

ZEN  
AND THE ART OF  
MOTORCYCLE  
MAINTENANCE

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*An Inquiry into Values*

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top. The only Zen you find on the tops of mountains is the Zen you bring up there. Let's get out of here.

"Feels good to be going down, doesn't it?" I say.

No answer.

We're going to have a little fight, I'm afraid.

You go up the mountaintop and all you're gonna get is a great big heavy stone tablet handed to you with a bunch of rules on it.

That's about what happened to him.

Thought he was a goddamned Messiah.

Not *me*, boy. The hours are way too long, and the pay is way too short. Let's go. Let's go. . . .

Soon I'm clomping down the slope in a kind of two-step idiot gallop . . . *ga-dump, ga-dump, ga-dump* . . . until I hear Chris holler, "SLOW DOWN!" and see he is a couple of hundred yards back through the trees.

So I slow down, but after a while see he is deliberately lagging behind. He's disappointed, of course.

I suppose what I ought to do in the Chautauqua is just point out in summary form the direction Phaedrus went, without evaluation, and then get on with my own thing. Believe me, when the world is seen not as a duality of mind and matter but as a trinity of quality, mind, and matter, then the art of motorcycle maintenance and other arts take on a dimension of meaning they never had. The specter of technology the Sutherlands are running from becomes not an evil but a positive fun thing. And to demonstrate that will be a long fun task.

But first, to give this other specter his walking papers, I should say the following:

Perhaps he would have gone in the direction I'm now about to go in if this second wave of crystallization, the metaphysical wave, had finally grounded out where I'll be grounding it out, that is, in the everyday world. I think metaphysics is good if it improves everyday life; otherwise forget it. But unfortunately for him it didn't ground out.

It went into a third mystical wave of crystallization from which he never recovered.

He'd been speculating about the relationship of Quality to mind and matter and had identified Quality as the parent of mind and matter, that event which gives birth to mind and matter. This Copernican inversion of the relationship of Quality to the objective world could sound mysterious if not carefully explained, but he didn't mean it to be mysterious. He simply meant that at the cutting edge of time, before an object can be distinguished, there must be a kind of nonintellectual awareness, which he called awareness of Quality. You can't be aware that you've seen a tree until *after* you've seen the tree, and between the instant of vision and instant of awareness there must be a time lag. We sometimes think of that time lag as unimportant. But there's no justification for thinking that the time lag is unimportant—none *whatsoever*.

The past exists only in our memories, the future only in our plans. The present is our only reality. The tree that you are aware of intellectually, because of that small time lag, is always in the past and therefore is always unreal. *Any* intellectually conceived object is *always* in the past and therefore *unreal*. Reality is always the moment of vision *before* the intellectualization takes place. *There is no other reality*. This preintellectual reality is what Phaedrus felt he had properly identified as Quality. Since all intellectually identifiable things must emerge *from* this preintellectual reality, Quality is the *parent*, the *source* of all subjects and objects.

He felt that intellectuals usually have the greatest trouble seeing this Quality, precisely because they are so swift and absolute about snapping everything into intellectual form. The ones who have the easiest time seeing this Quality are small children, uneducated people and culturally "deprived" people. These have the least predisposition toward intellectuality from cultural sources and have the least formal training to instill it further into them. That, he felt, is why squareness is such a uniquely intellectual disease. He felt

he'd been accidentally immunized from it, or at least to some extent broken from the habit by his failure from school. After that he felt no compulsive identification with intellectuality and could examine anti-intellectual doctrines with sympathy.

