

PIOTR STANKIEWICZ
University of Warsaw

STOICISM AND ZEN BUDDHISM SIX SIMILARITIES AND SIX DIFFERENCES

Introduction. The purpose of this text is to sketch the similarities and differences that exist between Stoic philosophy and Zen Buddhism. It seems necessary to present them, since Zen has been popular in our culture for some time, and recently we have also witnessed a growing interest in Stoicism. It is therefore worthwhile to try to illuminate how one relates to the other: in order to clear up some misunderstandings, and also – by highlighting the differences – to enable a better understanding of the two concepts.

Of course, to begin with, it is necessary to clarify *which* Stoicism and *which* Zen we will compare here. It is difficult to speak of a single and coherent Zen: there is no catechism, no single top-down interpretation that determines what Zen is and what it is not. Similarly, although to a lesser degree, it is with Stoicism: for a variety of reasons, we cannot speak of a single Stoicism, not to mention the fact that Stoicism, which is an ethical proposition "today", differs no small amount from the Stoicism that was practiced in antiquity. In one word: I am comparing here not "Stoicism as such" and "Zen as such", but, out of necessity, a certain interpretation of Stoicism with a certain interpretation of Zen. However, this is legitimate insofar as whenever we talk about Zen, we are talking about a certain interpretation, and similarly with stoicism: *whenever* we talk about stoicism, we are talking about a certain interpretation of it.

And one more necessary remark: with one exception, which will be mentioned at the end, I make the comparison here mainly on the ethical plane. I leave metaphysics and logic largely aside, treating both Stoicism and Zen mainly as *ethical* propositions. This seems legitimate, however, insofar as the popularity enjoyed by both is a popularity of these seen as certain ethical concepts.

Similarities. 1. The common goal of Stoicism and Zen is to end man's suffering and make him happy. In the Stoics:

"...A true sage is full of joy, cheerful, calm and unruffled. He lives a life of fraternization with the gods. [...] The serenity of a wise man is like the state of the heavens above the moon: there is still unbroken weather. Here, then, you have and reason why you should pursue wisdom: the wise man is never without joy"¹.

In Zen:

"The Buddha said: "Both in the past and now, I have only imagined one thing: suffering and the end of suffering."²

In both cases, the comparison between spiritual *praxis* (Stoic and Zen, respectively) and medicine is very appropriate. The Stoics used to say that "a philosopher's lecture hall is a doctor's chamber" and explicitly called their philosophy medicine:

"Our predecessors have already invented remedies for spiritual infirmities; our task, on the other hand, is to learn how and when to apply them"³.

And similarly in Zen:

"Sometimes [...] the Buddha has been likened to a physician who has found a panacea for diseases"⁴.

¹ Seneca: *Listy moralne do Lucyliusza*, 59. 14-16.

² D. Keown: *Buddyzm*, p. 58.

³ Seneca: *Listy moralne do Lucyliusza*, 64. 8.

⁴ D. Keown: *Buddyzm*, p. 60.

2. In both cases, this making people happy is seen as *liberating* them. In the Stoics:

““In order that your share is true freedom, you should serve philosophy”. He who has submitted and surrendered to it does not suffer even a day's delay: he is liberated at once”⁵.

"And what does this teaching of theirs [i.e. the Stoics] preach? "People! If you consecrate your wits to me, wherever you remain, whatever you do, you will not be overwhelmed by sorrow, you will not be overwhelmed by anger, you will not experience obstacles, you will not experience difficulties, but without passion and in true freedom you will remain all the days of your life!"⁶."

In Zen:

"Zen is the exercise of enlightenment, or the pursuit of liberation, and liberation is nothing but freedom."⁷

3. What does a person need to be liberated from? And in Stoicism and Zen from the same: from certain mental errors, from a wrong perception of the world, being the source of wrong wants and desires. In stoicism:

"Of us, however, some like this, others indulge in other delusions. One sees his misfortune in illness. Oh, it is not illness that is the cause of your unhappiness [...] Another in poverty, a third in having a grumpy father and a grumpy mother, a fourth that the emperor does not look upon him with a kindly eye"⁸.

⁵ Seneca: *Listy moralne do Lucyliusza*, 9.7.

⁶ Epictetus: *Diatryby*, III.13.

⁷ D. T. Suzuki: *Zen i kultura japońska*, p. 3.

⁸ Epictetus: *Diatryby*, IV.1.

