

Zen's Zenith of Zest

The Story of the Transmission of Wisdom

Shri Gurudev Mahendranath

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Would you like to become a Buddha? It will be a wonderful experience, and how the neighbours will talk about you! There are two kinds of Buddhas so you can take your choice. One belongs to the Theravada school of Southern Buddhism where they tell of a Buddha who spent most of his enlightened years making rules and telling other people what to do.

Oddly enough, before he became an enlightened Buddha, we are led to believe that he spent his life either silent or speaking very little. This could have been his most interesting period and more intimate details of his life and experience which led to his great realization could have been of much practical value to his followers. But practically nothing is recorded of this period, only the latter part where we are overwhelmed by sermons.

The other Buddha belongs to the Zen tradition and reveals a wiser man and one who had the wisdom to keep quiet. Zen does have scriptures passed on from ancient tradition, but they are from Mahayana sources, and thereby tactfully, have rejected the whole of the Pali Canon. Although Zen does have these scriptures, now translated from the original Sanskrit, none are accepted as being an authority or final word. The Buddha of Zen presents a different and wiser type. The Pali Canon relates that soon after the experience of Awakening (Bodhi), the Buddha rushed to the Deer Park near Varanasi to preach and convert his former associates. Zen has a very different viewpoint and tells us the Buddha "never said a word". This must not be taken to imply the Buddha lived a life of complete silence but rather that Truth cannot be expressed in words.

Thus the viewpoint of Zen must be that sermons and sutras can never in themselves express the final Truth. Zen had little regard for chronology or history and never tried to invent any. They tell a wonderful and beautiful story which serves to illustrate their viewpoint rather than as an event in history.

The story is told that the Sage Gautama was sitting quietly beneath a tree surrounded by disciples, a curious public and odd sight-seers. Then suddenly a local panjandrum waddled into the scene, paid his respects, gave his dakshina or offering, and presented the Buddha with a beautiful yellow flower of golden hue. Then, perhaps with a sincere desire for spiritual food or the mere intention to get something for his money, he begged the Sage Gautama to preach a sermon on the golden flower which

he held in his hand. When the official was seated, all listened intensely for the sermon. The Buddha held up the flower so that all the audience could both see and gaze at it. Gautama himself did precisely the same thing and sat silently gazing at the flower and smiled to the mystified mob to indicate the sermon was finished. But practically everyone betrayed a puzzled countenance and revealed their bewilderment. When the glance of the Buddha fell on the face of Mahakashyapa, his leading disciple, their eyes met and they both smiled. Then the Buddha knew that of all the congregation, only Kashyapa got the message. Zen calls this the transmission of mind to mind.

Thus Zen dragged Buddhism out of the relative ruts into which it was rapidly sinking. The cult of Zen Buddhism first came to bloom in China and became known as Ch'an. It was the real Golden Flower and had grown on a spectacular plant which had its roots in the Tantra of the Hindus, Taoism and Buddhism of the Indian school of Mahayana. The Hindu roots are there, and most obvious, but seldom is any reference made because scholars, especially foreign scholars, who write most of the Zen books, have never yet studied the higher Upanishad teachings, and less so the Agamas of ancient India and the expressions of these which are found in the teaching of Sri Dattatreya. So vivid are these relationships and so similar the fundamentals that it would not now appear odd if Bodhidharma, who is said to have taken the Dhyana cult to China, was proved to be a Hindu. He himself never claimed to be a Buddhist but it could easily have happened that the Chinese thought all monks or sadhus from India were all Buddhists. Prior to Bodhidharma, they had all been so. Certainly the pattern of his visit to the Chinese court, his answers and general behaviour were not the usual pattern of a Buddhist of any school. The story of Bodhidharma being the twenty-eighth Patriarch of Indian Buddhism is doubted even by the Zen people themselves and no Indian records of his period even mention him. Buddhism in India never did have an exclusively Dhyana school or cult but always existed in -mixed patterns. Ch'an tradition tells us that he arrived in China about 520 A.D. Zen, however rises above all these things, because it is the living lamp which gives the light and not the burnt-out wick of tradition.