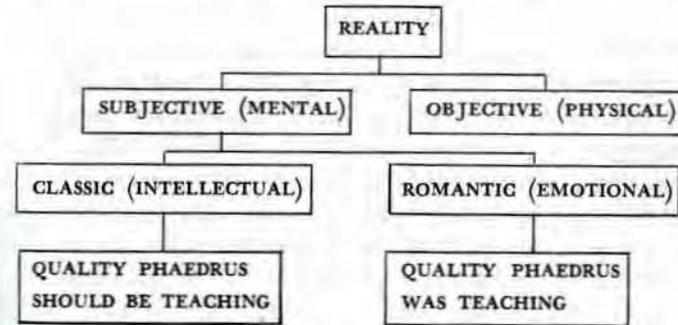
Squares, he said, because of their prejudices toward intellectuality usually regard Quality, the preintellectual reality, as unimportant, a mere uneventful transition period between objective reality and subjective perception of it. Because they have preconceived ideas of its unimportance they don't seek to find out if it's in any way different from their intellectual conception of it.

It is different, he said. Once you begin to hear the sound of that Quality, see that Korean wall, that nonintellectual reality in its pure form, you want to forget all that word stuff, which you finally begin to see is always somewhere else.

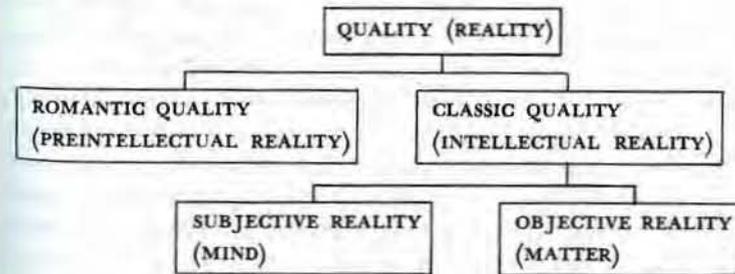
Now, armed with his new time-interrelated metaphysical trinity, he had that romantic-classic Quality split, the one which had threatened to ruin him, completely stopped. They couldn't cut up Quality now. He could sit there and at his leisure cut *them* up. Romantic Quality always correlated with instantaneous impressions. Square Quality always involved multiple considerations that extended over a period of time. Romantic Quality was the present, the here and now of things. Classic Quality was always concerned with more than just the present. The relation of the present to the past and future was always considered. If you conceived the past and future to be all contained in the present, why, that was groovy, the present was what you lived for. And if your motorcycle is working, why worry about it? But if you consider the present to be merely an instant between the past and the future, just a passing moment, then to neglect the past and future for the present is bad Quality indeed. The motorcycle may be working now, but when was the oil level last checked? Fussbudgetry from the romantic view, but good common sense from the classic.

Now we had two different kinds of Quality but they no longer split Quality itself. They were just two different time

aspects of Quality, short and long. What had previously been asked for was a metaphysical hierarchy that looked like this:



What he gave them in return was a metaphysical hierarchy that looked like this:



The Quality he was teaching was not just a part of reality, it was the whole thing.

He then proceeded in terms of the trinity to answer the question, Why does everybody see Quality differently? This was the question he had always had to answer speciously before. Now he said, "Quality is shapeless, formless, indescribable. To see shapes and forms is to intellectualize. Quality is independent of any such shapes and forms. The names, the shapes and forms we give Quality depend only partly on the Quality. They also depend partly on the *a priori* images we have accumulated in our memory. We constantly seek to find, in the Quality event, analogues to our

previous experiences. If we didn't we'd be unable to act. We build up our language in terms of these analogues. We build up our whole culture in terms of these analogues."

The reason people see Quality differently, he said, is because they come to it with different sets of analogues. He gave linguistic examples, showing that to us the Hindi letters *da*, *ḍa*, and *dha* all sound identical to us because we don't have analogues to them to sensitize us to their differences. Similarly, most Hindi-speaking people cannot distinguish between *da* and *the* because they are not so sensitized. It is not uncommon, he said, for Indian villagers to see ghosts. But they have a terrible time seeing the law of gravity.

This, he said, explains why a classful of freshman composition students arrives at similar ratings of Quality in the compositions. They all have relatively similar backgrounds and similar knowledge. But if a group of foreign students were brought in, or, say, medieval poems out of the range of class experience were brought in, then the students' ability to rank Quality would probably not correlate as well.

