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The Study of Living Words in Zen Buddhism

Of the five Buddhist Schools, Zen seems to be one of the least understood by students of religion today. Zen's unique discipline, the meditative study of the *koan* (more correctly called *hua-t'ou*¹), is, unfortunately, not clearly understood.

The starting point of Zen Buddhist study lies in the practitioner's recognizing the extent of personal opinions so frequently automatically assumed to be correct. In humbly acknowledging the very real pervasion of conditioned views and recalcitrant concepts, thereby becoming open to transformation, the intending student is prepared to begin Zen cultivation. This is extremely important for unless the influence of both coarse and subtle obscurations are perceived there is no point in proceeding to study Zen Buddhism, the Mind Dharma.

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1. *Koan*: *koans* are the records often found in books which include the setting, dialogue or physical demonstration of Buddhist Truth by a Zen Master with his or her student. It is only from the unenlightened, dualistic viewpoint that *koans* appear strange or meaningless. In actuality they are full of hidden meaning, descending as they do from the autonomous Buddha Realm. *Hua-t'ou*: *hua-t'ou* are the essence of the *koan*-story. To give an illustration of the *hua-t'ou*/*koan* difference :

A Zen student approached his Master, after long years of study, and asked, "Master, what is the True Nature?"

The Master replied, "It is not Buddha; it is not a thing; it is not empty-nothingness. Tell me, what is it?"

The senior student bowed and departed considering the old Master's reply. One bright morning several years later he entered the Vairochana Tower (attained Awakening).

The whole quote, from 'a Zen student' to 'enter the Vairochana Tower' is the *koan*-record made available to the public. The Zen Master's words, 'what is it?', constitute the *hua-t'ou* and it is on these that Zen practitioners focus their mind.

To reach the advanced position of Enlightenment, inordinate involvement with phenomena needs to be relinquished along with the negative attitudes expressed in such forms as unwholesome speech. In short, the beginner is taught to observe correct, skilful discipline of both body and mind. When the motivation for Zen training is aroused, called *Bodhicitta*², the prerequisite is that wholesome use be made thereafter of the physical, verbal and mental energies. These three activities are subsumed in the Six Perfections of *Mahāyāna*³ Buddhism: Giving, Discipline, Patient Endurance, Vigour, Mindfulness and Wisdom. Though classified as six, these trainings include 'the ten thousand wholesome departments' taught in the *Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva*.⁴

A characteristic of Zen Buddhism is its non-reliance on books. In the spiritual cultivation called Dharma nothing surpasses personal contact with Good Knowing Advisers. When a disciple of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, once remarked that half of religious life consisted in contact with good friends, the *Tathagata*⁵ refused to accept that, saying that far more than half of the spiritual life consists in drawing close to those who have similar interests. Thus, the prospective student, after having read books on the Zen-body of teaching, is requested to make suitable enquiries and interview several highly recognized Zen Masters. Further, in approaching such Teachers, the student needs to be aware beforehand of the unusual teaching style employed by adopts of the Zen heritage. Every action, including even the seemingly ordinary greeting or remark, is invariably of deeper signifi-

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2. *Bodhicitta*: 'the mind aroused to attain Enlightenment' for the benefit of all sentient beings.
 3. *Mahāyāna*: lit. 'Great Vehicle', Buddhism is so called because its aim is not personal liberation (*shrāvakayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna* and *theravāda* teachings), but the liberation of all living beings. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is more adaptable, more outgoing and more creative than the conservative, introspective and dogmatic *Hinayāna* found in SE Asia. It is, at the present time, the most widely followed in the Western world.
 4. *Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva*: available in English translation from the Buddhist Text Translation Society (Calif. USA) since 1974. A *Mahāyāna sutra* popular since the 7th century AD in northern Asia.
 5. *Tathāgata*: lit. 'Thus Come One' is a title of a Buddha, showing that the Buddha has long followed the *Bodhisattva* Path of cause and effect prior to realizing Complete Enlightenment, Buddhahood.

cance than is generally realized. Zen Masters lose no opportunity to 'point directly to the mind-essence of humanity' since the perception of the same is to see the True-Nature and instantly attain Buddhahood. For example, after having asked the enquirer's name, even the simple question, "Where do you come from?" contains a deeper import than what is generally attached to the very same words. Another characteristic of Zen Gurus is that of 'not speaking directly'. What does this mean? This refers to the Zen Masters' frequent use of simile, metaphor or poetry in transmitting Zen Teaching. Yet another fundamental principle employed by Zen Masters is the *Pure Land Sutra's* 'waterfalls, trees, birds and gurgling streams clearly repeat Amitabha Buddha's holy Name', that is, the basic tenet called 'the expounding of the Dharma by the sentientless.' This is an especially profound aspect of teaching which is little known and something with which Masters require students to familiarize themselves. Unfortunately the scope of the present essay does not permit full explanation of this, drawing as it does on the Four Dharma Realms of *Hua Yen*⁶ and the interpenetration of phenomena and noumena. Hence 'the expounding of the Dharma by the sentientless' will have to be left to the reader to pursue as prompted by individual motivation. Of course direct instruction from a Zen Master is necessary before this principle is understood, though the very nature of the instruction imparted will undoubtedly baffle the enquirer.

