KOAN OF THE DOG
BUDDHA TEMPLE

AND
OTHER WRITINGS ON ZEN

John Xavier

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Dedicated to my fellow prisoners.

Once the monks of the eastern and western Zen halls in Master Nansen's temple were quarrelling about a cat. Nansen held up the cat and said, "You monks! If one of you can say a word, I will spare the cat. If you can't though, I'll slay it. No one could answer, so Nansen finally killed the animal. Later that evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him what had happened. Joshu then took off his sandals, put them on his head, and walked off. Nansen added, "If you had been there, you would have saved the cat."

Case Fourteen, The Gateless Barrier

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Recommended Books

The following pages are just my observations. If you're taught anything it's because you're the one teaching yourself. I don't have any wisdom and if I did my wisdom would look like foolishness. Because it would be perplexing.

Zen, or Ch'an as it's called in the land where it first took root, has an ancient history though and studying this might reveal something more of what Zen actually is. If you're interested, the following books are widely recommended among those who practice this tradition.

The Gateless Barrier

The Sayings of Joshu

The Blue Cliff Record

The Book of Serenity

INTRODUCTION

What I have written here represents my own personal assertions regarding Zen. The views I express are largely the result of direct insights, although the koan, essays, and poems I've written all share in the same spirit as the one that I see infusing the lives of Bodhidharma and Joshu, to name only two. Likewise, there are a number of historical references to be found for those who are knowledgeable in such things, but I wanted to make sure that these wouldn't be an impediment to people who weren't familiar with them. Zen is not something that should be hidden at the center of a maze. Enlightenment is difficult enough to obtain as it is without unnecessary obstacles being placed in front of it. Also, I wanted to combine an enthusiasm for Zen with deliberate skepticism towards it as well, so that too has found a home in these pages. Plus humor. To joke about something is to cultivate a sense of detachment towards it; not treating Zen as something holy then is an important principle in cultivating an authentic sense of Zen and one that I gladly embrace. What is worthwhile in life must be expressed in all its various aspects. Love and hate, truth and lies, birth and death. Somehow all these things combine to create something greater than anything else without them. And within that tension resides the most profound of all mysteries. Why.

John Xavier
April 2021

KOAN OF THE DOG BUDDHA TEMPLE

JO HAN'S FIRST LESSON

A novice monk named Jo Han visited the abbot in his study. The room was rather small and cold but the abbot seemed to be in a fair mood and the novice had not yet learned to fear his seniors.

"Muki Mudo, please explain. Is it necessary to read many teachings?"

"If you have to," replied Muki Mudo.

"Meaning?"

"When you are lost," said the abbot, setting aside his calligraphy, "you ask for directions. But you will only ask for further directions if you become lost again. Your own ability to find your way will decide things."

"Did you read that in a book?" blurted Jo Han.

Furious, Muki Mudo picked up his bottle of ink and threw it at the novice monk. Not only did this give Jo Han a black eye, it gave him a black everything else. As he ran away though he heard the abbot shout after him.

"Someone as lost as you exceeds all arrogance doubting the directions they receive! And while begging!"

* * *

MUKI MUDO ASKS A RIDDLE

Almost all the monks were gathered together in the discussion hall. Among them were Yu Yi, Shi Xiao, and Yang Jing. Old Man Wu however was outside trying to catch a squirrel with his bare hands.

“How many stories are there?” shouted Muki Mudo as soon as he ascended to the podium. No one replied but the abbot caught Yu Yi scratching his head.

“Brother Yu Yi!” laughed Muki Mudo. “Are you finally going to crack that egg so the poor bird can fly out?”

Embarrassed, Yu Yi dropped his hands to his side as he made his reply.

“Sir. There are stories for each of the drops of rain in a typhoon.”

Muki Mudo’s eyes widened in surprise before narrowing beneath his large bristling white eyebrows.

“Sit down you idiot,” spat the abbot. “Give that chicken more time to hatch. What about you though Yang Jing? You can’t possibly say anything as stupid as what Yu Yi just said.”

“Sir!” exclaimed Yang Jing while leaping to his feet in great devotion. “You are correct. I cannot.” And with that he sat down again.

Muki Mudo nodded at Yang Jing with respect before turning to Shi Xiao, the quietest brother of the three.

“I see you have a book hidden in your sleeve Shi Xiao,” the abbot commented sarcastically. “What kind of man would sneak food from the buffet of his family’s restaurant after his father told him to eat as much as he wants? Now stand up and answer my question!”

“Perhaps,” muttered Shi Xiao as he rose to his feet, “the son was expected to watch some pigs waiting to be slaughtered. And he was still hungry.”

“The first question you rascal!”

Shi Xiao gave a long exhale before responding. “Out of all stories, there are only four at the beginning.”

“Really?” retorted Muki Mudo. “Name them.”

“Sir. They are the story of Summer turning into Autumn, Autumn turning into Winter, Winter turning into Spring, and Spring turning into Autumn. From these follows Summer turning into Winter, Summer turning into Autumn, Summer becoming Summer again and so on and so forth. ”

Muki Mudo rolled his eyes.

“And so on and so forth,” repeated the abbot disgustedly. “What a clever fellow. And yet wrong! Very very wrong!”

“Of course the abbot can teach the brother,” retorted Shi Xiao.

“All too easily,” smirked Muki Mudo. “You forgot the four nothings. The Summer that’s still Summer. The Autumn that’s still Autumn. And so on and so forth. Not every story is a rabbit-story despite what the great wisdom of Shi Xiao says. Tortoises and slugs have stories too.”

Just then a yelp came from outside. It was Old Man Wu, who had managed to get bitten by the squirrel he was bothering.

Here Yu Yi raised his hand but then asked without waiting.

“Which story was that?”

* * *

THREE ELEMENTS

Out in the garden of the Dog Buddha Temple, Shi Xiao was reading a new translation of Joshu without even cracking a smile. He was much absorbed though and failed to see Yang Jing sneaking up behind him.

“Like a goose feeding at the bottom of a pond,” mocked Yang Jing.

Shi Xiao sighed and closed his book. “Better than a single fire cracker wasted on an ordinary day.”

Yang Jing laughed.

“Says the brother who never made a noise someone else didn’t squeeze out of him. But let him teach me about water and I will teach him about fire!”

Reluctantly, Shi Xiao accepted the challenge.

“The water is all of Zen. And a lineage is a series of chain links ending in an anchor. Those who can’t escape their teachers… grow barnacles.”

Yang Jing sneered. “Will you continue studying books about the ocean and never visit it? How tiresome! But you won’t go near a fire either so I guess I can be your teacher in that. Here!”

With a shout, Yang Jing snatched away Shi Xiao’s book and started to flee. Angered, Shi Xiao yelled after him.

“You still owe me a teaching!”

“That was it!” laughed Yang Jing. “Trees give but fire takes!”

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FU DAO'S MASTER

It was raining one day and all the monks were lounging around bored inside. One of them, Fu Dao, was reciting from the sutras. And he was doing this so loudly that finally Yang Jing complained.

"Do you take poetry from other people's ashes and claim it as your own? Are you the rebirth of a grave robber or what?"

Fu Dao blushed.

"Who am I not to learn from the masters?"

Yang Jing snorted.

"Who are you to even see a master!"

* * *

EVERYTHING MEANS PRECISELY THAT

As punishment for getting caught snacking on a cricket, Jo Han had been ordered to clean the entire temple himself. First he started indoors, sweeping the floors, wiping tables and chairs. This took several days.

“Contemplate each speck of dirt as one of your own delusions,” said Yu Yi helpfully before strolling away.

Jo Han next climbed a ladder to get up on the roof where he did his best to scrub off all the bird shit with a broom. It was summer and there were no clouds in the sky so the work was very difficult. This also took several days and, by the end of it, the novice monk was sore throughout his entire body.

“Poor fellow,” commented Yang Jing with a frown. “It’s so hard to watch such a nice guy struggling.” Then Yang Jing went elsewhere.

After that, the novice monk got busy pulling out the weeds all around the temple walls. It was hot dusty work and he got exceptionally dirty. Down on his hands and knees, Jo Han looked up when he heard someone approach from the ascending path. It was Old Man Wu. The elderly monk grimaced but didn’t say anything so the younger continued his task. This also took several days.

Finally, Jo Han reckoned he was finished, but he was only able to spend a few minutes drinking water and relaxing by the well before the abbot approached him. The abbot did not seem angry however.

“You forgot this,” smirked Muki Mudo, throwing Jo Han a pebble.

“Such a tiny thing?” exclaimed Jo Han in surprise.

“Yes,” insisted the abbot. “And hurry up. There’s ten thousand more waiting in the garden after that one.”

* * *

DOES THE MOON HAVE FRIENDS?

Late one afternoon, Fu Dao and Old Man Wu were fishing in the creek that ran through the valley below the temple. They'd been at this for hours but their bucket had only a few minnows in it and both of them were getting distracted. Looking up towards the clear blue sky, Fu Dao's eyes rested on the barely visible Moon and he gave Old Man Wu a good natured nudge.

"Look at them," he said with half-feigned sadness. "All alone."

The old man quickly realized what he was looking at and replied.

"It's their own fault. They come early and then leave late. They always keep to themselves. What terrible manners!"

"So you don't think they have any friends?" asked Fu Dao.

Old Man Wu recast his rod before replying.

"Only a poet could love one as selfish as the moon."

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YANG JING'S ITCH

From the mountainside slope where the Dog Buddha Temple had been founded, the average person could see eighteen leagues to the east. But no cities or roads of any kind. The only other people in the vicinity of the monks was a small hamlet surrounded by a handful of farms. These the monks would occasionally visit but Yang Jing especially. Jo Han grew curious about this and one day he followed his brother monk in secret. As a result, the novice monk discovered that Yang Jing was meeting with the daughter of a farmer in one of the granaries and he could scarcely believe it. A monk! Doing who knows what with a woman!

The sun hardly travelled at all before Yang Jing and the farmer's daughter exited the granary, neither of them looking at each other as they focused on fixing their disheveled clothes. When the woman departed, Jo Han appeared to Yang Jing in a seething rage.

"Such treachery!" he sputtered. "It's immoral! Outrageous!"

For a second Yang Jing was caught off guard but then he collected himself.

"How can I explain Zen to one who has no Zen?"

Now it was Jo Han's turn to be thrown. Rather weakly, he protested.

"Where… where is the practice in this?"

Yang Jing smiled and approached his counterpart. Putting his arm around Jo Han's shoulder, the senior monk walked with him for a moment as if the two were the best of friends. Then he began to impart a teaching.

"You may have heard this koan before but pay attention younger brother and I will reveal to you its true meaning. One day a visiting monk was listening to a master explaining some subtle logic. The visitor was very conceited though so he interrupted what was being said and started to brag about his own abbot. This man told the other monks that his abbot could stand on one side of a river with a brush and write words of sacred scripture through the air so they'd appear on a piece of paper held up at the other side."

“I don’t understand,” complained Jo Han.

“Well, you didn’t let me finish,” replied Yang Jing sweetly. “Hearing this, the master retorted that he could perform a greater miracle. He could eat when he was hungry and sleep when he was tired. So now you know that your brother Yang Jing can also perform miracles.”

Jo Han was still confused though.

“But what does this saying of a master have to do with you and that woman? You make no sense brother.”

Yang Jing patted Jo Han condescendingly on the cheek.

“Your brother’s miracle is that, when he gets an itch, he scratches it.”

* * *

SPECIAL DHARMA POWERS

A number of the monks were sitting in the garden doing meditations when Bo Ji and Bo Lao began to quarrel. With a violent clap of his hands, Muki Mudo silenced the two monks. Then he spoke.

“Tell me the question!”

Both of the junior monks glanced at each other before facing their abbot and answering in unison.

“What can the enlightened do that the unenlightened can’t?”

“They can carry five staffs in one hand,” answered Muki Mudo.

The other monks contemplated this teaching for a moment before Yu Yi cleared his throat, obviously quite satisfied with himself, and he began to elaborate on what their teacher had just said.

“What the abbot is saying is that a true buddha has full mastery over all of the five elements…”

“Yu Yi?” interrupted Muki Mudo.

“Yes master?”

“Shut up.”

Muki Mudo grew silent again after this and so was everyone else for a time. Then Fu Dao became curious and dared to ask the abbot a question.

“Sir. Will you explain Yu Yi’s error to us?”

Muki Mudo gave him an unfriendly look but obliged.

“Do you not even have a basic knowledge of Zen? It was none other than Ummon who said that his own staff was an ordinary thing and a nonbeing and an

illusion and something genuinely empty. And he also said that the staff was just a staff but maybe that's too many things for you idiots to count."

"So what's the difference between the ordinary thing and the staff that's just a staff?" asked Jo Han.

Muki Mudo spat.

"What's the difference between a piece of writing in the eyes of the illiterate and the same writing being read by a scholar?"

* * *

THE NOVICE'S PURITY

Once in a while the monks of the Dog Buddha Temple would make rice wine with the full knowledge of their abbot.

"Don't let the farmers see us!" he might add but his only other complaint would be if he didn't get an extra share.

Likewise, Jo Han was sent away on an errand that would occupy him from sunrise to sunset. His brother monks couldn't trust him to not tell people about their unorthodox practices. And these were divinely jeweled illuminations only the wisest students of Zen could understand. Truly the dharma in its highest form.

"Friends! This is enlightenment!" cried Old Man Wu as the wine was flowing. "Hee hee. I can feel all of my material delusions slipping away."

