
Demystifying Zen
Satori for a Secular Mind
Rohan Roberts

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For

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PREFACE

Anatomically modern humans have been around for at least 150,000 years. For the most part of that time, we lived in small nomadic hunter-gatherer bands, barely eking out a living. We were at the mercy of the elements, lived in fear of the vast unknown, and were riddled with superstition. We had rudimentary forms of art (as depicted on cave walls) simple musical instruments (such as reed flutes) and basic pottery and tool-making skills.

The first civilisations began to flourish between 6-8 thousand years ago – in Mesopotamia, the Nile delta, and along the Indus river valley among other places. These civilisations were primarily urban places of trade and commerce. They certainly had language, but they also had basic writing techniques, administrative systems, social and economic classes, complex division of labour, and basic civic infrastructure.

For a few thousand years nothing changed in these civilisations, scattered as they were on different continents.

However, around 2,500 years ago, something did change. We call that era 'The Axial Age' – axial in the sense that it was a pivotal period – a turning point – an era of transition.

During the Axial Age, we saw the birth and death of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the rise of Hellenic philosophy, and the Golden Age of Greece. In the Middle East, the great prophets Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were holding sway over the tribes of Israel. Zoroastrianism had a similar influence in Persia. Over in India, the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas and Upanishads were being written that would be the basis of Hindu and Brahmanic philosophy. In the Gangetic plains, Siddhartha Gautama and Vardhamana Mahavira were spreading the principles of Buddhism and Jainism. Up north, in China, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu were gradually formulating the ideals of Confucianism and Taoism.

This was a time of spiritual awakening for the human race. Bjorn Thomassen describes this period as "a historically liminal period, when old certainties had lost their validity and new ones were still not ready."

During this age, people were grappling in earnest with the big existential questions of human existence: Who are we? Why are we here? What is our purpose in life? Where were we before we were born? Where do we go when we die? What is justice? What is mercy? What is morality? How do we achieve union with the universe or communion with the divine? How do we yoke the mundane and the transcendental, the physical with the spiritual, and everyday consciousness with enlightened consciousness?

Though Zen Buddhism started a thousand years after the Axial Age, its roots and origins lie in that great period of human history.

This book seeks to offer a beginner's guide to Zen and takes a secular perspective on some of its core principles.

WHAT IS ZEN?

THE TASTE OF AN APPLE

Trying to explain what Zen is like trying to describe the taste of apples to someone who has never eaten an apple before. You can describe its shape, its colour, its texture, but until one has eaten an apple there's no way to know what an apple tastes like.

The same is true of Zen.

Zen is not a theory, or an idea, or a piece of knowledge. It is not a belief, dogma, or religion; but rather, it is a practical experience that needs to be experienced first-hand. It is not something that the brain can rationally comprehend using the power of the intellect.

But if something has to be said to describe Zen then we might say it is a practice that helps in improving the self. It is a way of awakening the mind and transcending the ego.

Zen is also a branch of Buddhism that affirms that *satori* (enlightenment) can be achieved directly and intuitively and that Buddha-nature resides in all of us.

Buddhism is Hinduism stripped for export. Just as Shintoism couldn't be exported out of Japan because it so deeply rooted in Japanese history and culture, so too was Hinduism and India.

The first Indian monks took Buddhism to China in the 6th century. There it encountered Taoism and Confucianism and the gradual merger of the three philosophies resulted in *Chan* Buddhism. *Chan* Buddhism arrived in Japan by the 12th century. It subsequently became known as Zen and it flourished in Japan since then even as it gradually died out in China.

ZEN, THE TAO, AND TE

Zen is the result of the philosophical encounter of Indian Mahayana Buddhism with Taoism, the original Chinese way of liberation. It is a liberation *from* convention and a liberation *of* the creative power of *te*.

Influenced by the *Book of Changes* or the *I Ching*, there has existed in China for well over 3000 years a tradition that holds that there are two interactive elements that influence events. The first element is the *Tao* – or the way of the universe that is beyond thought and knowing. The second element was the *Te* – the virtue-ability-volition of the individual.

Te, is a key concept in Chinese philosophy, usually translated as

inherent character, integrity
in Taoism

moral character, virtue, morality
in Confucianism

Quality, merit, or virtuous deeds
in Chinese Buddhism

The *Tao* is a Chinese word signifying "way", "path", or sometimes more loosely "doctrine", "principle" or "holistic beliefs". It is the natural order of the universe and the ultimate principle on which it is based. The nature of the *Tao* cannot be grasped intellectually. It is to be discerned through human intuition and through life experience. Being in accord with the *Tao* leads to wisdom and inner peace.

The basic premise that the highest truth, or first principle, or *Tao*, is not expressible in words or conceivable through logical thought is common to both Taoism and Zen.

Both Taoism and Zen hold that an intuitive understanding of the first principle is possible, and this is called enlightenment.

ZEN HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A FINGER POINTING AT THE MOON. DON'T CONFUSE THE FINGER FOR THE MOON.

This imagery comes to us from the *Shurangama Sutra*. In this analogy, the moon represents *satori* (enlightenment). The finger represents the *Dharma* (set of beliefs and practices) that one uses to attain *satori*.

Oftentimes, we get so hung up with the rituals, dogmas, and the teachings of the master. Those represent the finger. It simply points you in the direction of enlightenment (the Moon).

The Moon is radiant and full of light – just as the enlightened mind.

ZEN IS LIKE A RAFT OR CANOE THAT WE USE TO GET FROM ONE SIDE OF THE RIVER TO THE OTHER. WHEN WE GET TO THE OTHER BANK WE DON'T CARRY THE RAFT WITH US. NO. WE LEAVE IT BEHIND.

This analogy comes to us from the *Sutta-pitaka.*

Here, one side of the river bank represents the unenlightened state of mind. The opposite bank represents wisdom, insight, or the enlightened state of mind. The raft represents the *Dharma* (the set of rituals, practices, and beliefs). We may use the raft to get to the other side. But once there, it is not necessary for us to carry the raft along with us. We leave the raft behind and carry on.

In the same way, the various practices, rituals, dogmas, and beliefs we use to achieve enlightenment are useful only up to a point.

Beware of priests and prophets, swamis and gurus, who guide people back and forth on the raft, without ever giving them the option of getting to the other side and getting off the raft.

It is wise not to confuse the journey with the destination.

ZEN IS LIKE RIDING AN OX IN SEARCH OF AN OX.

All the rituals, dogmas, beliefs, and practices we pursue are useful only to a degree. Ultimately, what we must realise is that peace, wisdom, insight, and enlightenment come from within.

In this analogy, the ox represents the enlightened state of mind. Each of us already has what we need to achieve enlightenment or wisdom or insight. Searching for it elsewhere is just as futile as searching for an ox when one is already riding on an ox,

The great 9th century Zen master Huang-po says in his book, *Ch'uan Hsin Fa Yao* (Treatise on the Essentials of the Doctrine of Mind):

"By their very seeking for it [satori/enlightenment] they produce the contrary effect of losing it, for that is using the Buddha to seek the Buddha, and using mind to grasp mind."

His disciple was the famous iconoclastic Zen master, Lin-chi.

As the story goes, every time Lin-chi tried to clarify his doubts about Zen or ask Huang-po a question about Buddha nature, his master would strike him.

In confusion and frustration he left the monastery and took refuge in a different monastery led by another Zen master, Ta-yu.

When Ta-yu heard Lin-chi's complaint about Huang-po he chided the young monk for being ungrateful and told him to be more appreciative of Huang-po's kindness.

At this, Ling-chi was awakened. He returned to Huang-po and requested a meeting with his former master. This time, Ling-chi struck his master and said, "there's not much in your Buddhism, after all."

Ch'uan Teng Lu mentions this story in his 11th-century book, "The Passing on of the Lamp". It illustrates that the beating and shouting was a way to make prospective monks realise that whatever can be learned about Zen cannot be taught. The secret is that there is no secret.

THE SECRET ABOUT ZEN IS THAT THERE IS NO SECRET.

Consider an adult who clenches her fist and pretends to a child she is hiding something important. This rouses the child's curiosity and the child tries desperately to discover what is hidden inside the clenched fist. The game is up when the adult opens her fist and reveals there was nothing hidden after all.

Zen and the search for enlightenment is the same.

There is no magic spell. No hidden reality. No final solution. No transcendental dimension. No profound secret. No primal original.

All the rituals, dogmas, beliefs, chants, rites, recitations, mantras, sutras, and sundry practices are ultimately meant to lead one to finally realise that

the secret is that there is no secret.

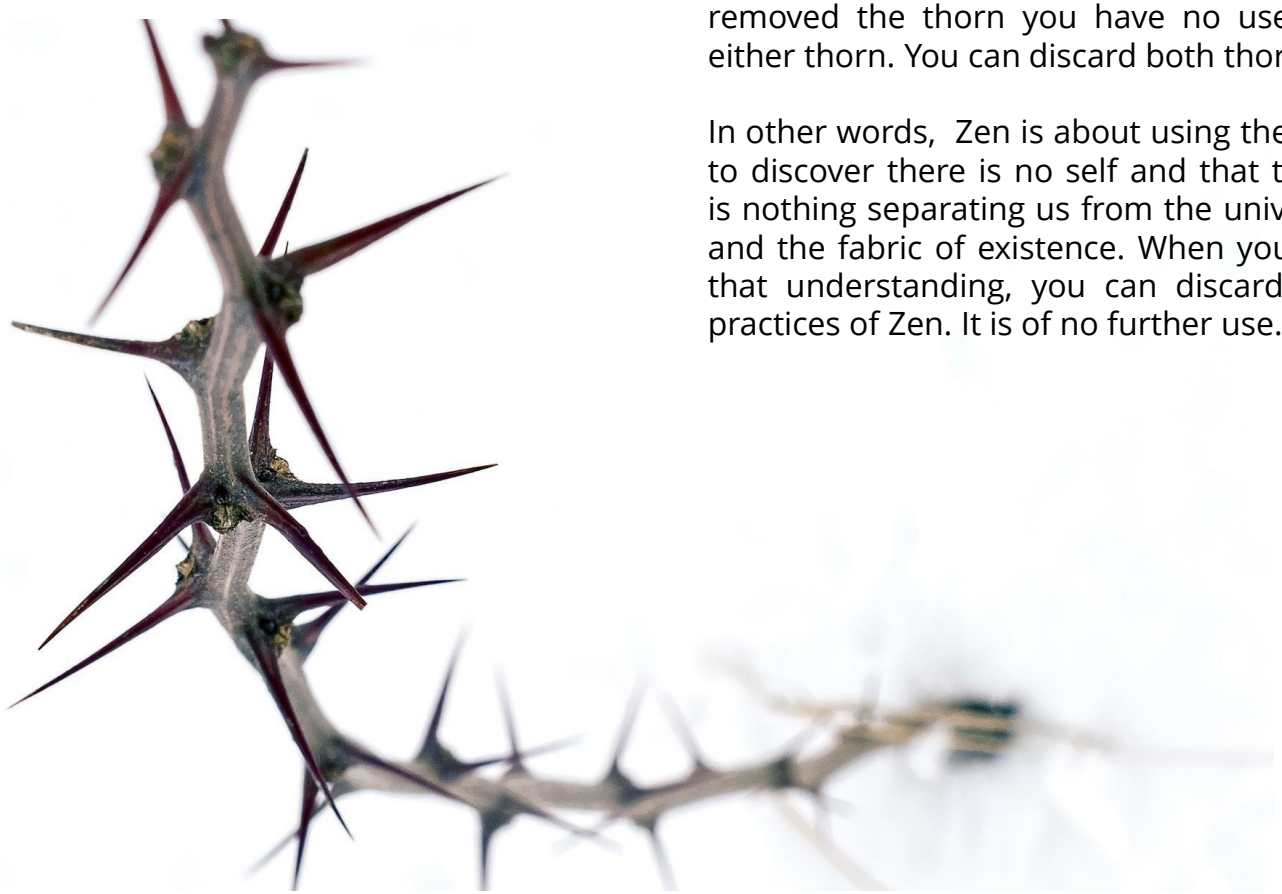
One doesn't practice Zen to become a Buddha. One practices Zen because one is a Buddha from the beginning. This is the meaning of "*The secret is that there is no secret.*"

This realisation that each of us already has Buddha-nature is the starting point of Zen.

This realisation isn't something intellectual that can be rationalised into belief. It is an intuitive and visceral realisation.

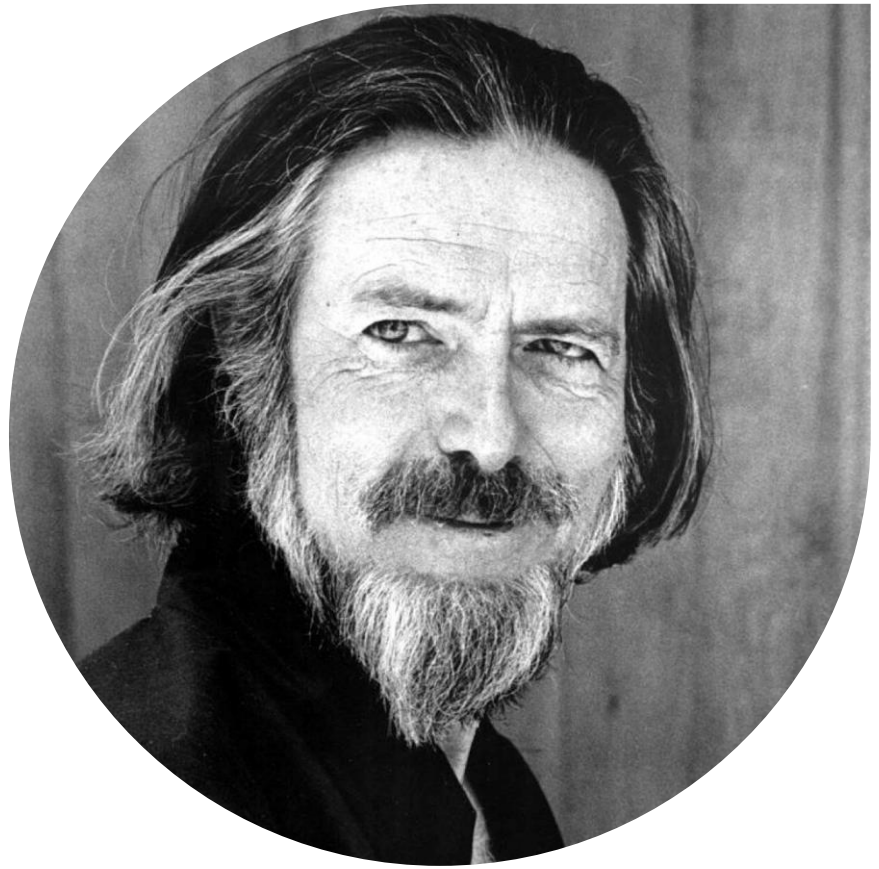
It can be arrived at after months and years of meditation or it can arrive in a flash of insight. It depends entirely on the individual. But the realisation is the same.

And once this realisation is had then the individual may be said to have *prajna* (wisdom) and their actions are guided by *karuna* (compassion).



Some Roshis (Zen masters) compare Zen to a thorn that you use to remove another thorn stuck in your foot. When you have removed the thorn you have no use for either thorn. You can discard both thorns.

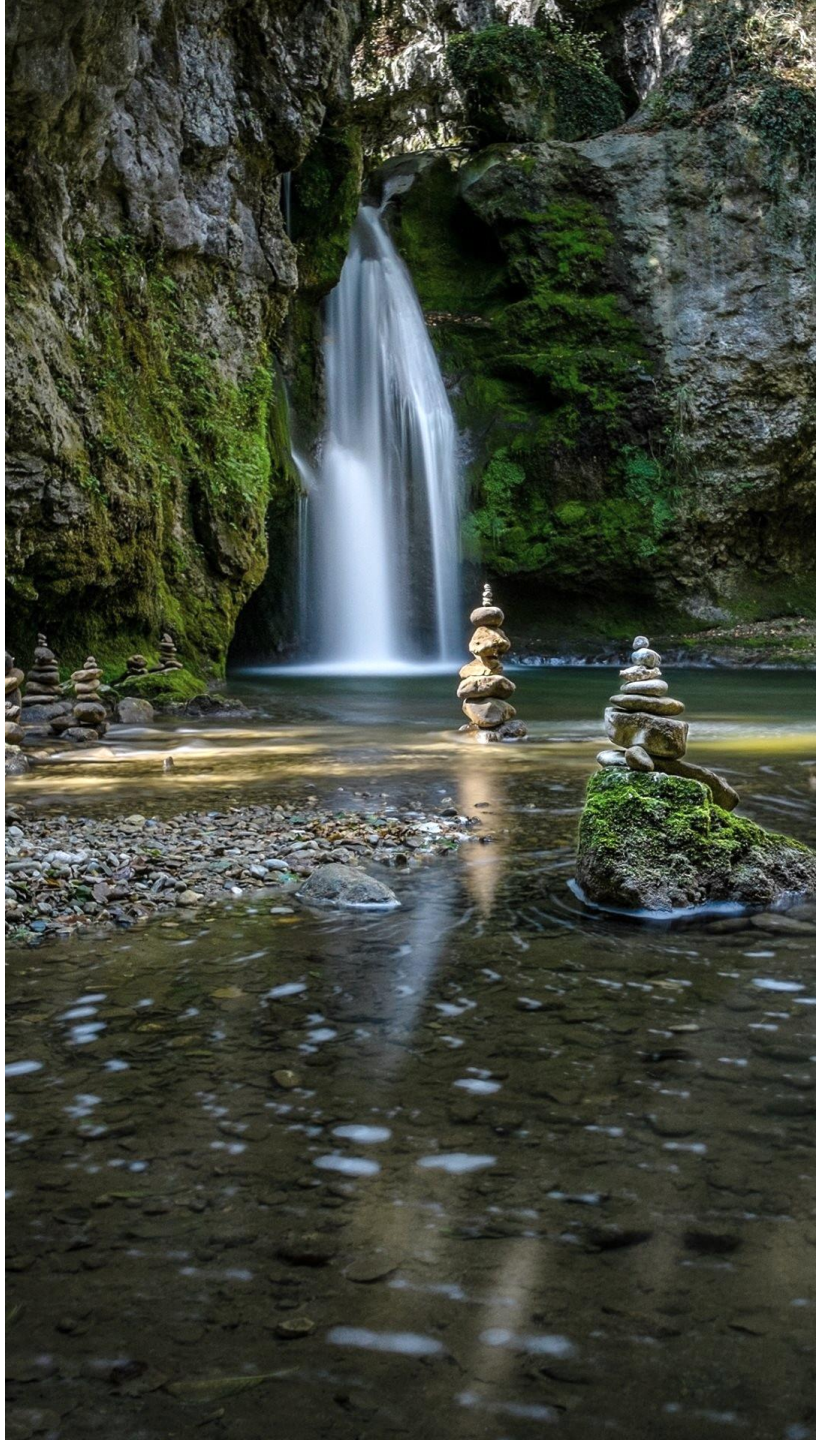
In other words, Zen is about using the self to discover there is no self and that there is nothing separating us from the universe and the fabric of existence. When you get that understanding, you can discard the practices of Zen. It is of no further use.



It is only when the thorn is discarded that we have Zen.

Alan Watts puts it thus:

“Therefore in Zen there is neither self nor Buddha to which one can cling, no good to gain and no evil to be avoided, no thoughts to be eradicated and no mind to be purified, no body to perish and no soul to be saved. At one blow this entire framework of abstractions is shattered to fragments.”



ZEN HAS BEEN SUMMED UP IN FOUR STATEMENTS:

A direct transmission outside scriptures and apart from tradition

Non-dependence on words and letters

Direct pointing to the human mind

Seeing into one's own nature realising one’s own Buddhahood

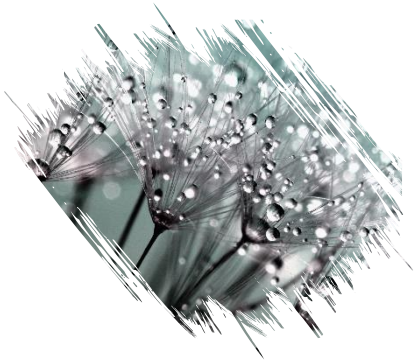
Zen makes no metaphysical claims about reality, it has no ontological position about our origins, and it takes no transcendental stance about morality.

Zen has more to do with psychotherapy than it does with conventional religion.

In everyday life, we visit the ophthalmologist to fix our eye and see the external world clearly. Zen has been described as spiritual ophthalmology that allows us to see our inner world clearly.

THE SPONTANEOUS LIFE

Part of the Zen experience is the ability to live a spontaneous life. The characteristics of a spontaneous life are :



mo chih chu
Going ahead without faltering

This is the mind functioning without hesitation or without 'wobbling' between alternatives. The point here isn't to eliminate reflection and thought, but rather to get rid of 'blocking' or 'choking' in both action and thought, so that the response of the mind is always like a 'ball in a mountain stream' – 'one thought after another without hesitation'.

wu wei
Purposelessness

This is the mind following the path of least resistance and in accord with the natural flow of things. *Wu wei* doesn't mean having no desire to achieve goals. What it does mean is achieving goals in accord with nature and the natural state of things – just as a sail boat is maneuvered to move with the help of the wind.

wu shih
Lack of affectation or simplicity

This is the mind acting unselfconsciously without the need for acknowledgement or reward. Just as a fish swims without being aware of the water or a bird flies without thinking of the air, *wu shih* implies doing things without pretension or ostentation.

BODDHIDHARMA

Boddhidharma was a Buddhist monk widely credited with bringing Buddhism from India to China in the 6th century AD. He is regarded as the first Chinese Patriarch.

In art, he has been depicted as having fierce eyes and a bushy beard.

The 6th Century Chinese Emperor Wu of Liang was a great patron of Buddhism. He once informed Boddhidharma that he had built many monasteries, ordained many nuns, constructed many temples, and translated many sacred texts. He then asked Boddhidharma what the merit of it all was.

Boddhidharma replied, “No merit.”

The Emperor then asked him what the first principle of Buddhism was.

Boddhidharma replied, “Great emptiness, nothing holy.”

THE FAMOUS DEFINITION OF ZEN

When the Zen master, Po-chang was asked to define Zen, he said, “When hungry, eat; when tired, sleep.”

When asked to clarify, he said, “Don’t cling, don’t seek.”

Essentially, he is emphasising the importance of being content. Ultimately, there are no dogmas and no doctrines.
There is nothing transcendental to be discovered through Zen.
We find peace and satisfaction in the mundane everyday course of events.

SATORI

In Zen, *satori* refers to the awakening of the mind. It refers to a certain comprehension – a certain insight into one's self and into the nature of reality.

What is this Enlightenment that is associated with *satori* ? What does it mean to have an awakened mind? It could be said to be beatitude that arises out of a combination of some or all of the below:

- a dissolution of the ego
- an understanding that time is an illusion
- a realisation that all we have is the eternal now
- a feeling of oneness with the universe
- an expanded sense of self
- a deep connection with all humanity
- a desire for everyone's wellbeing
- a profound compassion for all life
- a sense of calm elation
- a gentle understanding that everything will be ok
- a lack of attachment/clinging to people and material things.
- a realisation that good and bad/right and wrong are human constructs
- a realisation that there is sublime beauty wherever you look
- a realisation that nothing is permanent
- a visceral sense that the ultimate nature of Reality is ineffable

THE FOUR DHARMA SEALS

A teaching in Zen may be said to be of value, if it consists of the four *Dharma* seals:

Issai Kaiku

Life contains dissatisfaction

Shogyo mujo

Everything is impermanent

Shoho muga

Everything lacks independent existence or fixed self

Nehan jakujo

Nirvana is tranquility

The essence of this is that to live a life of tranquility free from mental stress and anguish, we must first accept that nothing lasts for ever and nothing has an independent existence.

