

What Is Zen -- One Introduction -- kas

Draft 1.01  
2022 February 23  
By Kevin A. Sensenig

If someone is interested in Zen Buddhism, the question might arise, What is Zen? Then, what is the format? So these questions might be answered, in introduction to the person.

For 'what is Zen', maybe something like:

Zen is a Buddhist tradition that focuses on dhyana, or objectless, concentrated, contemplation -- and this takes particular form in meditation, meditative concentration, and the dialectic between the universal and the everyday. Zen talks about sunyata -- or, emptiness -- as being of a key point: emptiness is a) things are marked with impermanence; b) things are without self-existent nature; c) there is the relative aspect to things; and d) there is both the conditioned arising of things and the 'beyond conditioned, conditionless -- or, 'it itself' nature to things. A second feature of Zen is that it talks about nonattachment and the six paramitas: giving, pure observance of precepts or discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and prajna or wisdom. A third feature of Zen is that it is nondual, and uses zazen and the koan (as well as philosophical perception) to cut through the clinging, discursive, endlessly searching mind; all of what you need is actually 'here and now' -- you simply work with what is innate, and release the extrinsic trappings that may find one ensnared. A fourth feature of Zen is that it speaks of the 'at-once' arising of things; and it is beyond causation of the discriminated objects -- the universe is an 'at-once' awakening and yields in its own particular manifold ways.

Zazen deserves special mention, and a Zen Buddhist will typically engage in zazen daily, for one or more 15 to n-minute periods of meditation. Zazen, as one practices it, becomes second nature and yields to contemplation of perceptual penetration of the reality one can realize in working with transcendental Innermost Wisdom, one's own observations of the world, and those of the teachings, reflections, and koans, that give Zen its distinct nature. A significant part of Zen is consistent or the same as other schools of Buddhism, with just this particular emphasis on dhyana (this zazen-realization-process as just everyday process), and zazen and its focus on quiet, objectless, contemplative meditation. There are many points of realization and yet others of enlightenment, and some forms of enlightenment are satori -- a profound awakening to the unspeakable nondual and resonant world. Yet, each moment is a realization; or one may be focused on much on one point of question that it becomes for one a dilemma, ... and then one has breakthrough, and it's the most striking thing.

The Buddha talked of the Four Noble Truths, as just 1) there is dukkha, or a particular form of attachment-suffering; 2) there is a cause to this, clinging and conditions that one gets stuck, the 'wheel is very much flat, or out of round', or one has despair and significant personal suffering with no relief; 3) there is an answer to this, and it is to replace dukkha with insight, an attachment-free existence, and realization of the actual nature of just this world; this step is called nirvana, and there may be sudden or steps to this; 4) the way to release from dukkha, and to realizing nirvana, is several fold, and includes the Eightfold Noble Path, namely, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right awareness, right dhyana or concentration or meditation. Then several things can happen; and there are categories to these that one may realize and work with. In the end, each path is unique, there are similarities, there are marks along the way such that the Masters become apparent in their compassion and immediate insight, and your own direct experience is key and essential and cannot be done without; it is genuine, and the way, as the universe is, is without flaw, and yet the world admits much that is problematic, dukkha, and

suffering. The way through this illuminates the entire thing, and your own illumination becomes, as Mumon said, a candle illuminating the entire universe -- of which each thing and all things are multi-faceted reflections, one of the other, and perfectly so.

The question 'What is the format and what can I expect during an evening or afternoon sesshin or meeting?' How do I practice myself?

One can expect that we focus on quiet zazen. We start with an introductory recital or chant, then a period of zazen that lasts 25 minutes, followed by walking meditation or kinhin -- deliberative walking-meditation at slow and fast pace. This is followed by a teaching sometimes, and then another period of 25 minutes of zazen. At the end is another recital or chant, then bows, then closing remarks. It is somewhat inner-directed, and over time the format becomes more resonant with one's own practice, if one is a beginner or new to Zen. One might expect, at a sesshin, a teaching by someone experienced in Zen, who can share from the tradition or a word that resonates with the moment, or can explicate yet another teaching, koan, or sutra.

Zazen is silent, seated, objectless meditation; one focuses with some concentration, penetrating through discursive mind, allowing the freedom within to express itself extrinsically and noticeably, in seated body-breath-mind-world-space. And the world-space at that point is simple, and intentionally so; one sits in the lotus position, or the Burmese posture, or seated in a chair, and concentrates in a relaxed yet focused style on the wall or floor before one. First one thought may be noticed, released, or traversed, or penetrated thru to nondual mind itself; where things arise naturally, perfectly, and spontaneously, or with some direction. This may take time and practice, and often does. In addition, to enhance awareness and concentration and the natural working of the mind -- and the body-breath-mind-world-space, all one and integrated, with differential aspects -- one may count the breath up to 20 or 100, from 1, and back down again or starting over. This enhances attention. Or, one may go right to other states. In any case, the at-oneness of body-breath-mind-world-space, and attention to it, is key.

The question 'What resources do I have on my own?'

In Zen Buddhism there are the traditional teachings of the Buddha. One may find any number of excellent books on these.

Then there are 4 primary sutras: The Heart Sutra, The Lankavatara Sutra, The Diamond Sutra, and The Flower Ornament Scripture (The Avatamsaka Sutra).

Then there are the koans, of which there are various collections. The most famous perhaps in the Rinzai tradition of Zen is The Mumonkan. The text 'The Gateless Barrier: Zen Teachings On The Mumonkan' by Zenkei Shibayama is excellent, and introduces a top-notch translation, with teisho (additional comments and background and explication), meant to penetrate the spiritual awakening inherent in each thing and its potential-manifest.

2 other references are influential, in modern Zen: 'Two Zen Classics' and 'Zen Training' by Katzuki Sekida.

Then there is the Soto school of Zen, with Dogen as the primary Master noted. His work 'Shobogenzo' is top-notch, and provides a more explicated, extensively-written series of essays or descriptions of facets of Buddhism as he saw it. I recommend in particular the essay 'Maka Hannya Haramitsu' from Book 1 of Shobogenzo, and 'Uji' ('Being-Time'), the Nishijima and Cross translation of that work in 4 volumes.

In Conclusion

If an interested person gets such an introduction, he or she is provided with some guidance, something that may resonate, and if not, then at least a bit of knowledge of what Zen is, and the expression of Buddhism that it is.