

## THE TEACHINGS OF ROSHI

by Dawn DeCunha

S = STUDENT

R = ROSHI

Student: What exactly is Zen?

Roshi: Zen is that which makes you ask the question, because the answer is where the question arises. The answer is no other than the questioner himself.

Student: Do you mean that I am Zen itself?

Roshi: Exactly. When you ask what Zen is, you are asking who you are, what yourself is. It is for this reason that the Zen masters often tell you not to ask where the donkey is when you are sitting right on it, or not to seek for another head when yours has been sitting on your shoulders ever since you were born. It is the height of stupidity to ask what yourself is when it is this self that makes you ask the question.

Now you know what Zen is, for it is Zen that tells you what yourself is, and that self is Zen.

### COMMENTARY

Zen teaches that the intellect serves us well in practical ways when it really knows itself, that is, its own limitations. When a student asks a question that arises from the intellect, the master directs the questioner's mind to the point where the latter can meet the answer needed. This is why, so often, a Roshi's answer has no apparent or logical relation to the question.

Since time immemorial, the human mind has acquired the habit of thinking dichotomously. In fact, this is the nature of thinking. Without the opposition of subject and object, no thinking can take place. This thinking has given us power of a specific nature; however, it has made us forget the source of our creative potentialities, placing the intellectually dichotomized self over and above the true absolute self.

In Zen, this ultimate self is above all forms of dichotomy, it is neither inner nor outer, neither metaphysical nor psychological, neither objective nor subjective. For purposes of clarification, the term "self" can be designated "God" or "Being" or "Soul" or "Nothing" or "Anything."

Student: You've said an awful lot. I'm not used to thinking the way you talk. I don't think I follow what you're saying.

Roshi: You remind me of another Westerner I once received. Let me tell you what happened. As is customary, I served my guest tea, but when the cup was full, I kept pouring. He squirmed for awhile and typically, being unable to restrain himself, shouted at me: "It is

over full, no more will go in." Like the over full cup, you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?

Student: If one is supposed to be "empty," then why should one study Zen or anything else for that matter?

Roshi: Zen teaches you the importance of everyday living. Zen teaches you that the greatness of life is not in artificial things nor material comforts, but in ordinary life doing ordinary things in ordinary ways, and that it is a delusion to believe there is something special because we are humans and feel superior to other forms of life. And most important of all, Zen teaches you reality.

Student: Reality? And what is reality?

Roshi: Reality is life stripped of illusion. Since we depend on our five senses - see - feel - taste - smell and hear, we deny anything that we cannot see or feel, for example, and we cling to the illusions that we call life. If the swordsman understands reality, he becomes the perfect man without illusion.

Do not be like the monkey who was seen scooping up water from a pond as fast as he could and when asked as to what he was doing, replied, "I am scooping up the moon so that can hang it in my house and have light always." The poor monkey did not realize that he saw the reflection of the moon in the pond and not the real thing. It was illusion and not reality.

Student: You talk about illusion and reality. How can I tell the difference between the two?

Roshi: There is a custom here in Japan, that any wandering monk can remain in a Zen temple, provided he makes and wins an argument about Buddhism. If he is defeated, he has to move on.

In a temple in the northern part of Japan two brother monks were dwelling together. The elder one was learned, but the younger one was stupid and had but one eye.

A wandering monk came and asked for lodging, properly challenging them to a debate about the sublime teaching. The elder brother, tired that day from much studying, told the younger one to take his place. "Go and request the dialogue be in silence," he cautioned. So the young monk and the stranger went to the shrine and sat down.

Shortly afterwards the traveller rose and went in to the elder brother and said: "Your young brother is a wonderful fellow. He defeated me."

"Relate the dialogue to me," said the elder one.

"Well," explained the traveller, "First I held up one finger, representing Buddha, the

enlightened one. So he held up two fingers, signifying Buddha and his teaching. I held up three fingers, representing Buddha, his teaching and his followers, living the harmonious life. Then he shook his clenched fist in my face, indicating that all three came from one realization. Thus he won and so I have no right to remain here." With this, the traveller left.

"Where is that fellow?" asked the younger one, running into his elder brother.

"I understand you won the debate."

"Won nothing. I'm going to beat him up."

"Tell me the subject of the debate," asked the elder one.

"Why the minute he saw me he held up one finger, insulting me by insinuating that I have only one eye. Since he was a stranger I thought I would be polite to him, so I held up two fingers, congratulating him that he had two eyes. Then the impolite wretch held up three fingers, suggesting that between us we only have three eyes. So I got mad and started to punch him, but he ran out and that ended it!"

Student: Well in that case, how can the real truth be determined?

Roshi: Come with me for a walk through town and we shall see what we can discover about this mystery. They went into the market place and the Roshi asked a greengrocer: "Tell me, what time of prayer is it?" "The time for the morning prayer." They continued their walk. After some time he asked a tailor: "What prayer-time is it?" The tailor answered: "It is time of the midday prayer." After spending more time in conversation and companionship with the seeker the Roshi approached another man, this time a bookbinder. He asked him: "What time of prayer is it?" The man replied: "It is now the time of the afternoon prayer." The Roshi turned to his companion and said: "Do you want to continue the experiment, or are you now satisfied that virtually the same question can elicit almost totally different answers, all of them corresponding to the current truth."

