



# THE WAYS OF ZEN

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FOREWORD BY  
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Translated by Brian Bruya

Foreword by Martine Batchelor

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# Foreword

## What Is Enlightenment?

MARTINE BATCHELOR

In *The Ways of Zen*, C. C. Tsai wonderfully depicts with humor as well as wisdom students looking for enlightenment in the wrong place or the wrong way. Enlightenment is an attractive notion. Nowadays, as in ancient times, people want to attain enlightenment or declare that they have done so. But what has actually been attained? When you meditate, you can experience various states in which you feel different from your usual self. Are these enlightened states? Do they give you enlightenment permanently? Modern Zen Master Kusan used to say that these were not an experience of awakening but merely a perception of the luminous nature of the mind.

The Buddha achieved great meditative states through concentration exercises, but he did not feel that they were the answer to his predicament—life, death, suffering. The Buddha's enlightenment was based on the dissolution of hatred, greed, and delusion, not on achieving any specific meditative states. In *The Ways of Zen*, Tsai's illustrations and commentary make these challenging Zen stories accessible to new generations while pointing out that saying one is enlightened might prove the contrary. As Nagarjuna, a second-century philosopher monk, said very clearly:

"I am free! I cling no more!  
Liberation is mine!"  
The greatest clinging  
Is to cling like this?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Batchelor, trans., *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).

A poem by an early Buddhist nun who was practicing at the time of the Buddha expresses well what the practice and the goal are:

Although I left home for no home  
and wandered, full of faith,  
I was still greedy  
for possessions and praise . . .

Life is short.  
Age and sickness gnaw away.  
I have no time for carelessness  
Before this body breaks.

And as I watched the elements of mind and body  
Rise and fall away  
I saw them as they really are.  
I stood up.  
My mind was completely free.  
The Buddha's teaching has been done.<sup>2</sup>

On the Zen path one must be careful of the expectations one has about enlightenment. As Zen Chinese poet Hanshan said:

Body clothed in a no-cloth robe,  
Feet clad in turtle's fur boots,

<sup>2</sup> Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Translation and Commentary on the Therigatha* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991).



I seize my bow of rabbit horn  
And prepare to shoot the devil Ignorance.<sup>3</sup>

Enlightenment is often associated with certain mystical images. People imagine that if they become enlightened suddenly it will be like pressing a switch and light will surround them, or that they will start floating in space. Or they might think that enlightenment will bring them ultimate peace and utter contentment, that it will solve all their problems and that they will never encounter any difficulties anymore.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, an important text for the Zen school, it is stated: "Sentient beings are Buddhas, Buddhas are sentient beings."<sup>4</sup> This implies that all beings have the nature of a Buddha and can awaken to it at any moment, which is a point that Tsai emphasizes in *The Ways of Zen*. But Buddhas must be humble and remember that they are also sentient beings and can make errors. In one second, you can be a Buddha; in the next second, you can be a deluded sentient being.

At the root of Zen meditation, there is the moment of enlightenment of the Buddha. The root of the word "Buddha" is *budh*, which means "to awaken." In the Zen tradition, there is a debate about whether practice and awakening are sudden or gradual. This debate is referred to several times in *The Ways of Zen* (e.g., pp. 46, 49, and 145). I would like to suggest that this is a false debate, as these two aspects, gradual and sudden, encompass the two essential facets of Zen practice.

Zen meditation stands at the crossroads formed by the two dimensions intersecting. The gradual dimension represents the width of practice, and the sudden represents the depth. There is a gradual aspect to the practice. You put in effort, with patience and a long-enduring mind. This bears fruit and you see some progress. Over time, meditation becomes easier, the mind is calmer and clearer. You become wiser and more compassionate. There is also a sudden dimension to the practice. Suddenly you have a flash of insight and you see clearly the

way things are. As you let go of certain mental and emotional habits, you have a glimpse of states of liberation. You do not consciously force yourself to do this; it just happens.

Korean Zen Master Bojo advocated several sudden awakenings followed each time by gradual practice. He pointed out that before you can really step confidently and surely on the path, you need a sudden insight, however small, to show you the way and to give you faith. Because delusions and habits are powerful, you must patiently cultivate gradual practice to actually put into action the breakthrough you've had and embody it in the world in an experiential way. Two Chinese Zen poems describe these two dimensions. The first one is by Master Shenxiu and the second one by the sixth Zen ancestor Huineng, as mentioned in *The Ways of Zen* (pp. 29–30):

The body is the wisdom tree,  
The mind like a bright mirror stand;  
Always strive to wipe it clean,  
Making sure that no dust lands.

Wisdom has never been a tree,  
The bright mirror has no stand;  
There has never been anything,  
So where can dust land?

Both dimensions are needed. If the practice is only thought about in terms of gradual development, you can become deterministic and narrow. There is a very fixed set of instructions and results, and everyone has to fit into it. This approach can become too mechanistic and does not always allow for people's differences. Following only the sudden dimension approach, on the other hand, could lead to ignoring ethics and morality. One way to reconcile the two could be to practice regularly without expecting any definite result while at the same time being open to awakening breaking through at any moment.

Enlightenment cannot be reducible to a single experience and replicated as such. As shown in *The Ways of Zen*, enlightenment is a process of de-grasping, of letting go, of shedding. It is not a permanent state that is transcendental and outside the conditions that one inhabits. One awakens to one's own nature, not to something outside of it. One awakens to what

<sup>3</sup> Han-Shan, *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet Han-Shan*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1984).

is there and at this moment cannot be clearly seen. As Tsai comments on p. 127:

By seeking the Buddha, we lose the Buddha; in seeking Bodhidharma, we lose Bodhidharma. The most precious thing there is resides inside you—it is yourself. In pursuing external objects, we tend to lose sight of that.

As illustrated in *The Ways of Zen*, awakening, or enlightenment, might not actually be what one thinks or hopes it is. In the opening panels of this book, Tsai depicts a fish surprised to learn that it is living in water. Looking for enlightenment is similar to a fish looking for water, and awakening is when it realizes it is already swimming in it.



# Introduction

BRIAN BRUYA

About the time Christianity began spreading across the Roman Empire, something momentous happened in China. Buddhist texts began trickling in from trade routes in the West, via what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. That trickle turned into a flood, and by the time of the Tang Dynasty a half-millennium later, China, the once-Confucian country, viewed itself as Buddhist, with tens of thousands of temples and hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns. The historic nature of this change was momentous. Confucians valued family above all else, yet the very word for joining the Buddhist order was *chu jia*, “leaving the family.” Confucians valued government service, yet Buddhist clerics lived separate from society, even escaping to mountain temples. Confucians saw the individual as a member of an enduring ancestral lineage continuing indefinitely into the future, yet Buddhists saw the individual as an ephemeral traveler from one karmic lifetime to the next.

Buddhist dominance didn’t last politically, but it did have a lasting philosophical impact. And yet the Buddhism of China was sort of like Chinese food in America—adapted to local tastes. Seriousness was tinged with playfulness, humans were cosmic participants, and schools of Buddhist thought came to resemble ancestral lineages.

The Buddhism of this book—Zen Buddhism—grew up in Tang Dynasty China (618–907 CE) and later spread to Korea and Japan, and has more recently traveled to the Americas and Europe. Zen came to the West mostly from Japan, specifically from the Rinzai and Soto traditions. Both traditions come from and are named after Chinese Zen masters. This book retells

the story of the origin of Zen in China and illustrates some of its greatest episodes.

