

TICKLING THE TIGER'S EARS: THE COMPLICATED EXPERIENCE OF ZEN

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Introduction

Of all the major world religions, Buddhism is perhaps uniquely based upon religious experience, or at least upon some sort of experience. (The perennial discussion of whether Buddhism is in fact a religion will not be addressed here). Going slightly further, it could be said that of all the flavours of Buddhism, Zen is the one most clearly focused upon a basis in religious experience.

Such an assertion would lead to a discussion of the life and teachings of Gautama the Buddha. Gautama, we are told, spent a great deal of time, about seven years, doing religion the proper way (for his culture), which was by renouncing the worldly attachments of home and family and becoming a shramana, a wandering spiritual seeker. In accordance with shramana practice, Gautama sought out in the forest teachers who could initiate him into various meditation techniques, and companions in extreme ascetic self-mortification. The legends say that he learned all the skills, graduated in all the practices but failed to find the goal of his spiritual quest, namely the reason for and release from human suffering. In a last do-or-die attempt, he sat down under a tree and vowed not to move from the spot until he had succeeded. All the legends of Gautama's life attest to his experiencing enlightenment under the bodhi tree, the tree of enlightenment; some traditions recount the meditative experiences he had leading up to the moment of awakening. Thus, Gautama's enlightenment was something not taught or intuited or acquired through practice, but directly experienced. Some versions of the tradition recount that there was an extra experiential dimension to Gautama's awakening, that it was triggered by a memory of a childhood experience. I quote from Mark Epstein's recent book *Going on Being*:

In the midst of the self-punishment, Gotama remembered a time of wholeness under a tree. An episode of pleasure tugged at his mind.

"I thought of a time when my Shakyamuni father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a roseapple tree: quite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unwholesome things, I had entered upon an abode in the first meditation, which is accompanied by thinking and exploring, with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion."¹

It seems that Gautama's experience of enlightenment or awakening under the tree was a direct experience of the possibility of existence without the suffering caused by the ego and its cravings and delusions, and that this may well have been triggered by the recollection of a childhood experience.

This points to the characteristic flavour of Gautama's teaching: *ehi passiko*, he used to say, 'come and see'... What he had to show people was not to be taken on faith, based on his authority or upon sacred tradition or revealed scripture. It was to be seen, tasted, tested in one's own mind and body. It was to be experienced.

Gautama used to liken himself to a physician: when he saw people suffering, he was able to tell them what the disease was, what caused it, how it progressed, and what medicine would cure it. But he could not cure people himself. It was they who had to take the medicine. In other words, in order to put an end to suffering, people had to have the experience of awakening for themselves, they could not simply hang on to someone else's experience as if that was enough. This is what Gautama said to the Mallas shortly before he died:

It is indeed a fact that salvation cannot come from the mere sight of Me. It demands strenuous efforts in the practice of Yoga. But if someone has thoroughly understood this my Dharma, then he is released from the net of suffering, even though he never cast his eyes on Me. A man must take medicine to be cured; the mere sight of the physician is not enough.²

It is interesting to note that there is nothing exclusively Buddhist about this awakening experience. Gautama's words recognise that it is perfectly possible to have the experience without knowing anything about the Buddha. This insight is maintained by Buddhists through the recognition of *pratyekhabuddhas*, people who gain enlightenment without any teacher, and in the Mahayana's bodhisattva vow, which commits the bodhisattva to master all teachings (not just Buddhist ones). This sense that the whole point and crux of Buddhism is just in the having of the experience of enlightenment is also articulated by Gautama's image of the teachings as a raft which gets us across the river and which we then leave behind. It is in fact a disarming characteristic of Buddhist groups to say 'we find our tradition very helpful, so please try it and see if it works for you, and if it doesn't work we can recommend a different tradition down the road which might be more suited to you', and the tradition down the road is not necessarily Buddhist. Buddhist leaders often cheerfully recommend people to try Yoga, or even Catholicism! For Buddhists the key question is not will you join our tradition, but what method will work, will bring about awakening for you?

Zen

After this introduction to Buddhism in general, it is time to look at Zen in particular. *Zen* is the Japanese version of the Chinese *Ch'an*, from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, which means meditation. Thus Zen Buddhism is a way of saying, meditation Buddhism. The question posed by the Zen Masters is that among the many different schools of Buddhism, the many thousands of Buddhist sutras, the many masters and many different practices, how can one work out which of all these best represent what Gautama really discovered and taught? Zen offers a very simple answer. According to Zen, the key to Gautama's life is not what he said and did, but the awakening he experienced. So we need to follow his method in order to experience for ourselves what he experienced, and all the rest will fall into place. As his method was seated meditation, Zen Buddhism offers a very practical method of training aimed at offering the possibility of gaining for ourselves the insight that Gautama experienced in meditation.