There are some Zen monks who hold the view that enlightenment is not a destination but a journey.

One of the many *koans* (Zen riddles) talks about enlightenment as a reflection of the moon in a pail of water. The moon doesn't become wet and the water remains undisturbed. This is the *satori* (awakening/enlightenment) that Zen talks about.

In other words, attaining *satori* is like capturing the reflection of the moon in a pail of water. Nothing changes, except that the moon (representing an awakened mind) is now in the pail (representing the individual).

Satori may be said to be the Zen equivalent of *nirvana*.

Often, people think of *nirvana* as a supernatural cosmic experience. There is nothing mysterious about *nirvana*.

Nirvana is a transcendental (but not supernatural) state of mind. It is a way of life based on the awakening to or realisation of the impermanence of life and a lack of independent existence.

In the Buddhist tradition, *nirvana* maybe described as the overcoming of the sensations that cause suffering.

These sources of suffering are typically identified as that of

attachment | *raga*

aversion | *dvesha*

ignorance | *avidya*

When the sensations are quenched, suffering or dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) comes to an end. The cessation of suffering is described as complete peace.

Thus, *nirvana* refers to the imperturbable stillness of mind after the sensations of desire, aversion, and delusion have been extinguished

Some would describe *nirvana* as the cessation of suffering and liberation from *samsara* (the mundane state of being or everyday state of mind).

However, in Zen tradition, according to the famous monk Dogen, founder of the Soto school of Zen, when we are truly in *nirvana* we awaken to the fact that *nirvana* and *samsara* are not two separate things. In Mahayana Buddhism – particularly in the Prajna Paramita Sutra – we learn that *samsara* (every day state of mind) and *nirvana* (awakened mind) are one. The lesson we are expected to learn is that if we don't find *nirvana* in everyday life there is no place we can find *nirvana*. In other words, *nirvana* is not a preternatural state of being or a supernatural plane of existence. It is not a magical place one goes to in an after-life. It is not a fantastical psychological experience like an LSD trip or a magical trance. *Nirvana* is simply a state of mind and a way of being that arises out of a quiet realisation or insight into the nature of reality. It is a liberation from even the desire to escape from *samsara* and achieve *nirvana*.

When we truly see the impermanence of existence, we understand deeply that we cannot hold on to anything. When we truly see the impossibility of independent existence, we understand deeply that the individual self is connected to the rest of reality at a fundamental level.

Shohaku Okumura points out that "when we deeply understand this reality and live a life in accordance with it, we no longer believe we need to compete with others or with ourselves. We no longer struggle to be more important or powerful than others, and we no longer strive to be who we want to be. This practice of awakening, which is itself *nirvana*, allows us to settle into the reality of impermanence and lack of independent existence. We then being to live more peacefully." We experience a tranquility that arises from being above satisfaction and dissatisfaction and being released from egocentricity."

This seeing, accepting, and letting go is *nirvana*. It is the mind stilled.

The Lankavatara Sutra says, “There is no *nirvana* except where is *samsara* ; there is no *samsara* except where is *nirvana*.”

In other words, *samasara* and *nirvana* are one and *rupa* (form) is really the *sunya* (void).

The Buddhist scholar, Stephen Batchelor describes *nirvana* as follows:

"Nirvana can be compared to the sudden opening up of a space within one's experience when one's innate inclinations die down and reactivity fades away. One glimpses in such moments how one is free to act in a way that is not determined by reactivity, thereby enabling the use of practical reason to decide on another kind of future. But these moments of nirvanic emptiness are liable to vanish just as abruptly as they appear.

Reactivity here refers to our unthinking and instinctive reaction to situations. When we are able to observe ourselves and not give in to our baser reactions of confusion, greed, and hate, then *nirvana* is present right here and now. It is the basis of how to live one's life in this world.

Of course, just as with all profound esoteric concepts there will be widespread disagreement about what these terms actually mean and there is no definitive or authoritative consensus on what *nirvana* or *satori* mean. It is open to personal interpretation and subjective rendering based on socio-cultural and religio-historic factors.

It won't do to say definitively and emphatically that *nirvana* is this or that – because it all depends on which interpretation one chooses to go with.

Attaining enlightenment or experiencing an awakened mind is not necessarily a one-off event that leads us to transcendental dimensions or that allows us to escape this reality.

In Buddhism, there are two kinds of buddhas:

Pratyekabuddha:
This is an individual who has attained enlightenment and has subsequently chosen to disconnect from the wider world. Their preference is to be silent and solitary and experience their enlightenment on their own.

Bodhisattva:
This is an individual well on their way to enlightenment or having an awakened mind. They are guided by a desire to help all sentient beings awaken.

TANHA / TRISHNA

Tanha is a Sanskrit word (*trishna* in Pali) that is typically translated as "craving." This could be craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, or craving for non-existence.

However, the word "craving" as a translation of *tanha* is limiting. A more nuanced translation would be "reactivity". This refers to our constant (often unthinking and automatic) responses to the various situations that life throws at us.

These reactions could be hatred, love, lust, greed, indifference etc. The essence of *tanha* is the attempt by humans to fill their inner void or existential loneliness with more and varied stimulations. When we realise that external stimulation won't satiate or obviate the inner existential loneliness we long for intoxication, sensual pleasure and/or physical death.

Another translation of *tanha* could be "clinging" – in the sense, having a fixation (covetousness, desire) for something. Alan Watts refers to it as having a "hang up" – the constant obsession with something.

A need for food is **not** an example of *tanha*. However, a fixation with food is. The same goes for sex, life, fame, wealth, praise, and anything else.

Tanha is also a self-centred desire. There could be other desires (longings/yearnings) that are not self-centred – like the desire to help others or alleviate poverty or clean the environment.

TANHA & SATORI

Being able to stop spending our time amplifying our thoughts and feeding our obsessions is a positive step in the journey to enlightenment.

Those who are unable to bring under control their unchecked desires and their unthinking reactivity move away from *nirvana/satori.*

However, we would do well to realise that desiring not to desire is also a desire.

Zen prescribes a middle way: *stop desiring as much as you can stop desiring, and don't desire to stop any more desire than you can stop.*

When we don't have an over-inflated ego or an over-important sense of self we realise the importance of not clinging to either people or to material things.

This leads us towards *satori* (enlightenment) and away from *klesha* (undesirable mental states such as greed, hate, doubt, anxiety, torpor, shame, pride, envy, conceit etc.)

DHARMA

Dharma is a complex word that has many meanings. It has different interpretations in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

In the context of this book, it will suffice to consider *dharma* as the teachings of the Buddha and the practices recommended by Buddhism.

These practices include:

- coming to terms with reactivity
- seeking knowledge and wisdom
- engaging in mindfulness
- cultivating empathy and compassion

DHARMA & SATORI

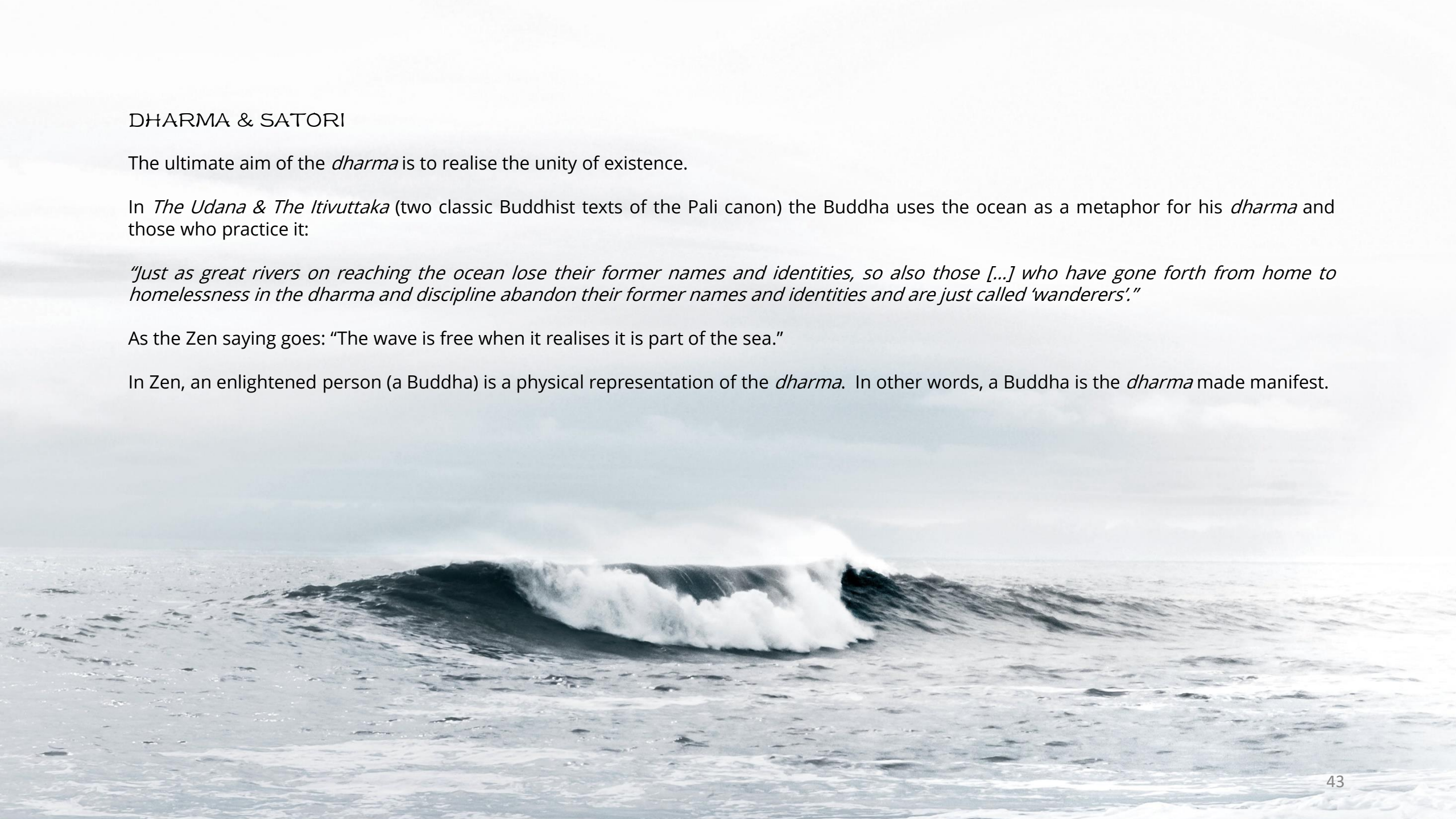
The ultimate aim of the *dharma* is to realise the unity of existence.

In *The Udana & The Itivuttaka* (two classic Buddhist texts of the Pali canon) the Buddha uses the ocean as a metaphor for his *dharma* and those who practice it:

"Just as great rivers on reaching the ocean lose their former names and identities, so also those [...] who have gone forth from home to homelessness in the dharma and discipline abandon their former names and identities and are just called 'wanderers'."

As the Zen saying goes: "The wave is free when it realises it is part of the sea."

In Zen, an enlightened person (a Buddha) is a physical representation of the *dharma*. In other words, a Buddha is the *dharma* made manifest.



THE SACRED AND THE SUBLIME

In Zen, there is no need to believe any dogma. The goal isn't to achieve some transcendental insight into the ultimate nature of reality. There is no privileged access to absolute truth. And there is no requirement to practice any set of rituals or spiritual techniques to attain *satori*.

There is nothing sacred in Zen. Meditation in general (and *zazen* in particular) is simply a cultivation of a particular outlook, a particular way of perceiving the world and oneself in a way that allows us to reduce reactivity.

As a consequence of this, we develop a sensitivity to the beauty in everyday life and in common things. We develop an open-mindedness to the unfamiliar and a curiosity of the unknown. Everything becomes elevated and worthy of attention.

We may call this an appreciation of the sublime.

If there is a "sacred" dimension in Zen, it is when we are able to lose ourselves from the thrall of "me" and "mine" – in other words, the "sacred" space is not out there on some transcendental plane of reality, but right here in this world. It is a psychological state of calmness and equanimity – when we realise that "I" is an illusion.

SATORI AND SOLITUDE

The Buddhist scriptures talk of the “freedom of mind through emptiness”.

This emptiness is the realisation of our interdependence with everything else in the universe.

When the solitary person retreats to a forest, or monastery, or any secluded spot, they remove themselves from the distraction of other human beings.

In the absence of peer pressure and social expectations, we are free to grapple with who we truly are or wish to be. We attain a natural dignity based on the wonder of our own existence. We discover deep insight into ourselves.

We realise we – each of us – have an expanded sense of self. We realise that there is a profound connection between the inner world and the outer world. We realise that we are a part of nature and nature is a part of us.

This is a sublime revelation. And with it comes freedom, exhilaration, and compassion.

BRAHMAVIHARAS

The *brahmaviharas* is a series of four Buddhist virtues that help achieve a sense of the sublime. Perceiving the sublime allows us to feel a sense of awe and wonder. In Zen, the sublime may be elicited by the most mundane things – like the petals of a flower or the veins on a leaf, or the smile of a passerby, or the cracks on a pot. One need only look for a thing of beauty and one will find it.

The four *Brahmavihara* are:

Metta
Benevolence

Desiring and practicing goodwill towards all.

Karuna
Compassion

Feeling others' suffering as one's own.

Mudita
Empathetic Joy

Feeling unenvious joy for others' success

Upekha
Equanimity

Even-mindedness, serenity & calmness under stress

BUDDHAS AND LIVING BEINGS

Both types of buddhas are ordinary human beings and are not supernatural in any way. What distinguishes them from the regular person is their having experienced *satori* (an awakening).

The difference also is that the *boddhisattva* has the additional realisation that we must perpetually explore even better ways to help and support other sentient beings.

The 13th century Zen monk from Kyoto, Dogen, says in his book, *Shobogenzo*, “Those who greatly realise delusion are buddhas.”

A significant part of *satori* (awakening) includes an awareness of two delusions:

our own self-centeredness.
our lack independent existence.

We are imperfect in realising both.

However, being perfect is not what being a buddha means.

Being aware of our imperfections and delusions and taking perpetual steps to rectify it is what Dogen means when he says “to realise delusion is to be a buddha.”

The key word is “perpetual”. There is no point at which one can say they are perfectly Enlightened. This is an ongoing journey.

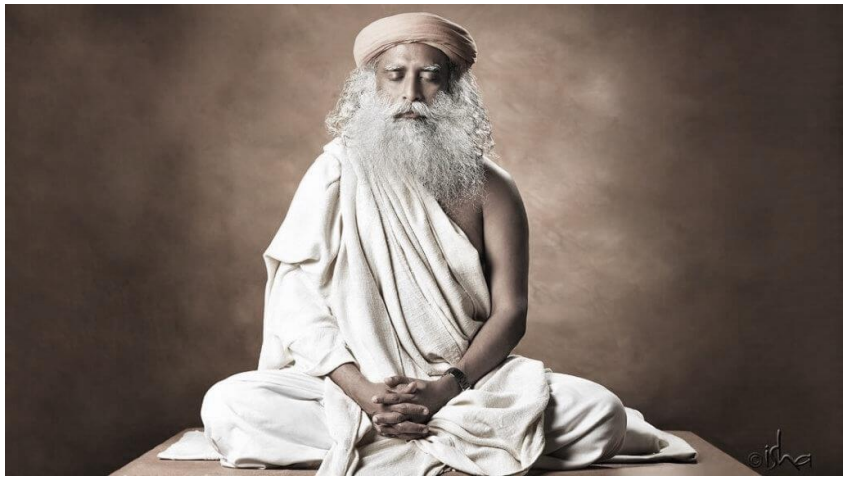
SATORI AS A JOURNEY

In Zen, *satori* is often presented as a flash of insight. When the 16th century artist, Hasegawa Tohaku was asked, How does one see into Zen? he said*: "It may take you three seconds, it may take you thirty years. I mean that."*

Jaggi Vasudev, often referred to as simply Sadhguru, is an Indian yogi, mystic, and author. He was once asked how long it takes to achieve enlightenment. He uses the parable of a mango tree to illustrate:

"If you look at a mango tree in February, March, there will be nothing but green leaves. Then, some small, innocuous looking flowers will bloom. Suddenly, one morning, you will see the tree is full of tiny little mangoes. From then on, they will be growing bigger by the day, until they are full of juice and sweetness. But initially, four, five years, nothing happens. You have to wait for years for a mango tree to bear fruits for the first time. It would be foolish to think after a couple of years, "Nothing happened, so I'm going to chop down the tree and throw it away."

The Buddha too, talks of awakening as a process rather than a state, a story rather than a statement.

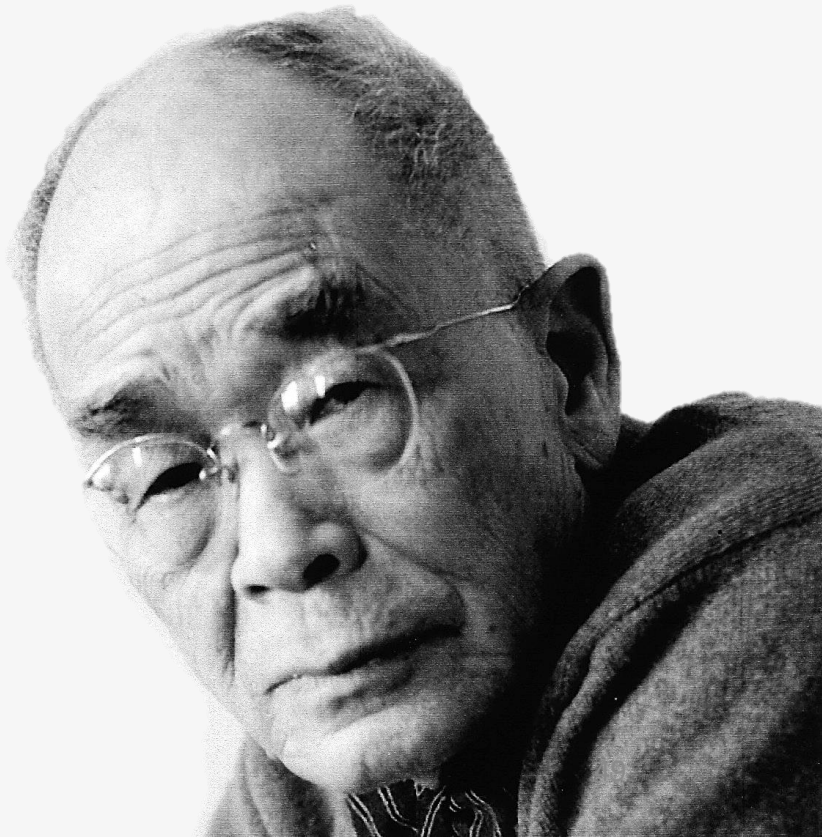


Additionally, after attaining *satori* one doesn't become divine or attain supernatural powers.

When D. T. Suzuki was asked what it felt like being Enlightened, he replied,

"Enlightenment is like everyday consciousness but two inches above the ground."

"There are, strictly speaking, no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity."



THE SELF

There are two major insights to be derived from Zen that are connected with the self:

The first insight is the recognition that there is no “I” – and with that comes a dissolution of the ego.

The second insight is the recognition of an expanded sense of self – an understanding that we have no independent existence and that we are connected to everything.

The self is an individual person as the object of his or her own reflective consciousness. It implies a first-person subjectivity.

When we spend even a brief span of time reflecting on the self, we will realise that the self is an illusion. There is no “I”. There is no first person experiential character of consciousness.

We can spend our whole life searching for our self – only to realise that there is no “I” that owns our consciousness.

Sam Harris also talks about the illusory nature of the self in his book, *Waking Up*. In an interview with Big Think, he says, “The sense of being an ego, an I, a thinker of thoughts in addition to the thoughts… An experiencer in addition to the experience…. The sense that we all have of riding around inside our heads as a kind of a passenger in the vehicle of the body…. Now, that sense of being a subject, a locus of consciousness inside the head is an illusion… It makes no neuro-anatomical sense. There’s no place in the brain for your ego to be hiding. Everything you experience – thoughts, moods, impulses, behavior – all manifest themselves within the brain. They are the results of myriad neural processes.”

Harris explains that what we perceive as self, an unchanging constant experiencer, is really an ever-changing system constructed within the brain.

We can spend our whole life searching for our self – only to realise that there is no “I” that owns our consciousness. No cognitive CEO of “me.”

This is a significant part of the *satori* experience.

There once was a man who said, "*Though*
It seems that I know that I know,
What I'd like to see
Is the “I” that know “me”
When I know that I know that know."

Most people have a visceral sense of self that stops at the edge of their skin. That's where "I" ends and the rest of the world begins.

We are conditioned to believe the world is completely external to the "I".

It doesn't have to be this way.

It is possible to have a different perspective of the self – an expanded sense of self.

We could define "mind" as an information processing system in a feedback loop between brain and body and environment.

In that case, our mind, and consequently our self, depends on the existence of a brain and a body and an environment. The environment also includes humans other sentient beings.

It is possible to cultivate this awareness and recognise that our "I" must include not just our own body but the environment in which we live, our fellow human beings, and other sentient creatures.

It is possible to illustrate this connection with our environment.

Consider our ability to formulate thoughts – any thoughts. It is contingent on our perception of the world.

For instance, our ability to visualise things in our imagination depends on our ability to see things in the physical world. But how do we see? Photons of lights from the outside world enter the eye, are transmitted to the visual centres of the brain, and are then sent to the higher order area of the brain for interpretation.

The molecules from a glass of water are absorbed by the body and become a part of the body.

In fact, every atom that we are made up of came from a dead star that exploded billions of years ago. This is science fact and not a metaphor.

These are but two of countless examples of how who we are is literally contingent on the outside world.

Thus, we see the boundary between the individual and the world is illusory.

Every conversation we have, every song we listen to, every laugh in response to a joke, every poem we read dissolves the tenuous boundary between self and other.

We now know that

We are related to all matter atomically
Everything is fundamentally made up of 3 types of matter particles: quarks, electrons, and neutrinos.

We are related to all life chemically
All life on earth is based on DNA

We are related to all humans biologically
All humans have 23 pairs of chromosomes

Those who are able to make this existential shift in their understanding of the self in a real and visceral way – and not merely as an intellectual exercise – are able to perceive themselves and the world around them in vastly different ways.

They are able to see the interconnectedness of everything.

They are able to notice that everything in this world operates like a revolving door that connects the inner world with the outer world.

They are able to realise that their existence is part of an infinite network of causes and effects and processes.

Alan Watts, the British philosopher once said, “You are a function of what the whole universe is doing in the same way that a wave is a function of what the whole ocean is doing.”

In other words, each of us is a wave in the ocean. Each wave can be differentiated from another wave. But the wave is a *part* of the ocean, and actually *is* the ocean.

He also said, “We do not come into" this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean ‘waves,’ the universe ‘peoples.’ Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe.”

We could choose to see the Big Bang as not a singular event but as a continuing process. In such a case then, we are not something that is a sort of puppet on the end of the process. He says. Each of us is still the process: “You are the big bang, the original force of the universe, coming on as whoever you are.”