Ch'an flourished in China for about 800 years and terminated as a monastic sect with its own Masters in the 13th century. In spite of its brilliance it reached a stage of weakness and became transformed into the very relativistic Pure Land school. Earlier it had spread into Tibet Korea and Japan and only in the latter country was it able to continue as two separate but related schools of Zen. Its existence in Japan in the present day is well known but Ch'an in China never completely died. It continued with separate monks who had access to its vast literature, records and teachings. But nearly all Chinese schools began to merge and the late Patriarch was known by the title of Patriarch of the Five Schools. It also existed in Malaysia where a very fine monk had a temple in Kuala Lumpur and identified himself completely as a Ch'an monk.

People have become somewhat conditioned to think of Buddhism as an atheistic religion. In some schools this could be so, but the interesting feature of early Ch'an is that the Patriarchs and Masters so rarely used the word Buddha or Buddhism. Instead, we find them talking and thinking in terms of the Tao and the Supreme Reality. Lao Tzu was generally the most quoted, not by name, but by the teachings he had expounded in the Tao Teh Ching. The Meditation Master Fa-Yung tells us: "No-thought is the Absolute Reality." He correctly used the term Ultimate Essence. for the Sanskrit word

Sunyata, though it later degenerated into being regarded as “nothingness” or “void”. He also used the term of one’s “Original Nature” to mean this “Ultimate Essence”, but it too became changed, in time, to “Buddha’s Nature”.

The oldest Zen poem, by Seng-Ts’an, the Third Patriarch begins with the words “The Perfect Tao is without difficulty,” and “Follow your nature and accord with the Tao.” The early period of Ch’an was much neglected by the recorders, but having become more Buddha-conditioned, they might have neglected what was obviously Ch’an’s earlier Tao period. As time passed, the Tao of Supreme Substance was thought of as Nothingness — a void. Perhaps rivalry with the existing Taoist religion may have had something to do with the change.

Zen values are infinite. It helps one to better understand Yoga Vidya, and Yoga Vidya helps one to better understand Zen. Both can play important parts in man’s attainment of Immortality. Now that Zen no longer exists as an organized cult in China, it is useless for Western people to go there to find it, also, unless you are a ping-pong player, you might have potential difficulties. While Japan still retains the Zen cult, even in a modernized form, the country does present great difficulties to the foreigner. Zen training today has now developed into a system of hardening and character building for young Japanese gentlemen and is considered an excellent introduction to a business career. To become involved in this system is not what the sincere seeker of wisdom really wants. The scanty diet and bitterly cold climate in the winter season do not provide the ideal conditions for any foreigner to spend two or three years in meditation. Language is also an insurmountable barrier and even where English is spoken it is not easy for teachers to translate into those subtle idioms of English which Zen requires.

Yet there is still an answer to the inherent desire of the awakened man to find the Supreme Absolute. To do this does not require any fixed religious or cult patterns. One need not join a new religion or even seek an entirely different way of life. Though these things have their values to the local people of different lands, they might be impediments to one from abroad. It is like trying to put the wind in a bottle. This must not be taken to imply that the cultural patterns and conventions of your own land will provide you with the ideal conditions. You must get the mind and body disentangled from these also. Zen, Yoga-Vidya and Tao all teach a Supreme attainment but one which is only attainable by a natural man or woman. Stories you can read in books, but to acquire naturalness, to be natural, and to revert to your own primitive nature, this you must do yourself and empty the mind of wrong ideas and free the body from its obligations and impediments. Thus Zen can help us much by a study of the teachings and injunctions of those who walked the path, achieved success and became competent as guides for others.

Zen and Yoga-Vidya lie close together. Zen is only the Japanese, but now the most universal form of the Chinese Ch’an. This in its turn is taken from the Sanskrit Dhyana and was the Chinese equivalent to the colloquial form (which generally drops the last letter) of Dhyana. Yoga-Vidya is a rather modern form of Brahma-Vidya or Atma-Vidya. It only means the Science of Attainment. Although popular opinion associates it with the highest form of Hinduism it actually comes from the ancient pre-Aryan Tantrik cult. But these associations should not mislead anyone into thinking of them as cult concepts of a separate religion. They arose in Ancient India long before people thought of themselves as Indians and lived without any ideas of separateness or nationalism.