One of Zen's most famous ways of describing itself is in words ascribed to Master Bodhidharma, the legendary transmitter of the Zen school from India to China:

A special transmission outside the scriptures, with no dependence on words or letters;
Direct pointing at the soul of man,
Seeing into one's own nature, and the attainment of Buddhahood.

This 'special transmission outside the scriptures' is passed down mind-to-mind, and Zen has a whole array of stories to illustrate the point. The foundation-story of Zen itself is the prime example:

Gautama sits in front of his arrayed disciples, who are waiting for a Dharma talk. Gautama just silently twirls a flower, until Kasyapa smiles, and then Gautama says, 'Kasyapa has understood my meaning and I transmit my Dharma to him'. This transmission is outside the scriptures because it cannot be put into words. You cannot get awakening from words or letters, you have to catch it from someone else who has it. In other words it needs to be passed down within a community of people, an experience of awakening which is preserved by those who have had it, and who are able by a variety of nonverbal means to pass it on.

To sum up, Buddhism is a religion or a system of thought and practice centred around an experience, the experience of awakening from suffering and delusion. Buddhism is not about revering the enlightenment-experience of Gautama the Buddha, or relying on it to save us, but about training ourselves to achieve that experience for ourselves. Of all the Buddhist schools, Zen is the most insistent on this point.

Enlightenment, not the Goal of Practice?

Having established this, there are a number of lines of enquiry which might be pursued. One could look at the kind of psychological phenomenon which this experience of awakening is. One could examine the sociological function played by the community of those who have achieved or are in process of achieving awakening within the context of the larger community. One might look at the texts which talk about the experience of awakening, or study the practices which foster and express that awakening. A philosophical analysis of the coherence of all this talk might be undertaken, and the anthropological and cosmological assumptions that underlie it examined.

However, this rather simple and neat picture does not really do justice to reality. Although it is the specific case of Zen which will be focused upon, other schools of Buddhism almost certainly manifest similar problems in regard to the sort of construal sketched out here. Within Zen tradition, there is a range of protests against seeing the point of Zen training as a quest to achieve an experience of enlightenment. Some of those protests will be assessed here in order to see what they reveal and where that leaves us.

First Protest

The first protest to be considered is the protest that Zen has no special experience to convey, that there is nothing apart from the ordinary, nothing beyond which we can have a vision of or an experience of union with. In my own experience of having Zen masters or monks come to talk to student groups, they almost invariably begin by telling the students that they have nothing to tell them, nothing to offer. That there is nothing special, no extra experience over and above the ones we normally have anyway, was the consistent teaching of Master Rinzai, founder of perhaps the most influential of the major Zen schools. Rinzai said:

Followers of the Way, the Dharma of the buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything in particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down ...

Fellow believers, you rush around frantically one place and another – what are you looking for, tramping till the soles of your feet are squashed flat? There is no Buddha to be sought, no Way to be carried out, no Dharma to be gained ...

Followers of the Way, here and there you hear it said that there is a Way to be practised, a Dharma to become enlightened to. Will you tell me then just what Dharma there is to become enlightened to, what Way there is to practice? In your present activities, what is it you lack, what is it that practice must mend?

A man of old said, 'If along the road you meet a man who is master of the Way, don't talk to him about the Way'. Therefore it is said, 'If a person practices the Way, the Way will never proceed. Instead, ten thousand kinds of mistaken environments will vie in poking up their heads. But if the sword of wisdom comes to cut them all down, then even before the bright signs manifest themselves, the dark signs will have become bright.' Therefore a man of old said, 'The everyday mind – that is the Way.'³

So strong is this objection to the idea that enlightenment is an extraordinary experience of some higher reality, that Zen, the meditation school, even began to deconstruct the meditative practices it had held in common with the wider Buddhist tradition. Whereas both the great meditative traditions of Calm and Insight, and the Chinese articulations of them such as Chih-I's *Mo-ho Chih-Kuan* for the T'ien-t'ai school, and in addition the Yogacara system, all set out taxonomies of meditative progress, gradual acquisition of meditative skills and of states of consciousness leading to the goal of realization of no-self (*anatta*), there arose in Zen such a concern to undercut the expectation that meditation led to rarefied and marvellous states, that the partisans of 'Sudden Awakening' were sometimes led to reject meditative practice altogether. This, however, was an extreme and a dangerous position, leading to quietist and antinomian misinterpretations.

More characteristic of Zen was a simplification of meditative practice, abandoning the complex schemes of ascent through various states of mind, replacing them with 'just sitting' (the Soto school's *shikantaza*) and with the articulation of the ideal of 'idealessness' or 'non-thinking'. This 'non-thinking' seems to me to be rather indifferent to the having of spiritual experiences, it is a practice of non-attachment and of clear vision into the impermanence of all experiences.

