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An Introduction to Zen Thought

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Thank you for your introduction. My name is Seijun ISHII. I work for Komazawa University. As you can see I'm a priest.

Today I'd like to talk about my major Zen Buddhism. Since Zen is a school within Buddhism, before get into the story of Zen I'd like to briefly touch upon the basic concept of Buddhist thought.

In order to give you a concrete example I brought sūtras with me today. This is a compilation of sūtras, and is read in the Sōtō school, to which I belong.

This compilation has an interesting shape. The sūtra is written on both sides of the paper. We read it by standing get up.

There are said to be some thousands of sūtras. 84,000 is said to be official number. However since I haven't attempt to count them in myself, I'm not sure whether this figure is correct. Please remember there are many kinds of sūtras. So the characteristics of the school determine which sūtras are chosen. It happened the Sōtō school chose this sūtras.

However there is one sūtra that is read across many schools. That is called *Hannya Shingyō* (『般若心經』) or *Prajuṇā Sūtra*. To give you a whole title, it is *Mahā Prajuṇā Pāramitā Sūtra*. It is a very short sūtra.

This particular sūtra is used regardless of school, because it contains the fundamental precept of Buddhism. Zen propagates that the truth can not be expressed in words (furyū-monji 不立文字) and the teaching of Buddha exists externally to the sūtras (kōoge-betsuden 教外別伝). So there should be no one sūtra to rely on. However this sūtra is read by all Zen schools

in Buddhist thought. I believe this shows how important this sūtra is.

The title somewhat explains the content. “Mahā” means greatness, “Prajñā Pāramitā” means innate wisdom. This is the meaning of this sūtra.

The ultimate goal in Buddhism is the complete wisdom, “innate wisdom”. Innate wisdom is the awareness of the fact that everything in the world, including one’s self, is constantly changing. You are always growing and every thing is always changing. Also to become aware of the fact that nothing exists in isolated.

Everything is inter-related. This concept of everything being inter-related each other is called “Engi” (緣起) or “dependant origins”.

I apologise for using technical terms from the outset. Perhaps this is why people tend to think Buddhism is sometimes difficult to understand. But here I hope you will understand that the concept of “Muga” (無我) or “non-self” is not to highlight the existence of yourself but to become aware of the fact with your wisdom that you are constantly changing.

Buddhism centers around confirming yourself, that is, confirming your constantly changing yourself. This is why Buddhism is called a religion of self-confirmation. Once you complete your enlightenment, you can become a Buddha. In this sense anybody who confirms themselves can become a Buddha.

This is the very fundamental precept of Buddhism. I believe this is the most distinctive feature in Buddhism. In Buddhism, the Buddha is not just Śyakyāmuni Buddha (釈迦牟尼仏) who founded Buddhism. Everyone can become a Buddha if one confirms one’s self and attains enlightenment. In this sense everyone could become a Buddha and there is a possibility that the number of Buddhas is infinite.

Buddhism has two meanings. One is the teachings of by Śyakyāmuni Buddha, the second is the teachings to active a Buddhahood.

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So far I have given you the very basic tenets of Buddhism. It was the

form of Buddhism known as Mahāyāna Buddhism (大乘仏教), that was exported to Japan and China. Basically Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches that not just people but all living things have the potential to become a Buddhas. So in order for us to become a Buddha, there is already a “vehicle” in existence to take us there. This vehicle is large vehicle, this is what Mahāyāna means. The ability for all things to become a Buddha is known as “Bussyō” (仏性) or Buddha nature.

So we can see that there is only one purpose to Buddhism, and that is for us to confirm our place in this world. And in order for us to do this, and the vehicle is already there for us.

So the only problem left is how we ride this vehicle, and how we drive this vehicle. In Buddhism at the moment, there are many varied schools of Buddhist thought, and I believe that the only difference between them is how we drive or ride this vehicle. So basically it’s just a problem of methodology.

I will briefly mention some of the Japanese schools of Buddhist thought. If you look specifically at the Jōdo-shū (浄土宗; the Pure land school) or, the Jōdo-shinshū (浄土真宗; the True Pure land school). We can see that the way they attain nirvāṇa is by chanting the Amida Buddha (阿弥陀仏). By their doing so, the Amida Buddha actually allows their lives in Jōdo (浄土; the Land happiness). So their voices are the means of driving the vehicle to the Jōdo.

In the Nichiren school (日蓮宗) they attain Buddhahood by reading the *Hokekyō* (『法華経』; *Lotus sūtra*).

Now I’d like to look briefly at the fundamental way of thinking of the Zen school of Buddhist thought. In Zen it is necessary that the riding of the vehicle and the driving of the vehicle are done by oneself.