In Zen:

"And this, O you monks, is the noble truth of the emergence of suffering: the source of suffering is desire (*tanhā*), which creates new incarnations, accompanied by delight, and passion, which is satisfied here and there – the desire for pleasures, the desire for existence and the desire for non-existence."⁹

"The second Noble Truth – the Truth of the Origin of Suffering (*Samudāya*) - explains that suffering arises from desire, craving or lust. [...] The Truth of the Origins of Suffering states that desire and craving manifest in three main forms; the first is the desire to experience sensual pleasure. [The second is the desire to exist [...]] The third [...] is the desire [...] to destroy"¹⁰.

4. In both Stoicism and Zen, the way is to remodel our attitude to the world and change our desires, rather than strive to satisfy them. In the Stoics:

"Everything is about thinking. And it hinges on you. Remove, therefore, the thought, if you will, and, like a sailor who has sailed around a rock, you will smile at the silence, peace and a bay safe from the waves."¹¹

"Reject judgment - and you are saved. And who forbids you to cast it away?"¹².

In Zen:

⁹ *Mahavagga* I.6, translated by S.Schayer. Quoted by: D. Keown: *Buddyzm* (p. 64), which quotes from: M. Mejer: *Buddyzm*. Warsaw 1980, p. 248.

¹⁰ D. Keown, "Buddyzm," pp. 63-65.

¹¹ M. Aurelius: *Rozmyślenia*, XII.22.

¹² *Ibid*, XII.25.

"And this, O you monks, is the noble truth of the destruction of suffering: [...] by utterly destroying desire, abandoning, divesting and releasing, and not giving access"¹³.

Nevertheless, the first difference already appears here. For Zen speaks of the "destruction of desire," while the Stoics will be more restrained here. The Stoics postulate the removal of (false) perceptions and the reconstruction of our relationship to the world, but they are skeptical about whether desires can be "destroyed" in a literal sense. Thus, they do not propose the elimination of desires, but rather something like proper "management" of them.

5. In both Stoicism and Zen we have an affirmation of reality as it is. The way to liberation is to "get in tune" with the world's perfection; the way forward is to learn to want it to be the way it is. In the Stoics:

"But," you will answer, "I want everything to happen according to my liking, whatever it may be. - You are mad and possessed! [For how do we proceed in learning to write? Do you want me to perhaps write Dion's name the way I like it? Not at all. But *I learn to want to write how I must write* [emphasis mine - P. S.] And how is the thing in music? The same. [...]. So only in this respect, in the most important and wonderful matter, namely freedom, do I have the right to want as I please? By no means, because *to acquire science means as much as to acquire knowledge, as to want everything as it happens.*"¹⁴

In Zen:

¹³ *Mahavagga* I.6, translated by S.Schayer. Quoted by: D. Keown: *Buddyzm* (p. 67), which quotes from: M. Mejer: *Buddyzm*. Warszawa 1980, p. 248.

¹⁴ Epictetus: *Diatryby*, I.12.

"All entities are perfect as they are. [...] The leg of a crane is long and is perfect in its being long, whereas the leg of a duck is short and is perfect in its being short. [...] The real meaning of perfection is that things are perfect as they are. A tall person is perfect by being tall. A low person is perfect being low. [A black person is perfect as it is, and a white person is perfect as it is. An elephant is perfect as it is. An ant, however small, is perfect as it is. An ant can't do the things an elephant does, but neither can an elephant do what an ant can do. There is no reason for a poor man to feel inferior, no reason for a wealthy man to be proud. Both are perfect just as they are]"¹⁵.

6. Both Stoicism and Zen advise against ascetic practices and extreme forms of renunciation. They recommend a "third way": do not give yourself over to the power of sensual things, nor should you abandon them completely. The similarity between the life paths of Marcus Aurelius and the Buddha is significant here - both went through a stage of fascination with hard renunciations, and both realized over time that there was an overly simplistic and one-sided understanding of wisdom. They understood that the extreme path is a false path. In the case of Marcus Aurelius:

"...it was the ascetic inclination that he showed above all in his life, and that from his earliest youth. [We know from historians about Mark, already twelve years old, that he practiced every kind of asceticism available to his age. It is a well-known and almost popular feature of his life that not eating meat, fasts and mortifications, sleeping on a hard floor and too few hours, so overtaxed the young boy that his mother, fearing for his health, required him with requests to return to a less austere life. [...] Mark's asceticism later, in "Meditations"

¹⁵ H.Y. Roshī: *Osiem podstaw buddyzmu zen*, p. 15.

nowhere does present renunciation as an end in itself, but always as a means to an end..."¹⁶.

