



Zen

PLEASE NOTE: Almost all of the below was written many, many years ago and I repudiate it now. But, I am too lazy to rewrite it and it contains information that some might find useful. Indeed, many have contacted me saying they had the same experiences and my sharing, made them not feel so nuts. This is for a person who aspires for advancement, spiritual experiences and spiritual knowledge, not for someone with or who wants a Jnana viewpoint.

This will be a long section on what I learned about Zen over a period of 12 years or so, between 1968-80, from various Zen masters at different centers. I will talk some about the various styles of Zen meditation, koans, chanting and their impact on the mind, the different absorptive states and all that kind of stuff, as it happened to me. More on the subject of meditation and chanting can be found in the [Practice](#) page, especially the Introduction to Meditation section where there is a good overview of the entire subject.

My spiritual life did not get serious until I left an awful Ph.D. program in economics at Wayne State University in Detroit. I would sit in the classroom and listen to a history of economics lecturer in stunned silence at the nonsense he passed on as worthy of investigation at a graduate level. I had thought that in graduate school someone would finally talk about what is real as opposed to what I felt was the watered down version taught to undergraduates. In fact, it was the same old thing but worse; many academics actually believed that what they were saying was true, or at least relevant. There was nothing there either; just empty conceptualizations.

My problem was that I did not trust that the supposed real was real. There just seemed to be something wrong with the world as I saw it, and I wanted to find out how and what it really was. I had looked into philosophy, physics, science fiction, UFOs (common discourse back then) and found them all empty of real, substantive content. I found Eastern philosophy tantalizingly close to feeling true, but very confusing as everyone seemed to have a different idea of what mattered.

With this last effort a failure, I had no choice but to turn my back on graduate school. I began my career as a seeker, feeling somewhere, someone knew what this was all about.

My first Zen teacher was Phillip Kapleau Roshi at the Rochester Zen Center, who was much, much later to become a friend. He and Robert both developed Parkinsons' Disease and we shared "recipes" for easing the symptoms. I must say I was quite insane during that period of time. My endless meditation and self inquiry using the "Who am I?" questioning, began to manifest as an awakening of the Kundalini energy, which was not gentle or kind. In fact, the visions and trances became very frightening at times. All this is discussed elsewhere on this site in greater detail.

My life took a turn for the worse when I went to Sasaki Roshi's concentration camp-style Zen at Mt. Baldy Zen Center in the Winter of 1970-71, where I met some interesting monks, nuns, Leonard Cohen and Ram Dass, who were all there as students at the time. I also saw a lot of snow, and at 3:00 in the morning, snow is really cold when walking bare-foot.

It was also worse because I went sane. The Kundalini experiences slowed. Sasaki said many Americans came with that as their koan, but this was too difficult an inquiry to begin with. He was right. I never would have found the answer doing what I had been doing then, which was the practices of Chinese monks a thousand years ago. I was not questioning what I was doing. However, at Mt. Baldy, a whole new realm of no-body and-mind experiences opened up.

At some point in a period of meditation, my "brain" would "freeze" and I would feel as if I were going to sleep. Then, all of a sudden, it felt like my mind had been flushed down a toilet and a whole new reality appeared. I would disappear as a body mind and awaken into a world of unity, where I was empty and filled with the sights and sounds of the world. As Ken Wilbur would say, there were no boundaries. This must have happened three or four times a day for the entire time I was at Sasaki's Zen Center. I never knew what to make of these experiences of unity-Consciousness, except to enjoy them. They did not

last. I asked myself was this the true reality revealed, or just a special state-experience that meant little or nothing.

When the Kundalini experiences began in 1968, I felt great pain in my upper back. I could feel that the rising energy was blocked. The blockage was associated with an intense pain. The pain became much worse from the constant sitting at Mt. Baldy. Others suffered from circulation problems from sitting and the cold. The pain made me want to stop, but the unity states made me want to continue.

At some point in your spiritual search, you have to get serious. You drop the whole package of seeking and begin to ask what am I doing?

Why am I doing all this? What is it that I want? Why am I following this practice? What do I expect will happen? Just because Joshu or Bassui or Seung Sahn did X or Y, does that mean it will work for me? What is awakening or self-realization? Who or what awakens to what? What do these concepts mean in terms of observables or experiences? What happens after enlightenment, whatever that was?