Before moving on to another sort of Zen protest against the understanding of Buddhism as about religious experience, there are a few comments to add. Zen offers no special experiences. People get terribly excited about koan study, which sounds very esoteric and promising of spiritual trophy-collecting. But it should be remembered that the Rinzai tradition preserves the precepts as the pinnacle of the koan system, and that the Soto school largely replaces the koans crafted by the Masters of the past with simple daily life, *genjokoan*. Again, the koans themselves frequently subvert any expectation that they lead to something special. A novice came to Joshu's monastery to train, avid for Joshu's wisdom, for the spiritual knowledge and enlightenment experience that such a master could transmit. Joshu asked him, 'Have you had breakfast yet?' 'Yes, Master', replies the monk, and the teaching given by Joshu is: 'go and wash your bowls'.⁴ Zen can even be rather brutal in its efforts to make us see that it is our very tendency to latch on to special and wonderful spiritual wisdom and experience which obstructs our realization of awakening. The Chinese master Gutei cut off his young disciple's finger in order to spur on his awakening, and Nansen cut the monastery cat in half in order to demonstrate how discriminative thinking kills. If Zen is pointing towards experience at all, it is not rarefied spiritual experience, but ordinary daily life, eating, sitting, sleeping, using the toilet.

But this does not mean that Zen experience is not marvellous. Huston Smith recounted the story of a Western student who had been studying 7 years in a Kyoto monastery. Asked what Zen training had led him to so far, he replied: 'No paranormal experiences that I can detect. But you wake up in the morning and the world seems so beautiful you can hardly stand it'.⁵ Master Hakuin found in the freezing mornings of practice at his temple that no extra religious experience was necessary:

At the north window, icy drafts whistle through cracks,
At the south pond, wild geese huddle in snowy reeds.
Above, the mountain moon is pinched thin with cold,
Freezing clouds threaten to plunge from the sky.
Buddhas might descend to this world by the thousands,
They couldn't add or subtract one thing.⁶

Second Protest

The second protest Zen would make against the idea that it is a training aimed at getting us to experience Gautama's experience of awakening for ourselves, is that awakening is something we already have, and do not need to try to achieve. Like many other schools, Zen is greatly influenced by the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, which is that there is Buddha-nature or awakening within us already. This is part of the significance of Master Rinzai's teaching. He followed some of the comments given earlier by quoting a verse from the Indian Master Buddhanandi:

Seeking outside for some Buddha possessing form –
this hardly becomes you!
If you wish to know your original mind,
don't try to join with it, don't try to depart from it.⁷

It is the original mind which is already enlightened, and so when we look to have some extraordinary experience to bring us to awakening, we are on a detour going further and further away from awakening. Master Rinzai used the Taoist term 'True Man' to signify the enlightened person, and insisted that the True Man is already within us:

The Master ascended the hall and said, "Here in this lump of red flesh there is a True Man with no rank. Constantly he goes in and out the gates of your face. If there are any of you who don't know this for a fact, then look! Look!"
At that time there was a monk who came forward and asked, "What is he like – the True Man with no rank?"
The Master got down from his chair, seized hold of the monk and said, "Speak! Speak!"⁸

But note the sting in the tail of the story: just in case the monk (or we) were inclined to be rather impressed by the idea of being a True Man of no rank:

The monk was about to say something, whereupon the Master let go of him, shoved him away, and said, "True Man with no rank – what a shitty ass-wiper!"⁹
The Master then returned to his quarters.

So, there are no special experiences to be had, and what we already have is all we need to look for.

Third Protest

Zen's third protest is against the reification of the experience of enlightenment. In other words, Zen wants us to understand that there is not a something somewhere out there which we can label 'enlightenment' and which we need to experience. There is just reality,

and we need to notice that we are already living in it, and stop being deluded about this. This reality is vast, ever-changing, and certainly cannot be pinned down in any way. Thus Master Dogen insisted that the business of the Zen disciple is not to achieve enlightenment, or to 'meet the Buddha', but to 'go beyond Buddha'.¹⁰ This is taken to mean that awakening is not an experience which we can have and then hold on to, reflect on, or appeal to as validation for our spiritual insight, but just the ceaseless activity of 'casting off body and mind'. He expresses this in one of my favourite Zen images, that of 'tickling the tiger's ears'. Discussing a conversation between two earlier Masters, Dogen quotes Master Isan Reiyu's comment that Master Obaku Kiun 'has the capacity to subdue tigers'. Subduing or catching tigers, like the more familiar image of the ox, is an image for achieving enlightenment. Dogen adds his own gloss to Master Isan's comment:

After he has caught one he scratches it behind the ears.
Catching tigers, scratching them behind the ears –
Going among different creatures, going among one's fellows.
Clearly seeing Buddha-nature, the Eye is opened;
Buddha-nature clearly seeing, the Eye is lost.
Hurry! Speak out! Quickly! Quickly!¹¹

To scratch, or tickle, the tiger behind its ears is to be familiar and playful with awakening, not to treat it with awe or respect, but to trust it. It is opening and losing the Eye of the Dharma, by being awake without dwelling on being awake, by losing our sense of self in the sheer delight of reality. Another way in which Dogen expresses this protest against reification of enlightenment-experience is to insist that we cannot limit ourselves to just one way of seeing things. Concerning water, for example, which is both real water, the stuff of life, and a place where enlightenment occurs,

... we should learn in practice the moments in which it is possible to put on the eyes and look in the ten directions at the water of the ten directions. This is not learning in practice only of the time when human beings and gods see water; there is learning in practice of water seeing water ...

