

The background of the cover is a photograph of a Buddhist shrine or museum. It features several statues: a large seated Buddha in the upper right, a standing Buddha in the center, and various other figures in different poses and colors (gold, green, blue). The lighting is warm and the scene is densely packed with religious art.

Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors

John Suler



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~ Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors ~



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Why Tell a Zen Story?

Once there was an old man who lived at the top of a very high and dangerous precipice. Every morning he would sit at the edge of the cliff and view the surrounding mountains and forest. One day, after he set himself down for his usual meditation, he noticed something shiny at the very bottom of the precipice. Now even though it was very far below him, the old man had keen eyes and could just barely make out what it was. It looked like a rather large, black chest with gold trimmings - just sitting there atop a rock. "Where did it come from? What could be inside it?" the old man thought to himself...

Nothing captures our attention like a good story.

Long before there was television, movies, radio, and even books, people told stories as a way to entertain and educate. Storytelling was as important to prehistoric cave-dwellers eating antelope around a fire as it is to corporate executives doing lunch. It's in our human blood. We love the development of plot and character, the climax, the resolution, the vicarious thrill of living and learning through tales of other's challenges, sufferings, and triumphs. All of literature and media is but an extension of the basic urge to tell a good story.

It's personal

The advantage of storytelling is that you do it in person - right there, right in front of people, so you get to see, hear, and feel their reactions. Unlike books and television, storytelling is much more interactive and personal. You don't do it alone, unless you're quite psychotic.... but that's another story.



Zen stories are fun, and "deep"

This book was created from the collection of stories, mostly Zen and Taoist tales. Why am I suggesting that you tell these stories to your neighbors? Is it because these are among the oldest stories in human history and have withstood the test of time? Is it because Zen and Taoism are ancient religions offering profound insights into human nature, the cosmos, and spirituality?

Maybe. Or maybe it's just because they are fun to tell. Without a doubt, these stories capture all sorts of truths about life and death. But they are also witty, entertaining, humorous, and at times puzzling, even mind-bending. And they are not just the secret lessons of monks sequestered away in mountain monasteries. The ancient teachers intended these stories to be used by everyone, everywhere. On the train to work, during dinner at a restaurant, leaning over the backyard fence as you talk to your neighbor - all of these situations and more lend themselves to these stories.

Handy tools

Once you read and learn a few of them, you will see opportunities to tell them popping up everywhere with your family, friends, and coworkers. Think of these tales as conversation pieces, as handy tools that you can lift out of your pocket to help you and others talk, think, and laugh about the wondrous and mysterious details of this thing we call Life.

To help you with your storytelling, I've done a little bit of background work for you. I've collected many people's reactions to these stories. These people include students from the psychology classes I teach, my friends and relatives, and cybersnobs who have visited this site. As you will see, people interpret each story in very different ways. That's what makes them so interesting. You may have heard some of these tales before and believe you know what they "mean." But if you read these people's reactions - or tell the stories to your neighbors and hear their reactions - I think you'll be amazed at how these tales strike a different chord in everyone.

The stories have many meanings. Talking about those meanings with your friends and family can be a truly educational experience.

Banishing a Ghost

The wife of a man became very sick. On her deathbed, she said to him, "I love you so much! I don't want to leave you, and I don't want you to betray me. Promise that you will not see any other women once I die, or I will come back to haunt you."

For several months after her death, the husband did avoid other women, but then he met someone and fell in love. On the night that they were engaged to be married, the ghost of his former wife appeared to him. She blamed him for not keeping the promise, and every night thereafter she returned to taunt him. The ghost would remind him of everything that transpired between him and his fiancée that day, even to the point of repeating, word for word, their conversations. It upset him so badly that he couldn't sleep at all.

Desperate, he sought the advice of a Zen master who lived near the village. "This is a very clever ghost," the master said upon hearing the man's story. "It is!" replied the man. "She remembers every detail of what I say and do. It knows everything!" The master smiled, "You should admire such a ghost, but I will tell you what to do the next time you see it."

That night the ghost returned. The man responded just as the master had advised. "You are such a wise ghost," the man said, "You know that I can hide nothing from you. If you can answer me one question, I will break off the engagement and remain single for the rest of my life." "Ask your question," the ghost replied. The man scooped up a handful of beans from a large bag on the floor, "Tell me exactly how many beans there are in my hand."

At that moment the ghost disappeared and never returned.



People's reactions to this story:

"Ghosts are just human and can't know or do anything that a human can't."

"No one knows everything. Not even a spirit. You can be wise in some ways, but not in all ways."

"The ghost kept coming back because the man was always impressed by how it seemed to know everything. It had power over him. But when he finally stood up to it, and challenged it, the ghost disappeared forever."

"The ghost is actually a part of the man. So it couldn't know anything that the man himself didn't know."

"The ghost comes from the man's own mind. He created it. It is his own guilt that came back to haunt him."

"The reason something haunts us is because we keep our attention on it. When we move on beyond it it will disappear."


"To me, this story just shows that souls have memories, but not enlightenment."

"I don't like the ending. I read the story with high expectations, but felt let down in the end."

"Why didn't the ghost know that the man had seen a Zen master?"

"If the wife really loved the husband, how could she subject him to such a promise?"

"Everything the ghost knew didn't amount to a handful of beans!"

 || Spider || Obsessed || Not Dead Yet ||

Bell Teacher

A new student approached the Zen master and asked how he should prepare himself for his training. "Think of me a bell," the master explained. "Give me a soft tap, and you will get a tiny ping. Strike hard, and you'll receive a loud, resounding peal."

People's reactions to this story:

""You get out of something what you put into it."

"The more you try, the more a good teacher will help."

"The more students needs a teacher, the more the good teacher will be there for them."

"Be careful what you ask for. The universe may just provide you with what you seek."

"You can think of the master as life. You get out what you put in. If you look for and are really open to beauty and happiness, they are everywhere. If you huddle miserably somewhere, it will all pass you by without you're even noticing."

"Sounds like the master is saying pay me a lot, and I will help you a lot; pay me little, and that's what I'll give you in return."

"Give and you shall receive."

"I think the teacher was warning the student that if he is struck he will strike back with equal force."

"All the student needs to know is within himself. The master will guide him to that knowledge by reflecting the thoughts, feelings, and questions that the student puts out to him."

"When I become a teacher, I'll use this story when a student questions my purpose or integrity."



Books



Once there was a well known philosopher and scholar who devoted himself to the study of Zen for many years. On the day that he finally attained enlightenment, he took all of his books out into the yard and burned them all.

People's reactions to this story:

"The most important things in life you can't learn through books. You have to learn them through experience."

"Life's most important lessons have to be learned for oneself, not from what other people have said."

"It's your own thoughts that are important. Everything else is indoctrination from others."

"Once you have gained a true understanding of something, the knowledge will be with you for the rest of your life. You'll never have to study it again."

"The reason that he burned the books was because he felt that he had learned all that he could possibly could from them and that it was time to move on and learn from life itself."

"One you attain a goal, you no longer need the methods that helped you get there."

"Did he burn the books because he realized their uselessness. Or did he burn them because he thought there was no more knowledge left in them to gain? I get the feeling that maybe he WASN'T very enlightened."

"I guess the scholar felt he was done with his studies, and didn't need his books anymore."

"All systems of knowledge (conceptual beliefs), including this one, limit perception."

"I don't know what enlightenment is, but I do know that you never stop learning and growing. Besides, what if the Zen master forgets something later on, and has to look it up?"

"Sounds like he wanted to rid himself of his former life."

"Nothing wrong with that. I'm sure the fire was pretty cool."

"This story stirs up mixed feelings in me about school. Will it all be worth it when I'm done? Sometimes I just feel like giving up."

"This reminds me of the Pearl of Great Price story from the Bible. A man sold everything he owned to buy this pearl, and did so joyfully."

"I guess once you attain perfect knowledge, you don't need to read anymore."

"Why burn the knowledge attained?! Knowledge must be saved for the future. A mind can only store away so much information."

"Learn it, know it LIVE it!" My drill instructor in basic training knew & taught this. I do recall that he felt the need to add a few extra embellishments to be sure we were paying attention :-)

"Maybe he realized with his enlightened mind that he was cold."

"I could never bring myself to burn a book! It's almost like burning the person who wrote it."

"Words, words, words..... They're not reality anyhow. They're just words."



|| Most Important Teaching || Elephant and Flea || Empty Your Cup ||

Christian Buddha



One of master Gasan's monks visited the university in Tokyo. When he returned, he asked the master if he had ever read the Christian Bible.

"No," Gasan replied, "Please read some of it to me."

The monk opened the Bible to the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew, and began reading. After reading Christ's words about the lilies in the field, he paused. Master Gasan was silent for a long time.

"Yes," he finally said, "Whoever uttered these words is an enlightened being. What you have read to me is the essence of everything I have been trying to teach you here!"

(In another version of this story, a Christian reads the Bible passage to Gasan.)

People's reactions to this story:

"It's so sad that wars are fought over differences in "religion," when in reality all the world's religions are saying the same essential things. If nations really took religion to heart, so many lives would be saved."

"If what is true for you is true, and what is true for me is true, than really nothing is true. If there are no absolutes in the universe higher than our own opinions or experiences, than we live on an ever shifting sand. True truth is true whether we know it, or believe it. It is absolute, unchanging, and independent of our reactions to it. God is God and we are not him. I believe this story is an attempt to dilute the hard division line that the Bible deliberately draws. Our culture tries to offer solutions that do not offend anyone. I wonder how Master Gasan would react to Christ's words "no one may come to the Father but by me." Or "the kingdom of heaven advances violently, and violent men lay hold of it."?

"I think this is saying that a great lesson can come out of one short story. Something that someone is searching for desperately can be revealed in one simple story."

"This story held no interest for me. I don't believe in the existence of God and therefore believe that the Bible is a bunch of bologna!"

"Universalism is an extremely faulty world view. All the worlds religions do not teach the same thing. Religion is not about being good to your fellow man, or doing nice things to other people. So many of these comments seem to think that because most religions teach that, in general, you should'nt kill people, and you should'nt steal, and that you should feed the poor, etc., that its all the same thing. That misses the point entirely, and trivializes a vast amount of the most deeply held beliefs of the world's populace. Religion is about what you are, or at least the part of you that is you and not just molecules combined together in unique ways. The most important question that religion tries to answer are "How should we act towards other people?" but "How should we act towards God?" How we act towards others is a by-product of our relationship to the Divine." "There is only One God!"

"Master Gasan found a pleasant verse. How would he have responded to less beautiful Revelations or Oholibah in Ezekial 23:10."

"Every religion has an awareness of the basic ethical principles that govern humanity. Anything else that a religion teaches is not about the human but about the divine."

"There is nothing even slightly Zen about this 'story.' It is an embarrassing, childish attempting to usurp the notion of Zen to endorse an unenlightened acceptance of Christian dogma without study, introspection, or question. Sad you published it. I admire both Christ and Buddah greatly, but this is catechism, rote dogma, not enlightenment."

"I think Gasan was so relieved that he finally got his point across to the monks!"

"This situation is similar to thinking about different races. People may look different on the outside, but when you look on the inside, everyone is basically the same."

"This story gives me a feeling of unity with everyone - I like that."

"This story is BORING! It begins nowhere and ends the same way. Shouldn't the essence of his teachings be understandable so we all can be enlightened as well? Master Gasan sounds like a fake or a very poor teacher"

"It sounds like Master Gasan has no idea of what he is talking about."

"Different people may be trying to convey the same message to others, but are going about it in different ways. I think that's good - diversity is good."

"We should always be learning. No one knows everything."

"Anyone can be a teacher."

"Gasan realizes that the monk's might become interested in what the Bible says, so he tries to act like he understands and believes in the Bible. He is trying to get the monks to respect him and think that these words and thoughts were also his."

"Cultural prejudices prevent us from seeing the Universals. It is irrational to think that a different truth applies to everyone."

"All races across the world are teaching the same ideas through religion, but one person's way of teaching may differ from another."

"I think the story is trying to say that we can ALL be right - or that sometimes a person needs to leave their usual surroundings in order to see and understand what's in front of their face."

"How could Master Gasan never have read the Bible? Maybe that's the point of the story - even a Zen master can be illiterate."

"I read this story twice and didn't like it. I felt like I needed more, but I wasn't sure what."

"This story seems choppy and unfinished."

"'Lillies of the field' is a rather zen story, encouraging naturalness acceptance of being."

"It is interesting that when presented with the Bible, the Master was open to listening. I don't find the same to be true when the situation is reversed, . It feels very comfortable to me to be Buddhist and still feel at peace with others who do not share my views."

"Maybe the point is that we don't need Bibles OR Zen teachers to find enlightenment. We already have it within ourselves."

"This comment is not about the story but about the other comments: Taken collectively, they illustrate Martin Luther's observation, 'A book is like a mirror -- if an ape looks in, no saint will look out!'"

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; They toil not, neither do they spin;
And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. - Luke 12:27

Chasing Two Rabbits



A martial arts student approached his teacher with a question. "I'd like to improve my knowledge of the martial arts. In addition to learning from you, I'd like to study with another teacher in order to learn another style. What do you think of this idea?"

"The hunter who chases two rabbits," answered the master, "catches neither one."

People's reactions to this story:

"To excel one has to focus all energy on the task at hand."

"I think that the Master could be mastered himself by the student. The more moves or strategies that the student knows will only make him stronger, wiser."

"Jack of all trades, master of none."

"Jack of two trades, Master of both".

"Stay focused on one thing, trying to get everything will get you nothing."

"Pretty straight forward... one should master/concentrate on one thing at a time... not as profound as some of your other stories, yet at least makes more sense than some others."

"If the rabbits are sitting close together you can get both with one shot gun blast."

"Reminds you not to take on more than you can handle. It brings to mind a candid camera segment I saw in the early 60's. A little grocery store put a big table outside heaped with oranges, and a sign that said 'FREE', but they purposely didn't leave anything to carry them in. The humor was in watching everyone try to take 3 or 4 more than they could humanly carry. I guess a good tie-in would be that if you get greedy, you might get nothing!"

"This story reminds me of the old Hindu reference to one mountain and the many roads going to the peak. Though they are all valid and effective, one cannot reach the top by trying to follow two at the same time."

"Anyone who puts much stock in this story should read the Tao of Jeet Kune Do by Bruce Lee. To look at zen, or martial arts, or anything in life as a chase, is to never find peace. I don't like this teacher, but the story has made me think."

"I interpret this as similar to Jesus' saying that you can't serve two masters without hating one and loving the other."

"I think the student cannot improve that which he has not yet mastered."

"First story I read. It made me laugh and feel a little better."

"The lesson is simple; Focus all of your faith and effort into one philosophy. The man who serves two masters, serves none."

"I don't think the master's statement applies for every situation. His statement can be true for some situations, when it is true that if you focus on one subject, goal, etc, you will have more probability in succeeding, but what about the saying that goes something like "1+1 is more than two". If you unite the knowledge or the insight from two masters you are more likely to have a better result than if you focus on one. Another advantage of having two opinions is that you have the possibility of discussing both opinions, which is a useful mental exercise, this way you can decide on your own which method or idea is better. It is always enlightening to discuss and argue different insights."

"Maybe most vegetarians have more than one teacher."

"If you learn from only one master, not only will you learn all his good traits, you will also learn all his flaws. going with two masters will give you the best of best of both worlds."

Cliffhanger

One day while walking through the wilderness a man stumbled upon a vicious tiger. He ran but soon came to the edge of a high cliff. Desperate to save himself, he climbed down a vine and dangled over the fatal precipice. As he hung there, two mice appeared from a hole in the cliff and began gnawing on the vine. Suddenly, he noticed on the vine a plump wild strawberry. He plucked it and popped it in his mouth. It was incredibly delicious!

(One reader claimed that Thomas Cleary once told him that the original ending of this story was quite different. According to Cleary, D.T. Suzuki changed the ending because he thought the original would not appeal to Westerners. The story was then picked up by others, such as Paul Reps. In the original version, the strawberry turns out to be, in fact, deadly poison)

People's reactions to this story:

"After having only 5 hours of sleep I understand now. 'Live life to the fullest!'"

"'Eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we die!' Not sure who to credit the quote, but it seems to apply."

"Live each moment to the full. The plight the man was in was no reason not to enjoy the wild strawberry."

"The man knew that he was about to die, and that there was nothing he could do about it. The strawberry was his last chance to enjoy life so instead of wasting his last moments in fear and frustration he took what little pleasure he could and made the best of it."

"Enlightenment can be found in distraction from distraction. The Universe is now! And strawberries are delicious."

"The most thought provoking story yet. We get so caught up with ourselves we assume the world around us changes. Why should the strawberry taste different?"



"I think most people take meaning of living in present as 'Don't worry about what next'. I think he was not living in present. He was living in past when he liked the fruit very much or future by thinking he may not get the fruit again. But the present was how to save his life."

"Aren't we all hanging from a fragile vine awaiting an inevitable plunge to doom while mice gnaw at our temporary safety? What else should we do but eat a strawberry?"

"This story puts me in mind of the band playing as the Titanic sank. There is something cloyingly 'live in the present moment' about it, BUT, on the other hand, why didn't the man throw the strawberry at the mice?"

"It's clear why the strawberry was delicious. I would think that mice would've been even more delicious at that point."

"The man should have taken those damn mice with him!"

"Perhaps if the man had thought to give the mice the strawberry then they would not know on the vine and he would live, but instead he was self absorbed and so he was destined to fall."

"The tiger is the past. The two mice are day and time which slowly kill us. And the cliff is the future. The strawberry is the present. Forget the past, not worry the future, and concentrate in the present moment. Only by that way can we live happily."

"I heard this story but it was a little different, not only did he face a lion but a bear jumped at his feet while two ground hogs nibbled at his branch just at the moment the branch would break he noticed a plump ripe strawberry - aah delicious. My view - no matter the memories of yesterday or the anticipation of tomorrow or even the events of the day remember to always enjoy the moment."

"Hmmm. The story 'Cliffhanger' is very similar to a Jain parable I read once. The parable was supposed to embody the Jainist view of the world. There was also a sword wielding demoness, the cliff was replaced by a pit full of snakes and the strawberry was a dollop of wild honey. the tiger represented old age, the demoness: illness and infirmity. The honey represented the fleeting pleasures of life."

"The vine represents the reality that we live in every day. The tigers are the fear, stress and lack of focus in our lives that interfere with our desire to achieve peace and that is represented by the field. We are forced by our fear out of the peace of our field into grasping to the vine that is reality. The mice are the thoughts of good and evil and the deeper nature of man that we try to ignore but constantly gnaw at our consciousness and effect our grip on reality. The strawberry is the true nature of the smaller things in life. The true value of these things is not truly appreciated until we are forced from our stagnant peace by our fears and confront ourselves, then we can truly appreciate what our reality has to offer us."

"People have a tendency to focus too much on the bad things that are happening, and don't take enough time to see that there is beauty right in front of them. If you grasp the beauty in a dark situation, you will be happy."

"Wonderful. I admire the man who is able to embrace the moment, and who, regardless of circumstance, realizes the moment is sweet. If one must die, said one ought to go with pleasure on the tongue. This is wisdom."

"Everything tastes sweeter when you know it is your last."

"Is this what it takes to appreciate wonderful?"

"Life is beautiful! It's a shame that we realize it just in very extreme situations."

"In the worst of adversity, it is always important to enjoy the little pleasures in life. Urgency of life, love, the heat of the soul, warm breath to keep the demons on their toes. Everything seems to go faster and become more important daily, whilst at the same time becoming harder to fathom. -- MORCHEEBA liner notes"

"Enjoy beauty while you can."

"What a story! Indeed, it points out that the essence of zen must be to live until you are dead!"

"Two possibilities: (1) even in the midst of tremendous adversity, a truly enlightened person knows how to Be Here Now; or (2) this guy was in a serious state of denial. These two possibilities seem to be polar opposites leading to the same result."

"IN THE MOMENT IN THE BODY HERE NOW - HOWEVER, I SPEND TO MUCH TIME OVER THERE - IF YOU FIND ME TELL ME WHERE I AM"

 || The Present Moment || Without Fear || Concentration ||

Concentration

After winning several archery contests, the young and rather boastful champion challenged a Zen master who was renowned for his skill as an archer. The young man demonstrated remarkable technical proficiency when he hit a distant bull's eye on his first try, and then split that arrow with his second shot.

"There," he said to the old man, "see if you can match that!"

Undisturbed, the master did not draw his bow, but rather motioned for the young archer to follow him up the mountain. Curious about the old fellow's intentions, the champion followed him high into the mountain until they reached a deep chasm spanned by a rather flimsy and shaky log. Calmly stepping out onto the middle of the unsteady and certainly perilous bridge, the old master picked a far away tree as a target, drew his bow, and fired a clean, direct hit.

"Now it is your turn," he said as he gracefully stepped back onto the safe ground.

Staring with terror into the seemingly bottomless and beckoning abyss, the young man could not force himself to step out onto the log, no less shoot at a target.

"You have much skill with your bow," the master said, sensing his challenger's predicament, "but you have little skill with the mind that lets loose the shot."

People's reactions to this story:

"Having a big ego gets you nowhere. Some people need to be taken down a peg or two. If you boast and brag, sooner or later someone is going to put you in your place."

"I like this story - it has some suspense to it."

"Physical skills are not enough. There also has to be a balance between mind and body. Your mind has to be open and curious."

"You can be highly skilled at something, but still not have a very creative mind."

"There's a big difference between talent and a disciplined mind. A disciplined mind is the most crucial element in mastering an art."

"It's just like my mother always used to tell me. 'EXPERIENCE is the real teacher.' We can learn a lot from our elders."

"The real talent is being able to apply your skills even in the most adverse situation- without fear, hesitation, or doubt."

"The mind can work with you, or against you."

"People who brag usually lack confidence and are insecure on the inside. Eventually, this results in their failing."

"Pride cometh before the FALL (pun intended)."

"The mind is the most powerful weapon."

"Learning is most powerful when your knowledge is tested under many different circumstances. The young archer was skilled under very specific conditions, but he was unable to apply that skill in an unfamiliar environment."

"The boy was a good archer but he seemed to be doing it only for the competition. The old man did it because he enjoyed it, not to prove anything. This gave him a sense of control."

"An interesting story about how fear can rule one's life."

"This is a great story to teach children who feel that they are stupid or can't do anything right."

"No matter how much you know, there is always more to learn. But also, everyone should be respected for whatever knowledge they have."

"The champion has good raw talent but he doesn't know how to use it properly. He's a show-off and will probably waste his talent. If he used his skill in a constructive way - like teaching archery, or for hunting for food or clothing - maybe someday he too will become wise."

"Just goes to show you - don't show off a talent until you've perfected it."

"If you're talented at something, at least be gracious about it. This kind of boasting person really turns me off. I love to see someone really skilled put them in their place!"



"What IS 'talent' anyway? Being good at one thing in one situation? Seems kind of narrow to me."

"The key is not that the champion was a braggart. He was better at archery than the master. However, everyone excels at something. The master at controlling his fear and the champion at shooting a bow. What makes the master wise is that he could put the champion at such a disadvantage by maximizing his own skills while minimizing the braggarts."

"The idea that came to me was to search for the lesson of the story. The old man in the environment he was in might have experienced defeat. By bringing the man to the area he did, he brought him to his area where he might make the odds more in his favor. The old man must have walked over the vast opening many times and gained confidence in his action. He might have even taken a few shots at the target. The younger man was removed from his comfortable area and put into the comfortable area of the old man. The lesson I learned was if a station confronts me, I'm better off trying to give myself the edge. Clint Eastwood..Josie Wales."

"Everyone is better when on solid ground. You're more assertive, more sure of yourself, etc. But when your stability is taken away, you are simply a child learning everything anew."

☞ || Without Fear || The Gift of Insults || Tea Combat ||



Destiny

During a momentous battle, a Japanese general decided to attack even though his army was greatly outnumbered. He was confident they would win, but his men were filled with doubt. On the way to the battle, they stopped at a religious shrine. After praying with the men, the general took out a coin and said, "I shall now toss this coin. If it is heads, we shall win. If tails, we shall lose. Destiny will now reveal itself."

He threw the coin into the air and all watched intently as it landed. It was heads. The soldiers were so overjoyed and filled with confidence that they vigorously attacked the enemy and were victorious. After the battle, a lieutenant remarked to the general, "No one can change destiny."

"Quite right," the general replied as he showed the lieutenant the coin, which had heads on both sides.

People's reactions to this story:

"You have to be optimistic and confident, otherwise you are doomed."

"If you believe in yourself, you can accomplish anything."

"If you believe that a higher power is on your side, you can accomplish anything."

There ain't nothing like the power of positive thinking. It's a power much greater than oneself."

"Keep the faith!"

"This is a good story for children. You have to TRY if you want to accomplish something. If you don't, you'll never know. To me, 'never to have known' is the worst destiny."

"You can change your destiny. If you aren't responsible for yourself, who will be?"

"I'd love to tell this story to my sister. She always has doubts about herself."

"Almost all of the problems I've encountered in my life were due to the fact that I had doubts about myself, or others."



"Often, when I have to make a difficult decision about something, I toss a coin. It does make me feel more confident about my actions.. Funny, though, that I sometimes keep tossing it until I get the answer I want."

"This story is about a charismatic leader manipulating the emotions of his followers to a beneficial effect. I wonder if Hitler flipped a coin."

"Reminds me of pulling the pedals off of a flower.... She loves me, she loves me not..."

"Talk about a self-fulfilling prophecy!"

"Well, the general won his battle, but he lied to his men in the process. I wonder if that's such a good idea."

"I'd be curious to know how the men would have reacted to finding out about the general's trick. Would they ever trust him again?"

"How many leaders are just tricking us into doing what we do?"

"One person's destiny is another's manipulation."

"I guess when someone surrenders himself to destiny, there's another person behind the scenes who has taken charge to make sure that destiny happens."

"If the soldiers' destiny was the trick of the general, then who is playing tricks with MY destiny?"

"Is there such a thing as destiny?.... I wonder."

 || Maybe || Going with the Flow || Working Very Hard ||

Dreaming



The great Taoist master Chuang Tzu once dreamt that he was a butterfly fluttering here and there. In the dream he had no awareness of his individuality as a person. He was only a butterfly. Suddenly, he awoke and found himself laying there, a person once again. But then he thought to himself, "Was I before a man who dreamt about being a butterfly, or am I now a butterfly who dreams about being a man?"

People's reactions to this story:

"I can identify with this story. Many times I have awakened from a dream and didn't know, for a moment, what was real and what was the dream."

"Dreams are weird. Are they trying to tell us something. If so, how are we to know what they mean?"

"You are who you perceive yourself to be."

"I've sometimes dreamed that I could fly. It's such a wonderful, free feeling. It seemed so real."

"This Zen master had an out-of-body experience, and now isn't sure about his identity."

"When you're a butterfly, there are no worries. You can flutter around without a care in the world. Perhaps this monk is wishing there were not so many responsibilities and barriers in his life."

"I think this Zen master wants some peace and quiet in his life. He wishes he were a normal person and not a Zen master with so many demands put on him by others."

"I think it's important for us to have dreams, but always remember that reality is much more important."

"Sounds like this guy conforms to what others think of him and allows them to govern his life."

"In my opinion, this is the kind of question asked by people who are struggling with their sense of individuality and self esteem."

"Only you know who you are - and sometimes it takes some soul-searching to find that identity."

"We should be content with who we are. If we try to be someone or something else, we will lose our sense of identity."

"I sometimes wonder whether we really exist as people, or whether we are only dreaming our lives. And if we are dreaming, when and how will we wake up?"

"It would be strange if our life were really part of someone else's dream. Our lives might seem long and tedious, but it would pass in the blink of an eye for that dreaming person."

"Are we really just living out someone else's dream or fantasy? I think that everyone at one time or another feels this kind of detachment from their lives."

"It's funny how we sometimes have to pinch ourselves to make sure we're really ourselves, to make sure we really exist. It's just like watching a movie, except in real life you don't follow a script."

"This reminds me of a philosophy course I once took. We discussed reality and how we know that we really exist. All I can remember from the course is 'I think therefore I am.'"

"Is this really reality? Or are we ALL dreaming this?"

"Thinking about this kind of thing for too long can drive you crazy."

"Blah, blah, blah. Philosophical babble..."

"I think this story has to do with being close to nature, and not forgetting that humans are as much a part of nature as a butterfly. Ultimately, we are all equal and should treat each other as equals."

"This story reminds me of Kafka's Metamorphosis. What would it be like if I woke up one morning and found that I had been completely transformed? Could I make a smooth transition into my new existence, or would I be really screwed up?"

