What Is Zen Essay, Research Paper

Introduction

Zen is simply a way for us to awaken from our slumber. It is just a way for us to focus on our present experience, living in the moment. It is simply paying attention to our actual experiences as they are: a breeze brushing through your hair, pristine water wetting your lips, a stomach ache, the laughter of children playing seeing what you see, feeling what you feel. It is being aware of all the colors, forms, sights, sounds, touch, taste, and smell of your surroundings.

Zen is entering into things as they are, beyond concept and cosmology, beyond separation and duality, beyond personality, and into the intimacy and richness of this whole moment. Zen is the day to day and moment to moment method of focusing on the moment. It has spanned two thousand, six hundred years from India to China to Japan to right here.

Zen is a philosophy designed to accomplish the Buddhist goal of seeing the world just as it is, that is, without the mind being cluttered by thoughts and feelings. This attitude is called no-mind , a state of consciousness where thoughts come and go without leaving any trace. Unlike other forms of Buddhism, Zen holds that such freedom of mind cannot be attained by gradual practice but must come through direct and immediate insight. Zen students prepare themselves to be receptive to such answers by sitting in meditation (Japanese za-zen) while they simply observe, without thought, whatever may be happening. The Zen belief is that nature cannot be grasped by any system of fixed definitions or classifications. Reality is the world as it is, apart from any thoughts an individual has about it. One of the original teachers of Zen, Shakyamuni Buddha said to his students one day in a talk that has been recorded as the Satipatthana sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness, that, There is but one way to liberation and that is mindfulness. Mindfulness is paying attention with the entire body and mind to the present experience. It is going past hesitation and reference points, past confusion and fabrication and into our actual lives. Liberation means freedom from the need to hide from our world and ourselves; it means finding out who and what this really is, what this world really is. Buddhadharma, the Teaching of Awakening, is the practice of sitting, walking, breathing, working and speaking with mindfulness and insight. As such Buddhadharma is not a religion, a dogma, a skill, a science, an art, or a philosophy. It is the presentation of our own natures. Zen is just this. True Zen consists of sitting quietly in the correct posture. It is not a special state, it is the normal state: silent, peaceful, without agitation. Zen means to put the mind at rest and to concentrate the mind and body. There is no purpose, no seeking to gain something, no special effort or imagination. It is not knowledge to be grasped by the brain. It is solely a practice that is the true gate to happiness, peace and freedom.

History

Historically, it could be said that Zen originated from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. Around 500 BC he was born a Sakyan prince. At the age of twenty-nine, deeply troubled by the suffering he saw around him, he renounced his privileged life, his wife and child, and went out among the shamans to seek enlightenment. After six years of struggle, he finally understood the meaning of enlightenment under the legendary Bo tree. After this he was recognized as a Buddha (meaning The Awakened One ). He taught for about forty years and then died in Oudh, India.

Zen, itself, originated from a blend between the Mahayana form of Buddhism originating in India and the Chinese philosophy of Taoism. Zen is the Japanese (Ch’an, which is often used interchangeably with Zen is the Chinese way of pronouncing dhayna) way of pronouncing the Sanskrit term dhyana, which can be roughly defined as meditation. Dhyana denotes specifically the state of consciousness of a Buddha, one whose mind is free from the assumption that the distinct individuality of oneself and other things is real. The school of Zen Buddhism begins with a Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma, an Indian Buddhist monk who arrived in China in 520. Bodhidharma began the Lanka School which later became known as Ch an (Zen). The doctrine of the Lanka School mainly concerned itself with the study of the mind. The members of the Lanka School were noted for the ascetic life, living faraway from communities. Not until the ninth century, did the name Ch an (Zen) become adopted. Early Zen became associated with enlightenment rather than physical seated meditation. Around 1200 AD, Ch an spread from China to Japan where it became to be known as Zen.