They lived in a world without fences, frontiers and borders. The cult of Yoga-Vidya, of which Zen became another expression, is international and belongs only to the cosmos. Thus it becomes the Science of the Microcosm attaining the Macrocosm. Yoga-Vidya expounds only the One Supreme Reality (Paramatman), the Cosmic Soul. Belief in relative gods and goddesses were only, necessary to people of lower wisdom.

Zen was imported into Japan and developed as two separate but related schools. Soto-Zen is exclusively a meditation sect and tends to imply gradual awakening through mind training. Rinzai-Zen came through a monk who studied under Huang Po and Lin-Chi. It is the "Sudden" school of Zen which utilized the verbal and mental conundrums known as the Ko-an plus the well-directed application of a big stick. This amusing process assumes that some people behave better when battered. At least, it keeps the boys awake, if not "awakened".

The real characters of Zen were always the most fantastic and unconventional. Lin-Chi became so free from entanglements that his own disciples failed to recognize him. When he removed his outer robe and appeared only in his undergarment his students knew him instantly and would playfully cluster around him. Lin-Chi was so pleased with the results that he decided to take the experiment to its obvious conclusion. He removed the undergarment and put on a nude act. But then everything changed and the students ran away. Later he lectured to his boys, "not to try to recognize a man only by what he wears, since a man's clothes are only attachments." He then explained that "To be a great Zen Master one must be free from all these attachments, and a good disciple is one who can see and recognize the Master's freedom."

Truth does not become more valid because it is seen by the light of a Chinese lantern or wrapped in a Japanese kimono. The Masters may have been distinguishable because they wore Mongolian masks, but the real souls of Absolutism were universal and cosmopolitan. Take them out of the Oriental environment and they are still great Masters. Many of the greatest are probably unknown, preached but little, did not seek disciples and were never entangled in monastic life. They lived like leaves blown by the wind. If realization does not give real freedom, then it is not realization. Liberation has no entanglements and involvements and those who permit them are not liberated.

Japanese Zen was much reflected in Japanese art, yet the favourite subjects of the artists were Patriarchs and Masters revealed in their Absolute expressions and not as conventional preachers and seat-sitters. Instead they were presented in wild abandonment, shouting, laughing, yelling and scolding. They became the insane ideals of Japanese spiritual life. It may also be noted that the characters most commonly represented were not the big names in Zen, but the obscure hermits Han-Shan and Shih-Te, dirty, ragged vagabonds of the hills and forests.

Another was the fat-bellied folk-god of the Chinese, Pu-Tai, whom Zen transformed into a Zen Bhikshu to make him more welcome on Japanese soil. Here was the real cult of Zen and the men of real value, living in just the same way as their forerunners had lived in India and the true pattern of drop-outs all over the world. One cannot become real Yog, Zen or Tao, until one reaches the stage of Naturalness (Chinese Tzu jan; Japanese Shizen; Sanskrit Sahaja). So if one distinguishes natural differences, then the thinking must be at fault.

Zen maintains complete identity with Yog as both are based on roll-realization as being their essential principle: and that meditation is the method to attain it. I cannot

recommend Zen books which should be read but I can recommend many which should be burned.

The worst books in English have been written by Japanese with Europeans panting up behind. Zen literature, translated into English has its own real values. But one does not actually read real Zen but rather absorbs it. If you cannot understand it, then you are not ready for Zen. Too many find Zen, like Yoga-Vidya, beyond them. To make things easier the only practical steps one can safely recommend is for you to kill yourself and try for a better rebirth where you can grow up less conditioned, brainwashed and have less rubbish-soaked brains. You might have to do this several times.

