

# **Zen and systemic therapy: Similarities, distinctions, possible contributions of Zen theory and Zen practice to systemic therapy**

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## **Abstract**

The basic motivation of the article is that the authors experience their *going into Zen* as enlarging for their work as systemic psychotherapists. On this base they ask how Zen in the context of systemic psychotherapy - on a theoretical and on a practical level - can be seen and practiced respectively can be used. Chapter one approaches the subject Zen from three points of view: Zen history, Zen teaching, and Zen practice. Chapter two introduces a *Koan* (teaching device/riddle) and possibilities of its interpretation. Chapter three is dealing with common interests and differences concerning systemic psychotherapy. Differences exist in the particular sociological, historical, and cultural context. Subjects of common interest are concepts of constructivism, practicability, and solution orientation, the dealing with paradoxes, as well as basic attitudes of self determination and trust in competence. Finally considerations are developed how Zen could enlarge systemic psychotherapy.

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## 1 Zen<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. *The historical development*

The Buddhist doctrine traces back to the religion founder Gautama (surname) Siddhartha (proper name) out of the ruling warrior clan of the Shakya in the oligarchic Republic of Shakya in North India, in the border area to today's Nepal. Most sources state 560-480 B.C. as his life data (Zotz 1991, p.16). North India at this time bore the mark of drastic change. Through the transition from cattle-raising to agriculture administrative structures strengthened fundamentally. The caste system changed: due to the establishment of hereditary monarchies the warrior caste became less important; the Brahmins (priests) scaled up and became the highest caste in place of the warriors. Small political systems at the Himalaya mountainsides like the one of Shakya got under political pressure of the large hereditary monarchies and lost their independence.

Moving ascetics who had given up their possessions und left their families were a reflection of this upheaval of the society and had a high reputation in the population. Also Gautama left his family for this kind of search. At 29 years of age he left behind his wife and his little son. Later they both followed just like his stepmother and two of his cousins likewise into the way of life of hiking religious seekers. About the youth time of Gautama and his experience of the transitoriness, there exist many legends. Well known over all is the story that Gautama, although the son of the ruler and protected from all negative, is confronted with senility, illness and death.<sup>2</sup>

The personal search of Gautama was characterized by hardest mortification. After six years of this practice it came to a second turning point, which led to the fact that he moved away from asceticism again and developed his specific doctrine. The Buddhist tradition purports that Gautama in a night and a day under a tree realized „equanimity and pure present awareness“. He awoke from the "dream existence of joy and misery of the transitoriness" (Zotz 1991, p.39-52) and experienced direct insight into the transitoriness and lack of substance of being and into the Conditioned Arising of all

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<sup>2</sup> This story however is of older origin and originally tells the life of prince Vipashyin (Zotz 1991, p.27).

phenomena.<sup>3</sup> From this time on he was given the surname Buddha, which means the awoken or illuminated one.

After this experience Gautama spent approximately 45 years to pass his insights on to people looking for the meaning of their lives or for practical advice. The group of humans who left their possessions and joined Gautama grew steadily. The fact that in this community and in the contact with people looking for advice no caste differences were recognized represented a revolutionary element of Buddhist practice. A further existed in the position of the women. In his statements Gautama made clear from the beginning that for him men and women were equal in their ability of personal and religious development. However he hesitated first to include groups of women into his movement. Today Buddhist men cloisters and Buddhist women cloisters exist, although in Buddhism altogether men are clearly over-represented in leading positions. In western Buddhist groups this ratio is more balanced, and women are established more and more as religious teachers.<sup>4</sup>

It is typical for Gautama's teachings that they contain complex philosophical ideas on the one hand, but on the other hand they are also practically and not speculatively oriented. In discussion with Brahmins he said for example that none of them had ever seen Brahman ("God"). In another teaching he emphasized that the release from greed, hate and ignorance was actually a value for itself, also without a reward for it after death. Traditional presentations that stood in contradiction to single elements of the Buddhist philosophy, like the concept of personal rebirth or the Hindu Gods canon, were relativized or amended but not posed in question in principle. Persons from most different social classes addressed themselves to Gautama and also rulers looked for his advice.

After Gautama's death a relatively ascetic current prevailed at first in the religious community.<sup>5</sup> Later on the two Buddhist schools of interpretation

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<sup>3</sup> The elements of Conditioned Arising, the Dharmas, are not deconstructible into subunits but depend on other Dharmas for their appearance. Examples of Dharmas are for instance the four elements, or greed, hate, emerging, or passing. *The Dharma* means the Buddhist doctrine.

<sup>4</sup> For instance Charlotte Joko Beck (Beck 1998).