There are beings which see what we call water as a string of pearls ... There are [beings] which see water as wonderful flowers ... Demons see water as raging flames, and see it as pus and blood. Dragons and fish see it as a palace, and see it as a tower. Some see [water] as the seven treasures and the mani gem; some see it as trees and forests and fences and walls; some see it as the pure and liberated Dharma-nature; some see it as the real human body; and some see it as [the oneness of] physical form and mental nature. Human beings see it as water, the causes and conditions of life and death.¹²

Or perhaps more familiar than Dogen's meditation on water is Joshu's response to the question, does a dog have buddha-nature? In the answer, *Mu*, we find not only the same sort of polysemy that water has in the passage from Dogen – we could spend hours just listing some of the things that Joshu means by that *Mu!* – but also, among them, a simple rejection of the idea that Buddha-nature, in other words, enlightenment-potential, is a thing that a person or a dog could have. We could validly paraphrase this koan: *Does a Zen monk have religious experiences? No!* In a marvellous video-interview the American Zen Master Susan Postal talks about the way in which we have 'spiritual experiences' which "punch holes" in the box of egotistic delusion and craving that we make for ourselves to live in: the whole point of having those experiences is that they make it clear to us that there is something beyond the box – we see through the holes that there is a vast brightness outside them. But we humans have an amazing tendency, instead of becoming determined to make the holes bigger and get out of the box altogether, to gild the holes we've punched, to hang little frames around them, 'Look at this wonderful experience I've had!' and of course to

keep the frames up we need to maintain the walls. Mixing her metaphors somewhat, Postal also likens spiritual experiences to medicine which comes in bottles. We have a tendency to line up the empty bottles once we've drunk the medicine, and to admire them. Look at all these things I've had! But once the medicine has been drunk, we don't need the bottles any more, once the holes have been punched in our ego-boxes we can see that the walls are not the real boundaries. The point of Zen training is not to give us special spiritual experiences but to set us free to live in reality and health. And of course, this is also what Master Rinzai meant when he advised his students, 'When you see a Buddha on the road, Kill Him!'¹³

Fourth Protest

Moving on from the protest against the reification of enlightenment-experience, Zen's fourth protest is against the reification of the one who experiences enlightenment. The term 'reification' here is used to mean endowment with substantive identity. Of course there is nothing particularly Zen about objecting to this, it is the standard Buddhist teaching of *anatta*, no-self. This, in my understanding is not some odd metaphysical claim that our individual existences are unreal, that we do not really exist, but is partly an almost scientific claim, that what we are is not a thing which exists independently of all the other stuff that the world is made of. We exist in reference to and dependence upon the material circumstances which decide whether we live in health or under the shadow of famine, disease or genetic disorder; upon the social circumstances which determine whether we will be educated or ignorant, fulfilled or alienated and so on. *Anatta* is also therefore partly a moral claim: that we will not flourish until we realize and act on our inseparability from the flourishing of others. Master Dogen quotes Nagarjuna as saying, 'If you want to realize the Buddha-nature, you must get rid of selfish pride' and he comments, 'it is not that there is no realization; realization is just *getting rid of selfish pride*.'¹⁴ This is partly, and most importantly for Zen, a psychological or epistemological claim: we are not what we think we are, the boundaries of consciousness are not where we draw them, there is more to know and feel than we are accustomed to recognize. To clarify, it may well be that there is in fact more 'out there' than we know of, some spiritual reality that the materialist culture is ignorant of, but this is not the main concern of Zen. Rather, the concern is to shift, make permeable, and finally erase completely the division we make between that part of reality which is 'me' and the rest which is 'not-me'. The most comfortable language we have for this is the one borrowed from Freud. We can talk about the ego and the falsity of the ego-identity. As long as we bear in mind that 'ego' here is a kind of shorthand for the very difficult notion of '*atman*' and is not exactly what any of the Western psychologists have meant by it, it is a useful expression.