"This story is a wake-up call for all those preoccupied with materialism and the mundane."

"I think that this Zen master is thinking too much. How can a butterfly dream?"

"This person is schizophrenic, and is having trouble distinguishing reality."

"Dumb! How can he not know whether he is a butterfly or not!?"

"Do butterflies really dream like humans, or is this monk just anthropomorphizing?"

"I can't think about this too long, because it will control my mind for the rest of the week."

"It's not important if what I perceive is a dream or if I'm someone else's reality or not. What matters is the principle of doing the right thing with the situations, real or not, I am confronted with."

"Why would a man want to be a butterfly, or a butterfly a man?"

"Reality is one's perception of reality, nothing more."

👉 || Banishing a Ghost || Knowing Fish || Spider ||



Egotism

The Prime Minister of the Tang Dynasty was a national hero for his success as both a statesman and military leader. But despite his fame, power, and wealth, he considered himself a humble and devout Buddhist. Often he visited his favorite Zen master to study under him, and they seemed to get along very well. The fact that he was prime minister apparently had no effect on their relationship, which seemed to be simply one of a revered master and respectful student.

One day, during his usual visit, the Prime Minister asked the master, "Your Reverence, what is egotism according to Buddhism?" The master's face turned red, and in a very condescending and insulting tone of voice, he shot back, "What kind of stupid question is that!?"

This unexpected response so shocked the Prime Minister that he became sullen and angry. The Zen master then smiled and said, "THIS, Your Excellency, is egotism."

People's reactions to this story:

"The best way to learn something is not by having it explained to you, but by EXPERIENCING it yourself, firsthand."

"Actions speak louder than words."

"It's interesting that the Zen master referred to his student as 'Your Excellency' just before he zaps him with the egotism comment. I wonder if he ever called the Prime Minister that before the Prime Minister asked the question about egotism."

"People need to put aside their petty titles in order to really relate to each other. Titles are very egotistical... But then, you also should never forget who you are."

"This story illustrates how enlightenment does not put the master above the student. They relate to each other as equals, including BOTH of them acting egotistical."



"Egotism is a large part of who we be, Without it I'm sure the daily obits would take up most of the paper. I think I was more frightened that a man in his position would ask such a question. Fictional I Hope!"

"I think the message of the story is that people already know the answer to most questions that they ask. Many questions are egotistical in themselves."

"Whenever we call someone else's question stupid, we are being egotistical. Questions are necessary."

"I hope the Prime Minister had a good sense of humor."

"Was the Zen master really insulted by the question, or was it just an act?"

"If the question got the Zen master angry, it must be because he thought the Prime Minister should know better. Maybe he really thought he was better than the Prime Minister. Or maybe the master felt inadequate because he thought he had taught the Prime Minister better. In either case, HE was the one being egotistical."

"People of status sometimes try to pretend that it's no big deal, but it is... to them."

 || Concentration || Self-Control || The Gift of Insults ||

Elephant and Flea

Roshi Kapleau agreed to educate a group of psychoanalysts about Zen. After being introduced to the group by the director of the analytic institute, the Roshi quietly sat down upon a cushion placed on the floor. A student entered, prostrated before the master, and then seated himself on another cushion a few feet away, facing his teacher.

"What is Zen?" the student asked. The Roshi produced a banana, peeled it, and started eating.

"Is that all? Can't you show me anything else?" the student said.

"Come closer, please," the master replied. The student moved in and the Roshi waved the remaining portion of the banana before the student's face. The student prostrated, and left.

A second student rose to address the audience. "Do you all understand?"

When there was no response, the student added, "You have just witnessed a first-rate demonstration of Zen. Are there any questions?"

After a long silence, someone spoke up. "Roshi, I am not satisfied with your demonstration. You have shown us something that I am not sure I understand. It must be possible to TELL us what Zen is."

"If you must insist on words," the Roshi replied, "then Zen is an elephant copulating with a flea."

People's reaction to this story:

"What an image this story brings to mind! I see that the infinite universe as large as that may be, is equally matched by the infinite microscopic world, joining the two in perfect harmony."



"On a first reading, the final line suggests that Zen is profane or absurd. Surely this cannot be what the Roshi intended to convey. Perhaps what the Roshi means is that putting Zen into words is profane or absurd."

"Some things are better learned through observation....Words only skew ones ability to establish an honest and personal opinion."

"Describe the colour red to a man who has been blind from birth. Zen is more than words, fitting it into the confinement of language is like an elephant trying to copulate with a flea. It just wouldn't fit."

"Zen is Zen and if you understood it you would not ask."

"He is saying in symbolism how futile it is to understand Zen if you believe you can learn it through words when the only way to truly understand is through actions and feelings. This story really makes you think."

"Maybe Its inconceivable!"

"To attempt to put Zen into words is as impossible as an elephant copulating with a Flea."

"On top of a flagpole a cow gives birth to a calf."

"My reaction to the story is that trying to explain Zen in words, or even with observations, is as impossible as an 'elephant copulation with a flea.' Also, to be able to explain meaning of Zen in words is an admission that one does not understand the meaning of Zen."

"This reminds me of the story of the Master who asked his student to comment on a skein of geese flying overhead. The student said they were flying South for winter - the Master beat him. The student then said they were coming from the North and the same happened. he tried again and again and each time the student's attempt at description was rewarded with a beating. The point being that the student could not describe what he saw only what his belief systems told him what the geese might be doing. Words are often not sufficient, observation and inner understanding may be the only path."

"The Roshi's imagery is spot on: Zen is impossible to explain in the talk, talk, talk of psychoanalysis."

"The Roshi was certainly in a state of transe when he ate the banana because of its taste. Then he wanted to share its smell, waving it to the student. But the student didn't used the right sense and expected an answer from his ears instead of his nose. Anyway the one that was enlightened in this story was certainly the flea...."

"This story is kind-of confusing, but I think it's saying that actions speak louder than words. If only people would stop and listen."

"What I'd like to know is, was the flea on top?"

Empty Your Cup



A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's full! No more will go in!" the professor blurted. "This is you," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup."

(in variations of this story, other people come to visit the master, such as a student)

People's reactions to this story:

"You cannot learn anything if you already feel that you know."

"Preconceived ideas and prejudices always prevent us from seeing the truth."

"You should open your mind before you open your mouth."

"Some people want to be taught everything in one sitting. It's not possible."

"The master is trying to tell him to ease back and relax. The professor is too anxious about the whole thing."

"This story proves to me that you have to unlearn before you can learn."

"We shouldn't get too wrapped up in one aspect of life. If we do, we close ourselves off to new experiences."

"Even though you may be full of knowledge, you should always be open to the fact that there is still more to learn."

"I bet the master did that just to shut the professor up!"

"If you want to learn, you have to shut up and LISTEN for a change."

"We should be open to the views of others, and accept them as their own. Treat each opinion individually, and don't just add it to your own."

"Sometimes another person has to catch you with your guard down in order to teach you something."

"The professor's understanding of Zen is too intellectualized. The master is trying to point him towards a more intuitive understanding . If you're too intellectualized about ANY subject, often you miss the boat."

"I would tell this story to anyone who believed something about me that was untrue."

"I think the master was trying to show him that when you can no longer take it is time to give - and you must sometimes give in order to receive."

"This professor probably doesn't really believe in Zen. His prejudices are preventing him from seeing clearly. This is what the master is trying to show him."

"Too much of anything is just too much!"

"I don't think the professor's reaction indicated that he had a closed mind. It was perfectly normal. Wouldn't you do the same if someone was spilling tea all over the place?"

Enlightened

One day the Master announced that a young monk had reached an advanced state of enlightenment. The news caused some stir. Some of the monks went to see the young monk. "We heard you are enlightened. Is that true?" they asked.

"It is," he replied.

"And how do you feel?"

"As miserable as ever," said the monk.

People's reactions to this story:

"The master was either lying or deceived, and the student was at the least lying to himself. As a wise man once said, 'Enlightened people take things lightly.'"

"To be enlightened doesn't mean to be lucky simultaneously. We all know why."

"Once achieving enlightenment the monk could see the state of the world and life with clarity. What he sees is not good. It is ironic that this wonderful achievement only brings him misery through the enlightened truth he now sees."

"It doesn't matter if your enlightened or not, you still have the same feelings as before. Only now things are much clearer. "

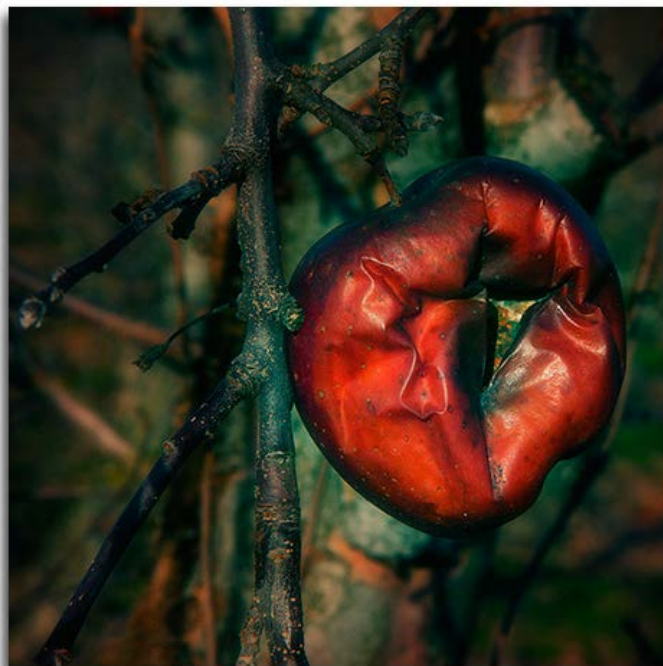
"Reality is reality whether you're enlightened or not."

"Knowledge is infinite. The more you learn, the more you will realize that you know nothing."

"Enlightenment changes nothing and everything. Nothing is solved! Enlightenment is not a goal but a state of being that has to be rediscovered on a continual basis."

"o.k. smile."

"The reason I believe this being to say "miserable as ever" is because now the others will be expecting him to be a certain being and act in certain ways. One cannot be free if there are always expectations of him."



"The more you know, the less you know."

"After 'enlightenment' the young monk finally understands the world, how it works, and all of its component parts. Now this feat is a large one, one that many do not achieve. The reason the monk is now more miserable is because he feels the situation that he now is 'enlightened' upon is a helpless one. Unfortunately the monk is pessimistic, and cannot foresee a solution for all of the problems that he has just begun to understand. Maybe the monk is not truly enlightened."

"the journey is more important than the destination."

"Enlightenment is a state of consciousness beyond emotions, positive or negative. An enlightened person would be totally accepting of his state of mind at each moment, however miserable that might be. Ultimately however true enlightened would in time lead to a wholly positive emotional state which would reflect and express the bliss of transcendence."

"If enlightenment is the state of seeing things as they truly are, then it isn't necessarily going to make you happy...."

"We have no valid way of predicting how we shall feel once enlightenment is attained - although we all have presumptions and curiosity. The reality may (probably will?) be wonderful yet different from our assumptions."

"When a person is enlightened, they discover that they still know so much less, than ever they did."

"For monks to become enlightened doesn't require to change feelings."

"I think that the young monk told his peers that he was as miserable as ever so that they would not envy him or his enlightenment. If they were to envy him then it would hinder their own development because in order to reach this higher consciousness one is supposed to have let go of any desires. To want this enlightenment so much would just add on another 'want'."

"Many people believe that with enlightenment comes peace, power and a sense of knowing, but with each stage of enlightenment we must still chop wood and carry water."

"I used to be different, now I'm the same..."

Full Awareness



After ten years of apprenticeship, Tenno achieved the rank of Zen teacher. One rainy day, he went to visit the famous master Nan-in. When he walked in, the master greeted him with a question, "Did you leave your wooden clogs and umbrella on the porch?"

"Yes," Tenno replied.

"Tell me," the master continued, "did you place your umbrella to the left of your shoes, or to the right?"

Tenno did not know the answer, and realized that he had not yet attained full awareness. So he became Nan-in's apprentice and studied under him for ten more years.

People's reactions to this story:

"Just goes to show you how little we pay attention to the things we do."

"This story makes me realize how much of my time is wasted by paying little attention to what I am doing at each moment. I'm either focused on the past or future and am not aware of what I'm doing."

"Do we remember EVERY detail of our day?! Is it possible to be aware at all times?"

"Full awareness includes even the most insignificant things?... Very odd."

"It's funny how people do things without realizing that they're doing them. I'm a cashier at a convenience store, and when I ask people what kind of sandwich they bought, they forget and have to look down to read the wrapper."

"Full awareness or great retention? Awareness should flow and not get caught up in what flows through it. Memory isn't attention. Doesn't it involve getting caught up in the flow?"

"How many experiences do we let slip by us in life? It's scary to think about."

"Sometimes we may think we know or are aware of everything, but someone else comes along to show us that we still have much to learn."

"No matter how much you know, there is always someone who can teach you more."

"Whenever you are absolutely sure you are doing something right, it turns out that you are going about it entirely the wrong way."

"This story is not inspiring! He's not aware of where he put his umbrella, so he lacks full awareness?! Maybe he was just focused on other things at the time!"

"I felt very frustrated and sorry for Tenno. He feels he has been wasting his time, so he has to study for another 10 years."

"I think it sucks that the poor dude has to study for another 10 years. Of course, these are dedicated people, so it's probably good for them."

"It's my opinion that an adult can never obtain full awareness, unless He or She is reared from parents with this developed state of mind. Maybe I'll give it a try after I get back from the shopping mall. Ha!"

"He really must have felt he was wrong in his forgetfulness if he was willing to lower himself and study for another ten years!"

"I think this story is a spoof of Zen practice. People take it too seriously."

The Gift of Insults



There once lived a great warrior. Though quite old, he still was able to defeat any challenger. His reputation extended far and wide throughout the land and many students gathered to study under him.

One day an infamous young warrior arrived at the village. He was determined to be the first man to defeat the great master. Along with his strength, he had an uncanny ability to spot and exploit any weakness in an opponent. He would wait for his opponent to make the first move, thus revealing a weakness, and then would strike with merciless force and lightning speed. No one had ever lasted with him in a match beyond the first move.

Much against the advice of his concerned students, the old master gladly accepted the young warrior's challenge. As the two squared off for battle, the young warrior began to hurl insults at the old master. He threw dirt and spit in his face. For hours he verbally assaulted him with every curse and insult known to mankind. But the old warrior merely stood there motionless and calm. Finally, the young warrior exhausted himself. Knowing he was defeated, he left feeling shamed.

Somewhat disappointed that he did not fight the insolent youth, the students gathered around the old master and questioned him. "How could you endure such an indignity? How did you drive him away?"

"If someone comes to give you a gift and you do not receive it," the master replied, "to whom does the gift belong?"

People's reactions to this story:

"The old warrior must have been thick-skinned!!!!!"

"I would hesitate (he who hesitates is lost) to call insults a gift, but this reminds me of child's saying, 'I'm made of rubber, you're made of glue, everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you.'"

"To win without violence is the greatest victory!"

"Reacting to insulting behavior only serves to give the insulting party EXACTLY what they want."

"Perhaps the master did accept the gift. The gift was victory. The master needed only stand there (and take it) to accept his gift."

"If you do not receive someone's gift of insults, you haven't been insulted." "The young whippersnapper obviously fell into his own trap. With the first insult he gave away victory to the old man by displaying his own weakness."

"It's not what happens to you that matters, it's what happens in you."

"This story reminds me of something I read in one of my aikido books. Two old, great masters were preparing to fight in a Kendo match, Japanese swordsmanship. When the match started, neither one moved from their fighting stance. In fact they both stayed exactly still for five minutes until the match was finally called a draw. If they made the first move it would reveal their weaknesses, and they would be defeated. Now that is awesome."

"An insult is like a glass of wine. It only affects you if you accept it."

"This story reminds me of the question, 'If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a noise?' The same question can be asked in this story, paraphrasing 'If an insult falls on deaf ears, who is insulted?'"

"The older warrior had no other choice but to not move and stand fast. He understood his own limitations and through his years of experience also knew his opponents strengths. He was once a young warrior too."

"If I may be so crude, I'd say that our 'infamous young warrior' got his ass kicked."

"This reminds me of my mother's words 'If you throw stones into a slushy puddle, it is bound to splash back on you!' We are Indians (from Asia) and boy do we have thousands of such zen stories!!!"

"This is one of the best illustrations of Zen stories because it illustrates a universal principle (read "truth"). The setting for the story is appropriate because its lesson is a two-edged sword: there is the obvious consequence of the elder warrior refusing to accept the younger warrior's "gifts," and also the more subtle but implicit idea that a gift cannot be accepted without quid pro quo. The old warrior also had gifts to bestow -- knowledge of his skill and his weakness. The younger man, because he focused only on weaknesses was blind to the older warrior's proffered "gift," and therefore refused it. So the elder retained his strengths while the younger went away empty-handed."

"It illustrates the universal truth that 'whatever you give is what you receive' or 'whatever goes around, comes around.'"

Going with the Flow



A Taoist story tells of an old man who accidentally fell into the river rapids leading to a high and dangerous waterfall. Onlookers feared for his life. Miraculously, he came out alive and unharmed downstream at the bottom of the falls. People asked him how he managed to survive.

"I accommodated myself to the water, not the water to me. Without thinking, I allowed myself to be shaped by it. Plunging into the swirl, I came out with the swirl. This is how I survived."

(Some versions describe Confucius as witnessing this event. Also, in some versions, the old man explains how he has been jumping into the waterfall like this since he was a small boy)

People's reactions to this story:

"You have to accommodate yourself to life and get used to dealing with your problems as they come. You must learn to cooperate."

"We must adapt to nature. Nature cannot change for us. If you try to fight the natural forces, they will overcome you. Because we are made primarily of water, it is easy to become a part of it."

"Because nature is so much more powerful than we are, we must become one with it in order to survive."

"Humans are not the almighty conquerors that they think they are. We can learn a lot from nature. Nature is wonderful and does not intend to harm. It is humans that are harmful."

"Sometimes we go through life wanting the world and other people to accommodate to us. When they don't, we get rigid and defensive, thereby getting us in trouble and making the situation a lot worse for ourselves."

"Have faith and serenity that everything will work out. When you try to control events, they backfire."

"Work with what life gives you and you will survive."

"Put your life into God's hands and you will be OK."

"Although you may not be able to control your destiny, you always have the ability to think and reason about your situation. This will help you come out on top."

"Too often people are strict in their ways of living. Stubborn people either are left behind or die out."

"You should take control of a situation before it takes control of you."

"Where there's a will there's a way."

"Sometimes even when you do the best you can to adapt to others and/or situations it doesn't help you. In fact, it could make things worse because you could lose your identity. Conformity is not always a good thing. Having an identity as an individual sometimes means going against the grain."

"Don't give in to fear during a dangerous situation. It is fear that destroys you."

"The water is like religion - we have to accommodate to it."

"It's interesting to see how the old man draws a parallel between the physical and spiritual world. You must be one with a crisis. If we accept obstacles or tragedies as universal events and don't attempt to conquer or repress them, then it will not be seen as an obstacle or a disaster, but simply as an experience."

"Miracles do happen. The old man must have been very strong-willed."

"I can imagine the old man's physical sensations when he was in the water - frightened and peaceful at the same time. I remember being two years old and overcome by large waves when swimming at the beach. Perhaps if I had accommodated myself to the water, I would not have been as frightened."

"The man knew he was going to survive and never gave into fear. Maybe that's the lesson - always maintain a positive attitude about life."

"Never lose your temper, remain calm, and take things in stride as they come. If you have faith, things will work out."

"This must have been a very dangerous situation, but then water symbolizes rebirth and cleansing, doesn't it?"

"Oh yeah, right! He was just lucky!"

"I don't know he could have done it 'without thinking."

"Sounds like the old man should be a character on a soap opera."

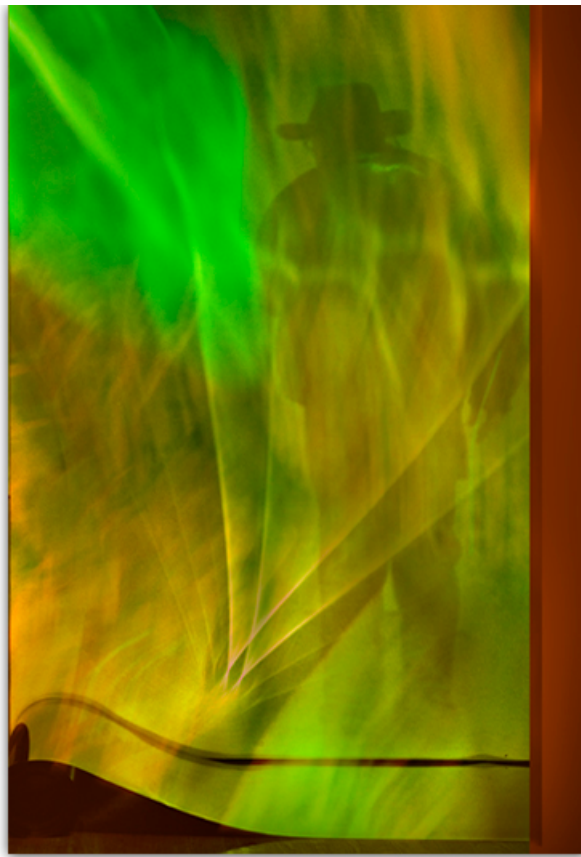
"This story doesn't apply to reality. Wake up!"

"Why didn't anyone who was watching help him out of the water?"

"This old man seems rather arrogant and narcissistic about himself."

"The story reminds me of people who tried to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel. They got arrested for that."

👉 || Maybe || Destiny || Present Moment ||





Gutei's Finger

Whenever anyone asked him about Zen, the great master Gutei would quietly raise one finger into the air. A boy in the village began to imitate this behavior. Whenever he heard people talking about Gutei's teachings, he would interrupt the discussion and raise his finger.

Gutei heard about the boy's mischief. When he saw him in the street, he seized him and cut off his finger. The boy cried and began to run off, but Gutei called out to him. When the boy turned to look, Gutei raised his finger into the air. At that moment the boy became enlightened.

People's reactions to this story:

"I don't get this at all."

"I guess Gutei doesn't believe that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

"I like this story, for some reason, but I don't know what it means."

"Gutei is just trying to dominate and control the kid."

"Whose finger did Gutei hold up at the end - the boy's or his own?"

"Did the boy become enlightened because of Gutei, or just because his finger got cut off."

"This story hurts!"

"Yuck!"

"Weird!"

"You can't imitate or own enlightenment."

"Imitation is no substitute for real knowledge and truth."

"When you lose the single most important thing that means enlightenment to you, maybe that's when you REALLY become enlightened."

"You don't know what you've got till it's gone."

"I don't entirely understand this story, but I do believe that the finger pointed in the air might represent "one", as in "not two"..

"In the end the boy realized Gutei uses his index finger, not his middle finger. Gutei took exception to the boy using his middle finger."

"I sense that this story does tell a great truth, but I just can't see it in the darkness inside my head. I guess if I were enlightened, I could."

"When you can no longer point at truth, maybe that's when you see it most clearly."

"Stories like this make me want to lash out. Gutei becomes the enlightener, when maybe he should just lighten up. Now we know the reason for lawyers, To sew crazy old self appointed wise men that carry pocket knives."

👉 || No More Questions || Just Two Words || Learning the Hard Way ||



Holy Man

Word spread across the countryside about the wise Holy Man who lived in a small house atop the mountain. A man from the village decided to make the long and difficult journey to visit him. When he arrived at the house, he saw an old servant inside who greeted him at the door.

"I would like to see the wise Holy Man," he said to the servant. The servant smiled and led him inside. As they walked through the house, the man from the village looked eagerly around the house, anticipating his encounter with the Holy Man. Before he knew it, he had been led to the back door and escorted outside. He stopped and turned to the servant, "But I want to see the Holy Man!"

"You already have," said the old man. "Everyone you may meet in life, even if they appear plain and insignificant... see each of them as a wise Holy Man. If you do this, then whatever problem you brought here today will be solved."

People's reactions to this story:

"This reminds me of Jesus. He was born a simple carpenter's son. It also reminded me of Martin Luther King believing that we are all human and worthy of respect."

"Anticipation of something may be greater than the thing itself.
Anticipation of looks is always a mistake."

"You can't judge a book by its cover."

"This is too obvious to be a story. You don't have to think about the point and make it yours. It just hits you on the head."

"We see ourselves in everyone we meet."

"The man in the story got lost looking for a deep solution to his problem, when all along the answer was right on the surface."

"A wise man learns more from a fool than the fool from the wise man."



"This is like the age-old story of Beauty and the Beast. Don't judge people until you get to know them. They may surprise you."

"Every step you take in life is significant. There are meanings to all and every event that takes place."

"Reminds me of when Luke Skywalker meets Yoda. I think many people go searching for things (love, happiness) and don't recognize them when they see them."

"Everyone you meet in life will know something about life that you may not."

"I don't like this story. It's a bit too much like the Little House on the Prairie for me. It makes me nauseous. Most people aren't wise. Anyone who says so is unrealistic."

"If you feel love and respect for all people that you meet, you will receive inward peace."

 || Searching for Buddha || Successor || Christian Buddha ||

I Don't Know

The emperor, who was a devout Buddhist, invited a great Zen master to the Palace in order to ask him questions about Buddhism. "What is the highest truth of the holy Buddhist doctrine?" the emperor inquired.

"Vast emptiness... and not a trace of holiness," the master replied.

"If there is no holiness," the emperor said, "then who or what are you?"

"I do not know," the master replied.

People's reactions to this story:

"We come from the void and will return to it. In between we are flashes of light. Sharing."

"Without God we are nothing."

"Every time our knowledge advances it discredits what we previously thought, we can be certain of nothing."

"When we believe the essence of self is knowable and definable, we limit selfhood to the confines of space and time, the matrix from which the ego is born. It is only when self is unknowable that it becomes identifiable with its true source in the infinite beyond human comprehension."

"Yeah, right on! I sometimes think that those are three of the best words that exist. If you don't know, don't be afraid to say it. And who knows everything about themselves, much less everything else?"

"Who or what are you?" That is a question I ask myself everyday. The funny thing is that I also come up with "I don't know" Does that mean I'm Buddhist ;-)

"The only true knowledge is knowing that we do not know."



"In Zen you don't have to be anyone or anything. You just have to "be" that's all and though it may seem simple just "being" is one of the hardest things in life. I think this story is about knowing yourself deeply, than, you don't need anything else."

"Vast emptiness, holiness, who are you," etc. are words of limitation. The emperor searches for 'answers' in the form of words. IT is beyond words and includes words. " I don't know" dwells there."

"Emptiness is form and form is emptiness. Ultimately we are nothing. We are nobody."

"This brief anecdote is enough to clear the mind, at least for a few moments. Such deep ambiguity, almost anti-dogma, may be all that the Zen master is trying to convey."

"I think that, while we are alive, it's early to know who or what we are. Perhaps after our death somebody could say what was our mission on Earth."

"Was the zen master Socrates incognito?"

"As long as you don't know something, you are free - free from your prejudices and fears. Then, you learn and you convince yourself that you do know; until, somehow, the world goes out of your hands - and you find yourself trembling in a corner, trying to discover again that you don't know a single thing about it. And there you are again."

"From a taoist perspective, I'd say that not a trace of holiness is accurate because then you don't feel on a lower level, you are with the Tao. As Lao-Tzu said, the Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao. The master recognizes that categorizing something or someone traps them, so it is better to be without labels. "

"The truth can be recognized only through intuitive understanding."

"One can not express the holly thrue in rational way of thinking. Intuition understanding of paradox is only way to know. The expression 'vast emptiness' means that nothing contains something."

"It doesn't matter whether he ever knew or not. He hides behind the idea of this. Good or Bad? He voices it like he still holds the answer to the riddle. He is as lost as we all are. He never has (hopefully) suggested that he has the answer because we all have to find it for ourselves."

"There are many ways to finish the master's statement. 'I don't know - and who cares?' is one.... 'I don't know -do you?' is another.... 'I don't know - and will never know' is still another. I tend to like the first one - but any of them can be used, any of them can be right, any can become a path to enlightenment. We are all prisoners of our own knowledge - our disengagement begins when we dare to say 'I don't know.' And the Things that guide our lives must remain eternally unknown."

Is that So?



A beautiful girl in the village was pregnant. Her angry parents demanded to know who was the father. At first resistant to confess, the anxious and embarrassed girl finally pointed to Hakuin, the Zen master whom everyone previously revered for living such a pure life. When the outraged parents confronted Hakuin with their daughter's accusation, he simply replied "Is that so?"