<sup>5</sup> In the centuries after Gautama's death the religious community changed. More and more of the moving ascetics became settled monks. Gautama himself had advised against sedentariness and had remained at permanent places only during the rainy seasons. But already during his lifetime many properties had been given to the community by donation. In the centuries after his death the reference to social topics of general interest became weaker because of monastery life; the dependence on political authorities grew due to sedentariness.

formed: Hinayana (the small vehicle) and Mahayana (the large vehicle).<sup>6</sup> In the Hinayana the students concentrate over all on their own development, for example by means of meditation and body exercises. This school is today particularly common in Southeast Asia. In the Mahayana the students try to include all beings into their self realization (*Bodhisattva* ideal). The reality of the world as an inseparable whole is stated this way. The Mahayana direction is particularly common in China and Japan, Zen is a part of the Mahayana.

In the context of the propagation of Buddhism to Eastern Asia the development of Zen takes its beginning. The Indian monk Bodhidharma who traveled in the fifth century A.D. as a Buddhist teacher from India to China is considered as the founder of the Zen tradition. The Japanese word *Zen* comes from Chinese *Chan* which is derived from the Sanskrit word *Dhyana* (concentration, meditation). Zen represents a specific connection of Indian, Chinese and Japanese elements. In the opinion of various Zen authors Chinese culture tends to be more practically and less speculatively oriented than Indian culture, which reflects itself in the alignment of Zen on practical life experience: "What's the use of talking about a musical masterpiece? What counts, is, that one performs it." (Nhat Hanh 1997, p.135).

Eisai (1141-1214, Rinzai school) and Dogen (1200-1253, Soto school) are the founders of the two large Zen schools in Japan, which respectively trace back to Chinese schools of older date.<sup>7</sup> At the time of Eisai and Dogen Buddhism became part of the popular culture in Japan. Today in Japan there exist various other Buddhist schools beside Zen, e.g. Jodo Shin, Shingon, Tendai, and Nichiren. Apart from Zen practice in a Japanese tradition, today above all the Vietnamese Zen teacher and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>8</sup> and his students are well-known in the West. In Tibet its own direction of Buddhism exists which combines local cultural traditions with the Buddhist doctrine and is popular likewise in the West.<sup>9</sup> In India Buddhism disappeared practically completely in the 13<sup>th</sup> century: 1000-1250 A.D. all monasteries were destroyed through Islamic invasion.

The propagation of Buddhism as the first world religion was connected with the transmission of cultural heritage and cultural techniques, e.g. the

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<sup>6</sup> The denomination Hinayana is a label of the Mahayana. The name of this Buddhist tradition in its own terms is Theravada: the school of the old (the founders); the original teachings.

<sup>7</sup> The third well known Zen school, Obaku, was founded by Ingen in 1654.

<sup>8</sup> Nhat Hanh lives in exile and is head of a spiritual center (Plum Village) in France.

<sup>9</sup> Most well known head of a Tibetan Buddhist tradition is the 14th Dalai Lama, who has been living in exile since the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

transfer of medical knowledge from India to China, or the adoption of Chinese writing in Japan. A further explanation for the expansion of Buddhist ideas consists in the fact that Buddhist monks always accepted local divinities and placed them merely under the Buddhist Law of Transitoriness.

In Europe an influence of Buddhist ideas in philosophy and humanities can be determined starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and reaching a first peak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the preoccupation with Buddhism became a proper fashion for certain society circles. Above all philosophers as for example Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Heidegger appointed themselves to Gautama's ideas.<sup>10</sup>

After the discussion of Buddhist theory, the Western preoccupation with Buddhist practice started to a greater extent after 1945. The contact between Japan and the USA due to the war actions of the Second World War contributed to the propagation of Zen practice in the United States. The books of Zen author Daisetz Suzuki (e.g. Suzuki 1993) attracted attention in the West. Starting from 1970 Zen and other meditation centers were established in the United States, for example by Shunryu Suzuki (Suzuki 1997) in California.<sup>11</sup>

Today Buddhism as a religion is important above all in Asia and increasingly also in the West. Buddhism is the predominant religion in the Himalaya region and in Mongolia; considerable parts of the population are also Buddhists in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, South Korea, Japan, and China. It is common to the different Buddhist currents that they do not proselytize and claim no contradictoriness regarding other religious systems. As a consequence many Japanese practice Buddhist and Shintoistic rites as well, or Roman Catholics and Protestants practice Zen Meditation.

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of pessimistic, passive Buddhism in contrast to the active Western word was thereby - at least in 19<sup>th</sup> century - taken over by opponents and followers of the Buddhist doctrine as well, although it is in many respects due to Western prejudices (Zotz 1991, p.9-11). Examples of twentieth century authors in a German philosophical tradition: Herrigel (1982), Dürckheim (1991).

<sup>11</sup> At this time also the perception of Zen by psychotherapists increased, which is reflected for instance in the publication "Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis" (Fromm et al. 1971).