"Look!" he added as he waved a hand in front of his face. "I can barely see my corrupt body!"

The other monks, not quite as intoxicated as he was, laughed hysterically at this foolishness. Even when sober, Old Man Wu was usually good for a laugh and no one in heaven or earth could compete with him once he was loaded. Meanwhile the merriment continued throughout the day and into the evening when, as the tall shadows of night were just reaching the tops of the mountains, Jo Han returned. Looking around at all the revelry, he stood in utter amazement.

"How are you all so happy?" wondered the novice.

Fu Dao pointed at him and laughed.

"That fellow wouldn't know a buddha from a drunken ox!"

* * *

ZEN PISS, ZEN POT

Early one morning Old Man Wu got up to urinate. Bo Ji and Bo Lao were the ones responsible that week for the piss pots so, when the old man couldn't find these, he went and woke them up. Both of them too because, why not?

"Hey!" grumbled Old Man Wu. "How am I supposed to take a leak when you haven't put the pots out? You know how Muki Mudo feels about people pissing in his garden. And I don't want to go outside. The sky is pissing too."

Annoyed, the two other monks nevertheless knew they'd erred and Bo Lao answered as diplomatically as he could.

"Elder brother, just use the one we have in the corner. If you won't urinate like a dog, don't yap like one either."

"Moron!" snarled Old Man Wu, striking the man on the head. "How am I supposed to fill your piss pot if you don't empty it first!"

* * *

ALWAYS QUESTIONS

Shi Xiao was dangling his legs in the creek when Jo Han approached.

“Brother,” exclaimed the novice monk. “Where does the path begin?”

Shi Xiao looked up with an arched eyebrow.

“Right where you’re standing.”

“No,” complained Jo Han. “Not the path through the valley. I meant the path to enlightenment.”

“Which I meant also,” assured Shi Xiao. “Are they not the same?”

Jo Han frowned.

“Then what work must I do?”

“Destroy every illusion,” the other monk replied.

“And after this?”

“Stop asking questions. Your questions are just a way to avoid the work. You have a clear path through the mountains, only you see how hard this is so you’ve convinced yourself there must be a river somewhere to gently carry you over them. Enough. Either give up the journey or begin it. But whatever you do, leave me alone to dangle my legs in this creek for a while.”

* * *

YANG JING'S YIN YANG

It was twilight and several of the monks were collecting pales of water at the temple well for the evening. This was outside the temple walls among a few scattered trees and the last of the day's sun was filtered in these beautifully. As it so often happened, Yu Yi recited a poem he conceived:

Falling in and out of Zen,
The temple monks.
Are they the branches of the trees
Or the light slipping through
When evening comes?

Unimpressed, Yang Jing responded with a poem of his own.

Fine words to cover the poet's thoughts
But if you think divinely jeweled illuminations
Will come to you in a regal dress
Then the queen you serve is ugly naked

Yang Jing departed as soon as he said this and Yu Yi pondered the other's poem as he waited for his own turn at the well. Trying to be nice and assist him, Shi Xiao spoke to his brother while also gathering water.

"Divinely jeweled illuminations are the goblins of a false goddess.

"Was that his insight?" asked Yu Yi.

"No," replied Shi Xiao as he shook his head and readied his bucket to depart. "His was just that shadows of night become one."

* * *

BETTER THAN GOLD

Muki Mudo and Yang Jing went down to the hamlet in the valley one afternoon to buy some food from the holiday market. The farmers were all shabby and poor so even the monks in their simple robes looked noble by comparison. It took a while but eventually they found what they were searching for at the decrepit vegetable stand of a man missing most of his front teeth. Muki Mudo handed two bundles of radishes to Yang Jing and gave the farmer a piece of paper as payment. It was just ordinary paper with the word “Mu” written on it.

“This is nothing!” howled the man. “Give me my radishes back!”

“Stupid farmer!” snarled Muki Mudo in reply. “How can you say it’s nothing when you don’t know what it is! Ha! Yang Jing! This vegetable seller has a vegetable head! He’s the biggest radish of the bunch!”

“Huh!” blustered the farmer. “What are you saying?”

A sly look came over the face of the abbot.

“What if I told you I gave you something worth more than gold?”

The stunned farmer looked at the piece of paper again, glanced around at the other farmers who were watching now, and then cautiously asked his question.

“How can this be?”

Muki Mudo responded with a question of his own.

“What good is gold to a foolish man if he cannot spend it wisely and all his gold does is attract thieves and cutthroats?”

“Not much I guess,” stammered the farmer.

“So wisdom is better than gold.”

“I suppose.”

“And did I not just give you wisdom you dirty fellow? Tell me I didn’t and you can have your scrawny radishes back.”

The vegetable seller wrung his hands in dismay and looked around at all the spectators who were now smiling at his expense and tried to think of a way out of his predicament and couldn’t. He was too honest of a man to lie to the monk but he was very poor and even a single coin was precious to him. Finally, Muki Mudo got tired of waiting and asked again.

“Well?”

“Yes,” answered the farmer sullenly.

“Then I must’ve overpaid,” sneered the abbot. “You owe me change.”

* * *

ANOTHER MEMBER

There was a wild man who lived in the mountains around Dog Buddha Temple and he often made a nuisance of himself to the farmers. One day a group of farmers came up to the monastery to complain about the wild man exposing himself to their daughters. They also asked if the abbot would help them. Muki Mudo quickly agreed to the surprise of many of the monks and he immediately travelled to the hamlet along with Bo Ji and Bo Lao. There they met with a couple elders who found a boy that knew where the wild man was napping. Together all these people visited the wild man as he was dozing under a tree at the top of a small hill. At their approach, the wild man sat up and yelled at them.

"What!"

Here the abbot replied.

"The farmers say you've been waving your penis around?"

"So what?" jeered the wild man.

"Show us," insisted Muki Mudo.

"What!"

"The famous penis."

The wild man balked at such a request but sensing that not complying would look like cowardice, he stood up and showed everyone his genitals.

Muki Mudo started to laugh.

"I thought you said this fellow was showing off his penis to the girls? How could you call it showing off when the penis is so small? That tiny bird's not even big enough to peek its beak out of the nest!"

Everyone else started to laugh now too. Especially the young boy who was their guide and had a joke of his own.

“Three little birds! The other two haven’t hatched!”

Thoroughly humiliated, the wild man stopped exposing himself to the women in the area and, a few weeks later, he prostrated himself at the temple doors and asked to become a novice with them. Muki Mudo casually accepted his proposal, leaving the other monks to see to all the practicalities.

Lastly his name was Wang Shang but the monks just called him Wee Wang.

* * *

THE SUM OF SLEEPING IN

Sometimes the monks didn't get up early. Certainly they wouldn't when they didn't have to. Since Fu Dao had no chores that day, he was perfectly content to stay in bed for a while. Or longer. Yang Jing soon walked by however and felt the need to comment.

"What a good Zen this boy has! The absolute best! He might even outdo the great nothingness itself one day!"

Fu Dao blinked his eyes as he peered out from under his blanket. He knew his brother was just being rude but he decided to answer sagely.

"Consider this Yang Jing. Is it not wise to avoid action without wisdom? And wise as well to recognize the absence of one's knowledge? But who can say what is and what isn't other than those who are fully enlightened? Our Muki Mudo would know but not you though. We are both humble brothers. The difference is you shout your demerits to the world while I confine mine to the studio of my mind. I am immune to your arrows. Thus so is my being."

These words just made Yang Jing admonish him further.

"Will you lie in bed like a philosopher then, thinking yourself into existence?"

* * *

FORGING THE BLADE

Yang Jing and Old Man Wu were having a screaming match in the garden. Outside the temple, Bo Ji and Bo Lao listened as they gathered kindling for the fires.

“Did you think that Zen would be so crazy?” asked Bo Lao.

“I heard that masters did odd things,” replied Bo Ji. “But a lot of these fellows just seem to enjoy being pests. Certainly it doesn’t help. How are we supposed to meditate and achieve realizations when harassed by all this noise? I bet half the monks here would have become enlightened already if they didn’t have to put up with the nonsense of their more selfish brothers.”

Overhearing this, Muki Mudo appeared and flung a lesson at them.

“You can’t make a strong sword with a gentle hammer. If the monks never yell at one another, the monastery’s no good. Burn it down.”

* * *

UNNECESSARY BOOKS

The library of the Dog Buddha Temple was quite large for a building of its size, thanks largely to the efforts of Shi Xiao to collect anything of interest he could find. He even wrote letters to other libraries and temples asking them to send any extra volumes they had. Muki Mudo on the other hand hardly ever appeared in the library and it was an unusual exception when he poked his head through the door that day and spoke to Shi Xiao while the latter was studying.

“I read a book about Zen once,” joked the abbot.

Shi Xiao sensed a trap.

“And you’ve learned so much without studying sir?” he replied.

“Not as much as I haven’t,” retorted Muki Mudo. “But even more so, I’ve managed to not be bitten by the vipers of false appearance.”

Shi Xiao thought about both claims and conceded to himself their merits. He was still confused about the abbot’s attitude towards books though.

“How is the history of Zen not Zen?” he asked.

Muki Mudo picked something out of his teeth before replying.

“If someone points out the moon to me just once, I’ll remember what it looked like. I don’t need a thousand years’ worth of scribes to wag their finger at it over and over again and do it in every different way. If you saw a fellow read the same page of a book for hours on end, what would you think? Probably that he didn’t even understand the language! And you Shi Xiao? Can you tell when you’re not just spinning like a waterwheel and going nowhere?”

* * *

ORCHARD ZEN

One day Shi Xiao was picking apples off the trees in the corner of the garden. Standing on a wooden ladder to do so, he was grabbing fruit from the highest branches while other fruit was left unpicked below. Yang Jing saw this and, quietly grabbing an empty basket, he began harvesting the bottom branches.

"I never saw a fox do work that wasn't the herald to some trick," commented Shi Xiao dryly. "Not that I'm not honored."

"Such a devious mind," protested Yang Jing. "But perhaps it's the nature of a thief that causes them to distrust others?"

"Maybe," replied the other monk. "And some snakes that look like poisonous ones aren't. But if you've already been bitten by them before, you don't have to wonder about it now do you?"

Yang Jing laughed delightedly.

"Worry not brother," he said. "I just saw all these apples resting here in arm's reach and, since you're way up there, I couldn't resist."

Shi Xiao descended the ladder with a full basket and then put this down as he went to examine Yang Jing's pickings. Grabbing one so he could look at it, he quickly dropped it back in the other monk's basket.

"Hmmm," mused Shi Xiao. "Your low hanging fruit is rotten. Perhaps when something's easy to have and there's plenty of it, this indicates its little value?"

* * *

GARBAGE MONKS

There was a trash heap in the valley near the hamlet. Sometimes the monks would go to scrounge there. To do so they had to travel through several farms though first. At one of these, Muki Mudo passed by with Fu Dao and Jo Han and all three of them noted a large well-kept shrine where a small bodhisattva idol sat surrounded by fresh offerings. Here Muki Mudo stole the idol without saying a word and neither of his companions commented.

When they arrived at the trash heap however, the abbot casually tossed the idol among the other discarded things and began to whistle while he went on with his usual search. Eventually, Jo Han gathered the courage to ask about the idol.

"Sir. Why did you do that?"

Muki Mudo whistled happily to himself before replying with a poem.

The idols feast
While children starve.
Such compassion
Among Buddha's followers

"One path hides the other," added Fu Dao. "Which is greater?"

When the abbot saw the perplexity this explanation produced in Jo Han, he laughed and recited a second poem at Fu Dao's expense.

Empty words hiding empty thoughts.
Only the most precious lies
Are worth the effort to hide them,
Only our falsest truths
Can be veiled by the void

* * *

ISSA RULE AND RULES ARE RULES

Yu Yi and Old Man Wu were painting and writing haiku in the garden. The former was getting frustrated due to creative blockage and, when he looked at his counterpart, he began to get even more annoyed due to their productivity. Finally, he sidled near to have a look over the old man's shoulders.

"There's no season word!" complained Yu Yi, referring to the convention of using specific words to signify one of the four seasons.

"Season word!" retorted Old Man Wu. "My words don't need seasoning!"

Yu Yi however would not relent.

"Why even write haiku if you're not going to write them properly? Would you propose a game of Go and make up your own rules? What's the difference? Can you not even explain yourself?"

Old Man Wu smirked and merely tilted his head towards the poem he wrote while Yu Yi was criticizing him.

birds madly chirping –
even when the cat
is just passing

* * *

THE SAVAGENESS OF BROTHERS

Several of the monks were reclining in the garden one day. Yang Jing was writing a letter while Yu Yi and Fu Dao played with a captured tarantula and Shi Xiao raked the sand pit. Old Man Wu and Wee Wang were also there, playing a game of Go in the shade of the trees. Taking a break from his task, Yang Jing looked over at the two men focused on their board game and started to sing.

Wee Wang was a barbarian
Wee Wang lived like a beast
Wee Wang spat on his hands
Wee Wang pissed on his feet

This angered Shi Xiao.

"You're wilder than he ever was Yang Jing. You're the wildest of all. But for the cultivation of compassion towards small creatures, I would throw our brother's own tarantula at you."

"Wrong!" shouted Old Man Wu. Then he stood up, marched over to Fu Dao as he held the bristling tarantula, snatched it up, and stuffed the creature in his underwear before nonchalantly leaving the garden.

