

The Directness Of Zen

Zen is the height and the quintessence of the whole of Buddhism. It is the direct, immediate way to liberation from imprisonment within the circle of birth and death.

Zen is solely interested in the pure, unadulterated truth in itself. In the eyes of Zen, all religious systems and philosophical teachings are nothing more than mind-bending speculation and a heap of intellectual rubbish, and therefore devoid of all value.

The truth of Zen is astoundingly simple and its methods of conveyance are constantly and uncompromisingly direct:

A Zen student goes to Zen Master Hsing-hua and says, "Master, I am deeply confused, I no longer even know the difference between black and white. What do you say to that?" The old master says, "What did you say? Come a little closer, my hearing is so poor today."

The student steps a little closer and repeats himself: "I do not know what the difference is between black and white."

Hardly has he finished speaking when he receives a resounding slap to the ear. This leads the monk to a sudden insight and, filled with gratitude, he bows before his master.

Why make everything so complicated? The truth is, it is all very simple. But exactly because it is so simple, you make everything so complicated. The reason for

this is that you are used to doing everything with your head. Yet behind every answer you find, a new question will instantly appear. You believe that everything of value for you in life must be achieved through great activity and effort. However, in Zen there is nothing to achieve – truly nothing.

“Tao lies directly beneath the soles of your feet”, as the Chinese masters of old say. Simply look and you will see that it has always been here. It has always been here – yet you are not here! “Now”, in this moment, the reality of your true being reveals itself “here”.

If you cannot find it here you will not find it anywhere. Zen Master Lin-chi, the Dharma successor of Huang-po, says:

You wear down your feet rushing in all directions, what are you seeking? There is no buddha to seek, nor is there a way to perfect, nor a universal truth to attain.

No sooner do you hear of Enlightenment, of the exalted teachings of Buddhism, of the sacred truth beyond the insipid, profane world, than you start your search. Yet Zen tells you, “That there is nothing to be reached are not empty words but the highest truth.” It is paradoxical that the truth has always been present and attainable yet it withdraws itself as soon as you deliberately try to grasp it. The truth of Zen is directly before you but as soon as you start reflecting on it you are mistaken.

When you interpret things with your intellect you distance yourself more and more from the truth of Zen. Zen can never be made the object of logical deliberations and explanations. Instead, to truly understand its

truth, you must live it within you at your innermost. You can never comprehend a thought unless it is supported by your own experience.

If you do not grasp this, and believe that you can comprehend the profound truth of Zen with your intellect, you will only end up in blocking your path to liberation. You will just be searching in circles. You search and analyse, prodding here and there in the hope of finding something after all. You believe that somewhere out there, there is indeed a great philosophical realisation which will come from outwards and make the matter clear. Yet the result is that you become increasingly caught up in the creeping tangle of your discriminating, conceptual thinking. But Zen rises above all this and calls to you:

If you could only free yourself from conceptual thinking you would know that there is no other buddha than the one in your own mind.

These words by Zen Master Huang-po (ninth century) form the core of true, original Zen of the ancient Chinese masters. Only when you can prevent your thoughts from roaming and searching are you truly on the Zen path to liberation. For when you try to grasp Zen with concepts, you create your own restrictions and shut out reality.

You limit yourself to within your self-produced confinements of dualistic discrimination. Each thought produces the next one and thus you distance yourself ever more. The more you become caught in the entwinement of your discriminating thought, the further away you are from the truth you seek. "All thought

is an erroneous belief”, says Zen. Why stuff your brain with all sorts of intellectual rubbish? What is the point of rooting around in every corner like a dog who scrapes up nothing but old rubbish in its muzzle? Dig into your own treasure, for the truth you are seeking is closer to you than you are to yourself.

There is nothing to seek and there is nothing to gain! There is no space in which things could be separate from one another, and there is no time in which anything is yet to happen or has already taken place. For everything is a simultaneity, revealing itself in this instance “now-here”.

This, too, is the central thought behind the Hua-yen school of Chinese Buddhism, based on the Avatamsaka Sutra. The fundament of the Hua-yen school is “the teaching of the mutual pervasiveness of all things” – the teaching of the fundamental unity, entirety, and equity of all beings. The whole universe is an integral organism, a cosmic network, in which everything is mutually pervading and is mutually connected. To better illustrate this, the Avatamsaka Sutra uses the analogy of Indra’s pearl net.

Here it is said that high up in the heavens, above the palace of the god Indra, there is a great net made up of an endless number of pearls. All the pearls in this net are so strung that each pearl reflects all others. Thus, a single pearl contains all the others and, by reflections of the light, simultaneously reflects the whole cosmos and all that it contains.

Everything is an all-embracing wholeness, containing everything within itself. Everything is an absolute Here and Now. Since now-here everything is present, where will you seek and what will you seek? Now is here and

here is now! If you wish to experience your true being you must immerse yourself in it “now, here”. How do you hope to experience “now” if you are caught up with tomorrow or the day after – when you are elsewhere?