## 1.2. *The Zen doctrine*

### 1.2.1. *Overview of the Zen-teaching*

The teaching of Zen is based on the four fundamental assumptions of Buddhism, the so called *Four Noble Truths*. The first says that life is Dukkha/suffering. The second relates to how Dhaka comes into being, the third tells how Dukkha can be extinguished and the fourth explains the path which leads to the extinction of Dukkha. Dukkha means in this context change/transitoriness, in the positive as in the negative sense. The origin of Dukkha is connected with desire or thirst towards satisfaction of the physical, sensual, intellectual and spiritual needs. Dukkha is terminated by nirvana, “the end of continuation and come into being”.

Buddha’s Nirvana-concept reads: “There is, O monks an area, where neither firm nor fluid is, neither heat nor movement, neither this world nor that world, neither sun nor moon. O monks I call that neither coming nor going, nor standing still, neither being-born nor dying. It is without foundation, without development, without base. That just is the end of suffering” (Fuchs 1989, p.49).

The Fourth Truth speaks of a way, also called the *Middle Path*. Its eight limbs are: right understanding, right mindedness, speech, action, living, effort, attentiveness, concentration.

According to Buddhist philosophy, a living being, an individual or an I is merely a connection of steadily changing physical powers and energies, which one can divide in five groups; body, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness. These five groups are well-known as the five Skandhas.

However Zen renounces to a great extent the theoretical considerations concerning the basis of Buddhist teaching and turns itself with all strength towards the realization of enlightenment (Satori/Kensho). Like in the solution oriented psychotherapy, the problem and the constructs which curl around it step in the background, are secondary important.

Zen-masters presented their enlightenment-experiences often unorthodoxly, independent of traditional forms, and spontaneously in statements and deeds, writings and lectures (Zen-teaching: see e.g. Kapleau 2000, Richard and Waas 2000).

Joshu Sasaki Roshi, one of the first Zen-teachers who came in the early sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to America and began to instruct western students in Zen, says:

“Zen cannot be comprehended by merely looking at things on the surface.

It teaches that the entire universe is nothing more than this single grain of rice: everything is resolved into this one round thing. From a linear point of view, this is hard to comprehend. Some people may disagree and say, 'Roshi, there is still an external world.' But such people do not have complete knowledge of this world that we live in."

(Sasaki 1992, p. 66)<sup>12</sup>

### 1.2.2. *Fundamental ideas of the Zen teachings in a European context*

- **Suffering and Asceticism:**

*All life is suffering*, Buddha's first *noble truth*, sounds very ascetic, detached from the world, or body hostile before the background of a Christian tradition. Buddhist practice does not understand itself however as asceticism, but rather as a *middle way*, which Gautama after turning away from asceticism had developed as a result of his experiences.

Everything in the world is considered transitory and therefore for the duration (e.g. duration of one's own life) seeking person painful. But in the conception of the world of the Buddha altogether there is a balance of joyful, painful and indifferent feelings, the emphasis of suffering above all is an incentive for a changing life practice (see Zotz 1991, p.70).

Influenced through regional religious traditions, cultural and social contexts, through subcultures and characters of leaders, respectively different elements of the Buddhist doctrine are emphasized. The *Hinayana/Theravada* direction of Buddhism with its emphasis of individual practice in cloisters is considered as detached from the everyday social world. In *Zen* a large range between secluded and socially oriented directions as well as between differently strong emphasis of physical discipline in the meditation practice can be observed (on socially engaged *Zen* practice: Glassman 1998).

- **Reincarnation:**

Philosophically Gautama's view of the reincarnation differs from the concepts of the well-known other Indian doctrines of salvation. According to the Buddhist teachings no constant being like the *Jiva* of the Jainas or the *Atman* of the *Upanishads* is received into a new body after the death of a person. Rather the passing away of one being - free of a substance of its own -

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<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Joko Beck, Zen teacher from San Diego, who understands and lives Zen out of everyday life, writes: "Zen practice is not about a special place or a special peace or possibly something else but merely about living our life as it is right now: precisely my difficulties in this instant are perfection. (Beck 1998, p.45)

determines the emerging of a new being, also lacking a substance of its own. The mosaic stones regroup themselves, and no lasting core plants itself away from the first to the next picture (see Zotz 1991, p.75).

The interpretation of the Karma doctrine and thus the question of a personnel reincarnation are seen differently in Buddhism, also in each case influenced by the cultural context. In the Tibetan Buddhism for example the conception of reincarnation takes a central place in religious theory and practice.<sup>13</sup>

- **Enlightenment:**

Nirvana (enlightenment, awakening) represents a central term for the Buddhist theory and practice, but according to the Zen teachings it cannot be discussed satisfyingly on an intellectual level. Nevertheless there exists a discourse with long tradition that can be represented. Some references as metaphors for an intellectual approximation to the term Nirvana: Awakening; Extinguishing of boundary drawing; Extinguishing of separating; Extinguishing of excluding; Development or integration of all human potentials; Condition of confidence and of being integrated (see Wilber 1996, p.345-387).

