The Spirit of Zen

Teaching Stories on the Way to Enlightenment

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Contents

Introduction

Zen is probably the most well-known yet misunderstood version of Buddhism in the West. Everyone thinks they know what ‘Zen’ means – some sort of blank state of being where whatever is happening is fine. Or perhaps the word Zen is taken to denote the core meaning of an activity: the Zen of Gardening, the Zen of Auto Repair, the Zen of Driving, etc. Yet, as any student of Buddhism can tell you, this is not true Zen. True Zen is so much more than this.

Most people, even those with a bit of understanding of Zen Buddhism, know little of Chan, the much earlier form of Zen that flourished in China 700 years before Zen became established in Japan.

Historically, the foundation of Chan Buddhism in China was laid by a strange and powerful teacher from India, known as Bodhidharma, or, as he is known in China, Da Mo. He is said to have arrived in China around the year 500 CE and his form of Buddhism emphasized meditation over sutra study and devotional practices (the more popular form of Buddhism at the time). Bodhidharma is usually portrayed in statues and paintings in China and Japan as an extremely stern, even gruff character. He was a no-nonsense type of teacher who even mouthed off to the emperor (see ‘Bodhidharma Comes to the West’, p. 46).

Bodhidharma’s form of Buddhist practice did not exactly catch on during his lifetime but his disciples, or what are called the patriarchs, carried his teachings forward and within a few hundred years (not long to a sincere Buddhist) Zen or Chan practices flourished all over China and eventually in Korea, Vietnam and Japan.

Bodhidharma found so few people willing to take up his extreme form of Buddhism that he ended up sitting in a cave for nine years, facing a wall! (Whether this is meant to be taken literally or to symbolize the fact that he spent a long time there, history does not tell us, but it does tell us that he was an extremely strong practitioner!)

At the time, his teachings were considered weird if not heretical. As Bill Porter tells us, describing the teachings of Bodhidharma's spiritual heir, Second Patriarch Huike: 'he aroused the anger of other monks who found the Zen teachings of Bodhidharma anathema, if not absurd. How could we all be buddhas? And how could Enlightenment be less than a thought away, since everyone knew it took lifetimes to achieve?'[1]

Today this form of Buddhism is the most well known in the West, though there are many other forms of Buddhism as well, some of which, such as Pure Land, actually have many more practitioners.

(The other form of Buddhism most familiar in the West is Tibetan Buddhism, a mixture of Mahayana and ancient shamanic practices.) Bodhidharma's teaching was much simpler and yet much more challenging. As mentioned, his Buddhism did not rely upon sutras but was instead more concerned with a direct 'mind transmission' outside of books (words). He taught that 'Accumulation of knowledge is useless and clouds awareness.'[2]

This is similar to Taoist teachings emphasizing 'belly knowledge' over mind or intellectual knowledge. Indeed, Chan Buddhism was heavily influenced by the ancient philosophy and practices of Taoism and emerged as a uniquely Chinese form of Buddhism.

China has always been a great melting pot of various religions and nationalities and has been equally adept at immersing foreign influences in its ever-bubbling pot and coming up with a unique Chinese version.

The term *zazen*, meaning simply 'to sit', is similar to the Taoist practice of *zuowang*, which is often translated as 'sitting in oblivion' or 'sitting and forgetting'. A commentary on the *Tao Te Ching*, written during the time of the Tang Dynasty by the emperor Xuanzong, says: '*Zuo* here is associated with non-action, with a

resting of the spirit in immobility, whereas *wang* means utter forgetfulness of one's own body. Thus the expression implies a double forgetting: the forgetting which is the method of meditation and the forgetting of this very method itself.'[3] This is a perfect description of Zen meditation practice as well.

For many people the most attractive elements of Zen practice are the non-reliance on scripture, the use of humour and paradox in teaching, the 'being in the present moment' attitude, the earthy simplicity of mindful practice in daily life, and the simple yet profound practice of 'just sitting'.