THE BUDDHA WAY

In his book, *Shobogenzo*, the famous 13th century Zen monk Dogen Zenji says,

"Studying the Buddha Way is studying the self, and studying the self is forgetting the self. "

In other words, realising that the self is an illusion is an important aspect of Zen practice.

Practicing the Buddha Way involves a realisation that when we genuinely study the self, the subject, object, and activity become one.

There is no such thing as a self that is separate from our activity. Such a self he calls, *jijuyu-zanmai (*An object-subject-activity or a "self 'selfing' the self")

IMPERMANENCE AND LACK OF INDEPENDENT EXISTENCE

In Zen, emptiness is not an empty area or space. Rather, emptiness is the reality that nothing lasts forever and nothing has a fixed and independent existence.

The self may be compared to a river. The River Ganges, for instance, flows down mountains and over plains and ends up in the Bay of Bengal. The river itself has been around for hundreds of thousands of years, yet the water in the Ganges today is not the same as the water that was in it last year or last month. Every drop of water is constantly in motion and flows down and merges with the ocean.

In what way is the Ganges one river?

Similarly, in what way can a person be said to have a single, unchanging self that remains permanent all throughout their life?

Our interests and personalities change from month to month and year to year. This is what it means to say everything is impermanent and without independent existence.

THE FIVE AGGREGATES (SKANDAS)

In Zen, we learn that the body and mind are but a collection of *skandas* or aggregates:

Form/materiality

Sensation

Perception

Mental Formations

Consciousness

The first is a material aggregate. The other four are mental aggregates.

These go into the generation of the self. Each of these changes from moment to moment and effects the evolution of the self (selves).

To believe there is one unchanging self is the foundation of our belief in a single self-identify. But this is an illusion.

JIN DAICHI

Dogen uses the word *Jin Daichi* to describe the Buddha. It literally means, “whole great earth.”

This is a self that is together with all beings.

It means two things:

The individual self not contrasted with other selves

The universe experienced as the self

LIFE, DEATH AND THE SELF

It is fair to wonder about life and death in the context of realising there is no fixed self.

In Zen, there are two terms that refer to the processes of being born, living, and dying.

Ichigo-shoji
(Life and death as one period)

This is the regular human lifespan as most people in the West would understand it.

Setsuno-shoji
(moment by moment life and death).

This refers to the body-mind changing from moment to moment, arising and perishing, over and over. It is an interesting lens to view the concept of reincarnation. If both the self and the mind are ever-changing from moment to moment, then we can say we are being reborn from moment to moment. A new “I” arises with every passing moment.

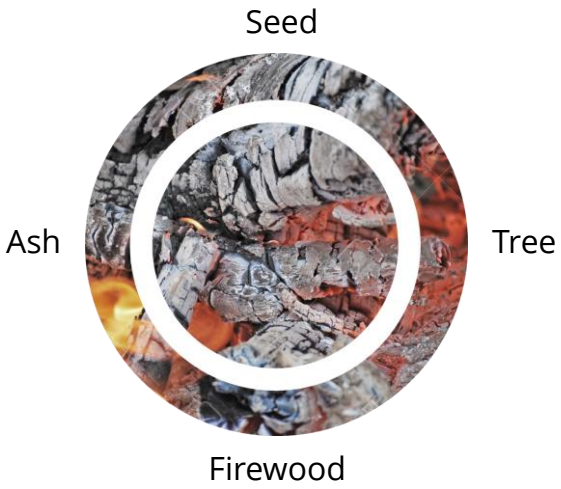
Of course, this is not to deny reality of physical death or human mortality. We certainly die from a biological perspective.

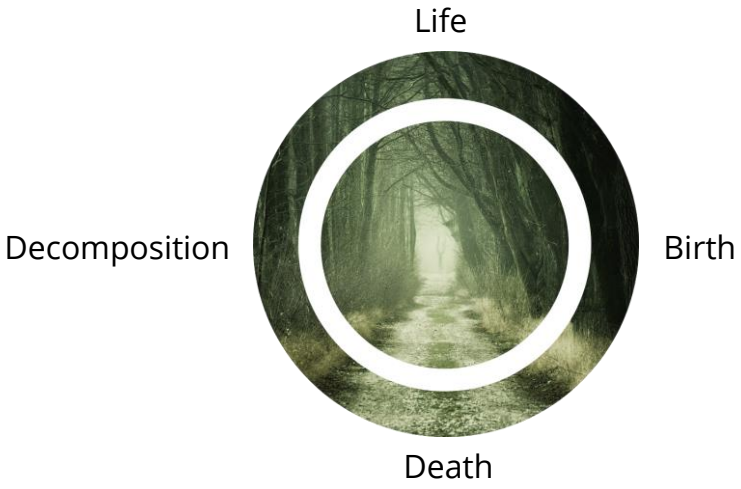
THE PRESENT

The present moment is the only reality because the past is gone and the future is yet to come.

The past is reflected from the present and the future arise from the present.

In Zen, being present, or being aware of living in the moment is what it's all about.



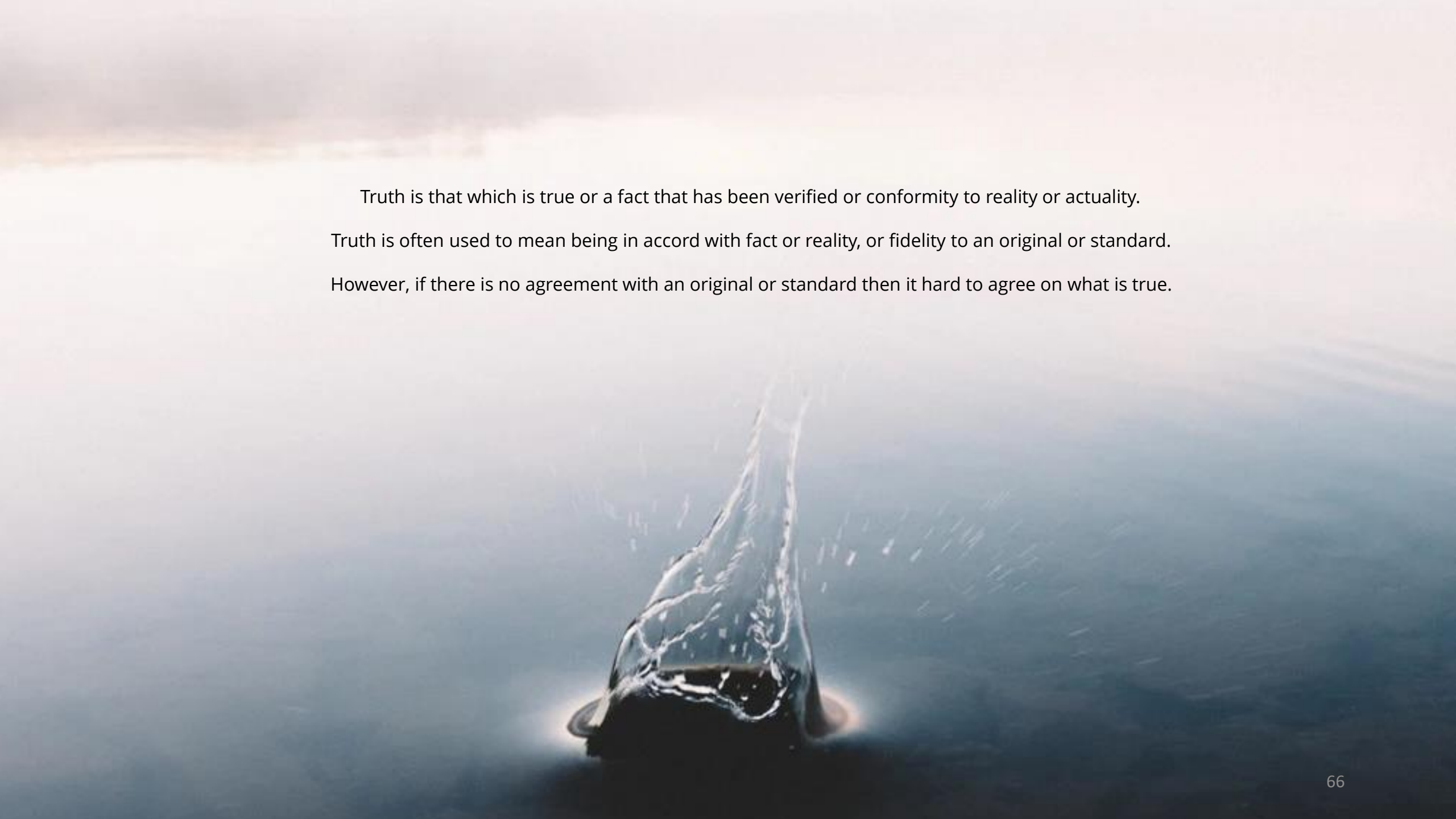



TRUTH

Truth is that which is true or a fact that has been verified or conformity to reality or actuality.

Truth is often used to mean being in accord with fact or reality, or fidelity to an original or standard.

However, if there is no agreement with an original or standard then it hard to agree on what is true.



The method used to determine whether something is a truth is termed a criterion of truth. If we are not agreed on the criteria of truth it is again hard to agree on what is true.

There are subjective truths and objective truths.

A subjective truth is to say, “This room is cold.” This may be true for person A but not necessarily true for person B.

An objective truth is to say, “The thermometer indicates that this room is 27 degrees Celsius.” If it is a properly working thermometer and that is, indeed, what it says, then that statement is an Objective truth (only if the criterion of truth – what a Celsius is – is agreed by everyone).

Correspondence Theory

The best known theory of truth is the correspondence theory. By this view, a candidate for truth is true if and only if it corresponds to facts. However, there are those who object to this because they believe that the notion of a fact is itself only to be explained in terms of truth.

So the correspondence theory is beset with the problem of circularity.

Coherence Theory

Coherence theory is another theory about truth. It posits that truth consists in a relation which truth-bearers have to one another, such as a relation of mutual support among the beliefs of an individual or community.

The problem with this is that it leads to relativism about truth – what is true for you may not be true for me.

Pragmatic Theory

Finally, there is the pragmatic theory of truth. What is true is what is useful.

Detractors complain that conflating truth with utility is fatuous, dangerous, dishonest and deluded. A belief can quite easily be useful but not necessarily true.

In Zen, Truth (with a capital T) may refer to two things:

.

The Virtue of Honesty

This includes making factually correct statements. Using words to make an accurate representation of what the case is in reality.

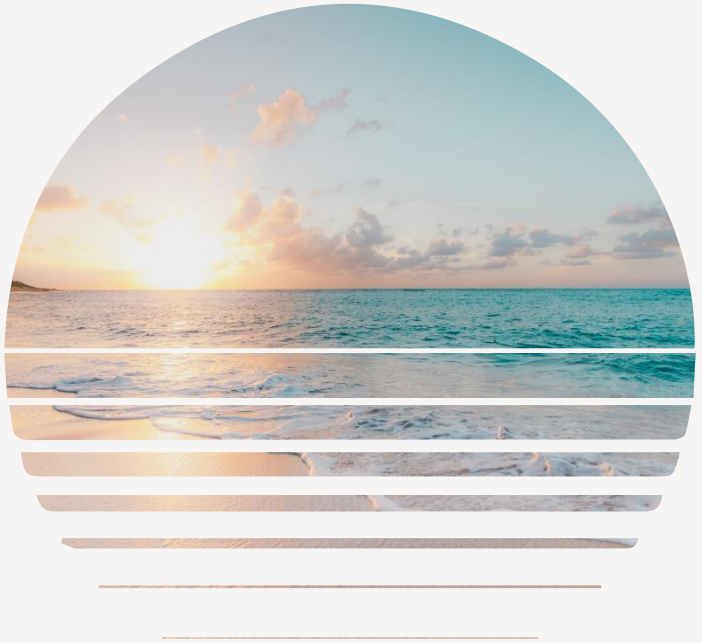
This Truth is an ethical practice.

This is something to do.

It is a prescription.

It endorses practical application.

It encourages scepticism.



Ultimate Truth

This sense of truth denotes an Ultimate Reality or Absolute Truth - a knowledge of things as they really are.

This Truth is a metaphysical claim.

This is something to believe in.

It is a description.

It endorses doctrinal belief.

It encourages dogmatism.

In his book, *After Buddhism*, Stephen Batchelor points out the dangers of using Zen practice or Buddhist philosophy to make metaphysical claims about truth.

Such a view of “the Truth” becomes a shorthand for something like a terminus to inquiry. “Truth assumes qualities of ultimacy and finality, which turns into a rhetorical weapon in the armory of religious, political, and scientific fundamentalism alike.”

“Craving is the origin of suffering.”

This is an example of a metaphysical dogma in Buddhism.

It is no different from the dogmatic statement:

“God created heaven and earth in seven days.”

It is better to avoid using Zen practice and Buddhist belief to make metaphysical claims or to gain ontological insights into reality. It is much more desirable to use Zen as a framework for the performance of appropriate behaviour.

To use Zen practice and Buddhist philosophy to gain infallible knowledge of truth or reality is to believe that Gautama (the Buddha) achieved omniscient insight into all of reality and how the entire universe works. This, of course, is not what the Buddha claimed and he ridiculed others who claimed to have it.

Unfortunately, *satori* (*nirvana*, awakening, enlightenment) has come to be associated with gaining transcendental knowledge about reality.

This is a dangerous view that leads to hierarchical power structures. Those who are "enlightened" may then claim to have some deep, mystical, transcendental, esoteric, and irrefutable insight into Absolute Reality and Ultimate Truth.

The power hierarchies in places like the Vatican are then replicated in Buddhist monasteries.

In place of Heaven we have Absolute Reality. In place of God we have Absolute Truth.

Appealing to Gautama's infallibility and omniscience is no different from claiming that only God understands the mysteries of the universe.

This is lazy thinking.

It is desirable to realise that God is the same as Absolute Truth, Ultimate Reality, Pure Consciousness, Transcendental Plain, and Non-Duality. These are all different ways of referring to the supreme. The Buddha didn't claim to have insight into anything supreme.

The *Sutta Pitaka* is a Buddhist scripture. It is a collection of verses that describes some of the earliest Buddhist practices. In it, the Buddha says "The all" refers to the body and the senses and to the mind and its contents. This is "the all" according to the Buddha. He goes on to say:

"If anyone should says, 'Having rejected this all, I will make known another all,' that would be a mere empty boast on his part."

The Buddha is clear that anyone claiming to know more than this is bragging or making a hollow boast.

He also says, in the *Sutta Nipata*:

> *The priest without borders*
> *Doesn't seize on what he's known or beheld.*
> *Not passionate, not dispassionate,*
> *He doesn't posit anything as supreme.*

Truth, therefore, in Zen, may be best understood as a virtue and as an ethical practice – a way of life in which one is true to one's potential, to one's deepest intuitions, to one's values, to one's friends, and to one's practice (of Zen).

ZAZEN

ZAZEN MEDITATION

Zazen is the main practice of Zen. Colloquially, we may understand it as “sitting Zen.” In its essence, it’s not a meditation as there is no attempt to direct the mind at any object.

It is a process of experientially discovering that we are impermanent, the we lack independent existence, and that we are connected to all things. When we experience this physically and not just understand it intellectually, we know fully and completely that all of us exist as part of an unfathomably vast network of causes, effects, and conditions.

We may well wonder what then is the purpose of this experience. There is no definitive answer to that, but it might certainly help us learn to relate to our planet, to our fellow humans, and to other sentient creatures with more care, compassion, understanding and love.

HONSHU MYOSHU

This translates as “The original realisation is marvelous practice.”

The “realisation” refers to *satori* or awakening. And the “marvelous practice” refers to *zazen*.

What this means is that in Zen, enlightenment and the practice of *zazen* are one and the same. One doesn’t practice *zazen* to achieve enlightenment.

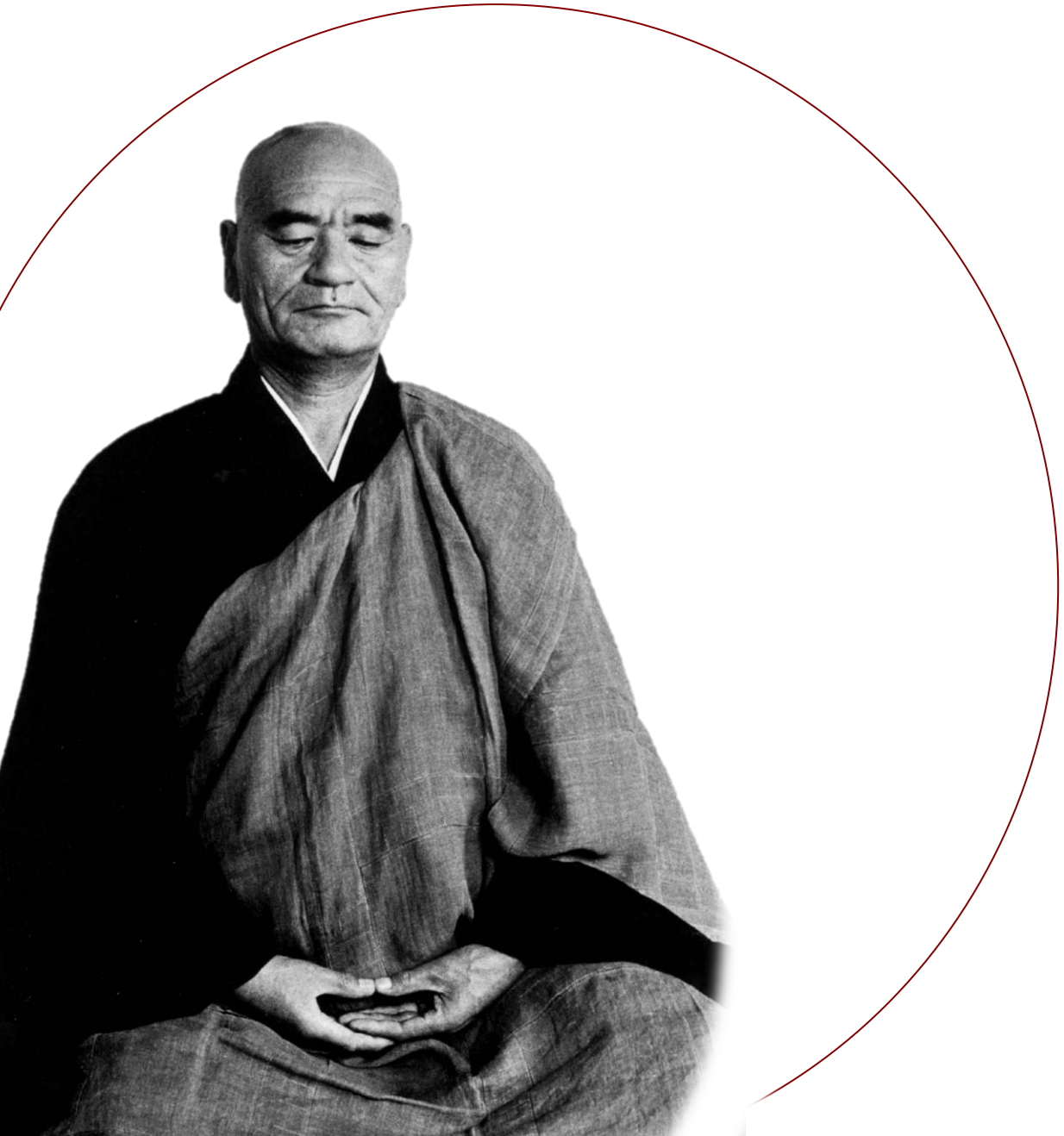
The practice and the realisation are one.

SUBJECT–OBJECT–ACTIVITY

When practicing *zazen*, the subject of experience, the object of experience, and the experience itself are all one.

However, when one experiences this subject-object-activity unity, one may not say, “I have become a Buddha,” or “I have experienced enlightenment” – because there is no independent “I” without relation to others and there is no enlightenment separate from the reality of all things.

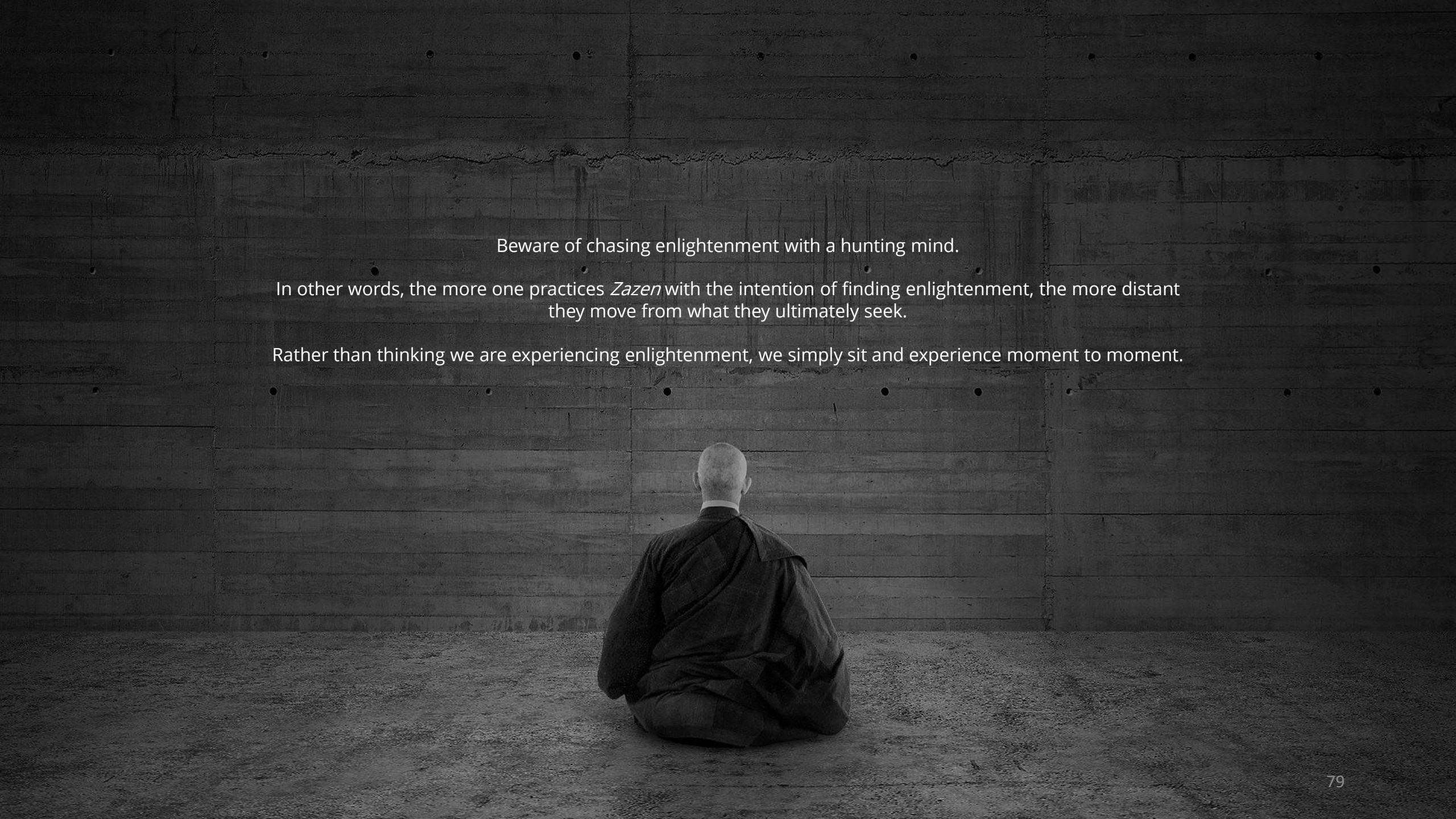
In *zazen*, there is no expectation of an outcome – either of reward or enlightenment. Practice and realisation are one.