When the child was born, the parents brought it to the Hakuin, who now was viewed as a pariah by the whole village. They demanded that he take care of the child since it was his responsibility. "Is that so?" Hakuin said calmly as he accepted the child.

For many months he took very good care of the child until the daughter could no longer withstand the lie she had told. She confessed that the real father was a young man in the village whom she had tried to protect. The parents immediately went to Hakuin to see if he would return the baby. With profuse apologies they explained what had happened. "Is that so?" Hakuin said as he handed them the child.

People's reactions to this story:

People will act on their own convictions if there is no response.

Just because everyone "knows" something to be true does not mean that it is.

"We are free to tell the mountain that it is too high, the road that it winds too much and the ocean that it is too wet."

"The master taught the village that perception is a relative phenomenon and that reality simply is what it is despite how people label it."

"Public criticism is a means for those who do not know themselves well. But for well self-understanding people, it means nothing."

My tickling is piqued by the choosing of ZenMasterNames, yes. I bet "Iza tsohaw qu-een" is some kind of mystic chant that the author wanted readers to mutter over and over again as they read this koan.

"We all have responsibilities. sometimes other create them for us. We then have a choice to accept these responsibilities or fight them. The Zen master sees the greater good in accepting responsibilities that he did not ask for or plan on."

That girl is a lying slut.

Hakuin must have been aware of his perceived status in the community. He accepted his charge by a member of the community unencumbered. With compassion he completed the mission.

No matter. That child was as we all once were. The only difference is in being. Hakuin excepted anothers lie for truth as proof of his virtue of ethics and morality.

"To be in harmony with the world."

The monks calmness is admirable, but the idea that one should not speak the truth when confronted with a lie is potentially very harmful. Perhaps the monk did not recognize his reputation among the people or the impact it would have on them, because if the daughter never admitted to lying about who the childs true father was, she may have created a spirit of cynicism among the people. That even the most 'spiritual' types of people are not really so, but are simply putting on an act is what alot of people would have taken from this situation if the truth never arose. People shouldn't be dependent on the oppinions of others for their happiness, but they should also recognize the impact that their life will make on others and therefore not permit calumny to prevail.

is that so?

So what? So what if he was or wasn't the father. Details can not overshadow what is right or wrong. Everyone allowed themselves to be bothered by truly trivial details, and allowed these trivial details to act as ethical guiedelines for action.

questions lead to the truth. Have you ever heard the following in a conversation "Well why didn't you tell me?! 'Because you didn't ask.' "? It is the same here. Nobody asked Hakuin if he was the father, nobody asked if he would care for the child, and nobody asked for it back. We must learn to ask the right questions of the world around us, and to request, not demand all the time.

People saying something does not make it true...Knowing yourself is the most important thing.

No matter what your reputation is, no matter how much your virtue is praised, because it depends on the opinions of others, it does not reflect the Real You.

I like Richard Bach's Messiah's Handbook from "Illusions": Live, never to be ashamed, if what you do or say is published around the world. Even is what is published is not true.

Even a large stone cannot stop the river. Its resistance marks its demise.

Perhaps it is too obvious that "Is that so?" is both a passive challenge to the accusers and an invitation to look more deeply into the matter -- both of which were repeatedly declined. The Hakuin wisely declines to force the issue, accepting minor injustice while avoiding greater disharmony.

The master has achieved complete acceptance of every person, situation and emotion. He has no fear of being unjustly labeled. He receives the child and gives up the child with the same peace of mind. He is both a detached observer and a complete participant.

The Zen master taught that there is no difference between truth and lie, because all happenings in life will be experienced through the filter of our sense-organs. That is why he reacted equally to both, the accusation and the apology. Another example that children born out of wedlock are foisted onto others who must then pay for the bundle of joy. No mention is stated of the devastating effects of terminating a baby's initial bonding with a caretaker. I'll bet the monk never recieved a Father's Day card.

When I read this story for the first time I thought that the only words that Hakuin knew were "is that so?". I then thought that couldn't be right so I read it again. Now I just don't know what to think.

So what?

In asking the question "is that so?" perhaps the Zen master was trying to tip the people about truth. It is not subjective. It IS. He may not have believed their apology at the end as true as he did not believe their accusations as true. Their judgement of him was not relevant (to him.) The truth IS the truth and is what matters.

"You can't tell the whole story by reading the front page"

Truth is what you make it. In a Society Truth is what most of the people think it is -- or is it ?

"Truth? What is it?"

 || Maybe || The Gift of Insults || Egotism ||

It Will Pass

A student went to his meditation teacher and said, "My meditation is horrible! I feel so distracted, or my legs ache, or I'm constantly falling asleep. It's just horrible!"

"It will pass," the teacher said matter-of-factly.

A week later, the student came back to his teacher. "My meditation is wonderful! I feel so aware, so peaceful, so alive! It's just wonderful!"

"It will pass," the teacher replied matter-of-factly.

People's reactions to this story:

"It is true that the only constant in life is change."

"Everyones life including their spiritual life has its ups and downs but they pass. All one can hope for when the spiritual is in a down is to keep it where it is until one can progress further."

"The teacher knows that life has its own cycles. There are good days and bad days."

"This reminds me of Matthew 6:27 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life. "

"At times we feel bad and at times we feel good, that is life whether you are meditating or not."

"It seems this story is suggesting to not get caught up in the "good and bad" or any of the dualities of life because it is all temporary."

"How true of Meditation"

"i did have a reaction to this story ... by now it's passed"

"Life is not static, change occurs all the time"



"Time is mighty force that wipes everything out."

"Even the stone at the river's edge experiences inevitable change, the warmth from the sun, the coolness of the snow, the erosion of the water. Nothing remains constant and we must always be prepared to adapt to the current conditions. "

"Being alive (Life) has its ups and downs, good days and bad, rain and sun, illness and health, laughter and tears. Nothing bad will last forever. Nothing good will last forever either."

"Whatever it is that we're looking for - Truth, Enlightenment, Nirvana, the Kingdom of God, Wisdom, etc. - I think it goes far beyond just pleasure and pain. I read another Buddhist story awhile ago that went something like this: A student asked his Master how he could meditate without being distracted by heat or cold. The Master replied, "When it is hot, you burn to death. When it is cold, you freeze to death." Pleasure and pain are both important in their way, but they're about us, and our human sensations, not about Truth. Then again, they're probably a big part of the puzzle and I just don't know what I'm talking about..."

"Meditation isn't supposed to be about you and your feelings."

"The mind initially experiences various moods during meditation...during true meditation there exists only bliss."

"In the language of the Buddha (Pali): 'Anicca, anicca, anicca.' 'Change, change, change.' At every moment there is change, there is nothing permanent, there is Nothing to hold onto. No wonder in Zen that awareness is so key! Who knows what change will bring?"

"Ecstasy will become ordinary and the ordinary will become extraordinary."

"Everything is transitory! Depression and jubilation are the hills and valleys along our path - one inevitably follows another. The only constant in life is change."

"This story demonstrates the impermanence of ALL things. Do not become attached to your bad feelings or to your good feelings for that matter. They are both equal in the fact they will both come to an end. Just experience things."

"Do not think, Do not not think, Do not!"

"I believe that if you think of something too much (how the meditation feels), you are changing the intent of the meditation, and it will no longer be natural."

"The zen master was trying to tell the student that meditation isn't about good or bad. It's not about emotion. It's about clarity"

"The eternal motion of Yin/Yang! Polarities seek their opposites. A hot cup of coffee becomes cold if left to itself and a cold glass of water becomes warm. There are fools who think that since they are going through a good or bad phase in life that it'll stay that way! Everything that a person studies about the life can be summed up in three words, "Life goes on." It will pass!"

"Life is a process, not a conclusion."

"Your road through life may be filled with an assortment of ruts and rocks, but it also has pleasant stretches of pavement. If you are currently in a rut, don't worry and be strong, it will pass', if you're riding the pavement, however, beware it too will pass."

"Everything passes. Buddha-Siddhartha is a river. (H.Hesse). The river is the true point of Buddhism.


"The only way to have a true understanding of the way we feel is to have an understanding that our emotional responses occur in a bigger picture. If we don't look at the big picture we let our momentary successes and failures seesaw our emotional states up and down...."

"Being is."

"It is trying to say that the mind wanders. You lose commitment to things and every other day, something more interesting captures your mind."

"Always a good thing to remember. Nothing is permanent. Enjoy."

"My reaction: Time heals all. If you can't concentrate it's because you're worried about something and not happy with yourself. Keep Smiling"

 || Maybe || Going with the Flow || Is That So? ||

Just Two Words

There once was a monastery that was very strict. Following a vow of silence, no one was allowed to speak at all. But there was one exception to this rule. Every ten years, the monks were permitted to speak just two words. After spending his first ten years at the monastery, one monk went to the head monk. "It has been ten years," said the head monk. "What are the two words you would like to speak?"

"Bed... hard..." said the monk.

"I see," replied the head monk.

Ten years later, the monk returned to the head monk's office. "It has been ten more years," said the head monk. "What are the two words you would like to speak?"

"Food... stinks..." said the monk.

"I see," replied the head monk.

Yet another ten years passed and the monk once again met with the head monk who asked, "What are your two words now, after these ten years?"

"I... quit!" said the monk.

"Well, I can see why," replied the head monk. "All you ever do is complain."

(This story is a favorite in many western monasteries. It may or may not be an original Zen tale. Like any good anecdote, it makes us laugh, but also encourages us to think about why it is funny .)

People's reactions to this story:

If all you ever do is complain you can't expect to cross the finish line, you'll convince yourself otherwise first.

"I heard this story, originally, from my father who heard it from a Franciscan Abbot. The chuckle it evokes is welcome, of course, but it does beg the question - Why was the monk there in the first place if he refused to let go of physical, mundane and certainly egocentric concerns and not search for universal truth?"

"stop...complaining."

"I believe that we have the choice to either focus on the positive aspects of our lives or dwell of the negatives. He obviously chose the negatives and therefore was not accomplishing much - he was basically wasting his time with negative preoccupations."

"Ha! Ha!"

"The thing that makes it humorous and enjoyable is not the fact that the monk should not have been there in the first place, it's that he stayed thirty years before he left. This makes us realise that if we were in that situation then we would have simply walked out and not have waited another ten years!"

"When eating, eat; when sitting, sit. These are not complaints. They are the moment. It would seem the head monk has no awareness...and talks too much!"

"Enough's enough."

"The head monk is shallow. The monk was enlightened."

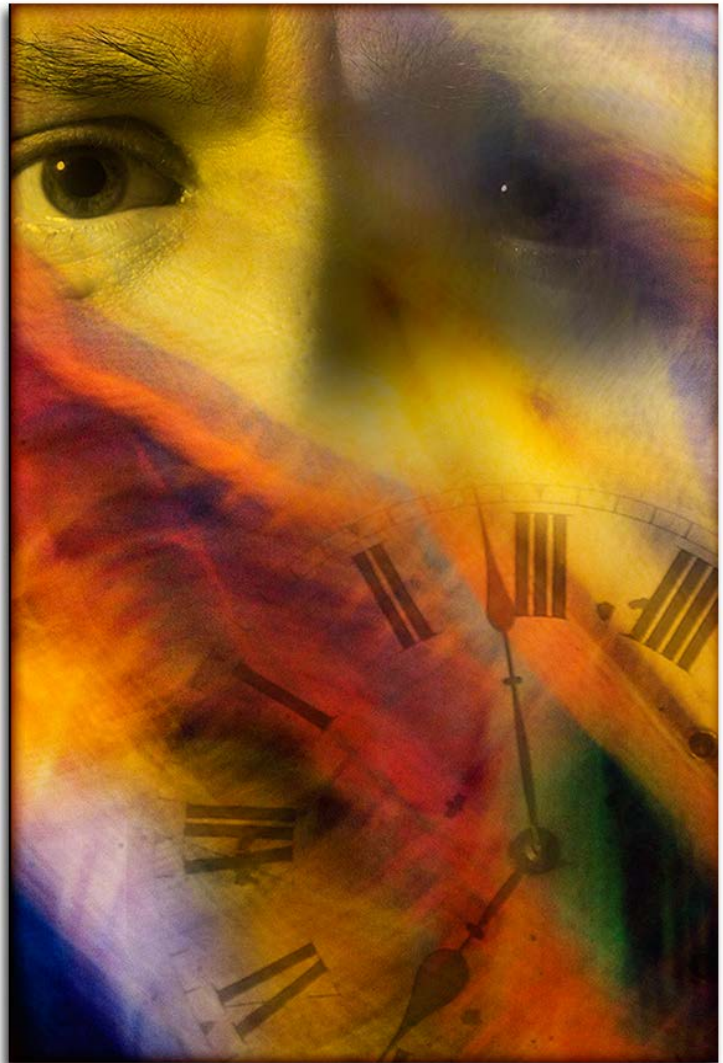
"The punchline of this story is certainly very Western. But if you look deeper, it deals with the basis of self deprivation. After thirty years the younger monk had learnt nothing. The head monk was understandably disappointed. And it was about time the younger one left."

"Although he spoke only six words in thirty years, the monk did nothing but complain the whole time - in his head. That's why he had nothing better to say when he had the chance."

"Although the monk only said two words every 10 years, he constantly thought of unimportant things, instead of focusing on what he was being silent for."

"It's just funny.....period. Quit analyzing and enjoy a moment you people!"

"Thank You"



Knowing Fish



One day Chuang Tzu and a friend were walking by a river. "Look at the fish swimming about," said Chuang Tzu, "They are really enjoying themselves."

"You are not a fish," replied the friend, "So you can't truly know that they are enjoying themselves."

"You are not me," said Chuang Tzu. "So how do you know that I do not know that the fish are enjoying themselves?"

(A western version of this story describes two philosophers on a walk while discussing phenomenology. One of them kicks a dog and says, "See! This dog is experiencing pain".... etc.)

People's reactions to this story:

Does any of us really know anyone else's true-self or soul?

You never say no to know because the truth can't be false.

Only THE fish knows the fishes heart...and even then it does not Know.

"I'm just assuming that, being of my kind, you're not any closer to a fish than I am."

"The fish in this story doesn't actually exist because, according to our spiritual leader Aristotle, all fish in this world are only imperfect copies of a sublime fish in a different world."

"This reminds me of some time spent in Scotland learning to fly fish. The secret to catching fish is to think like a fish. Disembodiment is the answer and the Tao of being the fish."

"does a fish have buddha nature?"

"I read an article in a fly-fishing magazine where the author (a zen philosopher name Lefty Kreh, I believe) said that you catch the fish by setting the hook just *before* you feel the strike. It took about four years of active contemplation at a local trout stream before I understand what he meant well enough to do this with any consistency. Perhaps Chuang Tzu had spent more time at the trout stream than his friend."

"The story is about the fundamental problem that has been treated by all big religions and philosophers. It is the question of the relationship between subject and object. Logically we will not be able to tackle this "everlasting" problem, but maybe there other ways."

"To think like a fish, you have to drink like a fish"

"If these guys were enlightened, wouldn't they just enjoy the fish without trying to figure out what the fish, or each other, are thinking? Would these guys be thinking at all? Come to think of it, if I'm enlightened, why am I thinking about this? And if I'm a fish, who is wondering if I'm enjoying this experience? Myself? Can I stand on the bank and watch myself as if I'm a fish?"

"Read Lord Alexander's 'The remarkable Journey of Prince Jen'! This story and the butterfly dream shows up there and the whole book is about enlightenment!"

"We each have our own individual perceptions of reality."

"Chuang Tzu is not his friend, how can he know that his friend does not know? But I am not Chuang Tzu, how do I know that Chuang Tzu does not know that his friend does not know?"

Learning the Hard Way



The son of a master thief asked his father to teach him the secrets of the trade. The old thief agreed and that night took his son to burglarize a large house. While the family was asleep, he silently led his young apprentice into a room that contained a clothes closet. The father told his son to go into the closet to pick out some clothes. When he did, his father quickly shut the door and locked him in. Then he went back outside, knocked loudly on the front door, thereby waking the family, and quickly slipped away before anyone saw him.

Hours later, his son returned home, bedraggled and exhausted. "Father," he cried angrily, "Why did you lock me in that closet? If I hadn't been made desperate by my fear of getting caught, I never would have escaped. It took all my ingenuity to get out!"

The old thief smiled. "Son, you have had your first lesson in the art of burglary."

People's reactions to this story:

"This is the sink-or-swim method of teaching someone. In the face of fear, people do things they never thought possible. People are a lot stronger than they give themselves credit for."

"A challenge brings out the most in a man."

"Your mind works best and fastest when you have your back to the wall. It's the old fight-or-flight response. It's basic instinct."

"This is how I learned to speak English. As a five year old, I found myself in a class where everyone spoke English except me. Had I just tried to learn English on my own, I would never have learned as fast. This is why foreign language courses in this country are unsuccessful."

"The best way to respect and appreciate what one has accomplished is by learning it the hard way and doing it on one's own."

"There is, of course, no better way to teach than to force one to teach oneself."

"When we learn from a master, we learn by imitation. When we learn on our own, we REALLY learn."

"In some lifestyles a man has to stand on his own. Even his own father may not be there to help him."

"When my cousin was learning to skate, she first practiced falling down so she would know how to do it and what it felt like BEFORE it happened for real."

"Just like everything else in life, the only way to really understand the situation is to be in it. Experience is the best teacher."

"I agree that the 'best' way to learn is sometimes by experience. But NOT ALWAYS. I know that I have changed greatly by watching other people suffer."

"To be a thief, or for that matter in almost any profession, you have to be ready for the unexpected and always on-guard."

"To do something at its best, you have to be able to accomplish it against all odds."

"A lesson about survival is always valuable."

"In the future, this boy will either be confident about escaping, or hesitant that he may not be that lucky again."

"The father taught him about his deepest fears. When a person lives through their worst fear, it doesn't frighten them as much anymore."

"His father put his son into a worst case scenario in which he would either break down and never want to burglarize a house again, or feel confident that burglary was the career for him."

"I dislike the fact that this story is about burglary. It's a crime and shouldn't be romanticized."

"This is not the kind of thing a father should be teaching a son. I would think twice about entering a life of crime."

"At first I thought the father was trying to dissuade the son from following in his footsteps by wanting him to get caught and face the consequences."

"He locked the son in to make him think about whether he really wanted to learn the secrets of the trade."

"I don't see any strong family bonds here!"

"What would have happened had the son been caught? The father should want more for his son than a life in prison. He should be teaching his son why this is the wrong way to live!"

"I see a very selfish man, raising the next generation of fool. He is neither a teacher or Father."

☞ || Wanting God || Gutei's Finger || Practice Makes Perfect ||



Masterpiece

A master calligrapher was writing some characters onto a piece of paper. One of his especially perceptive students was watching him. When the calligrapher was finished, he asked for the student's opinion - who immediately told him that it wasn't any good. The master tried again, but the student criticized the work again.

Over and over, the calligrapher carefully redrew the same characters, and each time the student rejected it. Finally, when the student had turned his attention away to something else and wasn't watching, the master seized the opportunity to quickly dash off the characters. "There! How's that?," he asked the student. The student turned to look. "THAT.... is a masterpiece!" he exclaimed.

(Legend states this is the story behind master Kosen's creation of an ink template that was used to create the wood carving "The First Principle" that appears over the gate of Obaku Temple in Kyoto)

People's reactions to this story:

"It's not how perfect you do something that's important, but how others perceive it."

"It's reminds me of trying hard to accomplish something, and failing. If you just do your best, then that's the masterpiece."

"Spontaneity is beautiful, not carefully planned out and conforming work."

"Trying hard at something can lead to poor results. Let it come naturally."

"We get habituated to everyday life. When we see something all the time, we take it for granted. When we see something new, for the first time, we appreciate it."

"Originality is what makes each of us a masterpiece. Don't stick to the same old way of doing things."



"Stop thinking and just do what's natural for you, instead of what's expected. Some of our best work is done when we least expect it."

"You can't perform perfectly under the watch of critical eyes. When you don't force perfection, it happens by itself, spontaneously. Great things happen when you least suspect it."

"Whenever you watch over someone you make them self-conscious and uncreative. It's like trying to teach a child. If you let them alone they will usually figure it out themselves and it will be great."

"Teachers always criticize students' work even though they revise it many times. It's a hassle. You wonder if it is ever good enough. Students sometimes feel that they'd like to switch places with the professor, so the professor can feel what it's like to be criticized over and over."

"I have to wonder why was the master so concerned with the student's opinion in the first place? Anyway, I think that when you become an expert at something, you pay less attention to it than someone who is new to it and who therefore has something valuable to offer."

"Sounds like the master is the student and the student is the master."

"People tend to be too critical. If they do not see the effort that goes into a project and just the finished work, then they can appreciate it."

"You can't see a masterpiece as it's being created stroke by stroke. You have to see it whole. It's like not being able to see the forest from the trees."

 || Working Very Hard || True Self || Nature's Beauty ||

Maybe

There is a Taoist story of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically. "May be," the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed. "May be," replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "May be," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "May be," said the farmer.

People's reactions to this story:

"You can't fight fate!"

"It's comforting to know that good can come from bad circumstances, but not so nice to face the fact that bad can come from good times. Yet, is there good and bad at all?"

"I guess there is no 'good' or 'bad.' Everything that happens to us is a mixture of good and bad. You have to just take things as they are."

"Everything happens for a reason, and worrying about what has or will happen has no effect. So don't worry, be happy!"

"Never judge a situation - wait for the outcome."

"God controls our lives. We may not understand his purpose, so just accept what happens."

"Nothing - I mean NOTHING occurs by accident!"

"Don't count your chickens before they hatch!"

"I think the farmer didn't want to jinx himself by agreeing with his neighbors."



"If you try to predict the future, you may be wasting your time. I wonder, then, how worthwhile is it to plan for the future?"

"This farmer apparently doesn't believe in free will. When he always replies 'maybe' he must feel that no matter what he says or does it will not make a difference in the path his life takes."

"I think there's a fine line between optimism and pessimism, the farmer is standing on it."

"We don't know what will happen in life. Man is narrow-minded and naive, yet he claims to know it all. No one knows where fate will bring us but people who have faith in God will have everything set right."

"Although the story may provide relief to people who believe that a superior being is looking out for us, it in effect tells us to accept our situation without trying to change it. I'm not sure I agree with that."

"Que sera, sera. Life is a mystery. Don't take it for granted. Accept it, and try to enjoy the ride."

"I wish I could be as relaxed and peaceful as this farmer. My mother always told me that I shouldn't worry about things that I can't change."

"This farmer has mastered the art of letting go and letting life take its course. But he also seems to be a bit unfeeling. I don't think that has to be sacrificed for serenity."

"I don't think this farmer realized how lucky he was that his son didn't have to go off to war. A broken leg is always better than getting killed!"

"This farmer sure is a man of few words!"

"If you take life just as it comes, one day at time, eventually you will see the Big Purpose to it all."

"This story reminds me of the Book of Job in the Old Testament."

"Life isn't a matter of good or bad luck. It's about what you do with what happens to you - where and how you take it."

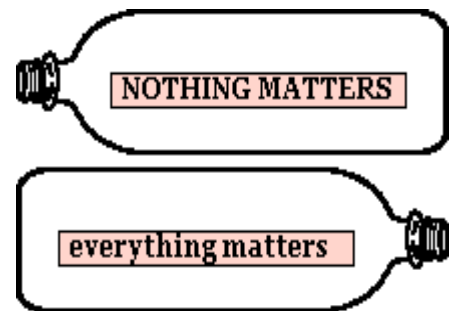
"I don't like the fact that there isn't a lot of information about the farmer in this story. The neighbors don't seem to understand how he feels about life. I guess the message is that if you think positive about events in your life, they will turn out OK."

"This farmer sounds rather confused - maybe because things are happening so fast in his life."

"First this story is about crops, then about horses, then about broken legs! There's probably some deep meaning in here, but it's over my head."

"Tell the neighbors to mind their own business!"

"Is there meaning to this story? maybe.."



The Moon Cannot be Stolen

A Zen Master lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening, while he was away, a thief sneaked into the hut only to find there was nothing in it to steal. The Zen Master returned and found him.

"You have come a long way to visit me," he told the prowler, "and you should not return empty handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The thief was bewildered, but he took the clothes and ran away. The Master sat naked, watching the moon. "Poor fellow," he mused, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."



People's reactions to this story:

"Material things mean nothing.... that is not wisdom that can be stolen, nor can it be easily given."

"First, be grateful to everyone: perhaps because the Master was before distracted by his material belongings, he never noticed the beauty around him. The thief in fact gave to the Master through his theft and maybe lost the sight of the Moon. Also, the beauty of nature is available to all - free and forever, and we forget this when we get caught up in the dazzle of our commercial society. "

"The Zen master was not attached to any material possessions. He could even give away his clothes without thinking twice. What he would have liked to give the thief was not anything material, but his appreciation of nature or enlightenment."

"The thief is poor because he does not understand what is of value in this life and what is not. The Zen Master is wealthy because he is content. The moon, I think, is a symbol of that contentment and peace."

"This reminds me of the vicar in *Les Misérables* who tells the thief that giving him what the thief has tried to steal means that the thief now belongs to God. The clothing is only a thing, which means nothing to the Zen master, so he removes the dishonor of the thief's act by giving him something. I think the moon represents the master's internal spiritual connection, which is something he cannot give away; it is there for all who seek it. The Zen master realizes that he cannot just give spirituality away, as the vicar attempted in *Les Misérables*. In Judaism, there is the evil impulse and the good impulse in all men, and resisting the evil impulse requires active participation in seeking through prayer and study, so that the difference between good and evil impulses becomes obvious. The Zen Master was acting with loving kindness, which is an element of all major religions (unfortunately, it is not always practiced)."

"It's a nice story. My interpretations are thus: (1) Maybe the Zen master wants to give the moon since if the thief had the moon, he could make use of it while he was at job in night. So it would imply that we should try to give to other people things after a thought of what may be useful for them, and not just for sake of giving, unless (as in this case) we do not have a choice or chance, (2) Second interpretation could be that when you give, you should give with all your heart, the best of what you can. the moon in this case, (3) Maybe the Zen master is talking of enlightening the thief, and the giving of moon signifies the bringing of light into his black nights... maybe you choose :))

"The master gives unto the thief the most that he can give materially. The one thing he can not give to the thief is that which he needs most; his own true nature. The moon represents our own true nature. The master's gesture represents his attitude towards those not-enlightened. He does not look down on them, he does not hate enemies; he is beyond animosity brought from attachments and materialism. The gesture is also an example of this."

"The Master and the thief walked beneath the same moon but the thief could not know the peace that the master held inside him. So their moons were, in fact, different. He was only giving to the poor."

"I look at this story in the way that the Zen Master acknowledges that the thief came into to steal something, the Zen Master is enlightened in not only can he forgive the thief for breaking in and invading his personal space but does a greater act by giving him his cloth. Like the feeling of fulfillment that the Zen Master gets from the moon, there is nothing like the emotional fulfillment of acts of kindness to another and having the strength to forgive others for wrongs done against you."

"Most of these stories depict a wiser master who knows what is truly important. Here, the master feels sorry for the thief, it is painful to the master that the thief cannot appreciate what is freely provided by all things. Painful enough for the master to give the poor soul his clothes."

"This is a story not of the power of possession, but the power to possess. The Zen master has the ability to give away something to one who does not have the ability to acquire what he has. If the Zen master could acquire the moon to give it away it would further his power to possess. This would connote a hierarchy distinguishing who has the ability to possess, but if the Zen master could give the moon away then his power to possess would dissolve any hierarchy. Ultimately the power to possess is the downfall of humankind because it lends to the false belief that there is power in possession."

"The Zen master feels sorry for the thief whose contentment lies only in material possessions and not in appreciating priceless possessions he already has ... like the moon."

"When sitting and watching the moon the Zen master came to realize something about himself, that He did what gave him most happiness- giving the thief something that gave HIM happiness. So he mused, I wish I could give him the moon, for that which gives me so much happiness will surely give me more happiness when i give it to the one who craves others' possessions."

"The Zen master sits naked enjoying life in the moonlight; he has no concern for tomorrow when the sun might burn his skin or when other people might be nonplussed by his nakedness. Does he have no concern for self because he has no self. He seemed to be concerned for the thief's self. Has he perhaps 'one-upped' the thief with his superior magnanimity? Why does he assume that the thief cannot enjoy the moon? Is his Zen correct-attitude Zen or is it truly no mind?"

