



SHAMBHALA DRAGON EDITIONS

ZEN ESSENCE

The Science of Freedom



Translated and Edited by
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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Zen is the essence of Buddhism, freedom is the essence of Zen. At its simplest and most profound level, Zen is purely devoted to liberating the hidden potential of the human mind. The Chinese Zen master Ying-an said, "Zen living is a most direct shortcut, not requiring the exertion of the slightest bit of strength to attain enlightenment and master Zen right where you are."

The freedom that Zen proposes is not remote, but right in this world. It does not require anything extraneous, but can be put into practice in the midst of normal occupations and activities. It is applicable immediately, and develops naturally. Dahui, another great Chinese Zen master, said, "To attain Zen enlightenment it is not necessary to give up family life, quit your job, become a vegetarian, practice asceticism, or flee to a quiet place."

Yet even while effectively *in* the world, Zen freedom is not essentially *of* the world; it is not the same as a freedom that can be instituted or granted by a social or political system. According to Zen teaching, freedom that depends on things of the world can be undermined, and freedom that can be granted can be taken away. Aiming for freedom that cannot be undermined and cannot be taken away, Zen liberation reaches out from within. By its very nature it cannot enter in from outside the individual mind.

Zen liberation is essentially achieved by special knowledge and perception that penetrate the root of experience. This knowledge and perception free the mind from the arbitrary limitations imposed on it by conditioning, thus awakening

dormant capacities of consciousness. Dahui explained:

The realm of the enlightened is not an external realm with manifest characteristics; buddhahood is the realm of the sacred knowledge found in oneself. You do not need paraphernalia, practices, or realizations to attain it. What you need is to clean out the influences of the psychological afflictions connected with the external world that have been accumulating in your psyche since beginningless time.

Zen cleans the mind for inner perception of its own essential nature; then inner perception of mind's essential purity enables one to remain spontaneously poised and free in all circumstances, so that one may go on clarifying daily experience. The old Japanese Zen master Bunan said,

People think it is hard to perceive the essential human nature, but in reality it is neither difficult nor easy. Nothing at all can adhere to this essential nature. It is a matter of responding to right and wrong while remaining detached from right and wrong, living in the midst of passions yet being detached from passions, seeing without seeing, hearing without hearing, acting without acting, seeking without seeking.

Enlightened Zen freedom, being in the world yet not of the world, is traditionally likened to a lotus flower, rooted in the mud while blossoming over the water. It is not a negative detachment but a balance of independence and openness. Therefore it is not realized by formal effort but by direct experience and unfolding of the essence of the human mind.

The paradox of Zen freedom is that it is present and available, yet somehow elusive when deliberately sought. It responds to what Bunan called "seeking without seeking." Ying-an put it this way: "Zen has nothing to grab on to. When people who study Zen don't see it, that is because they approach too eagerly."

For this reason, classical Zen books are not manuals of doctrine or ritual to be followed as systematic courses of Zen that are supposed to lead one and all step by step to the inner sanctum. They are written to awaken sleeping dimensions of consciousness, not to inculcate ideas or beliefs.

Countless systems have been devised to approach Zen since the disappearance of the original schools, but none of them is complete or final, and none of them lasts. This is simply the nature of Zen, which speaks to the personal experience of each individual and each time. It is also true of all Buddhist schools, as their scriptures attest. Zen master Dahui said, "If you think there are any verbal formulations that are special mysterious secrets to be transmitted, this is not real Zen."

Zen adds extra dimension to consciousness in both rational and intuitive modes. It does so by deepening and sharpening thought, and by fostering a special kind of insight or knowledge more subtle than thought. Since it is axiomatic that this kind of mental development ultimately cannot be given and cannot be taken, Zen learning needs its own approach.

The essence of the Zen approach is deceptively simple, as explained by the Chinese master Yuanwu: "Set aside all the slogans you have learned and all the intellectual views that stick to your flesh." Zen is the freshest essence of mind, already gone by the time it becomes an idea. The Zen meaning of literature is impact, not ideology.