There are two main sects of Zen. They are Rinzai Zen and Soto Zen. The Soto sect seems to put more emphasis on the discipline of zazen, while the Rinzai sect puts more emphasis on koans (meditation problems). However, Zazen and koans are both integral parts of both sects. Japanese who had studied in China brought the two main sects of Zen to Japan. The Buddhist monk Eisai introduced Rinzai Zen in 1191, and the Buddhist monk Dogen introduced Soto Zen in 1227. Both sects continue to flourish in Japan.

Meditation

Meditation is an integral part of Zen and almost all other eastern philosophies. Meditation was first introduced by the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, a religion dating back 2,500 years. The purpose of meditation is to attain wisdom and achieve enlightenment, which is the ultimate goal of Zen. Meditation is a method for coordinating all body functions, helping individual parts achieve their highest peak performance. It is an effective means for uncovering supreme wisdom and physical capabilities that are hidden within the mind.

Meditation can improve physical and mental health. It is a free medicine and does not require any prescription drugs. “Meditation can transform the weak into the strong, the dull mind into the alert and aware mind, and an ordinary person into a dignified human being. It is an art that is available to all, regardless of age, sex, intelligence, education and religion.

The physical benefits of meditation are that it can cure and prevent many kinds of physical diseases and injuries. The psychological benefits of meditation are a peaceful mind and purified emotions. Meditation increases patience, strengthens the willpower, sharpens the senses, calms the mind, stabilizes emotions, and increases energy, joy, and a love for life .

Meditation cannot make a person eternally young, but can increase the quality and longevity of life. In daily life, people pay little attention to their own bodies and minds. These people s levels of energy are far lower than they could be and often experience negative emotions such as hatred, despair or anger.

The practice of Zazen is the Secret of Zen

Central and indispensable to Zen is daily Zazen practice. Zazen melts away the distances created by the mind that separate man from himself. In Zazen, there is no reality outside what exists here and now. While sorrow and joy, anxiety and imperturbability cannot be avoided, by not clinging to them we find ourselves free of them. With Zazen, come composure and tranquility of mind, but these are byproducts of Zazen rather than its goals.

Zazen is a Japanese term that means meditation. It consists of two characters: za, to sit (cross-legged), and zen, from the Sanskrit dhyana, meaning concentration, dynamic stillness, and contemplation. The means toward the realization of one s original nature as well as the realization itself, Zazen is both something one does sitting cross-legged, with proper posture and correct breathing and something one essentially is. To emphasize one aspect at the expense of the other is to misunderstand this subtle and profound practice.

Zazen is a daily practice meant to expand consciousness and developing intuition. Master Dogen (who is often given credit for beginning Soto Zen) wrote in the Fukanzazengi, Zazen means to touch the cosmos through one single body, our body.6 Master Dogen also wrote: The zazen I speak of is not learning how to meditate. It is nothing other than the way to peace and happiness, the practice-realization of perfect awakening. Once you have seized its heart, you are like a dragon when he enters the water, like a tiger when he enters the mountain. While practicing Zazen, you should concentrate on the posture, the breathing and the attitude of mind. Zazen is practiced while seated on the zafu (traditional, round, kapok-stuffed cushion. The legs are crossed in a lotus or half-lotus position, or behind you in seiza (kneeling posture). The knees must press the floor, forming a stable, three-point posture with the buttocks on the zafu. The pelvis is tilted forward so the abdomen falls down naturally. There should be no obstruction or constriction of the abdomen, such as a belt or tight trousers. The spinal column is arched in the lower lumbar region, and the head presses the sky, stretching out the backbone.

The upper breastbone is raised, naturally throwing back the shoulders and neck. The face is perpendicular to the floor, and the nape of the neck stretched up. The nose is on the same plane as the navel. The ears are on the same plane as the shoulders. The shoulders and abdomen are relaxed. The mouth is closed the breathing is through the nose but the jaw is relaxed. The tip of the tongue rests on the palette, just at the top of the upper front teeth. The eyes are open, looking down at a forty-five degree angle. The gaze is steady, at rest, but not focused on anything.