The Reaching of a Nirvana experience or a more or less constant Nirvana consciousness is confirmed in the Zen tradition by an authorized teacher (Roshi) (see Kapleau 2000, p.265-397). Nirvana can never be seized or described intellectually, since this presupposes dual thinking and the fixing of intellectual boundaries: "The true spirit is the radiating nature of being, while the wrong spirit is the ability of forming terms and differentiating. If we perceive the true spirit, the living reality in its entire abundance reveals itself. That is the illuminated life of Zen." (Nhat Hanh 1997, p.81)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On the Tibetan Book of the Dead: compare Wilber (1990), p.265-288. For the doctrine of Tibetan Buddhism adapted for the West: see Trungpa (1996).

<sup>14</sup> „All interpretations of the Nirvana agree that it is the end of greed, hate and blindness. These three terms designate aspects of egocentricity. Greed means the longing for possession in the furthest sense: One wants to possess persons and things or wishes that pleasant events occur. Once one has got the desired, one is attached to it and wants to keep it. Hate is the antipodal activity: Persons, things, or situations that one does not want, one rejects and disclaims. Yet the undesired, for example the confrontation with death or the arrival of unintentional encounters, cannot be avoided. Also all the desired that one attains must decay. Therefore this existence fraught with greed and hate is experienced as sorrowful. In the attraction of the desired and the repulsing of the repelled, blindness emerges, which means the illusion of being separated from everything else. Humans do not experience themselves as conditioned, but as autonomous subjects who are separated from the world and are defining their existence by means of desiring and rejecting what they perceive as separated from themselves" (Zotz 1991, p.80).

### 1.3. *The Zen-exercise*

The Zen-exercise is formed by the Rinzai and the Soto school. The Rinzai school studies with *Koans* (teaching aphorisms or teaching riddles), a method to lead rapidly to enlightenment (Satori). Soto practices Shikantaza, an exercise which has perfect *awakeness* in the *here and now* as its goal and aims at gradual enlightenment. The exercise of Zen which was developed in monasteries and is known for severity, discipline, straight forwardness, and clarity, is common for both directions.

The monastery year is divided in times of intensive practice (*Sesshin* or *Seichu*) and quiet periods. During training time the students rise early, spend most time in Zazen and hardly talk a word. The daily schedule every minute is planned. Monks with different tasks (so called *officers*) are responsible for a smooth operational flow. Non-training periods are more relaxed. This time is used for traditional begging, renovation work and homeland vacation. Change is offered in the Zen everyday life by the meeting with the master several times during the day. At this occasion the student presents his answer to the Koan (spontaneously, physically, verbal) or a verbal exchange of question and answer respectively an instruction on the part of the teacher takes place.

In Zen, the teacher-student relationship is essential and embodies the throughout Asia spread ideal or system of unconditional obedience, until the pupil has reached the championship. The student stands henceforth in the ancestors' line of the master and is his or one of his successors, who again trains students and conducts communities.

The goals of Zen practice are: 1. developing the strength of concentration, 2. Satori – enlightenment/ awakening, 3. deepening of awakening through further Zazen-practice and integration of this experience into everyday life.

These goals are reached through Zazen (*Za*: to sit; *Zen*: meditation, sit in meditation). One takes a body-posture which is to be found also in Hatha Yoga. One sits on a cushion, on the ground, with crossed legs (lotus-posture), keeps the spinal column upright, and puts the hands into each other touching the lower belly. The eyes are open und the view rests approximately in a meter distance on the ground. This posture guarantees perfect stability and offers the best condition for a deeply relaxed breath and a large mental alertness. Zazen students spend many hours in this posture, which is a kind of compact form of being, in which the basic activities of life and death, the universe, expansion

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System-theoretical considerations on language and on enlightenment in Zen: see Luhmann and Fuchs (1989) p.46-69.

and contraction, perfectly manifest themselves. (Concerning Zen-exercise and its background compare for instance Kapleau 2000, Bottini 2002.)

## **2 An example of the connection of doctrine and practice: The Koan**

*Koan* (Chinese *Kung-an*, originally: official document) can be translated approximately as teaching aphorism or teaching riddle. The occupation with the Koan serves the comprehension and realization of the Buddhist teachings. Koan practice was established in the Chinese Zen tradition of the T'ang time and is used today in many, but not in all of the Zen schools (Nhat Hanh 1997, p.59-62).

Two dimensions of the Koan practice can be distinguished: In the first dimension each Koan has a firm philosophical meaning, which can be recognized and discussed analytically.