ZAZEN AND NIRVANA

The Zen scholar, Shohaku Okamura, says, “When we are truly in *nirvana* we awaken to the fact that *nirvana* (the awakened or enlightened state of mind) is the same as *samsara* (the everyday state of mind). If we don’t find *nirvana* within *samsara*, there is no place we can find *nirvana*. If we don’t find peacefulness within our busy daily lives, there is no place we can find peacefulness.”

When we practice *zazen* (sitting meditation) without any agenda or without expecting an outcome, then we are fully present in the moment. With this kind of practice, *nirvana* is present and *samsara* is present. We experience one in the other. Or, one with the other.



Beware of chasing enlightenment with a hunting mind.

In other words, the more one practices *Zazen* with the intention of finding enlightenment, the more distant they move from what they ultimately seek.

Rather than thinking we are experiencing enlightenment, we simply sit and experience moment to moment.

SIMPLY SITTING

Zazen may well be described as simply sitting. But it is not as simple as it sounds. To still the welter of thoughts and overcome the myriad doubts, anxieties, cares and concerns that fill the human mind is not as straightforward as it may seem.

However, when we practice *Zazen*, we let of go of the ego, negate our individual mortal self, subdue all judgements, and experience our interconnectedness with everything else.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

At the age of 29, Gautama (the Buddha) left his family and went on a quest to find an answer to the following questions:

assado
What is the delight of life?

adhinavo
What is the tragedy of life?

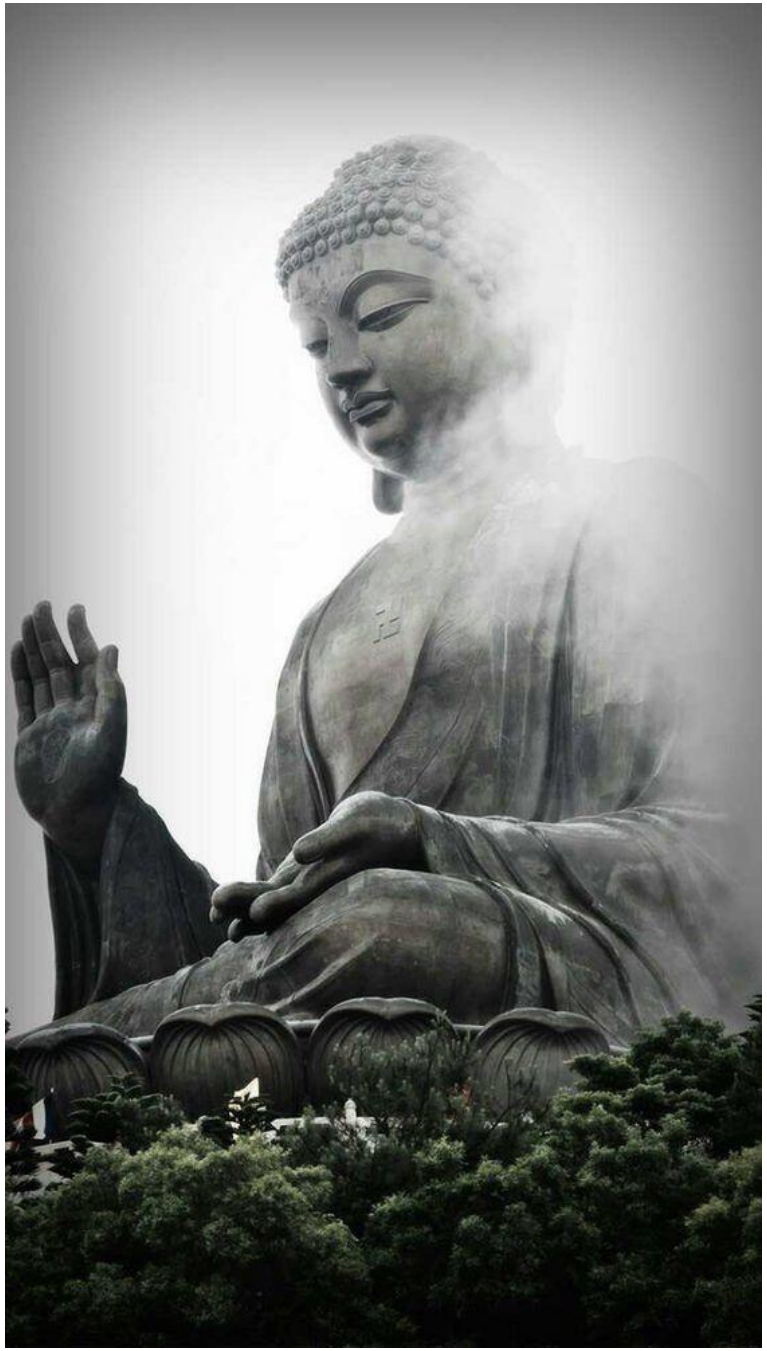
nissarana
What is the emancipation of life?

He discovered the following answers:

The happiness and joy that arise conditioned by life is the delight of life.

That life is impermanent, difficult, and changing is the tragedy of life.

The abandonment of clinging to life is the emancipation of life.



He also came to realise the Four Noble Truths:

1) Life inevitably involves suffering (or dissatisfaction/disappointment)

2) Suffering is caused by craving (excessive desire or clinging)

3) We can be free of suffering if we stop craving (achieve mental peace of mind)

4) There is a way of thinking, acting, and meditating that leads to complete liberation from suffering (continue to act in ways that sustain this peace of mind)

Based on his analysis of the relevant Pali texts and the line of interpretation developed by the English-born Buddhist monk Nanavira Thera in the 1960s, Stephen Batchelor has reinterpreted The Four Noble Truths as a fourfold task. For Stephen, Gautama's teachings about *dukkha* are not truths to be believed, but injunctions to transform our lives and promote human flourishing in this world.

He has created a pithy summary of the fourfold task:

> Embrace life
> Let go of what arises
> See its ceasing
> Act!

THE FOURFOLD TASK IS THIS:

Suffering (*dukkha*) is to be comprehended (*parinna*)
Fully realise that suffering/dissatisfaction is a part of life. Accept pain and pleasure, suffering and joy as a part of life.

The arising (*samudaya*) is to be let go of (*pahana*)
Here, the "arising" refers to the various reactions life provokes within us, including anger, greed, vanity, hate, and confusion. These are to be let go of. It is not so much letting go of desire *per se*, but rather, letting go of craving or clinging to material thing. It is letting go of any excessive emotional attachment or unrestrained affective reaction.

The ceasing (*nirodha*) is to be beheld (*sacchikata*)
This essentially refers to becoming aware of this change within oneself. Being aware, in other words, of a nirvanic state of mind and the sense of peace associated not giving in to reactivity.

The path (*magga*) is to be cultivated (*bhavana*)
Continually work on the following aspects of our life:

Complete vision – our understanding of our life process
Complete intention – our goals and volition
Complete speech – our communication with others
Complete action – our ethically significant actions
Complete livelihood – our approach to work
Complete effort – the effort we put into our spiritual development
Complete mindfulness – our presence of mind, and
Complete collectedness – our mental integration.

MARA

In Zen, Mara is the personification of everything that impedes enlightenment.

Metaphorically and mythologically, Mara is personified as a demon associated with desire and death that tempts and taunts the Buddha.

When we are constantly reacting unthinkingly to the troubles and travails of life we may be said to be assailed by Mara's army.

All our evolutionary baggage, our damaging responses, our undesirable reactions, our unwanted instincts and negative drives are personified by Mara.

BHUMISPARSA

“Buddha defying Mara" is a common pose of Buddha sculptures.

The Buddha is depicted with his left hand on his lap, palm facing upwards and his right hand on his right knee. The fingers of his right hand touch the earth, to call the earth as his witness for defying Mara and achieving enlightenment.

This posture is also referred to as the *bhumisparsa* "earth-witness" *mudra* (a ritual gesture)

BUDDHA AND MARA

When we notice greed, hatred, or anger welling up inside we, we are able to see them as impermanent emotions. This heightened self-awareness allows us to vanquish these negative emotions.

Nirvana or the enlightened state is not one in which no emotional reactivity happens. Rather, it is an awareness of how reactivity works.

Mara is whatever impedes human flourishing. Buddha is whatever enhances human flourishing.
Mara is a metaphor for death. Buddha is a metaphor for life.
The performance of the *dharma* cannot take place without resistance to Mara.

Thus, Buddha and Mara are one.

ZEN SYMBOLS

ENSO

The *Enso* is a hand-drawn circle using a single uninhibited, free-flowing brushstroke.

In Zen, it symbolises enlightenment. It also symbolizes both the entire universe and the void.

It exemplifies the sense of minimalism that has come to be associated with Zen.

The *Enso* exemplifies various dimensions of Zen aesthetic:

Fukinsei (asymmetry, irregularity)
Kanso (simplicity)
Koko (basic; weathered)
Shizen (without pretense; natural)
Yugen (subtly profound grace)
Datsuzoku (freedom; spontaneity)
Seijaku (tranquility)

CONCH

The conch and the sonorous sound it makes symbolises the *dharma* and the teachings of the Buddha.

The sound is associated with the symbolic awakening of the Zen adherent from the deep slumber of ignorance. It is also a call to action to accomplish our own welfare and the welfare of others.

DHARMA WHEEL

In Zen Buddhism, the cyclical movement of a wheel is also used to symbolise the cyclical nature of life in the world.

The wheel represents the cycle of *samsara* (everyday discontented and agitated state of mind). The wheel can be turned the other way around towards *nirvana* (enlightened state of mind) through practice of the *dharma* (Zen methods and Buddha's teachings).

LOTUS

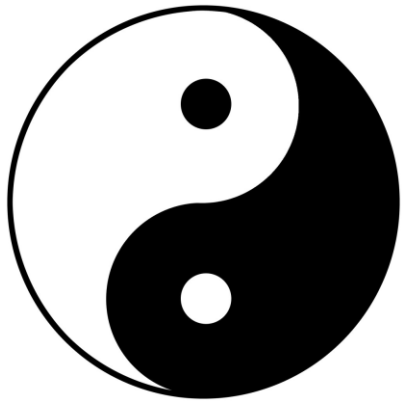
The *padma* (lotus) grows on the surface of lakes and ponds.

Just as the flower rises from muddy roots and mucky water, so too is it possible to rise to enlightenment in our everyday world.

The lotus, therefore, symbolises purity and enlightenment.

GOLDEN FISH

Just as water allows fish to swim freely, so Zen practice emancipates the soul. The fish symbolises spiritual liberation.



YIN–YANG

In his book, *Tao: The Watercourse Way,* Alan Watts says,

"At the very roots of Chinese thinking and feeling there lies the principle of polarity, which is not to be confused with the ideas of opposition or conflict. In the metaphors of other cultures, light is at war with darkness, life with death, good with evil, and the positive with the negative, and thus an idealism to cultivate the former and be rid of the latter flourishes throughout much of the world. To the traditional way of Chinese thinking, this is as incomprehensible as an electric current without both positive and negative poles, for polarity is the principle that + and – , north and south, are different aspects of one and the same system, and that the disappearance of either one of them would be the disappearance of the system."

The *yin-yang* symbolises this polarity inherent in nature and innate in existence.

LAUGHING BUDDHA

Budai (also known as Hotei or Pu-Tai) is a mythologised 10th century Chinese Buddhist monk whose name means "cloth sack“. It refers to the bag that he is conventionally depicted as carrying as he wanders without fixed purpose around the countryside. His jolly nature, humorous personality, and eccentric lifestyle distinguish him from most Buddhist masters or figures.

He is almost always depicted as fat and smiling hence his nickname in Chinese, the "Laughing Buddha“ or “Fat Buddha".

He is associated with prosperity, abundance, and good fortune.

He is not a representation of Gautama Siddhartha (the Buddha).

DARUMA DOLL

A *Daruma* doll is a hollow, round, Japanese traditional doll that is meant to represent Boddhidharma, the bearded Indian monk with fierce eyes who brought Buddhism to China from whence it spread to Japan.

What makes a *Daruma* doll unique is that it doesn't topple over. When pushed to one side it simply rolls back up again. This embodies the Zen approach to difficulties in life:

Seven times down eight times up.

The *Daruma* doll is seen as a symbol of resilience, perseverance and good luck, making them a popular gift of encouragement in Japan.

MT. FUJI

Mt. Fuji is a volcano in Japan that has deep cultural significance. Its extremely conical shape is often associated with elegance and the battle of fire and ice may signify the signify the yin and yang.

Franz Lidz mentions that the 17th-century poet Matsuo Basho, a Zen master of non-attachment, meandered along its steeply winding paths with one foot in this world and the other in the next. One of his best-known *haikus* contrasts our temporal attempts to harness the wind with the celestial power of the mountain:

> *The wind from Mount Fuji*
> *I put it on the fan*
> *Here, the souvenir from Edo.*

Perhaps no artist used this dynamic to greater effect than Katsushika Hokusai, whose woodblock series, the original *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, juxtaposed the mountain's calm permanence with the turbulence of nature and flux of daily life.

TORII GATE

The *torii* gate, represents the entrance to sacred space, the transition between the finite world and the infinite world.

The word *torii* was derived from the Indian word "torana".

WATER

Zen is an offshoot of Taoism. Water is often used to illustrate the core principle of Taoist philosophy, which is to live in accord with nature and in harmony with the universe.

Water flows effortlessly around obstacles and elegantly conforms to the contours of whatever receptacle it is placed in.

Water also follows the past of least resistance – if something blocks its flow it simply flows beneath it, or around it, or above it. If it is blocked by something solid like a wall of granite then water wears it down with deft patience.

BAMBOO

Bamboo is not a tree. It is a form of grass. It can grow tall and create groves, spinneys, and forests. It is hollow on the inside, but its inner void is the source of its vigour and strength because it can bend during storms and gale-force winds and still return back to its upright position.

The bamboo is a metaphor for how resilient the human spirit should be.


ZEN IN EVERYDAY LIFE

IKEBANA / KADO

Ikebana is the Japanese art of flower arrangement elevated to a philosophical discipline.

Even though the flowers are arranged following a precise set of rules, the point of *ikebana* is to spend time contemplating the beauty of the simple things in the natural world , like the leaf or branch or a petal.

The Zen aesthetic is obvious in the minimalist and simple style of the flower arrangements. There is a sense of being in harmony with nature. It's all about not trying to overstate things. This is an elegance about these arrangements - a degree of refined sophistication and understated naturalness.

We might contrast these *ikebana* arrangements with a western bouquet packed with flowers crushed into one another.

It is considered a prestigious accomplishment. All of Japan's most celebrated generals have been masters of this art, stating that it helped calm the mind and give clarity to their decisions.

KODO

Kodo literally translates as the “Tao of Incense” – or the Way of Incense. It includes not just an appreciation of the fragrance, but also all aspects of the tools, resources and of the incense production process.

Kodo is regarded as one of the three classical Japanese arts of refinement, along with *kado* for flower arrangement, and *chado* for tea and the tea ceremony.

CHANOYA / CHADO

Chado is the ceremonial preparation and consumption of powdered Japanese matcha green tea. The word *cha* derives from the Chinese word for tea.

Traditional tea rooms have a rustic feel with tatami mats, calligraphy scrolls, and simple ikebana flower arrangements.

This ritualised manner of drinking tea is a to promote inner peace and outer connections with others.

A successful ceremony will leave the participants with a sense of tranquility and empathy.

BONSAI

Bonsai is a Japanese art of growing small trees that mimic the shape and scale of full-size trees. It was initially a technique taught by Zen monks.

The *bonsai* tree represents nature in microcosm. The tree captures the Zen aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* (rustic beauty) and *mono no aware (pathos at the transience of life).*

KARESANSUI: ZEN GARDEN

Zen Buddhist monks created the first Zen gardens to capture the essence of nature in miniature and thus aid in meditation. Later, they began using the gardens to teach Zen principles and concepts.

Some of the elements of a Zen garden include:

- Rocks (represent mountains and symbolising the Buddha)
- Water (ponds represent stillness and waterfalls the passage of time)
- Bamboo (represents resilience and egoless inner strength)
- Tree arrangement (cherry, plum and pine trees are particularly popular)
- Ornamentations (Lanterns symbolise enlightenment)
- Living creatures (usually, turtles or carps - symbolising life)
- Sand or gravel (represents a beach or flowing stream)
- Moss (indicates antiquity and the passage of time)
- Blending (care is taken to ensure the garden is in harmony with the surroundings)
- Bridges (symbolise the connection between the everyday mind & awakened mind)

GRAVEL RAKING

Gravel is often used to symbolise water in a Zen garden. The act of raking gravel into patterns is reminiscent of the ripples of a stream.

Zen monks practice raking to help with the concentration and meditational practice. The practice enshrines the Zen idea that we can aim to make things perfect within a bounded space such as a garden or compound, but at the same time should gracefully accept the chaos and impermanence of nature and the wider world.

ZEN STONES

Stacking of stones is a Zen practice to help improve focus and concentration. The stones are reminiscent of stupas.

Increasing the number of stacked stones requires patience and each level represents a deeper or higher state of consciousness.

KINTSUGI

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of using gold lacquer to mend broken pottery. It is a portmanteau word consisting of *Kin* meaning ‘golden’ and *tsugi* meaning ‘joinery.’

In Zen aesthetics, if a pot or vase is accidentally broken it is not to be thrown away. Rather, the pieces are to be lovingly gathered and carefully stuck back together using a luxuriant golden lacquer.

No attempt is made to hide the damage. The entire point is to highlight the fault lines as beautiful and strong.

The metaphorical and symbolic meaning behind this is poignant and powerful. The pots and vases with their fault lines represent human beings with all our flaws. The message is that in spite of our shortcomings there is still hope and there is still beauty and that we are all worthy of love.

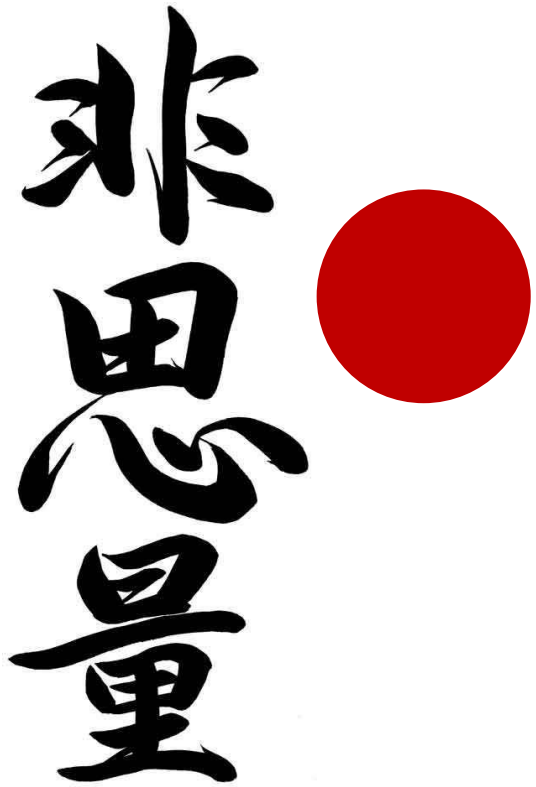
ZEN CONCEPTS

MUSHOTOKU

Mushotoku is an attitude of no profit, no gain. It is a philosophy of life, a way of living in which you act without wanting to achieve a result, and give without wanting something in return.

This is a state of a mind in which one does not get attached to objects and that seeks no personal profit.

In Zazen meditation, achieving a sense of *mushotoku* means letting go of attachments and letting go of the ego or the self.



HISHIRYO

Hishiryo is the heightened state of consciousness achieved during meditation when the mind moves beyond thinking and not thinking.

Hishiryo is a state of egoless consciousness and a feeling of oneness with the universe. This concept cannot be understood rationally or through words. It must be experienced.

A close expression used in Japanese martial arts is *mushin no shin* , "thought without thought“.

MUSHIN

Mushin is a state of mind associated with martial arts. It is achieved when a person's mind is free from thoughts of anger, fear, or ego during combat or everyday life.

In this state, the mind is focused and in a flow state, ready to react with the fluency and instinctive reactivity that comes from years of training.

In his book, *Manual of Zen Buddhism,* D. T. Suzuki refers to *Mushin* as "being free from mind-attachment".

It may seem that *Mushin* and *Hishiryo* refer to the same thing. But this is not the case. To put it succinctly, *Mushin* means unconsciously, *hishiryo* is the absolute consciousness.

ZANSHIN

Zanshin is a state of relaxed awareness and alertness mostly associated with the martial arts.

In this state, the mind is still but ready for the unexpected. The person is aware of the surroundings and of everything in the here and now.

FUDOSHIN

Fudoshin is a state of equanimity or imperturbability (literally and metaphorically, "immovable mind", "immovable heart“ or "unmoving heart").

A mind in the *fudoshin* state has met all challenges of life, and has attained a state of peaceful determination, complete composure, and gentle fearlessness.

One can develop such composure through introspection and meditation.

SHOSHIN

Shoshin literally means "beginner's mind." It exemplifies having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, even when studying at an advanced level, just as a beginner would.

In his book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* the Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki, illustrates the framework behind *shoshin*, thus:

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few."

What this means is that the beginner still has much to learn while the expert (especially in the field of martial arts) through experience and training knows that appropriate optimal responses in a given context are few.

MU

Mu (*wu* in Chinese) is a key concept in Zen. It literally means 'no,' 'nothing,' 'no thing,' or 'not applicable.'

It is used to answer a question that requires the following response:

un-ask the question
indicate the question is fundamentally flawed
reject the premise that a dualistic answer can or will be given

e.g.
"Does a dog have Buddha nature?"
The answer could be "*mu*"

Robert M. Pirsig points out that a computer circuit exhibits two states, a voltage for one and a voltage for zero. However, to ask *what is the state of the circuit when the power is switched off* could conceivable be met with the answer "*mu*"

WU–WEI

Wu-wei is a concept from Taoism that literally means “inexertion”, “inaction”, or “effortless action.” Though it means to go with the flow, it does not imply laziness or sloth.

It has connotations of savoir-faire and spontaneity.

It implies a conscious surrender of the will to the reality of a situation rather than resisting and agitating against it.

Lao Tzu puts it, “To be wise is to have learnt how one must sometimes surrender to the whole universe.”

We may not have the power to change certain circumstances or control certain situations, but we do have the ability to find peace and serenity by controlling how we respond to them.

MA

Ma refers to empty space or the void between all things. It can also refer to a pause or gap.

