Motorcycle and the Art of Zen

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"...The Dharma is devoid of words or appearances, but it is not separate from words and appearances. If you abandon words you are subject to distorted views and defilements; if you grasp at words, you are deluded as to the truth. Students of the scriptures often abandon the inner work and pursue externals; Zen adepts prefer to ignore worldly activity and simply look inward. Both positions are biases which are bound at two extremes. They are like fighting over whether a rabbit’s horns are long or short, or arguing whether flowers in the sky are profuse or scarce." Uichon (1055-1101), great Zen Korean master (cited in Sunim, Kusan. The Way of Korean Zen. New York and Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1987)

Zen philosophy is one of the most ancient philosophies in the world and has been a major dominating influence in the arts and sciences of Eastern thought and culture. Could we however determine if it is still relevant in the modern world? How can our Western society take advantage of such culture? For the past hundred years much has been done by Europeans, Americans as well Asians to translate Eastern ideas to the Western public. The book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert M. Pirsig is another example, now in the field of literature, which attempts to approximate those two concepts, an ancient Eastern and a modern American, in a rather fascinating way as he advances in his knowledge about motorcycle maintenance and the observations he draws from it which ranges from landscape scenes to motorcycle structure through the alleys of the Western philosophical history.

Published in 1974, the book by Pirsig had an enormous success in his trying to recapture an old way of life through the metaphor of the traveling of father and son through America and the motorcycle maintenance, which in itself is a major symbol for American culture and its way of life. What was a symbol of rationalistic and materialistic society, Pirsig transforms it into an instrument of explaining the workings of the mind revealing an art well known in the East, that is, to take examples gathered from nature or external environment and extract lessons relevant to the inner man. He says right on the front-page:

*The study of the art of motorcycle maintenance is really a miniature study of the art of rationality itself. Working on a motorcycle, working well, caring, is to become part of a process, to achieve an inner peace of mind. The motorcycle is primarily a mental phenomenon.*

In this way Pirsig tries to give a psychological and philosophical description of the process of rationality undergone by the Western thinking since the Greek times through the metaphor of motorcycle. Rationality is in itself a shaping force in Western society since Greek times, and motorcycle, at least apparently, is a product
of it. Nonetheless Pirsig challenges this assumption. In analyzing how near Pirsig goes in such comparison it is necessary however to give together with it an account of what Zen is in its main characteristics as, though he explains that his book:

*Should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhist practice.*

(Author’s note)

…the reader is made aware very clearly of the Eastern presence in the narrator’s life as well in Phaedrus’, a character often mentioned by the narrator along the book.

Within the vast Buddhist tradition born in the sixth century B.C. in India, there is an enormous variety of styles and forms, both in practical and theoretical aspects, in how to present the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. It is said that around the sixth century A.D., more than thousand years after Buddhism springtime, an Indian monk called Bodhidharma had traveled to China where he found a deplorable situation concerning Buddhist transmission. The Dharma, as the Buddha’s teaching is generally known, at that time was used only for theoretical debates. The Chinese saw Buddhism only as a foreign teaching and the noble Confucianists made use of it in order to debate points of the Confucian doctrine.

When around the first century A.D. Buddhism started to penetrate in Chinese land it was mainly because of its theoretical potential. Facing such situation Bodhidharma started to transmit the Dharma as it was taught in India since the times of the first teachers, emphasizing not only the theoretical elements but meditation too. As Chinese theoreticians were already too versatile in intellectual discussions Bodhidharma thought that if he would teach Buddhist theory he would probably end up teaching in an university or in the debate circles instead of transmitting the heart of the teaching. Bodhidharma was not a tie-and-suit man, but a master. His function was then to emphasize the practical elements of the teaching. Such characteristic was well taken by Pirsig for his metaphor, as we would not find a more “practical” symbol in American culture than a motorcycle. The narrator travels with his son Chris through the beautiful landscape of the American prairies and the starting point for his philosophical inquiries was the fact the couple of friends that were his companions in those trips did not take any interest in knowing how a motorcycle work. While they were trying to run away from a technological structure, the narrator finds that this same modern structure or “system” had a lesson to teach, revealing the way rational mind from Renaissance times created more trouble than answers due to a flaw built-in within it.

The solution for Bodhidharma was to make an adaptation of the Dharma in Chinese soil giving greater importance to meditative practice. Later on his way of teaching went to be known as *Ch’an* or, in its Japanese form, *Zen*. Bodhidharma taught that Buddhism was not a thing only to be taught or heard, but mainly something to be practiced. The narrator in page 4 says:

*You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you’re always in a compartment, and because you’re used to it you don’t realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You’re a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame.*
In a way that is what Bodhidharma was also saying. Life is not something to be passive about but a practical thing to be acted upon. Phaedrus get crazily suffocated because he could not see a way out of the mental trap rational mind created, and in a way he could just watch passively life going by. Bodhidharma instead urged the Chinese to go out of their discussion room and face the teaching in its essence.