Unlike a riddle in the European sense, in Koan practice the sought-after answer of the question is very often well-known. In traditional Koan collections the solution for the Koan examples is included in each case (Reps 1999). It is not sufficient to *know* the answer - it rather has to be experienced comprehensively. Therefore out of textual identical propositions by different students one answer may be satisfactory for the teacher and another may not.

Paradoxically in regard of the first, intellectually detectable dimension the Koan serves in its second dimension precisely to "lead the mind into a dead end that locks all ways of the usual thinking patterns and gets the mind into an extraordinary tension which comes close to psychosis in order to let it reach the final breakthrough" (Izutsu 1986, p.117).

The Koan in this second dimension is a means that in an entirely individual manner brings the spirit of the practicing to *awaking*: "if a master submits a Kung-an to a student, it has to suit for this student. [...] The meaning [of the Kung-an] consists in the effect it has on the spirit of the person who receives it" (Nhat Hanh, 59-63).

An example of the discussion of a classic Koan in the first, intellectually comprehensible dimension:

"Once a monk asked [master] Joshu: 'Say to me, what is the meaning of the journey of the First Patriarch [the Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma, 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.] from the West (In other words: What is the last truth of Zen Buddhism)?' Joshu answered: 'The cypress in the yard!'

What is the meaning of this connection between the cypress in the yard and the actual, living essence of Buddhism that was brought by Bodhidharma from India to China? Under normal circumstances Joshu's answer would

appear senseless, without any meaning. For Zen philosophy (that is the *first dimension*) Joshu's words make sense as an answer to the question of the monk. Briefly: [...] As we saw earlier, the original undifferentiatedness as it is understood by Zen is beyond both subjectivity and objectivity. At the same time it is free to reveal itself in the absolute subject or in the absolute object - or even in both at the same time, that is, the *subject-object*.

It is important to notice that the undifferentiated can not *ex-ist* [Latin: *step out, stick out*] in its original undifferentiatedness, it must necessarily differentiate in order to be able to *ex-ist*, that is, it must crystallize very concretely in a subjective or objective thing. And because the undifferentiated as entire, that is, without leaving a remainder, differentiates into myriads of things, none of these things differ from the undifferentiated, except under the aspect of non-articulation or articulation.

The cypress in the yard! The entire world rises like conjured up out of its metaphysical basis, the emptiness. The entire world is the cypress. Joshu is the cypress. The monk is also the cypress. There is actually nothing other than the consciousness of the cypress, because at this metaphysical zero the being illuminates itself in its undifferentiatedness as the unique and at the same time universal cypress tree. “

(Izutsu 1986, p. 117-119)<sup>15</sup>

There is accordance in the Zen teachings concerning the Koans that it is necessary to go beyond conceptual distinctions in order to comprehend the unity and the mutual conditionality of all phenomena:

"The world of the terms is not the world of the real. Conceptual knowledge is not a complete instrument for the acquisition of the truth. Words are not useful in order to express the truth of the last reality. According to Buddhism we touch reality only by direct experience. Pure sensation is an example of non-discriminating wisdom that initiates us in the heart of reality." (Nhat Hanh 1997, p.46-48)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In case that the original English text was not available, citations were translated from German into English by the authors. If the reference at the end of the article is in German, the translation of a citation was done by the authors. For the precise translations please compare the English original literature.

<sup>16</sup> The structure of the Koan practice bears certain resemblance to systemic procedures. For instance the Tetralemma work of Insa Sparrer and Matthias Varga von Kibed aims at finding unexpected solutions by means of discovering completely new categories of thinking (Sparrer and Varga von Kibed 2000).

### **3 Commonalities and differences between Zen and systemic psychotherapy**

Both Zen and systemic psychotherapy are not uniform in their theory and practice, but exhibit very different currents or subareas. A comparison is therefore inevitably simplifying in many points, but could also reveal the characteristics of each side.

#### *3.1. Differences: sociological, historical, cultural context*

Zen is a form of practice or philosophy or lifestyle or religion, which can be exercised by different persons with highly different motivations. A competition with other religious and philosophical systems is not aspired, rather the Zen system is offered as a supplement to existing backgrounds. This is one of the reasons for the fact that it is doubted by some authors if Buddhism in general or Zen in particular can be referred to as religions in the European terminology (Nelson 1991, 30-33).

Psychotherapy in general can be defined as a cure for mentally related problems. Historically and sociologically it is connected with medicine and with pastoral care. The scientific basis of psychotherapy is part of its identity. Some psychotherapeutic directions sociologically bear resemblance to shamanism and other traditional cure procedures due to the use of rituals in their methods (Walsh 2000, p.323-325).

