

Beginner's Course - 4

Rinzai and Soto Zen



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Lesson 4: Rinzai and Soto Zen

In the Vietnamese Zen practice, there is no distinction between Rinzai, Soto or Theravada methods. All are used for specific needs of the student. In the Zen schools of Vietnam, Rinzai and Soto methods are emphasized, but knowledge and awareness of practice in the Theravada traditions is studied and also verified against progression of Zen practice. Vietnamese Buddhism usually refer to the Rinzai and Soto Zen method as “the Patriarch Zen” and the Theravada methods as “Buddha Zen”.

Rinzai Zen

Rinzai is the Japanese line of the Chinese Linji school, in Vietnam it is called “Lâm Tế”.

Rinzai Zen is marked by the emphasis it places on *kensho* ("seeing one's true nature", or enlightenment) as the gateway to authentic Buddhist practice and for its insistence on many years of exhaustive post-enlightenment training to embody the free functioning of wisdom within the activities of daily life.

Training centered on koan is one tool to this end, which the Rinzai school developed to a high degree. In general, the Rinzai school is known for the rigor and severity of its training methods.

History

One of major 5 houses of Zen in China, a major school in Japan, Korea and Vietnam. It's like the Warrior Class Zen, crazy, rigorous and intense. Major writing emphasize on **Zen Stories** of awakening, **Blue Cliff Records** and **Gateless Gate**.

Rinzai Zen Methods

1. Emphasize on *Kensho* (intuitive seeing into one's true nature)
2. Emphasize post *Kensho* rigorous training for integration of awakening
3. Emphasize Bodhisattva Vows and way of being in the world.
4. Utilization of skillful means and the physical or mental zen staff to bring students to deeper insights and awakening.

Koan

A Question of Great Doubt - "It is like swallowing a red-hot iron ball. You try to vomit it out, but you can't."

Designed to focus the mind on the question for clarity to investigate the mind using the intuitive method.

Koan only should be studied with a trained Zen teacher and under supervision. It is a very unique skill that is quite esoteric and different from any other skill people have learned their whole life.

Kensho – Satori

An intuitive experience of seeing one's true nature for the first time, this experience changes your whole world. It is like a big bubble burst. After the experience, there is a drastic personality change or change in how a person experiences the world if it is properly integrated. Kensho is equivalent to Stream Entry in Theravada Buddhism practice. It is not just about having a glimpse into Nibbana or the end of suffering, but also understanding its nature and having unwavering confidence in this direct knowledge. This requires integration. The experience of Kensho is like seeing the door in, to integrate it means that one needs to return to it and enter it over and over again.

Why does it require a Zen teacher to confirm someone's Kensho experience? Because people are quick to claim it as some sort of attainment which serves their ego, not the practice. The Heart Sutra states very clearly that Nibbana has no attainment. It is without fanfare. There are many spiritual firework experiences that mimics awakening. In Zen we call this Makyo or Ghostly Illusion. If a practitioner buys into these experiences and claims it, they experience Zen Sickness where the mind becomes even more deluded. Only a skilled Zen teacher can recognize if a student had actually Kensho. This requires years of training and practice (thus the need for a teacher).

Koan Examples

1. What is the sound of one hand clapping?

Soto Zen

Soto or Caodong Zen School is a school of the five major school of Zen from China, like Rinzai Zen School, it is the second predominant Zen school in the West. It was established by Dongshan Liangjie in the 9th century and brought from China to Japan in the 13 century by Dogen Zenji.

Shikantaza, or “**silent illumination**” a specialized approach **to Zazen** which means “**just sitting**” is the practice of Soto Zen.

Soto Zen practice is considered a “farmer’s class” Zen in Japan because of mass appeal to working class than Rinzai Zen, which has a upper class appeal in style and practice. Rinzai is warrior or samurai Zen while Soto is the regular folks Zen.

Soto and Rinzai Zen practices are somewhat similar. Soto emphasize a lot on form, structure, rigorous schedule while Rinzai is a little more free moving but may be more intense in other ways.

Rinzai emphasizes on Koan study before Shikantaza whereas Soto just emphasizes on Shikantaza.