Zen is famous for its stories, especially the distilled ones called *koan* in Japanese and *gongan* in Chinese, meaning something like “case,” as in case study or legal case. They are designed to get you thinking but also to take you away from your typical patterns of thinking. They can be funny but perplexing, intriguing but mystifying, startling and thought-provoking. The illustrations in this book help enhance each of these aspects, so we can see the cypress tree that will become a Buddha (p. 115), the dog that doesn’t have the buddha-nature (or does it?) (p. 109), and the monastery wall where Huineng pens his famous poem (p. 30).

Philosophically, what should we think of the Zen stories in this book? How do we make sense of them?

Once when an Indian yoga teacher of mine was explaining the practice of meditation, he said that when he was growing up it was common for his parents and teachers to tell him to concentrate on his math problems or concentrate on his reading—to *dhyān* this and *dhyān* that. My yoga teacher’s point was that meditating—*dhyān*—is not something mysterious and outside of ordinary experience. Rather, it is nothing more than concentrating, or focusing the mind on a particular thing. About two thousand years ago, when Buddhism was transmitted from India to China, the term that was pronounced something like *dhyān* in India was passed straight into China—something like *dzyen* in the Chinese of that period. The Chinese character representing that pronunciation is today pronounced something

like *chon*, and spelled “Chan” in our alphabet. The Japanese version is spelled “Zen.”

So Zen is nothing more than concentrating on something. There is nothing fundamentally mystical about it. This little bit of information can go a long way in coming to understand the often-perplexing stories in this book. In story after story, when a seemingly innocent question is asked, the student is blindsided with a response that seems totally out of left field, as if the teacher were trying to say, “Stop thinking so much! It’s not that complicated!”

Is Zen complicated? It is, and it’s not. There is a story not in this book that is useful for understanding the stories that are in the book. The Song Dynasty Zen monk Weixin was giving a lecture to his students. He said:

Thirty years ago, before I studied Zen, I saw a mountain as a mountain and a river as a river. Later, after I had acquired some knowledge, I had a bit more understanding and saw a mountain as not a mountain and a river as not a river. Today, in a place of retirement, it’s the same as before. A mountain is just a mountain, and a river is just a river. (*Wu deng hui yuan*)

The arc of Weixin’s story is one from ignorance to book knowledge to experiential knowledge. The final step—from book knowledge to experiential knowledge—is the most difficult because it essentially involves forgetting (or transcending, or setting aside, or fully assimilating) the book knowledge—taking the final step by pushing away the ladder. Simply put, this book is about learning how to push away the ladder, then returning home with a new perspective. Zen is like an Escher staircase—climbing it brings us back to where we started.

For us, the ladder begins in India, specifically in a Hindu philosophy that sees an underlying reality to all things. We can think of this underlying reality as a spiritual essence. The Sanskrit term is *Atman*. You have an Atman that is who you are at the most basic level. I have an Atman that is who I am. Peel away all the layers, and the only thing left is Atman, the true reality of all things. When the Buddha came along about 2,500 years ago and pursued the most advanced philosophy of his

day, this is what he was taught. And yet, try as he might, he was unable to experience this Atman for himself. Finally, while meditating, he had a realization—*anatman*, “no Atman”—that there is no such thing as Atman, no underlying reality that defines each and every thing.

Some scholars today dispute this version of events, claiming that where the Buddha lived, this version of Hindu philosophy was not yet prevalent.<sup>1</sup> That’s okay, because other scholars now claim that the idea of a spiritual reality inside of things is something of a cultural universal, something that we all believe one way or another from the time we are children—it’s just how humans naturally see the world, they say.<sup>2</sup> I don’t know which of these sets of scholars is correct, but I do know that some influential ancient Greek and Roman thinkers also had a belief in something we would today call a “soul”—an underlying reality that defines a thing. And, of course, Muslims, Christians, and Jews still believe this today. If one grows up in a culture with this kind of belief, then it will become a habitual way of understanding the world, and like all habits, it will be hard to break.

This may be why the Buddha was frustrated for so long before his awakening and why the young monks in this book struggle and struggle. They see the world one way out of habit and convention, and although they know it’s not correct, they just can’t seem to turn the corner and see it for what it really is. It’s sort of like struggling to understand a math problem until it just clicks.

There is a hilarious irony here because yet another set of scholars believes that the early Chinese are a counterexample to the claim that a belief in an essential underlying, spiritual reality is a cultural universal. These scholars say that the early

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007) and Joseph Walser, “When Did Buddhism Become Anti-Brahmanical? The Case of the Missing Soul,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (March 2018): 94–125.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Paul Bloom, *Descartes’ Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) and Edward Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Chinese believed in something called *Dao*, which is more of a process than a thing, more of a dynamic patterning than a spiritual essence.<sup>3</sup> So, could the medieval Chinese have had just the right way to see the world to begin with and then spent decades studying Buddhist texts and meditation just to find their way right back to where they started?

Consider the episode on p. 139 of this book. The great monk Shitou (pronounced “sure-toe”) is asked what he gained when he studied with the Sixth Ancestor Huineng. He says he didn’t gain anything. And when asked, well, why did he go in the first place, he says, “If I hadn’t gone . . . how would I know I never lacked anything?”

This is learning as unlearning, acquiring knowledge for the purpose of forgetting it. We actually do this all the time when we learn a skill. My baseball coach used to tell me to just swing the bat and not try so hard to hit the ball. While I was concentrating on the other things he had taught me—holding the bat at a certain angle, right elbow up, stepping into the pitch—I should have somehow been forgetting all that. Or not forgetting, exactly, but through practice, assimilating that knowledge—converting it from “book knowledge” in my conscious mind to experiential knowledge that my body just performs without me thinking about it.

The last step off the ladder in Zen Buddhism, pushing the ladder away, is the success of this kind of conversion—from knowing intellectually that there is no spiritual essence of things to really getting it, to seeing and living in the world from this perspective.

This talk about spiritual essence is buried so deep in this book that it is impossible to see on the surface. Atman, while translatable as “soul” or spiritual essence, is also translatable as “self,” and this is where we begin to get some traction. But wait a minute: Does that mean the Buddha claims that I don’t

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Stony Brook, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998) and Francois Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

have a self? Yes, this is what the Buddha claims. It is the most fundamental idea of Buddhist metaphysics.

What does it mean to not have a self? Consider your plans for the weekend. Maybe you will go see a movie. Maybe you will help a friend move. Maybe you will catch up on things around the house. Maybe you’ll have a special family meal. Whichever it is, when you think about these plans, make them, carry them out, then evaluate how they went afterward, *you* will always be at the center of the events. Your perspective, desires, needs, anxieties, pleasures, and pains drive everything ahead. Your concerns are the motor that propels your life forward. In an early sutra, the Buddha says that a run-of-the-mill person may be able to realize without trying too hard that the body is not the self. This may happen, for instance, if we suffer from an injury or illness. We still seem essentially the same, even though our body may have suffered a drastic change. However, it is much more difficult, the Buddha says, to realize that the mind is not the self.<sup>4</sup> You can get a new perspective on the body, but how do you get a new perspective on the mind, when it is your mind that holds your perspective? This is what makes it so hard.

The philosophical path of Buddhism is about acquiring the knowledge and skills to understand that the mind is not the self. The final step of kicking away the ladder is to realize deep down that fundamentally there is no *you* there. Does that sound hard? Brutally. And it is basically what this book is about—how teachers incite students to take that step and how students finally succeed in doing it.

