Zen Introduction

“Zen or Chan, Buddhist school that developed in China and later in Japan as the result of a fusion between the Mahayana form of Buddhism originating in India and the Chinese philosophy of Daoism (Taoism). Zen and Chan are, respectively, the Japanese and Chinese ways of pronouncing the Sanskrit term *dhyana*, which designates *a state of mind roughly equivalent to contemplation or meditation*, although without the static and passive sense that these words sometimes convey. *Dhyana* denotes specifically *the state of consciousness of a Buddha, one whose mind is free from the assumption that the distinct individuality of oneself and other things is real*. All schools of Buddhism hold that *separate things exist only in relation to one another*; this relativity of individuals is called their “voidness” (Sanskrit *sunyata*), which means not that the world is truly nothing but that nature cannot be [fully] grasped by any system of fixed definition or classification. *Reality is the “suchness” (Pali tathata) of nature, or the world “just as it is” apart from any specific thoughts about it.*

*Zen is the peculiarly Chinese way of accomplishing the Buddhist goal of seeing the world just as it is, that is, with a mind that has no grasping thoughts or feelings* (Sanskrit *trishna*). *This attitude is called “no-mind” (Chinese wu-hsin), a state of consciousness wherein thoughts move without leaving any trace*. Unlike other forms of Buddhism, Zen holds that such freedom of mind cannot
be attained by gradual practice but must come through direct and immediate insight (Chinese tun-wu; Japanese satori). Thus, Zen abandons both theorizing and systems of spiritual exercise and communicates its vision of truth by a method known as direct pointing. Its exponents answer all philosophic or religious questions by nonsymbolic words or actions; the answer is the action just as it is, and not what it represents. Typical is the reply of the Zen master Yao-shan, who, on being asked ‘What is the Way [of Zen]?’ answered, ‘A cloud in the sky and water in the jug!’ Zen students prepare themselves to be receptive to such answers by sitting in meditation (Japanese zazen) while they simply observe, without mental comment, whatever may be happening.

According to tradition, Zen was introduced into China in 520 C.E. by the Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma. The most important figures in Zen’s early development, which is distinctively Chinese, were Hui-neng, Te-shan, and Lin-chi. Chinese black-ink painting during the Song dynasty (960-1279 C.E.) became one of the finest artistic expressions of the Zen school.”