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## Zen: A Few Clarifications

### *What is the meaning of the word Zen?*

The word Zen is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, Pali *jhana*. It can be translated as meditation. Zen is first of all a Mahayana Buddhist sect, which came about in the 6th century in China; it was born of the meeting of Indian Mahayana Buddhism with Chinese Daoism. In Chinese it is called *ch'an*, in Japanese Zen, in Korean *son*. The word Zen can refer to this Buddhist sect, or to the meditation method practised by this sect, or to the experience coming from this practice, or enlightenment which is the fruit of Zen practice, or to the way of life flowing from all of the above. It is fashionable nowadays to use the word Zen to imply austere beauty, bare simplicity, minimal art, refined spontaneity, symmetry-in-asymmetry, humane non-attachment, etc.

### *What is the particularity of Zen?*

“A rose is a rose is a rose!” Zen is just Zen, just do the practice. Zen, to be understood and practised properly, has to be situated in its tradition and community. It is difficult

to talk abstractly about the particularity of Zen. *Zazen*, the sitting meditation practice of Zen, may seem the same as in other ways, yet the way *zazen* is done is different. Zen also has the koan meditation practice, which is unique to Zen. It is to meditate on some of the ancient paradoxical Zen questions and stories assigned by the teacher and bring an answer to the teacher. This is like Ramana Maharshi's 'Who Am I?' self-inquiry. Yet, this is done differently in Zen; for instance, one has to bring an answer to the teacher, and the whole process is dynamic and interpersonal. The way of Zen life is simple and yet paradoxical: mystical and pragmatic, this-worldly and transcendent, joyful and compassionate. Freedom and compassion are Zen's two legs; both are the fruits of Zen awakening. Zen has elements of all other ways, yet it is a unique flowering of the human spirit.

### ***Are yoga and Zen similar or different?***

Yoga is of many kinds—*batha*, *kundalini*, etc; and the name is also used in a generalized sense—*karma* yoga, *jnana* yoga, *bhakti* yoga, etc. Even Zen has been called by some as Japanese yoga! If we take yoga in the restricted sense of *batha* yoga or Patanjali yoga, in spite of many commonalities between them like the emphasis on body, breath, concentration, seated meditation and on Self-realization, the world of Zen and that of yoga are different worlds.

### ***Is Zen the same as vipassana meditation?***

Yes and no. Zen and *vipassana* come from Buddhism; *vipassana* belongs to the Theravada tradition, Zen to the Mahayana one, so both are closely related to each other. Mindfulness is basic to Zen and to *vipassana*. However, beyond that they differ very much from each other. Zen calls for greater master-disciple relationship, involves paradoxical

koan work, delights in laughter and the absurd, is life-affirming and mystical, and so on. See, for example, *Heart Sutra*, and Mumon's *Zen Warning*, usually attached to the end of *Mumonkan*, for some radical differences.

***Who needs Zen?***

Anyone who is seeking and willing. Zen can lead those who practise it to peace, freedom and joy. It is above all uniquely fitted for the earnest seeker, seeker for the meaning of life and liberation, the seeker after enlightenment and awakening.

However, though Zen is most beautiful, still it may not be the right way for everyone. Each of us is unique and must find his/her own way.

***What is the place of the practice of Buddhist Precepts in Zen? Further, is Zen divorced from ethics and morality? Is it amoral, as some claim?***

Traditionally, the Precepts were not emphasized in Zen. For, in China and Japan, the Confucian morality and ethics were taken for granted. But the Precepts are part of Zen practice. However, there is a difference: awakening is awakening to who you are; ethics is the practice of becoming who you are. That is, you *are* Buddha, and you are called to *become* the Buddha that you already are. The second part is the ethical dimension. You need also ethical striving in order to come to awakening, but the spirit of ethics flowing from awakening is not the same as that before enlightenment. Enlightenment as such is beyond morality and rules. In awakening you realize yourself as beyond shoulds and should-nots, beyond guilt and blame, beyond defilement and purity. Yet awakening will not be authentic unless it flows into ethical relationship to others and the world. And

one has to enter the marketplace of the world in compassion, freedom and with ethical responsibility. Ethics and morality are the manifestations of compassion. Enlightenment and compassion are the two legs of Zen; or rather, two dimensions of one realization.

The danger is that Zen and Zen language can be misused and abused to justify one's egoistic seeking and individualism in the name of Zen freedom. During World War II, many of the Japanese Zen masters were blinded by self-seeking nationalism and used Zen language to justify aggression and war. One needs to awaken to non-dual wisdom as well as be alive to discriminative wisdom.