Philip Kapleau, one of the first American teachers of Zen, collected some diary accounts of people who had experienced the sudden realization that we are talking about here. They can be shocking to read. Here is one:

April 20, 1953: Attended S—’s Zen lecture today. As usual, could make little sense out of it. . . . Why do I go on with these lectures? Can I ever get [enlightenment] listening to philosophical explanations of *prajna* and *karuna* and why A isn’t A and all the rest of that? What the hell is [enlightenment] anyway? . . .

<sup>4</sup> *Assutava Sutta*.

September 3, 1953: Quit business, sold apartment furniture and car. . . .

Tokyo, October 6, 1953: . . . strolled through [the monastery] gardens. . . .

December 5, 1953: Pain in legs unbearable. . . . Why don't I quit? . . . Why did I ever leave the United States? . . .<sup>5</sup>

Five years later, finally:

August 5, 1958: . . . Threw myself into [thinking about nothingness] for nine hours with such utter absorption that *I* completely vanished. . . . I didn't eat breakfast, [nothingness] did. I didn't sweep and wash the floors after breakfast, [nothingness] did. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Here's another diary account:

Tears gushed out. . . . I'm dead! There's nothing to call *me!* There never was a *me!* . . . Everything my eyes fell upon was radiantly beautiful. . . . I feel a consciousness which is neither myself nor not myself.<sup>7</sup>

By my count, C. C. Tsai has given us at least nineteen depictions of enlightenment experiences in this book. Baizhang's, for example, occurs on p. 68. He is out with his teacher Mazu when some wild ducks fly overhead. Mazu asks a simple question: "What are those?" Baizhang gives the obvious answer: "Wild ducks." Mazu follows up with a more difficult question: "Where are they flying?" Baizhang musters his best Zen response: "Away." To which Mazu responds by tweaking Baizhang's nose so painfully that Baizhang suddenly experiences enlightenment. What the comic depiction doesn't show is that Baizhang returns to his hut and weeps loudly. Not from the pain but from the experience of losing himself in that moment and the radical new perspective that it gives him—a perspective absent the self.

When you read the stories in this book, they are all pointing in this direction: how to realize deep down the basic Buddhist

<sup>5</sup> Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), pp. 232–242.

<sup>6</sup> Kapleau, p. 253.

<sup>7</sup> Kapleau, pp. 297–298.

idea that your conventional way of seeing your self as the center of your existence is also the source of all your troubles. By overcoming that habit, you can live a life of simple freedom, joy, and beauty.

But why joy instead of anguish and despair at the lack of meaning and divine consciousness in the world? Where is joy without a soul, without a cosmic plan? Actually, the teachers in this book don't say there's no soul. They say, like in the episode about a cypress tree, that the buddha-nature underpins everything. Isn't that like a cosmic divinity imbuing everything with meaning? Yes and no. This is where early Indian (Theravada) Buddhism meets Daoism and later Indian (Mahayana) Buddhism, and where the ideas get increasingly difficult to explain. But allow me to try.

First, consider what an astronomer colleague of mine once said when I asked him about the shape of the universe. "Is it a sphere?" I asked. He told me that there is no way to use conventional ideas, like geometric forms, to accurately visualize the shape of the universe. You can only make sense of it through mathematics. But since most people can't understand the sophisticated mathematics required, astronomers resort to metaphors, like the shape of a donut, to explain it to the rest of us. When astronomers tell us that we can't understand something through conventional perspectives, does that make the subject matter mystical and divine—ineffable and achievable only through a spiritual connection? Not necessarily. It just means it's complicated.

The Buddhist view of the universe is also complicated, all the more so in that different Buddhists have different ways of explaining and the explanations sometimes seem incompatible. Buddhists have overcome seemingly contradictory explanations by proposing what is called the Two Truths theory—namely, that two contradictory notions can both be true at the same time. The universe is the shape of a donut, for example, but it's also *not* the shape of a donut. Karma really is a feature of the universe but really it's not. Like in the diary entry above: A isn't A.

On p. 96 of this book, a layman asks a monk whether there are such things as Heaven and Hell. When the monk responds

that there are, the man objects that a different monk had told him that there aren't such things. So which is true? They're both true. Ugh!

Although many stories in this book are designed by the original authors to seemingly throw you for a loop, there are a few that speak in a more familiar, straightforward way. Let's look at those as a way to understand the Two Truths theory and the wackier episodes in the book:

- On p. 103, the monk Zhaozhou asks his teacher Nanquan, "What is the Dao?" Nanquan says it is "the ordinary mind."
- On p. 138, a monk asks his teacher, "How should I practice the Dao?" The teacher responds, "Eat when you're hungry, and sleep when you're tired."
- On p. 167, Yongming asks his teacher Fayen whether emptiness possesses the basic characteristics of all things. Fayen's simple response is that it is empty.
- On p. 178, after a monk has been sent in circles trying to find an answer to his question, "What is the Buddha?" his teacher Dongshan says, "Language cannot get at the root of things. Whoever insists on using language sacrifices the truth and will forever be confused."

We'll begin understanding these stories by thinking about dirt, from three perspectives. From our typical, everyday perspective, dirt is inanimate. There is no vitality to it. It just sits there. From the perspective of subatomic physics, on the other hand, there are all kinds of movement and oppositional forces at play. Rather than stasis, it is fundamentally dynamic and, interestingly, mostly empty space. Now consider a reconfiguration of the components of dirt into the life of a plant that gets its nutrients from that dirt and then another reconfiguration into animals and humans. We humans are composed of the same atomic structures that compose dirt and are subject to the same forces; yet, rather than being inanimate, we are alive and, most importantly, conscious of our experience in the world.

In the first episode above, the ordinary mind is the answer to the question, "What is the Dao?" The Dao can be understood

as the proper way of practice. It can also be understood metaphysically as the basic constituent forces of the universe—cosmic patterning. The answer is that the cosmos is conscious at many localized points, like you and me. Not *in* you and me, but as you and me. You are the cosmos coming to life, coming to consciousness, as am I. The buddha-nature is like this.

The second story is about actually practicing the Dao, which is for the ordinary mind to live an ordinary life. The underlying principles may be complicated and hard to understand, but really, when it comes right down to it, whether it has clicked for you or not, we are of this world and the meaning of our lives is to simply live in this world by living simply.

What does the third episode mean by saying that all things are empty? A famous passage in the *Heart Sutra*, a favorite of Zen Buddhists, is that matter (the basic constituent of all things) is empty and emptiness is matter. This is sort of like the emptiness of the atoms mentioned above, but probably not in the way that you are thinking. Another deceptive model of physics is the typical toothpick and ping-pong ball depiction of the atom. The ping-pong balls that seem to be the substance of the atom are, themselves, reducible. To what? Not to anything that we can really hang our hat on and call the basic substance of the universe. The Buddha was not a physicist and would probably be as perplexed as the rest of us when trying to wrap his head around the specifics of subatomic physics, but he seemed to understand the concept of a universe that has nothing substantial at bottom. The term he used was *shunyata*, emptiness, and although he did not often stress it, later Mahayanists did, and it made its way prominently to China.

Couple this with the idea that we live our lives from a perspective of resolute subjectivity. Descartes said, "I think. Therefore, I am," purportedly proving that there is nothing more basic than consciousness—we are alive, we are the center of our universe, there is meaning in the world; I think, I feel, I am experiencing the here and now. And yet, according to the Buddha, I am really nothing more than a reconfigured lump of dirt.