Student: Good point! But tell me, what will I learn if I study the way of the Buddha?

Roshi: To learn the way of the Buddha is to learn about oneself. To learn about oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to realize that our sufferings are rooted in selfish grasping and in fears and terrors which spring from our ignorance of the true nature of life and death. In essence then, studying Zen does not bestow Buddhahood; it uncovers a Buddha-nature which has always existed.

Student: Buddha was an enlightened man right?

Roshi: Yes

Student: Well, if my Buddha-nature already exists within me, why don't I feel like I'm enlightened? What's the difference between him and me?

Roshi: Between a supremely perfected Buddha and us, who are ordinary, there is no difference as to substance. The "substance" can be likened to water. One of the salient characteristics of water is its conformability: When put into a round vessel it becomes round, when put into a square vessel it becomes square. We have this same adaptability, but as we live bound through ignorance of our true nature, we have forfeited this freedom. To pursue the metaphor, we can say that the mind of a Buddha is like water that is calm, deep and crystal clear, and upon which the "moon of truth" reflects fully and perfectly. The mind of the ordinary man, on the other hand, is like murky water, constantly being churned by the gales of delusive thought and no longer able to reflect the moon of truth. The moon nonetheless shines steadily upon the waves, but as the waters are roiled we are unable to see its reflection. Thus we lead lives that are frustrating and meaningless!

Student: So because of my ignorance of my own true nature, I lead a meaningless life. How do I find my true nature and lead a meaningful life?

Roshi: In order to illuminate our lives and personalities with the moon of truth, we need first to purify the water, to "calm the surging waves by halting the winds of discursive thought." In other words, "to empty the mind" of what one sutra (Kegon) calls the "conceptual thought of man." The Western world places a high value on abstract thought but Buddhism denounces this with the notion that discriminative thinking is the root of delusion. This is not to say that abstract thinking is not useful – it is when its nature and limitations are properly understood. Unfortunately, as long as human beings remain slaves to their intellect, fettered and controlled by it, they can well be called sick.

Student: I have given a lot of thought (or no thought ) to what you have said, yet I feel myself a prisoner of my ego. How can I escape this?

Roshi: Let us speak of mind first. Your mind can be compared to a mirror which reflects everything that appears before it. From the time you begin to think, to feel and to exert your will, shadows are cast upon your mind which distort its reflections. This condition we call delusion, which is the fundamental sickness of human beings. The most serious effect of this sickness is that it creates a sense of duality, in consequence of which you postulate "I" and "not I." The truth is that everything is one and this of course is not a numerical one. Falsely seeing oneself confronted by a world of separate existence, this is what creates antagonism, greed and, inevitably, suffering. The purpose of zazen (a form of meditation ) is to wipe away from the mind these shadows or defilements so that we can intimately experience our solidarity with all life. Love and compassion then naturally and spontaneously flow forth.

Student: The shadows and illusions that you speak of I think I understand. I think they are my

fears - and out of my fears I feel greed and envy and antagonism. My own craziness, I guess, but how can I undo so many years of socialization and conditioning?

Roshi: Did I ever tell you the story about the man that was so afraid of his own shadow and so disliked his own footsteps that he determined to run away from them. But the oftener he raised his feet, the more footsteps he made and though he ran very hard his shadow never left him. From this he inferred that he went too slowly and ran as hard as he could without resisting, the consequence being that his strength broke down and he died. He was not aware that by going to the shade he would have got rid of the shadow and that by keeping still he would have put an end to his footsteps. Fool that he was...

Student: Again you talk about shadows and emptiness and stillness and everything. Can't you be more specific or directive so that I understand clearly.

Roshi: There is a story of a boy who was given a pupae so that he might watch it hatch. Although warned not to help, the boy took pity on its struggles to free itself and broke the chrysalis open, only to find that the creature could not fly because its wings had not been strengthened by the ordeal of emerging.

Student: OK! OK! I get it. This is my experience, my journey. I realize that if I ask you to show me the moon, I can't get stuck on your finger pointing to the moon, otherwise I would delude myself into thinking that your finger was the moon.

Roshi: Excellent! But you seem not yourself today. What is troubling you?

Student: Well, I am rather frustrated. Yesterday, while meditating, I found myself getting angrier and angrier with the gong blasting away every half hour and the others chanting non-stop all day. I have a mean temper, how can I cure this?

Roshi: That's very strange. Let me see your temper.

Student: Well, I can't show it to you just now, just like that.

Roshi: When can you show it to me?

Student: It sort of arises unexpectedly.

Roshi: Then it must not be your own true nature. If it were, you could show it to me at any time. When you were born you did not have it and your parents did not give it to you. Think this over.

Student: Well I know what I'm supposed to do, I just can't do it - that's all.