"He has achieved full non-mastery," remarked Yu Yi.

"No," disagreed Shi Xiao. "That's just called eating the noodle raw,"

* * *

WHEN ZEN IS UNBENDING

Occasionally foreign monks and other strangers would visit the Dog Buddha Temple. Seekers of last resort who couldn't find any Zen elsewhere. Some of them would even come to teach. One of the latter of these was a scholar from the west who tried to give a lecture to the assembled Dog Buddha monks.

"Zen has many perfections reached by recognizing the incompleteness. If we understand the self-nature we see that we have no self-nature and in our seeing this there is both self-nature and its absence, which in turn is something that is neither self-nature nor nothing. Thus we take the self-nature as it is."

That was followed by a respectful silence until Muki Mudo, without standing up, offered a different interpretation.

"Zen is clarity," said the abbot.

Thinking he was just talking to a random monk, the scholar raised his hand as if to slap Muki Mudo.

"Your clarity is unclear. Show me your Zen."

Muki Mudo chuckled.

"If Zen is not-clarity then that itself is clarity. So Zen is not not-clarity. If Zen is both clarity and not-clarity, this is not-clarity and again Zen is still clarity. If Zen is neither clarity nor not-clarity, this is a not-clarity equal to the not-clarity of being both clarity and not-clarity. And that not-clarity is obviously clarity. Lastly, if we take Zen as clarity we have clarity so Zen itself must be that."

All the monks of the Dog Buddha Temple looked expectantly at the scholar to see what his reply would be. The man was flummoxed though and, after opening his mouth with the intent to make a reply, he changed his mind, gathered his things, and left the temple forever.

"The wolf thought he found a piglet," commented Shi Xiao, "but instead he tried to bite a porcupine."

Jo Han was confused though.

“I do not understand what happened,” said the novice to Shi Xiao.

“That fellow was a knot that just needed to be untied,” replied his brother. “And sometimes a bigger knot will untie a littler one.”

“But why did he leave?” insisted Jo Han.

Here Muki Mudo interrupted.

“Because frogs swim slower upstream and faster downstream.”

* * *

THE ABBOT'S TRNSLATION

Muki Mudo was writing calligraphy when Shi Xiao ventured a comment.

"That's not what Kashyapa said exactly."

The abbot arched an eyebrow before replying.

"And how do you know I'm not an eraser being used by the cosmos to fix its own mistakes? Would the old scriptures tell you if they were wrong?"

Shi Xiao shrugged.

"Sir, I cannot answer this, but here is what the historians say."

And with that, he took down a book from a nearby shelf and put it beside Muki Mudo. Then he turned to exit the room.

"Where are you going?" laughed the abbot.

"After he showed the people the way, did Lao Zi stay for debate?"

That was a good answer but Muki Mudo got the last word.

"Yes, I make mistakes my dear boy. But none as great as asking perfection from another human being."

* * *

FOREIGN TASTES

A group of the monks were eating together when Bo Ji and Bo Lao started to argue over the tin of seasonings. This quickly escalated.

“You use too much!” cried Bo Ji. “Your dull tongue makes you greedy!”

“The nerve!” snorted Bo Lao. “You wouldn’t know one spice from another!”

Then they began to physically wrestle over the tin and the other monks who were there, Yu Yi and Old Man Wu, watched in silent awe.

When the contents of the tin eventually spilled everywhere, the squabbling monks frantically tried to gather up as much of the spice as each of them could. Old Man Wu meanwhile leaned back and made a comment to Yu Yi.

“Now I understand the spice imperialism of the barbarian nations.”

* * *

ASSASSIN ZEN

Among the mountains around Dog Buddha Temple, there were several treacherous paths where a fall would be deadly. The monks however would travel these to perform secret meditations and other things. There was even a hermit who often had quality opium and he would give this to the younger brothers who visited. Muki Mudo didn't appreciate that though and he took a number of monks with him when he went to scold the man.

On the way however, at a particularly precarious stretch, they ran into an elderly woman followed by a herd of cats. Old Man Wu laughed.

"She has more followers than you master abbot! Perhaps she is even the reincarnation of the world teacher himself?"

Muki Mudo said nothing to this but when they got closer, he rushed her and pushed the elderly woman off the cliff.

"She looked like the Buddha to me," he shrugged.

* * *

WHAT INSECT ARE YOU?

Lying in a field of tall grass, Yu Yi and Jo Han were being a pair of lazy fellows in the sun. But Old Man Wu sat in the shade where he could see more clearly.

“You know Yu Yi,” said Jo Han happily. “I reckon that being a monk is most like being a spider. You have to wait patiently for the insights to happen and cast a large web for them.”

“I think monks are like bees,” murmured Yu Yi as he gazed on an elm tree. “Going from beauty to beauty, searching for something they can turn into honey. Each one adding to a great golden hive.”

“Hey Uncle Wu!” chirped Jo Han. “Tell us yours!”

“Locusts,” replied Old Man Wu grimly. “And working people our grain.”

* * *

THREE WORD DEBATE

The Dog Buddha Temple had become notorious in the wider Zen community but it still attracted curiosity regarding its teachings and practices. One of its most popular events was the three-word-debate in which two monks would argue over Zen with only three words allowed for each remark. As many as forty people might show up for one of these events, a large crowd by Zen standards. So Yang Jing and Shi Xiao were the ones put out as offerings that summer. Shi Xiao opened.

Shi Xiao: “Zen is obvious.”

Yang Jing: “You are obvious.”

Shi Xiao: “That was obvious.”

Yang Jing: “Explain that then.”

Shi Xiao: “Be more specific.”

Yang Jing: “Explain my obviousness.”

Shi Xiao: “Your obviousness prevails.”

Yang Jing: “Is that it?”

Shi Xiao: “Is more required?”

Yang Jing: “Much is lacking.”

Shi Xiao: “Name four things.”

Yang Jing couldn’t respond fast enough so, by general consent, Shi Xiao was declared victor. He got second choice at the peaches for dessert that night.

* * *

TRAINING MACHINE

Jo Han was surprised one afternoon when Muki Mudo arrived with a cart being pulled by a buffalo. All the other monks were elsewhere.

“Jo Han!” shouted the abbot. “Come set this thing up!”

The young monk did as he was asked and in an hour or so he had erected the contraption; a machine like nothing he’d ever seen.

“If you use this machine often enough,” explained Muki Mudo, “it will perfect your Zen.”

“What does it do?” asked Jo Han.

“It lets you use it often enough.”

“How will that help?”

“It gives you the time to figure out what it does.”

“But why this machine?”

“Because it’s currently available.”

“Does it have special powers?”

“No. It’s just an ordinary machine.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. That’s what the machine is for.”

And, to Jo Han’s great surprise, it worked.

* * *

THE GOD'S GOD OF NUMBERS

Jo Han was listening less now and talking more. He was getting bold enough to put strange questions towards his brothers too. One day, while he and some other monks were making a kite, he posed one to Yang Jing.

"If you add all the numbers to ten thousand and beyond, will you ever have completeness?"

"Yeah Yang Jing!" grinned Fu Dao. "You're always counting money. How can you not know this one?"

Yang Jing scowled at both of them before replying.

"The question's absurd. Where's your consistency? How can you add up that which has no end?

"Hmmm… You'd be the highest of deities," Fu Dao conceded.

Wee Wang was quietly listening in the corner and, hearing this exchange, he wrote down a couplet that he didn't recite. The poem read:

Sense and Zen,
Nonsense and when

How to kowtow,
Fox to hen

* * *

NIGHT LECTURE

Sometimes the monks would stay up late around a bonfire outside the temple and drink tea and talk, looking out over the valley. This was usually a jovial affair but even then there was always the spirit of provocation at work.

“Hey Yu Yi!” laughed Yang Jing. “The man who had only one hand to clap with, why didn’t he just use a thumb and finger?”

Yu Yi rolled his eyes before replying in verse.

The buffalo curls his tail around the fence
And moans he can’t flee his enclosure;
What the poor beast needs
Is a whip to cause him a freeing panic!

Yu Yi knew Yang Jing was born in the year of the ox and the latter recognized that this was a reference to him. Before he could escalate things into an argument though, Shi Xiao stood up on a large nearby and addressed everyone.

“Brothers!” he shouted. “I would say a word about the fire in our midst!”

Old Man Wu interrupted him however.

“What a fat head you have Shi Xiao!” jeered the monk. “You put too much inside it and now it’s eclipsed the very moon!”

Which was literally true from the position he was seated in. But Shi Xiao was sharp and quickly spat out a retort.

“Wrong! Your moon lust did!””

* * *

SEEING THE RAINBOW

After a couple days of rain, the clouds parted and the sun came out. Everything was drenched but glistening in the light and a warm wind was coming in from the west. Several of the monks went outside the temple complex to have their tea with the rich green valley in their view. Some distance away the halo of a tightly coiled rainbow could be seen.

“How many colors are there?” mused Fu Dao.

“Too many to say,” replied Shi Xiao.

“”Yes,” insisted Fu Dao, “but why?”

“Well,” began the other monk,” you can say every color is just color and then they become one thing. Or you can name a few and divide them. So too, the grasp of knowledge withholds from us the way things actually are. As it is truly, there we find no words. Just the thing.”

Jo Han, who’d been eavesdropping as usual, gasped.

“Our broken rainbow! Zen fixes it!”

Shi Xiao shook his head.

“The rainbow was never broken. Only your glasses. ”

* * *

DESIRE AND DESIRE

At the creek one day, several of the monks stumbled upon two young women bathing. Both were beautiful. At this, a new novice ran away and Muki Mudo had to sit down because he laughed so hard.

"What!" chortled the abbot. "Did he only become a monk because he was scared of women!"

Wee Wang then wrote the following poem about it:

Even a tiger must stalk their prey in stealth
But the dragon has no need to hide

Desire can be a terror to heart and mind,
And the fear of it is the fear of failure

What if the hunter's eluded by their prey?
Will they not have to slink home in disgrace?

This is where the teacher of Zen differs;
They desire nothing and so they fear nothing

* * *

PACIFYING THE TEACHER

"Do you know how Muki Mudo became enlightened?" asked Shi Xiao.

Jo Han shook his head.

"No. Please instruct me."

"Years ago," Shi Xiao went on, "In the farthest past, he was wandering across the south, visiting various monasteries. None impressed him. Then he heard about a hermit monk living in a secluded hut beside the sea. This was Wild Silver Fox and his Zen was so strong that Muki Mudo begged him to be his pupil."

"The hermit monk was a harsh teacher though. Every wrong word was met with a correcting strike. Muki Mudo became the leopard of bruises until, finally having enough, he lost his composure."

"If you can't teach me with words," he cried, lips curling with rage. *"I'll get the wisdom I want from you with my fists."*

At this Wild Silver Fox slowly opened one of his own fists and our abbot was enlightened. Also the hermit monk never hit him again."

"And thus the use of words to eliminate actions?" asked Jo Han.

Shi Xiao nodded before replying.

"Yes. But don't tell him who told you. If needed, blame Yang Jing."

* * *

EMPTY AIR

A speech by Muki Mudo:

"Two hands striking make a noise. And what is left for one? The empty air? Creation comes from two; the clash of opposites. One is the hand of eternity. Five fingers, five schools. And between them water and wind. With armored clay I create a human figure. Then I have an idol. Then I can fall down in worship. But my prayers are also swallowed in the air. Will they die if I have no merits? Then the sacred words are defeated by a shoddy heart. Like the urn that has a crack, who would use it to carry anything? Were the patriarchs fools to give their teachings? Then how did they come by them?

One day a wind will arrive from the mountains. One day the spices of the sweetest trees will descend on the cities. Not from the scholars, not from the monks, but out of a hidden place the unseen will be revealed. A thing greater than Mount Meru! And no one can climb this. No teaching can encompass it. Yet it is a single note on the iron flute, a glint of light in the true dharma eye. The fence that prevents you from entering is just your own and the gate isn't even closed. Your hungry ghosts are merely your own heinous deeds returning.

Listen to the words coming out of my mouth. You know each and every one. Yet you never put them together as I have. You had all the tools yourself but you wouldn't build the bridge. Why? Because the emptiness separating hard ground frightens you. You prefer to stand on the shoulders of the earth. But as long as this is true you'll never cross over. And enlightenment is right there! It's that close! All you need is to clap once more and your hands will become wings and you'll soar into the sky. Neither valley nor mountain will hold you."

* * *

ANOTHER FOX TAIL

In the old days, before Muki Mudo founded the Dog Buddha Temple, he spent several years with the hermit Wild Silver Fox. This education was most ruthless but eventually Muki Mudo made a decent impression on his teacher and, even before his enlightenment, an understanding arose between them. It was during this time that Muki Mudo, feeling familiar enough with the old fox, made the following statement.

“Shall I fetch us some water master?”

Wild Silver Fox swiftly responded with a stern gaze and marched up to the younger man, who for his part stood his ground with a flinching face. Muki Mudo was expecting to get a serious beating.

Instead, Wild Silver Fox said, “Give me your foot.”

Instantly obedient, Muki Mudo proceeded to stand on one leg while he extended his other towards his teacher. His balance held but with some difficulty. Then, to Muki Mudo’s horror, the old man leaned down and kissed his student’s foot. Just above the toes.

“Don’t ever call me master again,” Wild Silver Fox added. “If you do, I might even lick the bottom of your sandals to teach you a lesson.”

* * *

A SOLID INTRODUCTION

“Jo Han! Jo Han!” cried Muki Mudo cheerfully one day.