Ma has also been described as "an emptiness full of possibilities, like a promise yet to be fulfilled", and as "the silence between the notes which make the music“

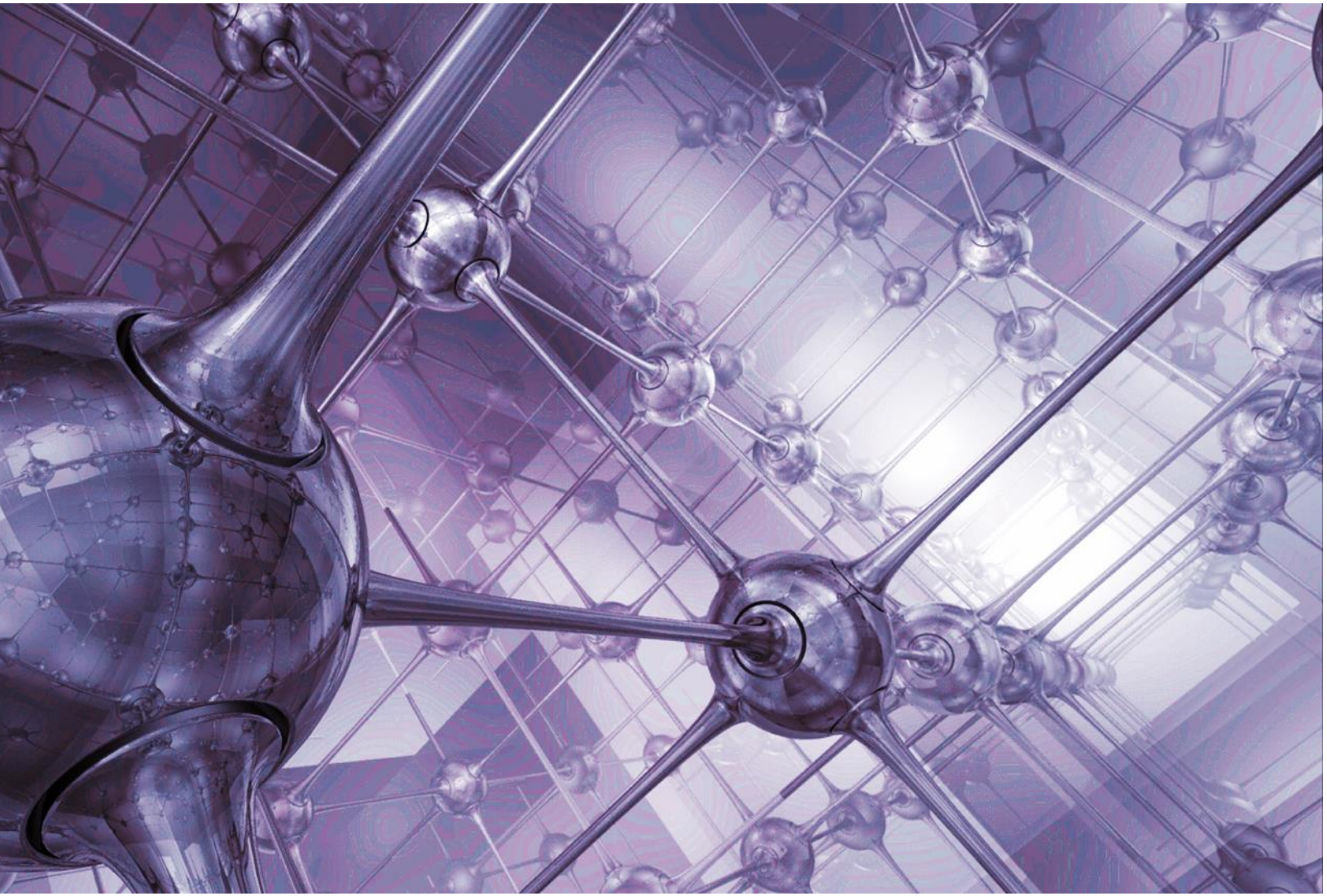
Other illustrations appear in this old poem:

> *Thirty spokes meet in the hub, though the space between them is the essence of the wheel.*
>
> *Pots are formed from clay, though the space inside them is the essence of the pot.*
>
> *Walls with windows and doors form the house, though the space within them is the essence of the house.*

GYAAN / JNANA / PRAJNA

Gyaan or *Jnana* is a Sanskrit word that means "knowledge."

Prajna refers to higher knowledge or greater spiritual wisdom that comes with the experiential understanding that the self is an illusion, that everything is interconnected, and that nothing is permanent.



INDRA'S NET

Indra's net is a metaphor in Buddhism used to illustrate our interdependent origination and connection with the rest of the universe. – That we are all individuals but we also part of each other and of the Absolute.

Imagine an endless net of threads throughout space. The horizontal threads are in space – the vertical threads are in time. At every crossing of threads is an individual – represented by a crystal bead. The great light of the Absolute illuminates and penetrates every crystal bead; but also every crystal bead reflects light not just from every other crystal in the net, but also every reflection of every reflection throughout the universe.

That is the Buddhist metaphorical conception of the universe in an image.


ZEN AESTHETICS

MONO NO AWARE

Mono no aware is a feeling of pathos at the impermanence of things and the transience of life.

It is a quietly elated, bittersweet sense of wonder at the brilliance of life, gratitude at having witnessed it, and a comprehension that none of it will last.

It is often associated with the autumn season.

YUGEN

Yugen is a deep awareness of the universe that elicits an emotional response too profound to put into words.

Yugen doesn't involve a reference to anything supernatural, transcendental, or otherworldly. It is an emotional response to the mystery of existence and the sad beauty of suffering.

Kanze Motokiyo, the 14th century Japanese aesthetician, actor, and playwright gives the following examples of *Yugen*:

"To watch the sun sink behind a flower clad hill.

To wander on in a huge forest without thought of return.

To stand upon the shore and gaze after a boat that disappears behind distant islands.

To contemplate the flight of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds.

And, subtle shadows of bamboo on bamboo."

WABI-SABI

Wabi-sabi is an aspect of Japanese aesthetic influenced by Zen that is based on finding beauty within the imperfections of life and accepting peacefully the natural cycle of growth and decay.

Wabi originally referred to the loneliness of living in nature and *sabi* meant lean and withered. Today, *Wabi* refers to a stark, transient, and impermanent beauty. *Sabi* refers to the beauty of natural aging.

Both words have connotations of desolation and solitude. Taking a Buddhist perspective, these have positive associations, representing liberation from a material world and transcendence to a simpler life.

Wabi-sabi evokes a mood of stillness and rustic ordinariness and implies understated elegance.

Characteristics of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic include:

Asymmetry
Roughness
Simplicity
Economy
Austerity
Modesty
Intimacy
Natural Beauty

SHIBUI

The Japanese aesthetic of *shibui* draws upon silent, subtle and unobtrusive qualities. A person, performance or an object can be considered *shibui*. Each thing is authentic and appealing without the need for decoration – this is the *shibui* ideal.

Something *shibui*, although seemingly simplistic, reveals the complex and intricate variables in nature that make our world unique. Its intent is to evoke awareness and appreciation for life as it is, seeing the implicit beauty in what has come to be considered ordinary or mundane.

Shibui is not to be confused with *wabi* or *sabi*. Though many *wabi* or *sabi* objects are *shibui*, not all *shibui* objects are *wabi* or *sabi*. *Wabi* or *sabi* objects can be more severe and sometimes exaggerate intentional imperfections to such an extent that they can appear to be artificial. *Shibui* objects are not necessarily imperfect or asymmetrical, though they can include these qualities.

According to Japanese aesthetician, Dr. Soetsu Yanagi, the seven elements of *shibui* are: simplicity, implicity, modesty, naturalness, everydayness, imperfection, and silence.

IKI / TSU

Iki is an aspect of Japanese aesthetic that expresses the ephemeral, romantic, straightforward, measured, audacious, smart, and lacking in self-consciousness.

Tsu exclusively refers to persons, while *iki* can also refer to situations or objects.

John Fiorillo mentions three primary elements within *iki*:

> *Hari* ("spirit"), a sharp, direct, and uncompromising social style that was balanced and cool.
>
> *Bitai* ("allure"), a flirtatiousness that speaks of a restrained eroticism. Thus a woman possessing *bitai* is charming but neither vulgar nor wanton.
>
> *Akanuke* ("urbanity"), an unassuming stylishness or polish without pretentiousness. There was an aspect of disinterest in *akanuke* that suggested the ideal beauty was restrained, not necessarily perfect, and always pleasant.

YABO

Yabo is the opposite of *iki*. It refers to that which is unrefined, gigantic, coarse, childish, colorful, self-conscious, permanent, loud, superficial, vulgar, snobbish, boorish, etc.

MIYABI

Miyabi is an aspect of Japanese aesthetics that is usually translated as "elegance," "refinement," or "courtliness" and sometimes to a "sweet loved one".

It is characterised by its contrast to the Zen ideals of rustic simplicity as seen in *wabi-sabi* and *yugen*.

IKIGAI

Ikiga translates loosely as “reason for being”. The Japanese believe everyone has an Ikigai. But finding it requires patience, exploration of the outside world, deep introspection, and a search for the self.

One’s *Ikigai* sits at the cross-section of that which they love, that which they think the world needs, that which they are good at, and that which they can be paid for.

Pursuing these four broad areas of personality development will help the individual discover their passion in life, their mission in life, the profession that is right for them and help them distinguish it from a vocation.

Ikigai can also be interpreted to mean “Reason for waking up in the morning.” Having an *Ikigai* leads to a longer and more fulfilled life.

NAIKAN

Naikan is a structured method of self-introspection. It literally means, “Looking inward.” However, a metaphorical interpretation of it would mean to consider oneself with the mind’s eye.

Naikan is a simple, straightforward, uncomplicated way of helping people figure out who they are and where they are headed. It helps us focus on the things that truly matter in life: what makes us different; who we ought to be thankful for and grateful to; what relationships matter; the choices we make; the lifestyle we lie; our connection with people and the environment; and our connection with our self.

Dozens of *Naikan* centres exist in Japan and help people with a host of problems including depressions, addictions, spiritual emptiness, mental afflictions, and existential angst. They are also present in schools, hospitals and even prisons.

The practice of *Naikan* allows us to zoom out, see the big picture, appreciate context, and find our place in the interconnected web of life, existence, and reality. It teaches us to focus on gratitude for the things that we have, instead of bitterness and resentment over the things that we do not have.

Naikan reflection is based on three questions:

What have I received from _____ ?
What have I given to _____ ?
What troubles and difficulties have I caused _____ ?


ZEN IN LITERATURE AND ART

ZEN INFLUENCE ON ART

The primary features of Zen might include the following:

- A sense of minimalism
- The understanding that sometimes, ‘less is more’
- An astute and intentional use of empty space
- An understated elegance
- Simplicity and rustic beauty
- Man in harmony with nature (not dominating nature)
- An absence of garish or bright colours
- Fluidity and spontaneity in brush strokes
- Use of the “controlled accident”

The purpose of Zen art, if there were such a thing, might perhaps be to help indicate man’s place in nature and to depict the challenges of trying to reach or maintain enlightenment given the difficulties of everyday reality.

In Zen art, there is little or no focus on transcendental, supernatural, or esoteric themes. The emphasis is on secular, earthly things, including landscapes, birds and animals, people in nature, and calligraphy poetry.

EAST AND WEST

In his book, *The East and the West: A Study of their psychic and cultural characteristics,* Lewis Gulick speaks of the difference between eastern and western artists (in former times) and the influence on their philosophies and religions:

Oriental artists

- Are not interested in a photographic representation of an object but in interpreting its spirits.
- Focus on cosmo-centric themes
- Depict man as an integral part of nature.
- Focused on the affinity between man and nature.
- Saw the physical world as a realm of beauty to be admired, but also as a place of mystery and illusion to be pictured by poets, explained by mythmakers, and mollified by priestly incantations.

Occidental artists

- Have traditionally been fixated with photographic accuracy and exalting the personality.
- Tend to focus on anthropocentric themes.
- Depict man as dominating nature
- Focused on how many was outside of and above nature
- Saw the physical world an objective reality—to be analysed, used, mastered and rationally explained.

ZEN ART

Fredrick Lieberman, in his paper titled, *Zen Buddhism and its Relationship to Elements of Eastern and Western Arts* says that "The style of painting favored by Zen artists makes use of a horsehair brush, black ink, and either paper or silk. It is known as *sumi-e.*

"The great economy of means is necessary to express the purity and simplicity of the eternal nature of the subject, and also because it is a generalizing factor.

"Zen art does not try to create the illusion of reality. It abandons true to life perspective, and works with artificial space relations which make one think beyond reality into the essence of reality.

"This concept of essence as opposed to illusion is basic to Zen art in all phases."

HAIKU

The *haiku* is a form of Japanese poetry that consists of 3 lines written in a 5-7-5 seventeen-syllable format.

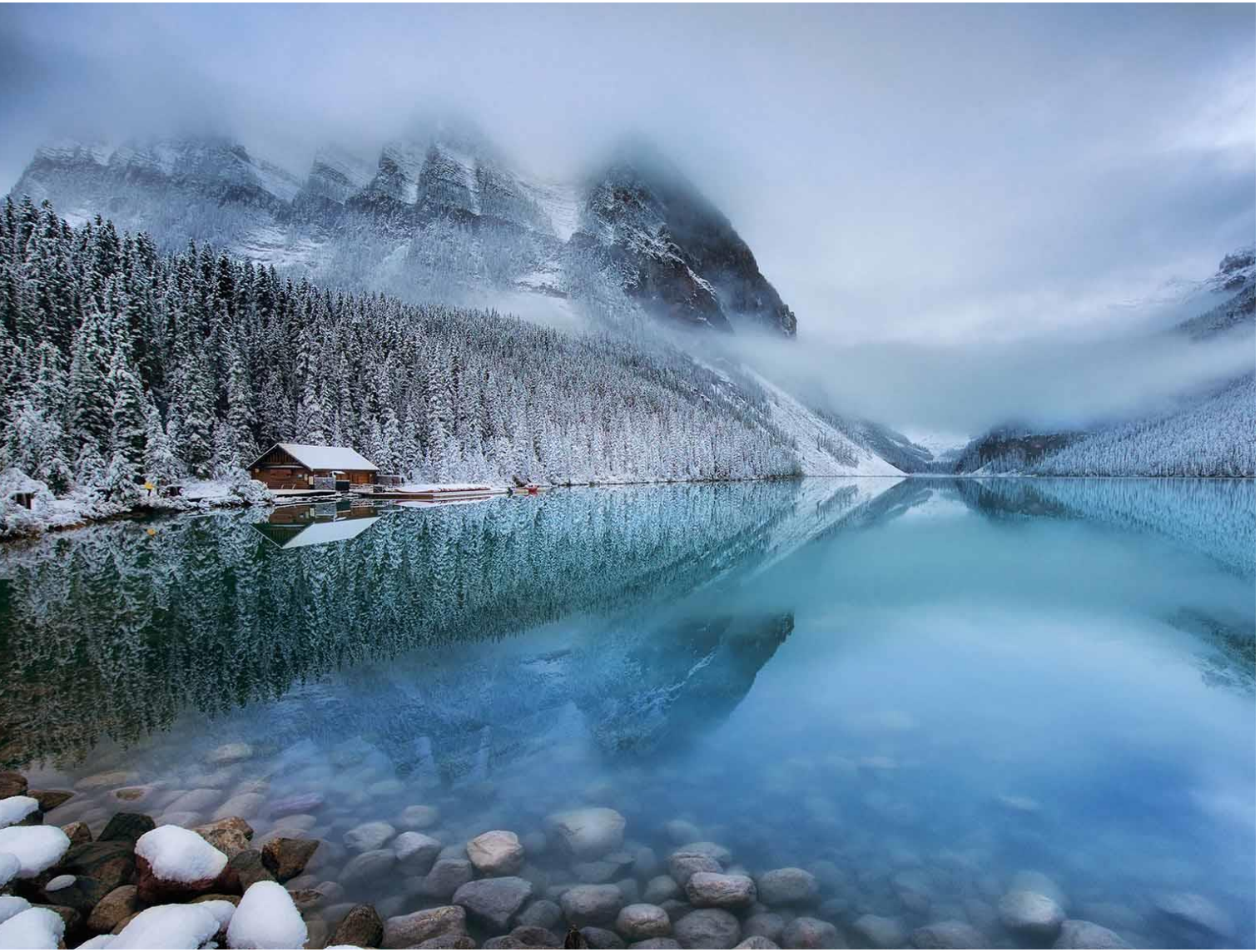
Consider this poem by the famous 17th-century Japanese poet, Basho:

On a withered branch
A crow is perched
In the autumn evening.

These three lines are pregnant with meaning and significance. It simply oozes poetry.

It is said that a good *haiku* is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener's mind. What makes *haikus* so special is that the reader brings all the meaning and significance to the poem. The reader evokes associations out of the richness of her own memory.

Haikus invite the reader to participate - unlike most of the Western poetry taught in textbooks that leave the reader dumbfounded with admiration at the poet's complicated use of words, metaphors, rhyme and rhythm.



HAIKU and ZEN

Though the *haiku* predates Zen it is often associated with a Zen aesthetic due to its simplicity and minimalist style.

Robert Hass points out that "the first level of a *haiku* is its location in nature. Its second is almost always some implicit Buddhist reflection on nature. One of the striking differences between Christian and Buddhist thought is that in the Christian sense of things, nature is fallen, and in the Buddhist sense, it isn't. Another is that, because there is no creator-being in Buddhist cosmology, there is no higher plane of meaning to which nature refers.

At the core of Buddhist metaphysics are three ideas about natural things:

That they are transient
That they are contingent
That the suffer

An important element of a *haiku* is also the silence. This wordlessness has its roots in Zen.

As Hass points out, "Zen provided people training in how to stand aside and leave the meaning-making activity of the ego to its own devices. Not resisting it, but seeing it as another phenomenal thing, like bush warblers and snow fall, though more intimate to us."

EXAMPLE OF SABI IN HAIKU

When the mood of the moment is solitary and quiet it is called sabi.

It is the loneliness in the sense of Buddhist detachment of seeing all things as happening by themselves in miraculous spontaneity.

Sleet falling;

Fathomless, infinite

Loneliness

EXAMPLE OF WABI IN HAIKU

Wabi is the feeling of sadness when one catches a glimpse of something rather ordinary and unpretentious.

Wabi is the unexpected recognition of the ‘suchness’ of ordinary things.

A brushwood gate,

And for a lock –

This snail.

EXAMPLE OF AWARE IN HAIKU

Aware is the feeling of an intense, nostalgic sadness connected with autumn or the fading away of the world.

Aware is the echo of what has passed and of what was loved. It is aroused when we see that the transience of the world is just the way things are

This dewdrop world –

It may be a dewdrop,

And yet – and yet…

EXAMPLE OF YUGEN IN HAIKU

Yugen is the sudden perception of something mysterious and strange – hinting at an unknown never to be discovered. .

Yugen is a compound word, each part, yu and gen, meaning ‘cloudy impenetrability,’ and the combination meaning ‘obscurity,’ ‘unknowability.’

The sea darkens;

The voices of the wild ducks

Are faintly white.

MATSUO BASHO

Basho was a 17th century Japanese poet, widely recognised as one of the great masters of *haiku*. He wrote his *haiku* in the simplest type of Japanese speech – naturally avoiding literary and highbrow language.

Basho was lay Zen monk, and incorporated various Zen themes into his *haiku*. For example, one of his more famous *haikus* is this:

Old Pond
A frog jumps into
The sound of water

One could easily understand this poem literally as being simply about a frog jumping into a pond. Or, it could be a metaphorical illustration of sudden insight or *satori* (enlightenment) that is a quintessential feature of Zen.

Below are a few more examples of Basho's *haiku*.

BASHO

Deep autumn—

my neighbour,

How does he live, I wonder?

BASHO

Even in Kyoto
hearing the cuckoo's cry
I long for Kyoto.

BASHO

The crane's legs
have gotten shorter
in the spring rain.

BASHO

I don't know
which tree it comes from,
That fragrance.

YOSA BUSON

Buson was a 18th century Japanese poet famous for his *haikus*. But he was also renowned for his paintings.

His *haikus* paint beautiful images with words. Many of them are striking to the mind's eye and have a cool yet powerful aesthetic detachment.

Robert Hass points out that Japanese scholars are fond of contrasting Basho and Buson:

> "*Basho the seeker; Buson the artist.*
> *Basho the subjective poet; Buson the objective poet.*
> *Basho the ascetic writer; Buson the worldly painter."*

Below are a few of Buson's *haikus*.

BUSON

Plums in blossom
and the geishas who can't go out
are buying sashes.

BUSON

The old cormorant keeper —
I haven't seen him
this year.

BUSON

Sparrow singing—

Its tiny mouth

Open.

BUSON

A field of mustard,
no whale in sight.
The sea darkening.

WAKA

Waka is traditional form of Japanese poetry using a fixed number of syllables.

Consider this waka poem composed by Zen master, Dogen:

What is the world like?	世中は
As a waterfowl shakes its bill	何にたとへん
On each drop of water	水鳥の
The moon is reflected.	はしふる露に
	やどる月影

The poem deals with Zen concepts. In this metaphor, the drops of water represent our limited and finite lives. The moon represents absolute reality, or Buddha-nature, or enlightenment. From a cosmic perspective our lives exist for but a fraction of a second – but even for that tiny amount of time we each contain and reflect the absolute within us.

SUMI-E
INK PAINTINGS

Sumi-e is a form of monochrome Japanese painting using ink that was introduced to Japan by Zen monks from China. (*Sumi* meaning black ink, *e* meaning paining).

The goal is not to capture an accurate reproduction of the subject but rather its spirit or essence.

Sumi-e paintings have a feel of spontaneity about them. They're often paintings of nature: of mountains, waters, mists, rocks, trees, birds and animals.

These landscapes are a world to which man belongs but which he does not dominate. There is a relative emptiness to the painting – what has been described as "painting by not painting" (Or, in Zen – playing the stringless lute).

MA YUAN

Song Dynasty
12th century

Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring

This painting is painted on an album leaf, which also contains Emperor Ningzong's poem inscribed in the upper right corner. Mountain Path is done in Ma Yuan's "One-Corner Ma" style, where most of the painting's imagery is in one corner.

TENSHO SHUBUN

Muromachi Period
15th century

Landscape of the Four Seasons

This long scroll (over 10 meters in length) depicts landscapes in the four seasons. Notice the use of empty spaces to indicate clouds and mists. Emptiness is as much an integral part of the painting as is the ink.

SESSHU TOYO

Muromachi Period
15th century

View of Amanohashidate

This masterpiece depicts a bird's-eye-view of the famous sandbar in Tango province, one of the Three Famous Scenic Spots in Japan. Painted from the vantage of a great height, the painting's combination of soft, wet ink tones, precise brushwork and sublime composition represent the acme of Sesshu Toyo's art.

SESSHU TOYO

Muromachi Period
15th century

Haboku Sansui

This scroll is nearly 13 ft. long. It gradually reveals itself to the viewer: emerging from the mist we notice the hazy mountains in the background. In the foreground we notice shrubs and bushes. We also see the triangular roofs of a house and the vertical lines forming a fence. At the bottom of the painting is a pond or a lake and to the right we barely notice a boat and two people.

HASEGAWA TOHAKU

Hasegawa school
16th century

Shorin-zu byobu (The Pine Trees)

The ink-on-paper work depicts a view of Japanese pine trees in the mist, with parts of the trees visible and parts obscured, illustrating the Zen Buddhist concept of *ma* (the void) and evoking the Japanese aesthetic *wabi* aesthetic of rustic simplicity. They are said to be the first paintings of their scale to depict only trees as subject matter, although a white shape to the upper right of the left panel might suggest a background mountain peak. The screen measures 1.5 by 3.5 metres.

MUQI FACHANG

Song Dynasty
13th century

Six Persimmons

The painting features six persimmons floating on an undefined, but skillfully mottled background. It is painted in blue-black ink on paper.