The trajectory of Zen practice, therefore, is towards the shedding of the ego-self. Master Dogen's teaching of the casting-off of body-and-mind has already been referred to. This, according to him was the practice taught by Master Tendo Nyojo, the Chinese master under whom he resolved his own Great Doubt and realized awakening.¹⁵ In Dogen's Japanese, this teaching is expressed as *shinjindatsuraku*: it is the primary activity of the Zen student in seated meditation, and therefore another way of talking about 'nonthinking'. *Shinjindatsuraku* is susceptible of a range of construals, the point being that one continues to engage it at increasingly subtle and profound levels as one progresses in practice. However, at its heart, it is the shedding of identity, of the delusory identity founded upon discriminative consciousness. It is learning to see water as water and fish and demons see water, instead of being imprisoned within the human view; or to use another of Dogen's images, it is learning to see the Blue Mountains constantly walking:

Mountains lack none of the virtues with which mountains should be equipped. For this reason, they are constantly abiding in stillness and constantly walking. We must painstakingly learn in practice the virtue of this walking. The walking of mountains must be like the walking of human beings; therefore, even though it does not look like human walking, do not doubt the walking of the mountains ... If we doubt the walking of the mountains, we also do not yet know our own walking. It is not that we do not have our own walking, but we do not yet know and have not yet clarified our own walking. When we know our own walking, then we will surely also know the walking of the Blue Mountains.¹⁶

This practice of shedding the ego-self is expressed in a whole range of ways in addition to *shinjindatsuraku*: for instance, a common theme among Western students of Zen is that of 'dying on the mat'. This is a way of putting into practice the Zen talk about the Great Death. It is also a way of talking about how one ends up responding to the pain in the legs which we feel when we sit for long periods in the lotus pose! Zen Master Bunan used to exhort his students constantly to

Die while alive,
Be completely dead!
Then do
What you will
And all will be well.¹⁷

Within the Rinzai tradition, the koan *Mu* is used sometimes as a beginning koan, sometimes as the only koan that needs to be practiced. Mumon put it first in his collection, and it is worth quoting his comment on it at length:

In order to master Zen, you must pass the barrier of the patriarchs. To attain this subtle realization, you must completely cut off the way of thinking. If you do not pass the barrier, and do not cut off the way of thinking, then you will be like a ghost clinging to the bushes and weeds. Now, I want to ask you, what is the barrier of the patriarchs? Why, it is this single word "Mu". That is the front gate to Zen... If you pass through it, you will not only see Joshu face to face, but you will also go hand in hand with the successive patriarchs, entangling your eyebrows with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears. Isn't that a delightful prospect? Wouldn't you like to pass this barrier?

Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word "Mu". Carry it continuously day and night. Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of "has" or "has not". It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try. All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream. Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth.

It will be as if you snatch away the great sword of the valiant general Kan'u and hold it in your hand. When you meet the Buddha, you kill him; when you meet the patriarchs, you kill them. On the brink of life and death, you command perfect freedom; among the sixfold worlds and four modes of existence, you enjoy a playful and merry samadhi [concentration].

Now, I want to ask you again, "How will you carry it out?" Employ every ounce of your energy to work on this "Mu". If you hold on without interruption, behold: a single spark, and the holy candle is lit!¹⁸

Susan Postal recounts her experience of studying 'Mu' with Master Bernie Tetsugen Glassman: she was certainly not encouraged to think about what 'Mu' is and about what Joshu meant when he said it, but instead was to sound 'Mu' until she became one with the sound. Again, not metaphysics but just something real to hear as present or as absent: a

woman holding herself separate from the sound she makes, or a woman who is sounding 'Mu'. To become one with the sound of 'Mu' one needs to strip off the clothes of self-consciousness and the paradox is that in the stripping off of this delusory self-awareness we first become aware of who we have always been. Hence in his most extended discussion of Buddha-nature, *Shobogenzo Bussho*, Master Dogen juggles the assertion by Gautama and other Zen masters such as Enkan Sai-an, that 'All living beings have the Buddha-nature', with its contradiction by the fourth patriarch, Master Dai-i Doshin, and Master Isan Reiyu: 'all living beings are without the Buddha-nature', or 'are no-Buddha-nature'. The terms here are *Bussho*, Buddha-nature, and *mu-Bussho*, no-Buddha-nature. *Mu-Bussho*, for Dogen, has some priority over *Bussho* as an expression of the Dharma. This is how he puts it:

The words preached by Sakyamuni are, "All living beings totally have the Buddha-nature." The words preached by Dai-i are, "All living beings are without the Buddha-nature." There may be a great difference between the meaning of "have" and "are without" as words, and some might doubt which expression of the truth is adequate and which not. But only "All living beings are without the Buddha-nature" is the senior in Buddhism.¹⁹

Part of Dogen's concern here, is to use the practice and experience of 'Mu' to make sure that we do not reify Buddha-nature or Zen students or ourselves as having it. We are just what we are, nothing special, not vehicles of transcendent reality:

Because the Buddha-nature is just the Buddha-nature, living beings are just living beings.²⁰

Moreover, if we wish to use the phrase 'All living beings have the Buddha-nature', we need to understand that Buddha-nature is not a thing that we have:

So now let's ask the National Master: "Do all buddhas have the Buddha-nature, or not?" We should question him and test him like this. We should research that he does not say, "All living beings are the Buddha-nature itself", but says, "All living beings have the Buddha-nature". He needs to get rid of the *have* in *have the Buddha-nature*. Getting rid is the single track of iron, and the single track of iron is the way of the birds.²¹

The quotation above is Nishijima and Cross's translation, but in fact the character they have translated as 'getting rid' is *datsuraku*, the same character seen earlier in *shinjindatsuraku*. Dogen's point could be retranslated thus: To understand what is meant when Buddhists state that we all have the Buddha-nature, we need to cast off the idea of 'having'; it is this casting-off which is the key to realizing Buddhist awakening. So Dogen reaches his conclusion: we need to cast off any tendency to think that Buddhism is about having special access to some spiritual reality:

Since the kalpa [era] without a beginning, many stupid people have seen consciousness of the divine as the Buddha-nature, and as the original human state. A person could die laughing! To express the Buddha-nature further, although it need not be getting covered in mud and staying in the water, it is fences, walls, tiles and pebbles. When we express it in the further ascendant state, just what is the Buddha-nature? Have you fully understood? Three heads and eight arms!²²

Fifth Protest

Thus Zen's third protest is against the reification of the experience of awakening, and its fourth is against the reification of the experiencer. These two can be added together, and the product taken as the fifth and final protest in our 'tour': namely, the Zen teaching of non-dualism.

One of the reasons why all the mystical traditions and not just Zen, would hesitate over and recoil somewhat from talking about having experiences, experiencing spiritual truth or God

or ultimate reality, is that all the evidence is that when you are in this state you cannot describe it as an experience because you can no longer distinguish between yourself as the experiencer and the content of the experience. You cannot apply words like 'experience' to it, or describe it as an 'experience of something', because words always split reality up into this and not-this, subject and object, noun and predicate and so on. This was the topic of a lecture given by Master Tozan Gohon, reported by Dogen:

One day, Tozan gave a lecture to an assembly of monks. He said, "After experiencing continuous development beyond Buddha we are able to speak of the Buddhist Dharma somewhat." A monk asked, "What kind of speech can we make?" Tozan said, "When I speak about it you won't be able to hear it." Then the monk said, "O Priest, can you hear it yourself?" Tozan said, "When I'm not speaking about it I hear it."²³

Dogen goes on to contrast Tozan with Master Gozu Hoyu, a famous teacher who nevertheless had not attained awakening, the 'great matter' which Dogen calls

the right Dharma-eye treasury and the fine mind of nirvana. Though it is present in the self, it may be *necessary to know*. Though it is present in the self, it is *still never known*. For those who have not received the authentic transmission from buddha to buddha, it is never realized, even in a dream.²⁴

In their notes, Nishijima and Cross interpret 'still never known' as pointing to something beyond intellectual recognition, while 'necessary to know' is "a state which must be realized through effort".²⁵ This state of making present to the mind by practice, without intellectual effort, is the state of non-thinking encountered earlier, Dogen's version of the Ch'an ideal of *wu-nien*, no-mind. This was presented in the Platform Sutra ascribed to Master Eno (Hui-Neng) as the 'main doctrine' of Zen. It does not simply mean that no thoughts occur: Eno says that "No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought," and goes on to explain that:

To be unstained in all environments is called no-thought. If on the basis of your own thoughts you separate from environment, then, in regard to things, thoughts are not produced. If you stop thinking of the myriad things, and cast aside all thoughts, as soon as one instant of thought is cut off, you will be reborn in another realm. Students, take care! Don't rest in objective things and the subjective mind. [If you do so] it will be bad enough that you yourself are in error, yet how much worse that you encourage others in their mistakes... Therefore, no-thought is established as a doctrine.²⁶

Yampolsky comments on this passage that no-thought "is the state of enlightenment."²⁷ According to Master Eno, it is a state beyond captivity to the subject/object duality, a state in which the mind is not empty but unconstrained. Again it is emphasised that this 'state beyond captivity to the subject/object duality' is not some special, spiritual state of mind or being, but just living in reality without being captive to the discriminating mind. This point is made very clearly in a famous Zen teaching, Master Seigen Ishin's 'mountains and waters'. Master Ishin said:

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, "Mountains are mountains, waters are waters."

After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, "Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters."

But now, having attained the abode of final rest, I say, "Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters."

There is clearly an important sense in which Master Ishin's third view is the same as his first: mountains are mountains and waters are waters. This is how Zen brings us back to reality as the place of awakened living: it does not give us access to some spiritual realm beyond this

world, but just gives us the ability to see reality. At the same time, the difference between Master Ishin's third stage and the first two is that it is the state beyond the dualism of 'mountains' and 'not-mountains', 'waters' and 'not-waters'. We should be careful to notice that the dualism which is transcended is not just between mountains and not-mountains, waters and not-waters, but also between the ego which identifies and labels phenomena, and the phenomena themselves.