Surprised, Jo Han came running.

“What is it master?” he asked.

“Did you hear?” replied the abbot. “A wonderful teacher has come to visit us! An eminent and inspiring one! Would you like to be the first to meet them?”

“Most assuredly!” exclaimed the novice.

Here Muki Mudo gestured for the young monk to follow him and they went out into the garden. It was empty.

“Where are they master?” wondered a confused Jo Han.

The abbot smiled and then picked up his new staff and hit the novice over the head with it. Just once but very sharply.

“This is Venerable Master Bonk,” said Muki Mudo. “How do you like them?”

Jo Han, wincing and rubbing his head, said nothing.

The abbot nodded sagely and then pointed with his staff towards an easel where some painting had been done.

“I believe that word in Sanskrit is a disparaging term, but tell me, what does the calligraphy say? Be quick or I’ll let the Venerable Master Bonk become your permanent tutor.”

“Holiest holy,” muttered Jo Han with a lisp.

“Ah,” remarked a satisfied Muki Mudo. “Then I was correct.”

* * *

RESPLENDENT HORROR

Muki Mudo and Yang Jing were meditating together on the mountain slope one day when an avatar of Lord Yama, the God of Death, appeared out of a sudden gateway of celestial fire.

It was a dreadful sight. Lord Yama had assumed the form of a wolf-headed giant with the corpses of the dead, like maggots, caught in the saliva dripping from his jaws. Each of the nine claws on each of his twelve hands was a jagged peak of obsidian and his thick fur was like a coat of blackened swords and for medallions he had an abundance of living demi-gods impaled in agony and hanging from chains. Even though he did not speak, the mere sound of his nostrils inhaling and exhaling was like the roar of typhoon winds and his eyes were the seething craters of two volcanos in turmoil. The world seemed to dissolve at his presence.

Immediately Yang Jing began to tremble and kowtow but Muki Mudo only opened one eye and then went back to his meditation.

“Oh look,” he muttered. “One of Buddha’s flies.”

* * *

KOAN HEAD

Jo Han visited Shi Xiao one day in the library.

“Wise brother,” the novice monk began. “I have read all the cases I’ve been given and I still don’t know what a Zen Master is. Please help.”

Shi Xiao invited Jo Han to sit with him and he poured the younger monk some tea. The senior gestured for quiet to start off and they sat in silence with their steaming cups for a few minutes. Then Shi Xiao softly asked a question.

“Are you sure Zen Masters exist?”

“I don’t understand,” replied Jo Han emotionally.

Shi Xiao raised his hand again and another period of silence followed before he began to elaborate.

“To master is to dominate. What is the Way if it is a thing to be controlled by mere human beings? Some will speak of Zen Master believe in them but if you were told that people could ride a dragon, would you believe this? I think any fool who tried to climb a dragon would get eaten. Or think of a great river. The one proficient in Zen is like someone who has simply learned to not swim upstream and the means to not be terrified by rocks and current.”

* * *

A NAKED SERMON

Several monks were writing poetry in the garden. Yu Yi was the first to finish a poem, and he immediately shared it.

The blue cliffs are burning,
Their ashes scattered.
Has the forest fire more light
Or the sun through bare branches?

Both Fu Dao and Jo Han thought this was a fine poem and they quickly stopped their own compositions to copy it. Just then, Old Man Wu appeared. He was completely unclothed.

“Give up the paper robes!” he jeered. “They only hide your true selves. And stop trying to turn your Zen into ink.”

* * *

COPULA AND COPULATION

Muki Mudo and Yu Yi were walking through the hamlet when they came across two dogs having sex in front of them. Here Yu Yi remarked.

“Not striving after understanding. Being one with one’s own nature. Finding harmony with the other. Is this Zen or is it not?

Muki Mudo clapped his hands as he laughed his reply.

“Is?”

* * *

ESSAYS

ANNOTATION OF THE FOUR STATEMENTS

Zen is a separate understanding outside the teachings

Often the word "understanding" here will be replaced with the word "transmission." This has unfortunately served a certain kind of over-caution. In debates about Zen between its most zealous enthusiasts, the claims of others are gleefully criticized so, over time, ambiguity has become one of the favorite defenses of those still wishing to preach. No one likes being trapped in their own words naturally. It's very humiliating when you're trying to project authority and someone finds a flaw in your logic so riddles and cryptic aphorisms proliferate.

Zen does require an understanding however. If it didn't, how could it show you anything? How could you recognize its absence? But this is not the same thing as saying that Zen is always a form of self-awareness. To the contrary, the practice of Zen requires that it exists undifferentiated from our natural selves. One does not have to concentrate to maintain one's Zen. As if one were holding one's breath. No. The transformation, once it occurs, is complete. To the degree that anything occurs at all. Because Zen can exist in degrees. Did the teacher of Shoju not have any Zen? If he didn't, it would be strange that Shoju thought he did. And yet Shoju's Zen must still have been greater because he threw his teacher's gifts in the fire. I would add too that this Zen also might have displayed its imperfection because Shoju sought to make a spectacle of his non-attachment.

Returning to the earlier point however; Zen is not defined by transmission. Maybe the Buddha did inspire it in his disciple. Maybe in secret. Even if that were the case though, a person who has received Zen does not need to be resupplied by another. As if Zen were a fuel one could run out of! But schools and religions are especially susceptible to this kind of error because they seek to preserve the group hierarchies that allow some to rise socially and materially in relation to others. If Zen is a form of transmission, then you must ask someone nicely for it. You may even be willing to become their slave in order to get it. How nice for those who are wise in this kind of false Zen that others are willing to be their servants.

The truth? You can become enlightened all by yourself. Teachings are just signs that, at best, point you in the right direction. There are many lazy and false sign makers too, so their signs can lead you somewhere else entirely. If becoming enlightened is somewhere worth going for you, then you will still need to be able to recognize when you've finally arrived at your destination. Because you can't simply trust the signs. You must judge the signs on your own. Ultimately, you have to have some sense of what your destination will look like and this can only be obtained through your own decisions. If you think things through by yourself, that can work. Or you can listen to others while keeping in mind that, even if they have the correct answers, you will still need to see this in your own private thoughts. In fact then, there are no Zen masters. Because everyone can only do the work for themselves. Zen masters are the delusions of those who have invented a fantasy that they call Zen. This Zen is the Zen of slaves, and the slaves of slaves. No one who possesses Zen esteems themselves so highly.

There's the story of a man named Gutei who had Zen. He did not teach Zen but only wagged his finger. His Zen was better than many others but since he had to brag about his finger-Zen in words, perhaps it wasn't perfect. Or he was simply attached to making the point he wasn't attached to it. Anyways, what happened though is that a boy started to imitate him. Here the boy was aping his behavior for whatever reason, to impress others or to make fun of old Gutei, and apparently he did this enough to make quite a pest of himself. So naturally, Gutei cut the boy's finger off. When the child was running away in agony though, Gutei managed to grab his attention for a moment. Here he wagged his finger at the boy. And, as the story goes, the boy became enlightened in that instant.

You can call this a form of transmission but doing so misses the point. First, what Gutei did was too vague to be properly understood as teaching. After all, most people who are well-educated can't figure out what this story means. Why then should this boy have gained any understanding here? Presumably he was illiterate too. As such, the Zen he gained was something beyond mere teaching. Secondly, if given that, it must have been something that was also beyond transmission. Because nothing definite passed between him and Gutei. What happened rather is that the boy observed and saw. Gutei's finger was like the apple for Isaac Newton. It was the inspiration that initiated the boy's own powers of awareness but nothing

more. He could just have easily been meditating on his own thoughts or watching the ripples in a pond. Zen can also be perceived in these ways.

Like other manners of symbolism, those that assist in Zen have no inherent meaning. A symbol is not something that produces a specific understanding because the particular form of any symbol is arbitrary. Even when there's a formal correspondence between a symbol and the meaning it conveys, such as a picture of a person that provides a realistic depiction, this correspondence imposes no requirements on the use of the symbol. I can, for example, use a picture of a cat to indicate a dog. That's analogous to how words can be encrypted so they're signified by other words. Regardless, a symbol only functions because of the meaning we attach to it. Symbols then are artificial, while Zen is not.

For those who prefer Zen to be expressed in a more oracular and mystical way, these statements will seem unpalatably plain. Nevertheless Zen can be spoken of in a more-direct-manner than is usually admitted. The cultivation of the mystery around Zen is sometimes created by those who covet power and wish to use an imitation of Zen to achieve this. They're rarely anything more than charlatans who get into the business of religion for making money. Although, in our age, this will more often express itself in the marketing of spiritual products and as a fetish oriented material lifestyle masquerading as spirituality. But one of the weaknesses of lies is that they depend on transmission through teaching. It's almost impossible to lie to oneself conversely when one is simply appreciating things as they are. Whenever we are lying to ourselves, our lying requires distortion. And fortunately for us, true Zen is defined by leaving everything else alone.

Zen is not based on the written word

In the recent past, most people would first encounter Zen through reading. Nowadays, social media is probably an equal or greater source of introduction. For monks and other sorts of dedicated-adherents; dialogue, debate, and lectures will likewise play a formative role in their spiritual development. All of these are on the same level of the written word however. In fact, reading and other methods of spectating are often the best means for developing our first acquaintance with Zen because they allow the freest exercise our autonomy. Isn't Zen supposed to be a liberation? Or what is worth shackling ourselves with new chains?

Texts about Zen, no matter how old, should never be treated as sacred. People are so eager to find something to believe in, something that won't place further demands on their thoughts, they'll venerate the authorities they perceive even where those supposed authorities explicitly tell them not to fall into said veneration! This is a tendency towards delusion that plagues Zen in all its forms; not just writing. And of course it's not specific to Zen. It's not even especially prevalent in Zen. To the contrary, humanity has a voracious appetite for delusion wherever it goes. Why? Because of how uncomfortable most kinds of uncertainty are. But through the constant experience of uncertainty, as with anything else, one can adapt to that state of being and learn to accept it or even enjoy it. Most people however are so quick to flee uncertainty, they never develop this. After a couple difficult minutes of trying to learn how to swim, they decide to climb out of the pool and never go back. But no one likes to believe they've failed and, if you never go swimming again, you can quickly convince yourself you did learn how. Sacred texts and authority figures are often ways to hide from the water.

The problem with spiritual books is that they are usually too persuasive or not persuasive enough. People either tend to become overly attached to said literature or they fail to get anything out of it at all. Neither a believer nor an unbeliever though can know the truth because truth can only be approximated by its representations. So both attitudes are inherently too flawed. The best way to approach a claim of insight rather is to expect to find something there without any particular expectation of what this will be. Even the worst errors are edifying! But only when they are understood properly. That's why the individual who views all forms of experience as manners of instruction so often attains the most profound understanding. This is true of artists and philosophers and scientists; of everyone. Those who are the keenest and the most appreciative observers have the most revealed to them. That's how the universe works.

To clarify even further why Zen is not based on instructions, written or otherwise, it's sufficient to understand that Zen is an inward revelation. As much as it transforms our perception of the world, it does not transform the world itself. Instead it will rid us of the delusions that distorted this. Delusions which always inhabited us, not the world. The person who tries to see better by making the world clearer is like someone trying to get rid of the dirt obscuring their view by washing the things beyond their window. People don't want to look at themselves as flawed

though so instead they try in vain to fix everything else. And their own brokenness is what prevents this from ever resulting in meaningful progress. When you achieve an insight into your own nature though, your relation to the things you experience becomes less confusing and so the outward sense you seek is really obtained by making sense of your own inward state of being. Obviously no external source can tell you the particulars of this. Some generalities and possibilities can be found from people whose experiences or thoughts were chronicled but even applying these to your own life first requires you to understand your own condition. There's just no way to better your life without honestly acknowledging where it can be improved. You cannot achieve something by truly doing its opposite.

Zen points directly at the individual's mind

If Zen were something outside us, it would be appropriate to acquire it. But it isn't and this leads to one of the most basic errors. Yes, there's a transformation that happens through Zen, a new orientation of the self if you will, but this does not come from any kind of acquisition. Which is why Zen is so frustrating for most people. Our entire material existence is defined by getting and accumulating so what Zen asks is really an inversion of our most cherished habit. It's like being asked to write with one hand after spending your entire life using the other.

Our physical and mental selves are largely extroverted due to various forms of necessity. We couldn't survive in the world otherwise. Even the most introverted person still lives primarily through their interaction with external things. Radical solitude is extremely rare but it consistently produces radical insights. Those who have practiced it are always transformed. What the authentic pursuit of Zen does is prioritize this. We are encouraged to shed ourselves of everything superfluous and look bravely on what's left. And what's left is always the same thing. It's the mind itself. The one place essential change in us can happen.

Zen shows you your nature and you're enlightened

Once you know who you are, what more do you need? If you truly realize what you actually desire, what will stop you from pursuing this?

CAN'T ANYTHING BE ZEN?

If Ummon used his Zen to turn his staff into just a staff, can't I use my Zen to turn anything I want into an instrument of Zen? If I take the thing as just a thing and understand this without trying to conceptualize it, what more needs to be done? The thing, as it is, now expresses my being Zen. My everyday existence is free of the burden of intellectual projections. Everything is nothing more than what it is, as it is. When I look at the trees, I see my Zen. When I turn on a faucet, I see my Zen. Because there is no longer a mental boundary between myself and the world I perceive. Everything that happens shares in my self-nature. My self-nature is emptied of personal contrivances.

