

What is Zen?

What is Zen? It is a difficult question because Zen is a deep and wide philosophy and religion. It is, however, not philosophy in the ordinary application of the term. Zen is, if anything, the antithesis of intellectual query. As a religion, it is a branch of Buddhism that was transplanted from India to China and then Japan and other Asian countries. Zen, in its essence, is the art and practice of seeing into one's own nature or discovering our true nature. Our true nature is reality itself. We are not separate from life or reality. So we can also say, this one reality manifests in 10,000 ways. Each expression of life is reality showing up in diverse ways. So, Zen is clouds, driving a car, mountains, grass, lightning, the self and on and on. Zen practice directs us to see this realization directly, intuitively. It is this direct, non-conceptual realization of our "true nature" that Zen opens us to.

According to Zen teachings there is no separate substantial self. In other words, there is no "substantial essence" in each person or thing. Because each thing is empty it is filled with everything else. It is our egoistic ideas and conceptual thinking that creates the illusion of separateness. Zen teaches that reality is not divided into two. It is a seamless whole and we are part of it. Zen provides the opportunity to see this oneness for ourselves. It clarifies that the freshness and vividness of life must be lived and experienced directly and not be mediated through an idea or abstract concept. It helps to open our "spiritual eye" so we can see this wholeness (Oneness) for ourselves.

One of the teachings of Zen is the seeming paradox that although we are perfect and enlightened just as we are, we must practice. Practice what? Attention. It is through the systematic practice of meditation (zazen) that we develop the discipline and attention it takes to really see the gifts life gives us. These gifts include joy, suffering, change, pain, and love. Meditation is like a silent spaciousness beyond any needs or wants, where, for a while, we detach from the gravity of our needs and want. This space provides the freedom to notice and embrace the rich diversity of our life as completely as possible.

Zen practice prepares us to work with the positive as well as negative aspects of life. Through zazen practice we cultivate an insight that we are empty of a separate self, and through this we are better able to weather the storms of life. We are able to see the storms as part of our life, rather than something that prevents us from being happy. We intuitively direct ourselves to the insight of Oneness through practice.

There are many practices in Zen. According to Zen teacher Bernard Glassman, in his book *Infinite Circle*, these practices are called three tenets. They are: "not knowing," "bearing witness" and "compassionate action". "Not knowing," writes Glassman is "the practice of being completely open. It means not knowing what is right or wrong." It is a place of pure being. It is a radical acceptance of everything beyond our ideas and internal dialogue about things. We receive life without critique or judgment as to whether it is positive or negative. Through this practice, we expand our vision to include the Oneness of life beyond all separate notions. "Not-knowing" means opening up to all things. We let go of our expectations and assumptions and, without the filter of our own wishes or needs, see what is actually happening. The verse poet David Ignatow, expresses this eloquently, "I should be able to see a mountain for what it is rather than a comment on my life."

A second practice is "bearing witness." This is the practice of complete mindful attention. We hold others truths as valid as our own, regardless of what they are. This includes ideas, opinions, facts, feelings etc. As we bear witness to the truth of others, we expand our views and awareness at the same time. Even when faced with negative opinions that make us uncomfortable, we do not judge but receive them openly. We practice opening to what is in front of us without denial. This is the practice of non-separation. We see the pain and joy of life as it is.

The third practice is "compassionate action." With awareness of the oneness of all things we act. Seeing the needs and suffering around us we do something. We act in a compassionate way. It flows out of bearing witness and seeing directly that we are all one. From this awareness, when I act to assist someone else, I am also saving myself. Glassman uses the example that when we hurt one of our hands, the other hand responds spontaneously, instinctively. The left and right hand are both part of one body. "Compassionate action" means we respond without any question of "should I assist or not?" we respond with the knowledge that all things are the one body.

We can use Zen principles and practices no matter what our religious affiliation. Zen is not about whether there is God or not. Zen Buddhists say that the best we can know is that we do not know. Zen is about living life in truth, in discovering truth. In honor of this truth, our Empty Bowl Zen community is interfaith. We invite all people to join us in the practice of Zen. Our community is made of Buddhists, Christians, Jews as well as those who hold no particular religious belief, practicing together. My own root religion is Catholicism and Zen inspires me to be a better catholic. I'm not interested in becoming Buddhist. I recall a friend of mine telling me a story about a catholic nun who was practicing Zen. Someone asked why she took part in Zen meditation. "It helps me," she said. "How?" he asked. "Before practicing Zen, I read the Bible and got good things out of it," she responded. "But after practicing Zen, I feel inspired. The words jump off the page".

In our Zen practice, through meditation (zazen), we emphasize discovering the very foundation of our being. Regardless of personal differences or religious affiliation, we find common ground in our meditation practice and our longing to be whole. If we identify with the notion of self, ideas or objects, we bind ourselves and suffer. Therefore it is critical that we develop this insight into our true nature. We do the work in support of each other on this path. Then we are free from self-imposed restrictions. Free as the blue sky.

- Ray Cicetti