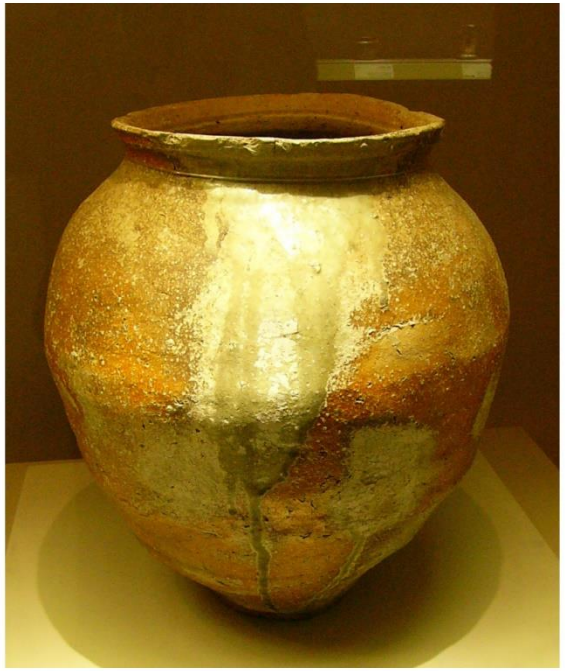
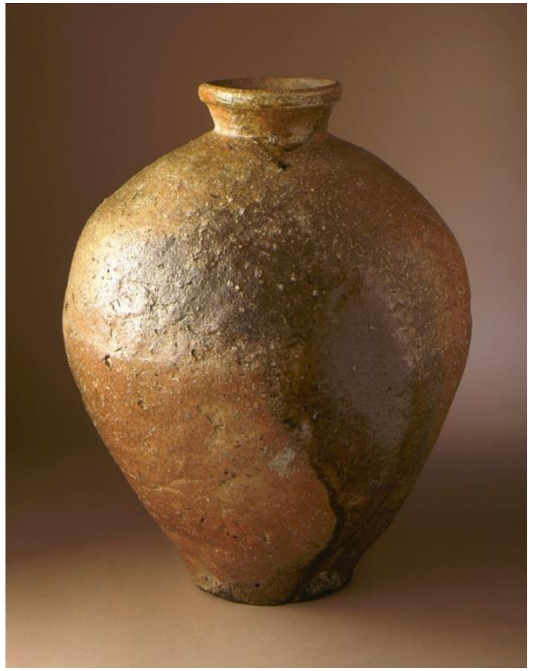
According to Sherman Lee, the painting became famous for the tremendous skill of the brushstrokes. Their subtlety of modeling is often remarked upon. The thick and thin brushstrokes that model the lightest of the persimmons make it seem to float in contrast to the dark one next to it. The treatment of the stems and leaves recall Chinese characters, and reveal brush control at its highest level.

IGA WARE

Iga ware is a type of Japanese pottery from the 8th century. Though it predates Japanese Zen Buddhism it captures the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic and is often used in tea-ceremonies.

In the 16th century, Iga ware water vases with characteristic "ear" lugs appeared. The ear lugs added prestige to a vessel and thus became the popular norm.

Iga is a region in central Japan.

SHIGARAKI WARE

Shigaraki ware is a type of stoneware pottery made in Shigaraki area of Japan.

Influenced by Zen Buddhist traditions, a 16th century tea master, Murato Juko, was of the opinion that the tea ceremony should reflect the concept of *wabi-suki* (or *wabi-cha*) the belief of emphasising simplicity, humility, and intense appreciation of the immediate experience. The natural appearance of this pottery helped reflect these principles and fit into the aesthetic of the tea ceremony atmosphere. The tea ceremony transformed the manner in which the Japanese viewed objects, including ceramic ware.





UKIYO-E

Ukiyo-e are Japanese woodblock prints. Ukiyo-e (meaning "pictures of the Floating World“) had its origins in the red light districts of Edos and often depicted scenes of the Floating World itself such as geisha, kabuki actors, sumo wrestlers, samurai, chonin, and prostitutes.

The term *ukiyo* (when meaning the Floating World) is also an ironic allusion to the homophone *ukiyo* (Sorrowful World), the earthly plane of death and rebirth from which Buddhists sought release.

HONKYOKU

Honkyoku, meaning "original pieces", are compositions for the *shakuhachi* (Japanese bamboo flute) that were written by Zen monks to be played for *suizen*, "blowing meditation".

These monks mainly belonged to the *Fuke* sect of Zen (an offshoot sect of Zen) and were known to play the *shakuhachi* flute while wearing a large woven basket hat that covered their entire head as they went on pilgrimage.

SHODO / ZENGA

Shodo is Japanese calligraphy. It predates the arrival of Zen.

Zenga is the term for the practice and art of Zen Buddhist painting and calligraphy in the Japanese tea ceremony. The calligraphy denotes a poem and is often accompanied by a painting.

In keeping with individual paths to enlightenment, nearly any subject matter can lend itself to *Zenga*. Everything from a cat, to a bamboo shoot, to a man defecating in a field has been used to illustrate a particular point - although *enso* circles and Mt. Fuji are the most common elements.

The aim in making *Zenga* is to represent one's single-moment awareness by brushing each word or passage with a single flow of the brush, ultimately realising Zen and manifesting one's Zazen practice into physical and artistic action.

BUSHIDO

Bushido is a Japanese collective term for the many codes of honour, principles, and ideals associated with the *Samurai* (noble warriors) way of life. It is similar to the English word “chivalry”

From the 15th and 16th century onwards, Zen had a tremendous impact on *Samurai* warriors, many of whom adopted it as their official religion. The *Samurai* achieved perfection in martial arts such as:

Kendo
Judo
Karate
Aikido
Kyudo

The practice of Zen was ideal for the *Samurai* way of life as it put emphasis on self-composure, vigilance, and tranquility in the face of death. Zen Buddhism also taught the *Samurai* to have an intimate awareness of death, and it stressed the importance of detachment from material possessions.

ZEN-INSPIRED MARTIAL ARTS

Kendo

Kendo is a traditional Japanese martial art which descended from swordsmanship and uses bamboo swords and protective armour.

Karate

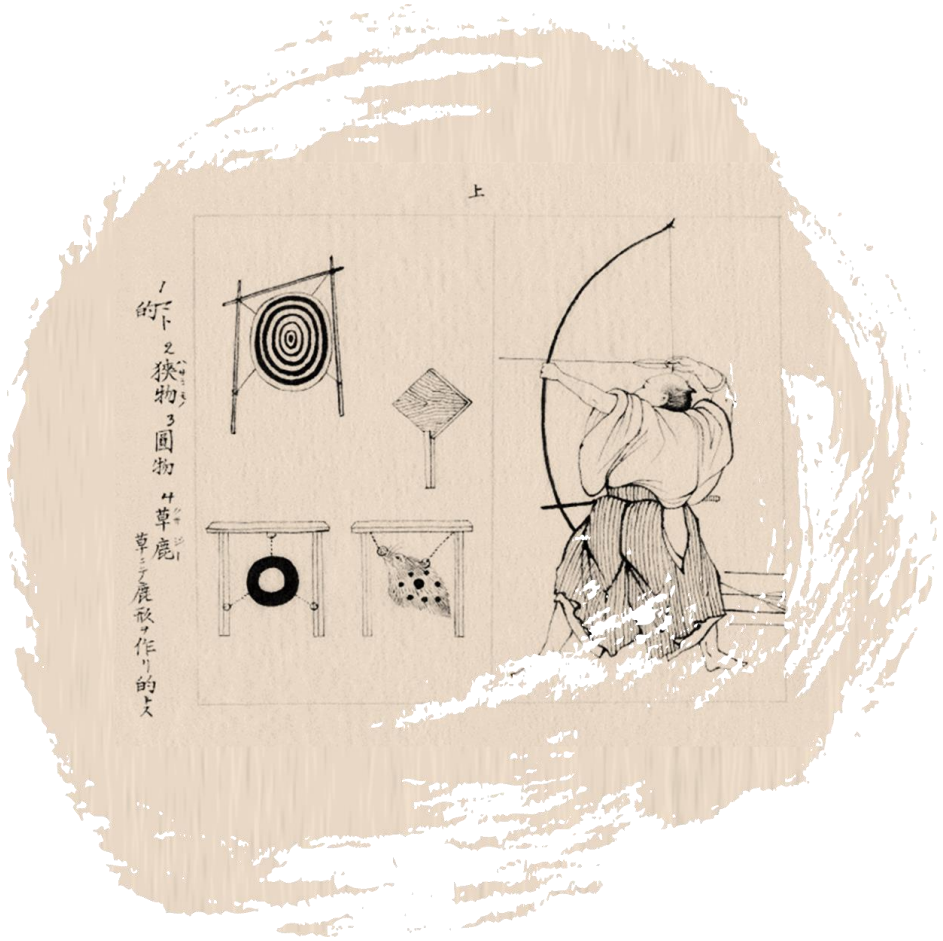
Karate is a martial art that developed from *kung-fu*. It is predominantly a striking art: punching, kicking, kneeing and elbowing.

Judo

Judo is a martial art that was developed from *Jiu Jitsu*. It was later developed into a more sport-oriented martial art. The aim is to take down or immobilise the opponent.

Aikido

Aikido is a modern martial art in which the practitioners aim to defend themselves while also protecting their attackers from injury.



KYUDO / KYUJUTSU

Kyudo, meaning the “Way of the Bow,” is the Japanese art of archery. Although it predates Zen it was deeply influenced by Zen philosophy and practice from the 16th century and even more so after the Second World War.

The International Kyudo Federation mentions the following three ethics of *Kyudo* :

Shin (Truth)
The greater purpose of the act of shooting the bow is to seeking the truth. Every shot is devoted to getting closer to the truth. The truth of the bow is measured by its *sae* (serenity), *tsurune* (sound of the string during release) and *tekichu* (hitting the target). *Kyudo* is a process of seeking *Shin* by improving these skills, one shot at a time.

Zen (Goodness)
The ethics of *Kyudo* such as *Rei* (courtesy) and *Fuso* (non-confrontation) requires one to always stay calm and not lose their composure. *Kyudo* does not promote strife, hostility or vengeance. The crucial idea of *Kyudo* is to associate, bond and be at peace with others while maintaining serenity at all times.

Bi (Beauty)
The *Sharei* (ceremonial shooting) is one way of expressing this concept of beauty. The Japanese *yumi* (bow) is exquisitely beautiful in its shape, but what really stimulates the sense of beauty is the dignity, the *Shintai Shusen* (harmony in all movements) and the rhythmical movement created by a calm state of mind.


ZEN QUOTES

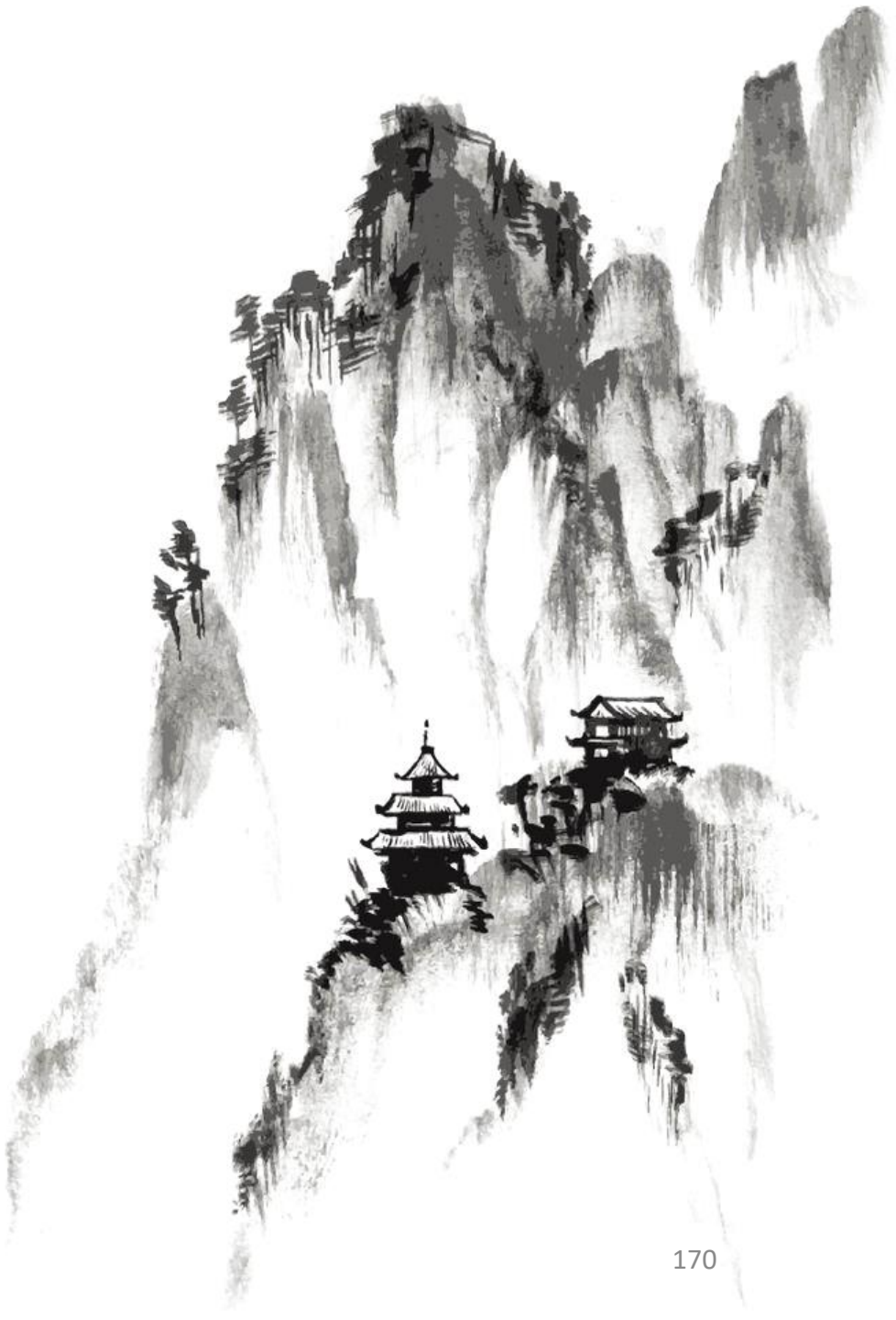
“The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in one dewdrop on the grass.”

— DOGEN ZENJI

Here, we learn the perspective that each of us is in the universe and the universe is in us. From one perspective, we are each an individual, puny and insignificant; but from another perspective, the entire universe reflects in us, out of us, because of us. The moon represents enlightenment and each of us is capable of realising it.

Dogen says:

“Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, The moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide.”



"Not thinking about anything is the Way. Once you know this, everything becomes the Way."

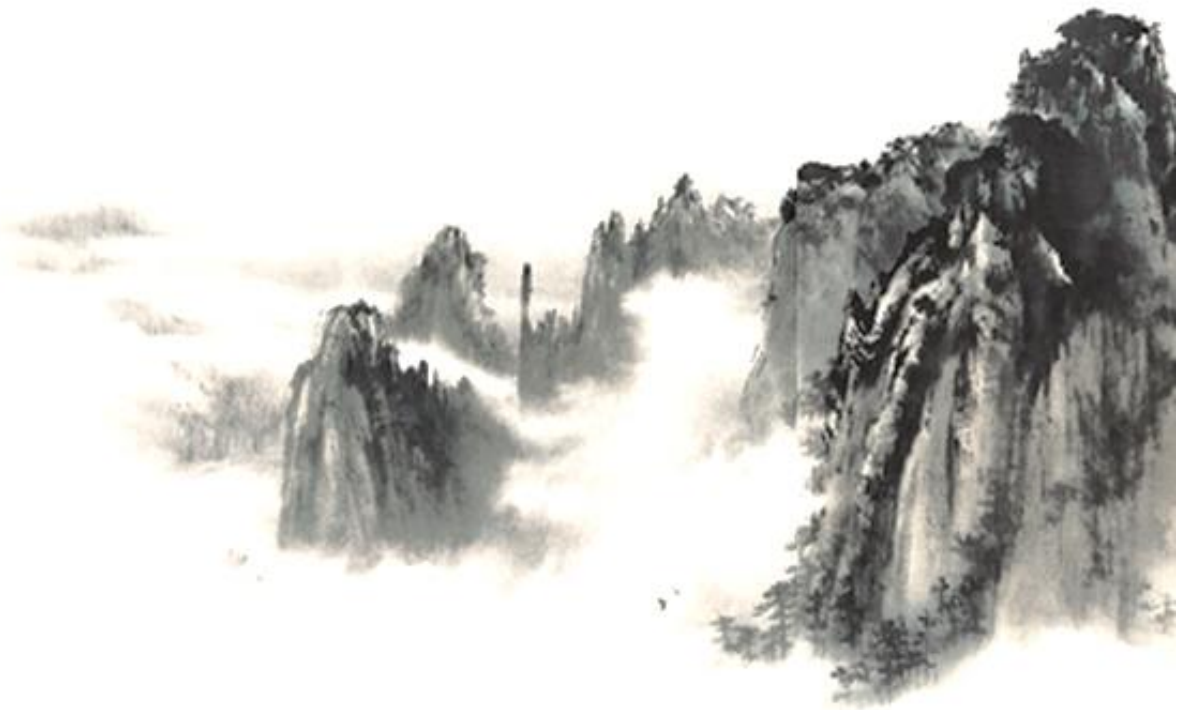
– BODHIDHARMA

Here, Bodhidharma reminds us to not practice Zen with an ulterior motive or hidden agenda. We mustn't do *zazen* meditation or think about the *Tao* because we seek *satori* (enlightenment). The injunction here is to do things unselfconsciously, without pretention, and without hope of a reward.

"To study Buddhism is to study ourselves. To study ourselves is to forget ourselves."

— DOGEN ZENJI

One of the primary purposes of Buddhism is to gain insight into our selves. And when we do this we realise that the self is an illusion, the ego or the "I" doesn't exist. Zen is the practice of forgetting ourselves – or realise that our self is connected to everything else and depends on everything else. Buddhism is the practice of expanding one's sense of self and seeing the unity in all things.

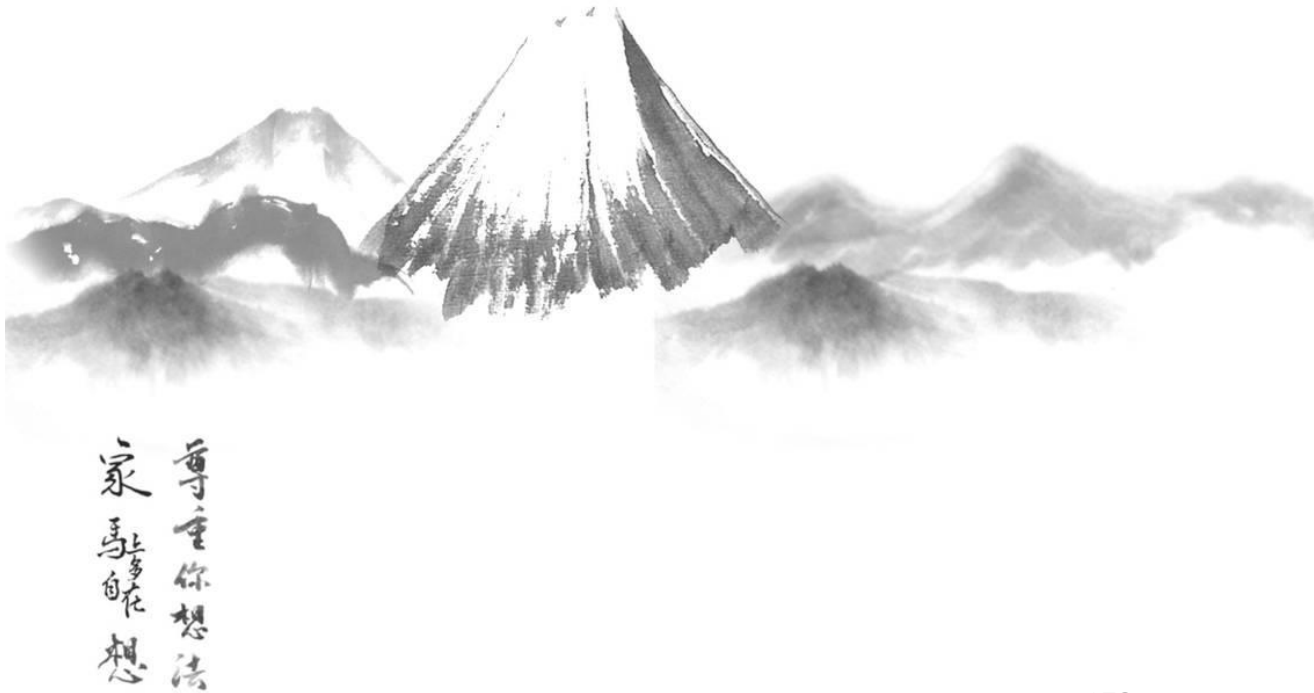


"You will not be punished for your anger; you will be punished by your anger."

— Buddhist proverb

In Zen, there is no god or supreme deity who will punish us for our foibles, frailties, fallibilities, and failures.

Rather, heaven and hell are states of mind. When we are angry, we create hell for ourselves. This hell is not a physical place, it is a mental state. We may not be able to stop the arising of anger, but we can certainly learn to check our reactivity to it and modify our behaviour when feel its presence rising in us.



"If you understand, things are just as they are. If you do not understand, things are just as they are."

– ZEN PROVERB

This proverb has a Taoist take on things. It essentially means that good and bad, right and wrong, understanding and ignorance are all relational and exist as part of a polarity. They have existed for thousands of years in the past and will continue to exist into the future.

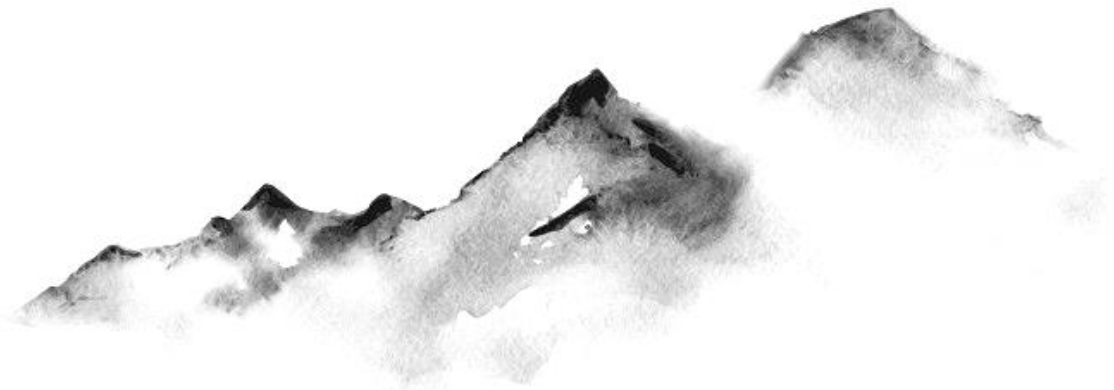
You cannot have one without the other. This is how things are. Whether we understand or not, whether we agree or not – that's just how things are.

That is the principle of the Tao.

“My advice to you, if you ever meet the Buddha, do not hesitate, kill him at once.”

– RINZAI ZENJI

In this quote, the injunction is not to literally kill a Buddha. Only a fool would think that. No. The instruction is to metaphorically slay the conception of a Buddha. If anyone claims to be enlightened then that is a clear indication they are not. If we find ourselves revering someone as a Buddha, then we must check our impulse to deify or worship any human.