Zen is an excellent approach to the Absolute but it is not the only one. Realization of the Supreme Reality is latent in each and every individual. People like to think that books help them but actually they become an obstacle. This is most true in the West where people have become conditioned to imagine that knowledge and wisdom must always be somewhere presented in black and white. Yet the Supreme Absolute which they seek has not a single word, phrase or sentence which is appropriate to describe it. How then, can it be conveyed by the printed word? Meditation is an experience and improves only with practice while “all-about-it books” lead only to confusion. So where do we go from here?

Once-a-week Zen is just about as useless as once-a-week Yoga. The Science of the Soul is a way of life and must permeate your thought and action for twenty-four hours of every day. Eat less, sleep less and meditate the more. You will not find it in societies and classes but only within. No guru can help you unless he is a Realized Soul- a Buddha himself. Only the awakened should be the guides to awaken others. Otherwise you are trying to buy purgatives from constipated doctors. Now that someone has already written “Teach Yourself Zen”, we are but a short time away from someone who will start teaching Zen by correspondence courses. Then tapes and gramophone records. While there are worms there will always be cunning birds looking for them.

Let us muse and meditate a while on the world of relative comparisons. A Hebrew, Christian or Muslim fanatic will become most aggressively insane if he feels his scripture is insulted. He will die to defend the name of his God and fight those who deny it. On the other hand Zen, not only lampooned itself, but ridiculed those who took the religious tradition and substratum too seriously. Yoga-Vidya went a step further and cracked relativity wide open. Sri Sukodev, the naked yogi, warned his disciples in the following way. “The Supreme Absolute is in all things and manifests as all characteristics and is represented in various ways in all religious systems and presented by learned people, but they are all under the influence of delusion (maya) and so it remains unknown to them.”

The Absolute, through the mouth of Krishna as Guru, says, “What theory is it possible to maintain when all are based on My illusion (maya)?” Speaking of the very life-blood of Hinduism, the manifestations and Avatars of the Supreme Reality, which millions worship, “I have indicated to you, in brief, all these manifestations of the Absolute but you must know them to be nothing but the fancy of the imagination –mere words, unreal.”

Also speaking of Gods and Avatars, Ugrasrava Suta says: “The descents and deeds of the Absolute are likewise illusory, for the Absolute is changeless and has neither birth nor action.”

In Christian patterns talk like this would have had them burned. It is only where there is real strength of teachings that a religion or path can freely express itself. Zen never produced holy or pious men in the usual accepted meaning of the word. Piety was even recognized as a defect and an outward show which need have no relationship to ones inner understanding.

Niu-T'ou Fa-Yung was one of the Ch'an Masters who lived in the early part of the 7th century. Having passed through considerable study of Confucianism, and Chinese History, he embraced Buddhism. Soon after, he went to live in a cave on Niu-T'ou Mountain as a hermit. Here he spent his days in the conventional patterns of Buddhism and developed such a condition of piety and holiness that a hundred birds would come every day and drop flowers and other things which birds drop, into his lap as he sat praying or meditating. Fa-Yung should have been in a glass case. He might well have died and rotted away in the odour of sanctity if the Fourth Patriarch, Tao-Hsin, had not chanced to pass that way and visit him.

The Zen Masters did not always use the word Buddha in the sense it came to be used in Theravada and Mahayana schools, yet their use was more in accord with the real meaning. The medieval courtesy title of Buddha only meant an Awakened One. It was identical to the stage of Pratibha – awakening, insight or illumination and in Japanese they use the term Satori and the Chinese Tun-Wu Thus, when a Japanese student attains Satori it means he has become an Awakened One, but this does not imply or mean that he has reached the stage of Moksha or Enlightenment and is free from rebirth. Zen did not really intend to make men into Buddhas of the Theravada type, although the Theravada attitude is somewhat inconsistent, for the fundamental basis of the whole Buddha. story is to demonstrate that what one man can achieve, others can do also.

The Theravada outlook is that a Buddha appears only once in millions and millions of years but this has the germ of its own degeneration and only presents the ultimate goal as being impossible for ordinary men. They also think of a Buddha as only being a man but cannot explain why there could not be a female Buddha. Zen is much aloof from these relative entanglements but it is important to understand what they actually meant and implied by "Buddhahood".