Because of the very nature of Zen, its essence is neither of the East nor of the West. The classical Zen masters have said that this essence does not belong to any particular culture or philosophy, let alone any particular social class or group. A Zen poet remarked, "On whose door does the moonlight not shine?" It is at the source of ideas, not a product of ideas; and this is what distinguishes the essence of Zen from all derivative philosophy, religion, art, and science.

There are many ways of entering into Zen, and the possibilities that emerge from Zen are even richer. This volume is a collection of hints on realizing and living the essence of Zen, drawn from the works of the greatest Zen masters of ancient China. Translated from the original Chinese records, these unique writings represent the most open and direct forms of instruction in the entire Zen canon. They are not religion or philosophy but a practical psychology of liberation.

This type of Zen literature has been public for centuries and can be enjoyed by anyone. It requires consciousness alone and

does not depend on a particular background in Zen Buddhism or any form of Asian culture. It applies directly to the relationship between mind and culture itself, whatever that culture may be. Therefore it relates immediately to the way in which the world is experienced and life is lived, wherever one may be. This is the universal aspect of Zen, the essence of Zen.

Notes on Sources

The translations in this volume are from standard collections in the Zen portion of the Chinese Buddhist canon. The Zen masters quoted lived from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries. Further teachings of some of these masters, especially the earlier ones, are recorded in the translation and appendices of *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992). The commentaries in the latter Zen classic are those of Yuanwu, who is also one of the major figures in the literature translated in the present volume.

Virtually all of the famed letters of Dahui, another important teacher in this collection, are in J. C. Cleary's translation *Swampland Flowers* (New York: Grove, 1977). A considerable amount of other material by and about Dahui is also translated in my *Zen Lessons: The Art of Leadership* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1989, 1993), in which Dahui is known by the epithet Miaoxi. This book also contains more on the teachings of some of the other Zen masters in *Zen Essence*.

ZEN MASTER MAZU

THE NORMAL MIND

The Way does not require cultivation—just don't pollute it.

What is pollution? As long as you have a fluctuating mind fabricating artificialities and contrivances, all of this is pollution.

If you want to understand the Way directly, the normal mind is the Way.

What I mean by the normal mind is the mind without artificiality, without subjective judgments, without grasping or rejection.

THE ROOT

The founders of Zen said that one's own essence is inherently complete. Just don't linger over good or bad things—that is called practice of the Way. To grasp the good and reject the bad, to contemplate emptiness and enter concentration, is all in the province of contrivance—and if you go on seeking externals, you get further and further estranged.

Just end the mental objectivization of the world. A single thought of the wandering mind is the root of birth and death in the world. Just don't have a single thought and you'll get rid of the root of birth and death.

THE OCEANIC REFLECTION

Human delusions of time immemorial, deceit, pride, deviousness, and conceit, have conglomerated into one body. That is why scripture says that this body is just made of elements, and its appearance and disappearance is just that of elements, which have no identity. When successive thoughts do not await one another, and each thought dies peacefully away, this is called absorption in the oceanic reflection.

DELUSION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Delusion means you are not aware of your own fundamental mind; enlightenment means you realize your own fundamental essence. Once enlightened, you do not become deluded anymore.

If you understand mind and objects, then false conceptions do not arise; when false conceptions do not arise, this is acceptance of the beginninglessness of things. You have always had it, and you have it now—there is no need to cultivate the Way and sit in meditation.

ZEN MASTER DAZHU

ARTIFICIAL ZEN

You are luckily all right by yourself, yet you struggle artificially. Why do you want to put on fetters and go to prison? You are busy every day claiming to study Zen, learn the Way, and interpret Buddhism, but this alienates you even further. It is just chasing sound and form. When will you ever stop?

