

Zen hyakudai

“One Hundred Zen Topics”

PART III

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Zen experience and “words and letters”

THE ULTIMATE Zen experience can be said to be that which is inexpressible in words and letters. One could also say that it is simply there, without our being able to express it, or again, that the very moment we do try to express it, we run into contradiction. It could also be said that this contradiction is in itself the Zen experience, and thus it is quite natural that we should encounter it. The matter can be viewed in various ways, depending on one's standpoint. But in any case, the Zen man emphasizes that without having encountered the reality of the Zen experience itself, whatever is said about it is a downright lie. The truth underlying this statement is the very life of Zen. The stories which follow are full of contradictions if examined logically. Anyone coming across these mondo unprepared would surely be left wondering where exactly their meaning lies.

Ch'en Tsun-su (d. 877?) of Mu-chou province was a disciple of Huang-po and the man who recognized the ability of Lin-chi. Once, meeting a learned man of exceptional intelligence, he asked:

“What are you studying?”

“I'm studying the Book of Changes,” came the answer.

“Is that so?” said Ch'en Tsun-su, “Well, then, in that work there's a

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line that goes: *'People from all walks of life use it daily but never know it.'* Tell me now, what exactly is it that they don't know?"

"They don't know the Way," said the learned man.

"Well then," Ch'en Tsun-su continued, "I'd like to ask you this: what is this 'Way' you speak of?"

This was a direction in which the studies of the learned man had never taken him. He had often spoken of the Way and had assumed from the start that he understood its meaning. This is our usual disposition. We never press our inquiry far enough, and thus we tend to be haphazard in everything we do. And so too for the learned man. There was nothing he could do but remain silent.

This silence can be taken in either of two ways, however. It can be the silence of one who simply doesn't understand. Or it could be the absolute silence of Vimalakīrti or Sakyamuni.

"It is natural that you don't understand," said Ch'en Tsun-su.

This too can be taken in either of two ways. It can be taken at face value to mean that since the Way is inexpressible, there is nothing we can do except be silent in "not-knowing." Again, it might be seen to contain an admonition of sorts: *"Do you understand what you didn't know?"* The choice is left up to the reader.

The Way is not understandable

A monk once came to Kuei-shan Ling-yu (d. 853) and asked: "What is the Way?" To the Chinese the word "Way" indicates the principle basic to all experience. It corresponds to the concept of God in Judaism or to that of Buddha-nature in Buddhism, although, of course, it is impossible for one term to be selected to represent the entire, vast store of Buddhist words. Here we will use the word "Way" to indicate the basic Zen experience. Zen monks often start out with people asking, "What is the Way?" Kuei-shan's answer to this question was:

"No-mind is the Way."

Nan-chüan's answer was, "Everyday mind is the Way." Everyday mind is no-mind, no-mind is everyday mind. It is what people from all walks of life use daily and never know. It is to eat when hungry and rest when tired. It is only natural that we do not know it. As expected, the monk said:

"I don't understand."

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As in the previous essay, this reply may be taken in either of two ways, but here it can be taken to mean a simple lack of understanding. Kuei-shan then said:

“Then understand that which you don't understand.”

This is the not-understanding of understanding, the understanding of not-understanding.

“What understanding is there in that?” the monk again asked.

It is a contradiction to understand that which is not understandable. How is this contradiction to be resolved? Or is the attempt at resolution futile in itself? Could it be that contradiction exists only in the person who strives for resolution, that, fundamentally, no such thing exists? Contradiction being a phenomena that occurs only when an experience is reconstructed, couldn't it be said that no such thing exists in the experience itself? It could also be said, however, that without such mental reconstruction, there would be no way for us to approach the actual experience. Isn't this the reason why Zen mondo come about in the first place?

Kuei-shan then said, “You are you and not someone else.”

That is, “There is only you yourself and no one else.” Is this the “understanding of not-understanding”? When Yüeh-shan Wei-yen (d. 828) was asked how the unthinkable can be thought of, he replied, “By *non-thinking!*” Are “non-thinking” and “You are you and not someone else,” the same or are they different? Be that as it may, when the declaration, “In all the universe I stand alone and revered,” bursts forth in us, there is nothing which exists of either contradiction or paradox.

To say is to not say

Yün-yen (d. 841) once told his following:

“There is a child in a certain house who can reply to anything he is asked.”

