himself. In the Bible, God tells us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, that Christ lives in us, and that we were originally formed in the image of God, an image to which God seeks to restore us. Therefore, this kind of *satori* does *not* promote a humanistic egocentric view of mankind, but rather, this kind of *satori* brings the Christian closer in communion with his/her God and allows one’s own sinful nature to melt out of view for a while. Such a moment could only be described as bliss. Therefore, we should not altogether dismiss the notion of incorporating some type of *zazen* into our faith life: it might actually nurture it!

One of the major tenets of *zazen*, and, therefore, of *Zen*, is control of the body via breathing. The rhythm of the breath controls all the other rhythms of the body. In this way, breath control is the ultimate bodily self-control. Johnston suggests that such an act of self-control could very well be an offering of adoration to our God (J., 79). While we certainly do not want to be idle, we also need to realize that we do not need to work ourselves into a frenzy all the time in order for God to get things done: He created the entire world out of nothing and did all the work of our salvation for us. This makes it safe to figure that God doesn’t need our help, although He does allow us to serve Him in many unique ways. Taking some time out once in awhile to attend to God alone, by
temporarily giving up corporeal motor activity, can be an awesome act of private worship. It would do us good to remember this, especially when we’re staring at our “To Do” lists with eighty-nine items in all capital letters—even if over half of them are for the church! Resting for a few moments with God in silence and non-activity is an offering of our most precious earthly commodity: time. Of course, this is just one way to give time, but it is a legitimate way.

I enjoyed reading Johnston’s book when I came across useful sections like those already discussed. Even so, we Christians need to read each other’s work critically, even if we all claim to have the Christian faith. While doing this careful reading, we need to constantly keep the Bible as our standard of what is acceptable and what is not: nothing else will do. Having said this, there are a few words of caution I would like to offer on a few doctrinal issues uncovered in the book.

The first sentence to make me do a double-take concerns our outlook on how God has spoken/speaks to us. Johnston writes, “Moreover I also believe that in sundry times and in diverse ways God spoke to our fathers through the prophets, and these include prophets whose voices echo beautifully in the Gita, the Lotus Sutra, and the Tao Teh Ching” (J., 11). At first and second glances, this struck me as a statement that epitomizes the misapplied ecumenical movement to all join together as one, as long as our intentions are in harmony. This is why I was bothered enough to bring it to attention.

A closer look, however, reveals that Johnston is not trying to pass off these other writings as Scripture. Instead, I believe that he is operating from the mentality that “all truth is God’s truth.” I see nothing wrong with this perspective. In fact, my awe at how God works to ready our hearts for His Gospel grows when I consider how He may have
used major characters in history, even in the history of non-Christian religions, to introduce the thought-seedling of God and His truth to people of all places and times.

Later in the book, the author refers to the Bible in this way, “Because apart from the fact that the Bible is not the whole of Christianity and necessarily restricts itself to Jewish cultural patterns …” (J., 26). This is clearly NOT the message communicated in the Bible itself; in it God tells us everything we need to know for life now and for life eternal. And this, William Johnston, my friend, is the whole of Christianity: God created us, loved us, saved us, and revealed Himself to us. It’s all there—in the Bible!

The last caution sign I want to set up (although each reader needs to read the entire text carefully for him/herself) is again in regard to Scripture. This time, Johnston advises his readers to read the Bible as a *koan*. This comparison is a double-edged sword, so I want to realize Johnston’s intentions, but also to be careful with how far we take this.

The positive side of looking at Scripture as a *koan* is that this means the words it contains are powerful, thought-provoking, and life-changing. Within the Bible is certainly enough dynamite to ignite the Christian slant on *satori* we looked at earlier. The Bible as *koan*: powerful and sufficient to change lives.

However, the negative side to this is that a *koan* is described as a paradox that the human mind simply cannot reason out, no matter how much time one spends with it. The term “paradox” applied to Scripture as a whole just really has a negative connotation, and I don’t like it. But we can unmask some of our most basic and cherished doctrines to be paradoxes—paradoxes we accept by faith. Some of these include: God’s simultaneous display of both justice and mercy, Jesus as true God and true man, the three-in-one God,
man’s involvement in the outcome of his salvation only if he rejects it, and there are more. However, this doesn’t lead to the conclusion that we should read all Scripture as a paradox! We know that God keeps His promises and that these do not mean their opposites at all. We also know that God tells us the truth in His Word, so we need not be looking for ways in which He is trying to “get us.” We know that God has revealed to us what we need to know, and that is enough for us.

Even sticking with the paradox theme, though, we can make it positive: Reason alone is not enough to enjoy one’s place in heaven, but faith, independent of reason, is the gift of God that sets us free. In this sense of koan, “beyond reason,” we can see this pointing to faith. This I agree with fully and totally. Scripture as koan can thus be a danger or just a different way of viewing what we already know to be true.

There were some additional points I was not able to discuss in the parameters of this paper, but I do want to quickly point out that Johnston’s writing style was an easy read and even pleasantly humorous at times. One such gem is found when describing the Western Catholic tradition: “…too much bingo and too little mysticism…” (J., 20).

Should all of us Christians now go out and buy zafus (zazen cushions), start talking in riddles, and take vows of silence for days at a time? There is no need for this: God has granted us Christian freedom to serve Him in a variety of different ways. No one here needs to adopt Zen, or even gedo Zen. What we do need to do, however, is to use our knowledge of the commonalities between Zen and Christianity to reach a population who is seeking truth—in the wrong place. In Christian love, let’s invite them to God’s place—the right place!
Bibliography


*This book was the main reference for the body of the paper.*