Zazen is taught 3 ways:

1. Establish Samatha practice– grounding the mind using the breath or an object of concentration (ie. Counting breath) then use the breath only method to gradually let go of the mental habits that stands in the way of deepening tranquility and peace. The mind must tranquilize and calm to a degree before serious observation of koan can be done.
2. Koan Introspection – question without logical answers which breaks the mind barriers.
3. Shikantaza (just sitting) – observing reality and discovery of inner awareness without object of concentration. This method is more difficult than modern day Vipassana, because the mind is not grounded on any object, but use the letting go of objects to establish observation. The Rinzai school take the stance that no one can do Shikantaza properly until they have Kensho.

Soto emphasizes Just Sitting, while Rinzai emphasize Koan Introspection.

Structure of all Zen Practice

Sesshin – means gathering of peace in mind is a period of intensive meditation in temples or seclusion. Most Sesshin are done in the West likened to an intensive retreat period where there are periods which students sit, then receive dharma talk, and have private meeting with the teacher (or dokusan). Several sittings of about 30-50 minutes long sitting with breaks for talks, light meals and private meeting with teacher is carried out through out the day. Sleep is kept to acceptable minimum. Sesshin can last a few days to months, depending on organization and individual practice. It could be done in groups or reclusively alone. Many Zen masters in the past retreated to the mountains to meditate alone with their teachers for months or years in seclusion.

Zazen practice is said to be similar to that of Burmese Vipassana such as “dry insight” as taught by Mahashi Sawyadaw the famous monk of Burma who taught the many famous present day western teachers of the west at Insight Meditation Community at Spirit Rock. So Vipassana and Zen have same goal and same destination, but approached a little differently at the beginning of the practice. Zen skipped a lot of the stages of practice which Vipassana teaches to build awareness. Zen emphasize threefold training of Sila, Samadhi, and Panna where the modern day Vipassana movement doesn't. Zen see most of Theravada training as provisional, which means it sets up the practitioner mind to experience direct method such as Zen where non-duality is experienced and forms the heart of the Buddha's teaching.

There are no “best” methods, just whatever works for each particular person at any particular time to progress.

Dokusan - Private consultation with teacher is held for the benefit of the student, it is very intimate and extremely intensive. People who don't have a regular and intensive practice need not apply, since it would not be of any use to do so. The style the teacher teaches can varies but mostly are piercing through to the student's progress. “Dharma combat” is a type of dokusan called shosan, like a challenge from the teacher for student's progress which is made famous by Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn.

Shosan – or dharma combat is a style of combative technique which an exchange is initiated when a master issues a challenge to members either individually or as a group. Or shock and or sudden method is used to wake up the student to no mind. The master will use confrontation as an emotionally charged tool to push a student into immediate realization. The Rinzai School use this Dokusan style more often than Soto School. This is why Rinzai school is associated with the bamboo stick that hit students into realization.

Soto School is more subdued and does not forcibly use this method in Dokusan. Thus the reason for its popularity, but it also takes longer for a student to make serious progress (even when you go into intensive sesshins often).

Over all, in review of the major Zen school which we have learned, they are some what similar in practice and all their methods can be utilized by students to find awakening.

The goal and achievement of Kensho is incomplete without the supporting guidance of the six paramitas serving as the foundation for practice. All Zen school relies on this foundation to practice. It will be discussed further to the end of our course.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapundarika), lists the Six Perfections as (original terms in Sanskrit):

1. Dāna paramita: generosity, giving of oneself (in Chinese and Japanese, 布施波羅蜜; in Wylie Tibetan, sbyin pa)
2. Śīla paramita : virtue, morality, discipline, proper conduct (持戒波羅蜜; tshul khrim)
3. Kṣānti (kshanti) paramita : patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance (忍辱波羅蜜, bzod pa)
4. Vīrya paramita : energy, diligence, vigor, effort (精進波羅蜜, brtson 'grus)
5. Dhyāna paramita : one-pointed concentration, contemplation (禪定波羅蜜, bsam gtan)
6. Prajñā paramita : wisdom, insight (智慧波羅蜜, shes rab)