I’ll touch very briefly on the Buddha nature or ability of all of us become a Buddha. In Zen this is regarded as very important. We believe that all people have, and all things have the innate potential to become a Buddha. So without having to depend on anyone and anything we can develop our own potential to become a Buddha. In order for us to do this,

there is a lot of emphasis and importance placed on our personal religious practices.

I'd just like to talk briefly about the religious practices in Zen. I'm sure that most of you here, when you think of Zen practice, think immediately of Zazen (坐禪) or sitting meditation. Of course sitting quietly with the legs crossed is very important part of practice within Zen. It does form the central part of practice of Zen. So why is this form of sitting meditation so important to the Zen school on Buddhist thought? It comes from the fact that founder of the Zen school of Buddhist thought called Śyakyāmuni Buddha was actually performing Zazen or sitting meditation at the time of he attained enlightenment. Therefore this practice of sitting cross legged and performing meditation actually dates from the time the Śyakyāmuni Buddha achieved enlightenment. So a fundamental way of thinking within Zen is that through your own effort and your own actions, everything one of us can achieve enlightenment and can become a Buddha.

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This is the way of thinking of just one of the schools of Buddhism known as Zen, and the person who is the founder of this school is called Bodai-daruma (菩提達摩) or Bodhi-dharma. He is said to have been born in South India, and after leaving India he came to China to help spread the word of Zen.

So how did the Bodhi-dharma bring about Zen Buddhism? It is said that for 9 years he faced a wall and practiced sitting meditation in the temple called Shāolinsi (少林寺) on Mount Sōng (嵩山) in China. It is reported that he did also use some sūtras, but most of the time he just practiced sitting meditation. I mentioned before there are not any written texts on which the Zen teachings were established. This is how Zen Buddhism came into being. Through his practice, Bodhi-dharma actually opened up a world beyond words.

I'd just like to digress from the topic for a minute. I'm sure you are

all aware of the "Daruma doll" in Japan. It is rounded in shape, red in color and it has a moustache on the face. As you probably know the eyes are not drawn in. The Daruma is regarded as a good luck charm. When somebody makes a wish they colour in one of the eyes, and then once that wish has come true they colour in the other eye, completeing the face.

In actual fact, this doll is based on the Bodhi-dharma. The round shape is the form of him sitting down with cross legged meditation, and the red colour actually comes from the brick coloured cloth that he wrapped roundhimself against the cold, The colour has been changed red which representsgood luck.

In Japan, when we draw in the eyes we use black ink. We draw really big black eyes. But in fact, Bodhi-dharma himself is said to be of Indian origin, and it is reported that he had blue eyes. So we ought to draw the eyes using blue ink. But I have never seen this done.

Now that you all know the actual facts I will hope the next time you have an opportunity to buy a Daruma doll, you will use blue ink instead of black. Although it will look strange.

Let's return to our talk on Zen. In Zen through the use of sitting meditation, it is said that we develop our inner self. I would just like you to think about this for a moment. Is it actually possible for our everyday lives to take place if we concentrated only on the practice of Zazen? It is not a practice in which we do anything other than meditate, eat and sleep. In order for that to happen, there has to be other peple to preparing the meals.

A lot of people consider this to be a menial sort of task and suitable only for those people who can't maintain the practice of meditation. The time spent in their religious practice will actually fall behind those who can. Those people it is fair to say those who people who concentrate solely on their own meditation. If we put it another way don't help serve other people will be the ones who benefit the most.

In Zen, the answer is no. We consider that the support of a daily life style is just as important as sitting meditation. In other words sitting

meditation is no more important than the practices that we use that are daily life.

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The concept of Zen is realised by taking a pure, whole-hearted approach to daily routine, so that preparing meals, doing laundry or sleeping, become religious practice.

This thought which expressed by Enō (慧能; huì néng) who was the 6th patriarch in Zen. Enō is a unique figure in the history of Zen. He didn't renounce the world but still attained enlightenment, resulting in his becoming the 6th patriarch.

Since he hadn't renounced the world, he hadn't practiced Zazen. So what kind of training did he undergo? He was threshing rice in a rice hut as a servant in a temple for 8 months. Further more he was illiterate. But by threshing rice he came to know his true self.

He expressed his feelings as a poem, and showed it to his master. Then this was officially recognized as his enlightenment. Thus he became the 6th patriarch of Zen. He couldn't write the poem himself, and had another person to write it down for him.

Enō attain enlightenment through nearly 8 months of rice threshing. You might think this is too easy. But in Zen we believe in the concept of Tongo (頓悟) or sudden enlightenment. This is because the basics of enlightenment is, as I have mentioned it the beginning of my speech, simply to become aware of your potential to become a Buddha.

