

What is Zen?

*“Lightning flashes,
Sparks shower,
In one blink of your eyes,
You have missed seeing.”*

One day, while teaching his followers in India, the Buddha held up a flower. A disciple smiled in response. This was a heart-to-heart transmission – a teaching beyond words and letters and became Zen.

But, What is Zen? This is a question that is easily asked but not easily answered. A Hindu story tells of a fish who asked of another fish: *“I have always heard about the sea, but what is it? Where is it?”* The other fish replied: *“You live, move and have your being in the sea. The sea is within you and without you, and you are made of sea, and you will end in sea. The sea surrounds you as your own being.”* The only true answer is the one that you find for yourself.

From the Zen perspective, nothing at all has been explained, the true teaching being a personal experience is beyond words. To a person who has never tasted chocolate, the description is meaningless. Just one piece of it, however, will instantly reveal its favour. That is how Zen is. The Zen teachings and all the descriptions are mere fingers pointing to the moon. It is important to look at the moon and not the finger, the spirit of Zen and not the form.

Historical Zen

Zen is a form of Buddhism which took root in China and today is being practised mainly in Japan and Korea, though traces of it can be found in many Eastern countries. Buddhism had been in China since about the first century CE, but Zen did not reach there until the arrival of Bodhidharma in the latter part of the fifth century. He must have cut a strange figure with his bushy beard and long nose in a land where beards were wispy and noses small.

At his arrival in China, Bodhidharma was summoned before Emperor Wu, a great Buddhist philanthropist who built temples, sponsored the copying of holy texts, and supported monks and nuns. The practice of giving is one of the basic principles of Buddhism and as Emperor Wu had been diligent in this practice, he wondered what his reward would be in this or a future life. He asked the newly arrived master from India, *“What can I expect to receive for all these meritorious deeds?”*

Bodhidharma replied, *“No merit.”*

Such a reply was a slap in the face for the emperor. Somewhat displeased, he continued, *“What, then, is the first principle of Buddhism?”* In other words, *“I thought giving was the first principle. If it isn't that, what is it?”*

Bodhidharma replied, *“Vast emptiness! Nothing is holy.”*

Emperor Wu scoffing at the idea that everything was empty, challenged the Indian master with an obvious response, *“Who it is who stands before me?”*

Bodhidharma replied, *“I don't know.”* (Literally – “No knowing.”)

This conversation was a profound discussion of doctrine. The remark – Vast emptiness! Nothing is holy, expresses the teaching that all things should be seen for what they are without making anything out of them in the mind. It also refers to ongoing process of thinking that occupies the mind. To stand aside from the habit of forming views and opinions is the first thing that a practitioner should attend to rather than build temples.

The essence of Bodhidharma's Zen can be summed up in these lines:

- A special transmission outside the scriptures;
- No dependence upon words and letters;
- Direct pointing at the mind;
- Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood.

Zen did not fully develop in Japan until the 12th century. In its secondary developments of mental tranquillity, fearlessness, and spontaneity--all faculties of the enlightened mind--the school of Zen has had lasting influence on the cultural life of Japan.

Zen teaches that the Buddha-nature, or potential to achieve enlightenment, is inherent in everyone but lies dormant because of ignorance. It is best awakened not by the study of Scriptures, the practice of good deeds, rites and ceremonies, or worship of images but by a sudden breaking through of the boundaries of common, everyday, logical thought. Training in the methods leading to such an enlightenment (Chinese *wu*; Japanese *satori*) is best transmitted personally from master to disciple. The methods recommended, however, differ among the various sects of Zen.

ZEN MEDITATION:: THE SEAT OF ENLIGHTENMENT

"But the way of practice is just to be concentrated on your breathing with the right posture and with great, pure effort. This is how we practice Zen."

Zazen is a particular kind of meditation, unique to Zen, that functions centrally as the very heart of the practice. In fact, Zen Buddhists are generally known as the "meditation Buddhists." Basically, *zazen* is the study of the self.

The great Master Dogen said, *"To study the Buddha Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, and to forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things."* To be enlightened by the ten thousand things is to recognise the unity of the self and the ten thousand things. Upon his own enlightenment, Buddha was in seated meditation; Zen practice returns to the same seated meditation again and again.

Zazen is the sitting meditation practiced in Zen Buddhism. It is very simple.

Here is how you do it: **When you sit, just sit!**

Easy to say, hard to do! One can learn the techniques of *zazen*; the sitting posture and way of breathing, in a few minutes. It is what to do with the wandering mind that catches us up. We may think that our essence is in our thoughts. Zen teaches that the essence is found between thoughts.

Zazen is a daily practice. Not easy, not difficult. But very effective in expanding consciousness and developing intuition. And not only does *zazen* release great energy, it is the posture of awakening.

While practicing, do not seek to gain anything. Without object, only concentrate on the posture, the breathing and the attitude of mind. Practice diligently. Practice without attachment to attainment of any goal.

Zazen means "to touch the cosmos through one single body, our body. All existences and myself are one single body."

Master Dogen wrote in the *Fukanzazengi*: *"The zazen I speak of is not learning how to meditate. It is nothing other than the way to peace and happiness, the practice-realisation of perfect awakening. Once you have seised its heart, you are like a dragon when he enters the water, like a tiger when he enters the mountain."*