In the last bullet point above, there is the question, "What is the Buddha?" What is the most revered figure in Buddhism? What does it mean to be enlightened, as the Buddha ("the



awakened one”) was? It is to somehow realize, beyond the limits of language, that it is both true that I am alive and conscious and living a meaningful life at the same time that it is true that nothing substantial really exists in the universe—it is all, we are all—at bottom, empty. On p. 67, Yaoshan asks Mazu point-blank, “How can I directly point at my mind, see my nature, and become a Buddha?” Mazu answers cryptically, “Sometimes I tell it to raise the eyebrows and blink. Sometimes I don’t tell it to raise the eyebrows and blink. Sometimes, the one raising the eyebrows and blinking is it, and sometimes the one raising the eyebrows and blinking is not it.” Now we have the conceptual tools to understand this remark. When you realize that you are the cosmos come to life, you’re no longer locked into your own subjectivity.

The mountain is a mountain—the mountain is a lump of dirt. The mountain is not a mountain—the mountain has the cosmic potential to be fully conscious. The mountain is just a mountain—even I, a fully conscious being, am, like the mountain, just a lump of dirt.

We have come full circle. We have, intellectually and in the medium of language, anyway, kicked away the ladder. Life is at once both imbued with meaning—joyful, liberating, lovely—and also, at bottom, empty of any significance whatsoever. Now, when you return home, which perspective will you live by? Will you be like the weeping lady or the chuckling lady on p. 220?

Attaining enlightenment—understanding these ideas through a profound experiential realization—is difficult because we have been habituated to see ourselves as substantial and important. Seeing ourselves as the universe seeing itself, experiencing ourselves as the universe experiencing itself, requires practice. It requires breaking down the usual way of seeing and doing things. It requires study. It requires contemplation, concentration. It requires fellowship and dialogue. You will see all of these methods in this book, which is one reason it is entitled *The Ways of Zen*. The other reason for the title is the different approaches that the teachers take in guiding their students along a very unintuitive path. How do you get someone to make a radical shift in perspective? I remember math teachers trying to help me understand certain concepts in math. For some

teachers, if it didn’t click for me after one or two explanations, that would be the end of the conversation. The best teachers, however, were the ones who set me up to understand a concept by explaining related concepts and then, at the right time, gave me an explanation, a metaphor, or a problem that would help me finally understand. The teachers in this book are like a great math teacher. Usually, the stories only depict the final step, but the preliminary steps should be inferred.

Teachers in this book would have lectured to groups of students and laypeople about the sutras and basic Buddhist concepts. At different times, students and teachers would also have recited the sutras, together or individually. They would certainly have had tea together. They lived together. Ate together. They saw each other’s foibles and potential. If a teacher’s own methods weren’t working, he would refer a student to another teacher at a different monastery. Specific methods may look cruel at first glance—like bonking a monk on the head—but the teachers saw themselves (and were seen by their students) as upholding the bodhisattva ideal—putting off final nirvana until they have compassionately helped others to their own realization. One of the wonderful things about these comic illustrations is that we get to see the monastic context, which can help us imagine the lives they must have led between episodes.

One kind of source text used for the episodes in this book is called a “lamp” text. Several collections of stories and biographies of monks were put together during the Song Dynasty. The first major one was called *Zu tang ji—Ancestral Hall Collection*, published in the year 952. The word “ancestral” refers to great teachers of the past, and the connection from teacher to student was analogized to the connection between a father and son. Instead of blood ties, however, these were ties of understanding. The term “lamp” is used as a metaphor for the light of understanding that is passed on from teacher to student, beginning with the Buddha, in an unbroken string right up to the present day.

Although some of these stories read like histories, we should keep in mind that their purpose is not to relate objective facts in the way that histories today attempt to do. When we read Plato’s dialogues or the parables of Jesus, for example, we don’t

do so to learn what Meno really believed about memory or how much money a particular head of a household really lent to his slave in Jesus' time. Instead, we read them for their ideas—to understand their values and their perspectives on the world so that we can learn from them. The same attitude should be applied to the narratives here.

Tsai makes it easy by beginning the book with a long-standing Zen saying:

Not reliant on the written word,  
A special transmission separate from the scriptures;  
Direct pointing at one's mind,  
Seeing one's nature, becoming a Buddha.

If you have trouble understanding any of the episodes in this book, thinking back to one of these lines in the context of the discussion above should help. Let's look at one example from the book for each line of the saying.

*Not reliant on the written word.* I count at least eight episodes where this is the basic message, one of which we already saw above (the final bullet point on p. xvii). The prime example in this book is on p. 45, in which the metaphor of pointing at the moon is used. As Tsai succinctly says in the final panel, “Language is merely a tool for pointing out the truth, a means to help us attain enlightenment. To mistake words for the truth is almost as ridiculous as mistaking a finger for the moon.”

*A special transmission separate from the scriptures.* The prime example for this line is the episode on pp. 9–10, in which the Buddha passes on the wordless teaching to his student. Did this really happen? That's not the point. The point is that understanding the ideas of Zen Buddhism requires going beyond the basic limits of language. It does not, however, mean that language or books don't matter at all. Although Huineng was said to be illiterate, many other Zen masters were not only literate but very well read, and the training of a Zen monk involved reading sutras, reciting them, and discussing their contents. You have to climb the ladder before you can kick it away.

*Direct pointing at one's mind.* There is a story that will seem counterintuitive if you see Zen as fundamentally involving sitting in meditation. On p. 61, Huairang asks his student Mazu why

he is sitting in meditation. Remember, “Chan/Zen” means “to meditate,” so a teacher asking a student this question is like a basketball coach asking a player on the practice court why she is shooting baskets. Understanding this episode has to do with two related Buddhist ideas that we've touched on already. The first is the notion of attachment. One way of understanding habitual behavior is through the idea of attachment. We become comfortable in a particular way of doing things, a particular way of viewing things. Although some Zen teachers, especially in the Linji/Rinzai tradition, have expressed a low opinion of the value of meditation in actually achieving enlightenment, it is still fundamental to the training. Huairang's point is to steer Mazu away from getting too caught up in meditation as a practice, something Huairang must have witnessed Mazu doing outside of this particular episode. The path of Buddhist practice means not being attached to anything, even to particular Buddhist ideas and ideals, such as the goal of enlightenment itself. The second important notion here is the nature of the mind. We saw above that it should not be equated with the self. So, “direct pointing at one's mind” means understanding—directly, experientially—that your individual mind is not who you most fundamentally are.

*Seeing one's nature, becoming a Buddha.* This line is the most difficult of all. If your individual mind is not who you really are, then who are you really? The answer, as we saw above, is Dao, or buddha-nature, which is not only who you really are but what everything really is—something that is and is not at the same time. There is something delicious about the thought that as we trudge a long, arduous road, we are actually already at our destination—we just have to look around and realize it. So, it's really complicated, but at the same time it's really not.