"The Zen master has nothing and yet there is nothing he does not have."

"The Zen master has found a way of life that keeps him content, it is a simple life but he is happy. There are people who are still looking. The Zen master wishes he could pass on this enlightenment that he has found to others. On a personal note - I am jealous of the Zen master and am still trying to find my way of life."

 || Cliffhanger || Nature's Beauty || Present Moment ||

More is Not Enough

The Stone Cutter



There was once a stone cutter who was dissatisfied with himself and with his position in life.

One day he passed a wealthy merchant's house. Through the open gateway, he saw many fine possessions and important visitors. "How powerful that merchant must be!" thought the stone cutter. He became very envious and wished that he could be like the merchant.

To his great surprise, he suddenly became the merchant, enjoying more luxuries and power than he had ever imagined, but envied and detested by those less wealthy than himself. Soon a high official passed by, carried in a sedan chair, accompanied by attendants and escorted by soldiers beating gongs. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow low before the procession. "How powerful that official is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a high official!"

Then he became the high official, carried everywhere in his embroidered sedan chair, feared and hated by the people all around. It was a hot summer day, so the official felt very uncomfortable in the sticky sedan chair. He looked up at the sun. It shone proudly in the sky, unaffected by his presence. "How powerful the sun is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the sun!"

Then he became the sun, shining fiercely down on everyone, scorching the fields, cursed by the farmers and laborers. But a huge black cloud moved between him and the earth, so that his light could no longer shine on everything below. "How powerful that storm cloud is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a cloud!"

Then he became the cloud, flooding the fields and villages, shouted at by everyone. But soon he found that he was being pushed away by some great force, and realized that it was the wind. "How powerful it is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the wind!"

Then he became the wind, blowing tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooting trees, feared and hated by all below him. But after a while, he ran up against something that would not move, no matter how forcefully he blew against it - a huge, towering rock. "How powerful that rock is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a rock!"

Then he became the rock, more powerful than anything else on earth. But as he stood there, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding a chisel into the hard surface, and felt himself being changed. "What could be more powerful than I, the rock?" he thought.

He looked down and saw far below him the figure of a stone cutter.

People's reactions to this story:

We all have great power within us. We merely need to know that."

"This story reminds me of a quote: 'At the end of all our searching we will arrive at the place we began and know it for the first time.'"

"If the stone cutter restart moving backwards, he go from nature in man. So, man flow out into nature, nature flow out into man. There's a fluid , energy ranbling between objects in the earth. It isn't human ambition;it's simply life,moving in a circle."

"We are all powerful in our own way.... We all have our own place"

"The Stonecutter's story reflects the nature of the human mind and of our attachment to it. We jump from one compartment to the next, one desire to the next, one point of view to the next, never resting content with how things really are, never grasping the whole."

"We have to learn to celebrate who or what we are. When there is a way that we can better ourselves we must work for it and not just wish and dream."

"He should have settled for being rich and powerful. Then he could have had all the stone cutters working for him."

"The grass is always greener on the other side -- until you get there. It's a matter of perspective. Satisfaction is a personal choice. Choose to green up your own grass rather than hopping that fence."

"This definitely proves to me that a person can achieve anything, as long as they stay focused and have a goal ahead of them. As I studied in my MBA classes, you always have to work backwards! Find the end product/result and work back on how you are going to achieve it!"

"We often meet our destiny on the road we took to avoid it."

"Do not expect too much and you will get plenty."

"So that's why the game of Rock Scissors Paper works...."



✊ || Egotism || Successor || Maybe ||

The Most Important Teaching

A renowned Zen master said that his greatest teaching was this: Buddha is your own mind. So impressed by how profound this idea was, one monk decided to leave the monastery and retreat to the wilderness to meditate on this insight. There he spent 20 years as a hermit probing the great teaching.

One day he met another monk who was traveling through the forest. Quickly the hermit monk learned that the traveler also had studied under the same Zen master. "Please, tell me what you know of the master's greatest teaching."

The traveler's eyes lit up, "Ah, the master has been very clear about this. He says that his greatest teaching is this: Buddha is NOT your own mind."

People's reactions to this story:

"The most important teaching is to think for yourself. Unfortunately, the poor pathetic monk wasted 20 years of his life to learn it. If you're going to meditate on a philosophy for 20 years, it better be your own!"

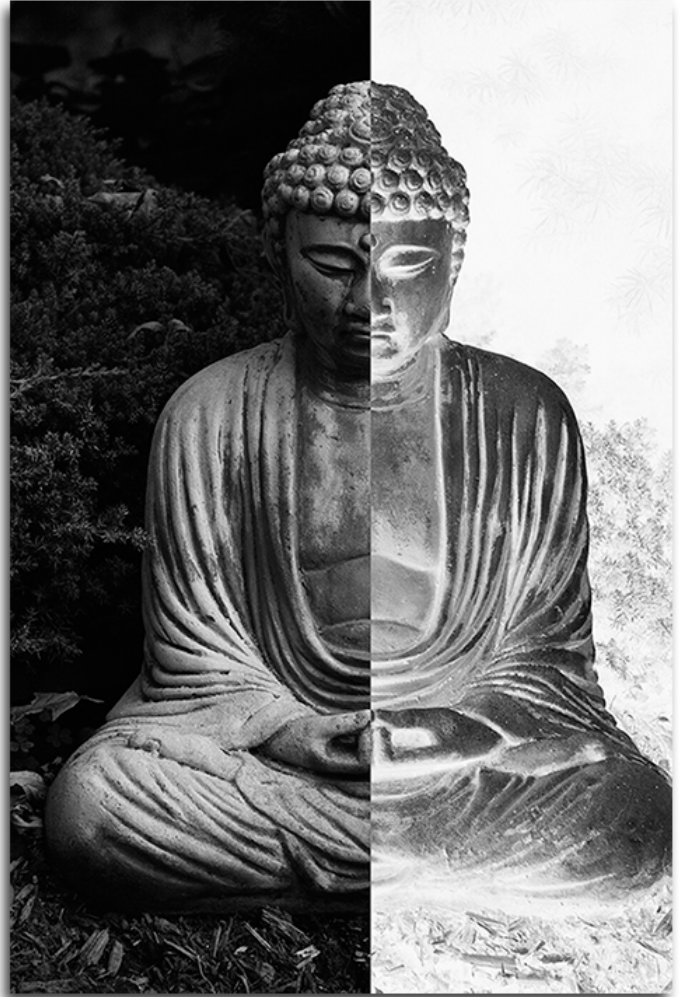
"One's own mind is just that - what you believe, not what someone else said."

"I think the second monk was wiser than the first. We are our own teachers, and he saw this rather than passively accepting the truth, like the first monk."

"What is mine isn't yours and my mind is not Buddha for you - or something like that. I believe this story conveys knowledge that I don't have. I think I identify with the first monk."

"What the Zen master was trying to get his students to understand is that what HE said to them was not important. He wanted to get them thinking for themselves."

"Don't be so quick to believe everything you hear."



"Even the greatest teachers and experts make mistakes. Be your own teacher and evaluate what is important to you - never take a teaching at face value!"

"How can you have any coherence in your teachings if you keep changing your ideas?"

"Great masters can make mistakes that waste or even ruin the lives of their followers."

"I don't believe that the monk wasted his time at all. As with everything, there must be a balance....."

"It just goes to show you how ambiguous people can be."

"I feel a bit confused or frustrated yet find it funny. It reminds me of that Saturday Night Live bit where the person in charge of the nuclear reactor tells his underlings that before he leaves he has just one thing to tell them and it's very important: 'You can't have too much water in a nuclear reactor!'"

"I found this story confusing - I guess the truth is confusing."

"This story is much like something I was once taught in Freshman Physics:

Q: Is light a particle or a wave?

A: Yes.

"Bob Dylan Wrote a song titled Serve Somebody, I think if the Monk only had a CD player he might have had maybe one more option. Twenty years?"

"The story was predictable, and reminded me of a joke I once heard, but I can't seem to remember what it was."

"The irony of this story is more powerful than the message - but, to be honest, I'm not sure what the message was."

"We all interpret things according to our own personality and desires."

"It's amazing how people interpret the same message in totally different, and sometimes totally opposite, ways. We are all individuals who find different paths to enlightenment."

"This story is an excellent overview of today's society - of how one missed word can greatly change the meaning of one's life. Had the hermit heard the word 'not' the first time 20 years earlier, his life would have been laid out completely different."

"Teachings change all the time, no matter how profound they may seem at the moment. We have to remain flexible to change as ideas change - which is a fact of life that itself will no doubt change."

"Everyone's views on things are constantly changing, so it's important to keep up and in contact with our ever-changing world. 20 years ago the Zen master believed that Buddha is your own mind. Now he believes it is not. So the hermit lost 20 years of his life to an old theory."

"I can't see how anyone could spend 20 years of their life probing one great teaching. He missed so many life-experiences by hiding out in the wilderness."

"I think the monk found buddha within if he truly spent twenty years meditating on what is buddha and what is your mind. The not is incidental."

"25 years of meditation are worthy if they are really spent in the search of Light. It doesn't matter much if the catalyst of the meditation is a particular statement or its opposite."

"The story is not about the monks, their lives or the specific 'truths' that masters impart. It is about enlightenment - which lies outside the realm of the conceptual. To trick your mind into letting go, the master sets up a paradox. The opposite 'truths' exist at the same time in the same place which snaps logic's grip on your mind and releases you to clear perception. Zen / Not-Zen, at the same time in the same place!"

"There is no single concept that can be expressed to encompass buddha\truth. paradox rules. deal with it."

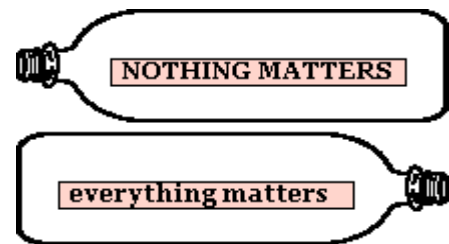
"While Buddha is not your own mind, your own mind is Buddha."

"Perhaps this story means that one needs experiences to feed the mind, and by becoming a hermit, the monk lost his mind."

"Too bad he didn't have any books to burn"

"I'd be real pissed off if I was that hermit!"

"The hermit's problem is that he has been carrying around that teaching as words. But he never realized what the teaching meant to him. You may be able to recite the words, but if you don't know what they mean, what's the use?"



"People tend to jump head first and follow an idea without seeing it through. This person meditated for 20 years only to learn that the greatest teaching is NO teaching at all."

"(1) I think he would have gone up and meditated for 20 years on anything the master said (or what he thought he said). (2) Maybe the second monk was just a prankster looking for something to do. (3) Is this guy a sloooow learner or what ?"

"This story should make people realize what a crock some religions are. There are so many religions, cults, and followers nowadays that it makes me want to kick someone's ass - especially those who exploit other people who are naive and gullible. No, I take it back, maybe they deserve it for being so stupid!"

Reminds me of something one of my teachers once said: "Everything is black or white. Nothing is black or white."

"I don't believe that the 20 years the first monk spent on this koan was wasted (incidentally, several respondents assumed that the second monk had been given the "right" koan - why?). All of us spend any 20-year span in the presence of our own minds, and perceive the world through this personal filter. So, if the monk had been an astrophysicist or an NBA forward, could his time truly have been spent any more usefully? I don't think so."

"The Zen Master needs to get a real job and buddha is just a marketing idea which changes to suit the consumer."

Moving Mind



Two men were arguing about a flag flapping in the wind. "It's the wind that is really moving," stated the first one. "No, it is the flag that is moving," contended the second. A Zen master, who happened to be walking by, overheard the debate and interrupted them. "Neither the flag nor the wind is moving," he said, "It is MIND that moves."

(In other versions of this story, the master says it is the HEART that flaps)

People's reactions to this story:

"The mind holds ultimate power. Without it, nothing would exist. If a tree fell in the forest..."

"Our minds create what we see. Our mind is strong and capable of anything."

"Nothing is as it seems."

"The Zen master is using 'move' in the sense of 'contemplate.' The flag and wind do not think about moving, they simply do as the patterns of nature dictate, but the mind contemplates this."

"The mind is the center of all things. Without it, nothing else matters."

"Interesting, although it is obviously the wind that is moving the flag."

"How stupid! I find it sad that two people would waste time on such an argument."

"I don't like stupid-ass answers to real questions! Is it possible that physical things move because of physical causes. I mean, c'mon, we experience physical things, but we don't disclaim its existence just because we are mentally aware of its occurrence."

"I liked this story, but I'm not sure why."

"I wonder if the two men agreed with what the Zen master said. If so, did they agree just because he is a Zen master?"

"Pretty intense situation! Two people arguing back and forth, and then a third person comes in with a totally different perspective! Just goes to show you, there are many different ways to look at a problem."

"So what's the point?"

"We westerners tend to think the mind is passive, that we just look around while our minds sit back and watch things move. But just the opposite is true."

"I guess this means MIND OVER MATTER!"

"This story isn't trying to say that the flag and the wind aren't moving - that's insignificant. It IS what it IS.. It's the mind that gives things meaning..."

"OK. The mind moves, but so does the flag and the wind!"

"Everyone perceives the world differently."

"This story is of very personal interest to me. There are parts of me that place very little value in my perceptual system's account of the world."

"It's a good story, but I think I'm missing something."

The Nature of Things



Two monks were washing their bowls in the river when they noticed a scorpion that was drowning. One monk immediately scooped it up and set it upon the bank. In the process he was stung. He went back to washing his bowl and again the scorpion fell in. The monk saved the scorpion and was again stung. The other monk asked him, "Friend, why do you continue to save the scorpion when you know it's nature is to sting?"

"Because," the monk replied, "to save it is my nature."

(Another version of this story describes a fox who agrees to carry a scorpion on its back across a river, upon the condition that the scorpion does not sting him. But the scorpion does indeed sting the fox when they are in midstream. As the fox begins to drown, taking the scorpion with him, he pleadingly asks why the scorpion has jeopardized both of them by stinging. "Because it's my nature." This story sometimes is attributed to Native Americans).

People's reactions to this story:

"This is an important story for me to hear right now. As times are difficult right now I have seen my tendency to want things to be "easier" or "more pleasant" or "right"... and my tendency to worry that I am not "doing the right thing" because life is painful right now... being reminded of the Nature of Things is a reminder to take these times for what they are even if they sting... to honor their nature is to honor mine... to honor mine is to honor theirs..."

"Each acts according to its nature and no amount of logic or reason overcomes our basic fundamental nature...but I think the monk could have stayed true to his nature and used the bowl for the rescue!"

"Despite the consequences all things can not be but what they are."

"To live the life of Zen you must have.... Indefinite respect to all that has past. Indefinite service to all that is present. Responsibility to the future.... The monk was living the life of Zen. Reason is a roadblock or wall to living the way of Zen...

"The monk did that because he have been practicing the compassion for many years; the compassion becomes his nature identity, and he love to rescue or to help living beings who are in dangerous situations with out thinking about risking himself."


"Nature shows you what is right, it is your choice to listen and follow through with it no matter the cost."

"I have pondered this story for years in the version of the fox and the scorpion to try and make sense out of it. It is too easy to simply assume the message is "that is just how things are accept them". I believe the message is focused on the monk, (fox), and their foolishness for accepting on face value the plight, (words) of the scorpion when they already know the scorpion will sting. The question is, "why do we do foolish things when we know that what we are doing is self destructive even before we do them."

"The monk did not prejudice the scorpion for its nature being caustic or for its station being a bug. the monk was saving a life, enduring the sting as the price of adhering to a higher principle."

"We often must do things that we know will cause harm to us, because to not do would eventually cause us the most harm."

"This story says that all suffering comes from trying to be something which one is not."

 || When Tired || True Self || Spider ||

Nature's Beauty

A priest was in charge of the garden within a famous Zen temple. He had been given the job because he loved the flowers, shrubs, and trees. Next to the temple there was another, smaller temple where there lived a very old Zen master. One day, when the priest was expecting some special guests, he took extra care in tending to the garden. He pulled the weeds, trimmed the shrubs, combed the moss, and spent a long time meticulously raking up and carefully arranging all the dry autumn leaves. As he worked, the old master watched him with interest from across the wall that separated the temples.

When he had finished, the priest stood back to admire his work. "Isn't it beautiful," he called out to the old master. "Yes," replied the old man, "but there is something missing. Help me over this wall and I'll put it right for you."

After hesitating, the priest lifted the old fellow over and set him down. Slowly, the master walked to the tree near the center of the garden, grabbed it by the trunk, and shook it. Leaves showered down all over the garden. "There," said the old man, "you can put me back now."

People's reactions to this story:

"It's not perfect to be perfect. It's a relief to remember that. But then I wonder, did the old master feel jealous of the beauty created by the priest and seek to destroy it in the guise of teaching a message? Trying to perfectly imperfect is egotistical too!"

"Nature is more perfect than anything man can create. To disrupt that beauty for the sake of making something beautiful is an absurdity."

"Let nature take its course. It's not perfect but is beautiful all in itself."

"We should try to see things as they really are, including their imperfections. THAT'S beauty."

"Trying to be perfect can make a person miserable."

"Beauty is not something you make. It happens spontaneously, naturally, by itself."

"Keep nature around! Don't try to sweep it away!"



"I wonder if cleanliness symbolizes emptiness, and if the leaves symbolize freedom. The old man thought the leaves gave the yard a more practical, natural look. What in life is perfect and always in order? When things are in order, there is nothing really to look at."

"Ah, a lesson from the Thoreau school of nature appreciation. People should make an effort to put off the facades they project in everyday life. You should present yourself as freely as possible and not feel so uncomfortable with your identity that you become something you are not."

"If you act a certain way all of the time, don't be a phony and try to change the way you are just for certain people."

"God gives nature its natural beauty. Things are a certain way for a reason."

"A person shouldn't get too preoccupied with the vanities of life, because something unexpected will come along and shatter your ideals."

"Normally the younger priest would not have the garden look so perfect. He was trying to impress his company. The Zen master was trying to show him to be and act like himself, and not to create a false image."

"Natural beauty is better than beauty put on for some purpose."

"The quest for perfect is an eternal pursuit with no destination in sight."

"Don't rain on anyone's parade! Give compliments where they belong and don't criticize so much! Jealousy is a bad thing - don't take revenge out on others."

"Don't try to create something that is not meant to be. Only when we disrupt nature does it become ugly."

"Nature doesn't need our help to be beautiful - but we need the help of nature."

"This story has to do with control, and how things are much better - especially events in nature and the world - if we just let go and let nature take its course."

"This story is about trust - when to trust, and when not to."

"Maybe because the old man's garden didn't look as good, this story is a message about the neglect of elders."



In a Zen garden

**you cannot see
all of it**



**from any one
viewpoint**

No More Questions

Upon meeting a Zen master at a social event, a psychiatrist decided to ask him a question that had been on his mind. "Exactly how do you help people?" he inquired.

"I get them where they can't ask any more questions," the Master answered.

People's reactions to this story:

"To have no questions is to be at peace with oneself."

"He who is all-knowing will never be helpless."

"If you can answer the questions in your own head, you are on the road to recovery."

"When all of your questions in life are answered, you will become a full and complete person."

"Does this mean that asking questions is bad?! Getting them to the point where they can't ask questions is good!?.... I don't get it!"

"A person always needs to answer questions because this is how we grown and learn!"

"How do you get a child to stop asking questions? This will make people feel inferior. Is this really what the master wants?"

"If you can teach a person to answer his own questions, then he will be at peace with himself."

"I can't imagine reaching a state of consciousness where I'd be free from the desire to ask questions about anything. Is it possible?"

"I believe that the Zen master is also implying that his job is never complete. People will continue to ask questions until they die..."

"All of our questions come from the fact that we are discontent about something. When we reach the place where we don't have to ask any more questions, we can just "be" and transcend our earthly problems."

"I think the Master found it to be an absurd question coming from a trained specialist, hoping he would go away and think of how juvenile the question was."

"Sometimes it's better not to dwell on questions, but just to accept."



Not Dead Yet



The Emperor asked Master Gudo, "What happens to a man of enlightenment after death?"

"How should I know?" replied Gudo.

"Because you are a master," answered the Emperor.

"Yes sir," said Gudo, "but not a dead one."

People's reactions to this story:

"Knowledgeable people are not afraid to say "I don't know" regarding things that they _cannot_ know. Observe all that you can. Do not invent what you cannot know."

"This story seems to me to be saying that we should rely on our own experience. That is the only thing that we truly "know". The master could not talk about what happened to an enlightened man after death because he had never experienced death."

Why should the emperor care? If he doesn't know, he's not enlightened and shouldn't try to act enlightened because he's not!!!

"I believe that this story is trying to tell us that first hand experience is the only kind of knowledge we can truly have."

"I guess that the master is still not enlightened completely."

A wise man knows that he is not wise-just like Socrates.

The truly wise are not afraid to say "I don't know."

To know that you know what you know is all anyone can really know!!

Your alive so mind your own business!

I think master Gudo wants the emperor to realize he should not think of the future but now.

The future is unforeseeable and the past is but dead images, we only really experience the present moment.

When one answers a question with another question that person is avoiding answering the question. Maybe the Zen master knows the answer and doesn't want to share it with the Emperor.

Sometimes, if you have to answer a question with a question, maybe more thought should have been put into it before it was spoken.

A fool can ask more questions than a wise man can answer.

I think this story is beautiful. It states,very briefly, the great flaws I see with traditional western religions. They all promise life after death and eternal bliss-worshipping God. But they miss the point--it doesn't matter what happens after death if we live our lives right.

Cross each bridge when you get to it.

"The World of the Living and the World of the Dead....so close but yet so far."

Just shows that you shouldn't trust all the quacks who claim to know everything about the afterlife!

Obsessed

Two traveling monks reached a river where they met a young woman. Wary of the current, she asked if they could carry her across. One of the monks hesitated, but the other quickly picked her up onto his shoulders, transported her across the water, and put her down on the other bank. She thanked him and departed.

As the monks continued on their way, the one was brooding and preoccupied. Unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. "Brother, our spiritual training teaches us to avoid any contact with women, but you picked that one up on your shoulders and carried her!"

"Brother," the second monk replied, "I set her down on the other side, while you are still carrying her."

(some versions of this story describe the monk as carrying the woman across a mud puddle)

People's reactions to this story:

"Reminds me of the fundamentalist type of preachings that are so moralistic and full of admonitions against secular things that they actually create the problems they seek to avoid."

"Rigidity gets in the way of your growth. Being rigid usually means you are denying something."

"It's better to do what you need to do and get it over with, than not do it and carry it with you in your mind."

"If we humans didn't dwell on things we've done in the past, then we wouldn't be who we are. We contemplate and feel guilt - it's in our nature."

"The first monk listened to his conscience rather than to what he had been taught by his religion - and he ended up doing the right thing."

"What happens, happens. Take the good with the bad, and the only way to get over the bad is to acknowledge it, accept it, and leave it in the past. There's no reason to be obsessed."



"I think the second monk was a bit jealous. He really wanted to carry that woman himself, and now he can't get sex off his mind."

"Kindness to people will always leave you with a clear conscience."

"The time I spend deciding whether or not to do something often takes longer than if I just did it in the first place."

"You have to go with your first reaction to a situation. Trust your instincts. If you think about something too long, any deed will seem like its the wrong thing to do."

"Any action you take should be without guilt or regret, despite what other people may say or think. This is what it means to be independent."

"Monks should help anyone in need."

"Obviously, the second monk is feeling guilty about not helping the woman."

"If you don't act on your wishes and desires, you become obsessed with them. The second monk is left wondering what it would have been like if had he acted on his impulses. You can't let thinking get in your way. I should have acted on my impulses last night. I should have just picked my man up!"

"Sounds like the first monk was able to confront and deal with his problems, while the second monk still harbors them in his soul."

"I find that when things happen, there are those people who forget about it and move on. Then there are those people who dwell on insignificant things - maybe because they feel they should have contributed more or should have taken control."

"What if the woman fell into the water and drowned? Who would be responsible?"

"We all carry with us the weight of our past mistakes, regrets, and mistaken beliefs."

"Treat others as you would like to be treated."

""What's this about how you're supposed to avoid women? It doesn't make any sense!"

"What I'd like to know is what is worse - physically touching a woman or thinking about one."

Paradise

Two people are lost in the desert. They are dying from hunger and thirst. Finally, they come to a high wall. On the other side they can hear the sound of a waterfall and birds singing. Above, they can see the branches of lush trees over the top of the wall. Their fruit look delicious.

One of them manages to climb over the wall and disappears down the other side. The other, instead, returns to the desert to help other lost travelers find their way to the oasis.

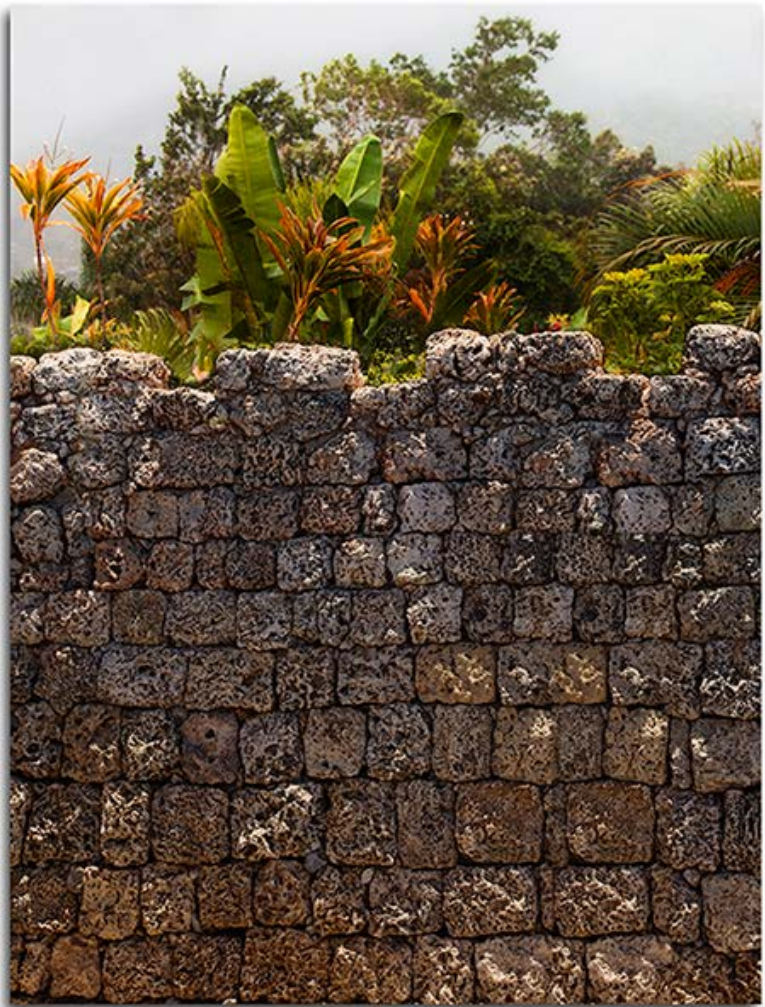
People's reactions to this story:

"Paradise is nothing without others to share it with. Who wants paradise anyway?"

"People have different views of paradise. Is it more fulfilling to find your paradise or to share it with others? Moral - Know yourself before you guide others?"

"Who will be a more convincing salesman for Paradise: a person who has seen it or a person who has lived in it? And is someone who is dying of thirst ready to retrace his steps across the desert, regardless of the nobility of the task? The road to hell and death is paved with good intentions."

"The story seems to ask a question: is it better to improve your own life, or improve the lives of others at expense to yourself? As an individualist, I favor the former option. In my view, the story provides a somewhat distorted image, neglecting the later travelers' ability to find paradise on their own. A secondary question is the motives of the original two travelers. The one who remains in paradise seems easy enough to explain: he wants to stay alive and enjoy life. The other one is more complicated. Is he motivated by a pure and inexplicable sense of altruism, of enjoying the success of others, even at his own expense? Or is he motivated by a desire to be admired (after all, the first traveler *disappears* into the garden, and that's the last we hear of him). Or does he feel he is unworthy to enjoy paradise while others wander in the desert?"



"Desert is our current life: Beautiful Oasis or other side is Nirvana. The story is dealing with the traditional disagreement between the Hinayana and the Mahayana: What behaviour is the culmination of spiritual journey: liberating self: Arahant who through personal discipline comes to the wall and then transcends it or Bodhisattva ideal- facing infinite rebirths (going back into the desert for the liberation of infinite myriad of sentient beings?) I am not sure if we get a clear opinion from this story and perhaps one is not intended however one man seems selfish while the other seems mad."