Finally, one asks, "Do I have the slightest clue as to what I am doing?"

Anyway, I was not thinking any of these things when, in 1972, I gladly left Mt. Baldy to go to Los Angeles, which was much warmer climatologically and emotionally. I was not yet ready to think in this investigative way. The spiritual search was joyful and dramatic and I had not suffered from its effects enough to question the whole business of seeking. I just blissfully followed the examples and practices of thousand-year dead yogis and Zen monks.

At Mt. Baldy I met in rapid fashion: Thich Tien-An, Maezumi Roshi, Seung Sahn Soen Sa, Song Ryong Hearn, Kozan Roshi, the Dalai Lama, Trungpa, Sakya Tenzin, the Karmapa, Muktananda and a dozen others. I was ordained in 1972 along with the present abbess of the International Buddhist meditation Center, Rev. Karuna, and by the ever-energetic, completely self-confident and fearless Zen Master Seung Sahn.

Eventually I left Zen because it was too emotionally cold. I felt that many of the "masters" were just priests in their own traditions who only paid lip-service to enlightenment. One abbot told me that Buddhism was a way of life as opposed to my concept, that Buddhism was what Buddha did: transcend life and death, matter and spirit through deep meditation which begets deeper understanding and enlightenment, whatever that was. In fact, most of the

Asian monks I met never, or rarely meditated. Instead, they studied Buddhist texts and lived a life of several hundred monastic vows. The prevailing concept of Theravadin Buddhism – as I saw it in practice – is that you gradually worked your way to enlightenment over a dozen, or a hundred dozen lifetimes, so you could not expect it this time. In the mean time, be a good fellow.

In fact, in many temples I visited, I had no idea what the monks were doing. They would hang around the dining room and talk about everything but enlightenment, meditation or truth. Rather, they would talk about food, make jokes about some other monk or temple, and generally do nothing.

It was mostly the Westerners who meditated and burned with a desire to reach the absolute. Unfortunately, many of us emulated the ways of Zen monks of a thousand years before because we didn't know better.

Traditional Zen was heavy with an emphasis on practice, from meditation, to chanting to koan work. The intent was awakening, but the many forms of practice seemed to miss the point for most of us. The appropriate contemporary "pointers" were not there. We had no foundation to enable us to extract the cultural elements of Buddhism, such as in Japan, Korea and Tibet, from what would be the "correct" practice or understanding, for each of us to awaken.

Kozan Roshi aptly put it when he said that unless you learn the Chinese language, culture and history, you cannot understand Zen. Koans are as much cultural/language artifacts as expressions of the essence of "enlightenment." Therefore, the question arises, is enlightenment only a language or cultural artifact? That is, is there any constancy, stability, or reality associated with the concept?

Heavy with failure to attain a great enlightenment, despite the most rigorous training one can imagine, and because of the emotional coldness I felt in Zen, I fell into the warm embrace of Siddha Yoga as taught by Swami Muktananda and channeled by my favorite Swami, Shankarananda. Shankarananda's Satsangs were as sweet back then, if not as powerful, as those of Muktananda himself. He assures me they are even better now.

After Muktananda, came Robert, who was a bird of a different feather altogether.

The next time you get to talk to any master, pin him or her down. Ask if there is enlightenment, and if there is, was it an experience or something else for

them. If it was an experience, what was it? How did it change him or her, or did it? Was there the coming of an understanding more than an experience? How does it affect how he or she currently perceives or understands the world and him or herself.

See if he bobs and weaves or starts talking philosophy or uses tenuous terms such as bliss, universal love, self-realization or awakening without explaining what the terms mean. Nisargadatta and Robert never talk about their actual awakening experience, but they do talk about what their world is like. They speak about going beyond the world even while in it. They speak not of love, but solving the problem of life and death itself.

[The Heart Sutra](#) ends with the phrase, "Gone, gone, gone away, gone entirely away (beyond the stream of life and death.)."

Other pages on Zen – also see the drop down menu above under the heading Zen:

[Kapleau's Zen](#)

[Korean Zen](#)

[Los Angeles Zen](#)

[Maezumi Roshi](#)

[Sasaki's Mt. Baldy Zen](#)

[Seung Sahn Soen Sa](#)

[Thich Tien-An](#)