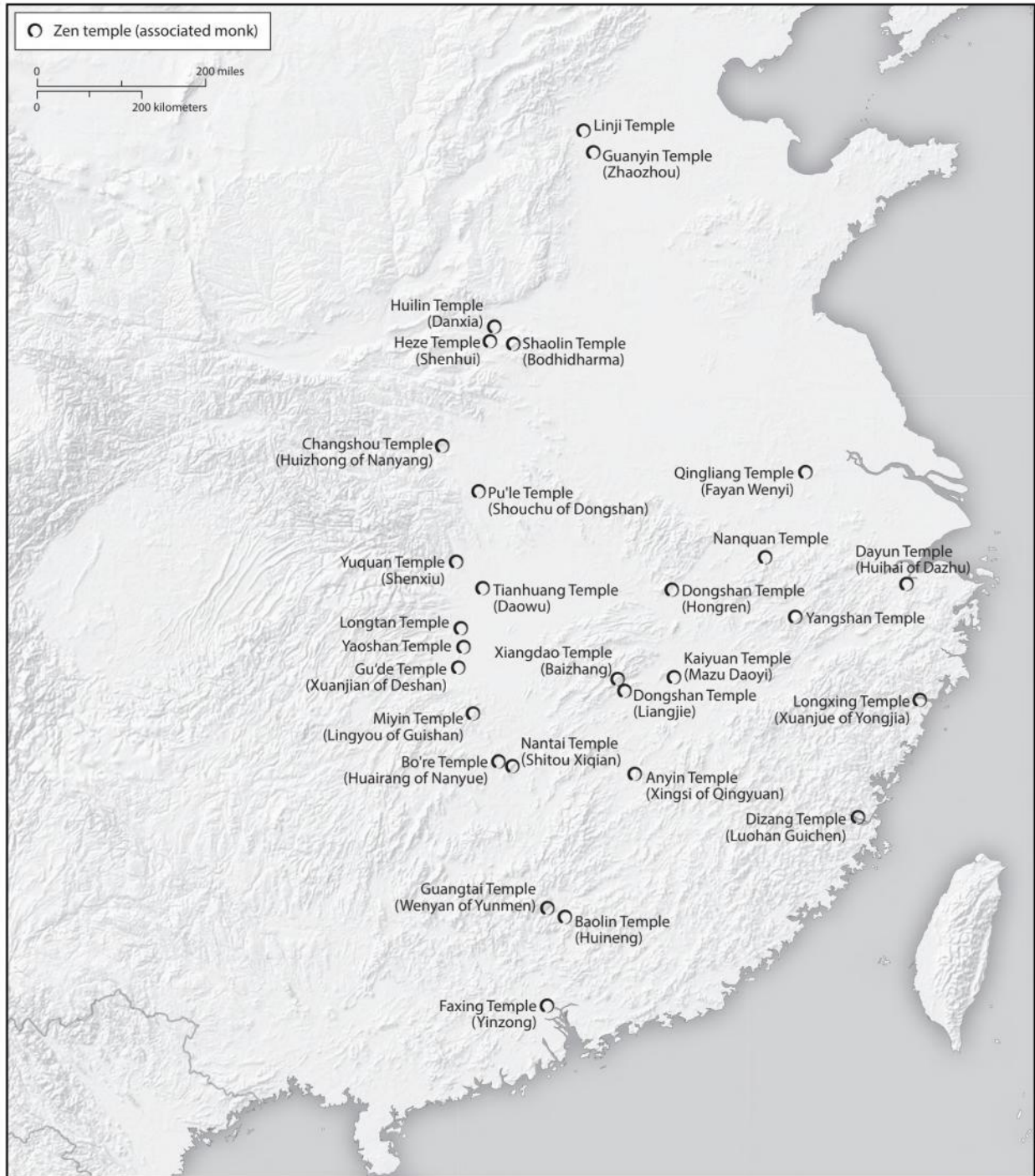
For most of the books in the Illustrated Library of Chinese Classics series, the classic text underpinning the illustrated version is obvious: *The Art of War*, *The Analects*, the *Dao De Jing*, etc. For this one, there are more than thirty separate texts from which Tsai has drawn. A small number of them account for the majority of episodes. The story of Huineng and his predecessors, from pages 26 to 50, draws almost exclusively from

the *Platform Sutra* (the Yuan Dynasty version, with some parts coming from the Dunhuang version). Some of the stories of Huineng's followers are also from the *Platform Sutra*, but after page 50, the "lamp" collections are largely the sources for the lineages descended from Huineng, up through page 188. The lamp collections most commonly drawn from are *Jingde chuan deng lu* and *Wu deng hui yuan*. Some stories come from *koan* collections, such as *Wu men guan* and *Bi yan lu*. The source of many of the Zhaozhou stories is a classic text dedicated to him.

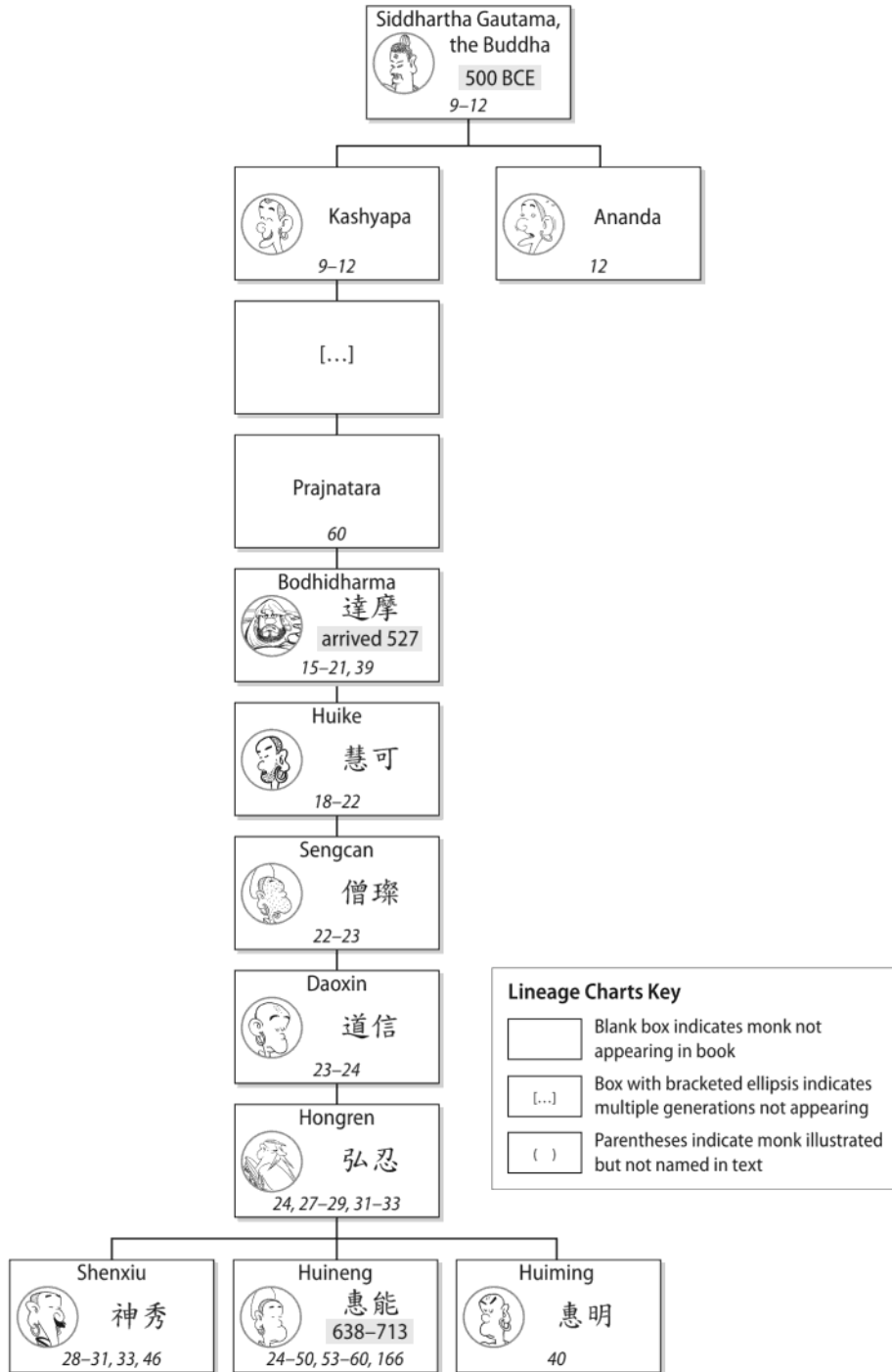
Because many of these stories have several versions told in different texts, the version depicted here may differ slightly