The child is never at a loss for words. He comes up with an appropriate response to anything said to him. If you say “Hey!” he says “Yessir!” When he sees a willow he says “Green!” When he sees a flower he says “Red!” When he touches hot water he says “Hot!” When he hears cawing he says “Crow!” Totally free and unrestricted, he is never without an appropriate response. Who is this child? Where is he?

Tung-shan (d. 869), who was in the assembly, came forward and asked,

“Does the child have a lot of books in his house?”

Is the child's ability due to his having read a lot? Perhaps his house is full of all kinds of books. This is what Tung-shan had in mind.

“Not one,” answered Yün-yen.

“Then how did he come to know so much,” asked Tung-shan.

“He never sleeps,” said Yün-yen.

But it wouldn't be possible for him to know so much simply by doing without sleep. If he were not one who is “all-knowing at all times,” he wouldn't be capable of doing all that Yün-yen says he can. Unless we take into consideration the Zen realization of the discrimination of non-discrimination, nothing would be solved. As Tung-shan knew well what Yün-yen had in mind, one could say that they were in league from the start. It might even be said that Tung-shan let Yün-yen get the last word in.

“There's always one more thing that must be said,” Tung-shan said. “Can you say what it is?”

How will the child be able to answer Tung-shan's question?

“That which has to be said,” Yün-yen replied, “is, rather, that which has to go unsaid.”

Here, the word “rather” should be taken to indicate identification; that is, “to say” is “to not say.” We said earlier that the child is never without something to say, but as we reach the end of the dialogue, we find that “to say” and “to not say” are the same. The contradiction has become self-identity. Although Tung-shan and Yün-yen talk about such things as the child not sleeping and whether there are books in his house as if these were matters of real importance, it is just a kind of game. It turns out that what we are ultimately seeking is that which cannot be expressed.

That which is unknowable, incomprehensible, inexpressible, unexplainable, unnameable, inconceivable—it is along this path that the reconstruction of the Zen experience has to return to arrive at its point of origin.

You are deluded because you question

One shouldn't practice Zen as if it were simply a matter of solving riddles. Life itself being one great riddle, however, everything comprising it and everything issuing from it is also a riddle. We spend our whole lives with the conscious desire to somehow solve this riddle, and yet, unable to do so, we live the riddle unconsciously in everything we do. Feeling it half-

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solved and half-unsolved, we are born, we live, and die. Say what you will, this is an inescapable fact. In the end even a philosopher is a poet. It is perhaps more human to sing than to think. And yet singing and thinking are not so very different. It might even be said that the thinking of a man is in no way superior to the singing of a frog, though to say so may anger the thinkers of this world. And this too is one of life's mysteries, another riddle of the universe.

In other words, the root of all man's troubles lies in the fact that he stopped for a moment to think. If he could act in accordance with his true nature as do cats and dogs or the pine tree and bamboo, there would be no problem. But because he stopped his car for a moment to view the autumn leaves, he is no longer able to go on as before. He finds himself separated from things. Questions appear, names are given. Once this happens there is no end. We are deluded by that which we make. When we act on something, the action comes right back to us. A single wave set in motion leads to wave upon wave in endless, ever increasing numbers. This may fascinate you or it may trouble you. It all started because a question was asked.

T'ou-tzu (d. 1083) said:

It is because you ask questions that I must use words. If you did not ask, then what I say to you would suffice. All matters you yourself bring out of yourself. I have nothing to do with any of them.

All our troubles arise because we ask questions. Once this happens, there appear our entanglements, our joys and angers, sorrows and pleasures, heaven and hell, the myriad things of the universe, the countless differences and distinctions, to which there is no end.

The Way before one's eyes

Let us return to the subject of Zen epistemology, from which our discussion has strayed.

The question this time is: "Where is the Way?" Asking "*Where* is the Way?" is the same thing as asking, "*What* is the Way?" *What* has to exist *somewhere*, inasmuch as it has to be *somewhere* to be a "*what*."

Wei-k'uan (d. 817) of Kuo-shan temple in Ching-chao answered this question by saying:

"Right before one's eyes!"

