

The Way of Zen

by Ama Samy S.J., Nov. 2010

1. *When two hands clap, there is sound; what is the sound of One Hand?*
2. *What is your Original Face even before your parents were born?*
3. *All things return to the One, where does the One return to?*
4. *Master Goso said, "For example, it is just like a great cow passing through a latticed window. Her head, horns, and four legs have passed through. Why is it that her tail cannot pass through, too?"*

These are some of the zen koans. Such koans are not simply riddles, they are existential questions and quests in order to open up one and liberate. It is a call to conversion and transformation of self and world.

There are two major zen schools in Japan and each follows a major path or sadhana. Soto zen school privileges *shikantaza*, silent sitting, just being, be-ing and letting-be. Rinzai school works with koans as the privileged way to awakening. Both aim at awakening and compassion. Soto's awakening is in terms of *shikantaza*, which leads one to the realization that practice and awakening are not-two, life and realization are intertwined, awakening is not apart from practice and daily life. Rinzai will fault Soto as being too quietistic and not distinguishing enough awakening from methods and practices. Some schools, like my own Sanbo Kyodan school, combine both methods and ways. For, some people prefer the way of just sitting, *shikantaza*, and some are prone to questioning and koan practice. Soto does not entirely ignore koans, koans are part of the study and are also incorporated into the practice, though not explicitly as tools and methods of practice and awakening.

The word zen is transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyana* or *dhyana*, and in China it is called Chan. Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism; in China however Chan was simply Buddhism. Only later it was distinguished from Pure Land, Tendai, Shingon and other forms of Buddhism. Chan was born from Indian Mahayana Buddhism, with a mingling of Taoism and Confucianism. As characteristic of Mahayana, zen is mystical and metaphysical, as well as pragmatic and this-worldly—*samsara* is *nirvana*, *nirvana* *samsara*. In the famous *Heart Sutra* words, emptiness is form, form is emptiness. *Samsara* or form is this worldly life and *nirvana* or emptiness is formless, ineffable, deathless, other-worldly realm of freedom, joy, and peace. These two dimensions or realms are neither two nor one—not-two, and not-one. In the proclamation of the Transcendent Wisdom of the *Heart Sutra*, the *other shore is not apart from this shore*.

As for formal practice, Soto practice is *shikantaza*, the seated posture, which is a body-mind-heart posture. Usually, focusing on the breath is recommended—counting the breaths, or observing the sensation of breathing, or just being aware of breath and all that happens. *Shikantaza* is above all just to *be*; it is a form of letting-be and letting-go, self-surrender and at the same time self-acceptance. Walking is part of the practice, just walking, or rather letting the walk do the walking. *Shikantaza* is sort of *wu-wei*, *action in non-action*, *Gelassenheit*, to use the German term of Meister

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Eckhart and Martin Heidegger. It is to *Abide where there is no-abiding*. Japanese masters advise one *to be seated as Mount Fuji*: to be centred and grounded, to give oneself space to be; to let thoughts, fantasies and emotions come and go, like waves on the ocean surface; to take note of all that happens and come repeatedly back to the shikantaza, to being, to self-presence. With the realization that one is not separate from the world and others and ultimate reality, that one stands in interdependence and interfusing of all beings; and in deep faith and trust of "*a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything): and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well, when the tongues of flame are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire and the fire and the rose are one* (T S. Eliot).

In the beautiful verse of the Japanese Soto master Dogen,

To study the buddha way is to study the self.
 To study the self is to forget the self.
 To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.
 When actualized by myriad things,
 your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away.
 No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.

Rinzai zen, on the other hand, uses the so-called koans to awaken one from the worldly self of ignorance and delusion. On the fundamental level, awakening is awakening to emptiness—it is, so to say, emptiness awakening to emptiness. Simultaneously, it is the realization of the world as the self and self as the world. If we use the metaphor of the ocean and waves, one is normally identified as the wave. In the koan practice and realization, one is led by and by to the realization that one is not simply the wave: the ocean is the wave. To use a fine phrase of Meister Eckhart, *my ground and God's ground is the same ground*. It is a process of conversion and transformation. Soto zen approach may tend to affirm conversion *within* one's own religion and tradition. Rinzai approach will call one to die to one's tradition and religion and to be resurrected to a new earth and new heavens. It is a transformation of world-vision, a paradigm shift. It is not a destruction of personhood and alterity but a transformation and transfiguration. The Rinzai master Shibayama Roshi uses the term *Absolute Subjectivity* to characterize this awakening:

"It is "Absolute Subjectivity", which transcends both subjectivity and objectivity and freely uses them. It is "Fundamental Subjectivity", which can never be objectified or conceptualised and is complete in itself with the full significance of existence in itself. To call it by these names is already a mistake. Master Eisai therefore remarked. "It is ever unnameable" (I would take it that the "I" in "Before Abraham was I am", also refers to the ever unnameable Reality)."