The lower forearm rest on the upper thighs against the lower abdomen, the palms of the hands face up. The fingers of the left hand rest on the fingers of the right hand. The tips of the thumbs touch over the middle of the hands. Once you are in this stable, vertical position, inhale and exhale slowly deeply. Your posture is now vertical and balanced. Remain in this posture during zazen without moving.

At the end of zazen, signaled by one strike of the bell, raise the hands and place the closed fists, thumbs inside, on the lower thighs. Stretch your torso and head down over the right thigh, then straighten up, and bend over the left thigh a bit then straighten up. Repeat this two or three times, each time bending over a bit more, until your head touches your knees. Get up carefully.

The Breathing

In Zen, breathing plays a primary role. The point of the breathing is above all to establish a slow, strong and natural rhythm. One should concentrate primarily on the exhalation, which should be calm, long and deep. The inhalation should be natural, automatic, and spontaneous. The concentration on the exhalation creates great energy in the lower abdominal region. The body s energy center is not in the head or upper body but in the major nerve groups located from the solar plexus to the lower abdomen . All martial arts are traditionally based on this breathing. Strong action of the body-mind takes place during the exhalation. During inhalation, a person is weakest and most vulnerable.

Air contains the energy of the universal life force and is received by our lungs and each cell in our body. It is very important to develop our breathing. Usually we breathe about fifteen times a minute using only a small part of the lung s capacity. Deep, complete Zen breathing is not just localized at the level of the thoracic cage or the diaphragm, but affects the lower abdominal organs, exerting a strong massage on the internal organs and stimulating the circulation of blood and other fluids in the body . By the regular practice of zazen this breathing, little by little, becomes habitual in our daily life and even during sleep. The more you are receptive to the universal life force through Zen breathing in zazen, the more your energy increases .

Attitude of Mind

The correct attitude of mind comes naturally from a deep concentration during zazen on the posture and the breathing. During zazen the conscious flow of thought from the cerebral cortex is greatly diminished and the thinking brain becomes calm and cool. Blood flows toward the deeper layers of the brain, the thalamus and the hypo-thalamus, and this body-brain becomes more active and developed. The nervous system becomes relaxed while our deeper brain becomes more active . Receptive and attentive in every cell of the body, you learn to think with the body, unconsciously.

During zazen, thoughts, conscious and unconscious, naturally and continuously rise to the surface of one s mind. One should not try to stop these thoughts from arising. But at the same time, one should not get involved with the thoughts or let them take him away from concentrating on his posture and breathing. One should just let the thoughts pass, neither opposing them nor attaching to them.

When the mind empties and is calm, one should be peaceful, with nothing obstructing the deep intuitive and unlimited life force that springs up from the depths of our being . Practicing zazen is the essence of Zen.

Zen students develop wisdom if they are vigilant in their zazen practice, in their effort to know themselves, to go beyond themselves, to give of themselves without expecting any personal gain. During the course of a day, one s mind is rambling thinking about family, friends, pressures, responsibilities, etc. During zazen, one concentrates only on posture and breathing, and can delve into his consciousness.

Koans

A Koan is a riddle with no solution. Koans are intended to break through the limitations of ego and intellect and lead to an intuitive flash of enlightenment. They were developed primarily by the Rinzai branch of Zen for use in training Zen students. More than 1700 koans are in use today.

My personal experience with Zen and Zazen

I have always been fascinated with Zen. My fascination began when I was about seven and saw a television program about Zen monks. These monks were able to do things that I would describe as being supernatural. Many of them were about sixty years old yet could break several bricks with their head and several slabs of ice with their elbow. They were also extremely flexible and could perform full splits.

I remember watching this program filled with envy and desire to also perform these tasks. I began reading about Zen but I found it boring and tedious (I was around seven.). I was, however, still fascinated with Zen and planned on studying it in the future when I was older and could appreciate it (I was a pretty smart seven year old).