from a version you've seen elsewhere. For example, many versions of Zhaozhou's dog story (see p. 109) told in English have only the part where Zhaozhou says "no." The *Wu men guan* has that version. The longer version you see here is drawn from the *Cong rong lu*, another collection of *koan*. It's hard to say whether one version of a story is more or less authentic than another.

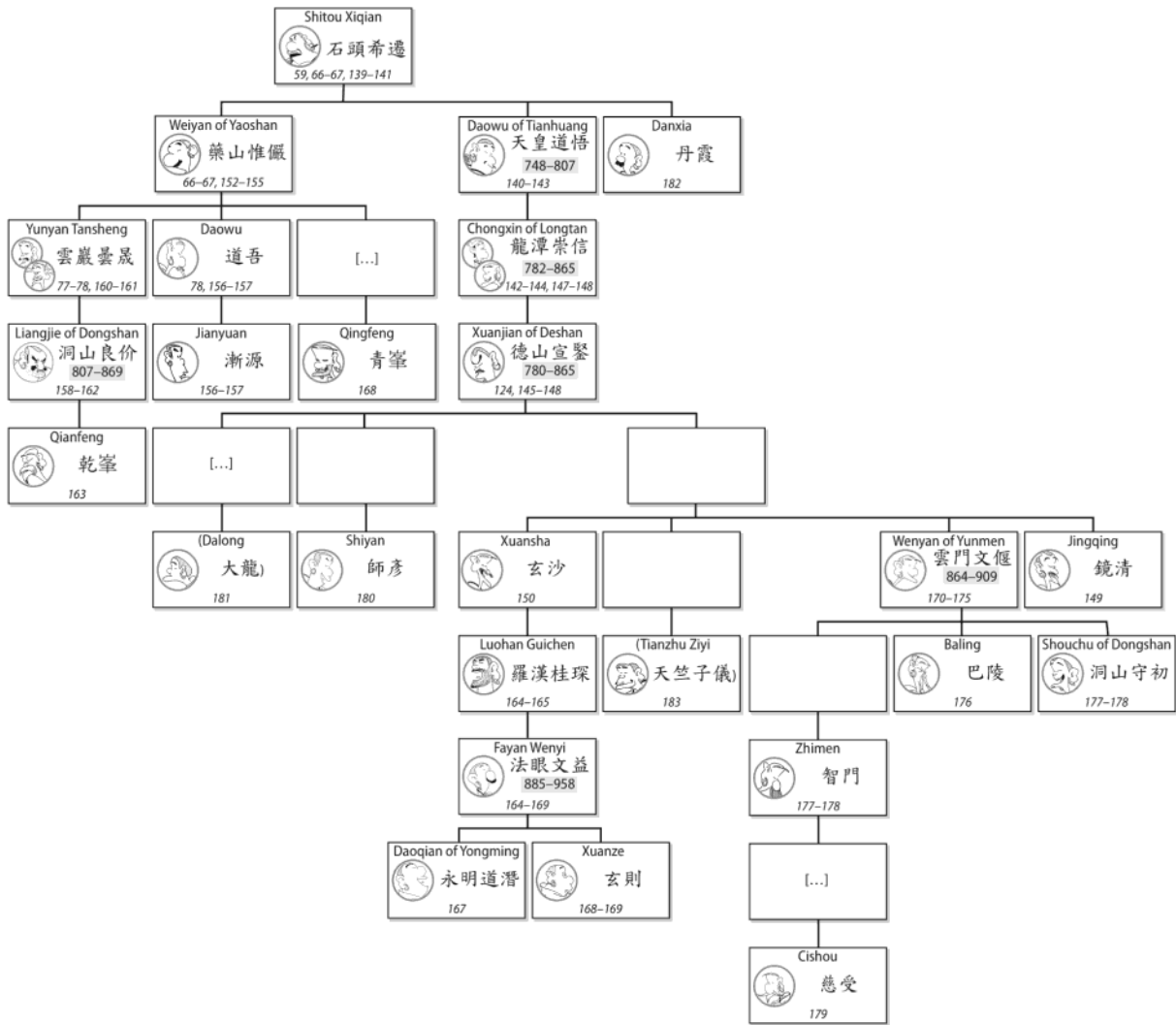
We have created a map and lineage charts for this edition to help you orient yourself to the scale of Zen across time and space. They are by necessity limited to people and places mentioned in this book. Many of the temples are still functioning today and welcome visitors.



Map of Zen Temples in Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty China



Zen Lineage Chart 1: The Buddha to Huineng



Zen Lineage Chart 4: Shitou's Legacy

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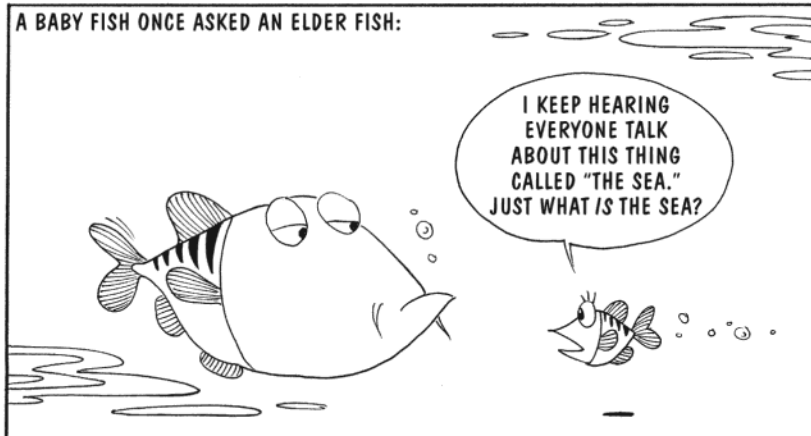


孔子曰：「魚相造乎水，人相造乎道。相造乎水者，穿池而養給；相造乎道者，無事而生定。故曰，魚相忘乎江湖，人相忘乎道術。」

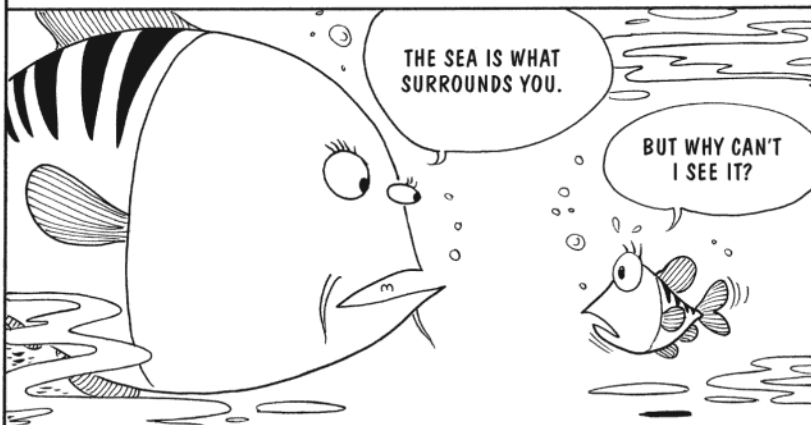
《莊子》

A BABY FISH ONCE ASKED AN ELDER FISH:

WHAT IS ZEN?