This is the same as Chao-chou's "Beyond the fence!" or "In front of the gate!" or "Right underfoot!" Confucianists say: "*The Way is near, nevertheless it is sought far away.*" The Zen man, not dealing in such vague concepts as "near" or "far," says, "Right before one's eyes!" But even so, those who can't see, can't see.

"Why don't I see it?" asked the monk.

Wei-k'uan was unlike other Zen men of the T'ang. His way of thinking was quite modern or, rather, Indian, and because of this we find him easy to understand. Even a scholar would find a mondo like this suitable grist for his mill.

"It's because you have a self," Wei-k'uan answered.

("It's because of your self that you can't see. Remove the self and you will be able to see.")

In Zen, as in Buddhism in general, the word "self" indicates an individual entity, one of the plurality of existent things which arises from the discrimination of subject and object. It is this which makes human experience possible, but it is also that which destroys the very ground of experience. This is the root of the problem. It is along these lines that the present mondo develops.

"If I don't see because of my self," the monk asked, "what about you—do you see?"

"Self" in its usual sense indicates religious or ethical self-attachment. We might say that since such defiling attachments are found in ordinary people, they are unable to see the Great Way lying right before their eyes. But this could hardly be the case with a true Zen man. Wei-k'uan, then, must have been able to see the Great Way as clearly as he could the broad highway leading to the capital. Still, the monk's question seems quite natural from our usual point of view.

"It is impossible to see when 'I am I,' 'you are you,' move around in mutual opposition," Wei-k'uan said.

What Wei-k'uan wants to say is probably something like this: "As long as one is caught up as you are in discriminating self and other, this and that, saying 'What am I like?' 'What are you like?' one will be confined to the relative world of mutual opposition, the world of plural entities. As long as you are limited like that, you can't say things like, 'I see but you can't.' " Since Wei-k'uan and the monk exist on different dimensions, it is impossible for any mutual understanding to be reached between

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them. Thus it is natural that the following question should come up.

The monk asked, "When there is no I, no you, then can it be seen?"

In the world of sheer nothingness, with no you and no I, the world where all individual existences have been swept out, there can be no seeing, no Way, much less a man who tries to see the Way.

At this point, what ultimately happened? What ought to happen? Did the monk see the Way? Or did he wander into a still deeper fog? How about you?

To pursue it takes us in the opposite direction

There's no limit to how much can be written on topics like this. I only do it in the hope that the reader will get at least some idea of what the Zen experience is like.

Kuei-tsung Chih-ch'ang (ca. eighth century) of Lu-shan was a Dharma heir of Ma-tsu Tao-i. He admonished his disciples to "never rely on others when seeking the Way." He said, "If what you say comes from what you got from another, then everything comes to a standstill. It's because there's *something* in front of your eyes that no light is able to get through." To have something in front of one's eyes means that one knows only the world of discrimination, the world of plural entities, and does not realize that discrimination is in itself the discrimination of non-discrimination.

"What is the Profound Meaning?" a monk asked.

(The Profound Meaning is the same thing as the Way.)

"No one can understand it," Kuei-tsung replied.

"How about one who pursues it?" asked the monk.

(If you say that no one can understand it, what are we to do? Shouldn't we pursue it and try to understand what it is?)

"To pursue it takes us in the opposite direction," replied Kuei-tsung.

(We must pursue it—whatever "it" may be—and try to understand what it is by going after it. While this may be so, it is virtually impossible to get hold of it, for "to pursue it takes us in the opposite direction." This contradiction itself is the Profound Meaning.)

It cannot be attained simply by pursuing it. If the Profound Meaning or the Way is taken to be "*something* in front of your eyes," and you try to grasp it, it is like clutching at shadows—the more you pursue it, the more it evades your grasp. If so,

"What if we don't pursue it?" the monk asked.

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This is the question that has to come next. As long as the questioner holds on to his own point of view, the whole day will be wasted in fruitless deliberation about pursuit and non-pursuit.

“Who is it that seeks the Profound Meaning?” asked Kuei-tsung.

If there is nothing to pursue, such things as the Profound Meaning would pose no problem from the start. The questioner, absorbed in the pursuit of the non-existent shadows of his own creation, finally found out there was nothing there. If you pursue it, it takes you in the opposite direction; if you don't pursue it, it cannot be attained. To go forward is wrong, to go back is wrong—this is the crossroads of contradiction. How can we penetrate this great impassable koan?

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