On a cycle the frame is gone. You’re completely in contact with it all. You’re in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. (page 4)

As time goes by, the narrator is getting even nearer to the Buddhist teaching of presence and communion as can be seen in this phrase of Master Taizan Maezumi Roshi, a leading Zen teacher in USA:

What the Buddha had experienced was... the direct and conscious realization of the oneness of the whole universe and of his own unity with all things... To have this very realization is in itself to be the Buddha.

To be present, in the scene, as Pirsig says, is essential to Eastern teaching of a way of life, something the Transcendentalist poets also drawn from.

Only that day dawns to which we are awake (Henry David Thoreau)

For Bodhidharma, Buddhism was not a mass of dogmas to be accepted unconditionally, but rather something extremely practical and experiential. Meditation was the main and first way of integrating the teaching. Within those conditions Bodhidharma found out a radical solution, to sit and meditate only, trying to show the importance of practice. Pirsig did not arrive to such radical solutions, obviously because the main historical set was different, but the reader is made to travel through the whole process of rational philosophical thinking through the medium of Phaedrus, a ghost-like creature that appears from page 33 and is the real motivating force of the story.

It is Phaedrus that will lead us to tracks and roads of the mind less traveled but are nonetheless fascinating. Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Lao-tzu, up to Poincaré, Kant and Hegel are sought out by Phaedrus traveling through these mental roads of thought. It is already foreseen when the narrator says about roads off the main highway.

These roads are truly different from the main ones. The whole pace of life and personality of the people who live along them are different. They’re not going anywhere. They’re not too busy to be courteous. The hereness and nowness of things is something they know all about (page 5)

This hereness and nowness is the essence of Zen teaching that Pirsig transports to motorcycle traveling, a “presence practice,” exercised by the technique of sitting meditation. After some time the fame of that Indian monk spread out attracting those that were searching for the essence of Buddhism. They would come to him, they would sit and meditate. Those outside the practicing circle would say that Bodhidharma taught
only one thing: meditation. From that came the name by which his teaching came to be known: Ch’an or Zen (in Japanese), which, coming from the Sanskrit word dhyâna, means only “meditation”.

Zen means only meditation, but with the time it came to be known as a specific form of teaching and practicing. After Bodhidharma this particular form of transmission, still in its origins was passed on through many generations till around the eighth century when Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch since Bodhidharma, gave its final form. In a sense, it is Hui-neng the real founder or organizer of Zen school. The Chinese Ch’an develops and grows reaching regions outside Chinese borders. It reached Korea where it is known as Song, Vietnam as Thien and Japan, whose form came to be better known in the West, the famous Zen. But all these words are only transliterations of the Sanskrit one, Dhyâna.

The narrator is clearly aware of this kind of transmission of teaching as he makes use of a Native American Indian word, Chautauqua, to name what he would like to do. He defines Chautauqua as

An old-time series of popular talks intended to edify and entertain, improve the mind and bring culture and enlightenment to the ears and thoughts of the hearer (page 7)

The book, he says, is meant to be a Chautauqua centering in a fundamental question of humanity: “What is best?” He says that:

“What is new?” is an interesting and broadening eternal question, but one which, if pursued exclusively, results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion, the silt of tomorrow (page 7)

…a comment very akin to Zen thinking that would see novelty as just a way to divert the mind from what really matters. It is not also foreign to Western ancient thinking which reverberates in Biblical saying:

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

The Chautauqua starts taking as its starting point the realization of the narrator that his friends had a scary and irritating way of relating to technology.

To get away from technology out into the country in the fresh air and sunshine is why they are on the motorcycle in the first place (page 14)

Though it could be taught that withdrawing to nature would be more akin to Eastern thinking, and then his friends would be more Eastern-like than the narrator, the plot is much more intelligent than that. If we take nature in opposition to technology we are splitting our mind in a division that has been dominating Western minds. Zen and Taoist teachings take the opposite direction, trying to make man realize the unity behind diversity as is so curiously demonstrated in the translation done by Phaedrus of the Tao Te Ching at page 227. For John and Sylvia the world is something split,
multiparted, and the trouble and the feeling of inadequacy they have along the story are characteristic of such frame of mind.

I just think that their flight from and hatred of technology is self-defeating. The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha - which is to demean oneself. This is what I want to talk in this Chautauqua (page 16)

The narrator in this way refuses to split between nature and man’s production again and we need just to compare it to a sentence of another leading Zen master of this century:

When we have our body and mind in order, everything else will exist in the right place, in the right way (Shunryu Suzuki Roshi)

To get body and mind in order is, as I see, an underlined motive during the story. The balancing of the mind is practiced through the medium of Phaedrus, in his pursuit of truth, goodness, and equilibrium. He undergoes in this search for moments of disturbance and conflict as is expected in a healing process. And the balancing of the body can be seen in the metaphor itself. What would be more appropriated to symbolize it than the riding on a motorcycle? The equilibrium needed to stay in a two-wheel machine, the disturbances caused by the wind and the road, the unexpectedness coming from the next curve, the need to be aware and equanimous regarding the weather, the beauty and the adversities along the road, all factors met by the characters of the story.