This is very similar to the teachings of Chinese Taoism, which had a direct influence on the formation of Zen (Chan). After all, Zen Buddhism is quite a different creature than the Mahayana Buddhism that developed in India and the rest of Southeast Asia. It was in its travels and transformation from India to China to Japan that Indian Buddhism became what we know today as Zen.

D. T. Suzuki states, 'Zen is the product of the Chinese soil from the Indian seed.'[4]

Another interesting thing that Bodhidharma brought to China was a series of exercises that evolved into what we know today as *wu shu* or martial arts (often mistakenly referred to in the West as *kung fu*). It is said that when he arrived at the original Shaolin temple, he noticed that the monks there were very unfit and unhealthy from sitting for long periods and studying sutras, with little or no physical exercise. So Bodhidharma got the monks up and moving – both for the benefit of their health and so that they would be less easy prey to marauding bandits – as a form of self-defence. Today the name of Shaolin is synonymous with amazing martial arts, and the temple is visited by numerous people from all over the world.

Bill Porter quotes a contemporary Zen priest concerning the connection of modern-day Zen to Bodhidharma, or the First Patriarch, as follows:

> External circumstances have changed, but external circumstances are not important. Zen is about cultivating the mind. The mind hasn't changed, and the way we cultivate hasn't changed. When Bodhidharma arrived in China,

> Buddhism had already been in China for more than 400 years. But people who practiced Buddhism then were concerned with the translation and study of sutras and the attainment of spiritual powers . . . But Zen isn't something you can see. It's how you see. You can't find it in a book. Zen is your mind, your Buddha mind. That hasn't changed.[5]

When Zen moved to Japan it was taken up by the samurai class, who layered onto it their very strict and often rigid code of conduct and ethics that they called *bushido*. This is the form of Zen practice that is most familiar to Westerners today and is most prevalent in Japan. It emphasizes 'just sitting' with little or no movement practice.

Here's an interesting description of the difference between Japanese Zen and the Chinese Zen:

> The differences between the Chinese and the Japanese ways of meditating tell something about each culture. While the Japanese tend to be rigid and quite formal in their meditation style and ceremony, the Chinese often appear more relaxed. Between periods of sitting meditation . . . Japanese meditators walk slowly in a single circle, sometimes at an excruciatingly slow pace . . . Chinese, on the other hand, do such walking meditation in a relaxed way, each person walking at their own pace in a wide circular area, swinging their arms and making a good healthy hike out of it.[6]

The ancient Taoist practice of *zuowang* sounds much like the practice of *zazen* today.

> First one must sit quietly and get rid of all thoughts, i.e., mentally abide in non-existence and take no foothold anywhere. In this way one is united with the universal principle. This will next lead to an empty mind, i.e., a state of mind in which one is fully detached from the outside, to a mind of peace, i.e., a state of mind in which one does not turn toward things any more. Then, whatever one hears or sees one will feel as if one had seen or heard nothing.[7]

The first flowering of Chan in China was followed by a time of

religious persecution in the sixth century. Because the ruling family favoured both Taoism and Confucianism, Buddhist temples were destroyed and the monks and nuns forced to resume their lay lives. (This unfortunately, was the sort of thing that happened at various times in China's history. Sometimes it would be the Buddhists who were persecuted, at other times it was the Taoists.)

Various leaders or patriarchs helped Chan Buddhism evolve in China, including the Fourth Patriarch, Tao Hsin, who settled on Mount Shuan Feng, where he is said to have founded the first Chan community. There, with his 500 disciples, he set up a self-sustaining, monastic community and instilled many of the qualities that Zen is known for today, such as the practice of maintaining the inner spirit of meditation, regardless of what one is doing. This included formal sitting as well as working on the community's farm, qualities that we see emphasized in modern Zen practice.