In Zen:

"[The Buddha] fasted, exposed himself to the greatest heat and cold, and subjected himself to various mortifications. After five years of such a life, Siddhartha was close to death from hunger and exhaustion, but he still could not find answers to the most important questions. He finally came to the conclusion that he would not learn what life was on the path of extreme renunciation, and he ceased these practices."¹⁷

Differences. 1 There is a certain difference between Stoicism and Zen already at the formal level: it concerns the extent to which one and the other is a religion. Stoicism is unquestionably *not* a religion¹⁸, and in the case of Zen it is no longer so simple. It is difficult here to be as unambiguous with which religions we call Christianity or Islam, nevertheless, undoubtedly in at least some senses of the word Zen *is* a religion.

The difference also has an institutional dimension: we have a Stoic school and tradition, but there are and were no Stoic monasteries or monks. Stoics did not form *religious communities*, a description such as the following does not fit them at all:

"One of the first things Zen did in China, once it had solidified and become independent, was to introduce a special kind of monastic life, different from its earlier forms. A Zen monastery was a self-governing entity divided into many smaller units. In each

¹⁶ H.Elzenberg: *Marek Aureliusz. Z historii i psychologii etyki*, quoted his: *Z historii filozofii*. Cracow 1995, pp. 185-186.

¹⁷ D. Scott, T. Doubleday: *Zen*, p. 22.

¹⁸ The only religious coloring that can be associated with it is, first, that specific sense in which a certain "sectarianism" can be discerned in all three schools of the Hellenistic period, and second, certain mystical inclinations present in late Roman Stoicism (Marcus Aurelius' "personalistically tinged communion with Cosmic Reason").

of these, there was a team of people whose task was to manage the community of monks. A notable feature here was the principle of full democracy. The senior monks were respected, but all of them were equally engaged in physical work, such as gathering firewood, cultivating the land, picking tea leaves. Even the master himself took part in these activities and, working with the entire community of monks, passed on to them the proper understanding of Zen."¹⁹

2. Stoicism is based on purely mental practices that need no counterparts in physical reality. Stoicism doesn't know any specific meditation positions; it doesn't know anything like *zazen*, for example:

"Zazen [...] means as much as to sit with crossed legs in a state of calm and deep contemplation. This exercise, which originated in India, has spread over time throughout the East. It has been practiced uninterruptedly for many centuries and is strictly adhered to by modern experts in Zen"²⁰.

3. The Stoic way of thinking is both highly rational and strictly practically oriented. Stoics do not resort to such irrationalities and such paradoxes as are used in Zen, Stoics feel an aversion to all intellectual and word games – they dislike what has no direct practical application. Entirely alien to the spirit of Stoicism, therefore, are *the koans* of Zen:

"A girl is crossing the street. Is it a younger sister or an older sister?"²¹.

"What is the sound [of clapping - note P. S.] of one hand?"²².

¹⁹ D. T. Suzuki: *Zen i kultura japońska*, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ D. T. Suzuki: *Wprowadzenie do buddyzmu zen*, p. 129.

²¹ A.W. Watts: *Droga zen*, p. 203.

"When Joshu was asked about the significance of Bodhidharma's arrival in the East [...] he replied:

- Cypress in the courtyard.
- You have an objective symbol in mind," the monk stated.
- No, that's not what I mean.
- In that case," the monk asked again, "what is the fundamental principle of Buddhism?
- Cypress in the courtyard," Joshu repeated"²³.

Stoicism not only does not use such conundrums, but openly opposes and ridicules them:

"You asked me what the sophisms are called in Latin. Many tried to give them a name, but none was accepted. Namely, since we did not accept the thing itself and did not use it, we also opposed its name. However, the most appropriate one seems to me to be the one used by Cicero; and he calls them spins. Whoever has dealt with them, indeed designs cunning questions, but he does not make life any easier, and he becomes neither braver, nor more temperate, nor more elevated"²⁴.

"You, however, have something else on your mind," he says.
 - "I for one would like to know what Chrysippus says in his treatises on Liar sophism. - And wouldn't it be better for you, heaven forbid, to hang yourself on a dry branch along with all your wishful thinking, ha? How will you benefit from such a reading?"²⁵.

²² Ibid, p. 202.

²³ D. T. Suzuki: *Wprowadzenie do buddyzmu zen*, p. 139.

²⁴ Seneca: *Listy moralne do Lucylusza*, 111. 1-2.

²⁵ Epictetus: *Diatryby*, II.17.

4. Freedom and nirvana in Zen are largely founded on what could be described as the "annihilation of personality," or the elimination of the individual subject as traditionally understood:

"Like all forms of Buddhism, Zen seeks to "enlightenment" resulting from the melting of all relations and subject-object oppositions into pure emptiness"²⁶.