There is just the Way and the elements that compose it. But each element is itself a complete aspect of the Way and enlightenment is the falsehood of their differentiation evaporating. The first have become the last and the last have become the first. Yin exists in Yang and Yang in Yin. There are no more opposites. And this end to the illusion of strife is something that can be called Zen. Nothing more, nothing less. Merely what is happening.

FENG SHUI, THE HUMAN SHAPE, AND A ZEN OF TOPOLOGY

In this world there is a tendency to maximize presence. And to dominate by substance. One way in which this reveals itself is in the construction of buildings. Both office towers and generic mansions usually focus on utilizing all the space available to them and the result is large rectangular blocks. In places where real estate is especially expensive, the result is a lack of front lawns and city green areas and various other kinds of aesthetically pleasing breathing spaces and alcoves of restful emptiness. The architecture of the human environment then tends towards an oppressive quality because freedom and movement arise out of openness.

However, you will also see tall buildings in some parts of the world that have large hollow spaces through them. This is a practice deriving from Feng Shui where there's sufficient emphasis on energy flow among adherents that such demands are indulged by developers despite the added financial costs. And regardless of how credible one might regard the metaphysical principles being invoked here, there can still be a recognition of symbolic merit. Because, again, openness is the source and foundation of all life. Living matter is responsive, meaning it does not possess a perfectly impenetrable substance. And a living mind is one which retains a sense of openness towards new ideas and experiences. The maximization of space is the opposite of this. Maximization leads to stasis and death. What Feng Shui, Daoism, and Zen encourage instead is the cultivation of our own emptiness. A kind of free maximization through neither maximization nor minimization; a fulfillment that comes from the retention of possibility through a non-grasping approach.

What this ultimately results in is flow. And fluidity is at the heart of all states of peak being. When an athlete is "in the zone," when a scientist is experiencing eureka, when a saint is undergoing the awe of epiphany, the human being is always surrendering to something. A cosmic potentiality if you will. Because in order for the universe to function in any sense, exchange and interplay must predominate. All healthy and progressive systems are in continuous flow and the only way in which these things can be transcended is through a fluidity that dissolves even the basic system paradigms. Human beings have called this both Zen and Ch'an.

Consider the biological nature of humanity for a moment. Specifically the fact that we digest nutrients and excrete feces. From the mouth to the anus there is a single tunnel and this is actually a significant fact in the geometry of a human being. But that begs some explanation, so here it is. Within geometry there's a field called topology and this is concerned, among several other things, with the transformational potential of shapes. In fact, topology defines types of shapes by their potential to be transmuted into others. So certain shapes are considered as belonging to the same group. Anything that can be warped or distorted into a proper sphere is considered a member of the sphere group. A wine glass, a tree, the planet Earth, are all considered spheres in this sense. But then what else is there? Well, there's the torus group. And here, anything which has a single hole running straight through it is a torus. Among other things, this includes toilet paper rolls, doughnuts, and yes, human beings.

Odd company right? Well, you don't get to pick your relations. The human being, like all other mammalian forms of life, is a species of sentient torus. We're not cul-de-sacs, we're drive-throughs. And so to understand our own self-nature and embrace it, we do well to recognize this aspect of our being. And even use it as an insight into the importance of an emphasis on flow. Our very own being is like a microcosm of the universe itself with its births and deaths, its geneses and its annihilations. For us though this is eating and defecating, adopting new ideas and discarding outdated ones. And it is in the maintaining of this, and the dedication to preserving it, that our own vitality resides.

SOMETHING LIKE ZEN

You are the hot metal on an anvil. Ready to become a sword or a plow. Anything. But someone must beat you to make this so.

If only you had the courage to hit yourself properly!

…

When a philosopher speaks obscurely, they are hiding from themselves. And yet this is different from being incomprehensible. What separates the two is the act of avoidance. When someone wants to be listened to but they have nothing to say, often they will make a cryptic remark. And that can be mistaken for wisdom. At other times, those who are estimated to be wise will be sought out. Pestered for insight, they might admonish the person harassing them. And this seeker, eager perhaps to possess an answer, may twist the words thrown at them to give these greater meaning. And so a lie can begin a tradition.

…

Just as a word can obscure the truth, so too pointing at a thing is not the same as leaving the thing alone. This is corruption.

And the lesser corruptions are just as bad as the greater corruptions. Because their purity is more convincing, it becomes easier to believe they aren't tainted.

If Zazen is the ruin of Zen then Zen is the ruin of something else.

…

There's a difference between chopping wood without thoughts and thinking that thoughtless wood chopping is a special thing to do.

…

When the disciple threw his masters' holy things in the fire he demonstrated that he'd been a bad student. The master had been reverent towards his own teachers and this was a lesson the master wanted to impart in turn. But the disciple realized something else. He saw something in the master's teachings that the master didn't. So the master chose his student incorrectly. He chose someone who wanted to learn rather than someone who wanted to be taught.

…

Can a monk attain Zen if they don't shave their heads? If they can't, then the gods of Zen must have very specific tastes. Or maybe the hair tangles up irradiant realizations? Perhaps the ideas prefer to perch on a smoother skull? Either way, it would be strange if a monk doesn't lose their Zen as soon as they stop shaving their head. What would that mean?

You don't understand though. Shaving off one's hair is a practice to release one from attachments. A symbolic method to let go of one's desires.

Is it? So you let go of one desire by replacing it with another? And you call this a step towards detachment? Fine. If that works for you.

…

In a real school you have to spend years studying. So the sudden school is not a real school. The longer you spend there, the more time you've wasted. The best student obviously is the one who only needs one lesson.

….

Thunder is loud without intent. Are you the same? Or do you want to be thunder?

….

If enlightenment has a form of appearance, this is a kind of theater. Who craves an audience other than an actor?

When someone has the appearance of being enlightened, we might ask ourselves whether this is them being themselves or whether they are giving a performance. I mean, I wouldn't expect an actor to teach me anything real. Would you?

…

What can you learn from the loss of a finger?

Suppose someone taunted you by wagging their finger at you?

How would you taunt them back?

…

Let's not think about Zen in the way it's taught. Let's approach Zen as philosophers.

Using the techniques of linguistic and conceptual analysis, what observations can be made about Zen? Well?

No doubt you could say something like this:

Zen is the quality of all beings which is why it's both omnipresent and unobtainable. Because the individual that separates themselves from other beings loses their awareness of Zen in this very act.

This Zen is a way for the mind to shut itself off.

…

Do you still want a theory of Zen? Fine. Here is one that I'll propose:

Zen is a re-orientation towards negative space. In a state of Zen, the mind no longer grounds itself in things but rather recognizes its foundation in the absence of these. Ordinarily people situate themselves by their relation to various material objects and goals. The more materialistic they are, the more they're inevitably caught up in delusions. Because they're substituting the nature of themselves for the nature

of something else. What we really are though, or at least what we are more of, is not the material things that give us temporary satisfaction but rather the desire for fulfillment. That is what's defining us.

And Zen allows the hunger to consume itself.

Returning to the idea of negative space, it's something primarily associated with western art. Basically it's the inversion of our usual focus, an appreciation of the role emptiness plays in contributing to the harmony of a composition. So too the true practitioner of Zen does not feel the anxiety of absence but rather appreciates it as essential to any form of being. Where the unenlightened person tries to fill their life up with acquisitions and accomplishments in the futile attempt to feed a craving and cram it until it's permanently full, the enlightened person kills their craving by starving it to death. And they do this because they understand that, no matter what they do, they'll still be surrounded by an equal amount of emptiness. What does not exist cannot be negated. The enlightened accept that.

Let's call the above theory the favorable version of Zen. Since we are analyzing Zen from an external perspective though, we can also view it through the lens of unfavorability. For instance:

Truth is as difficult to articulate as it is to ascertain. Those who are regarded as having special knowledge or insight however are venerated so even those who do not possess this have an incentive to pretend they do. And maybe it didn't even start out that way. Maybe the first patriarch of Zen was just a man living a strange life who other people mistakenly believed was enlightened. Perhaps he got tired of trying to convince people he wasn't and he started resorting to stupefying rebuffs. But there were still those who wanted to believe and so the patriarch's retorts were called the first koan statements. And then the others, the flattery seekers and lusters-after-power who couldn't figure out what was so profound about these koan statements, began to imitate them in a superficial manner and what is now called Zen and Ch'an was born. Similar things have happened elsewhere.

For those unfamiliar with cargo cults, these are the spiritual practices of primitive pacific islanders who, observing the militaries of industrialized nations bringing in planes loaded with cargo, take over the airfields after the militaries leave and mimic their behaviors in an attempt to summon the same cargo drops.

In fact, we can always ask ourselves whether we truly understand the things we do.

Someone who desires a theory of Zen now can choose from these two options. Both of which are consistent with a certain kind of rationality. One is deliberately sympathetic and the other is deliberately critical.

But whichever one of these interpretations you choose, you will still be imposing your perspective on something that has no inherent perspective.

…

You can build a wall and live inside it. But the outside will always be open.

…

Zen is something that people try to understand. One of the challenges though is that the rules of Zen seem rather hard to figure out. They also seem to change. When a Zen "master" does something inexplicable, that's regarded as good. But when their disciple imitates this, the disciple is liable to get slapped.

It's bad enough trying to figure out something when it has consistent rules. Take chess for example. If you knew nothing about the game, attempting to infer its rules from watching two players in a match would be quite a challenge. But let's suppose someone told you "The goal of chess is to capture all the pawns."

This is just correct enough that it could cause you a great deal of confusion. An observer might even try to preserve this incorrect understanding of chess by explaining a player's choice for not capturing a specific pawn when the opportunity arose as some form of deeper pawn-capturing strategy. The error might take a long time to realize. Longer the more insistent one is too.

Likewise the world won't make sense if we attribute false motives to its actors and our own motivations can also add to our frustration.

If you see your legal system as a thing dedicated to the pursuit of justice, its actions may confuse you. If you see it as a thing dedicated to the pursuit of power, its

actions may then make sense. What this illustrates is the importance of context. You cannot understand something without the proper context. But where is the context in Zen? There are stories about some old men. They're not particularly pleasant or comprehensible but there's an allure there. Enough at least to keep a lineage of literature alive. But just barely.

And one of the most obvious errors here is trying to perceive rules where no rules exist. So the disciple of the "master" makes a mistake when trying to conform to a certain kind of behavior and the "master" is often quick to punish this. Clearly Zen is resistant to definitions. Nevertheless, that's what people want. They want their definition of Zen. They want to square the circle.

Being told to do nothing is not good enough. The nothing needs to be made more palatable. So you invent a sitting meditation and call this doing nothing.

…

Even people who recognize that you cannot put out a fire by throwing dry wood on it can still find some excuse to keep it alive with little bits of tinder. This is a typical concession that those striving towards enlightenment will make.

…

Teach me Zen and I will show you how unnecessary it is. Why unnecessary? Because you've turned it into a field of research. You're recreating Zen in your own image, using the body parts of your ancestors as ghoulish props. And of course this has its satisfactions but, as soon as you try to say this thing is alive, it will flop down dead in front of you. The Zen of history is as gone as history.

Does that mean we shall find our Zen in nonbeing?

No. You will simply end up defiling the void with your awful presence.

…

Obviously the wheel spins because of the emptiness. But that does not make some pointless spinning any less meaningless.

…

To put your signature on a painting is like locking up a wild animal that decided to be your friend. In both cases you were not satisfied with merely being given something. Instead you desired possession.

…

Deciding to be in the moment is a gloss over actually being in the moment.

…

Only an insane person would cut a cat in two to make a philosophical point. But even another insane person might have enough sense to leave the room after the cat-killer told them what they'd done.

…

Identical truths are not always equal. You can say the same thing in a less sage way and no one will listen. Make your words seem profound and beautiful though and many will be impressed. Why? Because the people you're speaking to already have an idea of what the truth is… even though they are looking for an answer! The answer they desire then must do more than answer their question. It must answer it in a pleasing manner.

…

What you are looking for is a lost horse. A horse you imagine to be beautiful. And yes, the truth will lead you to this horse but, when you find it, you will discover its hideous corpse.

…

The end requires no beginnings.

THE POISON OM OF THE MERCHANT GURU

Spirituality was certainly a business from the beginning. Shamans no doubt had a better time of it then the hunters and gatherers who went out to do hard work, so they fostered and guarded this livelihood as a privilege. In thousands of years little has changed. It's still better making a living as spiritual teacher than to do the kind of dreg work that the masses find employment in. Which means people who are especially unscrupulous have a natural attraction to the vocation of the guru. It's an avenue to power over others, to wealth, and sex, and all the other material things so often deemphasized by money famished cults. Having a means to identify such individuals is obviously valuable for any spiritual seeker because, even for the intelligent and worldly, charlatans are not always obvious.

