

Beginner's Course - 3

What is Zen



Table of Contents

Lesson 3: What is Zen?.....3

Lesson 3: What is Zen?

Zen - is a Japanese word derived from the Chinese word "Chan" which has its roots from India from the Sanskrit word "Dhyana" or in Pali it is called "Jhana". In Vietnam it is called "Thien".

Jhana – refers to meditation or nine successive deepening meditative states described in the earliest Buddhist Text written in the Ancient Indian Pali language, the Sutta.

Jhana refers to a practice which helps one separate illusion from reality to help attain the ultimate goal of Moksha. Moksha means ultimate release, to let go completely. It is the highest state of meditative practice. How do you get to the highest state of meditative practice? By doing it!

Zen in Buddhism is a school from one of the three main sects of Buddhism: The Mahayana Sect or Greater Vehicle.

The teachings of Zen are said to be the most direct method of attaining awakening and liberation within one's lifetime by one's own effort, as taught by the Buddha.

Zen transmission is said to stem from the Flower Sermon of the Buddha in which, during a discourse, he suddenly held up a flower in his hand and was silent. All the disciples of the Buddha at that time were bewildered about the Buddha's actions and wondered what he meant. Only Mahakassapa smiled.

The Buddha said Mahakassapa was the only worthy successor who understood his teachings.

Mahakassapa became the first Patriarch of Zen (Buddhist meditation) in India. The profound wisdom of understanding without words was then passed on from teacher to student from one generation to the next to spread the teachings of the Buddha.

Zen came to China and prospered through the 28th Patriarch of India, the Bodhidharma, also the first Patriarch of Zen in China. From the Bodhidharma, five more successive Patriarch of Zen came after. The Patriarchship in China was then abolished, leaving many lineages of Zen to continue with many branches since Zen had become so popular and dominant in Buddhism practice by the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907 A.D.)

The sixth Patriarch of China, the most famous of all Zen Patriarchs in China, Hui Neng, was instrumental in spreading the teachings of Zen and bringing it to prosperity. Zen's foundations were solidified by Hui Neng's teachings, with the Platform Sutra composed by him in his later years.

Interestingly enough, Hui Neng was still a layperson upon awakening and gaining direct experience of Zen. He remained a layperson for 15 years, practicing Zen before becoming a monk. This goes the show that the fruits of Zen can be achieved by laypersons, not just monastics. After Hui Neng, many famous Zen masters of the Far East are not monastic. Thus, Zen is a teaching that is accessible to everyone. The legend of Hui Neng also emphasizes the central teachings of Zen that everyone possesses an innate ability to realize awakening and Buddhahood no matter if they are rich, poor, educated, or uneducated, from slave humble backgrounds or not.

During the Tang Dynasty, Hui Neng came from Ling Nam, which now is Vietnam, an annexed province in the Tang Dynasty that was considered barbaric. His father died when he was three years old. His mother never remarried and gradually the family fell into poverty. To earn a living, Hui-neng became a wood-cutter. One day, on his way to market to sell his wood, he heard a sutra being chanted and upon inquiring found out that it was the Diamond Sutra and that it was being taught by Hung-jen at Huang-mei. Determined to study the Dharma, he left home and traveled to the East Mountain monastery at Huang-mei in Northern China, a long and undoubtedly perilous journey.

After an interview with Master Hung-Jen, who immediately recognized the great potential of Hui-Neng, he was assigned to the rice-dehulling shed in the back kitchen, where he worked for some months in obscurity.

Meanwhile, Master Hung-Jen, desiring to appoint a successor, announced a verse-writing competition where the verse would show an understanding of the Dharma, the winner of which would become the next Patriarch. None of the monks dared submit a poem, feeling that the senior monk, Shen-Hsiu was the most worthy. Shen-Hsiu himself, however, was unsure of his attainment so he wrote his poem anonymously on a wall that was being prepared for a mural depicting illustrations from the Lankavatara Sutra. His verse said:

*The body is the bodhi tree
The mind is like a bright mirror's stand.
At all times we must strive to polish it
And must not let dust collect.*

Everyone, including Master Hung-jen, praised the verse. The monks were told to recite the verse but privately the master told Shen-hsiu that his verse did not show true understanding of the Dharma and he should try again. Shen-hsiu was unable, however, to do so.