Hearing Dragons

This completes the consideration of Zen protests against talking about having wonderful religious experiences. Yet spite of all this, Zen does often talk about having some special experiences. There are rumours, for example, that Zen will bring us into contact with dragons (and in China and Japan dragons are the lords and representatives of the spirit-world, as well as lords of life-sustaining water).

A well-known story refers to meeting the 'real dragon'. A peasant with a fascination for dragons filled his little home with pictures and models of dragons. The dragons got to hear about it, and one of them decided to visit the fellow; it would be interesting to see his collection, and the peasant would doubtless be thrilled to see a real dragon. So he went, and for a while failed to attract the peasant's attention; he was far too busy attending to his collection. When at last the dragon finally managed to make enough noise so that the man noticed and looked out of the window, he died of fright! Shunryu Suzuki used to say to his students, 'Why do you ask me about enlightenment? What makes you think you would like it?' Zen warns us to take care: we may well meet a real dragon if we commit to practice. How will we react to it? What if it is not the way we expect it to be?

Master Dogen also has something to say about dragons, about hearing them rather than seeing them. The noise that dragons make is expressed in Japanese by Dogen as 'gin' – he talks of 'ryugin', dragon noises. And 'gin' is one of those very difficult words. It has variously been translated as groans, howls, whispers, or chants: it obviously covers rather a broad range of noises, verbal and nonverbal, and can express something joyful as well as something sorrowful. In fact it is somewhat reminiscent of the noise a singer makes in traditional Japanese theatre, the *Noh* tradition. Dogen recalls that a monk once asked Great Master Shuto of Kyogen-ji temple, "*What is the truth?*" The Master answered, "*The moaning of dragons among withered trees.*"

With some commentary Dogen establishes that it is indeed possible to hear dragon-moans: what an amazing experience that must be! To hear the moaning of dragons is to hear the sound of the spirit-world, the song of the Absolute. But Dogen insists that in fact we can hardly avoid hearing dragon-moans, because they are the sound of reality itself, the sound, he says, of 'the passing of air inside the nostrils':

The monk says, "I wonder if there are any who are able to hear."

Sozan says, "Over the whole earth there is no-one who does not hear."²⁸

A student once asked Master Nishijima, in a packed room in the stifling heat of a Tokyo summer, 'Roshi, what do you say is the moaning of dragons?' Nishijima answered, 'The symphony of air-conditioners.'

Conclusion

So what can be concluded from this study of Zen and religious experience? Zen offers us the experience of enlightenment and awakening to transcendental truth only on the understanding that this is not different from the daily reality of eating and sleeping. It offers us the marvellous sound of dragon songs on the understanding that when the dragon is singing you and I will not hear it. Yes, Zen offers religious experiences. But who has these experiences? To say that we do, is wide of the mark. I would like to conclude by suggesting two ways of talking which might help us remind ourselves of the complicated nature of Zen experience.

First, I want to suggest that part of what is wrong with the language of experience is the suggestion of a thing external to us, unaffected by us, that we have contact with or experience of. Apart from the problems of reification of the thing and the person, what is wrong with this is that it is rather a passive model in which our role in the experience is a sort of noticing. But when Zen talks about 'realizing enlightenment', it does not mean noticing it, it means making it real, and this is about activity. Dogen insisted that if we understand 'practice' and the experience of enlightenment as different things, we have misunderstood them: enlightenment is just practice, it is the constant activity of casting-off body and mind, *shinjindatsuraku*. Dogen explains this at length in *Shobogenzo Bendowa*, but it may be summarized in two lines:

If a human being, even for a single moment, manifests the Buddha's posture in the three forms of conduct, while [that person] sits up straight in samadhi, the entire world of Dharma assumes the Buddha's posture and the whole of space becomes the state of realization.²⁹

This theme, that awakening is fundamentally something we do rather than experience, is explained particularly in Dogen's *Shobogenzo Gyobutsu-Yuigi*, 'The Dignified Activity of Acting Buddha', but in fact permeates Zen talk. Master Hakuin said,

Beneath an empty autumn sky stretch endless wastes where no one goes. Who is that horseman riding from the west?³⁰

The horseman represents ultimate reality, and Buddhist truth, but primarily in his unobstructed riding he represents the activity of being-reality and being-Buddha. So, my first suggestion is that we ought to counter talk of experiencing enlightenment or reality or truth with the activity of being enlightened, real and true.

In my second suggestion I want to go just a little further than I am aware of the Zen Masters going but then, it is only quite recently that Zen has begun to be expressed in English. If what we are to do is to be Buddha, and if this is hardly a unique or special calling since every living being, every blade of grass and every stone, the mountains in their walking and the birds in their flight, manifest Buddha-nature and are constantly being-Buddha and going-beyond-Buddha, all of which has been established, if a little sketchily, then as far as experiencing goes, we need to pay attention to the way the figure of the Buddha is affected by the great Mahayana figure of the Bodhisattva.