Perhaps the most famous of the Chinese patriarchs is Hui Neng, who followed the Taoist tradition of the 'wise simpleton' described in the *Tao Te Ching* (*Daode Jing*) as follows:

> Most people have more than they need.
>
> I alone possess nothing.
>
> Other people are brilliant
>
> while I know nothing.
>
> Other people are clear
>
> while I alone am muddled.
>
> I feel apart from them,
>
> like a windy and stormy sea.[8]

Chan Buddhism's history is full of such colourful characters as Lin Chi, of whom the following story is told:

A monk asked, ‘Where is the true meaning of Buddhism?’

The master held up his fly whisk.

The monk gave a shout and the master hit him.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan as early as 553 CE from Korea. Then, much later, Myoan Eisai (1141–1215) founded what we know today as Zen. He was trained in China, studying at Mount Tien Tai, which is still known for its Buddhist masters today. It was there that he is said to have achieved enlightenment (or what the Taoists would call ‘attaining Tao’) and was made the official Japanese emissary of the true dharma of the Buddha.

Eisai returned to Japan and founded Kennin-ji Monastery in Kyoto in 1202. Upon his death his disciple Myozen also went to China to study at Tien Tai, taking with him his student Dogen, who would go on to become one of the most influential Zen teachers in history.

Today, Zen centres are found all over the world, including many in the West due to the influence in the 1950s of teachers like D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts and the so-called Beat writers, such as Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac. Many Westerners are drawn to Zen’s seemingly simple yet direct method of spiritual cultivation. What many Westerners do not know is that in Japan Zen has become institutionalized and has lost much of its original simplicity and ability to go straight to the heart of enlightenment without a lot of religious dogma in the way.

The core practice of Zen, however – that of ‘just sitting’ – and its informal, sometimes outrageous fashion of teaching the dharma, remain in line with the ancient masters of both Chan and Zen.

So what are we to make of strange stories, like the one above, in which teachers abuse or even attack their students? How does spiritual cultivation translate into such bizarre behaviour as cutting cats in half or hacking off one’s own arm? How can we understand such odd and even cruel antics of the ancient and not-so-ancient Zen masters?

Of course if someone is merely picked at random and hit over the

head they are not going to attain any kind of realization other than that they want to hit their attacker back! These stories, however, are told about people who have already 'left the world of dust' and have put long hours into spiritual cultivation. In many cases the master can tell who is 'almost there', requiring simply a little more prodding, whether it be a koan practice or a whack on the head. The master is acting out of compassion for his students, not arbitrary cruelty.

Of course the opposite is also true. The master can tell if some students are getting 'above themselves' in their spiritual work and think they know what in truth they do not. They may think they are ready for a great *satori* (realization) or even enlightenment experience. It is really their ego that has grown, not their spiritual understanding.

In this case the most compassionate thing the teacher can do is to jolt them out of their complacency and spiritual egotism. The means chosen can again consist of a whack over the head or some other seemingly bizarre behaviour.

But only an enlightened teacher can read the enlightenment level of a student. This is of paramount importance. Arbitrary abuse of their students is not the sign of an enlightened teacher.

You will notice that most, if not all, traditional Chan and Zen stories are about masters and students who are male. Both China and Japan, not to mention India, are patriarchal societies. Very few women were recognized as spiritual leaders. Even today in many Buddhist cultures woman are often seen as second-class practitioners. (I even had one Buddhist teacher in China tell me that the most a woman could get out of spiritual cultivation practices in this life was the good karma to be born as a man in her next life so that she could then attain a high-level spiritual understanding!) Yet at its heart the practice of Zen, the experience of Zen, and the knowledge about self and other and about the world around and within us, transcend gender roles as well as cultural/historical divisions. Zen is as much alive as during the time of Bodhidharma and beyond.

Each of us has our own unique embodiment and expression of Zen. Each time someone sits down on a cushion or a bench and enters deep meditation . . . each time someone brews and shares a cup of

tea with grace and humility . . . each time a teacher instructs his or her student on the Way . . . each time someone reads the old stories and creates new ones . . . each time someone shares how Zen has impacted their life . . . each time someone reads or listens to or studies the old masters as well as the contemporary ones . . . each time someone lets go of their egoic self and instead embraces their eternal self, each time someone shares what they have learned and unlearned on their quest for spiritual understanding . . .