"[The Buddha] was primarily interested in pointing out the path to liberation – liberation from the deep-seated attachment to the illusory self, which is the source of all desires and passions and the resulting suffering and frustration. [...] in the Buddha's teachings [...] we discover [...] a momentous therapeutic method, an instruction telling us how to free ourselves from the attitude of overpowering *ego-attachment*"²⁷.

What will this look like in stoicism? The answer will be difficult, nevertheless, there is no question of "melting into pure emptiness" there. The most succinct way to put it is this: while Zen wants to free man from the bonds of his "I", Stoicism wants to teach him to *manage* this "I" properly.

5. Some significant difference also occurs at the level of meditation techniques. And in Stoicism and Zen the goal is the aforementioned liberation, but the paths to it are different. For we can put Zen meditation as an attempt to empty and cleanse the mind of unnecessary thoughts, while in Stoicism it is somewhat the opposite: the stoic's mind must be full of images and actively aroused thoughts that will prepare him for future misfortunes:

"Everything [...] must be anticipated and the spirit must be armed against what may happen to us. Prepare for howling, for the anguish of illness, for wars and shattering

²⁶ T. Merton: *Mistycy i mistrzowie zen*, p.19.

²⁷ G. C. C. Chang: *Buddyjska nauka o wszechcałości. Filozofia buddyzmu huayan*, p. 115.

ships. Coincidence has the power either to deprive you of your homeland, or to take it away from you; it can throw you somewhere into the wilderness, and it can also turn into a wilderness this place, where a whole cluster of people is now squashed. Let's put before our eyes all the varieties of human fate and – if we don't want to be surprised or by these unusual or, as it were, brand-new events – let's visualize in our spirit not only what often happens to us, but also what could happen to us in the worst case. It is necessary to imagine fate with all its full possibilities"²⁸.

"...for the future in the course of using and rejoicing in a check, weave in your soul opposite ideas about things that give you joy and delight. [...] - Well, yes, but these are sinister words. - And, after all, sinister are also some sorcerer's incantations, but that they are helpful, I do not pay any attention at all to their sound sinister, as long as they help me!"²⁹.

6. Finally, the announced excursion from ethics to metaphysics. Well, in both Stoicism and Zen there is a motif of the cyclical nature of life: after death we are faced with a new birth, a new life and another death, and then again and again. Stoics:

" [t]hey distinguished between two periods of history and thought that the period of formation [...] is followed by a period when the differences are again lost in the unity of primeval matter. The "fire of the world" takes place then [...]: what was made of fire, in fire perishes. And then again everything starts from the beginning, and again and again the world develops; according to the same laws same things come into being and perish in the same order"³⁰.

²⁸ Seneca: *Listy moralne do Lucylusza*, 91. 3-8.

²⁹ Epictetus: *Diatryby*, III.24.

³⁰ W. Tatarkiewicz: *Historia filozofii*, vol. I, p. 132.

In Zen:

"...According to Buddhist doctrine [...] each person can be born again an infinite number of times. This process is referred to as sansara (*samsāra*), or "[endless] wandering," which suggests a continuous movement, akin to the course of a river. All living beings are part of this cyclic movement and will be reborn again until they reach nirvāna."³¹

So there is some elementary similarity. Nevertheless, there are three fundamental differences in detail here.

First, reincarnation in Zen has an anthropological dimension - man is born again. In Stoicism, "eternal return" has a cosmic dimension: the whole world is born and dies, and man born and dies *with the whole world*.

Second, in Zen, the attainment of nirvana (enlightenment) is the same as the interruption of this cycle: whoever reaches the end of wisdom need not be born again. In Stoicism, it is different: it is not in man's power to interrupt this eternal rebirth of the world – the process will go on indefinitely³².

Thirdly, the process of reincarnation has a certain negative dimension in Zen: it is like a wheel from which one must break free, the task and goal of man is to put an end to the process of re-birth. Stoicism is devoid of this tinge; in Stoicism it is just the opposite: the cyclical nature of human existence is positive and mobilizing. It increases responsibility: we must do good, because our actions resonate not only in our present life, but also in all eternity - in all past and future lives.

³¹ D. Keown: *Buddyzn*, p. 43.

³² This is how it should be interpreted. However, this is not without complications and internal disputes between individual Stoic philosophers; after all, in Diogenes Laertios (VII.1) we read that "Kleantes teaches that all souls survive until the world is consumed [...], Chrysippus teaches that only the souls of the wise survive."

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Summary

In this text I attempt at shedding light on some of the main differences and similarities between Stoicism and Zen Buddhism. They are both paths leading in the same direction - both of them strive to provide man with lasting happiness. I try in my paper to figure out in which areas these paths are parallel and in which they are different.

Key words: stoicism, happiness, Zen, Buddhism, nirvana, philosophy of the East.