Rather than use 'dead words' (remarks containing conceptual content, dualistic terminology), Zen Buddhists have since long chosen to employ what they call 'living words' (the non-philosophical approach which eschews ordinary scholastic terminology). It is little wonder then that the Chinese proverb has, "Zen is hard to grasp. It is round and rolling, slippery and slick". An illustration: When guests have an interview with my Teacher, Zen Master Ku San Su Lyun, it isn't uncommon that he will thump his staff on the floor and ask, "What is it" (!) Such an extremely brief and physical/verbal demonstration of Zen is almost classic: unlike the Zen form known in the West today, which has come from Japan, the Korean form is classic T'ang Dynasty style—the same as the Zen of the Chinese Masters in ancient times when Zen (*Ch'an*, C.) was at its peak in

6. *Hua Yen*: lit. 'Flower Garland', the title of the longest and most profound Buddhist *sutra*. Zen Masters draw on its teachings as of course do those of the Hua Yen School.

mainland China. 'Dead words' or even 'dead thoughts' will, during a formal Zen dialogue, prove entirely useless. Consequently, until such time as the student has attained at least the lesser levels of awakening, utter confusion and bewilderment will be the order of the day. Yet, serious students will reflect on a Zen Master's saying and doings, and derive benefit and progress depending on the degree to which the enlightened Master's 'direct pointing' is aimed.

It is worth repeating at this point that the Zen method of instruction is based firmly on classical Buddhist sutras such as the *Avatamsaka* (Flower Garland), the *Prajna Paramitas* [perfection of Wisdom texts], the *Vimalakirti* and the *Vajracchedhika*. The latter two sutra-discourses of the Buddha's personal disciples' dialogue with the enlightened Layman of Vaisali, Vimalakirti (*Vimalakirti Nirdesha Sutra*) and Elder Subhuti's exchange with the Buddha at Shravasti (*Vajracchedhika Prajna Paramita Sutra*) are especially important. Also, in the Zen nations of Chinese-style (Buddhism that is, Malaysia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria) there is no emphasis whatsoever on 'answering' a *koan*. Basically there is no answer to a *koan* anyway, but when Japanese Zennists search for one they eventually achieve the same result as the Chinese Zennists, for the *koan hua-t'ou* technique is intended to produce a state called Great Inquiry. In generating the so-called Great Doubt in concentrating on an *hua-t'ou* the mind is stripped of wandering thoughts, knowing, feeling, hearing and seeing—a state which precedes awakening; this the *Lanka Sutra* calls concentrative *samapatti*. If, however, Zen practitioners were to think about the *koan* (or its essence, technically called *hua-t'ou*), they would be severely rebuked. *Koans* are statements or actions made by enlightened Zen Masters, revealing their totalistic perception of reality. Thus they are the same as the Buddha Shakyamuni's speaking the *Lotus Sutra* from the awakened mind called Lotus Samādhi, or his delivering the famous *Shurangama Sutra* from pure Shurangama Samādhi. The *Shurangama Sutra* has long been popular with Zen students since it records Bhikshu Ananda's search for the nature of mind, guided by the Buddha himself; this is one of the examples in the life of Shakyamuni Buddha, two thousand five hundred and twenty five years ago, wherein he gave the supreme Zen method of direct and immediate teaching beyond the ordinary methods of spiritual discipline called *Hinayāna* or *Theravāda*, characterized by relative teaching and gradual progression through stages of spirituality. In the *sutras* and

tantras, the *Tathagata* explained that human birth is rare, meeting the Buddha Dharma is rare, and that meeting the supreme form of that teaching, Zen, is even more rare.

Instructions for the cultivation of *koan* or *hua-t'ou* Zen are found in the words of the 14th century Korean Zen Master, Tae-go:

Generate the vigorous mindfulness of your *koan* by abandoning discriminations of, for example, good and bad. Give rise only to the *hua-t'ou*, "WHAT is this mind? (which hears sounds and sees forms)". Investigate it quite unswervingly, allowing no second thoughts to arise after the *hua-t'ou* question, "WHAT is it?" is generated. At all times of the day and night, while walking-standing-sitting and reclining, do not let it become dull. Steadily observing the *koan* while coming and going, one will become increasingly familiar with the exercise, a deep satisfaction will be found in the Zen work, and one's meditation will certainly improve. With time the practitioner becomes increasingly able to grip the *hua-t'ou*, simultaneously abandoning distracting thoughts. From the awareness of holding back from negativity, then proceed to drop consciousness of the same. When discriminations of bad and good are left behind one reaches a state wherein misplaced concern for externals no longer exists. This is a vast, peaceful place, knowing no obstructing thoughts. Here, the cares of yesterday are void, the anticipations of tomorrow do not arise, and the memory of today's toil is forgotten. Certainly this represents considerable progress, nonetheless this stage of emptiness is also not to be maintained as final. The non-maintenance of this emptiness is also to be forgotten, and this forgetting has also to be transcended. Then, free yourself from the same. When the idea of getting free is not preserved, only the alert and tranquil light of the spirit will appear quite prominently before one. With the smashing of *avidya* (primordial ignorance) there is the authentic awakening to Wisdom. Understand that I, *Purohita* [National Master] Tae-go, will only accept men of iron will and indomitable spirit as my students. The Zen track to distant Shu of following 'live words' is closed to those of hesitant or middling character.

Further, a quote from the Ming Dynasty Zen Master Ta Hui who greatly promoted the *huo-t'ou* method:

All Zen students have to do is steadily go on with the *hua-t'ou* in each and every second of everyday activities. Directly fix mindfulness (*shamatha*) on the live words and so avoid wandering thoughts. Looking into (*vipasyana*) the Diamond Sword called *hua-t'ou* a homogenous state results and on maturation there will be a sudden flashing out from your self-transcending mind. This Void-Light will illuminate the entire cosmos, and you will discover yourself to be quite free of birth and death. *Namo Buddhaya!*