Completely ignorant of the master's instructions regarding the succession, Hui-neng continued working threshing the rice until one day he heard a monk chanting Shen-hsiu's verse. He realized immediately that the verse did not express the central meaning of Ch'an and asked to be taken to the wall where the verse was inscribed. Being illiterate, he asked someone else to inscribe his verse along side Shen-hsiu's. Hui-neng's poem read:

*Bodhi originally had no tree.
The bright mirror also has no stand.
Before and after there exist not a single thing
Where could dust stick?*

Publicly, Master Hung-Jen denigrated Hui-Neng's poem but late that night he called in Hui-Neng and taught him the ultimate teaching of the Diamond Sutra and the illiterate wood-cutter was profoundly awakened. Hui-neng received the transmission and the robe and was told to secretly leave the monastery that night and stay hidden for sixteen years, living as a lay man with hunters in the forest before beginning to teach.

Hui-Neng traveled to the Fa-Hsing temple in Nan-hai and found shelter there, hiding his understanding until one day he heard two monks arguing whether a temple flag was moving or the wind was moving. Hui-Neng, still a layman, humbly intruded, saying, "It is neither the flag nor the wind that moves; it is only your mind that moves." Upon hearing of this exchange, the temple master, Yin-Tsung begged Hui-Neng to reveal himself and begin teaching. Hui-Neng showed him the robe of transmission and Yin-Tsung shaved Hui-Neng on the ordination platform that had been set up by Gunabhadra (394-468). After Hui-Neng received the full precepts he preached the East Mountain teachings from the ordination platform. Thereafter, he became a famous Ch'an teacher, preaching the Dharma for forty years. He died in 713, aged seventy-six, at the Kuo-en Temple in Hsin-Chou.

From Hui Neng's teachings, Zen branches out to five major schools which utilized various methods to help disciples practice in gaining awakening into the original nature, the realization of which brings an end to all sufferings. Over the course of our lessons, I will briefly cover the teachings and practices of these main schools.

So what are the basic teachings of Zen?

Zen is referred to as:

*A teaching outside of the scriptures
Not dependent upon words
Direct insight into the nature of human consciousness
To awaken to the true nature of the self*

The main points of Zen are as follows:

- Zen emphasizes practice, not reciting words or mantras.
- Zen doesn't care about dogmas
- Zen is non-religious and doesn't care about beliefs
- Zen master utilize all sorts of methods to help students arrive at understanding, the methods used are dependent on each individual's ability to benefit from it. These methods usually manifest during spiritual interviews (Dokusan) or while a student spent time with the master in everyday life. It's spontaneous and dynamic.
- Zen is all about meditative practices and direct experience, its ultimate understanding is beyond concepts and mind.

Just as the Buddha had found:

*The end of suffering is found within
There is no substitute for one's own experience.
So all the words are nothing but pointers, not the experience itself*

Zen is considered a difficult practice by most Asian Buddhists, but it is extremely easy. The only requirement is one's unwavering commitment to practice.

It is a paradox that in order to end suffering, which is caused by desires, one must have a burning desire to practice Zen in everyday life. The fruit of Zen practice is joy, peace and liberation in this very life, in this very moment.

The Buddha's whole life is devoted to teaching people to end suffering. Upon his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, he hesitated about teaching others what he found out, since it is very difficult to teach something that cannot be communicated by words. Since it is so difficult to teach the profound spiritual truth that he discovered, the Buddha then devised a number of gradual steps over the years in his teachings aimed at leading people eventually to the realization of freedom. Mahayana legends said that over the years of watching his students make painful and slow progress, the Buddha began to teach direct methods of arriving at liberation as he approaches the end of his mortal life.