The transitory nature of all being can suddenly and unexpectedly shatter all your speculations. Everything you are planning for the future is a speculation with a particular goal, yet faced with the presence of death it is nothing at all, absolutely worthless. In the words of Zen Master Yung-chia (eighth century):

The matter of life and death is immense and impermanence swiftly grasps hold. How can you waste your time with trivialities?

Nothing is important in the face of the presence of death! Let go of everything, whatever it may be – “MU” – nothing! MU is nothingness in terms of space and time, and thus nothingness with regards to all content of consciousness.

MU is here-now and reveals itself “now-here”. There is no coming and there is no going. MU is all-encompassing, be it behind, in front, above, below, and to the side, it is everywhere. This MU is “now” – and this “now” is eternity. Realise this and immerse yourself in it!

Your mind will then be completely free, even though it moves within the realm of life and death. You no longer embroil yourself in empty fantasies and the vanities of material desires. Free from attachments to the world of the senses, nothing can deceive you any longer. You live unbound in the midst of the world and pass through birth and death in complete freedom. You

come and go as you please and are completely free and independent.

In Chinese Zen painting we often encounter Hotei, known in Zen as the “laughing buddha”. Hotei is usually depicted as a small fat man with a large sack slung over his shoulder and an infectious broad smile covering his face. This laughing buddha represents the one who is totally liberated, having broken through all boundaries and transcended the world. He embodies the highest ideal of Zen as portrayed in the last of the Ten Ox-herding Pictures.

Hotei lived during the Tang dynasty, the golden age of Zen Buddhism in China. He was a Zen master of highest spiritual fulfilment, yet he had no desire whatsoever to live in a monastery and instruct disciples. Instead, he wandered through the villages with a sack over his shoulder and handed out sweets to the children.

Hotei lived the life of a Zen tramp, unattached and independent. Like the wind in the trees and the moon on the water he lived his life in total freedom, in accordance with the universe.

One day Hotei met a Zen monk who asked him, “What is the secret of Zen?”

Hotei’s silent response was to let the sack he was carrying on his back fall to the ground and to spread out his arms.

“Then tell me”, asked the monk, “what is the essence of Zen realisation?”

The “laughing buddha” immediately grabbed his sack, slung it over his shoulder, and continued on his way without looking back.

The freedom and cheerfulness of Mind is the natural state of your being. Simply free your mind of everything, whatever it may be. If you just take each situation as it arises, you will be in complete concordance with everything. Zen Master Lin-chi tells us this too:

The true path of Zen is very simple and requires no effort. It is found in everyday life and is without aim: dressing oneself, pissing, shitting, eating, and sleeping when one is tired. The ignorant ones, without Zen intuition, may laugh at me but the wise ones understand.

These words from one of the most original masters in the history of Zen are bound to shock certain people and they will ask themselves: how can this be the true Zen Way? Yet the old master Lao-tse would call down from his ox, "True words are not pleasant and pleasant words are not true."

Zen is always refreshingly direct and does not digress in pleasant words and friendly fussings, aimed at uplifting the ego.

One day, a monk came to Zen Master Tokusan (ninth century) to ask him about the truth of Zen. In accordance with Buddhist regulations he bowed deeply before his master prior to asking his question. But before he had finished bowing, Tokusan gave him a violent blow with the stick.

"Why are you hitting me?" asked the monk, with a pain-distorted face, "I haven't said anything yet".

"There would be no point in waiting for you to open your mouth", said Tokusan and raised his

stick, ready for the next blow. The monk quickly took leave.

Zen has but one sole concern. It wishes to thoroughly destroy all your attachments to words, ideas, and expectations, so that you awaken from your dreaming. That is why Zen Master Huang-po says:

Students of the way, if you do not awaken to this mind-substance you will cover the mind with conceptual thinking, seek buddha outside of yourselves, and remain attached to forms, pious exercises and such like, which is detrimental and has nothing to do with the way to highest realisation.

Why are you unable to recognise your original being although it is always present? Why do you hold on to artificially constructed spiritual practices and teachings which are devoid of all value and mere pastimes of the ego? Why build a discussion on false concepts?

Some of you have been asked the question of what I teach you. I shall tell you: my teaching is the teaching that there is nothing to teach. It is “the Freedom of Zen”, the truth beyond all words and limitations, whatever they may be. Immerse yourself “now” this very instant in the present moment, and see things as they really are. Be independent of everything, whatever it is! Free yourself of everything – above all of yourself, and in a flash you will achieve all-encompassing realisation.

Once, a very highbrow theologian came to my master Soji Enku and said, “I heard your last lecture but I am still not clear on the facts of Zen. I would therefore like

to ask you: what constitutes the fundamental truth of Zen?” Soji Enku simply replied, “The ground beneath your feet – that is the fundamental truth of Zen.” The highbrow theologian can call himself lucky that my master, in his grandmotherly goodness, answered him in such a friendly way. If he had asked one of the old Chinese masters of the early days, like Tokusan, Lin-chi, or Ma-tsu, he would surely have been instantly struck to the ground.