ZEN ENLIGHTENMENT: TEN BULLS

Ten Bulls is a series of short poems found in the *Maha Gopalaka Sutta.* It also refers to the accompanying drawings used in the Zen tradition to describe the stages of a practitioner's progress toward enlightenment, and his or her return to society to enact wisdom and compassion.

The paintings were made popular in China by Kaku-an in the 12th Century.

In these paintings and poems, the bull (or ox) represents enlightenment or the awakened mind and the ox-herder represents a seeker of enlightenment.

1. IN SEARCH OF THE BULL

In the pasture of the world,
I endlessly push aside the tall
grasses in search of the Ox.
Following unnamed rivers,
lost upon the interpenetrating
paths of distant mountains,
My strength failing and my vitality
exhausted, I cannot find the Ox.

In this opening section of the poem, the individual is presented as searching for a bull. The bull represents enlightenment. The tall grasses represent the myriad aspects of conventional life that prevent us from achieving *satori*. Enlightenment appears far away.

But the point to remember is that the bull was never lost in the first place. We travel (metaphorically) far and wide in search, but we each have Buddha-nature and enlightenment already within us.

2. DISCOVERY OF THE FOOTPRINTS

Along the riverbank under the trees,
I discover footprints.
Even under the fragrant grass,
I see his prints.
Deep in remote mountains they are found.
These traces can no more be hidden
than one's nose, looking heavenward.

In this phase, the ox-herder discovers the footprints of the bull. The prints represent the teachings of the Buddha. The prints are everywhere. The seeker realises that just as many utensils are made from one metal, so too are myriad entities made of the fabric of self. The seeker at this stage realises that he’s no longer as hopelessly lost as he was before. At the very least, he is on the right path.

3. PERCEIVING THE BULL

I hear the song of the nightingale.
The sun is warm, the wind is mild,
willows are green along the shore -
Here no Ox can hide!
What artist can draw that massive head,
those majestic horns?

At this stage, the seeker gets an early adumbration or inkling of what it means to have an awakened mind. He begins to see the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things.

This unity is like salt in water, like color in dyestuff. This is the experience of having an expanded sense of self – making the first steps to transcending the separate individual ego.

4. CATCHING THE BULL

Catching the Bull
I seize him with a terrific struggle.
His great will and power
are inexhaustible.
He charges to the high plateau
far above the cloud-mists,
Or in an impenetrable ravine he stands.

Here, the seeker is presented as putting a great effort to maintain an awakened state of mind. *Satori* is presented as being metaphorically far above in the clouds or far below in a ravine. Try as he might, the seeker finds it difficult to achieve *satori*.

The seeker's mind is presented as wandering and being easily distracted.

5. TAMING THE BULL

The whip and rope are necessary,
Else he might stray off down
some dusty road.
Being well-trained, he becomes
naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.

Here, the seeker realises that to achieve enlightenment one must be disciplined. The whip and rope represent the various practices and philosophies associated with calming the mind. The practice of *Zazen* meditation will help calm the default everyday mind and help make enlightenment more accessible.

His mind is starting to become less easily distracted.

6. RIDING THE BULL HOME

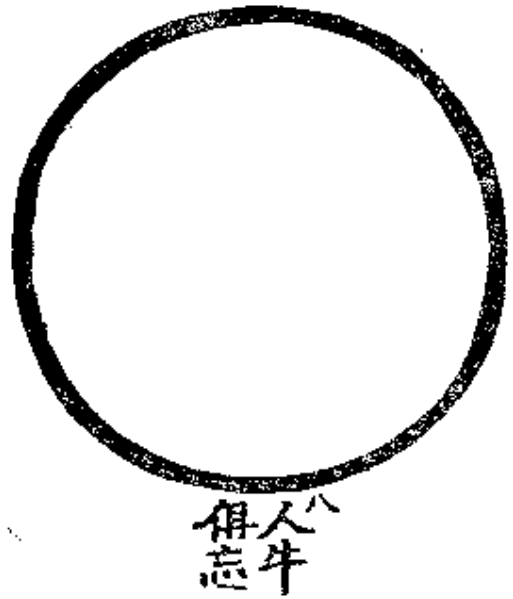
Mounting the Ox, slowly
I return homeward.
The voice of my flute intones
through the evening.
Measuring with hand-beats
the pulsating harmony,
I direct the endless rhythm.
Whoever hears this melody
will join me.

Here, the seeker has the bull under control and is returning home. Things seem more calm. He feels the rhythm of experience and the harmony of nature. Even others notice this tranquility in him. He is no longer easily distracted.

7. THE BULL TRANSCENDED

Astride the Ox, I reach home.
I am serene. The Ox too can rest.
The dawn has come. In blissful repose,
Within my thatched dwelling
I have abandoned the whip and ropes.

The aim of meditation is to not need to meditate. The seeker has arrived back home. His sense of tranquility is complete. His mind acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. He knows existence is transient, but this thought doesn't agitate him. Instead, it fills him with peace.



8. BOTH BULL AND SELF TRANSCENDED

Whip, rope, person, and Ox -
all merge in No Thing.
This heaven is so vast,
no message can stain it.
How may a snowflake exist
in a raging fire.
Here are the footprints of
the Ancestors.

The seeker realises that everything is connected – the ox representing enlightenment, the whip and rope representing the meditative practices, and the person representing the ox-herder. The person meditating, the act of meditation itself. and the realisation of enlightenment are all one.

Subject-Object-Action are in unity.

9. REACHING THE SOURCE

Too many steps have been taken
returning to the root and the source.
Better to have been blind and deaf
from the beginning!
Dwelling in one's true abode,
unconcerned with and without -
The river flows tranquilly on
and the flowers are red.

On achieving *satori* or reaching enlightenment, one realises that the long and arduous search for the bull was not required. Zen is like searching for an ox while riding on an ox. Buddha nature and enlightenment reside within each of us already. The herder left home in search of a bull and came back home realising he'd been riding on the bull all along.

Enlightenment is not a supernatural experience. The world and everything in it continue to be normal – the river flows and the flowers are red. Everything is as it should be.

10. RETURN TO SOCIETY

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.

After achieving *satori*, the seeker has transcended the ego. He doesn't cling to material things. He realises his mortality and sees his connection with all sentient life. He doesn't crave a supposed after-life. He no longer feels the need to read the scriptures He sees joy and wonder in everything. He experiences awe and happiness in the here and now. Like a *bodhisattva* he returns to everyday society to help other people on their journey to enlightenment and help everyone achieve *satori* and help them reach the realisation that Buddha-nature resides in all of us.

KOAN

A *koan* is a paradoxical anecdote or a riddle that has no solution. It is used in Zen to show the inadequacy of logical reasoning. Although *koans* may be non-sense, they are not nonsense.

Even though Zen values the intellect and reason, there are certain insights that are simply not possible through taxing the rational mind. This is where a *koan* comes in handy. It helps break the logical mind and teaches to arrive at certain realisations through intuition and experience.

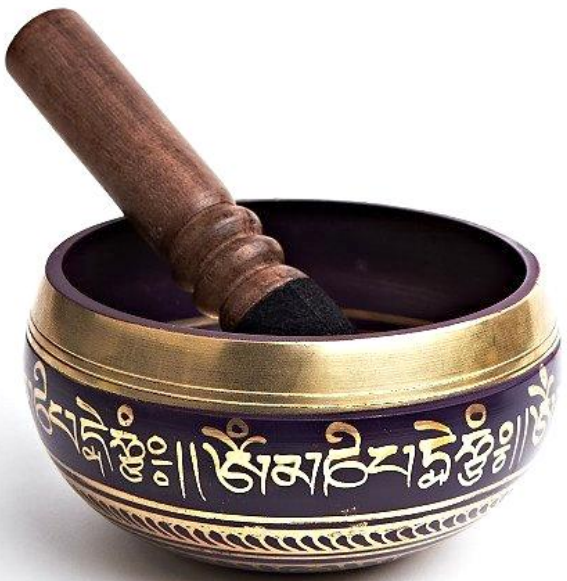
Modern Quantum Physics is filled with paradoxes that make no sense to the rational mind:

- Subatomic particles have both wave and particle nature at the same time.
- Time stands still at the speed of light.
- Space is curved by gravity.
- Force and matter are the same at the quantum level.
- There may be more than three spatial dimensions.
- Matter and energy are interconvertible.

These scientific precepts cannot be grasped by the rational mind and are counter-intuitive from a common-sense perspective. The same is true with *koans*. If we try to understand them rationally, we are doomed to be frustrated.

The *koan* was devised as a way for Zen monks to indicate to the master that they had truly learned the insights to be had from Zen and were not simply parroting doctrines or reciting dogmatic verses from the scriptures.

A *koan* was presented almost as a test or an exam by a master. The monk-pupil would volunteer a response. Often, they'd use their logical mind. Invariably, the master would see through that and they would fail. It was only when the Zen master was convinced that the pupil was genuinely being spontaneous that they would pass the test.



WHAT IS THE SOUND OF ONE HAND?

An example of a response would be for the pupil to stick out his hand and shout, “Hand!” Indicating that all concepts and all forms are ultimately abstractions of the mind.

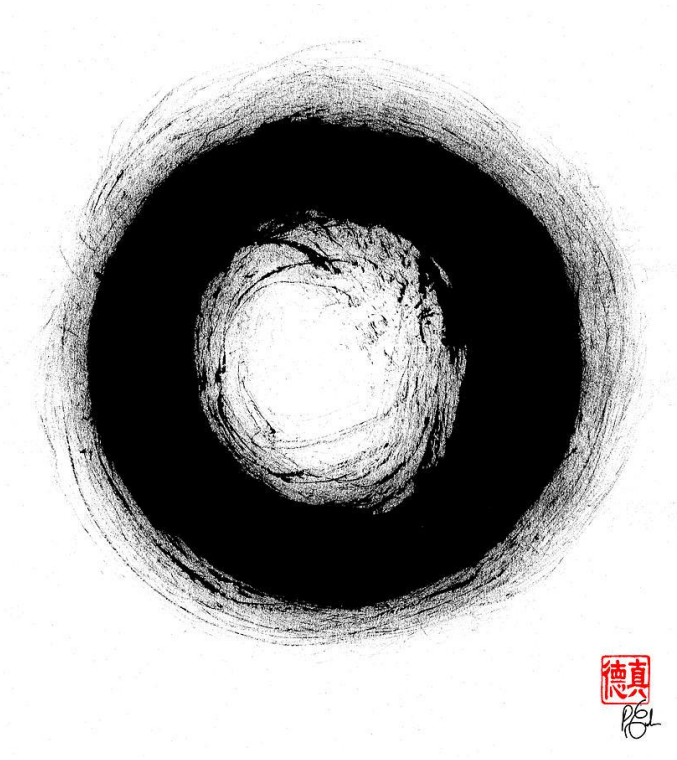
Another response could be for the pupil to remain in silence; indicating his understanding of the sound of no sound.

Yet another response would be for the pupil to slap the master across the cheek; indicating that the pupil realises there is no master, no pupil, and that this is all a sham. The secret is that there is no secret.

Of course, all these responses would need to have a certain spontaneity about them. If the master discerned these responses were rehearsed or contrived, he wouldn’t be impressed.

ON THE SEA, A CHINESE JUNK WITH ITS SAIL IN FULL IS RACING. STOP IT.

An example of a response would be for the pupil to leap up and pretend to be ship moving on the ocean pretending his robes were the sails; indicating the realisation that object (Chinese junk) subject (pupil) and action (sailing) are all one and the same and are in fact abstractions of the mind.

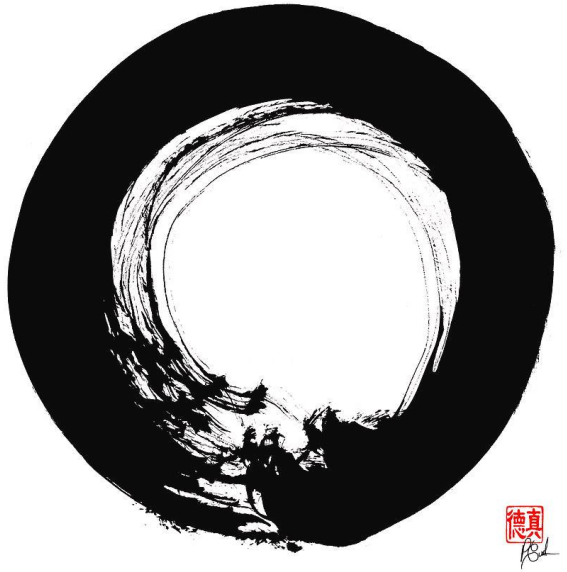


PICK UP A STONE FROM THE DEEP ISE SEA WITHOUT GETTING YOUR SLEEVE WET.

A possible response would be for the pupil to pretend to dive into the ocean and present a stone; indicating that sea, wetness, and stone are concepts created by the mind.

WHAT IS THE NAME OF THIS STONE?

If the master was sufficiently impressed, he might ask a follow-up *koan* : what is the name of this stone? The pupil might answer with his own name, indicating his experiential understanding of the fundamental unity of everything.



FROM THE FIRST DRAWER OF THE MEDICINE CABINET, DRAW OUT MT. FUJI.

The pupil might respond by saying, “Master, if your stomach is upset, let me fetch you some medicine,” – indicating a metaphorical understanding of the problem or making a non-logical association between the pain of a stomach upset and the size of Mt. Fuji.

Bodhidharma is widely recognised as the monk who brought Buddhism from India to China. He was the First Patriarch.

Bodhidharma left his robe and bowl to his chosen successor; and each patriarch thereafter handed it down to the monk that, in his wisdom, he had chosen as the next successor. Gunin was the fifth such Zen patriarch. One day he announced that his successor would be he who wrote the best verse expressing the truth of their sect.

The learned chief monk of Gunin's monastery thereupon took brush and ink, and wrote in elegant characters:

The Body Is A Bodhi-tree
The Soul A Shining Mirror:
Polish It With Study
Or Dust Will Dull The Image.

No other monk dared compete with the chief monk. But at twilight, Yeno, a lowly disciple who had been working in the kitchen, passed through the hall where the poem was hanging. Having read it, he picked up a brush that was lying nearby, and below the other poem he wrote in his crude hand:

BODHI IS NOT A TREE;
THERE IS NO SHINING MIRROR.
SINCE ALL BEGINS WITH NOTHING
WHERE CAN DUST COLLECT?

Later that night, Gunin, the fifth patriarch, called Yeno to his room. “I have read your poem,” said he, “and have chosen you as my successor. Here: take my robe and my bowl. But our chief monk and the others will be jealous of you and may do you harm. Therefore I want you to leave the monastery tonight, while the others are asleep.”

In the morning the chief monk learned the news, and immediately rushed out, following the path Yeno had taken. At midday he overtook him, and without a word tried to pull the robe and bowl out of Yeno’s hands.

Yeno put down the robe and the bowl on a rock by the path. “These are only things which are symbols,” he said to the monk. “If you want the things so much, please take them.”

The monk eagerly reached down and seized the objects. But he could not budge them. They had become heavy as a mountain.

“Forgive me,” he said at last, “I really want the teaching, not the things. Will you teach me?”

Yeno replied, “Stop thinking this is mine and stop thinking this is not mine. Then tell me, where are you? Tell me also: what did your face look like, before your parents were born?”


ZEN PARABLES AND ANECDOTES

Yamaoka Tesshu, as a young student of Zen, visited one master after another. He called upon Dokuon of Shokoku.

Desiring to show his attainment, he said: "The mind, Buddha, and sentient beings, after all, do not exist. The true nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realization, no delusion, no sage, no mediocrity. There is no giving and nothing to be received."

Dokuon, who was smoking quietly, said nothing. Suddenly he whacked Yamaoka with his bamboo pipe. This made the youth quite angry.

"If nothing exists," inquired Dokuon, "where did this anger come from?"

Very often, Zen students learn the doctrines and dogmas of Buddhism. They memorise it by heart, take things literally, and parrot it without thought.

By whacking Yamaoka with the bamboo pipe, Dokuon was looking to help him realise that pain and suffering exist, realisation and delusion exist, joy and anger exist.

But we can also learn to transcend such states.

Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling.

Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

"Come on, girl" said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. He was fuming.

Then he no longer could restrain himself. "We monks don't go near females," he told Tanzan, "especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?"

"I left the girl there," said Tanzan. "Are you still carrying her?"

The basic lesson we learn from this parable is not to get attached to things – whether material objects or immaterial ideas.

Ekido was fixated on the rule that said monks mustn't associate with females. He took the rule literally.

Tanzan, on the other hand, took the rule spiritually and psychologically. He realised the true meaning of the rule is to not allow oneself to fixate on women. Hence, from his perspective all he did was help another human being in need, which is what all good monks and all good people ought to do. He let her down physically and mentally.

Ekido was still mentally fixated on her long after they left her presence.

A rich man asked Sengai to write something for the continued prosperity of his family so that it might be treasured from generation to generation.

Sengai obtained a large sheet of paper and wrote: "Father dies, son dies, grandson dies."

The rich man became angry. "I asked you to write something for the happiness of my family! Why do you make such a joke of this?"

"No joke is intended," explained Sengai. "If before you yourself die your son should die, this would grieve you greatly. If your grandson should pass away before your son, both of you would be broken-hearted. If your family, generation after generation, passes away in the order I have named, it will be the natural course of life. I call this real prosperity."

The lesson Sengai was looking to teach is the essence of Taoist philosophy – which was the wellspring of Zen. Life and death are part of nature. To desire not to die brings anxiety and dissatisfaction. Clinging to life out of fear or desperation brings no enlightenment. When we realise life and death are polarities and that one follows the other just as naturally as day follows night, that is when our mind will be at peace.

Fa-yen Weni was a rewoned 10th century Chinese Zen monk. He once asked the monk Hsuan-tzu why he had never asked him any questions about Zen. The monk explained that he had already attained his understanding from another master.

Pressed by Fa-yen for an explanation, the monk Hsuan-tzu said that when he had asked his teacher, "What is the meaning of Buddhism?" he had received the answer, "Ping-ting comes for fire!"

"A good answer!" said Fa-yen. "But I'm sure you don't understand it."

"Ping-ting," explained Hsuan, "is the god of fire. For him to be seeking for fire is like myself, seeking the Buddha. I'm the Buddha already, and no asking is needed."

"Just as I thought!" laughed Fa-yen. "You didn't get it."

The monk said, "Well, how would you answer?"

"Go ahead, ask me." said Fa-yen.

"What is the meaning of Buddhism?" inquired Hsuan.

"Ping-ting comes for fire!"

Here, the question "What is the meaning of Buddhism?" can also be understand as "What is the first principle of Buddhism?" or "What is Buddha-nature?"

The point Fa-yen is trying to make is that the answer to the question does not come in rationally understanding Buddha nature. Neither is *satori* achieved through the intellect. It is a experience to be felt.

Hsuan-tzu's attempt to rationally articulate his understanding indicated to Fa-yen that Hsuan-tzu still didn't understand the importance of transcending language.

However, Fa-yen then replies with the same line, "Ping-ting comes for fire," not because he's being deliberately vague or obscurantist, but to drive home the point that such insight needs to be directly experienced and cannot be rationalised into words.

Alan Watts narrates an occasion where an officer of the army came to Nansen, a Zen master.

The officer said, "Sir, I have heard a very strange story and I want to know your answer to it. Once upon a time there was a man who kept a goose in a bottle. And it grew so large that he couldn't get it out. Now, he didn't want to break the bottle and he didn't want to hurt the goose, so how does he get it out?"

And the master changed the subject and said something like, "you know, it's a nice day today, isn't it? The waterfall's making a lovely sound outside."

And so they went on, in pleasant conversation.

And then the officer got up to leave. As he walked away to the door the master said, "Oh, officer?"

The officer turned around and said, "Yes?"

And the master said with a clap, "There! It's out!"

Here, the question presents an obviously impossible choice. The Zen master knows this. He also knows that the army officer's mind is now fixated on this problem. What he does is to distract the army officer and take his mind off the problem. And as the officer leaves the Zen master declares the goose is out.

The goose is out – not in a literal way – because that was impossible from the very beginning. Instead, when the officer's thoughts were focused on other things, the goose was out of the officer's restless logical mind.

The point we learn is that there is no bottle, no goose. These are all conceptual creations of the mind. And when the mind is stilled consciousness experiences release.

In early times in Japan, bamboo-and-paper lanterns were used with candles inside. A blind man, visiting a friend one night, was offered a lantern to carry home with him.

"I do not need a lantern," he said. "Darkness or light is all the same to me."

"I know you do not need a lantern to find your way," his friend replied, "but if you don't have one, someone else may run into you. So you must take it."

The blind man started off with the lantern and before he had walked very far someone ran squarely into him.

"Look out where you are going!" he exclaimed to the stranger. "Can't you see this lantern?"

"Your candle has burned out, brother," replied the stranger.

The lantern here is a metaphor for all the philosophies, doctrines, religious dogmas, and prophets and priests we depend on to give us direction in life.

Oftentimes, we think these are showing us the way, but the truth is the light has gone out, and we don’t realise that our clinging to it is futile.

Two monks were arguing about a flag.

One said: "The flag is moving."

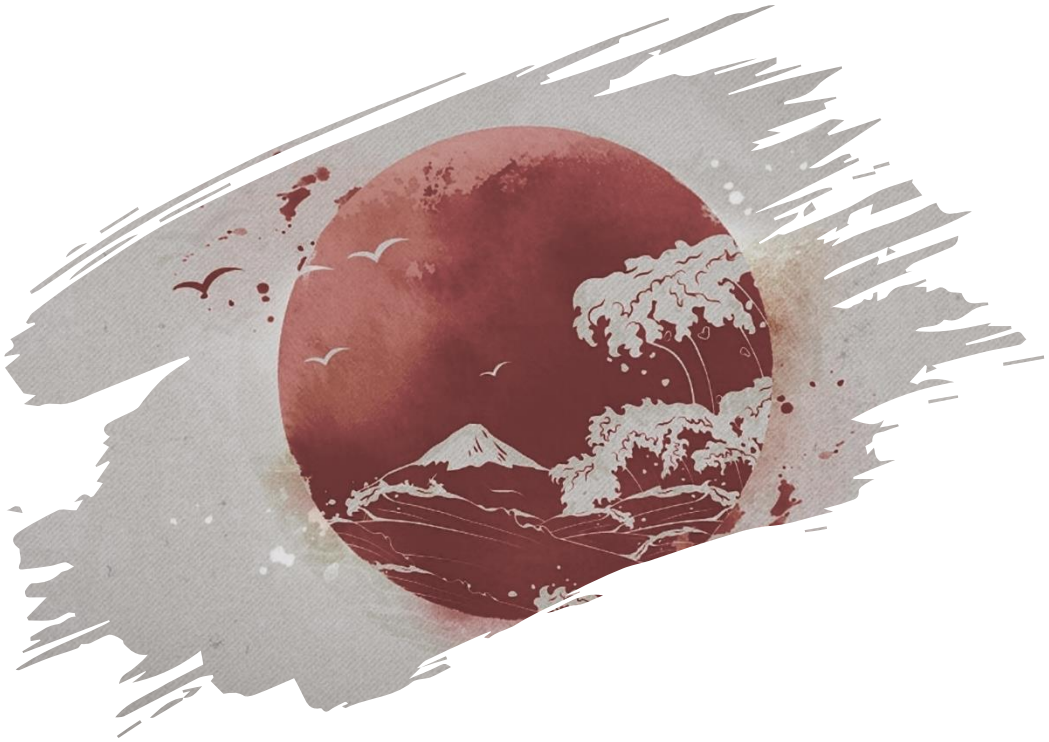
The other said: "The wind is moving."