"It took so much faith to walk the desert and so much awareness to see the wall and so much doubt to look up above the wall and so much courage to both climb the wall and to walk back for others... so much and yet just enough... thank you for this wonderful story..."

"Buddha turned away from paradise to help lead others out of the desert. God so loved the world that he gave up his only begotten son that our sins might be forgiven."

"Buddha returns to the desert to lead others to the oasis. He dies, and each traveler can only follow the tracks that he left."

"The one climbing over the wall finds his own salvation/enlightenment. The one returning to the desert is the teacher who finds the way and wants to help many others achieve their salvation. If everyone who found enlightenment STAYED there, who would exist to tell others it is not a dream?"

"This story reminds me of the teachings of Jesus. The traveler who sees the oasis and immediately runs to it is a sinner because he desired the good life without thinking of others. The traveler who went back to find other travelers who are lost will find eternal life. The oasis is superficial much like our life. The oasis like our life is only a test. If we go through life thinking only of riches and the good life like the weary traveler who immediately jumped the wall we will miss out on an even better oasis, an internal oasis with God."

"This illustrates the Zen equivalent of what Christians call 'evangelism'. It is not enough to possess paradise, the creature comforts; one is called to lead others to it. Great story!"

"It appears that the first traveler 'stole heaven' by scaling the wall while the second traveler compassionately sacrificed himself for the good of other travelers. Perhaps paradise to the first traveler is rest while paradise to the second is service. This tale also bears a striking similarity to a chapter from John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress."

"One dying traveler chooses life. He struggles to climb the wall to paradise and succeeds. The other dying traveler chooses death. 'Two people are lost in the desert' is not 'Two of the people lost in the desert'. The return to the desert to help imagined 'other lost travelers' is a justification for choosing death."

"The second person doesn't return to the desert out of commitment, he returns for pleasure. To him, it is the giving, or sharing that is paradise."

"The 2 who reached that wall are one, as who would not want to enjoy paradise, while at the same time saving his peers?"

"The one who leapt the wall has found what he was seeking. The one who returned to help other travelers undoubtedly lost his own life as he did not take care of his own needs before seeking to help others. Therefore, finish what you started before you begin another task."

"A lot of comments on your website have referred to classic literature (i.e., the Bible, the Scarlet Letter, Ben Franklin, etc.) to try and interpret the meanings of the stories. I feel as though I'm in my American Lit. class. But this story really does connect to the whole tradition of success in America, what some call the 'success myth'. The American concept of success has said for a long time that a successful person has a responsibility to help others, to use his position to serve the community. But recently, as the focus of success has changed from 'we' to 'me,' success is totally selfish. No one cares about anyone but himself. This story makes me think about who is more successful. I say the second traveler, because he is more enlightened than the first. Helping others is more a mark of true success than luxury is."

"Was it wise for the second person to go back to tell everyone, not knowing for sure what is beyond the wall. May be there was a Monster on the other side of the wall!"

"Sometimes we walk the path of self indulgence other times the path of sacrifice for others. I believe Zen is the path of conscious choices."

"Seems to be addressing the decision all we must make, whether to act for the benefit of ourselves or to act in a way that will help others. To stay behind teaching or move ahead alone?"

"This is a very fine story. The one who has found something valuable and keeps it only to himself will never become really happy."

"Some people find happiness through material things, while some find happiness by helping others and knowing in their heart that they're doing the right thing."

"Desire leads to suffering from desires yet to be quenched; non-attachment to desire leads to pleasure in selfless acts."

"Both men have found their way."

"The man who went back into the desert dying of hunger and thirst - did."

"As John Shaft would say 'Right On!'"

"Ah, the gift (and sacrifices) of the teacher..."

"This is the worst, most contrived story of them all. What a crappy attempt to communicate wisdom through a story!"

Practice Makes Perfect

A dramatic ballad singer studied under a strict teacher who insisted that he rehearse day after day, month after month the same passage from the same song, without being permitted to go any further.

Finally, overwhelmed by frustration and despair, the young man ran off to find another profession. One night, stopping at an inn, he stumbled upon a recitation contest. Having nothing to lose, he entered the competition and, of course, sang the one passage that he knew so well. When he had finished, the sponsor of the contest highly praised his performance. Despite the student's embarrassed objections, the sponsor refused to believe that he had just heard a beginner perform.

"Tell me," the sponsor said, "who is your instructor? He must be a great master."

The student later became known as the great performer Koshiji.

People's reactions to this story:

"Hard work will always pay off sometime in the future. I can see myself telling this story to someone who wants to quit something before they've really gotten into it."

"You can always take your abilities one step further, one inch closer to perfection. We should never be satisfied with a good or even a great performance. Let's be patient and strive for ultimate perfection, no matter what the cost."

"I can relate to this. I play golf. If you can develop an incredibly good short game, your performance on all 18 holes will improve greatly. It's also important to have one really impressive skill because it gives you the confidence to tackle other skills."

"He practiced so much that it became part of him. To really master something, it has to become part of you."

"People sometimes spread themselves too thin by trying to do too many things at once. You have to master one thing at a time. That builds a solid foundation that you can then build on."



"This reminds me of studying philosophy. You have to intensely study one small portion, master it, and then gradually build up your knowledge in new areas."

"Practice doesn't make perfect - perfect practice makes perfect."

"My dad brought me up with a quote - 'Only those who attempt the absurd achieve the impossible.'"

"You can't practice all the time. If you do, you'll eventually burn out!"

"Practicing isn't always enough. Be involved in what you are doing. You have to learn from the heart."

"I don't think this teacher could have been very good. If he was, the student would not have become so frustrated that he quit."

"People who are more knowledgeable than us in a particular area have reasons for behaving the way they do - even if the reasons are not apparent to us."

"This story reminds me of when I was in gymnastics. My coach kept pushing me to the limit. Well, I broke my arm and that was the end of my gymnastics career."

"Parents are sometimes like this - they push and push a kid until the kid finally rebels."

"This story reminds me of the movie The Karate Kid. His instructor made him practice all sorts of weird things, which he thought was useless - but the instructor turned out to be right."

"I felt this way about my parents. They raised me well, but at the time I thought I knew it all and didn't want to listen to what they had to teach me. Eventually, I realized they were right."

"I like this story because it emphasizes the kind of self-discipline that is missing in American culture. Our preoccupation with "freedom" makes it difficult for us to be disciplined and focused on difficult tasks."

"What?"

"I'm a bit paranoid about practice. Sometimes the more I practice the more careless I get. Then bad habits start to creep in."

"Practicing didn't do it for him. He just got lucky. He doesn't deserve any prizes because he's a quitter."

"I don't agree with this story. It's not realistic. In today's world you need more than just one skill in order to get ahead."

"So what's the message here? Even though you may feel that something or someone is wasting your time, the eldest are still the most wise?"

"I disagree with the consensus. Singing or music in general is anything but a skill, maybe talent, art, passion, relaxation, or a gift. If you take that away you have nothing. Practicing one passage over and over is nothing more than an elephant that stands next to a tree because he thinks he's chained to it. Not Music!"

The Present Moment

A Japanese warrior was captured by his enemies and thrown into prison. That night he was unable to sleep because he feared that the next day he would be interrogated, tortured, and executed. Then the words of his Zen master came to him, "Tomorrow is not real. It is an illusion. The only reality is now." Heeding these words, the warrior became peaceful and fell asleep.

People's reactions to this story:

"We have to take each day one at a time. Each moment in this life only comes once, so take advantage of it and live it fully."

"Don't worry about tomorrow until it comes. Take things lightly."

"Don't let yourself be troubled by tomorrow. It will take care of itself."

"We all have images and concepts of what tomorrow will bring - good or bad. But we never know for sure what will happen."

"It's a nice story, but I'd still be real worried about the next day!"

"Isn't this a bit of a paradox. The only reality is 'now' - but 'now' quickly becomes the past. So there is no reality at all! Maybe that's why the soldier shouldn't worry about it."

"That soldier better hope the Zen master is on his way to rescue him. Those words are pretty easy for the master, who's probably sleeping comfortably in his bed at home."

"Almost anyone would be anxious in this situation. I don't think the master's advice would work for most people."

"True wisdom is not easily applied."



"This reminds me of something my mother told me last week. 'Stop dreaming and live.'"

"We always want to plan for the future, but we often make ourselves miserable in the present while doing it."


"People tend to worry way too much about things that they can't control. If we can just let it go, we'd be at peace with ourselves."

"The only reality is now, but what WILL happen when the soldier wakes up. That will quickly become reality too."

"I think the warrior should be thinking of ways to escape, rather than sleeping. I hope the Zen master told him that torture is an illusion too."

"I guess we should live each day as if it is our last."

"A good tale, but it's not complex enough. It's too easily dismissed as being silly."

 || Concentration || Tea Combat || Cliffhanger ||

Prosperity



A rich man asked a Zen master to write something down that could encourage the prosperity of his family for years to come. Something that the family could cherish for generations. On a large piece of paper, the master wrote, "Father dies, son dies, grandson dies."

The rich man became angry when he saw the master's work. "I asked you to write something down that could bring happiness and prosperity to my family. Why do you give me something depressing like this?"

"If your son should die before you," the master answered, "this would bring unbearable grief to your family. If your grandson should die before your son, this also would bring great sorrow. If your family, generation after generation, disappears in the order I have described, it will be the natural course of life. This is true happiness and prosperity."

People's reactions to this story:

"The man should be happy because he has his life. The greatest prosperity in life is not any material thing, but life itself."

"True prosperity in life is to avoid tragedy - and to have your child die before you is probably the greatest tragedy."

"A close friend of the family had a one year old baby who died. It destroyed the family. I can see myself telling this story to my children someday."

"This story makes me think of my Mom because she always tells me that the worst thing that could happen to her would be me or my brother dying before her."

"The simplest things that we often take for granted are the things that can bring us the greatest happiness."

"We often take life for granted, especially how true happiness is being able to live our lives fully, then die naturally, without having to experience tragedy."

"This story makes me realize how backwards our society is about money."

"I'd like to tell this story to my boyfriend. He's always working so hard for prosperity that he loses sight of the fact that life itself is happiness."

"The rich man was so used to having his wealth on paper he felt compelled to have in writing some proof or form of unity."

"This story seems to follow the traditional pattern of oriental ancestor worship. The greatest honor is in the passing down of family traditions from one generation to the next."

"Don't be too greedy. Be here now."

"We shouldn't expect too much out of life. If you do, you wind up getting disappointed and unhappy."

"I don't feel that people dying is any kind of happiness or prosperity, regardless of the order. My grandfather died a year ago and it didn't bring me any happiness whatsoever."

"My father died when I was five. I don't think I have ever been happy about that."

"I don't get this story. If someone dies, it's going to bring unhappiness - period."

"In reality we don't know who is going to die when. In a way, I think that is good and helps us to live life more fully, and without worry."

"We humans are used to life following a certain order. It seems natural to us. But when that order is disrupted, we become very disoriented and unhappy."



Ritual Cat

When the spiritual teacher and his disciples began their evening meditation, the cat who lived in the monastery made such noise that it distracted them. So the teacher ordered that the cat be tied up during the evening practice.

Years later, when the teacher died, the cat continued to be tied up during the meditation session. And when the cat eventually died, another cat was brought to the monastery and tied up. Centuries later, learned descendants of the spiritual teacher wrote scholarly treatises about the religious significance of tying up a cat for meditation practice.

People's reactions to this story:

"It's amazing how people don't question authority."

"People don't think about what they're doing. They just do it because it's always been done that way, or because everyone else is doing it. Kind of scary!"

"This reminds me of the game kids play when they whisper something into someone's ear, and then the message is passed along from one kid to the next. By the time it gets to the last kid, the message isn't anything like the way it was when it started."

"This must be similar to how superstitions develop. There once may have been a logical reason for them, but eventually people just do it because they believe they should."

"It's like people being afraid to walk under a ladder, or to have a black cat walk in front of them. It makes no sense. It's an irrational fear of some taboo that they don't fully understand."

"Why tie up the cat? Why didn't they just let it out?"

"I wonder how many religious ceremonies and rituals originally started out as simply a PRACTICAL solution to some simple problem."

"Seems like someone (or something) always suffers from unnecessary, superstitious behavior."

"This makes me think of family traditions that are passed down from one generation to the next.... and they're not always a great thing to pass down!"

"Family recipes are like this. Everyone keeps passing them down, even when they taste terrible."

"Scholars can make even stupidity sound intelligent."

"I feel sorry for those cats!"

"I think a lot of us live our whole lives like this. We do this and that, over and over again, without really thinking about the significance or meaning of it."

"Maybe tying up the cat symbolizes tying up our animal needs and desires during meditation in order to achieve higher levels of consciousness."

"This story is more about the failings of one man than rituals, cats or scholars."

👉 || Sounds of Silence || Successor || Nature's Beauty ||



Searching for Buddha

A monk set off on a long pilgrimage to find the Buddha. He devoted many years to his search until he finally reached the land where the Buddha was said to live. While crossing the river to this country, the monk looked around as the boatman rowed. He noticed something floating towards them. As it got closer, he realized that it was the corpse of a person. When it drifted so close that he could almost touch it, he suddenly recognized the dead body - it was his own! He lost all control and wailed at the sight of himself, still and lifeless, drifting along the river's currents.

That moment was the beginning of his liberation.

People's reactions to this story:

"The dead body symbolizes his self-centeredness - his bodily desires and wants - which he must transcend in order to really find Buddha and the truth."

"I guess in order to find true spirituality, one must cast off this physical body. This guy's liberation came because he realized that his physical body had nothing to do with his pilgrimage to find the Buddha."

"You need to live your life for yourself, because one day you'll find yourself dead without having achieved anything you wanted out of life. You were too busy worrying about something else. What a waste!"

"Many times I have found myself heading towards a certain goal and then realized when I almost reached it that it really wasn't all that important. It was what I found on my way there that was important."

"Some people watch life pass them by - and they don't realize it until it's almost gone."

"Even when he was alive, he wasn't alive. He didn't realize that until he saw the corpse."

"I wonder if that corpse was his twin brother?"

"This story is very depressing to me - and it also doesn't make any sense."



"The man needed to find HIMSELF and not the Buddha. Seeing his own dead body made him realize that he had to search his own soul and not someone else's. He now knew that he could go on with his life and make it on his own."

"This guy wasted so many years of his life looking for this great Buddha, and for what?! He should make good of his own life and not spend it chasing after someone else, no matter how great they seem to be. He has to spend his life looking for himself!"

"Is this man being told not to look for death before his time?"

"He wasn't ready to receive Buddha. He still needed to search within himself."

"I think the Buddha knew that the monk was searching for him and this was a test to see how he would cope with their meeting and the meaning of that meeting."

"Does this mean you can only find the Buddha after you're dead?"

"Facing up to the reality of death enables one to live life more fully."

"He HAD found Buddha. Buddha had taken his soul into the afterworld. His soul was born as his body died. His soul was liberated by Buddha."

"This story is unbelievable. If I saw my own dead body drifting down a river I would check myself into a mental hospital."

☞ || True Self || Paradise || Wanting God ||

Self Control

One day there was an earthquake that shook the entire Zen temple. Parts of it even collapsed. Many of the monks were terrified. When the earthquake stopped the teacher said, "Now you have had the opportunity to see how a Zen man behaves in a crisis situation. You may have noticed that I did not panic. I was quite aware of what was happening and what to do. I led you all to the kitchen, the strongest part of the temple. It was a good decision, because you see we have all survived without any injuries. However, despite my self-control and composure, I did feel a little bit tense - which you may have deduced from the fact that I drank a large glass of water, something I never do under ordinary circumstances."

One of the monks smiled, but didn't say anything.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the teacher.

"That wasn't water," the monk replied, "it was a large glass of soy sauce."

People's reactions to this story:

"I see this sort of behavior often in men. They feel they have to put on a front to appear to be something that they are not."

"It's like someone bragging about how cool they are, and then you find out that he is just a geek underneath after all."

"Sounds just like my father - always in control, always right, always the leader. But WE know the truth!"

"Sometimes the calmest looking person in an emergency situation is really the most nervous."

"Someone should have thrown that water into that teacher's face so he could wake up and realize that he was kidding himself."

"This reminds me of people who think they are so great and are always bragging about it. Admitting that they are wrong is the hardest thing in their lives, when it should be something that's very natural."



"Everyone at one time or another has been in a tense situation where you think that you are composed and in control, but then you do something weird - which shows that you're not."

"Sometimes, when you're in a very stressful situation, you aren't aware of your actions until someone else points it out."

"It didn't matter to her what she drank. She wasn't concentrating on the taste, but instead the action."

"Even a Zen man is still human."

"I'd tell this story to children so they wouldn't be afraid to be afraid."

"How can you be so shaken that you can't tell the difference between water and soy sauce?!"

"I think the teacher was testing the monks - to see if they noticed what he drank."

"I think the teacher deliberately was trying to teach them that it's OK to do something weird in a panic situation. You can do somethings weird, but for the important decisions you still can make the right choices."

"Maybe the soy sauce explains why he is so relaxed."

"I really thought this story was going to have a great ending, but it was stupid."

 || Egotism || Full Awareness || Without Fear ||

Sounds of Silence

Four monks decided to meditate silently without speaking for two weeks. By nightfall on the first day, the candle began to flicker and then went out.

The first monk said, "Oh, no! The candle is out."

The second monk said, "Aren't we not suppose to talk?"

The third monk said, "Why must you two break the silence?"

The fourth monk laughed and said, "Ha! I'm the only one who didn't speak."

People's reactions to this story:

"Each monk broke the silence for a different reason, each of which is a common stumbling block to meditation. The first monk became distracted by one element of the world (the candle) and so lost sight of the rest. The second monk was more worried about rules than the meditation itself. The third monk let his anger at the first two rule him. And the final monk was lost in his ego."

The path is open to its failures as they are the stones to its success.

"I am reminded of a car game I used to play with my children called 'Listening for Silence.' The object of the game for me was to stop the noise in the car. The object of the game for the children was to see who could resist speaking the longest by listening for silence. If the first child spoke and the second child automatically burst out proclaiming victory, then both children lost. The object was to listen for silence and silence speaks for itself"

Things do not always go as planned.

This is symbolic of something else, I know, but I'll just say it the way it was told. If you're used to talking, it's going to be hard to resist the temptation to talk, moreso when you're with others, which I would think they would've thought of. It's like telling someone who sees just fine to close their eyes for a week, staying awake, and not open them at all, no matter what noises they heard. It's pretty near impossible to resist temptation when you've never had to resist that type of temptation before.

You could have ended the story at the point when "the candle flickered and went out."



The four monks have each broken their silence for an altogether different reason. But another side is in the fact that the 4th monk spoke at all. Had he simply maintained his silence, he would've been successful in his endeavor. But if he had, in all likelihood, the other three would've probably continued to argue and not even noticed his silence. I know many people who are like the 4th monk; their motto: If I'm doing something good and no one is watching (or no one notices), I might as well not be doing it at all. They believe that the reward is not in the effort, but in the recognition.

Were I a fifth monk I would wait 10 minutes into the exercise, stand up and yell loudly. HAAAAAAH I LOSE!!!! Then walk out to do some non-competitive meditation.

Enter a woods and hear the wilderness listen. That's where you'll find it.... John, your "Ph.D." is not silent.

This story reminds me a teaching. When you meditate in breathing, you should concentrate your mind to your breath only and cast out all thoughts, including a thought that you are breathing.

"If you can describe the zen then you do not know it. 'The buffalo left his enclosure for the abyss, his head passed the doorway, his shoulders, girth and haunches, yet his tail would not pass through' - - koan from the gateless gate"

"Oaths and Promises - Lightly spoken..Hardly Kept."

It is the Provenance of knowledge to speak; it is the privilege of wisdom - to listen.

It is clear from reading the story that none of the monks are spiritually ready to perform the difficult silent meditation. Unfocused and easily distracted by their surroundings(the burnt out candle and the conversations of themselves) they all failed to reach their aim of meditating in silent for two weeks. I see the moral of the story is 'to plan thoroughly and be solidly ready before embarking on an action. Focus your mind constantly in reaching your aim, and the objective will be reached, no matter how hard it is.'

 || Just Two Words || Egotism || Ritual Cat ||

Spider

A Tibetan story tells of a meditation student who, while meditating in his room, believed he saw a spider descending in front of him. Each day the menacing creature returned, growing larger and larger each time. So frightened was the student, that he went to his teacher to report his dilemma. He said he planned to place a knife in his lap during meditation, so when the spider appeared he would kill it. The teacher advised him against this plan. Instead, he suggested, bring a piece of chalk to meditation, and when the spider appeared, mark an "X" on its belly. Then report back.

The student returned to his meditation. When the spider again appeared, he resisted the urge to attack it, and instead did just what the master suggested. When he later reported back to the master, the teacher told him to lift up his shirt and look at his own belly. There was the "X".



People's reactions to this story:

"Always look at yourself first."

"This guy obviously doesn't have great self-esteem or self-worth. He is afraid and ashamed of what he is. He can't face the reality that he doesn't like who he is."

"The spider could represent the evil within himself - or the evil all around us in the world."

"We are our own worst enemy. It is our own self that is the greatest threat to our own existence - now that's a paradox, isn't it?"

"This story reminds me of The Scarlet Letter."

"Humans, by their very nature, seem to want to destroy those things that they don't understand and fear."

"I guess the message is that we shouldn't kill any other being, including animals and insects. Everything that is alive has a right to live. The spider and the student BOTH have the "X" of life on them. So if he killed the spider, he would be killing one of his own kind."

"Don't always be so ready to kill. Take a different approach. In the end it will save your own life."

"This reminds me off we cannot see something about ourselves that is right there in front of us - like the day I heard a psychologist say that we usually marry someone like our same-sex parent. A bell went off in my head because I suddenly realized I had married A MAN who was just like my mother!"

"The spider symbolizes a deep seeded guilt or frustration within the student. These problems are growing larger as the spider grows. Until he lets out his problems, this spider will always be there to threaten him."

"This story teaches you that it is best NOT to jump to conclusions. Don't judge things by appearance alone."

"Apparently this teacher has taken a few psychology courses. But I think the story would have been more interesting if the student DID stab himself. Whatever the problem is that he is facing, it is increasing to the point where it must destroy him, or he must destroy it."

"I bet this student was suicidal to start off with."

"I think the spider symbolizes the student growing more focused and immersed into his meditation - so much so that he is seeing himself. But that scares him, because he doesn't know that he is looking at himself, and no one wants to really look at oneself."

☞ || Banishing a Ghost || Dreaming || Searching for Buddha ||

Successor

The old Zen master's health was fading. Knowing his death was near, he announced to all the monks that he soon would be passing down his robe and rice bowl to appoint the next master of the monastery. His choice, he said, would be based on a contest. Anyone seeking the appointment was required to demonstrate his spiritual wisdom by submitting a poem.

The head monk, the most obvious successor, presented a poem that was well composed and insightful. All the monks anticipated his selection as their new leader.

The next morning another poem appeared on the wall in the hallway, apparently written during the dark hours of the night. It stunned everyone with its elegance and profundity but no one knew who the author was.

Determined to find this person, the old master began questioning all the monks. To his surprise, the investigation led to the rather quiet kitchen worker who pounded rice for the meals. Upon hearing the news, the jealous head monk and his comrades plotted to kill their rival. In secret, the old master passed down his robe and bowl to the rice pounder, who quickly fled from the monastery, later to become a widely renowned Zen teacher.

People's reactions to this story:

"The person who everyone thinks is best doesn't always end up winning."

"The obvious choice is not always the best choice."

"Expect the unexpected. Take nothing for granted."

"Some people are born leaders."

"Never judge a book by its cover. It's a platitude, but it's true. Everyone has a hidden talent inside them."

"I would tell this story to children who lack self-esteem. It would allow them to see that anyone can accomplish anything, regardless of their appearance, race, money, etc."

"Why is it that the quiet people always seem to be the intelligent ones?"

"This story says a lot about 'little' people. Those who are not well known often are the ones who are well-composed and insightful."

"Power corrupts."



"People you would never expect to be the 'ONE' usually turn out to be the best, if they're just given a chance."

"Sometimes the one you expect least to speak out does so, and does so wonderfully. I think this is a major problem with Americans. They prejudge so quickly."

"The greatest good can exist in the most unlikely places. Some people really hate this fact."

"The people who act like they are smart aren't really smart at all."

"The other monks didn't understand that it was not a contest to find a winner, but to find a believer."

"People of great importance often fail to realize that everyone is equal.... And for the monks who plotted the killing, they are already part dead. "

"The kitchen worker would never have killed for the position. Knowledge (Zen) is not politics."

"Some people will do just about anything to get what they want."

"I guess pounding rice gives you lots of time to meditate and find selflessness."

"When small-minded people don't get what they want, their true colors come out."

"It pisses me off when the successful underdog is attacked for no other reason than just being the best! Were this story told to an impressionable individual, it might frightened that person away from trying to succeed."

"In life, there are no rules."

"Instead of this weak little rice pounder staying in the village, he runs away with the robe and bowl. He could have been an inspiration to the others in the village who didn't succeed! There are always people who are jealous, but to give into them only gives them another victory."

"The rice pounder didn't really want to become the next master. He just wanted to show his self without anyone knowing."

"Reminds me of King Arthur and how he pulled the sword out of the stone - but no one believed him."

"This sounds like Cinderella!"

"People who are truthful and genuine will go furthest in life."

"I guess the old Zen master learned to read the writing on the wall."



Fundamentally no bodhi tree exists
nor the stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is voidness from the beginning,
where can the dust alight?

Surprising the Master

The students in the monastery were in total awe of the elder monk, not because he was strict, but because nothing ever seemed to upset or ruffle him. So they found him a bit unearthly and even frightening. One day they decided to put him to a test. A bunch of them very quietly hid in a dark corner of one of the hallways, and waited for the monk to walk by. Within moments, the old man appeared, carrying a cup of hot tea. Just as he passed by, the students all rushed out at him screaming as loud as they could. But the monk showed no reaction whatsoever. He peacefully made his way to a small table at the end of the hall, gently placed the cup down, and then, leaning against the wall, cried out with shock, "Ohhhhh!"

People's reactions to this story:

"The 'MASTER' was human after all! It took him time to react, but he reacted just the same."

"I doubt that anyone here in America has that kind of concentration and self-control. Very few of us can concentrate on one thing like that."

"Maybe it's a lesson about how even the toughest of us can only be pushed so far."

"This is a lot like meditation and intense concentration on something. It takes a few seconds for things to sink in. You're almost in a daydreaming state of mind."

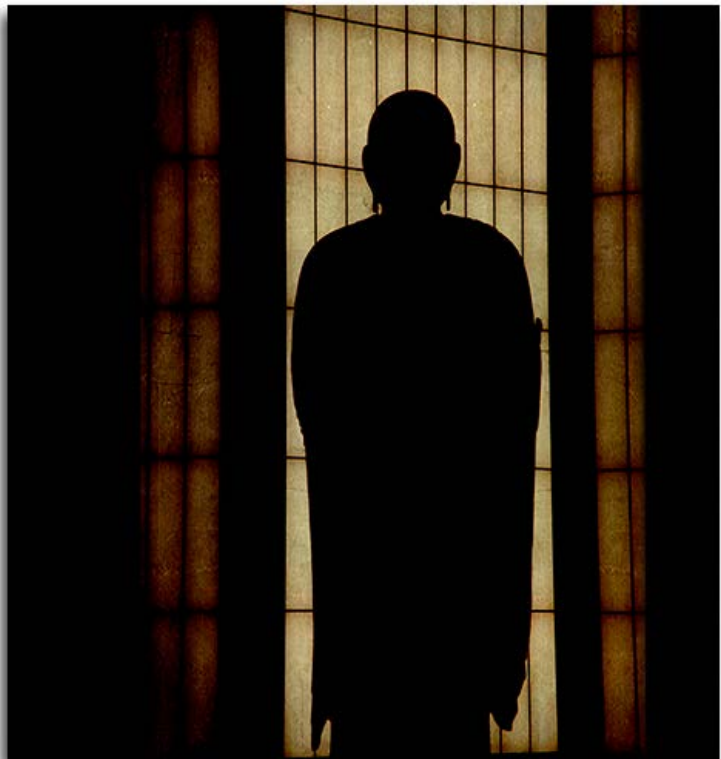
"Don't be disrupted by outside foolery!"

"The master yelling was fear and no fear at the same time. Rather than a reaction, the sound of his cry put all of the monks into samadhi or no mind to free them from their attached states at that moment."

"This reminded me of a mysticism book I once read. It cautioned against being over-impressed by surface trickery that ignores the significance of true awareness."