During my sophomore year of high school, I was watching David Letterman one night when monks once again performed. I believe, but am not certain, that they were Shao Lin Buddhist monks. They also achieved supernatural feats in being able to break slabs of iron and wood. They also looked to be in their sixties and I was reminded of the program I watched when I was seven.

My original fascination with Zen returned. I was now fourteen or fifteen and once again decided to study Zen. I took out some books from the library and studied them but once again I couldn t get into it. I remember practicing zazen or rather trying to practice zazen. I was very restless and had trouble concentrating on posture and breathing. My mind kept wandering to history tests and English essays and, needless to say, I did not expand my consciousness. I also spent some time thinking about koans (Zen riddles such as What is the sound of one hand clapping? or If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? ). These koans also did not expand my consciousness and my mind once again wandered to history tests and English essays.

I was very frustrated about my inability to be one with Zen. I spent some time thinking about this and I realized what my problem was. My fascination with Zen stemmed from breaking bricks and ice which is obviously not an integral part of Zen. I was into Zen for all the wrong reasons. I was still fascinated by Zen but I decided to stop reading about it.

I decided that if I ever seriously wanted to practice Zen (as opposed to just wanting to break bricks) I could study it again. If a desire to practice Zen never arises, that is all right too.

The next time I studied Zen was in the beginning of this term when I started taking metaphysics. All the meditations we did in class got me thinking about reading about Zen again. I though this time I had reached the maturity needed and would appreciate it much more.

I practiced Zazen again and this time I lost myself for several moments while concentrating solely on the posture and breathing. Zazen lasted for several minutes but afterward I did not feel any more wiser or enlightened and got back to thinking about history tests and English essays.

I realized that I still could not fully appreciate Zen and my mind was still cluttered by thoughts and concerns. I figure that I am too young to fully appreciate Zen and Zazen. At seventeen, there are too many hormones and/or concerns to be able to focus on posture and breathing for an extended period of time.

Though I was not as successful at practicing Zen as I would have liked to be, Zen still has made an impact on my life. I focus on the moment much easier now and am usually fully aware of my surroundings. I also don t allow things to bother me as much as they once did. Now when a negative thought enters my consciousness, I ask myself why that thought exists in my system, and then detach myself from the thought until it leaves on its own.

If the negative thought is powerful and does not exit my consciousness, I consciously focus on my breathing until that thought is no longer part of my consciousness.

Before my experiences with Zen, I was often very irritable and felt a lot of pressure and stress from my surroundings. I now am able to relax and focus on my present activities much more readily and enjoy my days much more.

I still have a complete inability to practice Zazen or meditation (including the ones we do in class). I just have too much energy in my system to do physically nothing for an extended period of time. I have spent some time wondering why I can t fully enjoy meditation and haven t really come up with an answer for it yet.

Until one can focus properly for meditation and zazen, it can be argued that they have not fully been connected to Zen, or any other Eastern philosophy for that matter. I have read and been told on several occasions, that enlightenment and wisdom usually arrive during meditation. This makes me realize that I am missing something due to my inability to meditate.

This is unfortunate but I am not discouraged. I will be able to meditate when I will be able to meditate and if I will never be able to meditate, well, then that s alright too Just as long as I can break bricks over my head.

Connection between Zen and Metaphysics

The connection between Zen and Metaphysics is that both have the same goals. They are concerned with studying the underlying nature of things. Both, Zen and metaphysics focus on self-discipline, meditation, and attainment of enlightenment through direct intuitive insight.

Both Zen and Metaphysics recognize the importance of reality and both see reality as being the world as it is, unaffected by thought.

They are most similar in their goal to expand the consciousness of the mind through meditation. Meditation is an integral part to the study of both Zen and Metaphysics and is used by both to attain wisdom and enlightenment.

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