There is no one place or sharp line where the Central Plains end and the Great Plains begin. It’s a gradual change like this that catches you unaware, as if you were sailing out from a choppy coastal harbor, noticed that the waves had taken on a deep swell, and turned back to see that you were out of sight of land (page 17)

Zen is a teaching aimed to achieve balance but it also is, apparently (but only apparently) a teaching that opposes to erudition and theoretical study. It is one of the errors some Westerners incur avoiding the study basing themselves in a phase took out of its original context which says:

A special transmission outside the scriptures, no development on words and letters. Seeing directly into the mind of man, realizing true nature, becoming Buddha. (Bodhidharma)

So some beginners think that Zen would be a spiritual path where books, study and all intellectual comprehension would be thrown away. It would only remain a “Zen” taken as a magical word, possessed of virtues and powers by itself. The true and only Zen however takes this sentence as meaning that after you have studied and gotten a deep investigation of the doctrine, then, you should throw away your books and stay with experience. To say it is “outside de the scriptures” is to say that first you go through
all the texts and only then you outgrow them. It is a point far away from saying it disdains all erudition and theoretical knowledge. Phaedrus also goes deeply into the philosophical problems realizing the dead-end of rationality by the end. Phaedrus appears in a conversation after a storm and during a talk about ghosts. It is said he was a man:

> who spent all his whole life doing nothing but hunting for a ghost, and it was just a waste of time (page 32).

This ghost is seen later to be rationality as the West takes it. And Phaedrus is the Western philosophical mind trapped in the snare of rationality. It is by the end of the first part of the book that Phaedrus is revealed as being the narrator himself, his old self almost forgotten but still alive in a ghostly form. The story from now on becomes a dialogue of two selves in a same person, an inner dialogue in search of truth.

We have seen that some have taken Zen as something destituted of rationality, emphasizing instead intuition. But those instead of seeing the truth beyond the scriptures see it beneath the scriptures. Beyond and beneath is the difference between the true Zen practitioners and their fake counterparts. For Zen all intellectual study is a stair which one has to climb and up there to throw the stair away. But the false Zen believes one could throw the stair before climbing it. Such mistake could be due to the conception that intellectual comprehension is something opposed to spirituality, but it is interesting to see that Pirsig does not buy it, as to say. Though rationality is seen as a ghost, product of what the narrator calls “classical understanding,” its opposite is the “romantic understanding,” and not spirituality. The narrator does not attribute “romantic understanding” to a “spiritual” teaching, rather he sees spiritual understanding as something beyond and at the same time unifying them both. The split between spirituality and intellectual comprehension, something unimaginable in the East, permeates the Western thinking, even the religious one, culminating not in “religion” but in “religious sentimentalism”, the blind faith and the valorization of emotionalism and sentimentality as the only means for spirituality.

Pirsig is aware that such split is one of the flaws in Western thought that undermines many of the problems in modernity. He summarizes an Eastern way of looking in page 70:

> There is a perennial classical question that asks which part of the motorcycle, which grain of sand in which pile, is the Buddha. Obviously to ask that question is to look in the wrong direction, for the Buddha is everywhere... About the Buddha that exists independently of any analytic thought much has been said - some would say too much, and would question any attempt to add to it. But about the Buddha that exists within analytic thought, and gives the analytic thought its direction, virtually nothing has been said. (page 70)

I think that the merit of Pirsig here is to call for an awareness to the Western public regarding a theme so rare to be seen. Pirsig does not write for a specialized Zen public, but addresses to a fundamental question that is the basis of Western thinking itself. Phaedrus is a tormented man in search for himself, and this disturbance comes from the philosophy he himself adopts. Pirsig shows this fundamental conflict using the Eastern way of looking applied to motorcycle maintenance that is taken not as
pieces of metal combined in different shapes, as he puts it, but as series of concepts and ideas, revealers of patterns of thought:

That’s all the motorcycle is, a system of concepts worked out in steel. There’s no part in it, no shape in it, that is not out of someone’s mind.... I’ve noticed that people who have never worked with steel have trouble seeing this - that the motorcycle is primarily a mental phenomenon (page 88)

Pirsig makes use of this well-known object of American society as a metaphor of Western mind, calling the attention to the conflict, but also addressing our awareness on a false spirituality that wishes to remain outside the realm of rationality, much like John and Sylvia wished to go outside the technology and paradoxically traveling on a motorcycle! Some of us would wish to embark in a journey of self-knowledge going away of rationality, but curiously taking all bias of Western thought with us. Others would wish to stay within the realm of rational thought, but it would amount to a split of the man in multifaceted parts. This is a conflict of contemporary man, a conflict that is revealed in scientific thinking and in day to day common living as is well represented in the Western literature and that Pirsig tries to reveal.
Bibliography:


