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Zen and the Problem of Language

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Translated by Anttoni Kuusela

From its beginning Zen has advocated for a standpoint that goes beyond the area governed by language, writing, and thought. "Transmission outside the scriptures," "not based on words and letters," and "directly pointing to the mind, perceiving one's true nature and attaining Buddhahood" are the mottoes of that standpoint. Truly, if we remove this standpoint there is no life in Zen. In that sense the way of Zen is a way that must really be walked. For the way of Zen only exists purely and thoroughly as a "living way." At the same time, no records can possibly contain the letters to register the footprints of the many people who have walked the way of Zen. What these people see and hear, the simple movements of their hands and feet and raising of their eyebrows, the words that come out of their mouths, and thoughts that occasionally flash through their minds are written down as they are and passed to future generations. The massive amount of these writings might exceed the number of writings left behind by any other sect. However, they are all products based on the awareness of the essential meaninglessness of writing and as such, Zen records are a literature that differs essentially in its characteristics from general literature.

Seen from this point, the frame of mind of the reader of Zen records becomes a problem of particular importance. This problem contains two points. The first is that writing and language are temporal, fingers pointing at the moon, and thus our minds must not be captivated by these but must catch the moving and living thing at the heart of writing directly. What is called the insight to penetrate in between the lines, breaking through the area governed by writing and language, opening a path behind this area, and opening one's eyes through reading Zen records requires effort. (This is done in the form of what is called in Zen the investigation of the matter of the Self, 己事究明).

Even if we look at words one by one from the saying cited above, "directly pointing to the mind, seeing one's true nature and attaining Buddhahood," which exemplifies the unique standpoint of Zen, the words "human,"

"mind," "nature," and "Buddha" are undeniably words that belong to the fundamental concepts of Buddhist teaching, but probing into the doctrinal meaning of these words is not at issue in Zen. Rather, while Zen goes completely beyond the dimension of doctrine on the one hand, on the other it returns to the most direct place before dogmas and doctrines—that is, it returns to the constantly moving place of experience inside our everyday life—and grasps them there. Inquiries about what person or mind or true nature or Buddha is arise on such a standpoint, which can be said to be the Zen way of investigating the matter of the Self.

Similarly, when Zen is said to point directly to the mind, what is "directly" and what does it mean to "point?" If we are to speak of seeing one's true nature and attaining Buddhahood, we must also inquire about the living meaning of "seeing" and "attaining," that is, its meaning at the point where they go beyond their literal meanings. In short, we seek a fundamental place, a place prior to writing things out word by word. Therefore, to question what this Zen is that takes that phrase as its motto is to engage for the first time in a true mode of questioning from a standpoint that aims to return to a place of discernment that does not depend on any words whatsoever. What we have said about this one phrase is only one example of something that applies to every phrase in Zen records. The first problem, then, is the frame of mind one must bring to the reading of Zen records.

The second important problem is that even though (or rather, precisely because) Zen is, as we have said, not based on words and letters, the fact remains that Zen comes with a vast store of written texts. What can the production of such a massive number of texts possibly mean? It is said that the path of Zen, to put it simply, is extremely simple, and anyone at any time or place who walks that path is walking the same path as everyone else. At the same time, however, each person who walks that path in their own time and place is *not* walking precisely the same path. On the contrary, each path demonstrates the infinite diversity of paths, and this, too, belongs to the essence of Zen. Truly, the history of Zen tells of activities that have taken place in various places and at many times and led to new developments, the traces of which are recorded in the annals of Zen. Basically, the historical development of Zen can be compared to narrow, white valley streams that have split off from a single great river. In China the river divided into

schools known as the Five Houses and Seven Schools, several of which, in turn, underwent distinctive developments of their own.

From the beginning, there have been few great Zen figures with their own unique style who did not belong to one of these lineages. But the fact that all of them belong to the Zen tradition stemming from Bodhidharma indicates how the path of Zen can only be passed down through ceaseless creation and the generation of new forms. This way of transmitting the essence of Zen has been likened to passing the light from one lamp to another. The fire and light of the Dharma lives in this transmission. Anyone who seeks to attest to that essence and cultivate it, in all its boundless variety, in all its vastness and depth, cannot disregard the flowing rivers of its historical development.

As the saying goes, "One flower opens five sepals, bearing fruit follows naturally." Applied to Zen, we may say that the single flower with its five petals represents the five branches of Zen that opened from Bodhidharma, and the fruit of those flowers is the insight into one's true nature by each and every Zen practitioner investigating the matter of the Self. The standpoint of a true Zen person is like swallowing all the water from the great river of Zen history in a single gulp. It is at one and the same time a return to the origins with Bodhidharma and an advance to a new creation. In any event, Zen tradition's orientation to immersion in the depths of the river must be kept intact when learning the path of Zen.

The two aspects of Zen that I just mentioned, namely not being based on words and letters and yet engaging the history of Zen through literature of its recorded annals are both important and inseparable for learning the path of Zen. Their unity may be said to be fundamental.

The first aspect, directness of the direct pointing, represents the study of the self directed to the source of one's own mind. It manifests itself in seeing the self's original face. To borrow Rinzai's words, it is a return to "this very you standing distinctly before me without any form, shining alone." Of this "shining alone," he remarks that what is called "the mind is without form: it traverses the ten directions and is manifesting its activity right before your very eyes." (That said, we usually find ourselves in the condition that Rinzai

goes on to describe as follows: "But because people lack sufficient faith [in this] they turn to names and phrases, attempting to grasp the Buddha Dharma through written words. They're as far away as heaven from earth!")[1]

"Traversing the ten directions" implies being "freely oneself in all three realms,"[2] which in turn implies that:

> In an instant of time one penetrates the dharma realms, on meeting a buddha one teaches the buddha, on meeting a patriarch one teaches the patriarch, on meeting an arhat one teaches the arhat; [In another passage Rinzai says that in penetrating the dharma realms and meeting a buddha, one kills the buddha, on meeting a patriarch one kills the patriarch, and so on, but in effect the meaning is the same.] one travels throughout all lands bringing enlightenment to sentient beings yet is never separate from one's present mind. Everywhere is pure, light illumines the ten directions, and "all dharmas are a single suchness."[3]

"Manifesting its activity right before your very eyes" is described in the following terms:

> In the eye it is called seeing, in the ear it is called hearing.
> In the nose it smells odors, in the mouth one converses.
> In the hands it grasps and seizes, in the feet it runs and carries.
> Fundamentally it is one pure radiance; divided it becomes the six harmoniously united spheres of sense. If the mind is void, wherever you are, you are emancipated.[4]

The essential point here is a grounding in the simple experience of the ordinary, everyday life, as the activity in front of one's very eyes, on seeing and hearing things, on moving one's hands and feet, on discussing. These simple human experiences are universal, whenever and wherever they take place We may say they form a ground of human existence freed of historical and societal restrictions. To return to that ground is to plant oneself on the foundations of human being itself, foundations common to people from other countries and other historical and cultural backgrounds. Insofar as

1. Sasaki, 2009, 9, 11.

2. Ibid., 13.

3. Ibid., 13. The masculine prepositions have been adjusted to a neutral form. The parenthetical remark is Nishitani's.

4. Ibid., 9–10.

the grounding of Zen is characterized by its basic appeal to all peoples and to humanity as a whole, it is able to resonate directly in their hearts.

We may rightly assume that the steady spread of Zen's influence in present-day Europe and the Americas, and the increased interest in Zen comes down to this: Zen is gradually becoming a world Zen. In other words, the directness of directly pointing to the mind is the fundamental power that allows modern Zen to spread across the world. The orientation to *kenshō* (見性), investigating the origins of the self without reliance on words but by way of special transmission beyond the reach of any specific doctrine, is universal and worldwide by nature. Its ubiquity is one of simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity. Investigating the self as the absolute individual in each human being and conducting this investigation from its foundational nature are one and the same. When Rinzai says "traversing the ten directions and manifesting its activity before your very eyes..., directly standing before me without any form," and when he refers to "the true person of no rank in this red lump of flesh," he points to something in Zen that can be said to offer a way for our modern historical world to truly become one world. Now if Zen is in the process of becoming a world Zen, then it must, as a matter of obligation to itself, accept as its mission the needs of the modern world.

That said, to fulfill this duty in the present age, Zen must make an effort not to close itself up within the limits of a religious sect called Zen. It must even escape the limitations of a particular "religion" called Buddhism. This requires a re-examination of its traditional position within the framework of a particular religious organization and a particular "religion." This traditional consciousness must change, and that means breaking down conventional structures. In other words, strict adherence to tradition, even if it represents a natural adherence to established forms, needs to be reflected on and efforts made to escape from tradition.

Rinzai likened this to a disrobing. Robes of purity or birthlessness or nirvana, bodhi robes, patriarch-robes or buddha-robes—one may recognize that they are all different, but this does not mean that they actually exist. One has rather to recognize the "one" who is wearing these robes, for robes do not move around on their own, only the one who is wearing them. So it is with buddhas and patriarchs, with nirvana and the Pure Land—all are circumstantial. What is important is "the one who is in control of every

circumstance."[5] Robes cling to the body, as it were, but at any time one can take them off like smelly undergarments. If society is said, in part, to be like a corpus, then it can also be said that buddhas, patriarchs, nirvana, and so forth are things that cling to it. One can wear many different faces—human, bodhisattva, buddha, or even demonic—but we can also cast them off and return to one's simple and unadorned face. This return to the fountainhead of the mind is the primordial demand of the Zen standpoint. Particularly now, as it moves towards becoming a Zen for the world, that demand has become more forceful.

When we speak of dismantling the framework of tradition or loosening our adherence to it, we do not mean separating ourselves from tradition. The aim is rather to revive tradition and return to the creative life force at work within it. Avoiding both the route of strict adherence and that of separation, tradition can itself be transformed and revitalized. As we remarked above, the historical development of Zen and the path taken by the ancients must become, as far as possible, the inner truth of our own investigation into the truth of "the matter of the Self." To grasp the working of Zen and to return to the self's original face, the aspects that were cast aside—the human, the buddha, the demon—must be donned anew and their respective roles played out.

We speak of "playing" these roles, but this is not mere play. It is engagement in the form of the most serious and solemn "practice." It is none other than the part of a buddha or a human or a demon played out by the ancients. Their performance as recorded in the annals of Zen are taken as normative and essential for learning of the way of Zen. The appearance of what is called the *kōan* Zen too has its pretext therein. This is what made the existence of those Zen records important. By advancing the foundation of one's own mind and letting go of everything, allowing it the "directness" of directly pointing, the various aspects we have been referring to may be seen as the mediation of skillful means. In other words, they are taken to mediate the connection of Zen's primordial activity to the world of reality. Rinzai lik-

5. Sasaki 2009, 16.

ens the scene of this work of mediation to "traveling throughout all lands, bringing enlightenment to sentient beings." There, "on meeting a buddha one teaches the buddha; on meeting a patriarch, one teaches the patriarch; on meeting an arhat, one teaches the arhat; on meeting a hungry ghost, one teaches the hungry ghost."[6]

Previously it was said that being worldwide in the true sense of the term belongs to the essence of the standpoint that is Zen, and that the origins of this fact are exposed in the investigation of "the matter of the Self." This realization of the wider world in the mist of the actual world implies the insight of each individual into their original mind. This seems to be the historical duty of Zen in the world. Entering into the daily activity of the ancients inscribed in the annals of Zen as they play out in their historical and social settings, is not only a way to cultivate personal potential but is vital for fulfilling the duty of Zen today. We referred to this as a "skillful means," but insofar as it actually exhibits and manifests the truth, we may speak of "true skillful means."

Concretely speaking, the world in which Zen finds itself today is completely different from the ground on which the tradition of Zen was first established. It has entered into relationships with realms whose cultural and historical circumstances have changed at the most basic level. In the attempt to respond to the current desire for Zen in America and the countries of Europe, it is inevitable that, sooner or later, the nuances and complexities of religion, thought, culture, ethics, and the like will come to the fore on various fronts. The need for confrontation and dialogue is already upon us; the question is how both sides can make themselves understood and at the same time understand the other is a new problem for Zen. To travel through all these lands, preaching to all living things, to encounter the buddhas (according to the beliefs of other countries) and teach them, to meet the hungry ghosts and teach them, requires coming up with new true skillful means, new *hōben*. Fresh avenues to mediate the self and the other need to be explored.

To this end the standpoint of the other must be understood, first and foremost, from their own spirit and culture. If not, dialogue is impossible. Understanding the other this deeply is like donning one Noh mask after

6. Sasaki 2009, 13.

another—the religious, the ideological, the cultural—and learning to play their respective roles. Dialogue unfolds as each seeks to grasp the other from within and at the same time working towards mutual clarity. This is the reason dialogue always entails confrontation. For dialogue to takes place as an achievement of self-awareness through mutual understanding, the confrontation must, in a real sense, sustain the gravity of a *mondō*. The purpose of a *mondō* is to reach a point of agreement beyond the achievement of mutual understanding, a point at which both attain insight into what is true. As the achievement of a state of mind, it is also, in essence, an awareness of truth within the self and of the self.

In one sense, because the *mondō* between teacher and the disciple—or between one who has already attained insight and one who has not—involves the guidance of another to the self-awareness of truth from within, it takes the form of a Socratic maieutics: an agreement about the truth based on reason. This agreement is based on *logos* and emerges from out of *logos*. Plato's philosophy and the ethics of the Stoics were later developments of this approach.

When we come to the encounter of essentially different cultures and ways of thought, the agreement achieved through a dialogue of *logos* is a significant advance. It is an indispensable element in mutual understanding from within. The annals of Zen open us to both the skillful means or "method" of the ancients to teach all living beings as well as to their lives and works. They offer us a common language (*logos*) for conversing with spiritual strangers in our own time and learning to understand them.

All of this has to do not only with Europeans and Americans. For over a century now, Western cultures and ideologies have worked as constitutive principles in Japanese society and within the Japanese people themselves, so much so that they are half-strangers to themselves. The question of the possibility of dialogue is one directly underfoot for us as modern men and women. In practice, this is the more serious issue for us, but the two are essentially the same.

In Zen, *mondō* is not only important but indeed essential. Rinzai often speaks of it as a "meeting of host and guest":

> When host and guest meet they vie with each other in discussion. At times, in response to something, they may manifest a form; at times they may act

> with their whole body; or they may use tricks or devices to appear joyful or angry; or they may reveal half of the body; or again they may ride upon a lion or mount a lordly elephant.[7]

From there various dimensions of dialogue unfold between master and the student. (For example, the famous "Four Classifications" and the "Four Shouts,"[8] which may be called Rinzai's Zen's "method," are based on Zen's field of the "I-Thou.")

But unlike the dialogues of Socrates, the *mondō* in Zen does not result in knowledge of the truth. There is no expectation of being based on "reason." It is not a discussion that takes place on the field of *logos* at all. Rather, *mondō* is based on the breakdown of such a field, on the "lump of red flesh" and the "true person of no-rank." The meeting of host and guest is meant to be an encounter of true persons, and therefore the *mondō* between a master and a student too is maieutic only in the sense that it prompts the true person to leap out of the student. This is where dialogue needs to be rooted today, whether it be between strangers or between practitioners of Zen: an encounter of understanding where the robes and masks fall to one side and the original face of the self comes into the open.

The Zen action of penetrating into the origins of mind, does not change when it comes to strangers. Zen's strong point, as noted earlier, is that it is grounded directly in a kind of pure experience, an experience that is shared by everyone and fundamental to us all, like seeing and hearing, using one's hands and feet, perceiving the mountain as the mountain and the river as the river. Once returned to that point, mutual understanding with regard to religion, culture, ideas, ethics, and other aspects of *logos* may, for the first time, become something living and creative. It mediates Zen action and becomes a medium for developing new skilful means. Zen begins to work like an enzyme that produces new wine and also serves as the wineskin. Dressed in a new robe sewn with the golden needle of Zen, the Zen "person" comes to light. Zen will then have been able to arrive at strange lands that are no longer strange. The world will appear as in its original oneness.

To be sure, the world in its original oneness is not a world of undifferentiated monotony and uniformity. False equality goes against the spirit of

7. Ibid., 23–4.
8. 四料揀, 四喝.

Zen. Difference and diversity in individual temperament are obvious across countries, peoples, and races, not to mention the varieties of cultural and historical tradition. But from the perspective of one who has returned to the source of the self, allowing all this difference and diversity to converge from all directions and pass before one's eyes, belies exclusivity. The standpoint of the true person is essentially a universal standpoint. No differentiation of itself has the power to transform confrontation into hostility or to make dialogue impossible. To dismiss the idea of meeting between person as an impossibility, given our human condition, or to consider any person as humanly unfit for *mondō*, would be as contradictory as saying that a particular human being is not human. This is the end result of viewing the human only from the standpoint of the ego, a standpoint which is, at bottom, unreal.

This is where the standpoint of reason as a basis for dialogue becomes crucial. *Logos* is the defining characteristic of the "human." The words and letters that mediate communication between one person and another stem from it. To eliminate dialogue as a possibility is to make human existence unimaginable. What is more, from the standpoint of the subjective and objective universality of Zen that we spoke of earlier, all differences, precisely as differences, are also manifestations of universality and, to that extent, fundamentally entail equality. This equality reveals itself when a shepherds-purse flower blooms on a hedge and its radiant beauty touches the heart of the poet.[9] A false equality that brushes away true differentiation and obscures the essential oneness of the world lies concealed in the roots of all sorts of real problems. Losing sight of the right way of solving these problems has itself become a source of many such problems. Breaking with such an ingrained "way of seeing things" is the one of the duties of what we call Zen.