The development of the psychotherapeutic discipline of systemic therapy is historically connected with the spread of systems theory and social constructivism/constructionism in humanities and with the development of family therapy. It can also be understood as a movement against a scientifically aligned expert-psychotherapy and against problem oriented depth psychological procedures. (As an overview see Schlippe and Schweitzer 1998; on theory and clinical practice see Simon 1993.) In this regard on the one hand the constructionist criticism of the psychiatric diagnostics is an important example for the development of systemic psychotherapy (Simon 2000, Watzlawick 2002), but on the other hand also structural and strategic family therapeutic approaches are characteristic as elements of a more traditional expert identity of therapeutic knowledge (Brandl-Nebehay et al. 1998, p.33-47).

In the self-conception of systemic therapy a reference to general principles of lifestyle or to spiritual aspects of life are possible but not inevitable. Anyhow constructivism or solution orientation can be lifestyle enriching

models. Comparable with Zen they have relevance for a philosophy of life.

Further differences appear in the objectives. Systemic psychotherapists work with their clients to find new aspects that solve a problem or change it in a positive sense. Their goal is to help by contributing to healing or solution processes. They concern themselves with relative truths. (Watzlawick and Nardone 2001, p.313-314)

In contrast to these orientations of systemic psychotherapy, Zen negates any self related position and emphasizes the experience of non-entity and of principal not knowing. Zen therefore is unintentional and perspectiveless in the sense that it aims at the experience of an ultimate reality. To a certain extent the exercising person may heal itself by means of Zen exercise but anybody who practices is his or her own therapist. None the less there is interpersonal support in this process of the Zen way. In traditional Zen training this personal process is intensified by the teacher student relationship and by the practicing in a community.

Zen philosophically refuses concepts of solutions, goals, and utility. Nevertheless in practice there are assistance and pieces of advice for everyday life. (To this subject cf. also Watzlawick and Nardone 2001, p.111-133).

Also in the use of the body as a vehicle and resource, differences appear. In systemic therapy there are few interventions that focus the body explicitly as a means of therapeutic change.

In contrast to that the body has a central position in Zen training. It is a tool that the practicing student needs in order to follow actively the very challenging process up to enlightenment. To put oneself in a posture that makes possible optimal concentration on the processes of the spirit requires a sensitive, mobile body. Practicing for many years is connected with it. Also in the Zen related martial arts like the swordplay, archery etc. the body is a main resource.

### *3.2. Common interests*

#### *3.2.1. Constructivism and “process of becoming”*

Constructivism postulates that the reality is not found but invented by us. The perception of an absolute truth is therefore not possible (Glaserfeld et al. 2000). In contrast to this Buddhism sees the world perceived and legally established by us as inconsistent and without substance. Something perceptible is not regarded under the aspect of a thing or a being but concerning of its “coming into being, being in process and therefore of its transience” (Zotz

1996, p.42).

Zen, based on the teaching of emptiness and Conditioned Arising as a Buddhist constructivism, permits also on a theoretical level no dogmatic final explanation and must therefore be oriented at life-practice, at the concrete experience in the *here and now*. Similar to the Radical Constructivism of Heinz von Foerster, it is a matter of freeing oneself from attachment in order to extend possibilities. In solution oriented psychotherapy the basic assumption exists that by deconstruction, becoming conscious, and reconstruction, something positive can be achieved. Development possibilities are in principle stressed in this approach (for example De Shazer 1996).

Possibly there exists a common interest in psychotherapy and Zen in the fact, that linguistic differences are not a self purpose, but a means for the respective purpose. Change, not intellectuality or differentiating is actually the goal. Also from this viewpoint Zen in vocabulary of systemic therapy could be called solution oriented.

### *3.2.2. Viability and Practice emphasize*

Constructivism developed a way of thinking, which replaces the proportion between the world of comprehensible experiences and the ontological reality by another conceptual relationship. It labels this with Viability, which means “as long as something doesn’t interfere with any hindrance and restrictions” (Glaserfeld 2000, p.19). This suggestion to orientate oneself at the practicability of a way is also reflected in the practical attitude of Zen. Functionality and usefulness have a central meaning in Zen-practice. In Zen-training there is the well-known saying: “If you walk, walk; if you sleep, sleep! Live each moment with 100% of your energy. If you do this, all meanings and obstacles fall away and your mind is liberated.”<sup>17</sup>

### *3.2.3. Look for solutions*

In systemic psychotherapy, the on usefulness oriented procedure, working in the “here and now” with clients on solutions, is of importance. Paul Watzlawick sees consensus between the therapeutic solving of problems and the Four Noble Truths: “If one approaches a problem in the described way, the result is an almost easy quartering of the procedure: 1<sup>st</sup> a clear and concrete definition of the problem, 2<sup>nd</sup> an investigation of the previously tried solutions,

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<sup>17</sup> Sasaki, personal statement to Zen students.