Once, a monk asked Zen Master Ma-tsu: “What is the reason for Bodhidharma’s (the first Zen patriarch’s) coming from the west?” Immediately, the master gave him such a violent blow to the chest that the monk fell to the ground.

Ma-tsu laughed loudly and bellowed, “If I had not struck you down, the whole land would have laughed at me!”

Such an original, direct, and spontaneous teaching method lifts the intellect from its hinges and short-circuits the process of thinking. Zen points constantly and with great emphasis to the direct experience of pure truth, and does not burden itself with conjectures and empty talk.

Without doubt, the main characteristic of Zen is its incomprehensibility. Like water which flows through your fingers, it eludes all conceptual classification. Everything is perfectly clear, yet your discriminating, conceptual thought makes it unclear. As long as you are a prisoner of your intellectualness and try to interpret things using reasoning, you will never find entry to the truth of Zen.

While we are on the subject of Soji Enku, I'd like to tell you about one other little situation I experienced with him. One afternoon, a number of students were tidying up Soji Enku's room and were busy talking about this and that. The master was sitting at his desk and slowly turned himself on his swivel-chair to the left and right, and appeared to be completely indifferent to what was happening.

Suddenly, he stopped with a jolt, pointed to the wall and said, "What is that nasty spot there? Where has that suddenly appeared from?" Everyone looked and asked, "What spot?" – "Over there on the wall. Can't you see it?"

All at once he removed his glasses and said in great surprise, "Oh, it's gone." Then he put his glasses back on and said, "I say, now it's back again." He then examined his glasses and said, "Oh, what is that spot on my glasses?" Afterwards, everyone was sheepish and quiet. Each of them had understood the wonderful lesson.

Together they had filled the room with their individual projections of their identifications and misinterpretations. One idea confronted another idea, ignorance confronted ignorance. Much ado about nothing.

But in China, as far back as the fourth century, the Taoist Master Chuang-tse said:

Far better than to counter another's every "yes" with a "no" and every "no" with a "yes" is the way of Enlightenment.

"Yes" and "no", affirmation and negation are born of ignorance, this being the way it usually manifests itself. As long as you still dwell in a logical, dualistic state of ignorance and you continue to cling to your own preju-

dices, you are condemned to squirm in the straitjacket of your own projections.

You are caught in maya, the illusion of a world of deception that you dream, which is a phenomenon that has no reality of its own. Thus, there is no other way than to leave everything just as it is and awaken. Only in this way can you become a master who shatters all limits and bounds. In other words, free yourself of everything and your true self, which is constantly present and has always been so, will radiate clear and bright a hundred thousand times brighter than the sun.

Enlightenment is not something that comes in from the outside. Many people think they could be sitting here now in their ignorance and suddenly, a light would shine forth, like a light bulb, and everything would become clear.

The truth of it is, the projections you have been projecting onto reality your whole life long and longer still will vanish. Then everything is just as it is and as it has always been. Then you will experience that there was never anything like birth and death, or space and time, and thus there is no external world of phenomena, bound by space and time. All these are mere phenomena of the maya-dream, which you yourself dream – projections resulting from ignorance.

Enlightenment and ignorance, imprisonment in the circle of birth, ageing, despair, illness, pain, and death – all belong to the dream you are dreaming. Therefore, there is only one possibility to escape from this, and that is: Wake up! Awaken and stop dreaming!

(short silence)

Should I say more? Or should I say no more? If I say nothing more you might start believing that everything has been said about the Truth. Yet if I say more, there is the danger you will believe there is something to be said about the highest Truth, which is beyond all words. But no word hits the mark! Everything that I just said has nothing to do with it. Everything that has ever been expressed about God, Enlightenment, or eternal life etcetera, is nothing more than utter rubbish. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the inexpressible reality which is beyond everything that sense and reason can comprehend. “So why take autumn leaves for gold?”

All religious and philosophical sayings are like an empty fist which one holds out to a child for fun. The child believes there is something in it – but there is nothing. No spiritual system holds the truth. You can seek as long as you like. You can spend your whole life studying every religious and philosophical teaching there is. But none of this has anything to do with the inexpressible truth. Therefore, I shall give you this piece of advice: let it all go! Free yourself of everything! Do not needlessly waste your time. Think of the admonishing words of Yun-men:

Do not needlessly waste your time! Once you have lost your human corpus you will not regain one for innumerable aeons to come. That is no trifle.

Do not rely on external things. When even a worldly man such as Confucius could once say, “When I hear of Tao in the morning I can die in peace in the evening” – how much more is this valid for us Zen monks? So what is the problem

that needs to be dealt with? Above all, you must make great efforts! Take heed of this!

All things are like a dream, a vision, petals from nowhere; to chase after them is a completely pointless and arduous exercise. A true person of Zen views all phenomena on his path through the world as illusion. He is constantly master of himself and does not make himself slave to human passions. Free of all identifications, in the turmoil of the world he breaks through to the clear light of reality.