There are certain ways one can assess someone though that will help to reveal whether they engage in a sincere spiritual practice or not. Certainly you shouldn't expect perfection in your teachers because, if you look hard enough, you will never find it and, when you think you find it, that's only because you didn't look hard enough. So forget perfection. Instead look for ways to grow in a healthy manner and seek to surround yourself with people that can assist this. Which should mean a variety of people and not just agreeable ones. Having some confrontation in your life will guard you against certain forms of self-satisfied stagnation. What this does not entail though is placing someone above you as an unquestionable authority and abdicating your own personal responsibility over your inner development. There are many though who will gladly assume this role for you and here are a few ways to identify them:

1. Hypocrisy

If someone told you smoking was bad in between happily taking drags off a cigarette, their statement might still be sincere. But what wouldn't be sincere is their concern for your health. If they really cared about your health they wouldn't do the unhealthy thing in front of you while speaking against this because that

undermines their message and obviously makes it less effective. When someone says cigarettes are bad while still smoking them, what they're really just doing is fulfilling a sense of obligation. Perhaps to the truth, or perhaps just to social expectations but, either way, not out of real personal concern. Contrast this with a parent who may curse but avoids cursing in front of their child. While you can still argue there's some hypocrisy here, the sincerity of their desire to discourage their child from swearing is demonstrated by what they impose on themselves.

And that's basically the essence of the proof. If someone says they believe something and acts consistently with this belief even though it imposes limitations or difficulties on them, it's reasonable to believe them. If they don't then you can see they're still not capable of living up to the ideals they advocate and, regardless of how well articulated those ideals are, clearly they can't show you how to achieve them. They should be working on themselves rather than teaching because, out of all the things they could have chosen to teach, they chose something that they themselves haven't even realized. A very serious delusion.

2. Living in Luxury

I heard this story about a guy who went around saying you should store your treasure in heaven rather than on earth. I heard a lot of people say he knew what he was talking about. Imagine my surprise when I found out that many of them, most of them really, were practicing all kinds of conspicuous consumption and devoting their lives to material profit. That's when I knew that none of them really understood the guy and had no business calling themselves his followers. If you don't go where the shepherd leads you, you're not a good sheep.

Similarly, anyone who claims to be a spiritual teacher while living a life grounded in materialism is a fraud. If your religion revolves around capitalism then your religion is capitalism and you should be preaching capitalism. Which plenty of honestly greedy people do, using their own luxurious lifestyles as a means to promote their ideology. And that is what it is but, if you're looking for a spiritual teacher, shouldn't they be someone who prioritizes spiritual things? If I met with a biologist and they had a large bookshelf with no biology books, I'd be suspicious. Likewise, it's quite reasonable to infer that a spiritual claimant's real spirituality is inversely proportional to the materialism of their lifestyle.

3. Prioritizing Obedience

What Wittgenstein said about philosophy is also true about Zen and other spiritual practices. None are bodies of doctrine; they are all activities. Meaning that the achievement of authenticity here depends on a sincere personal engagement. Something that tends to confuse people though is separating the form of a thing's realization from the thing itself. It's like confusing an avatar for the nature of a god. What the god really is conversely is a power that can become many things, not just one thing it assumed the form of. So if the person who would teach you emphasizes the specificities of the form of their practice, you have a clear indication that they don't understand anything about the deeper reality.

If all this is rather obvious, why do so many schools and religions obsess over physical practices? Because that's a straightforward way to tell someone what to do. And you have to be able to articulate a demand before you can charge someone for it. Physical practice is rooted in the desire for social control, no less when this is not even apparent to the individuals demanding it. The secret lust for power is often just as invisible to people as the nature of the snake is to the snake. Can you achieve something through physical practice? Obviously. But committing yourself to a specific way of being will inevitably obscure the true potentiality that defines the actual nature of being itself.

It's like making the same ice sculptures over and over again in an attempt to understand the nature of water. It has all of the downsides of being completely lost and none of the benefits (like realizing how lost you are)

4. Pressured Commitments

A good teacher could potentially demand a lot from you. But what they won't do is make themselves dependent on the commitments of their students. If the teacher has an appetite for the authority of being a teacher and its other superficial benefits, like monetary reimbursement, then actual teaching isn't really their main priority. The teacher who spends their own money to provide for their students education is the teacher most sincere in their desire to teach.

Being pressured to liquidate your bank account or sever ties with family and friends are all signs you have not found yourself an authentic spiritual community. Real spirituality is always a form of liberation and while that process may ultimately involve the renunciation of material things and the termination of certain kinds of relationships, this will not be something demanded of you. It will arise out of a wholly personal self-revelation. The people who masquerade as spiritual teachers while demanding subordination and self-sacrifice from their followers are merely predators engaging in a predatory stratagem. Their looking to use you to feed their own desires. If subordination is good, what are they subordinating themselves to? If self-sacrifice is good, what are they themselves sacrificing?

Someone who keeps birds in cages will at most teach them a few stupid tricks. They certainly won't teach the birds how to soar.

5. Obscurantism

Don't confuse this with being unable to explain things to you. Genuine obscurantism is when someone claims to be able to explain something and then proceeds to do so in a way that doesn't. It's irrelevant whether it's an Indian mystic or a French philosopher, the goal here tends to be the same. To impress you with the appearance of being knowledgeable while possessing little to none.

Confusion is a natural and healthy state in any learning process. If things only ever make sense, you're not challenging your own preconceptions. The danger though, and especially when you have an instructor with compromised motives, is latching on to something because you're too uncomfortable with being confused. This is where the doublethink and self-delusion regarding obscurantic teachings arise. People convince themselves that what they've been taught has some great meaning by projecting their own desires into it. Doing so they become complicit in the fraud of their false teachers and eagerly participate in their own imprisoning. All to try and save themselves from the state of not knowing.

The difference here is between a moon reflecting light and one that eclipses.

6. Self-Elevation

Does your teacher wear superior things? Do they expect the subservience of others? Do they emphasize how important they are? Then they are practicing a form of self-elevation and, if you want to also elevate yourself above other people, you can probably learn a lot from them. If that's not your goal however, if you'd rather pursue authentic spirituality, they won't be any more able to assist you than any other random person.

One of the best things to understand about reality is that it is infinite. Even someone who doesn't recognize the existence of an infinite universe or multiverse would still presumably admit that things like mathematics and imagination contain infinitudes within them. So reality, containing infinitudes, is infinite and, knowing this, we can appreciate that we ourselves have a relation to the infinite. And that relationship is that of being infinitesimal. Because if reality is infinite and we are finite, not finite in our potentiality but in our actuality, then reality is always infinitely greater than us. Which is why subordinating yourself to any teacher is absurd if they can't even perceive their own infinitesimal being.

The best teachers conversely are those who do not place themselves above anything. Not a beggar, not a stray cat, not even a sidewalk dandelion. Such a teacher appreciates the equality of all infinitesimal things. And maybe the best way to learn from them is to simply to observe how they are. How they interact with others and respond to events in their own lives.

7. Inconsideration

Spirituality and other forms of knowledge involve being attentive. This means a concern for others things outside oneself. Specifically everything. A person who is enlightened is always someone who is very careful. Full of care.

The teacher who casually dismisses the concerns and suffering of another is an individual who obviously does not care deeply about them. And if they don't even care about those closest to them, how can you expect them to care about anything else? To the contrary, when a person is apathetic in this way it's generally indicative of a sociopathic condition.

8. Emphasizing Appearances

Maybe your teacher doesn't wear fancy things. Maybe they go naked or dress themselves in sackcloth and ashes. That's just as telling though. In both cases what you have is someone giving a performance. It's an attention seeking behavior. Like animals who engage in threat and mating displays, it's similarly grounded in a thoughtless biological instinct. An attempt to establish themselves in the eyes of the rest of the group. Why would anyone enlightened do this?

You have to consider the context. Someone living in a Buddhist community who wanted to practice Buddhism seriously would quite reasonably choose to wear a Buddhist robe. Or they could just wear it out of some perceived practical benefit. But if they were really sincere about their Buddhism, they wouldn't have any problems discarding this if that ever became more expedient. A truly spiritual person will not obsess over appearances because they know these things are trivial. They will not judge others harshly or favorably based on superficialities. They will not spend a great deal of effort cultivating a certain image of themselves for others. Because that's not important.

If someone is wise in something it means they understand value. An expert diamond merchant for example should be able to distinguish fake diamonds from real ones and even assess their relative merits. Wisdom in spirituality or philosophy however means being wise in things that lie beyond appearances and so anyone who preoccupies themselves with appearances has no wisdom here.

SUMMARY

Here is a Zen for you. Zen as no awe. Zen that reveals the equality in all things. Is a tree greater than a flower? By what measure? An artificial one of course. Nature itself will only make its true choice at the end of time. So the measures we employ are strictly our own. Which means they have absolutely no authority over things that merely are. True Zen meanwhile shows us this. The revered teacher is soon a revered urn, full of ordinary ashes, sitting on a mantle.

WHAT IS ZEN?
A Verbatim-Zen Response

Zen is built on a foundation of epistemological utilitarianism and this can be easily demonstrated. Consider the case of Ummon's staff.

Ummon held up his staff, and said, "We are told in the scriptures that an ordinary man perceives the staff as a real thing; that those in the Hinayana take it as nothing; that those who believe in the pratyekabuddha regard it an illusion; and that the bodhisattva consider its reality to be emptiness. But I say to you, take this staff just as it is…"

Ummon contrasts his understanding with four other perceptions but the distinction between these is not necessarily evident so clarifying this is worthwhile. What differentiates the first four perceptions from the fifth is that the first four are all conceptualizations and the fifth is utilitarian. The first four are explanatory and the fifth is practical. As such, Ummon is emphasizing that our relation to things can be confused by our perceiving them through self-created ideas and that our most direct access to the truth about these will always come from the nature of our actual interactions. Their reality exists in the nature of their interrelation to us; in the manner they appear without elaborations.

This is why if you want to know what Zen is, there's no substitute for the experience of Doing-Zen and Being-Zen. People though are usually dissatisfied with this fact and look for Zen elsewhere. Probably the most popular elsewhere is the pervasive elsewhere of the Mystic-Zen which is frequently used to hawk the cheap trinkets of the ubiquitous Product-Zen. As bad and lost as the mystic version is, the product version is worse, so something should be said against it. And as much as words aren't Zen, they are helpful in deflecting the greater falsities of other words; like a car being deliberately crashed into another one to prevent the first from driving into a crowd of people. Epistemological utilitarianism in this sense is coming to terms with our perception of things by engaging with them in the least contrived manner. In their ordinary being.

Call this Zen “Verbatim-Zen” if you will. It’s like Gutei’s finger; a mockery of those acts which ape the superficial aspects of Zen in order to gain eminence. Anyone can say Zen is beyond words but they doesn’t mean they really know this and it can all be a disguise for pious nonsense. If Zen is beyond words, it’s beyond gestures too, so words and gestures should only be resorted to when these facilitate insight. But the lust to have the obedience and the awe of innocent people remains and the lying continues.

What Zen is in its ultimacy, the thing itself, can only be gestured towards. Which is why the Zen patriarchs often avoided abstractions and logical analysis. What has happened historically though is that their teachings became conflated with a kind of nihilistic relativism and a de-intellectualizing laziness of the mind, where the use of obscurantic sermons assumed the place of real wisdom. Which is why the Verbatim-Zen being employed here might be useful and necessary. Because these words, however much they are merely approximating the truth, may help clear away the greater swarm of nonsense that’s obstructing the honest interest of the humbly curious. Many people who’ve decided to act as the gatekeepers of Zen do so with the unadmitted lust to refuse all others entry. Perhaps because they are too afraid to go inside themselves.

The closest words can come to Zen is this:

Zen is clarity.

YES TO ZEN AND YES TO ANARCHY

All political parties are anti-Zen. And not just un-Zen either. Systems of public organization, and their inevitable hierarchies, are constructed out of an attachment to various goals and policies. Aside from this, they also tend to be dominated by individuals who prioritize their own coercive power at the expense of the freedom of other individuals. Because of that, political parties will do their best to stomp out any hint of Zen wherever they find it. You can only mobilize "The Discontented" after all so, in order for a political system to work, the people under its influence need to retain a sense of unfulfillment. And what else is Zen for but the eliminating of unfulfillment? Does this mean Zen is a kind of anti-politics?

No. The fact that politics is anti-Zen does not imply the inverse. In fact, as much as Zen requires the spirit of negation towards inward things, it also demands an equal spirit of non-negation towards outward things. But that's not the same as acceptance. Life is often defined by the absence of choice. Being forced to decide between two imperfect options isn't inherently a contradiction and doing nothing usually isn't a valid way to preserve the perfection that's desired. If a practitioner of Zen decides to abandon the clashes of the world and live somewhere in peaceful seclusion, that's fine, but this isn't superior to the lives of those who remain. In fact, the strongest Zen is the one that can sustain itself in direct contact with the world despite all of the chaos and evil. And cultivating such a powerful Zen would require someone to fully participate in the world. Human beings would never be able to achieve enlightenment in Eden. Utopias are stifling so it's not surprising then that we'd have to end up getting ourselves thrown out.

The question remains however as to what sort of political ideals are most congruent with the principles of Zen. Given Zen's radical emphasis on liberation, this would inevitably have to consist in some form of anarchy. And because of its prioritizing of self-evaluation over material ambition, anarcho-capitalism and other forms of capitalist libertarianism are not compatible with it. Bodhidharma's teachings aren't an instrument for the preservation of laissez-faire commodity markets and international banking liquidity. Those things are just noise.

The powers of finance and industry are part of the forces of delusion. Their interests lie in preserving the many useful falsehoods that make their profitable systems possible. But Zen is dedication to enlightenment. Not just to a personal enlightenment either but to the universal furthering of enlightenment. And this kind of knowledge will destroy all systems of fraud. Not through overt conflict, but through an erosion of them at the spiritual level. Authentic Zen is like an acid that eats away at our material preoccupations and purges these from society. Of course if you look at the history of Zen, you'll find an absurd but not unsurprising amount of complicity by Zen priests and monks in corrupt power structures. This isn't surprising because like all other ideas, movements, and inventions, Zen appeals to many people who don't care about its actual content but rather its social utility. Claims of Zen wisdom can raise your social status and even provide you with a source of income. False Zen can also be used to control other people. Like with Christianity where a radical anti-worldly messiah preached a message of inward morality that was perverted for political and material gains, Zen was appropriated to serve things in complete opposition to its own essence.