3<sup>rd</sup> a clear definition of the treatment goal (the solution), 4<sup>th</sup> the determination and execution of the plan to causing this solution.[...] Only a long time after this systematization of our procedure we put ourselves down to the fact that we had plagiarized the so-called four noble truth of Buddhism without blasphemous intention. Retrospectively this does not appear all too surprisingly, since the base of the Buddhist teaching is eminent practical and existential.” (Watzlawick et al. 2001, p.135)

Also Giorgio Nardone appoints himself explicitly to Buddhist ideas: “Zen-Buddhism differs between truth of the essence, which has transcendental character, on the one hand and truth of the error on the other hand. These truths of the error or instrumental truths serve to realize projects, they break after they were used, in order to be replaced by other truths of the error. The strategic idea in the systemic psychotherapy strives to construct truths of the error.” (Watzlawick and Nardone 2001, p.314-315)

#### *3.2.4. The paradox as a common intervention instrument and a paradoxical handling of reality*

A further, at least at first sight connecting commonality is the meaning of the paradox for both disciplines (Palazzoli et al. 1999). Also in Zen paradoxical events have an important meaning. Riddles with paradoxical contents are prescribed by the Zen-Master to the student. They should help to solve the tricky task to look behind the level of intellectual understanding or in order to speak with Peter Fuchs „to carry out operations in the mental area [...] whose execution conditions at the same time are the conditions of the impossibility of its execution“ (Fuchs 1989, p.54). Similar to psychotherapy, something to which one holds to should be disturbed here, in order to come to new, previously unknown aspects.

A common challenge in Zen and psychotherapy exists in the paradoxical handling of the subjectively experienced reality which represents itself often more constant and substanceful as postulated on a theoretical level. Both thought systems help itself with integrating elements in its theories, which appreciate also the sense of the apparently substantial and constant.

In the systemic psychotherapy for example it can be useful in the context of the diagnosis of schizophrenia, to deliberately not support the pole of the vague, liquid, insecure, and indiscriminate. „Here a *hardening* can be useful that permits to see a difference which makes a difference“ (Stierlin 2002, p.205-208). In Zen the all- embracing illuminated consciousness contains everything and therefore also the apparently separate and substantial. „An

awoken person lives in the material world exactly like each other person also. If he sees a rose then he knows like every other person too, that this is a rose. But he is neither conditioned nor locked up by terms. An illuminated person looks, hears and distinguishes things, but simultaneously he is incessantly and completely conscious about the present of the not-distinguishing and not-itself-introducing reality, thus the perfect, non-distinctive nature of things“ (Nath Han 1997, p.93).

### *3.2.5. Self-determination and confidence in competence as basic attitudes*

A common characteristic between Zen-exercise and systemic psychotherapy exists in the value of self-determination: „No intervention without order“ as well as „no instructions of clients“ in systemic psychotherapy (Ludewig 2002, p. 169-177), „no proselytism“ respectively „no competition with other sense giving religious systems“ in Buddhism and Zen.

The master and the tradition give in Zen instructions, the student however can only make progress if he goes his own way; direct instructions are not possible. Despite knowing the goal, the teaching person does not purge to the temptation to guide the student, to thus take the expert point of view. How does this work in Zen? A possible explanation is that Zen practice covers the physical, intellectual and mental perception and so the complexity of the development of an individual becomes clear. In this practice way it seems excluded to understand humans in the words of Heinz von Foerster as „trivial machines“ (Foerster in Wippich 1995, p.144-146). Critical voices say that in Zen the collectivistic, authorities subordinating mentality of China and Japan reflects itself. (On collectivism see: Fuchs 1995, p. 58-74; on Zen and nationalism: see Victoria 1999.)

It is to be held for that for the founder figures of Zen individual, authority-critical attitudes are characteristic (Besserman/Steger 1999).

Self-determination and confidence in competence seem to be basic attitudes which must be updated vis-à-vis a self-establishing (expert-) knowledge again and again, in Zen just as in the systemic therapy.

## **4 How could Zen enrich the Systemic Psychotherapy?**

### *4.1. Not-knowing and sympathy*

The constructivist element as communality between Zen and systemic psychotherapy is based on scientific founded theories (Maturana, Varela 1987)

and philosophical considerations derived from it (for instance Schmidt 1987, Schmidt 1992). Concerning this the basis of Zen is self-research in meditation and the Buddhist philosophy developed from it (Zotz 1996). Moreover the development of union and sympathy is stressed. Francisco Varela, a systemic theoretician and Buddhist expresses it as follows: “The continuing practice of self research, the discovery of selflessness and the inter-subjective nature of human existence leads, as told in the ethical tradition of Buddhism, to a behavior carried by sympathy and concern towards the other. If one opens the eyes this allows going forward without stumbling. If one investigates oneself and understands the own selflessness and non-individuality increasingly, the goal comes into the view to cultivate this experience of interdependence. And the condition of the other one becomes an affair concerning me directly (Varela 2002, p.131-132).