YOUR TREASURE

My teacher said to me, "The treasure house within you contains everything, and you are free to use it. You don't need to seek outside."

ZEN MASTER LINJI

TRUE PERCEPTION AND UNDERSTANDING

People who study Buddhism should seek real, true perception and understanding for now. If you attain real, true perception and understanding, birth and death don't affect you—you are free to go or stay. You needn't seek wonders, for wonders come of themselves.

SELF-CONFIDENCE

What I point out to you is only that you shouldn't allow yourselves to be confused by others. Act when you need to, without further hesitation or doubt.

People today can't do this—what is their affliction? Their affliction is in their lack of self-confidence.

If you do not spontaneously trust yourself sufficiently, you will be in a frantic state, pursuing all sorts of objects and being changed by those objects, unable to be independent.

BUDDHA WITHIN

There is no stability in the world; it is like a house on fire. This is not a place where you can stay for a long time. The murderous demon of impermanence is instantaneous, and it does not choose between the upper and lower classes, or between the old and the young.

If you want to be no different from the buddhas and Zen masters, just don't seek externally.

The pure light in a moment of awareness in your mind is the Buddha's essence within you. The nondiscriminating light in a moment of awareness in your mind is the Buddha's wisdom within you. The undifferentiated light in a moment of awareness in your mind is the Buddha's manifestation within you.

NO OBSESSIONS

It is most urgent that you seek real, true perception and understanding, so you can be free in the world and not be confused by ordinary spiritualists.

It is best to have no obsessions. Just don't be contrived. Simply be normal.

You impulsively seek elsewhere, looking to others for your own hands and feet. This is already mistaken.

THE MIND GROUND

The mind ground can go into the ordinary, into the holy, into the pure, into the defiled, into the real, into the conventional; but it is not your "real" or "conventional," "ordinary" or "holy." It can put labels on all the real and conventional, the ordinary and holy, but the real and conventional, the ordinary and holy, cannot put labels on someone in the mind ground. If you can get it, use it, without putting any more labels on it.

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE

When followers of Zen come to see me, I have already understood them completely. How can I do this? Simply because my perception is independent—externally I do not grasp the ordinary or the holy, internally I do not dwell on the

fundamental. I see all the way through and do not doubt or err anymore.

AUTONOMY

Just be autonomous wherever you are, and right there is realization. Situations that come up cannot change you. Even if you have bad habits, you will spontaneously be liberated from them.

SPIRITUAL DILETTANTES

Zen students today are totally unaware of truth. They are like foraging goats that pick up whatever they bump into. They do not distinguish between the servant and the master, or between the guest and the host.

People like this enter Zen with distorted minds, and are unable to enter effectively into dynamic situations. They may be called true initiates, but actually they are really mundane people.

Those who really leave attachments must master real, true perception to distinguish the enlightened from the obsessed, the genuine from the artificial, the unregenerate from the sage.

If you can make these discernments, you can be said to have really left dependency.

Professional Buddhist clergy who cannot tell obsession from enlightenment have just left one social group and entered another social group. They cannot really be said to be independent.

Now there is an obsession with Buddhism that is mixed in with the real thing. Those with clear eyes cut through both obsession and Buddhism. If you love the sacred and despise the ordinary, you are still bobbing in the ocean of delusion.

LABELS AND OBJECTIVE TRUTH

Because you grasp labels and slogans, you are hindered by those labels and slogans, both those used in ordinary life and those considered sacred. Thus they obstruct your perception of objective truth, and you cannot understand clearly.

THE FREE SELF

If you want to be free, get to know your real self. It has no form, no appearance, no root, no basis, no abode, but is lively and buoyant. It responds with versatile facility, but its function cannot be located. Therefore when you look for it you become further from it, when you seek it you turn away from it all the more.

NO CONCERN

Just put thoughts to rest and don't seek outwardly anymore. When things come up, then give them your attention; just trust what is functional in you at present, and you have nothing to be concerned about.

