



What is Zen?

Some snippets compiled and adapted from *Zen Keys* by Thay, *Zen Buddhism* by Christmas Humphreys, *The Spirit of Zen* by Alan Watts, *Zen Philosophy and Zen Practice* by Thich Thien-An, and *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* by D.T. Suzuki

The Sanskrit word dhyana and the Pali word jhana mean meditation. In China these evolved into the word Chan, which in Japan became Zen. Chan, also known as Zen, was born in China during the sixth century in a fusion of Buddhism and Taoism. In 520 A.D. Bodhidharma travelled from South India to China. He was the 28th Indian Patriarch and became the First Chinese Patriarch of Zen. He taught The Four Propositions to describe Zen:

A special transmission outside the Scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Direct pointing to the soul;
Seeing into one's own nature.

Zen means Wisdom-Power-Compassion that lies beyond all words. Special words count for nothing, because understanding Zen is not a matter of book learning but of personal experience. While Zen uses Sutras, they are not the truth but only guides to the truth. The Buddha's teachings are a finger pointing to the moon. Once the moon is seen the finger is no longer needed.

In Zen mere intellectual understanding is nothing—doing is more important. Experience counts for everything. And to achieve experience, to attain enlightenment and realize Nirvana, practice is necessary. The way of Zen does not involve praying to some supernatural being, but seeing into our own true nature and realizing that it is Buddha nature.

Zen is not found in the scriptures because Zen is not based on words or letters. The scriptures are no substitute for your own experience. They are of value only to give us an idea of what the truth is like and where it is to be found. Once we know the direction we have to leave all words behind, even the words of the Buddha, because if we cling to them they become an obstacle to enlightenment.

Zen is attaching one's belt to the powerhouse of the universe. It's a direct, sudden, immediate path to awareness. It is the way to Truth and not facts about Truth. The process of Zen is a leap from thinking to knowing, from second-hand to direct experience. A Zen teacher tries to stimulate direct knowledge.

Zen cannot be taught through symbols, it passes directly from master to student, from mind to mind. The image often used is a seal imprinted on the mind. The word "transmission" denotes the transmission of the mind seal.

A student of Zen tries to bring the practice into every moment of life. A master observes the student in silence. If for example a student shuts a door noisily or carelessly the master may remind the student to be mindful. Learning Zen is like learning to swim. The instructor can show some basic techniques, then the rest is up to the student. The student must jump into the water and practice.

Zen has no ritual, no prayer, no God that made us, nor a soul to be saved. Zen seeks the wisdom that has gone beyond, that which lies beyond duality. Zen is at once the knower and the known. It is also the factor which unites the two. Zen is equated with Reality, the Absolute, the Void, what the Buddha called “the Unborn, Unoriginated, Unformed.” It’s a postulate beyond argument or proof.

Zen does not attempt to be understood by the intellect. The method of Zen is to baffle, excite, puzzle, and exhaust the intellect until it is realized that intellection is only thinking about. It will again provoke, irritate, and exhaust the emotions until it is realized that emotion is only feeling about. Then it contrives, when the disciple has been brought to an intellectual and emotional impasse, to bridge the gap between second-hand conceptual contact with reality, and first-hand experience.

It is useless to try to drag Zen down to the intellectual plane. Zen belongs to an intuitive plane. It is therefore beyond all discussion, and beyond the sway of the “opposites” by which all description and argument are carried on. It must be understood on its own plane or not at all, for the intellect can never understand or assimilate spiritual facts. Zen can no more be explained than a joke. You either get it or you don’t. One does not understand Zen any more than one understands breathing and walking. The wise person just breathes and walks on.

Zen is the direct, unswerving path which leads beyond the intellect. Zen is a state of consciousness beyond the opposites. Zen is also the way to such a state. In the intuition, every two is one. Ordinary logic states that A is A, B is B, and A is not B. Zen contradicts all of this, stating that A is not A, B is not B, and A can be B.

Zen is first and last a matter of experience. Words have their uses, but the noblest words are but noises in the air. They die, and in the end is silence, silence and a finger pointing the Way. Words are the pins on which the butterflies of life are stuck to a board. All words are nets in which to ensnare life, and Zen regards them as a necessary (and not always necessary) evil. A handful of a river is dead within the hand.