In a sense, he said, it's the student's choice of Quality that defines *him*. People differ about Quality, not because Quality is different, but because people are different in terms of experience. He speculated that if two people had identical *a priori* analogues they would see Quality identically every time. There was no way to test this, however, so it had to remain just speculation.

In answer to his colleagues at school he wrote:

"Any philosophic explanation of Quality is going to be both false and true precisely because it is a philosophic explanation. The process of philosophic explanation is an analytic process, a process of breaking something down into subjects and predicates. What I mean (and everybody else means) by the word *quality* cannot be broken down into subjects and predicates. This is not because Quality is so mysterious but because Quality is so simple, immediate and direct.

"The easiest intellectual analogue of pure Quality that people in our environment can understand is that 'Quality

is the response of an organism to its environment' [he used this example because his chief questioners seemed to see things in terms of stimulus-response behavior theory]. An amoeba, placed on a plate of water with a drip of dilute sulfuric acid placed nearby, will pull away from the acid (I think). If it could speak the amoeba, without knowing anything about sulfuric acid, could say, 'This environment has poor quality.' If it had a nervous system it would act in a much more complex way to overcome the poor quality of the environment. It would seek analogues, that is, images and symbols from its previous experience, to define the unpleasant nature of its new environment and thus 'understand' it.

"In our highly complex organic state we advanced organisms respond to our environment with an invention of many marvelous analogues. We invent earth and heavens, trees, stones and oceans, gods, music, arts, language, philosophy, engineering, civilization and science. We call these analogues reality. And they *are* reality. We mesmerize our children in the name of truth into knowing that they *are* reality. We throw anyone who does not accept these analogues into an insane asylum. But that which causes us to invent the analogues is Quality. Quality is the continuing stimulus which our environment puts upon us to create the world in which we live. All of it. Every last bit of it.

"Now, to take that which has caused us to create the world, and include it within the world we have created, is clearly impossible. That is why Quality cannot be defined. If we do define it we are defining something less than Quality itself."

I remember this fragment more vividly than any of the others, possibly because it is the most important of all. When he wrote it he felt momentary fright and was about to strike out the words "All of it. Every last bit of it." Madness there. I think he saw it. But he couldn't see any logical reason to strike these words out and it was too late now for faintheartedness. He ignored his warning and let the words stand.

He put his pencil down and then . . . felt something let

go. As though something internal had been strained too hard and had given way. Then it was too late.

He began to see that he had shifted away from his original stand. He was no longer talking about a metaphysical trinity but an absolute monism. Quality was the source and substance of everything.

A whole new flood of philosophic associations came to mind. Hegel had talked like this, with his Absolute Mind. Absolute Mind was independent too, both of objectivity and subjectivity.

However, Hegel said the Absolute Mind was the source of everything, but then excluded romantic experience from the "everything" it was the source of. Hegel's Absolute was completely classical, completely rational and completely orderly.

Quality was not like that.

Phaedrus remembered Hegel had been regarded as a bridge between Western and Oriental philosophy. The Vedanta of the Hindus, the Way of the Taoists, even the Buddha had been described as an absolute monism similar to Hegel's philosophy. Phaedrus doubted at the time, however, whether mystical Ones and metaphysical monisms were introconvertible since mystical Ones follow no rules and metaphysical monisms do. His Quality was a metaphysical entity, not a mystic one. Or was it? What was the difference?

He answered himself that the difference was one of definition. Metaphysical entities are defined. Mystical Ones are not. That made Quality mystical. No. It was really both. Although he'd thought of it purely in philosophical terms up to now as metaphysical, he had all along refused to define it. That made it mystic too. Its indefinability freed it from the rules of metaphysics.

Then, on impulse, Phaedrus went over to his bookshelf and picked out a small, blue, cardboard-bound book. He'd hand-copied this book and bound it himself years before, when he couldn't find a copy for sale anywhere. It was the 2,400-year-old *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu. He began to read through the lines he had read many times before. but this

time he studied it to see if a certain substitution would work. He began to read and interpret it at the same time.