The foregoing is a rough outline of my thoughts on the reasons for reading the annals of Zen. Obviously, one reason is to study the way of Zen itself,

9. The allusion is to Bashō's poem: よくみれば　薺花さく　垣ねかな. ("Closely if I look / shepherd's purse bloom / fence." See REICHHOLD 2008, 280.)

both what we may call its basically constant and transhistorical life as well as its historical unfolding. This latter may be said to display its "inconstant" side, but constancy and inconstancy are fundamentally one. The annals of Zen were composed to represent Zen activity as a whole in which these two sides come together. These records are the only way to enter into the activity of Zen in its full length and breadth.

As Zen is ported from the historical circumstances of the East Asian world into the entirely different circumstances of the modern world, another reason for reading the annals of Zen comes to the fore: to answer the question of how can Zen develop creatively in the context of our modern world. That is, we can read the Zen records in order to explore new models of Zen action. As already noted, this is more than a question of coming up with secondary measures; it has to do with the quest of true skillful means that relate to the essence of Zen action itself.

As is evident in looking at the two volumes of *The Sayings of Zen Figures*,[10] the historical development of Zen, even when splitting into different branches, is permeated with this essence. The records collected in this volume alone allow for classification. First we have the category of records in the proper sense, where the teachings, *mondō*, and deeds of individual Zen figures are compiled. In all, such records probably add up in the hundred, only the most important of which were selected for inclusion in the first volume, among them *The Record of Dongshan*, *The Record of Yunmen*, and *The Record of Xutang*.[11]

A second category comprises ancient guidebooks like the *Hekiganroku* and the *Mumonkan,* which includes hints and commentary to the main text. These transcend the differences between schools and given their comprehensive nature, may be said to represent an outline of Zen. In addition to the two texts just mentioned, we may include *Book of Serenity*[12] in this category.

A third category covers writings that, like the *Zen Stick of Guishan*,[13]

10.『禅家語録』. The reference is to Nishitani and Yanagida 1972, which includes the "Commentary" on which this essay is based.

11.『洞山録』,『雲門録』,『虚堂録』.

12.『従容録』. See Cleary 1999.

13. Guishan Lingyou 潙山靈祐 (771–853),『潙山警策』.

have to do with things like the frame of mind and manners that relate to the carrying out of Zen practice. The *Principles of Zazen* is also included in this category. Other examples are Fayan's *Ten Guidelines for Zen Schools* and the *Precious Teachings of Zen*.[14] Further, while not collected here, the letters of various Zen masters are also counted into this category. Of these, the *Dahui's Letters*[15] and *Lingyuan's Brush Words*[16] are well known.

In the fourth category are the *gāthā* and hymns, collected in the second volume of *The Sayings of Zen Figures*. They include *Faith in Mind* and the *Song of Enlightenment*.[17] Generally speaking, it is customary in Zen to expresses one's meditative method of attaining enlightenment, or the state of mind of the enlightenment attained, through a poem. Such accounts are beyond number. Just why the custom came about is an interesting question, but in any case, *The Sayings of Zen Figures* gathers only those from the most ancient times that have gained the status of classic importance. Within are special examples like the *Ten Oxherding Pictures*. Other than that, as writings belonging to different categories from the above, there are deeply meaningful collected anecdotes from the world of Zen, like those of *Dahui's Arsenal* and the *Record of Silken Lake and Plain*. Works like *Progression on the Way of Zen*[18] are different in nature but well-known.

In addition, there are many writings relating the history of teaching Buddhism, like the records of the transmission of the lamp, including the *The Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* and the *Five Original Meetings of the Lamp*,[19] and which constitute a special category of Zen literature. One could go into further details of categorization, but from what has already been said the multifaceted nature of Zen literature should be obvious. The entire corpus of texts is seeped in Zen and mark the footprints of its development. To trace them is to gain a comprehensive grasp of Zen action.

From of old, it has, of course, been learned Zen monks who have zealously conducted this study. Compared to Western philology with its advances in

14.『坐禅義』,『宗門十規論』,『禅門寶訓』(『禅林寶訓』).
15.『大慧書』. See Kirchner 2024.
16. 霊源惟清 (?–1117),『霊源筆語』
17.『信心銘』,『證道歌』
18.『大慧武庫』,『羅湖野録』,『禅關策進』.
19.『景徳伝燈録』,『五燈会元』.

scholarship covering a range of literary form and the results it has yielded, one feels that the traditional method of Zen research is in need of reform. The two or three prominent scholars who collaborated in producing *The Sayings of Zen Figures* have made notable progress in this regard.

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