"Sometimes I may be so wrapped up in a project that someone could come and tell me the most incredible news, but I'll have no idea what they said until I'm no longer focusing on the project."

"I think the students are a bit evil by scheming to scare an old man holding hot tea. Shame on them!"



"Isn't it always that those who are jealous of another just have to plot to find ways to 'demythologize' them!"

"I wanted the monk to remain silent."

"Why did the master yell at all? Did he do it just to satisfy his students? Was it a way for him to get in the last laugh?"

"I don't understand why the monk went over to the table to where the student's couldn't see him. He didn't feel it was necessary for the students to see his emotions?"

"I think the old man held in his fright until he was alone, so the students wouldn't see."

"Some people don't let things bother them. Or maybe they don't like to show their emotions for fear of being vulnerable."

"The monk sounds a lot like me. I tend not to let people see how much things bother me and then I become upset when I'm alone."

"I like the way the story leaves your mind to wander because it cuts off without letting the reader know what the delayed reaction is all about."

"I love that monk! He's got his priorities straight."

"Did he burn himself with the tea?"

"This story reminds me of a lot of sarcastic people I know. You can never scare them or get any emotion out of them. I hate that. It's as if they don't have a soul."

"Not everyone can be emotionless at all times. We all have flaws."

 || Full Awareness || Without Fear || Self-Control ||

Tea Combat

A master of the tea ceremony in old Japan once accidentally slighted a soldier. He quickly apologized, but the rather impetuous soldier demanded the matter be settled in a sword duel.

The tea master, who had no experience with swords, asked the advice of a fellow Zen master who did possess such skill. As he was served by his friend, the Zen swordsman could not help but notice how the tea master performed his art with perfect concentration and tranquility.

"Tomorrow," the Zen swordsman said, "when you duel the soldier, hold your weapon above your head, as if ready to strike, and face him with the same concentration and tranquility with which you perform the tea ceremony."

The next day, at the appointed time and place for the duel, the tea master followed this advice. The soldier, readying himself to strike, stared for a long time into the fully attentive but calm face of the tea master. Finally, the soldier lowered his sword, apologized for his arrogance, and left without a blow being struck.

People's reactions to this story:

"Peace and tranquility are sometimes more powerful and intimidating than anything else."

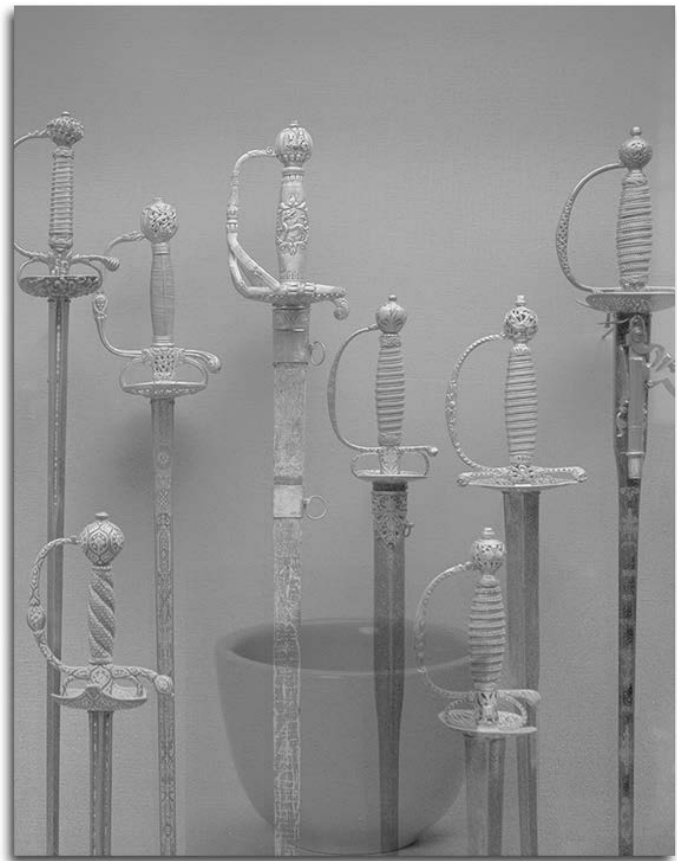
"The tea master showed great courage. That's what stopped the soldier."

"The soldier bowed to the tea master because he had a higher level of confidence."

"If you are perceived as competent and able, you will be considered an equal."

"The story seems to suggest that it is the appearance of the tea master that deters the attack. He looks calm and confident, but it's an illusion. Simple illusions can defeat enemies."

"If you look like you know what you are doing, people will not think otherwise. Where I work all of the supervisors park inside the gate while everyone else parks outside. But if you act like you're SUPPOSED to be inside the gate and drive right through, the security guards won't stop you! It's a matter of confidence."



"All that we ask others to give us we already possess."

"Each of us possesses certain skills, but none of us possesses all skills."

"There is nothing to fear but fear itself."

"I like this story because it demonstrates how you can do things you never thought you could - like face death."

"I really thought the soldier would fight anyway! But I guess people in Japan think differently than we do. Maybe they are more able to see bravery in others, and even step back to swallow their pride."

"I don't like this story because it's not realistic. If you stand your ground and show others you are not afraid, they won't necessarily leave you alone. You might get shot! Hey, I live in the city! What can I tell you."

"Good overpowers evil."

"This reminds me of the movie Star Wars. Oby just stands there and lets Darth Vader strike him down. But as a result, Oby becomes even more powerful than before."

"Musashi Kensei once said something like: 'Underneath the upraised sword you tremble at the gate of hell. But advance fearlessly and there you find heaven.'"

"Seems like some kind of assertiveness training that failed."

"Maybe the tea master's quiet determination made the soldier see that a fight was not necessary. It moved him to see the master's intrinsic worth and to accept the apology that the master had offered."

"The actions that one performs daily may actually be special skills that only others truly see in you. These skills are an extension of who you are. Maybe that's what the soldier suddenly realized about the master."

"It's not easy showing kindness in the face of hostility. But kindness does win over anger. The other person comes away with a changed heart."

"You can't control other people's actions, only your own actions and your own state of mind. This is what stopped the soldier. He couldn't control his own mind, but he saw that the tea master could."

"I like that the tea master didn't try to control what would happen. He just accepted the situation and whatever outcome might result. That's true wisdom. That's what the soldier noticed."

Tea or Iron

The Zen master Hakuin used to tell his students about an old woman who owned a tea shop in the village. She was skilled in the tea ceremony, Hakuin said, and her understanding of Zen was superb. Many students wondered about this and went to the village themselves to check her out. Whenever the old woman saw them coming, she could tell immediately whether they had come to experience the tea, or to probe her grasp of Zen. Those wanting tea she served graciously. For the others wanting to learn about her Zen knowledge, she hid until they approached her door and then attacked them with a fire poker. Only one out of ten managed to escape her beating.

People's reactions to this story:

"I guess if you really want to understand Zen, you better be very alert!"

"There's more to learn about Zen from drinking tea, than discussing it."

"Maybe there's something important to learn about Zen by being whacked with a poker... beats me what it is, though."

"People often have ulterior motives - sometimes good, sometimes bad."

"The old woman didn't like nosy people, did she?"

"The woman wanted company, not people looking to believe in something."

"We look to others not for who they are and to truly experience their talents and abilities, but often 'to get what we can' out of them.... I would probably have been attacked with the poker, unfortunately."

"She didn't like being used for her knowledge of Zen. Maybe that's what she was trying to convey to the students. You can't take Zen from someone else."

"The old woman's lesson is very evil."

"She was a strong woman, for keeping her secret."

"The tea represents good, and Zen represents evil. People are forever faced with this choice. I think she used the poker to persuade people to want the tea."



"Why wouldn't she want to tell people about Zen? Why be so violent and secretive?"

"This reminds me of fairy tales where there is a wicked old woman. It's just another story that portrays women in a negative light."

"All your possessions can be taken from you, but they can never steal your knowledge."

"I don't get this one..... I REALLY don't get it!"

☞ || Full Awareness || Gutei's Finger || Learning the Hard Way ||



Transient

A famous spiritual teacher came to the front door of the King's palace. None of the guards tried to stop him as he entered and made his way to where the King himself was sitting on his throne.

"What do you want?" asked the King, immediately recognizing the visitor.

"I would like a place to sleep in this inn," replied the teacher.

"But this is not an inn," said the King, "It is my palace."

"May I ask who owned this palace before you?"

"My father. He is dead."

"And who owned it before him?"

"My grandfather. He too is dead."

"And this place where people live for a short time and then move on - did I hear you say that it is NOT an inn?"

People's reactions to this story:

""We are ALL here for just a short time, and then move on."

"This is more like a riddle than a story... a riddle about life."

"I like this story because it shows that people in power think that their power or status is permanent. But nothing in life is permanent. People like this need to be put in their place."

"I couldn't tell if this man is ready to die or just needs a place to sleep."

"We live and die and never really own anything. How many people today think this deeply?"

"Materialism and wealth makes you think things will last forever. It's all a defense against the realization that everything eventually passes away."



"An entertaining story. But it doesn't mean much."

"The teacher is trying to show the king that the palace is not his. If the palace represents life itself, then who does it belong to? Does life belong to any one person?"

"Maybe the teacher wanted the king to understand how he should be sharing the wealth."

"People on the road, like the teacher, may have a better grasp of what life is about than people who have entrenched themselves in their possessions and positions."

"This story doesn't remind me of anything, except maybe a dumb joke I might have been told once."

"We are all just passing through 'this thing called life' and time is very short. We should make the best of it while we're here."

"Sooner or later, we all have to move on, both during this life and afterwards."

☞ || Prosperity || Useless Life || Going with the Flow ||

True Self



A distraught man approached the Zen master. "Please, Master, I feel lost, desperate. I don't know who I am. Please, show me my true self!" But the teacher just looked away without responding. The man began to plead and beg, but still the master gave no reply. Finally giving up in frustration, the man turned to leave. At that moment the master called out to him by name. "Yes!" the man said as he spun back around. "There it is!" exclaimed the master.

People's reactions to this story:

"I think the Zen master was trying to show him that his 'true self' was giving up too easily. He needs to be patient and then he will know who he really is."

"When this man doesn't get what he wants, he gives up and runs away. He's a quitter. He's frustrated. The master wanted to demonstrate this to him so they could then talk about it."

"His true self is that he doesn't push enough for what he wants. He gives up too easily. You should strive for your goals and never give up."

"Makes me think of the times I would ask my father to help me with homework. I would ask him a question, and he would say, 'Well, what do you think.' I always got really frustrated because I thought that if I was asking him then I didn't know the answer myself. But he was right. I always did come up with the solution myself."

"Only you can find yourself. He is who he is. The master showed him that by calling his name."

"Your true self is who you are - that's it!"

"No one can tell you who you are. You have to do that yourself."

"He who loses himself in a crowd always asks for guidance from elders. But when shunned, they are willing to walk away and search for the truth."

"This man only knew himself through his own name. He saw himself only through others."

"I have no clue what this is supposed to mean."

"I guess you will discover the most important things about yourself when you least expect to. There must be an element of surprise! When you're desperate, or trying too hard, you overlook things."

"You must surrender, give up, in order to really discover who you are."

"You have to give up on certain qualities of yourself, to unburden yourself, in order to find your true self."

"Is the master telling him that his identity IS his name?"

"I find it too simple that one's identity exists solely in one's name."

"You can't be distraught and get spiritual help - you have to go with the flow."

"Thinking about this story drove me bonkers!"

 || Masterpiece || Dreaming || When Tired ||

A Useless Life



A farmer got so old that he couldn't work the fields anymore. So he would spend the day just sitting on the porch. His son, still working the farm, would look up from time to time and see his father sitting there.

"He's of no use any more," the son thought to himself, "he doesn't do anything!"

One day the son got so frustrated by this, that he built a wood coffin, dragged it over to the porch, and told his father to get in. Without saying anything, the father climbed inside. After closing the lid, the son dragged the coffin to the edge of the farm where there was a high cliff. As he approached the drop, he heard a light tapping on the lid from inside the coffin. He opened it up. Still lying there peacefully, the father looked up at his son.

"I know you are going to throw me over the cliff, but before you do, may I suggest something?"

"What is it?" replied the son.

"Throw me over the cliff, if you like," said the father, "but save this good wood coffin. Your children might need to use it."

People's reactions to this story:

"What's useless to one person isn't useless to another."

"Everyone is here for a reason, even if it isn't obvious."

"There is nothing useless in life, if God created it. Everything has a purpose. Sometimes when you think something is useless, there will come a day when you need that very thing."

"Each person has their own unique flaws and imperfections. But it's all part of the purpose and meaning of his or her life. Nobody can decide for another what the purpose of that person's life is."

"Maybe the story suggests that when someone loses all meaning and purpose in life, there's no reason to resist death.... But you better be careful about what you assume is meaningless."

"The farmer wanted the son to realize how cold-hearted he could be."

"The father is saying to the son; from your perspective I'm as good as dead, but son you will realize who I am- when you are me ;) "

"That father was truly patient with his son's misunderstanding."

"This story gave me an uneasy, horrid feeling. I was shocked by the father's last statement."

"The wise man always wins in the end, even in the worst of circumstances."

"It's so easy to forget what knowledge and experience any one person has, especially older people who have been around for a long time. Our society tends to define a person's usefulness in terms of their physical capabilities and what they can DO. We tend to forget that human worth is in the mind and heart."

"If we went about things the way the son did, every time we got frustrated or felt we were the only ones working hard, sooner or later we'd wind up throwing everyone off a cliff."

"It's interesting that the story is about human worth, but the father points out the worth of the coffin. Some people are more concerned about material things than about an old man dying. Maybe some of us are unable to appreciate human worth, so we focus on the value of THINGS."

"I like the humor in this story."

"Why did the father get into the coffin in the first place? I'm glad he made that sarcastic remark at the end. I can't believe a son would do this. What kind of life philosophy leads you to think you should push your own father over a cliff?"

"Be careful! Your children someday may do to you exactly what you did to your parents. All bad things that you do will eventually come back to haunt you. It's karma."

"What goes around, comes around."

"As far as I'm concerned the son should be shot. The father worked hard all his life to provide for his children. I'm sure the father does not particularly like being old. So have some respect!"

"This story reminds me of when my father was in a depression. But we didn't throw him over a cliff. The family pulled together and helped him recover."

"We're all going to get old and useless someday, but that's life. We have to be strong enough to help those who need our help, and also confident enough to let ourselves be helped."

"We often don't stop to realize what we're doing until it's too late."

"I am surprised at how many of the reactions to this story seem to ignore the obvious reason for the old man's comment-this is a joke! Like it or hate it, the author created this for the primary reason to make you laugh. These are not meant to be real people in this story.... As to the meaning behind the joke-I believe it is just to point out the usefulness of things that are not immediately obvious to being useful. Like spending a day to get to a store where something is on sale, and not realizing that the time you waste getting there might be worth more than the amount you save on the purchase."

 || Prosperity || Transient || Successor ||

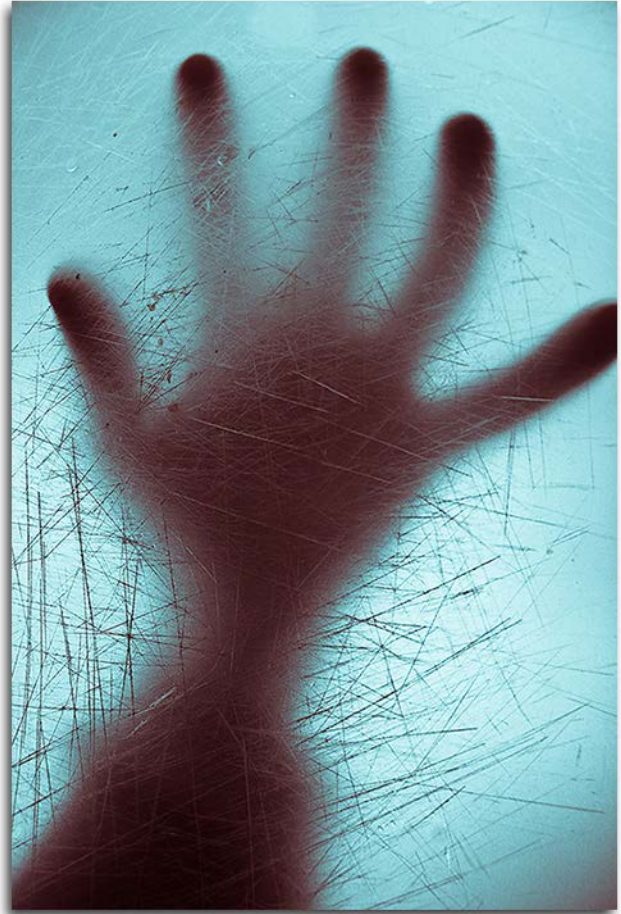
Wanting God

A hermit was meditating by a river when a young man interrupted him. "Master, I wish to become your disciple," said the man. "Why?" replied the hermit. The young man thought for a moment. "Because I want to find God."

The master jumped up, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, dragged him into the river, and plunged his head under water. After holding him there for a minute, with him kicking and struggling to free himself, the master finally pulled him up out of the river. The young man coughed up water and gasped to get his breath. When he eventually quieted down, the master spoke. "Tell me, what did you want most of all when you were under water."

"Air!" answered the man.

"Very well," said the master. "Go home and come back to me when you want God as much as you just wanted air."



People's reactions to this story:

"Sometimes people aren't serious when it comes to God and religion. They should be willing to dedicate their whole lives to him if they are truly serious. You must do it with passion."

"For the young man to truly want God he must put all other wishes and needs aside. God must become the center of his life."

"This reminds me of the passages in the Bible when Jesus tells people that they must give up everything in order to follow him to God."

"This life needs to take the backseat if you pursue God. If you are seriously pursuing God, you are preparing for the afterlife."

"A person who really wants God and has lived a righteous life should not fear death. The young man doesn't want to get close to God, he wants to live. Anyone who wants God should expect death at any moment and know that this death will bring him closer to God, if he has lived a good life."

"The will to live is sometimes stronger than wanting God in your life."

"If you want to find God bad enough, you don't need someone else's help."

"Any person who truly wished to find God would immediately think of him when they were almost drowned!"

"People sometimes want something but are afraid to give something else up in order to achieve it."

"This is a reality check. Wanting God means becoming his servant. You have to put your priorities in order and know 100% what you are looking for, and what you will sacrifice along the way."

"Reminds me of sports - you can say you want to be the best, but you have to really want it to accomplish it. Takes practice and hard work. Anyone can just say it."

"Of course the young man wanted air - he was being drowned! That would have been any normal person's response!... But does that mean that any normal person wants God?"

"This hermit has a bug up his ass. He wants fanatical followers or none at all. He SHOULD stay away from people."

"The hermit was a bit extreme. How is the man supposed to find God at home if he has already gone looking. This story makes me angry."

"What was the hermit going to do? Was he going to kill the young man to see how much he wanted to be with God?"

"The hermit wanted to know if the young man could trust him."

"Like air, God helps us and makes us able to breathe life."

"God is not an essential for life, like air is. It's something that people only think they need. If everyone found out tomorrow that there really is a god, or that there isn't, we'd all go on living the same way anyhow."

"This story seems totally irrelevant to me."

"This story focuses on the difference between needs and wants."

"People always want something in life. They're never satisfied with what they have."

"This story shows the frivolity with which people, and societies, go about life without any compassion for anything. It seems like it's only in times of crisis or depression that people are able to FEEL for anyone. We don't appreciate the everyday phenomena with the zest we should."

"I wonder if God would expect the man to want him more than air."

"Why doesn't God make himself known to me? Why must I pursue Him?"

When Tired



A student once asked his teacher, "Master, what is enlightenment?"

The master replied, "When hungry, eat. When tired, sleep."

People's reactions to this story:

"Living in the now is the most difficult task for us humans. Most live in the past or future."

"Pleasures are simple things. Make the most of what you have."

"Enlightenment may not be an unachievable task - it may be right in front of us all the time."

"You have to accept and enjoy the basics before you can understand the more complicated aspects of life."

"Do what you want to do. You are not given instructions on how to act. When you feel a need, fulfill it."

"If you satisfy your needs, you will be happy."

"Complexity is not always needed to get the job done. Life is only as difficult as we make it out to be."

"The master is truly at peace."

"This doesn't sound like much of story, even though the message makes sense. It sounds like something a child would come up with. I would like to ask my boyfriend about this statement, because he seems to like these kinds of things."

"When your body signals messages to you, and you answer your body's questions, you will reach happiness. It reminds me of last night. It was dinner time, but I didn't feel like eating. I was exhausted. So I laid down to take a nap, and woke up when my body wanted to wake up. I felt very revived and happy, and was able to go back to the work that I had to finish that night. I guess I was "enlightened" because I listen to my body."

"To know yourself is enlightenment."

"I think he means you choose what your enlightenment is."

 || Masterpiece || Useless Life || True Self ||

Without Fear

During the civil wars in feudal Japan, an invading army would quickly sweep into a town and take control. In one particular village, everyone fled just before the army arrived - everyone except the Zen master. Curious about this old fellow, the general went to the temple to see for himself what kind of man this master was. When he wasn't treated with the deference and submissiveness to which he was accustomed, the general burst into anger.

"You fool," he shouted as he reached for his sword, "don't you realize you are standing before a man who could run you through without blinking an eye!"

But despite the threat, the master seemed unmoved. "And do you realize," the master replied calmly, "that you are standing before a man who can be run through without blinking an eye?"

(other versions of this story then describe how the general, awed by the master, sheepishly rides out of the town)

People's reactions to this story:

""Happy are those who do not fear death. They know no fear and therefore cannot be controlled."

"It takes a lot more strength and courage to be a non-violent person."

"The captain goes down with his ship, just like the zen master stays with the village and confronts the invaders."

"There is a similar idea in American Indian culture. When you were being tortured to death by your enemy, you could still defeat your enemy, and in a sense win the battle, if you showed bravery and didn't scream."

"STEELY RESERVE - I love it! This feat could only be accomplished by one who fears nothing and understands the course of life."

"There are certain kinds of people who get attacked more often than others. I would tell this story to children who are always being harassed by other kids."

"The sword does not make the man."

"Sounds neat, in a chivalrous kind of way!"



"I'm not quite sure of the meaning of this story, but I liked how the master replied."

"This Zen master obviously exists on a high spiritual level. His body is unimportant to him."

"I find this story a bit humorous. The master is quite a funny guy. It makes me wonder how the general replied. His mouth probably dropped!"

"This general is obviously a selfish man. Why else would he conquer all those towns? And then when he doesn't get what he wants, he childishly resorts to anger and violence."

"It's the master's wisdom and his possession of such a closeness with self that intrigues me. These attributes could allow you to touch the lives of an infinite number of people, as well as deal with any kind of adversity."

"I don't agree with the Zen master's decision to stay. I think his so-called 'wisdom' - or stupidity, will lead to his eventual downfall."

"He showed no attempt to defend himself or his village - that's kind lame!"

"The Zen master had the courage to stand up for what he wanted and wasn't afraid to die for it. Making a solid decision, that's what this is about. He proudly stood his ground and took responsibility for his actions, and I bet this probably warded off the general."

"Too many people let fear run their lives."

"You shouldn't flee from disputes, but rather face them head on with both eyes open."

"This story shows man's innate courage and unwillingness to be intimidated, something which in many of us is inherently absent."

"Self-control: it's not what you say but how you say it. The only time the general was intimidating and violent is when others allowed him to be."

"People instantly recognized someone who is internally strong."

"This makes no sense to me. I think that standing up to someone should be encouraged, but not when the consequences are that severe!"

"The master could be in complete control, or he could be insane."

Working Very Hard

A martial arts student went to his teacher and said earnestly, "I am devoted to studying your martial system. How long will it take me to master it." The teacher's reply was casual, "Ten years." Impatiently, the student answered, "But I want to master it faster than that. I will work very hard. I will practice everyday, ten or more hours a day if I have to. How long will it take then?" The teacher thought for a moment, "20 years."

(in other versions of this story, the student says he is eager to attain "enlightenment")

People's reactions to this story:

"The student is too eager. The master is trying to tell him that he needs to learn patience first."

"Sometimes, if you try too hard, you just get in your own way. It makes you anxious, which just blocks understanding. Some things have to develop naturally, by themselves."

"This story makes me think about life. If you want to do something, then just let it happen. Don't push it. the harder you try, the longer it will take."

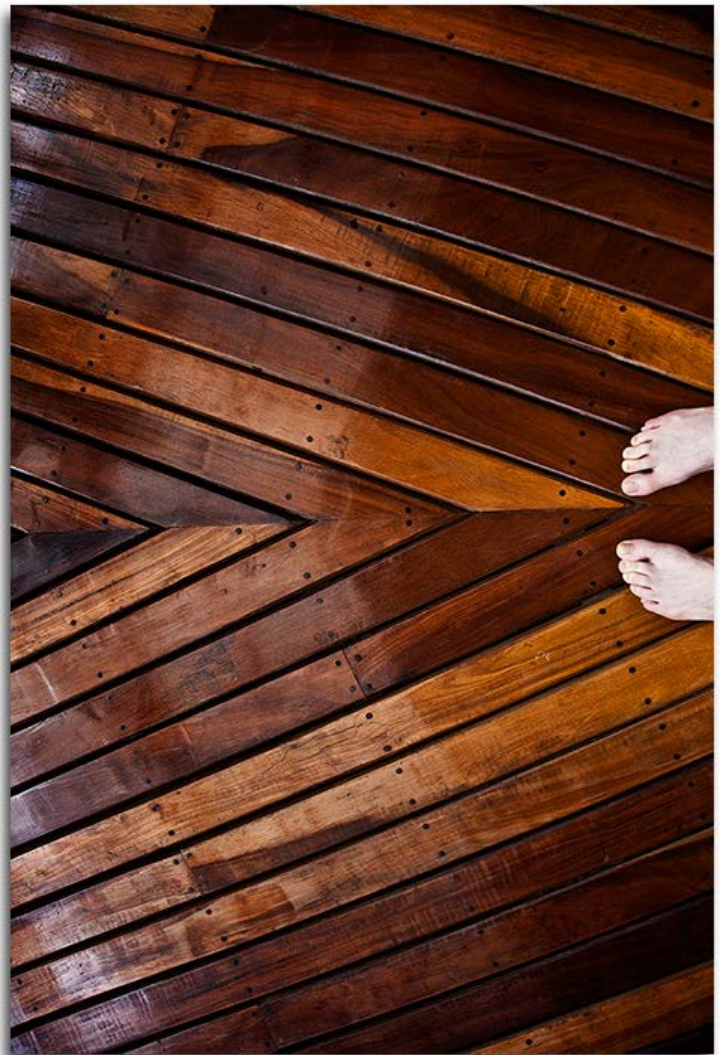
"You can't rush true leaning. You have to take it one step at a time."

"Reminds me of dieting. If you loose weight slow or by a natural method, it works much better than trying to do it quickly and compulsively."

"Live for the moment. Don't rush things and worry so much about later. Let it flow. I would tell this story to those Type-A personalities who are always pushing in life."

"Usually we are taught that the more effort we put into a task, the greater the reward. Then why is someone like this student, who is showing so much zeal, rebuffed by the master like this?"

"Maybe this means that the harder you work at something, the more there is to learn. The more you want to learn, the more there is to learn."



"You have to LIVE what you are studying."

"The master is trying to tell the student to slow down, experience life, be self-aware. Maybe he is even trying to tell him to not be so preoccupied with the martial arts."

"Get a life, already!"

"Mastery doesn't come just from practice alone."

"The student wanted to study the martial arts for the wrong reasons. He is immature in what he wants and expects. It probably would take him 20 years before he realized this."

"You can't ever master the martial arts."

"I've been in therapy for many years and now I wonder just how long it will take for me to master my problems. I guess it will take time."

"This story reminds me of Aristotle who said that we should search for the mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency."

"The student can't hear the answer the master is giving him because he is asking the wrong question. He anticipates eagerly what will only come naturally."

"Don't just talk it, DO IT!"

"Haste makes waste!"

"I recently had this conversation with a workmate about the distinction between people who sail, and people who drive power boats (!)."

"I know this story doesn't come from our western culture, but it reminds me of us. People always want to get things over with as quick as possible. They want to accomplish everything yesterday!"

FAQs

Where do these stories come from?

The stories come from my own collection of books on Zen, Buddhism, Taoism, and eastern philosophy. I make no claims about their authenticity as "true" Zen or Taoist stories. But they ARE stories that I've often seen in more than one book. The stories I collected here first appeared online in my website *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors*, first uploaded in 2003 and then revised several times.