While much of Zen talk is about being Buddha and realizing Buddha-nature, it should not be forgotten how often the Zen monk or lay-practitioner will recite the bodhisattva vow. At the last Zen monastery I stayed at, we recited it three times daily in the morning meditation period, but that was during the vacation! In taking or reciting the bodhisattva vow, we declare our commitment to putting all living beings' experience of awakening before our own. Now, if I may just play with these words a little, if it is the job of a Buddha to teach the Dharma and show all beings the way of enlightenment, then what the bodhisattva is saying in essence, is 'Rather than pursue my own experience of enlightenment I will aim to help

others achieve that enlightenment; and to that end I will endeavour to be experienced as Buddha by them.’ Not experiencing Buddhist truth, but being experienced as Buddhist truth: this is the bodhisattva’s priority.

And if that all sounds a little bit contrived, I thought I would finally conclude by quoting a poem by Master Dogen. Although human beings are not mentioned here, Dogen does assert that ‘the worm at the bottom of my garden’ can be experienced as ‘the diamond eye’ of Buddhist truth, and so perhaps I have not gone too far in thinking what we might:

Days and weeks of pouring rain!
Completely clear skies!
Croaking of bullfrogs.
Singing of earthworms.
Eternal buddhas have never passed away.
They are manifesting the diamond Eye.
Aah!
The complicated! The complicated!³¹

NOTES

1. Quoted in *Tricycle*, Spring 2001, p.48.
2. From Edward Conze’s translation in *Buddhist Scriptures* (Penguin, 1959), p.62.
3. Quotations from Burton Watson’s translation, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi* (Boston & London: Shambala, 1993). The first ‘man of old’ referred to is Pen-ching (667-761); the second is Ma-Tsu (709-788) – vid. Watson pp.45-46.
4. Case 7 of the *Mumonkan*; p.44 of Sekida’s translation, ‘Two Zen Classics’ (New York: Weatherhill, 1977). The same theme is treated at length in Master Dogen’s *Kajo* (‘Everyday Life’), pp.221-226 in Book 3 of Nishijima & Cross’s translation of the *Shobogenzo* (London: Windbell, 1997).
5. Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (HarperCollins, 1991) p.137.
6. Translated by Norman Waddell in *Zen Words for the Heart* (Boston: Shambala, 1996), p.11.
7. Watson, p.62 & note.
8. *Ibid.*, p.13
9. For those who know the image, there is a further layer of ambiguity: a ‘shitty ass-wiper’ is a familiar Zen symbol for the Buddha himself.
10. This is the theme of the fascicle *Bukkojoji* (or *Butsukojoji* in Nishijima & Cross’s translation).
11. From Waddell & Abe’s translation of *SG Bussho (The Eastern Buddhist 9/2 , 1976, 71- 87)*.
12. *Shobogenzo Sansuigyo*, pp.172-3 of Book 1 of Nishijima & Cross’s translation.
13. p. 52 of Burton Watson’s translation: “If you meet a buddha, kill the buddha. If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch. If you meet an arhat, kill the arhat. If you meet your parents, kill your parents. If you meet your kinfolk, kill your kinfolk. Then for the first time you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go.”

14. *Shobogenzo Bussho*, Nishijima and Cross, I.15-16.
15. The *Gyojoki* records the conversation in which Dogen uses Master Tendo Nyojo's teaching of '*Shinjindatsuraku*' to express his enlightenment, and Nyojo authenticates it. There are a variety of problems associated with the claim that this really was Tendo Nyojo's teaching, however: these are fully discussed by Steve Heine in *A Dream Within a Dream: Studies in Japanese Thought* (New York: Peter Land, 1991), pp.3ff.
16. *Shobogenzo Sansuigyo*, pp.167-8 of Nishijima & Cross, Book 1.
17. See John Stevens, *Zen Masters*, (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1999), p.66.
18. Sekida, pp.27-28.
19. *Shobogenzo Bussho*, Nishijima & Cross 2.23.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p.22.
22. *Ibid.*, p.32.
23. *Shobogenzo Butsukojoji*, in Nishiyama & Stevens; translation (Tokyo: Nakayama Shobo, 1977) II.1.
24. Nishijima & Cross's translation, 2.117.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967) pp.138-9.
27. *Ibid.*, p.116.
28. *Shobogenzo Ryugin*, Nishijima & Cross 3.229.
29. Nishijima & Cross, I.4-5; the 'three forms of conduct' are conduct of body, speech, and mind.
30. p.43 of Waddell's *Zen Words for the Heart*.
31. *Shobogenzo Ganzei*, Nishijima & Cross, III.219.

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