***Is Zen Buddhist? Can Christians, Hindus, Muslims or atheists practise Zen?***

Zen is rooted in Buddhism, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism. But Zen meditation, Zen experience and Zen awakening are not confined to Buddhism and to Buddhists. Any person of good will and willingness can practise Zen. Zen master Yamada Ko-un used to say that Zen was like tasting tea, there was no Christian tea or Buddhist tea, tea is tea, and that Christians doing Zen should become better Christians. However, Zen is religious or better, spiritual; and it should not be uprooted from its grounding in Buddhism. Particularly those who teach Zen should be knowledgeable in Buddhism, should have reverence for and intimacy with the Buddha and Zen Buddhist tradition. Zen experience and awakening are not apart from Zen Buddhist language.

There are two ways of practising Zen for non-Buddhists: one is to practise Zen in order to deepen their own religious experience and faith; however, if one is fanatical about one's beliefs and practices, Zen will not be suitable. The other and the better way is to practise Zen just as Zen. This means in a sense

‘dying’ to one’s own religion and tradition, and ‘passing over’ into Zen and Zen tradition. Such ‘passing over’ can be deeply liberating and one can then ‘come back’ to one’s own religion and tradition, transformed and liberated. One in a sense then stands in the in-between. It is a beautiful and dynamic place to be!

### ***Does one need faith in order to practise Zen?***

Zen talks about three prerequisites for entering Zen: Great Doubt, Great Faith, and Great Effort or Questioning. This Great Faith is basically a trusting and willing heart: trust in the Zen way—that the Zen way can lead you surely to liberation and awakening; trust in the teacher—that the teacher who comes in the line of teachers and the tradition can be truly a guide; trust in yourself—that there are resources and strengths in you and in the universe to lead you to the goal. It means above all that you sense or intuit a supra-sensible or invisible realm of reality, a reality beyond the sensible world, that your heart and mind are open to the possibilities beyond this mundane, utilitarian world, that you are open to truth and love beyond calculation and manipulation, and that the possibility of awakening and liberation is inherent in your self-nature. All this means, in traditional Zen Buddhist terms, that you are already Buddha and at the same time you are called to awaken to your Buddha-nature. The trust and conviction that you are already Buddha is called *Patriarchal Faith*, in contrast to *Tathagata Faith*, the latter meaning *belief* that you can become Buddha.

Faith involves trusting, believing and willing. Faith is more than believing; belief is ‘believing that’; faith is openness of your heart-mind to the beyond, which is manifested in your willingness to affirm this life and world, self and others; and it calls forth the willingness and courage to follow the call of your heart. To be human is already to live in

faith and trust. Of course it does not mean that you have to come to Zen with full and complete faith; a modicum of faith is enough to begin with, which is part of you already; it implies, above all, the willingness to question and seek, willingness and readiness to listen and to follow truth and love. Faith is awakened from ‘hearing’, that is, from listening to the *sutras* and the teachings, which implies listening to your own heart-mind in the depths. To enter Zen practice is to let your heart-mind be opened further and deeper into faith and trust, in willingness and courage. Such faith blossoms into awakening and realization. Awakening is beyond belief; awakening and faith stand in a sort of dialectical relationship.

***How can bowing before the Buddha not be construed as idol worship; to which especially Muslims may have objection, if they wish to practise Zen?***

Sometimes non-religious people too object to making bows before the Buddha statue. In Zen understanding, this bowing is not to Buddha or to any object, divine or human. It is not worship or idolatry, you do not kneel or prostrate to the statue as such. Bowing is body-mind practice, not a mere mental one. When you bow, just bow; it is the practice of not-two. True bowing is a form of letting-go, surrendering self and all attachments and objectifications of reality: “Kill the Buddha if you meet him!” admonishes Zen. If you are bothered with bowing, it is a sign that you are attached to and obsessed with some ideas and objectifications, whether they be of reality, of truth, of God or of freedom.

Secondarily, bowing can be interpreted as showing reverence and gratitude to the Buddha and the tradition for giving us the way and guidance. One can say also that you are bowing to your True Self beyond the ego-self—the Self nodding to the Self!

Thirdly, it is also a form of longing for liberation and awakening.

Still, if someone is bothered, that person need not make the bows and can stand reverently while others bow. But if the person is too rigid in this posture, he or she cannot enter the Zen way. Fanatical obsessions, rigidities, attachments are unfreedom and are blocks to Zen spirit.

It must be also mentioned that bowing is not a must in Zen. In many Western centres there is no bowing, not even recitation of *sutras*. That is sad! Symbols, rituals and language are part of the way and practice.

### ***Does Zen practice help in healing of body and mind?***

The goals of Zen are wisdom or awakening and compassion. Zen is primarily and basically awakening to your Original Face before your parents were born, and this is healing of the root causes of human illness of greed, hatred and illusion. Such healing and transformation reaches all the realms of human existence. Zen can thus be therapeutic. *Zazen* is a practice of letting-go and letting-be, befriending one's emotions and body, accepting oneself and life, letting the other be the other; it is the practice of compassion for self and all sentient beings.