One does not talk about Zen, one experiences it. Knowledge is the greatest obstacle to awakening. We must let go of all our knowledge, habits, and prejudices. A Zen Master said “Do not strive to seek after the true, only cease to cherish opinions.”

Zen, being of the essence of freedom, resents all rules which hamper and confine the mind. It eschews philosophy, religion, ritual and magic. It climbs, with empty hands, from the “usual life” to the heights of spiritual awareness. Zen has no special forms, nor ritual, nor creed, unless you call “seeing into one’s own nature” a creed. Zen is the Light in the darkness of ignorance.

Zen is indefinable because it is the active principle of life itself. The aim of Zen is to restore the experience of original inseparability, which means to restore the original state of purity and transparency. Zen tries to lead to a deep realization of the oneness of everything, beyond comparison and distinction, and the illusion of separateness. The Buddha said “The mind, the Buddha, and sentient beings are not three separate things.”

In Zen all things are as holy as you make them, by themselves being neither divine nor profane. Zen is a direct way of looking at life, whereby all things are seen just as themselves, yet at the same time seen as the interfused aspects of the whole. Zen is a way of living life, not a way of escaping from it. Zen is not an escape from things, but a new way of looking at things, whereby they are already seen to be in Nirvana.

Three signs of awakening Zen are a sense of serenity, a sense of flow, and a sense of rightness in all action. The steps in Zen training are:

1. Having the preliminary intellectual equipment for the maturing of Zen consciousness
2. Having a strong desire to transcend oneself; that is, the limitations of our humanity
3. A master’s hand is generally found to open the way for the struggling soul
4. A final upheaval takes place, called Satori. We can cultivate the mood of Satori.

The process to shed light on all things, to produce the power of concentration, and to bring forth deep insight and awakening, is called the “Threefold Training.” This consists of precepts, concentration, and insight.

There are three essentials of Zen practice. First is great faith in our own Buddha nature. To realize our Buddha nature is not easy. It calls for relentless work and a long and difficult struggle with ourselves. We must believe in the seed of enlightenment within us.

The second step is great doubt. Zen takes the same stand as science in that nothing should be believed until it is proven, demonstrated experimentally. Inquire and doubt until everything is checked out. It is said that “great enlightenment comes from great doubt.”

The third essential is great determination. We must vow to never give up but strive on diligently. We need patience and self-discipline. Do not expect short-cuts. The mind is like a mirror. Be careful to keep it clean and not let dust collect on it.

We can meditate not only while sitting but also by doing all our daily activities mindfully. In Zen one’s daily work becomes one’s meditation. All labor is viewed with the eye of equality. There is no duality of agreeable and disagreeable jobs, no creative or uncreative work. The sutras say “in all things be neither overjoyed nor cast down.”

A person of Zen delights in simple things. Rocks, water, a flower, a pond, a singing bird, a lake reflecting the moonlight, a mountain clothed in mist. The beauty of Zen is found in simplicity and tranquility, in a sense of the all-embracing harmony of things. It is a beauty which reflects the stillness and emptiness that ever dwells in the midst of constant change. Zen art strives for simplicity. A few brush strokes represent a landscape. Zen is wedded to poetry, because both are intuitive.

Zen is a one-pointed aware mind, a disciplined life of simplicity and naturalness, a life of compassion, in harmony with the natural order of things. The aim of practice is to return to our true home, to see into our own nature.

The aim of Zen Buddhism is a clear vision of reality, seeing things as they are, and that is acquired by the power of concentration. This clear vision is enlightenment. Seeing into one's nature is the goal of Zen. When one has reached this enlightenment all wrong views dissolve and a fearless spiritual strength is born.

If you students of the Way wish to become Buddhas you need study no doctrine whatever, but only how to avoid seeking for and attaching yourselves to anything. Relinquish everything and do not even desire to accumulate merit. People are afraid to forget their minds and feelings, to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real Dharma.

Think of Zen, think of the Void, think of good and evil and you are bound hand and foot. Think only and entirely and completely of what you are doing at this moment and you are as free as a bird.