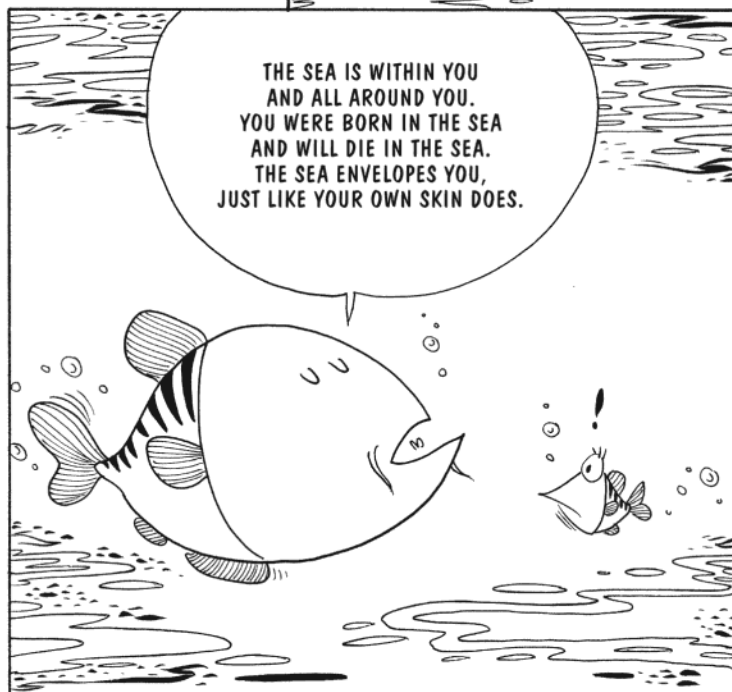


I KEEP HEARING EVERYONE TALK ABOUT THIS THING CALLED "THE SEA." JUST WHAT IS THE SEA?



THE SEA IS WHAT SURROUNDS YOU.

BUT WHY CAN'T I SEE IT?



THE SEA IS WITHIN YOU AND ALL AROUND YOU. YOU WERE BORN IN THE SEA AND WILL DIE IN THE SEA. THE SEA ENVELOPES YOU, JUST LIKE YOUR OWN SKIN DOES.

CONFUCIUS SAID, "FISH FORGET THAT THEY LIVE IN LAKES AND RIVERS; PEOPLE FORGET THAT THEY LIVE IN THE MAGIC OF THE DAO." PEOPLE LIVE IN A SEA OF ZEN, YET THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS. WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW WHAT ZEN IS?

PLEASE, READ ON ...



**ENLIGHTENMENT  
OF THE  
WAVE**

OH, HOW I SUFFER SO.  
THE OTHER WAVES ARE SO BIG,  
AND I'M SO TINY.  
SOME WAVES ARE SO WELL OFF,  
AND MY LIFE IS SO LOUSY.

IT'S BECAUSE YOU  
HAVEN'T SEEN CLEARLY  
YOUR "ORIGINAL FACE"  
THAT YOU THINK YOU  
SUFFER.

I'M NOT  
A WAVE?  
THEN WHAT  
AM I?

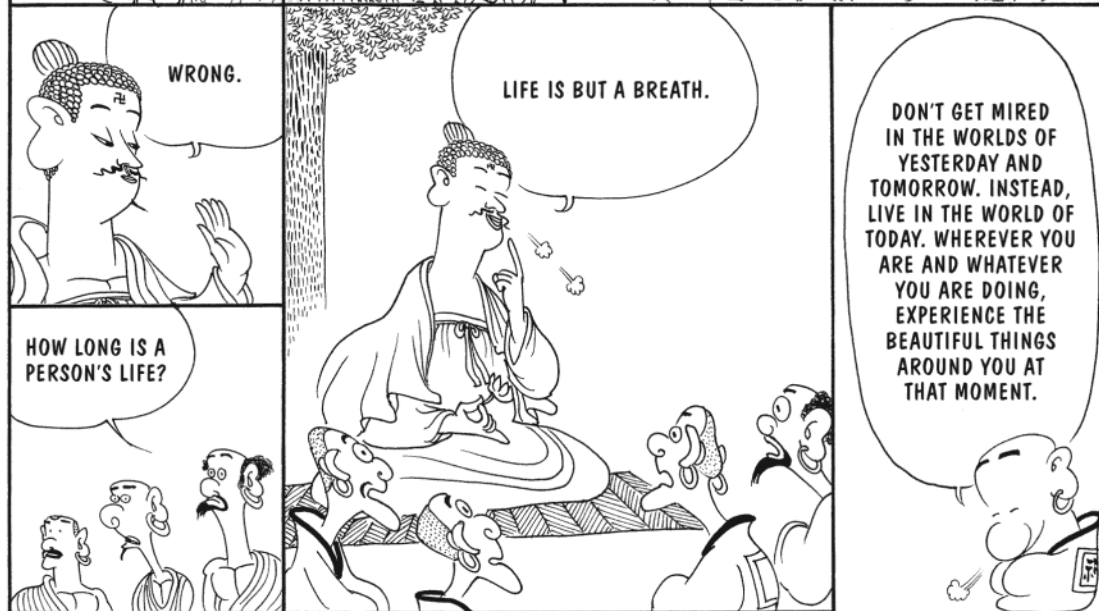
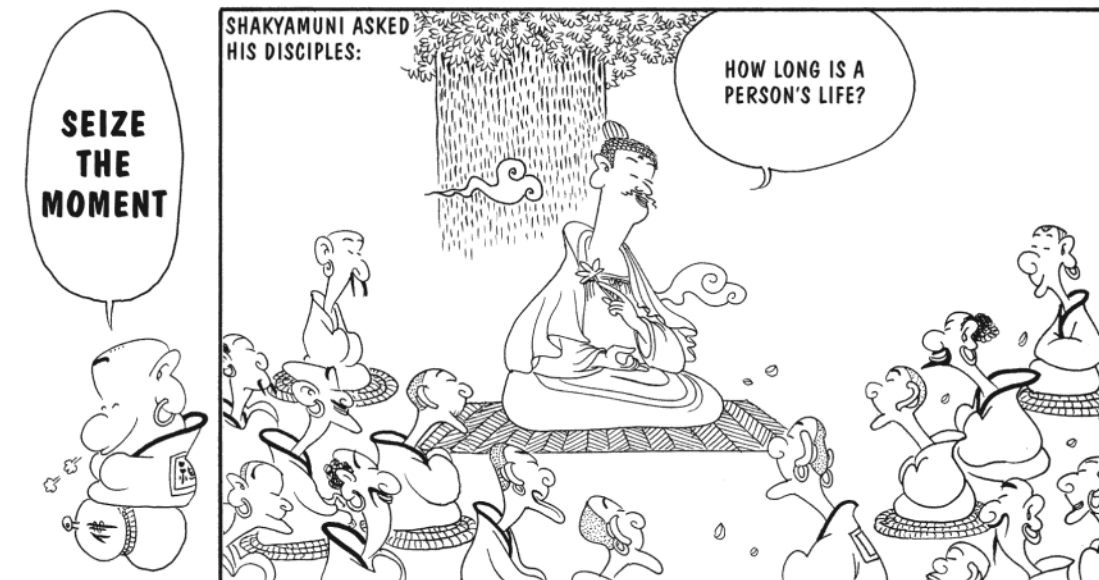
A WAVE IS JUST  
YOUR TEMPORARY  
FORM. YOU'RE  
REALLY WATER!