But Zen is no cure for serious mental or physical illnesses. There is a danger of people imagining that Zen enlightenment will set right and heal all of life's illnesses and problems. Often people are unwilling to face the messy emotions, entangling desires and pervasive fears of their own hearts and they try to escape into the superficial calm and quiet of meditation. This is called 'spiritual bypassing' and is addictive and destructive.

Do come to Zen for meaning of life and for enlightenment; most often, a lack of meaning in life can lead to

illnesses; but for serious physical and mental problems, go to the appropriate helpers.

Zen is religious or spiritual and it should not be reduced to some kind of psychological therapy.

***Does Zen produce siddhis, powers, or energies, synchronicities and the like?***

Be wary of all such claims. The whole universe is one and somehow you will be guided and helped on the way. At times there can happen events which may look miraculous. But take all such things in your stride, don't get hung up on them and, above all, don't go looking for them; otherwise, they will lead you astray and be destructive.

The same applies to experiences, don't hanker after them. Awakening is not an experience, awakening is realization. Remember, in Zen you have to awaken to the marvel and miracle of your ordinary life: "Wondrous miracle, marvellous activity: I draw water and split firewood."

***What about karma and transmigration (reincarnation/rebirth), have we to believe in them in order to practise Zen?***

Karma is a complex religious teaching in Hinduism and Buddhism. It can mean ritual action, mental/physical action, the consequences of the action, the universal law of causation, the chain of cause and effect in the moral realm, and so on. The entire universe is under the law of karma. That is, every action has its reaction, consequences. Hinduism and Buddhism see karma as flowing from previous births affecting this birth: what you are now is due to your previous incarnations. The Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* teaches that there is no eternal self, only the causes and conditions generated by one's life and actions which transmigrate from birth to birth; but this

teaching is more complex and deeper than the surface meaning. Transmigration or reincarnation is the doctrine that one is born many times on this earth, in various forms of sentient beings, according to the merits of one's karma. One has to go on being born again and again till all of one's karma is burnt out, so to say. The theory of karma came about in order to explain the problem of the disparities, injustices and inequalities of our lives, and transmigration or reincarnation came as a sort of solution to this problem. Before the Buddha, karma was understood rather in mechanical terms, that is, in terms of deeds and actions without any reference to the intentions of the doer. The Buddha injected will and intention into karma: it is one's good or evil intentions that brings about good or bad karma. Hence, one has also the freedom to undo karma by good will and virtuous actions. For Hindus and Buddhists transmigration is burden and misery, one seeks to be liberated from karma and repeated births. In the West, they are seen in evolutionary terms, as the opportunity for one to progress in spirit and mind.

But one must realize that karma and reincarnation are only doctrines and hypotheses. There is the danger that these can lead people to fatalism and resignation, and to justification of the present social order of oppression and injustices. However, in their better aspects, reincarnation can be accepted as pointing to the interconnection and inter relationship of all beings and all of reality. The great Hindu advaitic sage Sankara commenting on the Upanishads proclaims: "Verily, there is no other transmigrant but the Lord." Karma can be understood as our generational past genes and social and other conditioning equipping us with a particular body-mind; it has to be seen not as determinism but as a call to learn to be creative with these our given building blocks, so to say. Hear the awakening story of the Fourth Ch'an Patriarch in China in Master Keizan's *Denko-roku*:

*Daoxin said to the Zen master Sengcan, "I beg your compassion—please give me a way of liberation." Sengcan said, "Who is binding you?" Daoxin said, "No one is binding me." Sengcan Said, "Then why seek liberation?" At these words Daoxin was greatly enlightened.*

Zen Buddhism accepts karma and transmigration and uses them as the context for our longing and effort towards liberation and awakening. But one does not need these doctrines in order to practise Zen meditation. Our suffering and longing for awakening are irrespective of such theories. And in awakening, one cuts through all of karma and rebirth, or better, one throws away all such theories and concepts. Karma and rebirth are empty, the self is No-Self. One awakens from the dream of karma and rebirth. Eternal life is in this very moment. Heaven and hell are not somewhere else or in some future. As Hakuin sings in his *Song of Zazen*, this very earth is the Paradise of Pure Land, this very body, the body of Buddha. One accepts this very life here and now and lives it in joyous freedom and compassion. This calls us at the same time to be creators and players in the drama of life.

### ***Do we need a master to practise Zen?***

Yes and no! First, as in any field of science and art, one needs to learn from experts; one needs to become an apprentice and follow models and mentors. If you want to go deep into Zen, particularly koan Zen, you have to become disciple of an awakened master and learn to listen and follow. Discipleship and Following are vital in the spiritual way; sadly, many are allergic to such discipleship. The commitment of the disciple is to the Dharma, to truth, to liberation and to awakening and not simply to the person of the master or teacher. Discipleship and following of an awak-