Zen is not achieved by a calculating mind, nor by the intellect. Men become trapped by their own thoughts and these lead to other thought traps. Like Master Nan- ch'uan's goose in the bottle, it is not really the goose which needs liberating from the bottle but man himself.

Master Nan-ch'uan related to one astonished disciple, "Last night I gave Manjusri and Samantabhadra twenty blows with my stick and drove them out of the temple." This was the way of telling the disciple that those seeking for Truth must not become attached even to Buddhism or its concepts. Other Ch'an masters made the same point when they said, "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha; if you meet a Patriarch, then kill him also."

Master Wen-Yen gives us the warning, "To grasp Zen you must experience it, and if you do not have that experience, do not pretend to know," and "when the great awakening takes place, no effort needs to be made by you. You will then be no different from the Buddha or any of the Patriarchs," and "Search for the coin in the river where you lost it."

People all over the world have shown an interest in Zen. Many must feel it has

something they want. But how can they grasp it? From a world of names, symbols, forms, classifications, groupings and mechanical packaging, it is not easy to grasp something which cannot be grasped easily and defies not only reason and classification but thought itself. To such people an attempt to understand Zen can only be like trying to get horse dung from a rocking horse. But there is no law to prevent one trying. Realization is always something outside and beyond normal control.

As Sri Dattatreya taught about 4000 years ago, "It is spontaneous and comes of itself." It cannot come to "normal" people, because the civilized "normal" man is so artificial. He will strive for something and make efforts which prove to be obstacles. He will try to reason, debate, memorize and wrangle to improve his knowledge and the Essence only gets further and further away. To become natural and stop reasoning and calculating often proves to be impossible because he has been conditioned and educated that way. He is always tempted to seek knowledge from someone he thinks has studied more and read more books than himself. This leads to more confusion.

The Master Ma-Tzu summed this up by saying: "Cultivation is an obstacle for attaining the Tao. All you can do is become free from defilements (conditionings). When the mind is tainted with thoughts of life and death or intentional action, they are defilements. Grasping the Truth is a quality of everyday mindedness. Everyday mindedness (spontaneity) is free from intentional action, free from the concepts of right and wrong, taking and giving, the finite or the infinite. All our daily activities should be natural responses to situations as we deal with all circumstances when they arise. All this is Tao."

The time will soon come when the simple expression Zen will have common usage, and be used in a general sense to express the essence of a new freedom, previously unknown in the West. Hitherto, the Western approach to Zen has been much too conventional as it has been presented as an orderly, scrupulously clean and neat temple and monastic life with strict disciplines. None of this is really Zen and it can have no outward forms or patterns. Most of the ancient Indian gurus were more Zen than much which is found today in Japanese temples. The same is also true of the celebrated dropouts of European history, not to mention many of the tramps and hobos of Europe and America. Zen can have no fixed patterns and it is a Truth which needs no robes. Japanese Zen is too much entangled in Confucian and other ethics. The real Masters are the hermits, vagabonds, and disembodied rogues who live in nature's wilds, blown about like leaves in the wind.

Thus Zen must be the simplest of all simple patterns. It can have no methods beyond the spontaneity of natural people. It cannot be preached, for there is nothing to preach. It is the Golden Flower beyond explanation or definition. Children and insane vagabonds are nearer to Zen than most of the people who call themselves Zen masters. Its real history and records are written in the trees, plants and stones, and its only temples and monasteries are the hills, mountains, rivers and clouds. It belongs to nature and to natural man. You will not find it in the cities because it cannot live or survive there.

The first approach to Zen is the first approach to the Absolute Reality. It means you are already Zen just as you are also Supreme Reality. It is only ignorance and delusion of maya which prevents you seeing this. Stop reading newspapers, listening to radio and watching television. Worry not about what you wear or how you are dressed.

Stop planning and living in the delusions of a vague future. Live only in the bliss and detachment of the present moment. Cease holding opinions and being well-informed. If you sincerely seek the Absolute, remember only verse 13 of the Book of Ashes:

All the materials of the higher path,
All the foundations for spiritual gain,
All and everything to attain the goal
Are sleeping latent in the human frame.

What more do you want to know?

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