WATER?

WHEN YOU REALIZE THAT YOUR  
FUNDAMENTAL NATURE IS WATER,  
YOU WON'T BE CONFUSED ABOUT  
BEING A WAVE, AND YOUR  
SUFFERING WILL GO AWAY.

OH, I GET IT!  
I'M YOU, AND  
YOU'RE ME. WE'RE  
BOTH PART OF A  
GREATER SELF!

PEOPLE SELFISHLY  
THINK THAT THEY  
BELONG ONLY TO  
THEMSELVES, SO THEY  
COMPARE THEMSELVES  
WITH OTHER PEOPLE AND  
THEN THEY THINK THAT THEY  
ARE SUFFERING. IN FACT,  
THOUGH, EVERY PERSON  
IS A PART OF NATURE.  
THINK ABOUT IT ...



佛問諸沙門：「人命在幾間？」對曰：「人在世間極可五十歲。」佛言：「莫說是語。」復有一比丘言：「可三十歲。」佛言：「人命在呼吸之間耳。」

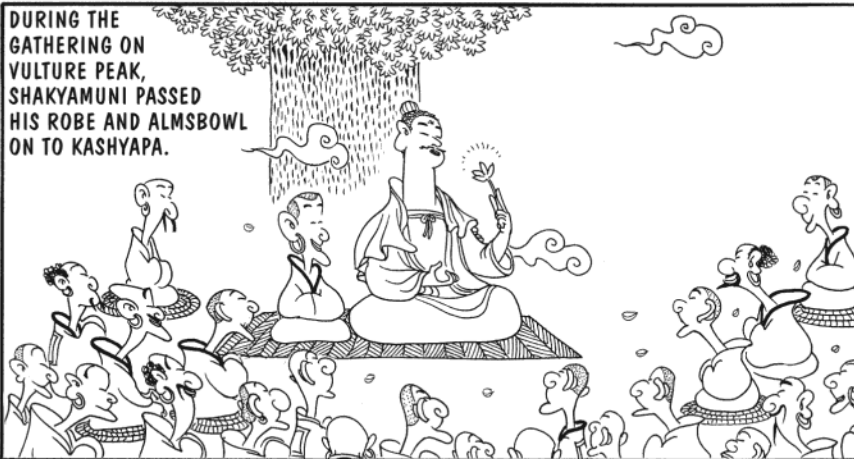
《四十二章經》、《佛說處處經》

迦葉因阿難問云。世尊傳金襴袈裟外。別傳何物。葉喚云。阿難。難應諾。葉云。倒却門前剎竿著。

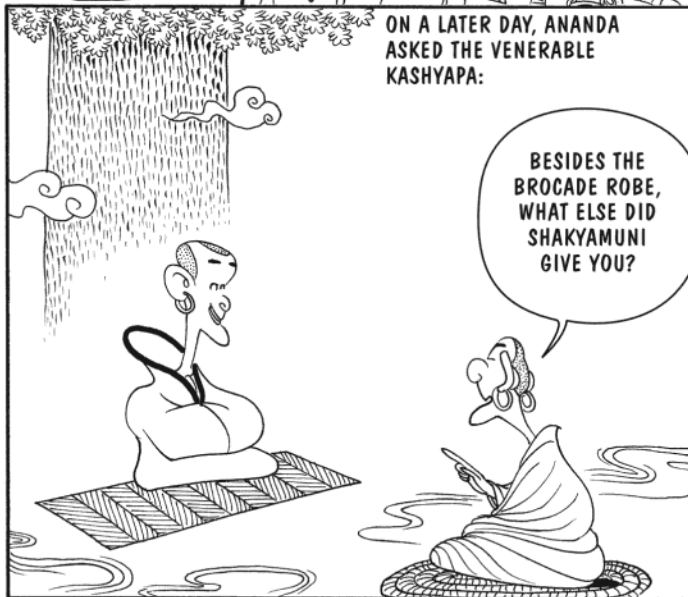
**KASHYAPA  
AND THE  
FLAGPOLE**



DURING THE GATHERING ON VULTURE PEAK, SHAKYAMUNI PASSED HIS ROBE AND ALMSBOWL ON TO KASHYAPA.



ON A LATER DAY, ANANDA ASKED THE VENERABLE KASHYAPA:



BESIDES THE BROCADE ROBE, WHAT ELSE DID SHAKYAMUNI GIVE YOU?

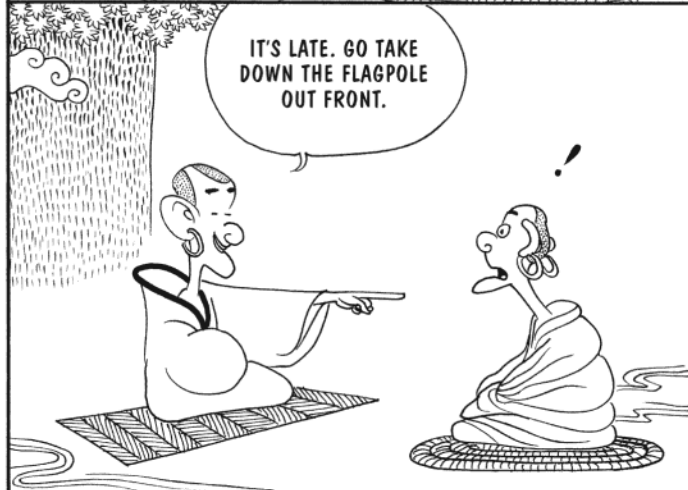
ANANDA!



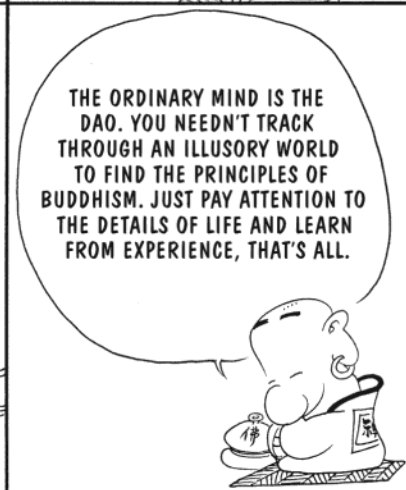
YES?



IT'S LATE. GO TAKE DOWN THE FLAGPOLE OUT FRONT.



THE ORDINARY MIND IS THE DAO. YOU NEEDN'T TRACK THROUGH AN ILLUSORY WORLD TO FIND THE PRINCIPLES OF BUDDHISM. JUST PAY ATTENTION TO THE DETAILS OF LIFE AND LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE, THAT'S ALL.



菩提本無樹，明鏡亦非臺，  
本來無一物，何處惹塵埃？  
《六祖大師法寶壇經》



*image*

*not*

*available*