BLIND BALDIES

There are blind baldies who, after they have eaten their fill, do zazen and practice meditation, arresting thoughts leaking out to prevent them from arising, shunning clamor and seeking quiet. This is a deviated form of Zen.

UNCRITICAL ACCEPTANCE

You take the words of these ordinary Zen teachers for the

real Way, supposing that Zen teachers are incomprehensible and as an ordinary person you dare not attempt to assess those old timers. You are blind if you take this view all your life, contrary to the evidence of your own two eyes.

TOURIST TRAPS

At Zen centers they say there is a Way to be practiced and a religious truth to be realized. Tell me, what religious truth is realized, what way is practiced? In your present functioning, what do you lack? What would you fix?

Younger newcomers, not understanding this, immediately believe these mesmerists and let them talk about things that tie people up.

SUPERNORMAL FACULTIES

The six supernormal faculties of the enlightened are the ability to enter the realm of form without being confused by form, to enter the realm of sound without being confused by sound, to enter the realm of scent without being confused by scent, to enter the realm of flavor without being confused by flavor, to enter the realm of feeling without being confused by feeling, to enter the realm of phenomena without being confused by phenomena.

OBJECTIVE PERCEPTION AND UNDERSTANDING

If you want to perceive and understand objectively, just don't allow yourself to be confused by people. Detach from whatever you find inside or outside yourself—detach from religion, tradition, and society, and only then will you attain liberation. When you are not entangled in things, you pass through freely to autonomy.

ZEN TEACHING

I have no doctrine to give people—I just cure ailments and unlock fetters.

ADDING MUD TO DIRT

There are Zen students who are in chains when they go to a teacher, and the teacher adds another chain. The students are delighted, unable to discern one thing from another. This is called a guest looking at a guest.

SLAVERY

When I say there is nothing outside, students who do not understand me interpret this in terms of inwardness, so they sit silent and still, taking this to be Zen Buddhism.

This is a big mistake. If you take a state of unmoving clarity to be Zen, you are recognizing ignorance as a slave master.

MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS

If you try to grasp Zen in movement, it goes into stillness. If you try to grasp Zen in stillness, it goes into movement. It is like a fish hidden in a spring, drumming up waves and dancing independently.

Movement and stillness are two states. The Zen master, who does not depend on anything, makes deliberate use of both movement and stillness.

ZEN MASTER YANGSHAN

ZEN TEACHING

There is interaction if there is a call for it, no interaction if there is no call for it.

DEEP AND SHALLOW

If I were to explain the source of Zen, there wouldn't be a single person around, let alone a group of five hundred or seven hundred. If I talk about this and that, however, you race forward to pick it up. This is like fooling a child with an empty fist—there is no reality in it.

THE ZEN ESSENCE

I explain to you matters pertaining to enlightenment, but don't try to keep your mind on them. Just turn to the ocean of your own essence and develop practical accord with its true nature.

SUPERNORMAL CAPACITIES

You do not need supernormal capacities, because these are outgrowths of enlightenment. For now you need to know the mind and get to its source.

ROOT AND BRANCHES

Just get the root, don't worry about the branches, for someday you will come to have them naturally. If you have not attained the basis, even if you consciously study you cannot attain the outgrowths either.

THE INNER GAZE

You should turn your attention within—don't memorize my words. You have been turning from light to darkness since before you can remember, so the roots of your subjective ideas are deep and hard to uproot all at once. This is why I temporarily use expedients to take away your coarse perceptions.

ZEN MASTER FAYAN

FALSE ZEN TEACHERS

It is wrong to act as a teacher of others before your own mind ground is clearly illumined.

THE BASIS OF ZEN

The teaching of the mind ground is the basis of Zen study. The mind ground is the great awareness of being as is.