Next to “having no substance” and “Conditioned Arising”, sympathy and union and therefore basic confidence in human existence are central elements in Zen-Buddhism. This could stimulate the systemic psychotherapy in the sense of the question: “What happens after the constructivist deconstruction?” In our opinion, theoretical explanations, why for example resources and solution orientation are helpful, represent an important starting point for the advancement of systemic psychotherapy.

#### *4.2. Perception and attentiveness: work with the body*

Exercises represent a parallel between systemic therapy and Zen. Enriching for systemic therapy could be in this context that in Zen a reference to body, perception and experience is always present. Meditation and general attentiveness as an applied practice of Zen unites Buddhist teaching, subjective experience and body perception. A starting point for the systemic therapy could lie concretely therein that systemic therapists maintain attentiveness in relation to their perceptions and their intuitions and also express their perception concerning this to their clients and communicate about it. Beside it, it appears also useful to make the attentiveness of clients to their own sensitivity the subject of psychotherapeutic work.

Diane Gehart gives an example for attentiveness in psychotherapeutic practice: “If one is afraid for example, an attentive attitude holds one off to try immediately to diminish or to remove the feeling through reframing, externalization or exception finding. An attentive starting point holds off from submerging entirely into the experience; instead one would observe it sympathetic without changing it through judgment or intention. Be with it! If

one behaves in this non-attached manner (neither to follow it nor to go in distance of it), the experience changes unavoidably because our relation to it changes” (Gehart 2000, p.10).

It would be also interesting to examine the on constructivist ideas based systemic-psychotherapeutic attitude of “not-knowing” (compare De Jong and Berg 1998, p.46) in daily practice. Does the therapist have to be in a kind of contemplative condition, in order to be able to observe the “recognizing”? (On experience in systemic psychotherapy: compare Klammer and Klar 1998, p.67-71).

In contrast to Zazen, where one sits calmly without talking and acting, the therapist is forced to explain himself actively to his vis-à-vis. Or maybe there exists a kind of intermediate thing? One contemplates the therapeutic situation and suddenly steps out from this quiet room into action in order to later withdraw again. Paradoxical interventions are nothing new in systemic psychotherapy. Used in the right moment they can effectuate a lot in a process. Similarly, the Koan-practice is functioning in Zen. After resulted confidence, the master can address the things more and more openly opposite the student. In relation to this, Zen could support and inspire systemic psychotherapists in the forming and handling of paradoxical interventions. Zen-Koans are equipped always with commentaries and sayings. Similarly to that, Giorgio Nardone reports of aphorisms, which he uses in his strategic short time therapy.<sup>18</sup>

#### *4.3. Goals of action and personal development*

The goal of the Zen-path is – although with large restrictions – named: Enlightenment can't be described conceptual but can be to a certain extent communicated as metaphor. This could be a starting point to stimulate systemic therapy to think even more about the goals of therapeutic action. Also in systemic understanding that represents a delicate venture because the systemic therapy consciously and for good reasons does not want to take in an expert standpoint. Nevertheless therapists in their acting are influenced by goal pictures about what would be good for their clients. According to our opinion, considerations about general goals of psychotherapy processes, for example concerning mental health, should not be seen in systemic therapy as a relict of old structural or strategic family therapy concepts.

Psychotherapeutic work includes in not slight measure work of the

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<sup>18</sup> Nardone, Personal Statement at the ÖAS-Jour Fixe Vienna 2004

psychotherapist on himself. Unlike in other occupations, knowledge and experience can be used here explicitly in order to come to terms with own existential and sense questions. Zen, which aims at to lift dual thinking habits und rigid viewpoints out of the hinges, could continue here and help to deepen insight into reality.

## 5 Conclusion

A goal of our work has been that readers can get an idea of Zen Buddhism, its history, its practice, its contents, and its aims. Furthermore an approach to systemic psychotherapy was tried by comparing the two disciplines and by working out overlaps. In regard to a possible enrichment of systemic psychotherapy by Zen, concrete suggestions were made whose practicability can be tested only in practice of therapeutic acting.

This article can be seen thus as an invitation to the occupation with Zen in a systemic-therapeutic context. The spectrum of this invitation is manifold: For therapists who feel enriched in their therapeutic practice by Zen, to communicate about that. For therapists who are practicing Zen, to concern themselves with the possible relationship of these two fields. For interested colleagues, to begin with the acquirement of theoretical knowledge about Zen and to relate this experience to their therapeutic work - or to start Zen practice. For this purpose various Zen groups with different profiles and different perceptions of themselves offer programs.<sup>19</sup>

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