And once more, the essence of Zen is freedom. All that ruthless practice of detachment and elimination of pretenses is dedicated to liberating individual human beings from their own self-imposed bondage. Slavery today is illegal but the world is still full of slaves. Ideology and corporate propaganda have manufactured a global society of debt-burdened parrot-talking fantasists. Not only do we have to resist our own weakness for self-delusion then we also have to be wary of those who would prey upon this! Which is where Zen takes up its sword.*

The popular distortion of Zen that portrays it as a lackadaisical creed emanating out of gentleness and serenity is a hostile contamination foisted upon it. That is not Zen. Real Zen is grounded in truth and direct confrontation. Read the stories about the old Zen monks. The monks don't hold back! Authentic Zen will make people uncomfortable. It's the gong clanging while the dreaming are trying to stay asleep. The barrier of the patriarchs is a moat and it's got some rather unpleasant things floating in it. Which in itself explains the false Zen fraud.

Zen is a way to show people how to be free. After which it asks for nothing. No obedience or price is exacted. Liberty is the end in itself.

*The blade of Nanquan

ZEN IS STRICTLY CASH, NO CREDIT

Maybe the two most important facts about money are these; money has zero spiritual value and money makes everything else easier. Want to get in shape? Money certainly helps. Want to start a new business? Money's essential. Want to end poverty and world hunger? Yeah. Sure you do.

If you ask any enthusiast of Zen whether Zen can be purchased with money, they'll almost certainly tell you no. Like Peter when he was asked whether the power to heal in the name of Jesus Christ was something that could be bought, they might even get offended at the suggestion. And yet these same people will fill their houses with the odor of imported incense and statues of bodhisattvas and tell you all of it contributes to their peace of mind. So which is it? Either you can buy Zen or you can't. If material things help promote spiritual well-being then Zen is quite obviously a thing susceptible to the assistance of money. But talking in this way doesn't sound very enlightened, hence the cognitive dissonance.

When I achieve Zen for a moment, I exist in a state of perfect freedom. No delusions hinder me, no worthless desires are leading me astray. However briefly this lasts, I remain undisturbed. So if you can buy something that makes you feel better, that's an investment in Zen right? No. My shooting heroin to subdue my heroin cravings won't actually help me with my heroin cravings. Which is not to say that a person needs to strip their lives of everything but the barest necessities.

There's a story that says the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes had only three possessions once. A large urn which he slept in, a tattered cloak which he wore, and a wooden bowl he used to eat and drink from. One day however he supposedly saw a dog drinking from a puddle and, at the mere sight of this, threw his bowl away. Because perhaps he really hadn't considered how little he needed it. Similar acts of radical detachment were performed by the famous Zen patriarchs of the distant past. Transforming any of these actions into moral rules though is a total misunderstanding. Non-attachment is also the state of non-attachment to every form of non-attachment. Meaning what?

When you ascribe a form to the negation of things, you're reattaching a thingness to your negation. You're turning it into something. What you've done is create a conceptual reference for yourself; which is something all perceptions are to begin with. Aggregates of molecules and nuclei only become trees and lamps once we conceptualize them as such; until then they're just vague sensory phenomena. And regardless of the actual qualities of any form of reality, the form itself is always something decided on at a conceptual level. Sure there's a great deal of pragmatism at play here because of how we interact with the world, but that doesn't change the fact that there's no intrinsic reason to choose any particular categorizations. The world is basically just a soup of electromagnetic energy, and sure we can isolate specific ingredients in our minds but, seeing the world in that way has no ultimate validity. The same world is just as completely the appearance of un-differentiation. It's like that gestalt picture of a duck-rabbit. You can see it as a duck or a rabbit or both or neither but, no matter what, it's still just a picture. And there's a koan about Ummon's staff that makes the exact same point.

In a similar way, money is also an intellectual construct. The main distinction being that it exists to serve the exchange of goods and services in society and so its symbolism is consensual rather than solipsistic. But what we do as a society with money is not fundamentally different than what the individual does while situating themselves in relation to the world. Both involve the creation of functional beliefs; that is to say, beliefs acquired to serve an additional function. Something that's essential to basic human existence but serves as a major hindrance to authentic spirituality. Because achieving communion with what we might call transcendental realities is not going to be possible if we try to impose a function-based paradigm on them. The totality of all things cannot exist as a function of something else and it's a connection with this totality which honest spirituality pursues.

Money is grounded in the finite. I can buy this thing or that thing and many other things but I cannot buy everything. The whole is not something that can be accumulated. Therefore money can't be the means by which I have any profound revelations; these are beyond being purchased through installments or collected in increments. Everyone has empty pockets when facing the infinite.

The price you pay for Zen is the price of the here and now. Zen isn't about investing in the future. It's the cash of the actual moment, and you handing it over.

HAIKU AS ZEN

fallen fence –
grass sprouting through
brand new planks

cherry trees
upon the hill top –
not a single shadow

April noon –
a dry path among bogs
of budding trees

new mother playing
with her dog –
shadows of crossing clouds

never have I
seen such a yellow!
twin bushes

walking past
the same pretty girl –
first eastwards, then west

street patio –
half a glass of beer
abandoned or waiting?

train tracks
taking up the earth
and no trains

a green
hedge row –
a row of shadow

overturned couch –
nothing else but dust
in the empty lot

crossing the street –
the sun no longer
accompanies me

bent slightly –
a stop sign against
the blue sky

weeds amid garbage
but the dandelion
just as vivid

how nice those trees
that somebody
fenced off

daisy like –
the little flowers
I cannot name

another day of sun
and finally a
butterfly

snow touched mountains –
everything else
far below

full bread loaves –
these crows enjoying
figuring it out

empty baseball field –
a flush cherry tree
just beyond

circled by Spring –
the poetry
ceasing briefly

the best view –
a tree stump to sit
and city sprawl

gutter dandelions
near the empty
green field

lichen growing
where no one sits –
a park bench

atop the
shadowless hill –
roads and telephone poles

the child's kite
gently falls to earth –
a mother comes

seeking shade –
there's plenty where
the benches aren't

crossing sign
with no cross walk –
budding branches

the shaded hill –
and some pinecones
rolling far

picnic table –
graffiti and bird shit
both together

the clouds far above
but to the north
farther mountains

a cherry sapling
barely more than a branch,
blossoming all over

the way I've gone
or another –
which way's the sun?

no clouds where I am –
the dark high-rises
far away

tire swing in stillness –
all the children
elsewhere

rusty pipes –
the creek water
red as well

the lunchtime rush,
kitchen mishap –
spaghetti

no sidewalk –
wandering a path
worn by others

teeming houses
upon the hills –
budding branches

shore grass
and creek ripples –
a still goose treads water

halted freight train –
too long to see
the end of

yellow caution tape –
my path roped off,
another appears

just exploring –
I find the hidden stairs
down to the valley

wonderful colors!
the alley chalk drawings
of a child artist

one red picnic table
in a green field
slick with rain

crossing mud –
good thing these aren't
good shoes

where the stones end,
the deeper road
begins there

very carefully
crossing the street –
startled by a car

palm shrub –
its fanning leaves
like sun rays

flat undersides –
clouds resting on
the invisible

a golf ball
out of bounds –
no, I leave it

peck peck peck –
the scrounging bird
busy in grass

trees flocking
the mountains –
birds flying away

marina murder –
I leave the hapless crab
to the seagull

keeping my
wanderings west –
sweltering sun at my back

breezy palm trees –
frond shadows dancing
like piano fingers

veins of
mountain snow –
pale blue aura

white brush strokes –
the ocean canvas
on a windy day

bare branches
spreading and thinning
against blue sky

sky, ocean,
and mountains blue –
red oil tankers

weather vane
hard at work –
a crow glides past

fallen petals –
in the shadows
with the mushrooms

two bare feet –
passenger side window
of a passing car

beyond the iron gate –
pale cherry blossoms
fluttering down

her white sun dress –
and skin like
the cherry blossoms

uniformed school kids –
girl with an arm around her
brother's shoulder

Victorian house –
black on black and a
rainbow garden

chess set –
between empty chairs
outside the barber's

one move in –
the chess set after
something came up

sudden wind –
flying cherry blossoms
in a whirl

sapling branches –
like a man
raising his arms

too many poems –
I avert my gaze
from the blossoms

waking late –
the gentle rumble of a
distant motorcycle

the red broom
next to a yellow door –
sunlit front yard

field of flowers –
I tread
carefully

bare log –
taking a seat I attract
a carpenter ant

small dirt pile –
I look closer and see
the tiny ants

lost keychain –
all I took from it
was a buddha medal

pale cherry blossoms –
as blue and orange
meet in twilight

the wide road
leading on
to dusk

OTHER POEMS

ADDING TO MUMON'S COMMENTARY

1.

If the truth looks like a stick
The dog will fetch it;
If the truth looks like a fire hydrant
The dog will piss on it

Because, happy or sad, the dog is
Blind to truth itself

2.

When rain drops fall into a river,
They become the river;
Their formlessness prevails

When a stick or leaf falls in though,
The river is their master

So what is Zen?

3.

If your fatal disease is
Limited to a finger,
How fortunate you are!
Remove
The poisoned limb
And be cured!

Take away the things that
Corrupt your thoughts
And you will see how healthy
The rest of you is

4.

Bodhidharma doesn't hide his face,
We are not our physical selves,
The real person cannot be represented;
The real person is always naked

And you cannot stare at him
And the picture won't return your gaze

Anyone who tries to hide themselves
By growing a beard
Will fail and look foolish

5.

Let the hanging man beckon for help;
If no aid comes, he can
Study the tree he'll die under

The real question however is
How did he get there?

6.

When Buddha
Twirled the flower
Did he
Subdue it?

And the spoken words too?
Are they just twirling?

Kasyapa knows,
And what the flower hides is
Like a smile as well

6.

When your desire is fulfilled
What is left to do?

You can continue to eat the same porridge
And keep washing the same bowl
Or just live like a beast
And eat natural things directly

7.

Are you the master of the tools you own
Or are you a slave to them?

Empty the seed and only
A shell remains;
The skull a prince would ponder,
Mute without a brain

Mastery overcomes itself; mastery
Ends in defeat

8.

If you look for yourself
Can you know where you are?
Unless you have a mirror
Where else can you find yourself?

By trying to fulfill what is
Already fulfilled
You will remain forever unfulfilled,
Buddhahood or not

Truth is the self-explanatory

9.

To see that you are alone,
To see that you are poor,
To see your own desire;
Three cups of wine

And the best because here
The celebration began!

10.

Ask someone with pride a riddle
And, if they can't answer,
You will disturb them

But how to tell the illusion of peace
From the real thing?

If the fly lands on a rock instead of an ox,
The rock won't twitch its ears

11.

How strange that anyone would
Try to free themselves
By searching for a master!

Should a spider build a web just to
Trap itself?

If you need to talk to someone isn't it
Easiest to talk to yourself?

Seek freedom by just being free

12.

What good is a beautiful kite if you need others
To confirm its beauty?

Will you sing harder for the deaf?
Or would you rather sing to enjoy the music?

13.

Two monks fighting over a cat
Are like two sandals worn on one's head,
Not doing their jobs,
Taken up with nonsense

14.

The realm of reincarnation,
The house of the gods,
The returning to the earth;
These too
Are dead things

If all you do is go from place to place
How can you get anywhere?

Where does the journey end?

If you can't answer that,
At least you've found the beginning

15.

You must really enjoy your slavery when you're
Content to serve without chains;
Have you ever really tried to escape?

16.

A name is just as empty as an answer,
The one who commands
Equal also to the one who obeys

If neither can respond differently
They are like two rocks
Beside each other in a river

17.

If you make him into a gold statue,
Your Buddha becomes a statue

Asking what anything is, well
How do you measure it?

18.

Has anyone ever doubted whether
The sky existed? No?

Maybe because it doesn't
Hide itself;
And maybe the way to know is
Also like being known

See what's there
Before the judgement

19.

Who do you get up for?
And should you?
What belief is greater than the
One that needs no more?

21.

If you see the Buddha as a question,
He will not even
Make a good fertilizer

Mix in some clean water,
Find a spot of good earth and a
Few seeds to plant

22.

What is greater than a symbol of
Wise authority?

When the authority means nothing
Then you are ready to teach

23.

What remains of a person when all their
Beliefs are suspended?
Where is the desire that drove
Them then?
Where is the innocent child who
Became a cynical adult?

Once you no longer look for secrets,
Nothing will be secret

But do not forsake the delusions that travelled
With you towards enlightenment;
They were your teachers,
They helped you along the way

Just be grateful

24.

What is the meaning of Spring?
It offers us no words,
Only the noise of its wild creatures
And the sweet odor of all
Its many flowers

The noise and the plenitude of life;
That is the thing itself

25.

As far as the earth is from the sun,
So too are the wise from the enlightened

But there is not one in the whole
Celestial host
Who can answer in words
What has no answer
In words

26.

A mat can be rolled with only one monk

The one who offers first
May truly desire to be of assistance

The one who gets up too though
Just wants to look helpful

27.