CONFUSION

Due to confusion, people mistake things for themselves; covetousness flares up, and they get into vicious cycles that cloud perceptions and enshroud them in ignorance. The vicious cycles go on and on, and people cannot be free.

THE DETERIORATION OF ZEN

The purpose of Zen is to enable people to immediately transcend the ordinary and the holy, just getting people to awaken on their own, forever cutting off the root of doubt.

Many people in modern times disregard this. They may join Zen groups, but they are lazy about Zen study. Even if they achieve concentration, they do not choose real teachers.

Through the errors of false teachers, they likewise lose the way.

Without having understood senses and objects, as soon as they possess themselves of some false interpretation they become obsessed by it and lose the correct basis completely.

They are only interested in becoming leaders and being known as teachers. While they value an empty reputation in the world, they bring ill on themselves. Not only do they make their successors blind and deaf, they also cause the influence of Zen to degenerate.

SECTARIANISM

Zen is not founded or sustained on the premise that there is a doctrine to be transmitted. It is just a matter of direct guidance to the human mind, perception of its essence, and achievement of awakening. How could there be any sectarian styles to be valued?

There were differences in the modes of teaching set up by later Zen teachers, and there were both tradition and change. The methods employed by a number of famous Zen masters came to be continued as traditions, to the point where their descendants became sectarians and did not get to the original reality. Eventually they made many digressions, contradicting and attacking each other. They do not distinguish the profound from the superficial, and do not know that the Great Way has no sides and the streams of truth have the same flavor.

DISCERNMENT

Zen teachers need first to distinguish false and true, then they must clearly understand the time.

DEGENERATE ZEN

Zen teachers in recent times have lost the basis, so students have no way to learn. There is egotistical contention, and impermanent states are taken to be attainments.

PRINCIPLE AND FACT

Zen Buddhism includes both principle and fact. Fact is based on principle, principle is illustrated by fact. Principle and fact work together like eyes and feet.

SUBJECTIVE JUDGMENTS

If you make subjective, personalistic judgments of past and present events, not having been through the process of refining and purifying your insight, this is like trying to do a sword dance without having learned to handle a sword.

UNDERSTANDING AND IMAGINATION

It is not possible to fathom the intention of the words or acts of the enlightened by indulging in fantasy.

ZEN SUCCESSION

If you memorize slogans, you are unable to make subtle adaptations according to the situation. It is not that there is no way to teach insight to learners, but once you have learned a way, it is essential that you get it to work completely. If you just stick to your teacher's school and memorize slogans, this is not enlightenment, it is a part of intellectual knowledge.

This is why it is said, "When your perception only equals that of your teacher, you lessen the teacher's virtue by half. When your perception goes beyond the teacher, only then can you

express the teacher's teaching.”

The sixth ancestor of Zen said to someone who had just been awakened, “What I tell you is not a secret. The secret is in you.”

Another Zen master said to a companion, “Everything flows from your own heart.”

When you're settled in Zen, your mind is serene, unaffected by worldly distractions. You enter the realm of enlightenment, and transcend the ordinary world, leaving the world while in the midst of society.

REALIZING THE WAY

Once you realize universal emptiness, all situations are naturally mastered. You have perfect communion with what is beyond the world, while embracing what is within all realms of being.

If you miss the essence of Zen, after all there's nothing to it. If you get its function, it has spiritual effect.

The real Way of "nonminding" is not a school for petty people.

ZEN MASTER XUEDOU

THE LIVING MEANING OF ZEN

Someone asked Xuedou, "What is the living meaning of Zen?" Xuedou said, "The mountains are high, the oceans are wide."

WHERE DO YOU GET IT?

Someone asked Xuedou, "As it is said, 'The one road beyond is not transmitted by any of the sages.' Where did you get it?" Xuedou said, "I thought you were a Zen practitioner."

AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE

Where the sword wheel flies, sun and moon lose their shine; when the jewel staff strikes, heaven and earth lose their color. Through this experience, all devils' guts burst; through this experience, all sages' eyes open.