The training of Zen is not the kind of work where we have to remove rubbish, extra rubbish or dust from yourself, like polishing rough stones into a beautiful shining jewels. You are already pure from the beginning, and everyone has potential to become a Buddha. So all you have to do is become aware of this fact, and this is enlightenment can be achieved in a very short period of time.

However you cannot relax and simply enjoy yourself after achieved enlightenment. This is where the strictness in Zen arises. Even though it

is easy to attain enlightenment it is just as easy to return to unenlightened state if you fail to maintain it. This is called the training after enlightenment; in another words effort to maintain the enlighten state is required.

I'd like to expound on this point by giving you an example. I brought a mirror with me. Since I borrowed it from a female student, it might look a bit cute. But whether it is facing upward or downward, or it is close or not, it doesn't matter it is still a mirror.

If you look at this mirror from the perspective of its function, how will it be? The function of a mirror is to reflect things. So if it is facing downward it is not performing its function. Then how can you assist this mirror perform its function? It is very easy. All you have to do is support it with your hand. Then this mirror will perform its function.

In the practice of Zen, the very action of supporting this mirror is training. So I hope you will understand till this example that enlightenment in Zen is not to change yourself into something different. Even when the mirror is not performing its function it is still a mirror. But the state of a mirror performing its function is the state of enlightenment. So you don't have to change it into something different.

Once you understand how to support "the mirror", you will achieve enlightenment. This is the concept of Tongo or Sudden enlightenment. So now the enlightenment is achieved. But the strictness arises after the event. What will happen if you loosen your grip? The mirror will be facing in another direction and it will not reflect what you want to see. For example, I am looking at my face. But if I loosen my grip it will stop reflecting my face. This is where the strictness of Zen arises.

The ideal state will be realized very easily. However if the motivation to maintain the state is not strong enough, the state will disappear instantly. In another words, strong will to retain the state of enlightenment is constantly required. This is the foundation of Zen practice.

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So for Enō the way that he achieved enlightenment was his practice of threshing rice. But for Enō he was serving other people, and through serving other people he achieved enlightenment. As soon as that happened the former ways of Zen thinking, it is the only way to meditate was through sitting cross-legged and meditating —Zazen— changed completely. From that time through until today, within the Zen school of Buddhist thought there has been a lot of importance placed on the work that we do in our everyday living.

Currently although Zen practice halls base their own rules and regulations on the practices of Enō, they use different forms of everyday practices as their religious practices. That has become a foundation of today.

However, this methodology actually goes against the principles of early Indian Buddhism. Which prohibited priests from performing productive tasks. In Early Indian Buddhism, it was said that priests and others in monasteries were not allowed to produce goods or do any sort of activities that produced goods. The way of thinking in Zen which places importance on everyday working lives is actually in strong contrast to this.

In some ways it could be suggested this Zen actually brought about a great revolution in Buddhist thought. It would also be fair to call it a distortion of the original Buddhism. But I believe that no matter the methodology changes in the different branches of Buddhism, the purpose is still the same. That is, the development of the knowledge that the inner selves of all people and the world are inter connected. And so long as Buddhist teaching don't digress from this way of thought, I believe it is still Buddhism.

The Zen school of Buddhist thought has not digressed from that path. I believe that although it has made clear that the fact that, it is important to do undertake everyday work, it is still fundamentally true to the Buddhist path.

I have shown that in Zen school of Buddhist thought, there is not as

much emphasis placed on Zazen or sitting meditation as some way have thought, and that everyday lifestyle practices are considered very important.

To conclude, I would just like to give a belief story from *Tenzo-kyōkun* (『典座教訓』), one of the writings from the Sōtō school of thought by a principle Dōgen (道元).

It was very hot day, Dōgen encountered a priest in the temple on Mt. Tiāntōng (天童山) in China. The priest was very old and he was sweating profusely, as he set mushrooms out to dry. Because of his age, the work seemed to be very hard.

Dōgen asked the man “How old are you?”

He replied “I will be 62 years old this year.”

Dōgen asked the old priest “It must be very hard at your age to keep working in the sun. Why don’t you get someone else to do this work instead of doing it yourself?”

In response to this, the priest said “This is my work, my religious practice. I am not really sure how much longer I have to live. So if I don’t do it whole-heartedly today, I don’t know I will have opportunity to do it again. Further more, the work of others is not the work of one’s ownself.”

The priest continued to work as part of his own religious practices, and in service for other people.

In this way, we can see that no matter how hard certain tasks may be, we should not let other people do them for us, because others are not self.

Thank you very much.

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