He read:

*The quality that can be defined is not the Absolute Quality.*

That was what he had said.

*The names that can be given it are not Absolute names. It is the origin of heaven and earth.*

*When named it is the mother of all things. . . .*

Exactly.

*Quality [romantic Quality] and its manifestations [classic Quality] are in their nature the same. It is given different names [subjects and objects] when it becomes classically manifest.*

*Romantic quality and classic quality together may be called the "mystic."*

*Reaching from mystery into deeper mystery, it is the gate to the secret of all life.*

*Quality is all-pervading.*

*And its use is inexhaustible!*

*Fathomless!*

*Like the fountainhead of all things . . .*

*Yet crystal clear like water it seems to remain.*

*I do not know whose Son it is.*

*An image of what existed before God.*

*. . . Continuously, continuously it seems to remain. Draw upon it and it serves you with ease . . .*

*Looked at but cannot be seen . . . listened to but cannot be heard . . . grasped at but cannot be touched . . . these three elude all our inquiries and hence blend and become one.*

*Not by its rising is there light,*

*Not by its sinking is there darkness*

*Unceasing, continuous*

*It cannot be defined*

*And reverts again into the realm of nothingness*

*That is why it is called the form of the formless*

*The image of nothingness*

*That is why it is called elusive  
Meet it and you do not see its face  
Follow it and you do not see its back  
He who holds fast to the quality of old  
Is able to know the primeval beginnings  
Which are the continuity of quality.*

Phaedrus read on through line after line, verse after verse of this, watched them match, fit, slip into place. Exactly. *This* was what he meant. *This* was what he'd been saying all along, only poorly, mechanistically. There was nothing vague or inexact about this book. It was as precise and definite as it could be. It was what he had been saying, only in a different language with different roots and origins. He was from another valley seeing what was in *this* valley, not now as a story told by strangers but as a part of the valley he was from. He was seeing it all.

He had broken the code.

He read on. Line after line. Page after page. Not a discrepancy. What he had been talking about all the time as Quality was here the Tao, the great central generating force of all religions, Oriental and Occidental, past and present, all knowledge, everything.

Then his mind's eye looked up and caught his own image and realized where he was and what he was seeing and . . . I don't know what really happened . . . but now the slip-page that Phaedrus had felt earlier, the internal parting of his mind, suddenly gathered momentum, as do the rocks at the top of a mountain. Before he could stop it, the sudden accumulated mass of awareness began to grow and grow into an avalanche of thought and awareness out of control; with each additional growth of the downward tearing mass loosening hundreds of times its volume, and then that mass uprooting hundreds of times its volume more, and then hundreds of times that; on and on, wider and broader; until there was nothing left to stand.

No more anything.

It all gave way from under him.

"YOU'RE NOT VERY BRAVE, ARE YOU?" CHRIS SAYS.

"No," I answer, and pull the rind of a slice of salami between my teeth to remove the meat. "But you'd be astonished at how smart I am."

We're down quite a way from the summit now, and the mixed pines and leafy underbrush are much higher here and more closed in than they were at this altitude on the other side of the canyon. Evidently more rain gets into this canyon. I gulp down a large quantity of water from a pot Chris has filled at the stream here, then look at him. I can see by his expression that he's resigned himself to going down and there's no need to lecture him or argue. We finish the lunch off with a part of a bag of candy, wash it down with another pot of water and lay back on the ground for a rest. Mountain springwater has the best taste in the world.

After a while Chris says, "I can carry a heavier load now."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," he says, a little haughtily.

Gratefully I transfer some of the heavier stuff to his pack and we put the packs on, wriggling through the shoulder straps on the ground and then standing up. I can feel the difference in weight. He can be considerate when he's in the mood.

From here on it looks like a slow descent. This slope has evidently been logged and there's a lot of underbrush higher than our heads that makes it slow going. We'll have to work our way around it.

What I want to do now in the Chautauqua is get away from intellectual abstractions of an extremely general nature and into some solid, practical, day-to-day information, and I'm not quite sure how to go about this.