The sixth patriarch happened to be passing by.

He told them: "Not the wind, not the flag; mind is moving."

It is not the wind that is moving; nor the flag. It is the mind that moves. What this means is that all our perceptions and opinions are the product of the mind. During *Zazen* meditative practice we reach the realisation that subject, object, and action are one.

Disputation will not resolve this. Words and language cannot convey this. It needs to be experienced for oneself.



A Zen student told Ummon: "Brilliancy of Buddha illuminates the whole universe."

Before he finished the phrase Ummon asked: "You are reciting another's poem, are you not?"

"Yes," answered the student.

"You are sidetracked," said Ummon.

Afterwards another teacher, Shishin, asked his pupils: "At what point did that student go off the track?"

Zen, *satori*, Buddha-nature are experiences to be felt not words to be understood.

The moment we use words to convey these experiences we have already failed.

The 13th century Chinese Zen master, Mumon Ekai has this to say:

“If anyone perceives Ummon's particular skillfulness, he will know at what point the student was off the track:

When a fish meets the fishhook
If he is too greedy, he will be caught.
When his mouth opens
His life already is lost.”

ZEN AND GEISHA

A geisha is Japanese woman trained to entertain men with conversation and singing and dancing. Alan Watts tells the following story about an encounter between a Zen master and a geisha:

"There was a very interesting dinner party once where a Zen master was present, and there was a geisha girl who served so beautifully and had such style that he suspected she must have some Zen training. And after a while, when she pours to fill his sake cup, he bowed to her and said, 'I'd like to give you a present.' And she said, 'I would be most honored.' And he took the iron chopsticks that are used for the *hibachi* – the charcoal brazier; moving the charcoal around – he picked up a piece of red-hot charcoal and gave it to her. Well, she had very long sleeves on her kimono—she whirled the sleeves around her hands and took the hot charcoal, withdrew to the kitchen, dumped it, and changed her kimono because it was burnt through. Then she came back into the room, and after a suitable interval she stopped before the Zen master and bowed to him and said, 'I would like to give you, sir, a present.' And he said, 'I would be very much honored.' And so she picked up a piece of coal and offered it to him. He immediately produced a cigarette and said, 'Thank you, that's just what I needed'."

CONCLUSION

BUDDHA NATURE IS NOT SUPERNATURAL

Friedric Lieberman points out that “Buddha-nature is not metaphysical, not something apart from ourselves. There is nothing to gain from enlightenment. We realise that there is nothing to realise.”

Some Zen scholars have been more forthright about this than others. Zen monk and scholar, D. T. Suzuki has said: "Before Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains; during Zen study, things become confused; after enlightenment, men are men and mountains are mountains, only one's feet are a little off the ground."

In his book, *History of Chinese Philosophy,* Fung Yu-Lan points holds that there is nothing at all: we have always been enlightened, and will forever be deluded; Zen enlightenment consists only in this realisation.

WHEN YOU GET THE MESSAGE, HANG UP THE PHONE

Enlightenment consists in coming to the realisation that Buddha-nature exists in everyone. When we practice *zazen* meditation or look into our self or see into our own mind, we will find the Buddha-nature that has been there all along. Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, is no greater or less than the lowest sentient being—all share in Buddha-nature.

When we truly get this message, we can hang up the phone. There is no further use for Zen.

THE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHISM ARE EMPTY

The *Prajnaparamitahrdaya* (Heart Sutra) is an important *sutra* (aphorism) in Zen. It says that even the teachings of Buddhism are empty and should not be clung to as irrefutable truths.

ATMAN & REINCARNATION

In the Hindu system of belief, the *atman* is the equivalent of the individual's soul. The mind and body is considered the car and the *atman* is the driver. According to this theory, when the body-mind dies, the *atman* is reincarnated into a new body.

Vedanta philosophy teaches us that ultimately, all individual *atmans* are manifestations of the *Paramatman* (the Absolute)

However, in Buddhism, it is not necessary to believe in *atmans*. In his book, *Realising Genjokoan,* Zen scholar Shohaku Okumura, mentions that "the Buddha's teaching on this subject was called an-*atman*, or no-*atman* ("no soul," "no essential existence", or "no self.") He opposed the basic idea of atman as a permanent entity that transmigrates in samsara. The Buddha taught that the world is comprised solely of five aggregates (form/materiality, sensations, perception, mental formulations, and consciousness. He taught that these aggregates are the sole constituents of the human body and mind, and that there is no separate, permanent owner that is the essence of a human being."

Of course, Gautama Siddhartha (the Buddha) was a human being just like the rest of us. He had no privileged insight into the afterlife that the rest of humanity doesn't have. However, the basic approach he takes here in denying the *atman* is what we today call scientific scepticism:

The Sagan Standard: Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

The Hitchens' Razor: What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.

ZEN PRAGMATISM

What Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) is emphasising with his pragmatic scepticism is to focus on practical knowledge that affects our behaviour here and now; not theoretical knowledge that may or may not have an impact us in an after-life.

In the *Majjhima Nikaya* Buddhist scripture, the Buddha narrates the story of a man who was struck by a poisoned arrow and is bleeding to death. His friend calls a doctor to remove the arrow. However, before allowing the doctor to remove the arrow, the man insists on getting information about the name of the person who shot the arrow, where he is from, the complexion of his skin and various other ridiculous details that have nothing to do with pulling out the arrow and fixing the bleeding.

In this story, the bleeding man is compared to those who refuse to practice the *dharma* and change their moral and ethical behaviour until they are given answers to all their metaphysical questions – about souls, reincarnations, nature of sin, beginning and end of the cosmos, meaning of infinity etc.

Stephen Batchelor points out that “the purpose of the Buddha’s teaching is not to resolve doubts about the nature of reality by providing answers to such conundrums, but to offer a practice that will remove the arrow of reactivity, thereby restoring the practitioner's health and enabling them to flouring here on earth.”

BUDDHIST DOGMAS

A dogma is a doctrine or belief that is proclaimed to be true without evidence or based solely on authority.

The Buddhist scholar, Stephen Batchelor points out that Buddhism abounds in dogmatic claims – these include the four noble truths, the twelve links of dependent origination, and various claims about karma and reincarnation. These are all presented as self-evident facts revealed through the Buddha's enlightenment and confirmed by his omniscience. We are not called upon to question them but to accept them as unshakable, non-negotiable foundations upon which to build a Buddhist practice.”

In Buddhism, one is expected to accept these dogmas without question.

However, what distinguishes Zen from other forms of Buddhism is that one may dismiss such dogma and still find enlightenment.

BUDDHIST RITUALS

Buddhism abounds in rituals as well. These include a dizzying array of *mantras* (chants) and *mudras* (gestures) and a wide assortment of prayers to say and pilgrimages to make.

In Zen, one may discard all of the rituals. If there is one practice that goes to the core of Zen, then it probably is *zazen* meditation.

EXISTENTIAL INTELLIGENCE

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences posits that there are a number of distinct forms of intelligence that each individual possesses in varying degrees. There are different ways of being intelligent. In its essence, Multiple Intelligences considers the ability to sing and dance, to play music and sports, to sympathise and empathise, to reflect and introspect, to role-play and emote… all as different ways of being intelligent.

We each have all the intelligences but in varying degrees.

The eight types of intelligences are:

- Linguistic intelligence ("word smart")
- Logical-mathematical intelligence ("number/reasoning smart")
- Spatial intelligence ("picture smart")
- Bodily-Kinaesthetic intelligence ("body smart")
- Musical intelligence ("music smart")
- Interpersonal intelligence ("people smart")
- Intrapersonal intelligence ("self smart")
- Naturalist intelligence ("nature smart")

However, he later added Existential Intelligence ("cosmic smart") as a discreet type of intelligence.

It is the intelligence ascribed to those who think philosophically; it involves an individual's ability to contemplate values and intuition to understand themselves and the world around them. People who possess this intelligence are able to see the big picture and ask the big questions. They are able to see the interconnectedness of different aspects of life and wonder about the complexity and diversity of the universe

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EXISTENTIAL INTELLIGENCE AND SATORI

Howard Gardner said, "*This candidate for intelligence is based on the human proclivity to ponder the most fundamental questions of existence. Why do we live? Why do we die? Where do we come from? What is going to happen to us? I sometimes say that these are questions that transcend perception; they concern issues that are too big or small to be perceived by our five sensory systems*."

Those genuinely drawn to Zen and who deeply seek to understand themselves and wonder about our connection to the rest of the universe are individuals with a higher degree of Existential Intelligence. Often, they are able to intuitively and speedily grasp some of the more spiritual, esoteric, and seemingly abstract principles of Zen.

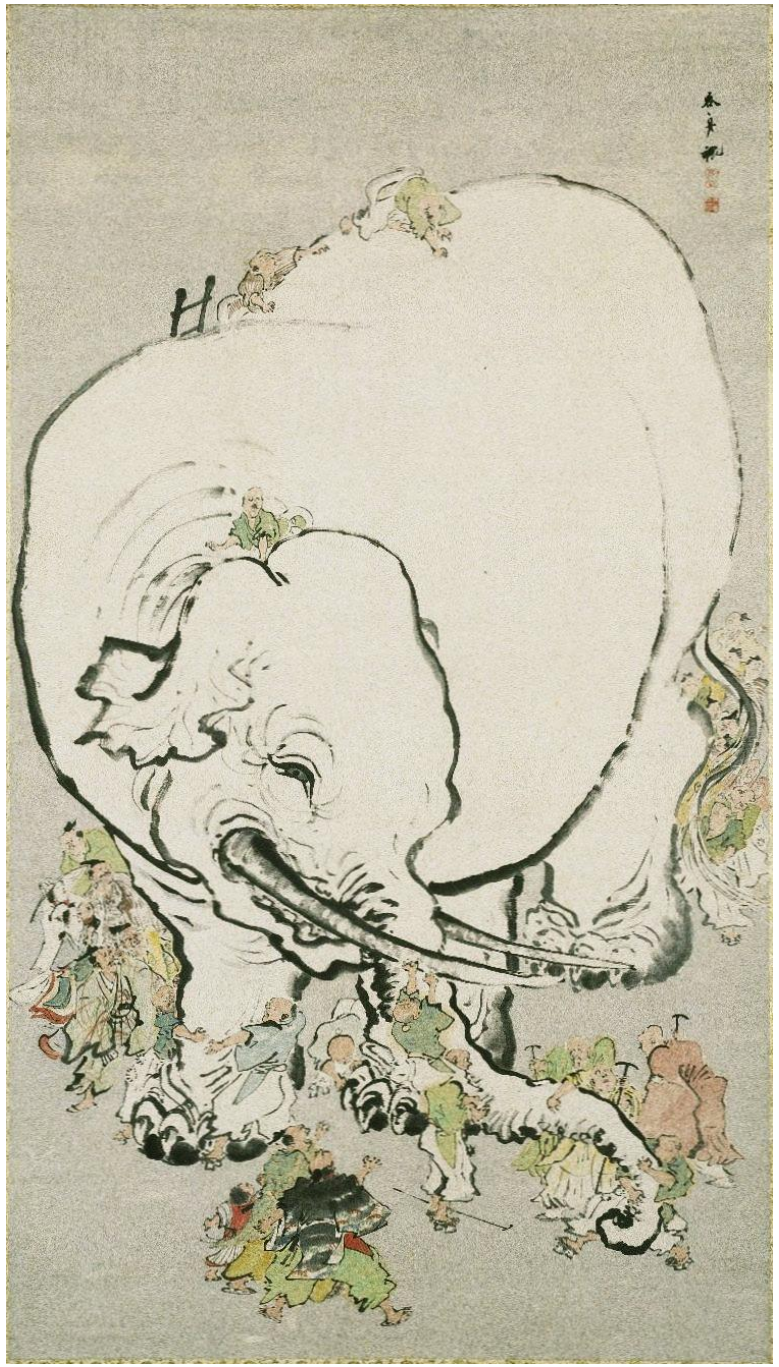
Other people are wanting in this type of intelligence. They therefore need years of practice, rituals, readings, punishments, rewards, meditation etc. before they understand what it means to be have an awakened mind.

The same is true of artists, musicians, and sportspeople. Some of us intuitively know how to make art or music or play sports – others need years of training and practice. At the end of that training, maybe some will end up being good at art, music, or sports, and others won't.

The same is true of Zen practice.

A lot of Eastern practices are designed to help those who don't have a naturally high degree of Existential Intelligence and therefore don't intuitively understand concepts of *satori* or *trishna*. They don't immediately understand that enlightenment is not some obscure, mystical, deep dark cosmic secret. They cannot accept that the secret is that there is no secret.

As Fredric Lieberman points out, enlightenment consists in realising that Buddha-nature exists in everything and everyone. "See into your own mind" and you will find the Buddha-nature that has been there all along. The historical Buddha is no greater or less than the lowest sentient being—all share in Buddha-nature."



THE ELEPHANT AND THE FOUR BLIND MEN

The *Udana* is a Buddhist scripture that is part of the Pali Canon.

In it, the Buddha uses the parable of four blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time. They each separately hold on to the trunk, the tail, a leg, and a tusk.

Of course, when they are asked to describe what an elephant is they each give a wildly different account based on their limited experience. They are furious at one another and each accuses the other of being dishonest.

The parable illustrates that there are a range of subjective truths.

We also learn that humans, with our limited experience, are as incapable of comprehending any notion of Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality (whatever that means) as the blind men are of seeing the elephant.

Zen is just one tool we use to gain insight into ourselves or reality. It is one way of achieving *satori* or an awakened mind. One needn't cling to Zen as the only way for everyone at all times.

THE THREE VINEGAR-TASTERS

The Three Vinegar-tasters is an allegorical painting of Confucius, Buddha, and Lao-Tzu gathered around a vat of vinegar.

Confucius has a sour expression as if to say, “The vinegar is sour. We must *teach* the correct recipe in order to make proper pickles.”

Buddha has a bitter expression as if to say, “The vinegar is bitter. Only by not desiring a pickle can one eliminate bitterness.”

And Lao-Tzu has a neutral expression, as if to say, “It’s all good. Sure the vinegar is both bitter and sweet. That is the way nature intends vinegar pickles to taste.”

This painting illustrates that there are different perspectives. But it also illustrates that since the three men are gathered around one vat of vinegar, the "three teachings" are one.

THIS IS IT

Dogen's classic 13th Zen book, *Shobogenzo* is widely considered a masterpiece. In it he says, "Therefore if there are fish that would swim or birds that would fly only after investigating the entire ocean or sky, the would find neither path no place."

What this means is we mustn't be like a fish that wants to understand the ocean before swimming, or a bird that needs a reason to fly before flying.

It also means that a fish can choose to swim in a small range, but it has the entire ocean to explore if it so wishes. Same with a bird and the sky. So too, us humans have the entire sky and ocean to explore. Here, the sky and the ocean are metaphors for Buddha-nature or enlightenment. We are immersed in it, whether we realise it or not. It is ours to explore as much as we desire.

Dogen also says, "Since ancient times, no fish has ever left the water and no bird has ever left the sky."

In other words, this life is all we have.

ZEN AND GOD

In Alan Watts' autobiography, he asks the reader to consider the thought that the god of a flower would not be a transcendental flower. Rather, the god of a flower would be a field – a field that fostered other flowers and trees, a field that nurtured bees and insects and so on. Connect that idea to humans.

Many humans conceive of god as a transcendental human (many even see him as male!).

However, applying the field idea to humans, it would make sense to conceive of the human god as our planet and the universe we live in. The planet sustains us and the universe sustains our planet.

This is a beautiful and transcendental way of contemplating god from a Zen perspective.


ZEN
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AFTERWORD

By our very nature, humans are finite and limited. To believe even for a moment that we can grasp a supposed Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality – or, to understand the Mind of God, if you will – is to be guilty of a great hubris and to reveal a lamentable level of ignorance.

Can a centipede creeping on a tree branch even begin to fathom the meaning and purpose of the towns and cities around it?

Can an ant crawling on a circuit board have even the faintest adumbrations of what the function and significance of computers are?

Can a catfish lurking at the bottom of a murky pond have any idea of the existence of the billion of stars and galaxies out there?

Humans are like the centipedes, ants, and catfish. We too are bound by our senses, by our human frailties, our biological inadequacies, our mental limitations, and ultimately by the deficiencies of language. Of course, humans can build tools and create technologies that give us a wider view and a grander perspective. But we still interpret and comprehend the output of our tools and technologies through our limited perspective.

To think we can grasp an Ultimate Reality or Absolute Truth (should such a thing even exist) whether through Zen or through any other system of thought or practice, is a fool's belief.

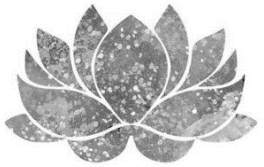
Just as a bacterium doesn't have either the intellectual or physical ability to zoom out and see the big picture, we humans don't have the ability to see the "entirety of reality" (should such a thing even exist).

An atlas is a likeness of the Earth. It is a limited representation of the Earth not a facsimile. In the same way, it is not possible for our mental images of the world to be an exact copy of reality.

All we can hope to do is to continue to create mental models of the world around us, develop ethical systems for us to live contented lives, and enquire perpetually into the nature of things.

Zen is a tool for self improvement. That's all it is.

Enlightenment is a journey not a destination.



Enjoy the journey.

APPENDIX

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

The Way of Zen by Alan W. Watts

An Introduction to Zen Buddhism by D. T. Suzuki

The Tao of Zen by Ray Grigg

The Spirit of Zen by Sam van Schaik

The Spirit of Buddhist Meditation by Sarah Shaw

After Buddhism by Stephen Batchelor

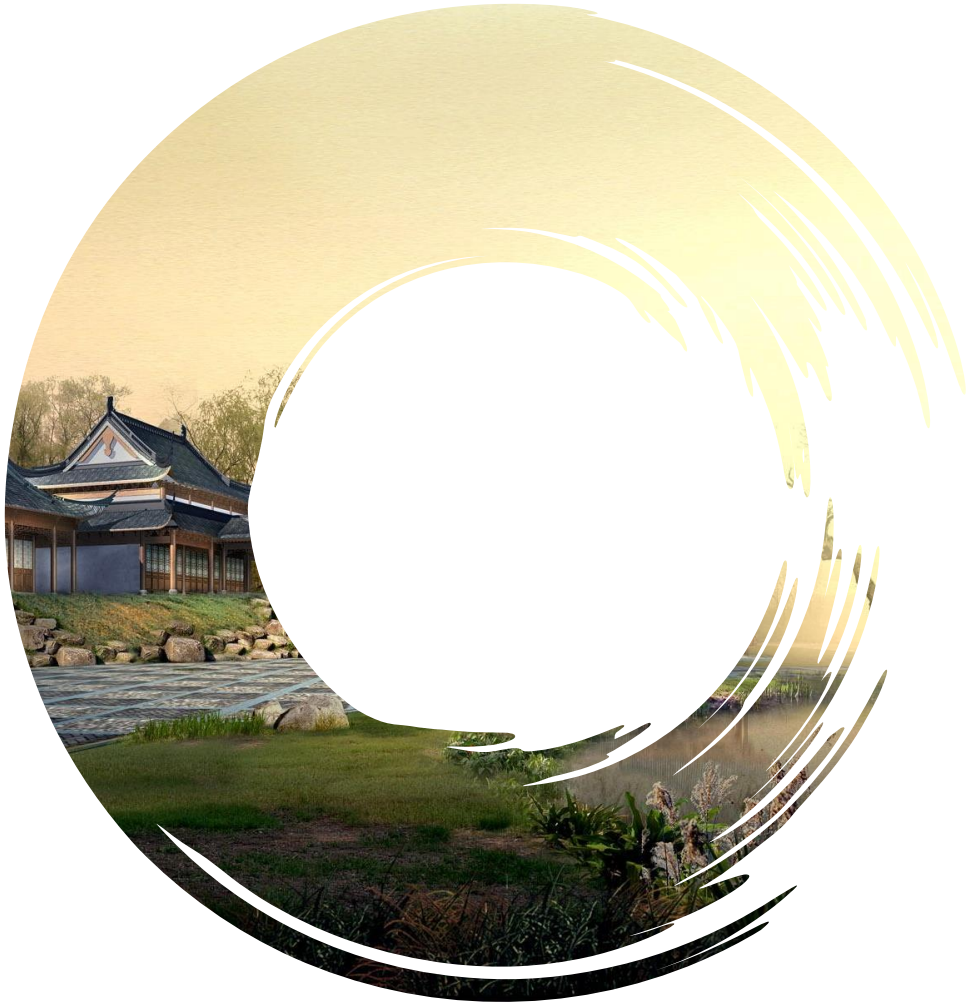
Why I Am Not a Buddhist by Evan Thompson

The Art of Solitude by Stephen Batchelor

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki

Zen Flesh, Zen Bones by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert M Pirsig



RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

Alan Watts: Buddhism and Science

BBC: The Long Search – With Ronald Eyre

Alan Watts: Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life

Stephen Batchelor: A Secular Buddhism

Japanese Broadcasting Corporation: Zen Principles and Practices

Cosmos Pictures: Among White Clouds

BBC: Seven Wonders of the Buddhist World

Jehm Films: Yogis of Tibet

Alan Watts: What is Zen?

RECOMMENDED MUSIC

Vyanah Music: Zen Music

Alan Watts: Zen Chillstep

Kohachiro Miyata: Shakuhachi [The Japanese Flute]

Nanae Yoshimura - The Art of Koto

Keith Smith: Sleep Easy Relax

Yellow Brick Cinema: Tibetan Meditation Music

Nu Meditation Music: Chinese Zen Music

Relaxing Tube: Koto, Zen Garden

Lounge Central: The Far East

Healing Sounds: Tibetan Singing Bowl

San San: Nhạc thiền

RECOMMENDED TED TALKS

David Steindl-Rast: Want to be happy? Be grateful

Amishi Jha: How to tame your wandering mind

Andy Puddicombe: All it takes is 10 mindful minutes

Guy Winch: Why we all need to practice emotional first aid

Kathryn Bouskill: The unforeseen consequences of a fast-paced world

Matt Killingsworth: Want to be happier? Stay in the moment

Mehdi Ordikhani: Your brain when you pay attention

Pico Iyer: The art of stillness

Matthieu Ricard: The habits of happiness

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Zen has flourished in Japan for over seven centuries. It has had a profound impact on almost all aspects of Japanese sensibilities, culture, art, and aesthetics. Since the 1950s, with the rise of the beat generation and the subsequent flower-power counter-culture movement in California, there was an increased interest in Zen and other Eastern Philosophies. Philosophers like Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki were instrumental in sharing these ideas with the West.

Demystifying Zen: Satori for a Secular Mind is an illustrated exploration of Zen concepts from a secular perspective. Written in a style that is minimalist and nuanced, it is a beginner's guide to some of the profound themes and concepts associated with Zen. The book explores experiences such as *satori*, *nirvana*, and *trishna*, and also analyses various Zen koans, quotes, poems, parables, and anecdotes. It will undoubtedly appeal to those with an existential mindset and a spiritual bent.

The author, Rohan Roberts, is a multi-award-winning educator and polymath based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.