At the end of his life, he said: "I have not spoken a single word." This means that there is no substitute for practice. To realize the Buddha's teaching, one must practice to realize the goal of all his teachings. The end of sufferings, Zen is a practice that ends suffering.

In Zen, when you get the inner right, the outer follows.

Zen is a practice of getting your inner consciousness right, to align yourself with the truth and realize reality as it is without the filters of the mind.

Sounds difficult, but it is very easy. All it takes is determination and persistence.

It is difficult because most people practice meditation to relax, to have better health, and receives little or no guidance at all. Their fundamental goal isn't about the end of all sufferings.

When you don't begin with the end in mind, you won't get there. To take up the study and practice of Zen is to never settle for anything less than the end of sufferings.

Even the Buddha had teachers. He studied from two famous Hindu teachers before his enlightenment. Upon his enlightenment, both of his teachers have passed away, but his teachers were important people who helped introduce meditative practices to the Buddha which he later integrate into his teachings.

So in order to realize the fruit of Zen, one must get oneself a Zen guiding teacher. Just as you would not climb Mount Everest without a guide, one usually doesn't intensively practice Zen without a teacher.

The mind's conditionings and mental patterns have all kinds of trappings which can easily lead one to the wrong path, to be totally immersed in ego trappings.

So the Zen traditions are built on an intimate teacher-disciple relationship, knowledge of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha and practice. There are many branches of Zen school but it ultimately find its roots in the five major Zen schools which originated from China.

The Five Houses of Zen are:

1. **Surrender School - Guiyang School** (Japn., Igyo, Vietnamese, Quy Ngưỡng), named after masters Guishan Lingyou (Japn., Isan Reiy, 771–854) and Yangshan Huiji (Japn., Kyozan Ejaku, 813–890)
2. **Secret Meaning School - Linji** (Japn., Rinzai, Vietnamese, Lâm Tế), named after master Linji Yixuan (Japn., Rinzai Gigen, died 866)
3. **Tao's Cave School - Caodong** (Japn., Soto, Vietnamese, Tào Động), named after masters Dongshan Liangjie (Japn., Tozan Ryokai, 807–869) and Caoshan Benji (Japn., Sozan Honjaku, 840–901)
4. **Cloud's Gate School - Yunmen** (Japn., Unmon, Vietnamese, Vân Môn), named after master Yunmen Wenyan (Japn., Unmon Bun'en, died 949)
5. **Dharma Eye School - Fayan** (Japn., Hogen, named after master Fayan Wenyi (also Fa-yen Wen-I, Vietnamese, Pháp Nhãn Tông) (Japn., Hogen Mon'eki, 885–958)

Each school's methods are a little different in its practice, but overall, they are all true to the teachings of Zen which is about direct experience and not just intellectual studies. All five houses of Zen emphasize on daily meditative practice. The teachings of Soto, Rinzai still survives today, very little teachings of the other three schools still exists today. Through out this course, I will try to introduce you to the various practices of each individual school; their methods seemingly different, but their goal are the same; it is all about direct experience.

It would be ridiculous to ask "What is Paris like?" and then try to get the answer from a book. A book can not allow you to feel what it is like to visit Paris. In the same way, Zen doesn't care about anything that deals with conceptual mind thinking and not the experience itself.

To truly know what is Zen one really has to practice and dive into being Zen, not defining what Zen is. The whole point of a meditative practice is to rise above the duality of the mind and transcend it. This can only be done through regular practice. So let's forget what I said today and experience Zen in taking up the Zen practice to discover what Zen is.

As one lamp serves to dispel a thousand years of darkness, so one flash of wisdom destroys ten thousand years of ignorance. This is the ultimate realization of a Zen practice.

- Hui-Neng