This is attained, to use again Shibayama's words, through death and rebirth: "Master Dogen very aptly said, 'Death: just death all through--complete manifestation!' When you die, just die. When you just die thoroughly and completely, you will have transcended life and death. Then, for the first time, free and creative Zen life and work will be developed. There, cats and dogs, mountains and rivers, sandals and hats, will all transcend their old names and forms and be given new birth in the new world. This is the wonder of revival."

Let me quote the zen saying, which delineates the zen tripartite paradoxical way: Before enlightenment, mountains are mountains, trees are trees. During the process of enlightenment,

mountains are not mountains, trees are not trees. After enlightenment, mountains are mountains, trees are trees! That is to say, before awakening, I am I, you are you, and the world is the world; in awakening, you are not you, I am not I, the world is not the world. After awakening, you are you, I am I, and the world is the world. But the third phase is impregnated with the second phase. This is the point of the saying, samsara is nirvana, nirvana samsara.

Zen awakening is awakening of the heart, or better, awakening of the heart-mind of the universe. An ancient verse describes the zen way as:

*A special transmission outside the scriptures
No dependence on words and letters
Directly pointing to the heart-mind
Seeing into one's Nature, attaining Buddhahood.*

In terms of techniques, methods and practices, Mumon's 'Zen Warning' is instructive. Mumon is the 13th century Chinese master who edited some 48 cases of zen koans, *Mumonkan*:

MUMON'S ZEN WARNINGS:

To obey the rules and regulations is to tie yourself without a rope. To act freely and without restraint is heresy and devilry. To be aware of the mind, making it pure and quiet, is the false Zen of silent illumination. To arbitrarily ignore causal relations is to fall into a deep pitfall. To abide in absolute awakening with no darkening is to wear chains with a yoke. Thinking of good and evil is being in Heaven and Hell. To have ideas about the Buddha and the Dharma is to be imprisoned inside two iron mountains. Becoming aware of consciousness at the instant it arises is toying with the mind. Practicing concentration in quiet sitting is an action of devils. If you go forward, you will lose the essence. If you go back, you oppose the truth. If you neither go forward nor back, you are a dead man breathing. Tell me now, what will you do? Make the utmost effort to attain realization completely in this life! Do not let yourself circulate karma forever.

Neither Soto shikantaza nor Rinzai koan practice is some short-cut method. Methods, language and scriptures will be used, but one has to go beyond all of these while dwelling in the home of language. It is a prolonged process of practice, discernment and realization. All this takes place in the relationship with the master and the sangha, in the matrix of the tradition and walking the way. Thomas Merton has said that you have to look long and steady at duality before you are freed from dualism and come to realize non-duality. The zen way is not very different from the Ignatian way: however, the Ignatian way is rather dualistic, while the zen realization is non-dualistic. In zen awakening you have not only to *die with Christ*, but you have to die *to Christ* as well and awaken *as Christ*.

In the 12th century a Chinese zen master drew the so-called ox-herding pictures, usually ten of them, to illustrate the stages of zen practice and awakening. Commentaries and verses were added to the pictures. The ten titles of the pictures and brief explanations:

1. Searching for the Ox

A young farmer is shown searching for his lost ox. This is the search for ultimate reality, the quest for the True Self. Suffering and lostness, and hope and trust, are the sine qua non. The seeking and longing have to be such as if one is standing on the brink of life and death. The sound of cicadae fill the air—what are they proclaiming?

2. Finding Traces of the Ox

He has found the footprints of his ox and is hastening along their path. Empty, aimless wandering is not enough, one has to find and choose a way, a marga. The way has to be your way, and it must be an authentic way to the True Self. It also implies a guide along the way, a true master.

3. Finding the Ox

The man discovers his ox, but at some distance. This is a crucial phase in the quest, a coming to experience for oneself the true reality, the first Enlightenment or satori. Mere belief and searching forever, without experiential Realization, will be a wasted life. But this awakening and realization is only the beginning, not the end.

4. Catching the Ox

The farmer catches hold of the ox, which is trying to get free. It is not enough just to see, one has to touch and experience the real. Receptivity, willingness, renunciation are all part of the way.

5. Taming the Ox

The ox has been quietened, tamed. The previous picture and this one show that it is not enough to merely see, hear or experience the True Self. It is a long process of discipline, training and discernment in discipleship.

6. Coming Home on the Back of the Ox

Man is sitting on the back of the ox, playing a flute, returning home. He has found what he had lost or had been seeking; has caught, tamed and taken possession of it. There is certainty, peace, joy, music. The struggle is over, or so it seems.