Where can I find a book with more Zen stories?

There are many books out now about Zen, and many of them contain stories. One classic book is Paul Reps' "Zen Flesh, Zen Bones" which contains lots of Zen stories and anecdotes. Many of the stories that I like best from Reps' book have been adapted for this site.

In addition to a website format, can you provide one downloadable file that contains all the stories?

At last, here it is! In its original website format, I experiment with hypertext. The links at the bottom of each story take you to other stories with a similar or opposing theme compared to the story in front of you. If you use that method of circulating through the stories (rather than returning to the main page each time), you will find yourself creating a path through the land of Zen - your OWN path. There might be something very meaningful about the path you create for yourself!

How about some MORE Zen stories?

I maintain this site in my spare (ha!) time. About once a month or so I modify it, either by adding one or two new stories, new comments from readers, or other improvements (like an FAQ page!). In the meanwhile, read over the stories you've already seen. There's enough here right now to keep you busy on the path to enlightenment for..... well..... a lifetime. Remember, a Zen student may work on one koan for YEARS and not penetrate its full depth!

I don't like those comments on the same page as the stories. Can't you put them on separate pages?

I could, but I find the comments as fascinating up-front additions to the stories, even the "dumb" comments from which we can learn. The purpose of this web site is to convey stories that you can tell your neighbors. To prepare yourself for the storytelling, it's a good idea to see how various people react to the stories. As you can see, your neighbor might not have the same reaction you did!

Are you a Zen Buddhist?

If I said I was, I'd be lying... then again, if I said I wasn't, I'd probably be lying too.

and More Comments

Be the Ball

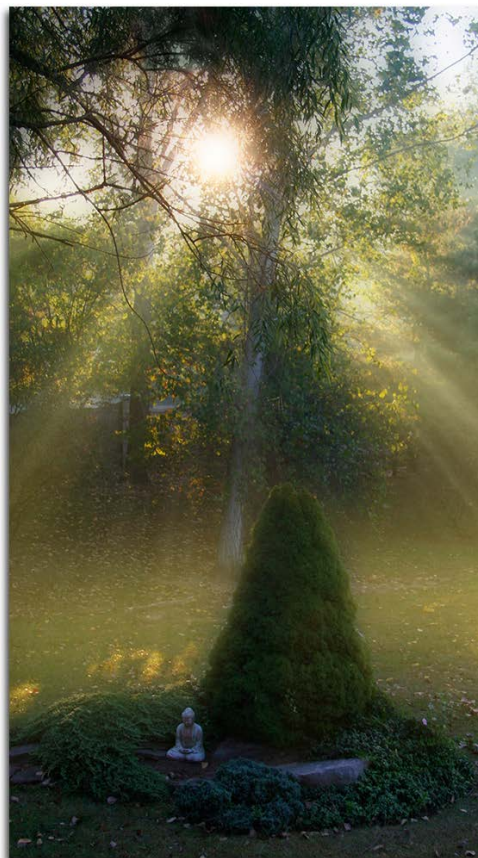
The stories often remind me of one of my religion teachers at a Catholic High School. Father Jack often told similar stories in class. I wish I could remember some of them. Incidentally, he was a great golfer. I don't know if that was from Zen or the priesthood.

Like and Dislike

I've been reading these zen stories for few weeks. Two or three times a week, from three to five stories each time. It's really strange that some days I like every or almost every story and on other days I like only one or none. Maybe I should read them all again. Well, I won't do it yet.

Stupid Comments

Those comments are stupid. Zen doesn't need any commentary. I enjoy the stories more when I do not choose to read the comments following them. It's like having a high school year book signed. People use trivial cliches to sum up there limited grasp on the story. My grasp may be as limited as theirs from time to time. But when I am contemplating thoughts that fill my mind with wonder and retrospective thought, those comments can be a real buss kill. Wonderful revelations that I can barely grasp seem to fly away from my mind like birds into the void. But here I am writing a comment. I enjoy the irony.



A Better Life

I felt the need to sincerely thank you for providing such a useful and purposeful site. Each time I read a new story I can relate it directly to a situation in my life. It has improved my thinking and my relationships with other individuals immensely.

Fooled You!

Most of those who responded with comments have over-analyzed. In fact, the very act of asking for comments is a Zen trick. Understanding comes without words.

Crap

I'm used to Zen stories of high quality.. this was Crap.

How 'bout Some Links?

It may be helpful to provide a link on your page to some of the Buddhist pages on the web, especially some that could help explain Zen a little. i realize that the mere idea that Zen can be "explained" by simply reading about its history (or whatever can fit on a web page) is a dualistic delusion, but it may be a good way for new visitors to get their feet wet if they are intrigued by the stories. visitors might be surprised at the many schools of thought there are out there that are grouped under the Buddhist umbrella.

Song of the Bird

Thank you for sharing such a spiritual site with us, I do appreciate it. I have seen most of these stories in compilations by Anthony DeMello ("The Song of the Bird" etc...) . They are indeed a way of touching chords deep within us, and I am grateful for your efforts.

No Pain, No Gain

Such "litmus test" stories are fine classics, but they obscure the long term hard work needed to really make a success of the results. Ben Franklin's aphorism does capture that: "genius is 99% sweat.

If you have ice cream I will give you some.

If you have no ice cream I will take it away.

Yes, this is an ice cream koan.

Transcendental Unity

I like your stories so much that every week I post one of your stories out side my cubicle door at work. Its my "Zen story of the week" I guess you could say that I am telling my neighbors, eh? I am a Catholic, and I notice a lot of similarities between these stories and the parables I hear in church. I have the feeling that all religions come from the same source, and this just adds to that belief.



Who Owns Zen?

Are any of these stories copyrighted?? None of them seem to have an author. I read that you collected them from various books, so I would assume they have some sort of copy protection. Or, are all of these stories so old as to be exempt from ownership? I'd like to know, since there are a couple that I would LOVE to use for a project I'm working on.

Non Sequitur

One thing is for sure drugs will destroy your mind and your home... I love gett'n totally smashed and eat'n weed cake then following it up with some E or coke. How 'bout that neighbor?

Campfire Chat

I loved your Zen stories, John. The reactions from others made the stories come alive, as if were were all sitting together around a virtual campfire. The thing I liked most about the experience is that there is no chance of virtual marshmallows getting burnt. ;-)

Getting Those Who Don't Get It

Which do you find more fascinating? The responses of the people that just don't get it, or the responses of the people that just don't get the people that just don't get it? Though this could be taken has having humorous intent I really do want to know. After reading the responses of people that "just don't get it" I caught myself wondering in the third person if I was missing something. Even though I am sure I am "missing" something I thought I'd ask you your thoughts on the "THEY" just don't get it train of thought.

Refreshing

Deep, enlightening,pure and simple as a small refreshing spring that runs through your fingers.

Distracting Comments

I would like to be able to think about each story when I finish it. I'm kind of a compulsive reader, so I immediately begin reading the comments when I've finished each story. I do think it would be interesting to see what others have to say about the stories, but I'd rather form my own opinions without the distraction of others' response.

Bark Like a Dog

If I were a zen master and if by some outside chance I were to read your collection I would say to no one in particular: The meaning of all is "bark like a dog." There is either understanding of what I said or not. That is or it isn't and that is Zen.

Stop This Injustice

I am touched by the Zen stories that you have put up. Though your intentions are good, I see an injustice. Just anybody and everybody is allowed to comment on Zen masters' actions. It hurts to read people's remarks. I value enlightenment, being with my master. So I also value what Zen masters have got in life. So kindly stop this injustice. Zen is for each one to experience his or her own way, others' comments only corrupt it.

From the Heart

I like it very much when academics speak with humility and communicate from the heart. That is my experience of your stories.

Shake It Up

There seem to be three links to other stories at the bottom of each page. To arrange the links between stories according to the themes you identify is to say that the only proper arrangement of the stories is the one you understand. It would be interesting if three random links were served with every new page view. I am suggesting going into your neatly kept garden and shaking the tree.

Fake

i think you made up some of the stories. sorry 4 the disturb

Come Again?

I think the relinquishment of desire is almost the totality of the path. Beyond this it becomes a choice. What one thinks about how one thinks about why one thinks about What one sees how one sees why one sees things the way they do. Subtle attention to the processes within one's self Maintaining the focus Minor adjustments. Tweaking the controls if you will. Looking at the world through colored glasses of one's choice. I like your sight and your site.



The Decline of Western Civilization

I just want to say that the way you've run this site, and the content on it is something I really appreciate. You used sickeningly futuristic technology, and incorporated into it ideas and philosophies that seem to be increasingly passed over as ancient and out of date jibber jabber, which it only is to the unenlightened, materialistic jerks of a capitalistic and competitive society.

Descartes in Saffron?

I was interested in several of the stories in that they seemed to cover the metaphysical and epistemological processes that Descartes tried to unravel in the Meditations. I am studying Philosophy (Politics and Economics) at Oxford and have studied Descartes in some detail last year. I wonder if he read any Buddhist teaching!

Drop Dead

These are all interesting stories and worked well for Zen masters in enlightening their ripe disciples in the stories by dropping their minds dead. Reactions to these stories by us readers cannot help anyone since we all have our minds alive. Drop dead your own mind by finding its source.

Gilligan's Isle of Zen

My office mates and I were planning on adding a response to each Zen story that referenced Gilligan Island, such as "Yeah! I remember in such-n-such episode where Gilligan did the say thing to Skipper", or "The Professor said the same thing once on Gilligan Island!" These responses sure would have fit nicely with a few of the others! Lucky for you we are too lazy to carry out our ill-conceived malicious conspiracies.

Company Perk

Just found your page. My company will send you the bill for (wasting) my time. ;)

Americans Eat Paradox

Respondents seem to think the american mind is uniquely unsuited to gleaning wisdom from any of the stories. i wonder why that is ... also, and i guess this is a function of the low self esteem thing, nobody wants to accept paradox in these stories. the ones with the most open-ended conclusions seem to provoke a lot of outrage. hmmm...

Zen Munchies

I have been visiting the site in my spare time for a couple of days now, and was trying to read just a couple of stories at a time, in order to prolong my enjoyment, but the damn things are just like peanuts! naturally, i've gone through all of them as of this date... guess i'll just have to reread the more inscrutable tales until some new ones come along.



Hot Dog!

A Zen student went up to a hot dog vendor and said,
"make me one with everything."

Zen Chocolate

i stumbled onto your stories, and really took away some food for thought. the stories are very rich, like something chocolate. i think that i will only read a few, then come back some other time when i have finished digesting them! (wow!, a lot of food analogies. sorry about that!)



A Little Help for My Friends

Not only do the stories help me to relax in the morning, when I'm getting ready for work, but they give me something to think about during the day. I am very thankful for these stories and want to extend my thanks to you for making them available. Lately, while me and my friends are sitting in a restaurant, hanging out at my house, or just driving down the road, I have been sharing these stories with them. Each time I have been amazed at their reactions. The discussion which results from the thoughtful interpretations of each story is nothing short of amazing. Thanks again for making these stories available. I commend you on your work.

The Meaning of It All

I'd just like to ask you the main essence of these stories, what are the real insights to these paragraphs. In other words "If these stories were just long winding questions, What would be the answer?"

Crystally Unclear

This site is: "A monument to ambiguity zen stories high".

Zen English

My second hour english class has become a great place to relate Zen Stories. The only problem is I feel like the child who always pointed at the sky when people began talking about Zen; the stories carry much more wisdom than I, the storyteller, do.

A Poem

You perverse puppeteer,
dealer of existentialism to the masses.
I'll have some please.
I'm an addict don't you know.
For the reactions, not the stories,
are the best of the show.

Missed the Point

My friend here and I are arguing. He believes I've missed the point. I believe the point is what I make it. Missing the point is therefore an impossibility.

Being Wise

This is one of the funniest places I have ever been on the Internet. The people's comments are more enlightening than the stories. Many sound like a combination of Jack Handy's Deep Thoughts and Beavis. I had to laugh out loud so many times. This site was a good idea by the way but I guess you realize that by now. Are you a Zen Master or just a wise guy? Thanks for the laughs.

Who

MY STORY IS wHo IS ZEN?

Cliff Hanger

I feel as if I were the old man on the cliff, upon discovering something completely unexpected far below him; I stumbled upon your site purely by chance, and cannot even retrace my steps. Having done so, I feel very rewarded for having used idle time wisely. I have found an unexpected jewel.

The Beholder's Eye

Is there a "true" accepted meaning to these stories, or only want the reader perceives?

Owning Zen

It reminds me when I started school in the first grade. The teacher called me to the front of room to recognize my birthday. She pointed out a music box with a crank. I thought it was for me. She indicated that I was to turn the crank. She was letting me play it, not own it. This memory has lasted longer than I suspect the music box would have. The Internet and the Zen Stories are something like that.

Who me? A Threat?

Based on my responses to the short stories, in your opinion, am I a threat to myself or others? ;~)

Minimalist Meditation

These passages seem to require quite a bit of meditation to comprehend the fullness...or maybe the minimalness...of their meanings.



Who Needs an Explanation?

As a Buddhist, I have some mixed feelings about your "project". My "understanding" of Zen koans (both stories and riddles) are to enable students of Zen to gain insight into the experience of life/living. The "point" of most koans is that of "direct experience," and your request for readers to "explain" their "understanding" of these stories deflects their primary goal (IMHO). Sooo, while walking down a Zen monastery path, a student cannot pass his master and say nothing, nor can he stop and talk with him. What does he do?

Censoring the Negatives

Particularly interesting to me is the varied reactions to the stories. I compliment you on publishing these responses without censoring the negative responses. Often, the responses sounding the most intellectual offer the most negative criticism and the least perception. Zen masters would find that interesting, no doubt.



It's Getting Old

how about some newer material?

Better Net

You have made the internet a better place.

ROFL

I really love the quality of the stories here. And the responses of the people: Christ!! How do you keep from rolling on the floor in laughter at these?!!!

Empty Tracks

I was walking along some railroad tracks some months ago, and I came upon a child. The child looked at me and asked "is there a train on the tracks?" I looked at him and said "Yes, somewhere"

Zen Therapy

I think what you've done here, perhaps unwittingly, is build a therapeutic site. Even if you don't have time to read and respond to everything, you are still the invisible

listener...and because you are invisible, we feel freer to trust you. I have really enjoyed writing my comments, because I feel part of a group, and yet I don't have to worry about the reactions of the group. I don't feel threatened by the thought that somebody might not like what I say.

Zen Misery

How about: Now that I'm enlightened, I'm just as miserable as ever.

What Modern People Know

One can't help but admire the apparent simplicity yet at the same time great depth these thought provoking stories possess. If I had one suggestion it would be that you separate the "People's Reactions to the Story" from the story itself, perhaps by a link so the story remains stark and uncluttered on the page. I myself am drawn to the timelessness of the tales, and prefer not to be "contaminated" with modern interpretation. At the same time, I realize I am viewing these ancient stories through the miracle of the World Wide Web while SLIP-ed into my ISP through a 28.8 modem, so I guess it's pretty hard to fully escape the modern world anyway!

More Hate for the Comments

I just wanted to write to tell you that I love your pages! However, I HATE HATE HATE the comments after them! They are so distracting! Yes, I know I shouldn't read them but I can't help it - it's like looking at the scene of an accident. The one after the Christian Buddha - "I guess even a Zen master can be illiterate" because he hasn't read the Bible?! Ahhrrgh - do you pick out the most idiotic comments on purpose?

Doctor This!

Why tell us that you have a PHD ? You'd better stand in the present. Your PHD is of the past. Isn't it ?

PhD Defense

Somebody commented negatively on the "Ph.D." designation--in my case, I said, "Oh--it's some sort of academic" (You could have been lying about the Ph. D., of course--but would an academic lie?) and I felt comfortable writing you because I am biased in favour of people with formal education. (Even though I have serious reservations about the way it is done--I sort of want to go back to the "wise man under the tree" approach. But can we ever go back? Does anyone ever really seek wisdom for its own sake?)



Still More Complaints about the Reactions

I think it will be better if you just removed those comments made by others. Those comments are simply irritating. Some people, not understanding the actual message of the story, write nonsense. I know getting irritated is just not good. Even so, I request you to remove all the comments from the Zen stories.

Right Thinking

I love to read these stories as they make me think, and think, and think. I am sad that I have no understanding of Zen and what it means so I feel that my reactions to these stories are way off the mark, despite the realisation that the essence of what they are saying is very real to me. These stories have sparked in me an interest to learn more about this 'way of thinking', which is forgotten by most of us in our pointless lives. Thank you very much for taking the time to put them in this wonderful WWW.

No Opinion

I read your pages with great interest. I guess I just don't understand the point. The stories, as you present them are just that, just meaningless stories. They are in fact part of a collection of Kong-ans (Korean), Koans (Japanese), Kung-ans (Chinese), with the questions removed. The point of these stories, along with their attached questions is to help the individual who is struggling with the question to eliminate a false understanding of this universe. They are, in fact, designed to teach an individual correct situation, condition and relationship.... all the responses are just peoples opinions, and how can another opinion help us in this world. You must put down your opinion, condition and situation. Only then can you begin to see, touch, taste, smell and feel the truth.... This is the purpose of these "stories" as you call them. So I guess I don't understand your purpose with the web site. Perhaps you could enlighten me?



Missed the Boat

The Zen stories are quite enlightening but the surprisingly large number of people who, by their "reaction", entirely missed the point of many of the stories is rather saddening.

Is this Zen?

Some of the stories certainly did not seem ZEN to me. They seemed contrived to try and look like it. My previous experience with ZEN stories was different. It usually was a bid on the part of story teller to cut through our process of conceptual and perceptual division of things, built through words and thought (basically cut through duality or Advaita). Some of the stories fell out of this category, also the 'feel' was not ZEN. Could you please explain this?

Me? A Zen Master?

i read your page and found that you might not be a master at all. why read this and then reply, cant read this than you did not fly.

Rocky Road

Possibly my favorite zen quote is from my best friend, who taught me how to rock climb (which he once described as full-body zen chess). He said, "If you find a hold, grab it. If you don't, grab it with both hands!"

Salute

For the past 20 years I have been training in various contexts in corporations, institutes, etc. I salute you for your energy in putting a superb (ly generative) collection of Zen stories together. Even more heartfelt thanks for your apparent generosity. I will make these stories available to other consultant and training colleagues of mine - who are always on the look out for metaphores in training.

Non-Judgmental

Also, the way you non-judgmentally include everyone's comments is a very good idea.

Those Reactions.... AHA!

I felt rather arrogant reading some of the responses to the story, and then a comment by someone who didn't "get it" crystalized the story for me perfectly, and I understood.

Don't Worry. Be Happy!

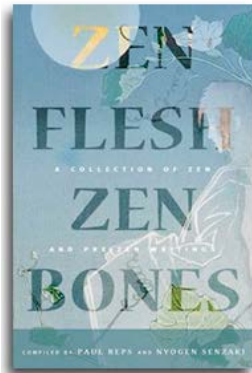
I have a friend who is totally preoccupied with finding unconditional happiness. I wonder if this is possible? She seems to be working too hard at it. Do you have any stories relating to unconditional happiness specifically (I know they all relate to happiness in some way)

The Complete Answer

""

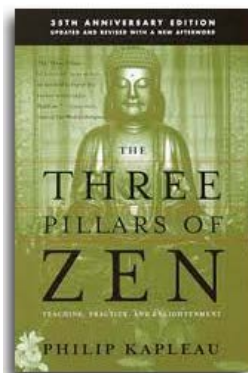
Reviews and Recommendations

When doing background research for *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors*, as well as in writing my book *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Eastern Thought* (listed at the bottom of this page), I read quite a few works about eastern philosophy, Taoism, and especially Zen. Here are some of the classics that I would recommend.



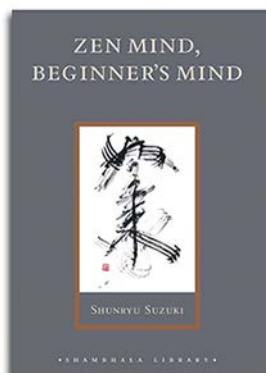
Zen Flesh, Zen Bones - Paul Reps

Since it first appeared in 1957, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* has become one of the most popular books about Zen Buddhism. It includes 101 classic Zen stories; a collection of traditional koans that are designed to free the mind of dualistic thinking; the Ten Bulls commentary on the stages leading to enlightenment, and the 4000 year old *Centering* which is considered one of the roots of Zen.



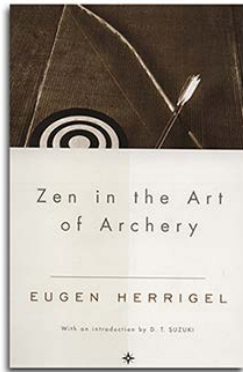
The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment - Philip Kapleau

This well known classic by Roshi Kapleau, former spiritual director of the Rochester Zen Center, is a comprehensive voyage into the fundamental aspects of what Zen teaches, how its followers practice meditation and other aspects of the Zen way, and what the experience of enlightenment means. It is widely considered to be one of the pillars of Zen literature in the west.



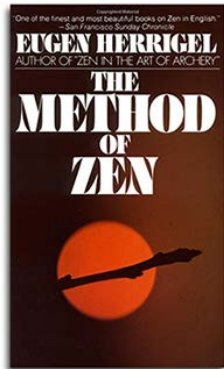
Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind - Shunryu Suzuki

Written in a deceptively simple, clear, poetic, and down-to-earth style, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* skillfully guides the reader into the profound realm of the Zen experience. His reference to the "beginner's mind" is his way of letting us know that our true nature and the true nature of all things is right in front of us. All we have to is learn how to open our eyes. If you were to read only one book about Zen, this would be it.



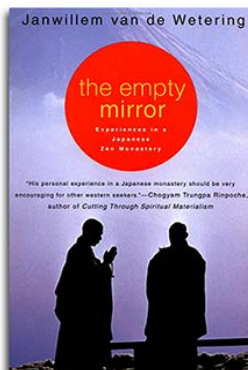
Zen in the Art of Archery - Eugen Herrigel

This classic by German philosopher Eugen Herrigel was one of the very first personal accounts of what it's like to study Zen, the ancient Japanese way. In his training with an archery master during the 1920s, Herrigel's goal was to learn how to release the arrow without thinking, or desire, or, in fact, without having any intention to release it. In tackling that seemingly incomprehensible and paradoxical challenge, he came to understand what enlightenment means.



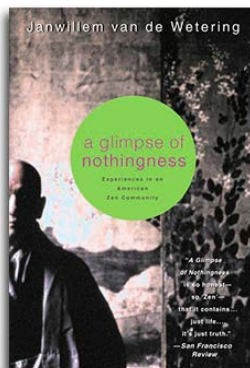
The Method of Zen - Eugen Herrigel

When Herrigel died in 1955, he left behind copious notes about his archery training. Edited and revised by other respected scholars, including Alan Watts, those notes became this classic book. It clearly and succinctly summarizes four things that Zen is and is not. It is not an ideology or belief system. It is not about "God." It transcends rational, logical thinking. It is, above all, a method for freeing the mind of its illusions so reality can be experienced more fully and directly.



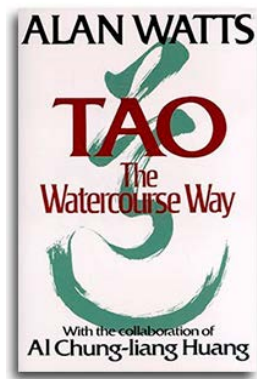
The Empty Mirror: Experiences in a Japanese Zen Monastery - Janwillem van de Wetering

Along with Herrigel, only with an updated 1960s perspective, van de Wetering offers us one of the first personal accounts of what it's like to study Zen the traditional Japanese way. While contemplating the nuances of Zen training, he also gives us a down-to-earth and at times even humorous account of life in a Zen monastery, the people there, and the challenge of delving deep into meditation. Throughout the book he keeps us wondering whether he ever will attain even a glimpse of the enlightenment experience known as "satori."



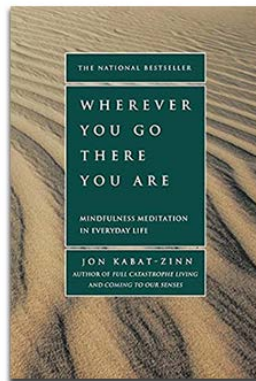
A Glimpse of Nothingness: Experiences in an American Zen Community - Janwillem van de Wetering

In this 1975 sequel, van de Wetering continues the story of his search for satori, only this time in an American Zen community. In his usual style that is simultaneously reverent and irreverent, he talks about his experiences there while comparing it to his former training in Japan. If you read and enjoyed his first book, which I imagine you will, you'll want to complete the journey with van de Wetering by reading this follow-up and conclusion to his story.



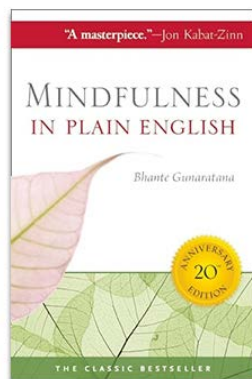
Tao: The Watercourse Way - Alan Watts

Alan Watts was one of the most prolific writers, speakers, and advocates of eastern philosophy. There aren't many good books written about Taoism, but this is one of them. It does an excellent job of explaining the mysterious complexities of Taoism in a clear, concise way. As with the best of books about eastern philosophy, it is like a finger pointing, in a deceptively simple way, to a very profound understanding of the underlying force in the universe that is the "Tao".



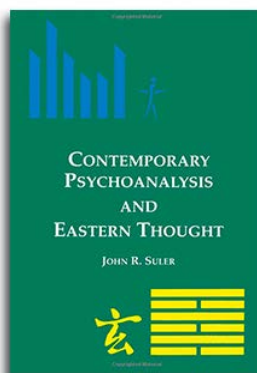
Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life - John Kabat-Zinn

Some books on meditation and "mindfulness" offer wonderfully philosophical or poetic ideas but not many how-to specifics. If you want to develop meditation to an extent where it can truly change your life, you'll need to go beyond many of the usual books on eastern philosophy. You'll need to develop a meditation practice. That's why I include here the classic, widely acclaimed *Wherever You Go There You Are* by the highly respected physician Jon Kabat-Zinn.



Mindfulness in Plain English - Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

If you're looking for lots of practical suggestions on how to do mindfulness meditation, including how to deal with all of the challenges that come up, such as taming the distracting "monkey mind," this is the book to get. As Kabat-Zinn says, this book is a how-to masterpiece.



Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Eastern Thought - John Suler

This book marks the culmination of my many years of research into how eastern philosophy and contemporary psychoanalytic theory compare, contrast, and enhance each other. It includes chapters on the history of east meeting west, concepts about the "self," the role of paradox in personal transformation, meditation, the relationship between students and spiritual teachers, the psychotherapist as a "warrior," the use of the Tai Chi images to understand psychotherapy, and the "vision quest" as a model of spiritual discover.

What is This Thing Called Self?

Once upon a time there was a psychologist who was invited to speak at the 1998 conference on Psychotherapy, Spirituality and the Evolution of the Mind held in Santa Monica. This is what he said:

As a university professor I've done quite a bit of public speaking, but it still amazes me how each new speaking engagement still has the potential to stir up some... anxiety. In fact, to make matters worse, last week when I did a dry run of this presentation at home, my dog Griffin got up in the middle of my talk and threw up all over the rug.

I'm hoping nothing like that happens here today, but even if Griffin hadn't disrupted me like that, I'm sure I'd still be experiencing some anxiety. Which reminds me of a quote from Steve Allen:

The mind starts working the moment you are born, and doesn't stop until you stand up to make a speech.



Actually, that quote is quite relevant to what I'll be talking today. But first, I'm wondering how many people here are clinicians, psychotherapists? (almost the whole audience raises hands). How many are meditators? (again, almost everyone). If, say ten years ago, we had asked a group of clinicians whether they were meditators, we probably see very few hands raised. I think it's a good sign that eastern traditions have had such an influence on western psychology. I think THAT marks an evolutionary change, at least for psychotherapists.

So, to start off, I like us to try a very short, one minute, guided meditation. Please get comfortable in your chair and close your eyes. Use whatever technique you prefer to clear your mind a bit..... Just relaxing your awareness..... Just being aware as you listen to my voice..... I'm going to say a word, and in response to that word, let an image or sensation pop into your awareness..... Any image or sensation..... The word is SELF.... notice what comes to your awareness when you hear the word SELF.....