ILLUMINATING PERCEPTION

When you illuminate your perception, your eyes are like a thousand suns, so that nothing can escape notice. Ordinarily, people just have never been so observant, but they should not give up in frustration because of underestimating themselves.

THE ZEN WAY

The Way does not need cultivation—just don't defile it. Zen does not need study—the important thing is stopping the mind.

When the mind is stopped, there is no rumination. Because it is not cultivated, you walk on the Way at every step.

When there is no rumination, there is no world to transcend. Because it is not cultivated, there is no Way to seek.

SEEKING

To travel around to various schools looking for teachers is outward seeking. To take the inherent nature of awareness as the ocean and the silent knowledge of transcendent wisdom as Zen, is called inward seeking.

To seek outwardly busies you fatally; to seek inwardly while dwelling on mind and body binds you fatally.

Therefore Zen is neither inward nor outward, not being or nonbeing, not real or false. As it is said, "Inner and outer views are both wrong."

LEAVINGS

"When ordinary and sacred feelings are forgotten, Being is revealed, real and eternal. Just detach from arbitrary involvements, and you awaken to Being as it is."

Although these are the leavings of an ancient Zen master, there are many people who cannot partake of them. I've lost considerable profit just by bringing them up.

Can anyone discern? If you can, you will recognize the disease of "Buddhism" and the disease of "Zen."

LIVING ZEN

To drink up the ocean and turn a mountain upside down is an ordinary affair for a Zennist. Zen seekers should sit on the site of universal enlightenment right in the midst of all the thorny situations in life, and recognize their original face while mixing with the ordinary world.

REAL DETACHMENT

“Where people of today dwell, I do not dwell. What people of today do, I do not do.” If you clearly understand what this really means, you must be able to enter a pit of fire with your whole body.

GOLDEN CHAINS

Someone asked Huanglong, “It is said that someone who is uncontrived and unconcerned is still hindered by golden chains—what is wrong?”

Huanglong said, “When a word enters the public domain, it can’t be withdrawn for nine years.”

IN AND OUT

All sages since remote antiquity have entered the pit of life and death, gone into the fire of ignorance, to help people out. What about you? How do you enter?

If people can enter, this can be called not burning in fire, not drowning in water.

If people cannot enter, they not only cannot help themselves, they cannot help others.

the supreme vehicle, even the sages stand aside, buddhas and Zen masters disappear.

Why? Because you are all the same as the buddhas of old.

But can you really believe and trust this?

If you really can, let us all disband and go our separate ways.

If you don't leave, I'll go on fooling you.

MIND AND PHENOMENA

Mind is the faculty, phenomena are the data: both are like scratches in a mirror.

When there are no scratches or dust, the clarity of the mirror shows.

When mind and phenomena are both forgotten, then your nature is real.

SILENT ZEN

Someone asked Yangqi, "When the founder of Zen came from India to China, he sat facing a wall for nine years—what does this mean?"

Yangqi said, "As an Indian, he couldn't speak Chinese."

ten thousand miles, sun and moon in the original sky are of themselves clear.

It is not permitted for a general to see great peace, but a general may establish great peace.

THE GOAL OF ZEN

To study Zen, first you must obtain directions to the ultimate goal. Hearing sound and seeing form are inconceivable. From the eternal sky every night the moon shines on every home; its reflection descends into a quiet pool, but how many know?

SEEKING WITHOUT FINDING

Few seekers of Zen attain it. When will judgments ever cease? If you talk about high and low based on words, that is like before enlightenment.

EVERYONE CAN ARRIVE

There is a road to emptiness by which everyone can arrive. Those who do arrive realize that its rich flavor is lasting. The ground of mind doesn't produce useless plants; naturally the body radiates light.

TALKING ABOUT ZEN

Talking about Zen all the time is like looking for fish tracks in a dry riverbed.