Zen teaches that everything we see and feel and experience is but our own mind, yet that mind is none other than the mind of the Buddha. This is the way it has been since the beginning of time.

There is nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to be understood or learned or embraced or denied that is not Buddha, our own simple enlightened self. But this clear, wise being is buried under layer and layer of acculturated obscuration. When we are born we are clear and unafraid. As we grow we become less sure of our innocence. We become buried under these layers of duality and opinions, coming to believe that we know who we are when in reality we have no idea.

The Zen masters and teachers of old, as well as the Zen masters and teachers of today, wish only to help us shed some of these layers and reveal the shining Buddha diamond that lies beneath. And all the tools of Zen – the koans, the sitting, the studying, the chanting, the bowing, the cleaning, the working, the building, as well as the tearing down of the old and useless things that keep us apart from and ignorant of our true natural Buddha nature – all are useful and can help us reach that often brief yet shining moment of true insight and inner sight that will reveal the truth of how far we have come and how far we have to go . . . to enlightenment, to true understanding, to being worthy of calling ourselves men and women of Zen.

I hope the wild and woolly stories in this collection will help to inspire and excite the reader to create their own stories, their own insights and illuminations, their own attempts at letting go and getting off of the always enticing, yet ultimately entrapping, wheel of samsara, and to fly off into the outer limits of spiritual experience.

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A Case of Bad Temper

A student came to Master Bankei and said that he had an uncontrollable temper, which he felt was obstructing his cultivation practice. What, he asked, could he do about it?

‘Okay,’ said Master Bankei. ‘Show it to me.’

‘I cannot show it to you right now,’ answered the student.

‘Well,’ asked Master Bankei, ‘when *can* you show it to me?’

‘It comes on me all of a sudden,’ said the student.

‘Ah,’ said the master. ‘Then it cannot be a part of your true nature. If that were so you would be able to show it to me any time.’

The student went away and meditated on this and from that day his temper was gone.

A Curious Remedy

The old monk had been seriously ill for some time. He was too sick to attend the morning dharma talk and too tired to sit in *zazen*. All he did was lie on his mat all day and look up at the ceiling. One of the other monks offered a herbal remedy but it only made the old monk even sicker.

Finally he couldn't take it any more and he dragged himself to the abbot's room and knocked feebly at the door. 'Come in,' said the abbot, in a hearty voice.

The old monk hobbled into the room and collapsed in front of the abbot. The abbot sat and looked at him without saying anything.

Eventually the old monk said, 'Master, I have been so miserably sick. My bowels are in an uproar, I have no energy for anything and my thoughts have become darker and darker. I took some medicine one of the monks gave me and it was so poisonous it made me even sicker. Do you have a remedy for me?'

The abbot looked at him with compassion in his eyes but was silent. Suddenly he shouted, 'Gold! Pour the medicine on the top of your head', and struck him, knocking him over.

The old monk pulled himself back up, bowed to the abbot and walked out the door, feeling stronger than he had felt in some time.

A Lesson on Essential Mind

Once, the student Chongxin asked his master Daowu, ‘Since I became your student, you have never taught me anything about essential mind.’

Master Daowu said, ‘Since you became my student I have never *stopped* teaching you about essential mind.’

‘When have you taught me this?’ asked Chongxin.

Daowu said, ‘When you bring me tea, I receive it from you. When you bring me food, I receive it from you. When you bow to me, I bow to you. When have I not taught you about essential mind?’

At this Chongxin bowed his head and stood that way for some time.

Then Daowu said, ‘Look for it right in front of you. If you think about it too much you will miss it.’

As soon as he heard these words Chongxin awakened.

‘How can I uphold this teaching?’ asked Chongxin.

‘Live your life in as free a way as possible, in accord with circumstances. Give yourself over to everyday mind,’ said Daowu. Then he opened his arms wide and said, ‘There is nothing sacred to be realized outside of *this*.’

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