7. The Ox Forgotten, Man Alone

The ox has disappeared, man is alone. Man has been identifying himself, finding security, in one thing or the other—pleasure, power, romance, society, dogmas, ideologies, action programmes, reason, emotion, history, nature... Images and ideas of god, world, self, truth and reality can become idols, one finding security and identity in them. All these are human constructions, fantasy projections. There is no solid, certain, absolute foothold either out there in the objective world or in the subjective world. What he had thought was his True Self, the Absolute, was only a finite being, and his construction. This stage is the phase of the withdrawal of projections. It is a time of loneliness, isolation, relativity; of aloneness and solitude. A time of peace and calm, not yet authentic and full.

8. Ox and Man, Both Forgotten

There is only empty space, zero, with a circle. It is the letting go of all identifications and egoistic attachments. Subject and object have both vanished. It is the womb of nothingness and at the same time the source of all. Emptiness is Fullness, Death transmutes into Life.

9. Return to the Source and Origin

There is a tree in bloom, a running brook, birds and fish. When you die completely, you awaken to the heart of each and every reality. Man is not shown here. It is not a homocentric world, which is a human construction, but reality in suchness, in its interdependent co-arising and co-creating, in its inexhaustible depth and infinite possibilities. It is the as-is-ness of the real, suchness, tathata: the presentation of the mystery that is graciousness.

10. Entering the Market-Place with Open Hands

In the final picture, an old man, bare-chested and bare-footed, is conversing with a younger one, who is carrying fish and liquor to sell in the market place. It is the return to the world, to the market-place, in dialogue and relationship, in self-less compassion. There is no more dualism (duality and

plurality are not dualism) of sacred and secular, holy and profane, market-place and temple, the unenlightened and the Enlightened. Samsara is Nirvana, Nirvana is Samsara.

A verse to the 8th ox-herding picture representing *sunyata/emptiness* declares:

*All worldly desires have fallen away and at the same time
The meaning of holiness has become completely empty.
Do not linger where the Buddha dwells.
Go past the place where no Buddha dwells....
With one blow the vast sky suddenly breaks into pieces.
Holy, worldly, both vanished without a trace.*

Zen, as every other religion and tradition, is multi-layered. There is the zen as practice and method, zen as philosophy, zen as religion, zen as institution with all that goes with that, zen as creative art and so on. Zen can be practiced simply as a method—a method of just sitting and silence, in mindfulness, self-surrender and self-acceptance. This is the way most people use this method, and Christians, too. This is the practice of mindfulness meditation; it is a wonderful healing and liberating way and practice.

By the way, Western Christian spirituality has no such deep, experiential methods and ways as zen or some of the Eastern spiritualities. The modern *Centring Prayer* and *Mantra Prayer*, as well as the Orthodox *Jesus Prayer*, have learnt from and incorporated some of the Eastern elements, but these are not enough. Let me not get into the matter further.

It should be mentioned also that as in every institution and method, zen institutions also has their human problems and failures. Quite many zen masters are not mature enough ethically, psychologically or spiritually. Most are not really enlightened teachers, but if they are humble and caring, they can be of great help. Zen attracts, particularly in the West, not only psychologically unbalanced people, but also some narcissistic and power-hungry people. In today's world, Christianity and every other major religion has become dysfunctional and fail to meet the spiritual hunger of so many seekers, young and old. Given good, mature and enlightened masters and teachers, zen offers great illumination and solace, peace, freedom, joy and compassion; yet only the one who wakes from dreams can see the morning light. The way of zen is like the flight of the bird leaving no traces:

The Great Way has no gate,
In myriad differences there is a road:
If you manage to pass this barrier,
You will walk freely through the universe.

Zen to be fully and authentically zen, it has to be religious. Stripped of being religious, zen loses its heart and soul. Zen is a way of salvation and liberation, not merely one of healing, relaxation, peace and quiet. Zen is marvellous and profound, but it is utterly demanding and challenging. Zen calls for a radical self-emptying, and it is also a radical challenge to religions—“Kill the Buddha if you meet him/her on the way!” Meister Eckhart echoes this when he prays to God that he may give up God! When Christians practice zen, it can be used as a method; but this will not be enough if one wants to go deep into the heart of zen. One has to pass over into the zen vision and realization, and return to

one's home-ground. One then stands in-between the worlds, one worships in spirit and truth, and it is neither in this mountain nor in that temple.

Here is the verse to the tenth and final ox-herding picture portraying the enlightened person returning to the marketplace of the world:

Barefooted and naked of breast,
I mingle with the people of the world.
My clothes are ragged and dust-laden,
and I am ever blissful.
I use no magic to extend my life;
Now, before me, the dead trees become alive.

[A few of my writings: Ignis, 2003/1; Jivan, August 2002. Zen Heart, Zen Mind and Zen: Awakening to your Original Face, both by Cre-A Publishers, Chennai. Zen: Ancient and Modern, Vaigarai Publishers, Dindigul.]

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