Many things have not been said, but they are
Much smaller than the one thing that cannot be said

28.

Every question is an hour in darkness
But will you need a teacher
To show you how tired you are of night?

Candles will only
Light the path at your feet;
They will not reveal the way in full

Burn all that you have written however
And maybe you'll see something

29.

Does the self create its choices
Or do these choices create the self?

Perhaps the things that we perceive are
The very being of perception?

30.

You answer the unanswerable by
Your not answering it

The enlightened one does not
Dwell in mystery,
So why would you look for
Them inside one?

31.

Anyone can show you the way
When the temple is very obvious;
But then why can't you see it for yourself?

32.

What would you do if, while
Besieging a castle,
Your battering ram failed to even
Dent its doors?

Would you return to your kingdom then
And not try to make war on others?

33.

The one who sits while the
World is turning
Does not turn with it,
Although they may appear to

If you still want a teacher
You're not ready to be one for yourself

34.

How many grains of sand
Does it take to make a glass of water?

The question makes no sense
Because one kind cannot
Be made from
Another element

Travelling a road is not the same
As hearing about it

Understanding here is walking

The going itself

35.

Fear is a cruel tyrant, but hope
Can be just as ruthless

Does the truth of who we are
Rest in our weakness
Or imagination?

If neither can prevail over the other,
Then strife is the reality

But Yin and Yang are eternal equals
And at the end of the path
Their love for each
Other will reveal itself

36.

How did you recognize him?
Who are you to be
Wise enough to know the difference?

If someone is still on the path
Then they have
Not reached its end;
So they cannot
Tell you everything and you
Thinking they can is
The problem

If you see a Zen Master,
Simply rub your tired eyes again

It's only a mirage

37.

We can shed ourselves of many illusions
But the least of these
Are the hardest to get rid of

What good is it to take great care with your horns
Only to end up getting your tail tangled?

38.

Did he have to go anywhere?
If all places are the same
And leaving is the same as staying
What “why” is left?

Why did the oak tree stay in the garden?

When the self-nature is complete
No “why” remains

39.

If someone roars like a tiger
They have not become like a tiger;
It is merely foolishness

When we imitate what we are not,
We fall off the way

And our getting lost, born
From not knowing and not asking

40.

Spilling the vase expresses its nature;
And a nudge can be more eloquent than words

41.

Where do waves go
After the sea has been dried up?

And will you drain the waters
To try and search for their depths?

If you ask for something
That doesn't exist,
You ask for nothing… except without
Understanding this

Look at your desires!
Are they
Really there?

42.

The one who lords over paradise
Will still not have peace
If they are bothered
By the serenity
Of others

What good is any sorcery
If you still can't
Command the seed of delusion?

And who are you to wish to plant such a thing?
Can you learn a secret from the false?

But the humble one!
They will awake
As soon as a delusion arises!

43.

Why carry something that causes
You to stumble?
Why burden yourself with an
Unnecessary weight?

If someone asks you what to call a staff,
Ask them what they call it

You'll get an answer they'll accept

44.

The thing within your grasp,
A delusion of desire

The thing you don't possess,
A delusion of emptiness

And words from the wise
Will bring on theft either way!

45.

You and I

The only reason the Buddhas
Do not serve us is
We do not
Accept them as
Our servants

46.

You will be stranded, clinging to your knowledge,
If you never climb down from it

47.

If you look for barriers, your nature
Is the barrier

The corpse cannot shut its eyes,
So shut them
And become alive again;
Then open your eyes
And be freed

48.

If a gesture tracing air is not enough
Then the desire will not be
Satisfied until some
Absurd story has been concocted

Both have the same
Beginning and ending though

Nowhere else but here

49.

If you criticize the critic
You emulate them

And if you are not reverent to all
Are you reverent to anything?

If Buddha said do not write or think
Why record or ponder this?

From a reading of the Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps translation

CONVERSATIONAL JUDO

Two people talking at a cocktail party
One of them lost a promotion
“You’re not really going to keep us in suspense?”
What would you reply?

Two lovers getting into an argument
One of them is suicidal
“When’s the last time you weren’t selfish?”
Which person is correct?

Two parents at a public playground
One child injured the other
“How about teaching them to take responsibility?”
Who can decide what’s fair?

Two monks meditating at a monastery
One of them wants to be master
“Do you have proof of your own realizations?”
When is it not like this?

EDO LULLABY

ruin this corpse. show me
your zen.
or gather me the flies
to be my disciples

between mountainous storm clouds,
veins of diamond sky

…

a chanter competing with
the wild songs of the animals,
pacing cut grass,
and no one is listening
and the music has
no name

pink cherry blossoms
swaying gently in their branches

…

how vast the clouds,
presently skulking off like chastened
school boys

the sun at its apex

though the wind cannot touch
the shadows hiding
in the groves of city trees,
though the
playful crows wheel, reckless
with delight

there’s a cave somewhere
supposedly
which a man sat in
for nine years

GOLDEN BUDDHA WITH DOG FACE

You have built yourself a wonderful statue of the Buddha
And everyone is very impressed with this

How much gold it has!
What fine things you place at its feet!

It is clear that you are most reverent towards your
Finely crafted and cared-for statue

But what if one day you woke up and found it
Transformed with a dog's face?

What would you do when confronted with this horrible miracle?
Would you hide your dog-faced Buddha in the basement?

Or would you see that the statue
Was always just another thing, dog-face or not?

Is your statue the love of the Buddha??
Or the love of something else?

JESTING ZEN

Why did the Zen master cross the road?
SO YOU COULD KILL HIM

How many Zen masters does it take to screw in a lightbulb?
HOW MANY LIGHT BULBS DOES IT TAKE?

Knock knock?
NO ONE'S THERE!
Who?
TRY KNOCKING AGAIN
As you say

There once was a man from Bodhgaya
WHO COULDN'T EVEN NAME THE SIX PERFECTIONS!

What do you get when you cross a pratyekabuddha and a bodhisattva?
A MAHA-YAWNA FOR SANSKRIT SYLLABLES

Take my life
FLEAS!

Your teacher's lineage is so engrossed in karmic delusions…
HOW ENGROSSED IN KARMIC DELUSIONS IS IT?
That when they meditate on the lower planes of existence, they meditate *ON* the lower planes of existence

A Zen master walks into a monastery
"Teach me everything you know about Zen," he says to the monks
"But aren't you that famous Zen master?" they ask
"I should be a most excellent student then, shouldn't I?"
HA! BUT WHERE'S MUMON'S COMMENTARY?

NONSENSE

huang-po s aid
mind is an illus ion

yes

ideas are t he barriers to thin gs

a gain, yes

we might st art to un derstand nature
once we realize
no one can pain t a tree

this and that
are brush strokes, but
together we
i magi ne them to
be
s om ething

the clouds we see in sh apes
though

are only c louds

and

your sac red words
just graffiti

that the non sense of
old me n

w ashes a way

SCATORI

The dung beetle is a monk studying Zen
And he is rolling up all of the enlightenment
Into a single sutra of pure shit

Backwards he scrambles pushing his prize,
Collecting some more when he passes a pile
Of three pounds of digested flax

No constipation is constipation –
If you want to escape the cycle of feces
You must utterly cleanse your own bowels

Those who do not reach Nirvana in this life
Will then be reborn as new beetle larvae,
Hatched to feed on the same old crap

SHI XIAO BECAME SURRENDER

As a novice monk he had learned many things

Later he learned one thing :
Surrender

When he first saw the temple it was rising from a mountain
He was climbing and its bells were all ringing
As fifty monks streamed inside

Their yellow robes like an eternal autumn

They did not let him enter immediately but he waited,
Impatiently but he waited as he prayed
And eventually they consented

He desired the truth and so he scrubbed the temple's floors for the truth,
He desired peace and so he cleaned piss pots for peace

Over many years he was drained of desire

Without truth, without peace, he meditated and came to realizations

The old man who hung the bird feeder,
The thieving squirrel,
One Dao

Kong Fu Zi, Lao Zi, Siddhartha, Bodhidharma,
And the toothless village idiot,
One Dao

The luminous and profound thought,
The dull thought,
One Dao

Now the temple had become one with the garbage heap
And the garbage heap with the temple

Because everything was the same
It was all contained
In surrender

He knew this now and so that night he left for the nearest gas station

He carried his purchase down out of the mountains;
He walked alone along the highway,
No longer a monk

At dawn he arrived and kneeled before the sea,
Dousing himself with his can of gasoline

Here he slowly breathed out before setting himself on fire :
Watching the water calmly
Until he died

SPOKEN ZEN

Zen is
the apocalypse in uneventful moments

Zen is the omnipresence identical to the Kingdom of God
: what Zen is defies your scrolls
and scriptures

transcending the constrictions of purely mortal reminiscence

: a panopticon for the original and genetic Om
Zen is the Dasein that descends into
the Sich, Ding an

Zen is that which the Ka'ba orbits and what
goes beyond kabbalah
Zen is all of the zealot hearts of every fallen Maccabee
and Zen is fear and trembling when the
veil of the temple is rending

Zen is kindly old monks immolating themselves
like torches and
sexualized Vedic goddesses
and corpses that are
gorgeous

above Zen there's nothing
: not even the nothingness that annihilates
or the secretly broken celibacy of
a mahatma or even
past apartheid pariah states

Zen is the long march through a war torn countryside
and the burning radioactive dust
: what it is
and always was is us

THE FOUR THINGS OF ZEN

I. Nothing Between

In the ocean
No waves appear there,
From the water
One island and another;
Separate volcanos
Feeding from the same earth,
Not a transmission
But a unity of being

II. The Shapes Themselves

Within these brush strokes
Where is the meaning?

The ink cannot know the poet's mind
Or the poet see the ink
As it is;
Meanwhile the paper is waiting
To be transformed,
Waiting
For another

Zen is not the artist
Or what they do;
Zen is what is forgotten

III. Absence of Absence

A bowl can be filled
With anything
And if you show someone the bowl
What will they see first?

So you empty the bowl
To show them the bowl itself
But still they look
At the obvious things,
At the material

The eye cannot see the function,
Only the mind can;
To see the function of the
Mind itself though,
Where is that organ?

And the bowl-ness will not show itself
If you take away the bowl

To touch on its depth,
You must empty the bowl and
Combine it
With being and unbeing

All that it is, the nature of all

IIII. Dust Wiped Away

Even the finest clothes
Soon turn to rags

Staring in the mirror
We may think they represent us
But they don't

We are both less and more
Than our naked selves

So don't look into the mirror,
Look at it

THIS IS A ZEN JOKE

Question…

How does a Zen Master paint?

Answer…

Just so, just so.

Mumon's Commentary…

Why is this funny? Because Zen explains nothing.

APHORISMS

ZEN APHORISMS

Plant some seeds. See what grows.

In desire, things collide
In acceptance, all is one

Patience is worthless respecting Zen. Why are you waiting for something to happen? Why not just accept things as they are? Stop waiting, start accepting.

Writing without expectations, your words flow
Living without expectations, your life flows

The goal of Zen is to cure yourself of the crutch of the teachings but, in order to do so, you have to use them to acquire an understanding of your ailment.

Remove expectations. By expecting something you create the artificial possibility of disappointment. Expecting nothing, no disappointment can arise.

If would be a mistake to confuse a stop sign with the conventional form of a stop sign. The conventional form is just a means to bring about an understanding. On this conventional level, a stop sign is an octagonal sheet of metal, painted in red with the word “stop” in white, held up by a post. But at the essential level, what is a pragmatic condition in this case, a stop sign is anything that serves as a sign to stop traffic. So too, understanding Zen means guarding against the conventional misapprehensions of confusing Zen with specific forms of practice.

I am a single blade of grass
You are a single blade of grass
It is as remarkable and
Unremarkable
As that

I’m not the reincarnation of anything. I’m just the reincarnation of myself.

Koan are knots to pause the weaving and give the mind temporary rest.

Zen is the order of un-superfluous nature. How a waterfall descends; how the wind carries things. Nothing more.

If you need to meditate on something then meditate on the infinite. This is just as good as meditating on nothing.

The finite cannot finitize the infinite. Only the infinite can finitize itself. The hateful cannot degrade the enlightened but the enlightened humble themselves.

The good teacher sows good seed, the bad teacher sows weeds. You will better yourself most though by being neither. Just open like a scattered pine cone and take root. The earth will give you what you need.

When you make a joke at another’s expense, ask yourself, “Did it make me happy?” And if not, is it still a joke? Do not hide your fear behind the mockery of others and never confuse hostility with friendship.

You can’t be born anew without completely letting go. If you want to be your own person, you have to sever the umbilical cord of your attachment to control.

Dying is part of the fun.

If you try to become water you will become like ice. Water doesn’t try.

Do you hate the flowers because they are weak? Do you hate the deluded because they are wrong? If not the former, why the latter?

Soreness is a sign of growth. What comes easy offers little improvement.

Sometimes we will have fortuitous accidents and we won’t even recognize them. Here the peel is kept but the fruit tossed. If you are attentive however, you can recognize these moments and profit from them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I enjoy coffee and tea equally. I don't meditate. I've written and self-published several books; most of them collections of poetry. Essays and fiction too though. And I think they're all pretty good. Also, while I've never gotten serious about it, I enjoy using my phone for photography. Zen as a subject has only recently begun to occupy me seriously but it's really changed things. It feels like the door I've been waiting at for years has finally opened.