Roshi: There is nothing you are supposed to do, nothing you are supposed to understand. You have only to grasp the fact that when it rains the ground gets wet, that when the sun shines the world becomes bright. Take understanding as understanding and nothing else.

If you think, "I must not understand" or "I must understand," you are adding another "head" to the one you already have. Why can't you accept things as they are without projecting your own values or judgements onto them?

Student: Nevertheless, Japan is a lovely place to visit, but I can't stay here forever. If I want to attain enlightenment, how long do I have to stay with you?

Roshi: Ten years at least.

Student: Ten years is a long time. What if I study twice as hard as all your other students?

Roshi: Twenty years.

Student: Twenty years!?! What if I practise and study day and night with all my effort?

Roshi: Thirty years.

Student: Why is it that each time I say I will work harder, you tell me that it will take longer?

Roshi: The answer is clear. When one eye is fixed on your destination, there is only one eye left with which to find the way.

Student: In other words you're saying that the sooner I stop thinking, or empty my mind as you put it, the sooner and faster I will learn.

Roshi: Yes. You see, it's like this. A wheel has thirty spokes; but its use depends on its centre of emptiness. Clay is made into vessels; but the use of a vessel is in its emptiness. A house has doors and windows; and their use lies in their emptiness. So it is that there is the use of what is and the use of what is not.

Student: That is a really beautiful way of perceiving things.

Roshi: You do not appear to have grasped the significance of this.

Student: Well I guess I am a little distracted. I'm annoyed again today. You see, yesterday I went into town to do some shopping and someone stole my wallet. It's not fair! People shouldn't steal other people's things!

Roshi: Should? Should not? Aside from material things being of no significant value, the most valuable things cannot be stolen.

Student: What do you mean?

Roshi: There was once a Zen master who lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut only to discover that there was

nothing in it to steal.

The Zen master returned and caught him: "You have come a long way to visit me," he said to the prowler, "and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.

The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. The master sat naked, watching the moon. "Poor fellow," he mused, "I wish I could have given him this beautiful moon."

Student: That is a very beautiful story, but having my wallet stolen still ruined my day. I can't help but harbour some resentment.

Roshi: Did I ever tell you the story about the two monks on a journey to another temple. A heavy rain was falling and the woods were very muddy. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the muddy stream. "Come on girl," said one monk at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the stream. The other monk did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he could no longer restrain himself. "We monks don't go near females," he told his friend, "especially not young and lovely ones, it is dangerous. Why did you do that?" "I left the girl there," replied his friend, "Are you still carrying her?"

Student: So what you are saying is that I should live in the present?

Roshi: Yes. Buddha taught this lesson in a parable. A man travelling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him. Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away at the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him and grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

Student: Delightful story, but quite frankly, I'd still like to get my hands on the guy that stole my wallet '.

Roshi: To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the highest skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the highest skill.

Student: Yes I know. But right now, revenge would sure be sweet.

Roshi: Very well then, but remember, in order to achieve victory you must place yourself in your opponent's skin. If you do not understand yourself, you will lose one hundred percent of the time. If you understand yourself, you will win 50% of the time. If you understand yourself and your opponent, you will win 100% of the time.

After much effort, concentration and time, the student returned to his Roshi, and wishing to impress him announced:

Student: The mind, Buddha, and sentient beings, after all, do not exist. The true nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realization, no delusion, no sage, no mediocrity. There is no giving and nothing to be received.

The Roshi sat quietly smoking his pipe and said nothing. Suddenly he whacked the student with his bamboo pipe which made the youth quite angry. "If nothing exists," inquired the Roshi, "where did this anger come from?"

Roshi: Remember, cleverness is only the show of wisdom and the beginning of stupidity. He who knows, does not speak. He who speaks, does not know.

Student: Roshi, I have studied here for many years and still I cannot solve my koan [a koan is a problem posed by the Roshi, which cannot be solved rationally]. I do not know the sound of one hand clapping. I have to return to my home now – humiliated and ashamed.

Roshi: Wait one more week and meditate constantly.

The student returned after one week of meditating on his koan.

Student: The sound of one hand is the sound of raindrops on the roof.

Roshi: Try for another week.

The student returned after another week of meditating on his koan.

Student: The sound of one hand is the music of geisha girls.

Roshi: Try again.

The student returned after still another week of meditating on his koan.

Student: It is the sound of the wind.

Roshi: Try again.

The student returned after another week of meditating on his koan.

Student: It is the song of the birds at dawn.

Roshi: Try for three days more and if you fail to attain enlightenment, you had better kill



yourself.

Finally, the student returned to the Roshi yet again.

Student: Roshi, I have thought unceasingly of nothing else. I could collect no more, so I reached the soundless sound.

Roshi: Excellent, in your exhaustion and desperation, you entered true meditation and transcended all sounds. The sound of one hand is much louder than the sound of two hands. The one-hand sound vibrates throughout the world.

Tomorrow I will announce your enlightenment.

Much impressed by the news, several of the student's peers went to talk to him. "Roshi says that you have reached enlightenment. Is this true," they asked him. "It is," he replied. "Well how do you feel?" they asked. "As miserable as ever," replied the enlightened one.

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