As you open your eyes, try to hold onto that experience..... I like meditation techniques that use spontaneous images because they allow the unconscious to speak to us, not unlike dreams. Now I don't know what experience the word SELF created in any of you. But whatever that experience was for you, please keep it in mind as I go through my talk today. Maybe write it down and later during the break talk to other people about what they experienced. Even if what you saw or felt seemed vague, trivial, or irrelevant. Even if you think you saw nothing at all. That's OK. There's probably something important there. Compare what you experienced to the ideas that I mention about This Thing Called Self. Use your experience to understand the self.

When I first spoke to Dr. Schuman about this conference, I suggested the possibility that I would talk about eastern and western concepts of the self. It seemed like a good idea at the moment. Then afterwards, when I thought about it, I quickly slipped into a state of panic. Isn't the "self" one of the central conceptual

dilemmas of eastern and western philosophy? And here I am offering to tackle this encyclopedic task in 45 minutes. If the march of intellectual thinkers from the Greeks to the deconstructionists hadn't yet arrived at an answer to this Thing Called Self, what chance did I stand?

Then I calmed down a bit when I realized that I didn't have to cling to my compulsive scholarly self. I didn't have to be perfectly comprehensive. I could just mention a few ideas about this Thing Called Self. Maybe tell a few jokes or anecdotes... maybe a few stories. That helped calm me down too - especially the part about telling stories. I especially like Zen and Taoist stories. In fact, nowadays most of my work in east/west psychology is devoted to my web site, which I affectionately call "Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors." What's truly interesting about the stories is how visitors to the site react to them.

So allow me to start off with one of those stories.

The Emperor was really into Buddhism. He read everything he could get his hands on, he talked with philosophers and monks about it, he even tried writing his own discourses and Haiku. One day he heard that a famous Zen master was visiting the city. So, naturally, being the Emperor, he requested that the Master come to visit him at the Palace. He offered the Master a fine meal and afterwards performed a truly elegant tea ceremony. The whole time, the master is pretty much silent and peaceful, as you might expect from a Zen master - but the Emperor is biting his tongue. He wants to pick this guy's brains about Zen. So finally, as they are drinking their tea, he breaks the silence. "Master, according to Zen, what is the Self?"

The Master briefly looks up from his tea and says, "I do not know." Then he quietly continues sipping.

That's it! End of story! Now I wouldn't be surprised if the Emperor was a bit, shall we say, peeved. After all, this is a famous Zen master, a truly enlightened being. And he doesn't know what the self is? Come on! Now maybe he really wasn't all that enlightened. Maybe he really didn't know. At least he was being honest. Or maybe he did know, but he was doing the "Oh Humble" bit. Maybe that was the lesson for the Emperor - humility in the face of the Eternal Self. Or maybe his terse reply was intended to mean that no one can know what the self is, because the self is fundamentally unknowable, a mystery. It can't be spoken about or intellectualized. That's very Zen. Or, if we think about what he actually said - "I do not know" - he actually IS telling us that he does know something. He knows "NOT." Aha! Maybe that's it. The path to the self is through "NOT" - the process of negating, of stripping away, of undoing attachments. That's also very Zen.

So, it looks like we have several possibilities about what the Master might have meant. Of course, being a typically tight-lipped, enigmatic Zen master, he doesn't tell the Emperor which possibility is the right one. He leaves it up to the Emperor. So that's another possibility, isn't it? "What is the self?" is a question you have to answer Your Self. It's purely a subjective knowing. Maybe it's one's asking the question One's Self that reveals the answer that is One's Self.

I don't know about you, but now my head is spinning. At this point, as I was preparing for this talk, I took an aspirin and convinced myself that I just needed to do a little research. If the question and answer about This Thing Called Self was up to me - as, I guess, the Zen master was suggesting - I should try to investigate it personally, experientially.

So first I tried sitting in front of a mirror and meditated on myself. Have you ever tried that? It got very weird, in a convoluted narcissistic sort of way. After about 5 minutes, I couldn't tell who was staring at whom, whether my self was sitting inside or outside the mirror. It was very disorienting.

So I gave up on that, and as I was recovering, my dog Griffin - a border terrier - walked into the room. I suddenly remembered an old Zen koan. Does a dog have a Buddha nature? Which I guess is similar to asking if a dog has a self. "Griffin!" I called to him. He came and sat down in front of me.

"Griffin, do you have a self?" He looked interested, and stared right back at me.

"Griffin!" I said a bit more earnestly, "Do you have a self?" Now he was really staring at me intently, and I knew I was onto something.

"Griffin!!", I said, with excitement clearly showing in my voice, "Show me your self!" He barked, licked his lips, and ran to his bowl in the kitchen. Self... lunch... it's all the same to Griffin. So I followed him into the kitchen and poured him a bowl of kibble.



Well, two strike outs so far. The mirror, the dog. What's next? When in doubt, fall back on what you know. I do a lot of research in what's called cyberpsychology, the psychology of cyberspace. What is this thing called Self? Why not look it up on the internet, the information superhighway? I mean, you can find everything on the internet, right? And some people even think that the internet marks the next stage in the evolution of the human mind and self.

I fired up the computer, logged on, and immediately aimed my browser at the Alta Vista search engine. I entered in the keyword "Self" and hit the search button. In a matter of seconds, after furiously scanning all of cyberspace (well, actually maybe about 40%, but that's still a big territory), the engine came back with a reply... 2.5 million hits! Looks like the self is everywhere! Maybe that meant something. Or maybe I just needed to narrow my search. So I entered in the keywords "True Self." This time I got 11,000 hits. Better. I was on the right track. How about "Essence of Self?" The search engine hummed away and returned 245 hits. Now I was definitely zooming in on the target. I could tell this was the right path because a lot of the hits included web sites devoted to philosophy, spirituality, and poetry - although it also turned up the American Legion Magazine and a web page called "Understanding Diarrhea in Travelers." No, really! In fact, maybe there was a connection here. After all, when asked what is the Buddha, a great Zen master once replied, "Dried turd." On the other hand, maybe those anomalous search engine results meant that the hunt for the self will lead to glitches and dead ends. But I wasn't going to let that stop me. Finally, I entered in the keywords "The True and Essential Self" and clicked the search button. Once again Alta Vista went out into the vast Netherland of global electrified knowledge and came back with... zero hits. Nothing! The void! The True and Essential Self was no where to be found, well at least not in cyberspace.

So the internet quest was only marginally productive. To prepare this talk, I needed to go back to my original idea: summarize what I knew in philosophy and psychology about the self. What are the different ways the self has been conceptualized? I'm not going to pretend that my summary is comprehensive or definitive. What I'll say today is new and good, but what's good is not new and what's new is not necessarily good. These are just a few ideas about the self. And they're probably not even distinct concepts. They overlap and intertwine with each other. They're different facets of that Thing Called Self. No matter how many ways you slice a pie, it's still a pie.

While thinking about these concepts, let's keep in mind Zen's warning about the limits of talking and intellectualizing about the "self." Conceptualizing means drawing a distinction between this and that, a process that probably isn't the best path in understanding the self. Taoism states that once we take that first step in dividing the one into two, invariably more and more discriminations follow, resulting in 10000 things. In the world of intellectualizations, there are categories within categories, distinctions heaped upon distinctions, but ultimately they are all aspects of the same thing - whatever that thing is.

A philosopher studied Zen intensely for many years. When he finally attained enlightenment, he took all his books out into the yard and burned them.

Or here's another Zen story that's one of my favorites.

A renowned Zen master said that his greatest teaching was this: Buddha is your own mind. So impressed by how profound this idea was, one monk decided to leave the monastery and retreat to the wilderness to meditate on this insight. There he spent 20 years as a hermit probing the great teaching. One day he met another monk who was traveling through the forest. Quickly the hermit monk learned that the traveler also had studied under the same Zen master. "Please, tell me what you know of the master's greatest teaching," he asked the traveler. The traveler's eyes lit up, "Ah, the master has been very clear about this. He says that his greatest teaching is this: Buddha is NOT your own mind."

At any point we should be prepared to let go of even our most cherished ideas and concepts. We might even reverse those ideas, and reverse them again. This is probably also a wise thing to keep in mind when doing psychotherapy. Do it without memory or desire, as the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion suggested. Perhaps the evolution of mind and the transformation of the self requires a breaking free of clinging and this-or-that thinking. Having said that, here I will mention the first concept of self:

THE SELF AS STRUCTURE

When I was a kid, I had a Tinker Toy set - at least I think that's what it was called. It was a box filled with round wooden rods of various lengths and colors, and circular wooden wheels with holes along the edges and sides. You'd insert the rods into the wheels to make complex, interconnected structures of all different shapes, sizes, and colors. You could construct them into buildings and towers, or into abstract shapes that looked like molecules.

That's how I think of this concept of the self as a structure. The self is a complex constellation of interconnected memories, attitudes, ideas, representations - whatever terms you'd like to use. It's a nuts-and-bolts model of the self that's been very popular model in western psychology, no doubt inspired by concepts of atomic and molecular structure in classical physics. We can think of the goal of therapy, as well as the evolution of the self, as the development of a more sturdy, elaborate, flexible, balanced, cohesive, and fully integrated constellation. The healthy self means its structure has UNITY.

One of the complications of this model of the self-as-structure is where to place emotion, affect. We could think of it as just another module embedded within the structure. On the other hand, some theorists like to talk about the "affective coloring" of the structure, as if emotion isn't really a unit within the structure, but rather an attribute or tone that is infused into the structure. It's the various colors of the Tinker Toy pieces, and not the structure of it. Then the goal of therapy and evolution is the positive valence of these affective qualities. Simply put: to feel good, to be happy. As the Dalai Lama said, the purpose of life is JOY.



The distinction between particles and qualities as the fundamental component of things actually is a age-old debate in physics dating back to the Greeks. Is reality composed of units (like atoms, electrons, neutrinos), or blends of qualities (like "charm" and "strangeness")? Maybe it's both. Maybe the self is composed of both structure and a melding of qualities. In an old Saturday Night Live simulated commercial, Gilda Radner and Dan Akroide are debating about this mysterious new spray can product. Is it a floor wax? Is it a desert topping? Surprise, Chevy Chase, the commentator says, it's BOTH a floor wax AND a desert topping! Even though it may seem like a contradiction, maybe the self is both a structure and a blend of qualities. Sort of like how light acts both like a wave and particles.

Another complication in this concept of self-as-structure is that structures are really PROCESSES at a slow rate of change. Sure the Tinker Toy creation looks stable and fixed, but over time it will sag a bit, some of the connections will loosen and open, or someone might come along and rearrange, add to, or break it. Structures change. Trees and mountains change. People change. We never step in the same river twice. The eternal ebb and flow of things is the Tao. Structure and Form sit on the surface of formless process. Maybe the goal of therapy and evolution is to accept and ride along with these changes rather than fight them. To try not to cling to the illusion of structure.

A Taoist story tells of an old man who accidentally fell into the river rapids leading to a high and dangerous waterfall. Onlookers feared for his life. Miraculously, he came out alive and unharmed downstream at the bottom of the falls. People asked him how he managed to survive. "I didn't struggle," he said. "I accommodated myself to the water and just went with its flow."

So the idea of a self-as-structure is complicated by the fact that these structures are really processes at a slow rate of change. But let me emphasize that there ARE structures and even under the best of circumstances - as in really effective psychotherapy - these structures (in the time frame of ordinary human consciousness) still change slowly. Deep psychotherapy takes time to remedy a pathological psyche. Excellent longterm psychotherapists possess spiritual qualities that enable such long change to occur - the qualities of respect, patience, and compassion... Now let's take a look at another way to think about the self.

THE SELF AS AWARENESS

This is the idea that the true self is not a thing or object or structure, but the process of observing, pure awareness, consciousness, mindfulness. It's a phenomenon that is highly developed in eastern traditions, especially in meditation practices.

An interesting turn of events in evolution is that we humans seem to have developed a unique type of awareness: self-awareness. We can become conscious of ourselves. We have the ability to be self-reflective. The psychotherapist joins forces with that observing center of their clients' consciousness in order to help them explore their intrapsychic worlds. Psychotherapy is the broadening of the scope of self-awareness. It helps us observe what was previously unobservable. It makes the unconscious conscious. Because we can become aware of many, if not all aspects of the self-as-structure, some theorists believe that pure awareness lies beyond that structure. It transcends the nuts and bolts of the Tinker Toy self.



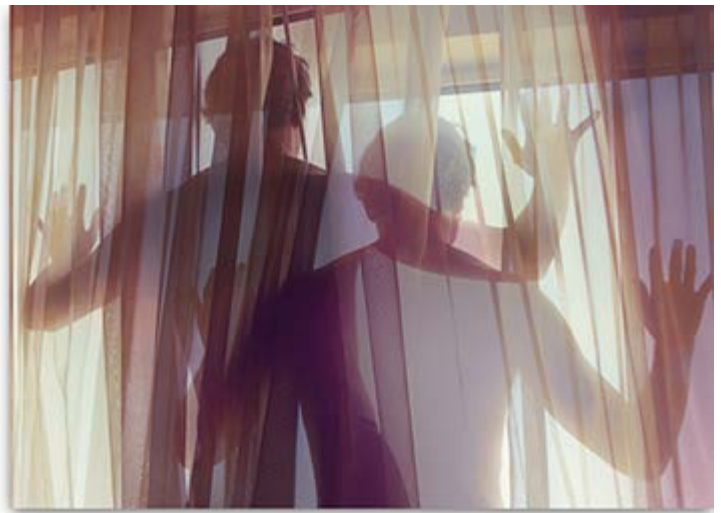
In this model of the self as an observing phenomenon, the goal of therapy and evolution is to become more fully and clearly aware - to brush away the dusty concepts, beliefs, and anxieties that obscure and distort our vision in order to really see. It's like waking up. Western psychology tends to emphasize interpersonal awareness - consciousness of ourselves and others. Awareness of oneself is a good thing, but we can carry it too far or in the wrong direction. It's like staring at yourself in the mirror for too long. Solipsism is a lonely dead end. You lose perspective. There's also awareness of others. Awareness of one's self as a relationship to others is what psychotherapy is all about, isn't it? And maybe the evolution of mind as well.

I like those eastern meditative traditions that point awareness in directions other than at that self within our skins or it's interpersonal field. What about things? Is mind there too?

After ten years of apprenticeship, a student achieved the rank of Zen teacher. One rainy day, he went to visit a famous Zen master in another city. When he entered the house, the master greeted him with a question, "Did you leave your wooden clogs and umbrella on the porch?" "Yes, master," he replied. "Tell me," the master said, "Did you place your umbrella to the left of your shoes, or to the right?" The visitor didn't know the answer, which made him realize that his awareness was not fully developed. So he stayed with the master and studied Zen another ten years.

Wouldn't it be interesting to try that on our psychotherapy patients? "Tell me, Mrs. Smith, on which hook did you hang your coat in the waiting room" or "What color is the bathroom down the hall?" It would be a tiny assessment of their mindfulness. It might reveal a lot about them.

One problem with conceptualizing the self as the process of "observing" is that it gives a distant, detached, almost alienated feeling to the self. It steps back and observes. It's not connected. I prefer to think of that observing or awareness as close up, intimate, infused into the thing of which the self is aware. In meditation, we can become one with our breath, a mantra, a candle, or whatever is the focus of our awareness. That awareness or mindfulness of other people might be called empathy or compassion. It's a merging of selves.



The development of awareness and the observing self seems to be very different than the development of the self-as-structure. It doesn't involve the building up of a Tinker Toy construction, but maybe the process of taking it apart. Activating pure awareness may be a process of negation, stripping away, letting go, unclinging. It's a process of returning. The Tao Te Ching states this very clearly. Touching the Tao is the act of returning.

There's an interesting exercise that I first read about in Yalom's book on existential psychotherapy. It's called the "disidentification exercise." You draw up a list of, say, ten things that you are. Things that are important about you, about your self. "I am a wife... I am a mother... I am a professional... I am intelligent... I am ambitious...." etc. Then, one by one, you cross off each item on the list and try to imagine what you would be without that aspect of self. When all items are crossed off, what's left? Who or what are you when all aspects of your self-as-structure have been chiseled away. You return to pure awareness, pure mind. It's a self without content. Some would say it's "no-self." Maybe we arrive at the true self by passing through loss, grief, mourning, and, paradoxically, through the loss of self itself.

I remember reading a story once about a family in which one of the children, from birth, was severely impaired mentally. I don't remember the medical details of what was wrong with the child. But his existence consisted only of lying in bed with his eyes open. He seemed aware, but he couldn't talk or move at all. Just lying in bed with his eyes open. Obviously he required constant and total care. He did grow physically, but his mental condition never changed.

When the oldest sister grew up and started dating, she would bring her boyfriends to meet the family - which, of course, included meeting her brother. The boyfriends typically acted very anxious and awkward, or just plain freaked out when they saw the brother. But one day, the young woman brought home a new boyfriend who reacted very differently. When he walked into the bedroom and saw the brother on the bed, he sat down next to him. He put his hand on the brother's hand, and just sat there quietly with him. The boyfriend seemed perfectly comfortable just being there with the brother. The sister fell in love with that man and later married him, in part because he understood how her brother was not a monster or some aberration in human development. He was a person, real, unique, essentially human as we all are, and loved by his family. The boyfriend understood something important about the self.

Revealing the self as awareness is a process of stripping away and returning. Some mystics sometimes take this idea to the extreme. They say: If I lose my arms and legs, awareness still exists. If I lose my arms, legs, and body, awareness still exists. If I lose my arms, legs, body, and this very thought and all thinking, awareness still exists.... The self as awareness, mind, consciousness, may transcend the physical and mental self. And when we think of the self in this way - as awareness that transcends the individual - something interesting happens.

A few months ago I was watching the movie "The Spirit of St. Louis." There's a great scene where Jimmy Stewart, who plays the role of Charles Lindbergh, is talking with a minister. Looking a bit skeptical, but also uneasy, he asks the minister what would happen if his plane started to spin out of control and was going down. Would God intervene? Would God help him? The minister says, "I don't know if God would or would not intervene. But I do know this. God will know that the plane is going down."

The idea of God as witness is a powerful one. It's the observing self, the self as pure awareness that transcends the individual. It's BEING WITH. Quakers believe that if someone is suffering, no matter where they are, you can always "hold them in the light." You can always be aware of their suffering and hold them in the light of awareness and being with. As a psychotherapist, never underestimate the power of simply listening, being aware, being empathic, affirming the client's suffering. It's the healing empathy and compassion of the self that transcends the boundaries of individual selves.

THE SELF AS TRANSCENDENT

This idea has come up several times, so let's make it the third way to conceptualize the self. In the self-as-structure, the transcendent self is the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, the superordinate glue or container that holds it all together, the fundamental organizing force, the grounding of all facets of selfhood. Evolution and psychotherapy is the actualizing of that greater holistic self. We also can think of the transcendent self as the pure awareness that lies beyond the self-as-structure. Maybe that **is** the superordinate glue that holds it all together.



One metaphor I always loved is that the self is like a wave on the ocean. It appears as a separate and distinct entity, but it is a form that arises from, passes through, and eventually returns to the larger, formless volume beneath it. Evolution of mind and psychotherapy involves the realization of that connection to the source. The word "religion" comes from the Latin "re-ligare" which means, "to tie back." There's an old Japanese saying,

At times I go about pitying myself, when all the while I am being carried by great winds across the sky.

To resist the realization that one comes from and returns to the transcendent self is a type of sickness. It's a splitting and fragmenting of awareness. Woody Allen said:

I don't mind dying... as long as I don't have to be there when it happens.

With this idea of self-as-transcendent comes an interesting spin-off concept...

THE SELF AS MANIFESTATION...

The individual self is a representation, a manifestation of the larger, transcendent self. The Bible tells us that God created human's in God's image. Zen masters ask us, "What did your face look like before your parents were born?" We can see the universe in a grain of sand. The transcendent self infuses or shines through the individual self. Maybe the manifestation is a complete representation. And maybe sometimes only certain facets of the transcendent self shine through each individual self.

As I mentioned earlier, over the past several years I've been doing a lot of research and writing on cyberspace. It's fascinating to think about the internet as a representation of the collective human mind and as a place for the individual to manifest him or herself. Cyberspace is an infinitely complex, interconnected constellation of information and ideas that shows no limits in how much it is expanding. Will it be a complete manifestation of the collective human mind, or partial? Is it a new stage in the evolution of human consciousness? And how does the individual person choose to manifest him or herself in that collective cyberspace consciousness. In the new multimedia communities on the internet, you can present yourself in any way you want, with any identity or personae you want. You can even choose any visual appearance you want, a picture or icon to represent yourself - whether it's Bugs Bunny, the Mona Lisa, the moon, a triangle, anything you wish. That self-icon is called an "avatar," which is the Hindu term for the appearance Gods choose to represent themselves on earth. Perhaps in cyberspace, we see a playing out of the divine process of striving for a transcendent self while also finding new ways to manifest the individual self.



OK, we've sliced up the self pie four ways so far. Let's add in just one more...

THE SELF AS DOING (willing/being)

What about the idea of the self as doing, as motivation, the initiation of action. It's the force or energy that moves us along our path in life. Sounds good, but a problem comes up when we start to think and behave as if the self is an internal doer, as an entity or center inside us that makes us go. Where inside the individual can we locate this initiator of action? Is there a tiny homunculus that sits at a control panel inside our head? Psychology can't find it.

Perhaps, instead, the self **is** the doing of something. There are actions and thoughts without hidden internal actors or thinkers. In fact, the evolution of the mind and psychotherapy may be the ability to set aside that illusion of an internal self-entity that makes us do, think, and feel. The Zen master Dogen said that to study Zen is to study the self, and to study the self is to forget the self.

Two monks were talking. One of them bragged about how his teacher was so spiritually developed that he could float in the air while meditating. The other monk said, "My teacher also is very spiritual. When he's hungry, he eats. When he's tired, he sleeps."

The development of the self-as-doing is simply to do - to act fluidly and spontaneously according to the moment, to act fluidly and spontaneously according to one's basic nature. When I asked my dog Griffin to show me his true self - and he licked his lips and ran to his bowl - he did indeed answer my question. Psychotherapy and the evolution of mind involves freeing the doing-self from the superfluous baggage of the self-conscious, over-controlling homunculus. They involve freeing the doing self from the anxieties, worries, doubts, and second-guessing that stands over us with a club and blocks spontaneity. "The mind starts working the moment you are born, and doesn't stop until you stand up to make a speech." Here's one of my favorite Zen stories.

A distraught man approached the Zen master. "Please, Master, I feel lost, desperate. I don't know who I am. Please, show me my true self!" But the teacher just looked away without responding. The man began to plead, but still the master gave no reply. Finally giving up in frustration, the man turned to leave. At that moment the master called out to him by name, "Hey Joe!" "Yes!" the man said as he spun back around. "There it is!" exclaimed the master.

I've been taking piano lessons for about two years now. It's one of the hardest things I've ever attempted. My hands are too tight. I tend to try too hard and am overly self-conscious. But sometimes there are moments - jazz musicians call it "flow" - when I'm just playing, fluidly and easily. It's the doing piano self. It's wonderful. Unfortunately, in the middle of that flow, a tiny voice will speak out from the back of my head. "Hey! You're playing piano!" And that ruins it. The same sort of thing happens in meditation. The tiny voice says, "Hey! This is bare awareness!" In the evolution of the self-as-doing, that tiny voice fades away.



I don't want to overemphasize the idea of "doing" too much. In our western culture, we are overly ambitious about doing and achieving. Maybe a better term is WILLING.

When I was an undergraduate, I took a course on religion with Thomas Altizer. He was very prominent in the 1960s for his philosophy of Christian Atheism, and once was almost lynched by the audience at the Merv Griffin show because talked about God being dead. He was quite charismatic and eccentric - with fiery eyes and greying hair that always looked windswept, as if he just stepped in from a metaphysical windstorm. One afternoon I went to his office to discuss my term paper. The discussion turned to Nietzsche, who was one of Altizer's favorite philosophers. He talked so fervently about Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" that even a hardcore skeptic would waver. Being a bit oppositional by nature, I decided to challenge Altizer a little bit. Drawing on my background as a psychology major, I mentioned the fact that Nietzsche became schizophrenic during the last ten years of his life - which was the result of untreated syphilis. How can you reconcile Nietzsche's philosophy with this fact. How do you take into consideration the fact that he was completely mad?

Altizer looked me straight in the eye and said, "Maybe he willed it."

Now what was that supposed to mean? Isn't that like willing what Dan Rather says on the news, or that there's a tornado in the next county, or the fact that you were born? How do you will such things? Maybe the self as doing is, at a deeper level, the self as the force or energy of willing. The willing of oneself. The willing of life and being. It's a choosing and affirming of what you are - even if what you are or do isn't always pleasant. While driving home from work one day, I heard on NPR an interesting poem, which is from a published collection all of which are written in the voice of Barbie - you know, the doll. Here's Barbie's poem (loosely quoted):

*Buddha says that existence is emptiness
and there is no self.
I agree, but I wonder why a man
with such a fat belly
would pose for a picture with no shirt on.*

Barbie understands the nature of self. She's also a bit vain. But that's Barbie. That's what Barbie does and is. It's her nature. One's self is one's Buddha nature, and to question whether that nature is good or bad may not be a relevant question.

Two monks were washing their bowls in the river when they noticed a scorpion that was drowning. One monk immediately scooped it up in his hand and set it upon the bank. In the process he was stung. He went back to washing his bowl and again the scorpion fell in. The monk saved the scorpion once again and was again stung. The other monk asked him, "Friend, why do you continue to save the scorpion when you know it's nature is to sting?"

"Because," the monk replied, "to save it is my nature."

One internet visitor who read this story on my web site emailed me and said, "Geesh. I guess the monk's nature didn't include a lot of intelligence. Why didn't he use his bowl to scoop the scorpion up!"



So that's it. Those are some ways to conceptualize the self - as structure, awareness, transcendence, manifestation, doing, being. The concept of self is a bit like the concept of energy. We talk about it all the time, we see the effects of it all around us, we try to manipulate it. But no one is exactly sure what it is. It's the bedrock that we can't pass through or completely wrap our minds around. One day at the university I met one of my colleagues, a physicist, in the bathroom. "So, George," I said while we stood at the urinals, "What exactly is energy." He thought about it for just a few seconds, and said with a wry expression, "The ability to do work." And then he zipped up and walked out.

George is a bit of a pragmatist. But maybe there's something to that. What is energy? The ability to do work. What is the self? When tired, sleep. When hungry, eat. Freud might say "To work and to love." So maybe the answer to the riddle of the self is pretty simple. It's our concepts that get complex, like a big Tower of Babel where we're all speaking in different tongues and can't fully understand each other. We need a Star Trek universal language translator of some kind. We need the tower to come tumbling down.

The concept of self is like the ultimate projective test. What it is is what we make it out to be. It's a reflection. It's like staring at yourself in the mirror. And the reflection will vary across people, cultures, and history.

What is it about us humans that draws us to this projective test, that makes us search for the self, that makes us do silly things like probe mirrors, dogs, and computers to find it. The only True Self you'll find at the top of a mountain is the True Self you bring there. But that's OK. We humans ask questions. We search. It's our nature. It's what we need to do to finally realize that we don't need to do it.

In that short meditation we did at the beginning of this talk, your experience - what you saw or felt - was a finger pointing. Maybe it pointed at something that I talked about. Maybe it pointed somewhere else. Wherever it pointed, that direction was more true for you than anything I've said today.

So let's go full circle, back to that cup of tea offered by the Emperor... What is this thing called self?

I do not know.

About the Photography

in *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors*

Unless indicated otherwise, all the photographs in this book were taken by me. As a photographer, I enjoy creating images that capture concepts related to psychology as well as the psychological ideas embedded in these classic Zen stories. In my book *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche* and in *Perception and Imaging: Photography as a Way of Seeing* that I coauthored with Richard Zakia, I discuss how to create such conceptual photographs as well as the role of mindfulness in photography.

Be the camera...



About John Suler

I'm a writer, researcher, and photographer who is recognized for my work in the emerging integrative fields of cyberpsychology, east/west psychology, and photographic psychology. My collected works and vita are available online at johnsuler.com. As a professor of clinical psychology for almost 40 years, I became well-known for a casual teaching style, my humor, hard exams with ample opportunities for extra credit, and activities encouraging you to understand yourself. A running theme throughout my research as well as my teaching is that psychology can arrive at knowledge not just through the traditional scientific method, but also through intuition, participant-observation, interviews, and in-depth case studies.



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During the first few years that *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors* was online, it received awards from various online organizations. These are their emblems. Some of their emblems and many of their websites have since vanished. Think of them as cherry blossoms.



The End

