

27 Ch'an and Zen

Americans think of Zen primarily as a Japanese version of Buddhism. It is that, yet Zen came from a type of Chinese Mahayana. The word "Zen" is the Japanese version of a Chinese word now spelled in English "Ch'an" or "Chan". "Ch'an" comes from Sanskrit "dhyana", or "meditation", so it refers to schools in which meditating and doing are important. The Chinese spoke "Ch'an" like "jan" or "zan" so Japanese "Zen" is not far off. Ch'an grew in China after about 500 CE (AD). It moved to Japan about 1000 CE. It dwindled in China after about 1300, so most of what we read about now is Japanese Zen.

Zen was a fad in the West in the 1950s and 1960s, and has been again periodically after. Much crap has been written featuring Zen including the famous novel "On the Road" by Jack Kerouac. Be cautious. At first, avoid modern material, even by "modern masters" such as D.T. Suzuki (Daisetz Teitaro) and by heartfelt students such as Phillip Kapleau. Go to original Ch'an and Zen adepts. A lot of good material has been translated well into English, and most is short.

Ch'an-Zen is a blend of Taoism and Buddhism. Which prevails is not clear. I think Taoism usually wins despite the fact that Zen uses Mahayana terms. Rather than a Taoist living with his-her family in a hut by a bog, imagine he-she lives in a monastery celibate. Rather than catching fish, he-she tends a garden, goes "begging" in villages where he-she will be fed decently, and accepts support from patrons. Rather than fall into a system of many lives, he-she uses this life to settle issues and to win mental freedom. The Taoism in Ch'an-Zen took some of the Mahayana out of Buddhism. The Buddhism in Ch'an-Zen kept most Ch'an-Zen adepts from excesses of Taoist nature worship, drink, drunken poetry, and magic. How Japanese Zen differs from Chinese Ch'an is a topic for scholars and is not an issue here. What I say applies to both Ch'an and Zen. I don't care about schools within Ch'an or Zen.

In a nutshell, you can think of Zen as Taoism, cluttered at first by Mahayana categories, which Zen then throws off. Zen also says to act spontaneously without dogma, pretense, guile, or too much thought. Zen does not say such action will solve political problems but it does say you will see them in a new light and not worry as much. As with Taoism, most people cannot act as Zen advises, and we certainly could not base a society on the hope that people do act as Zen advises. Zen knows this, and does not advise basing society on Zen. Who can get it, does get it. If this nutshell summary satisfies you, then you can skip the rest of the chapter. But Zen is fun; its blend of Taoism, simple Buddhism, and Mahayana is fun. It is fun to go along as Zen throws off clutter. So I hope you do read on.

The idea of "no dogma, free action" was deep in Taoism before Buddhism came to China. Arguments by Taoists against Mo-ists, Legalists, and Confucians improved the idea. During its formation, Ch'an did not take part in political fights as much as Taoism had, Ch'an did not need "no dogma" in the political sense, and Ch'an did not develop "no dogma" that way. Taoists live ordinary life without dogma, enjoy ordinary life, and value it. Mahayana comes with the idea that ordinary life is the same as awakened life. So Ch'an took "no dogma" and the value of life from Taoism, and merged those with Mahayana ideas of "cannot be said in words" and "ordinary life is the same as awakened life". Ch'an and Zen are largely about how to live clearly, openly, plainly, naturally, and well without dogma. Ch'an-Zen students were

nearly all Buddhist monks, although lay people did practice Zen. Ch'an-Zen masters take whatever personality suits their particular mental freedom.

Almost every assessment that applies to Taoism also applies to Zen. Zen does not have fully accurate ideas of nature and human nature although Zen's ideas are beautiful. Zen scorns rote morality yet has strong tacit morality. Zen scorns discrimination yet Zen masters obviously discriminate between this and that skillfully. Zen adeptly plays the dogma of no dogma. Zen masters rebuke elaborate theology yet yearn to fully feel they are at one with the Great Mind that is both seamlessly whole and makes particular individuals. Zen cannot serve as the basis for a modern democracy or any state. Zen ideas can be modified to go along with ideas for a state that come from other sources, such as Confucianism and Western political philosophy. Zen can go well with the teachings of Jesus except Zen is leery of being proactive and of involvement in politics. Zen would tacitly approve of "pay it forward" and the Golden Rule although Zen would condemn them if stated as explicit dogma. Few people can succeed in Zen but it is still worth learning from Zen.

From now on, I use "Zen" for Zen and Ch'an both unless I need to separate them. I use the English terms "master" and "adept" as synonyms; neither English term refers to a Buddhist term such as "arahant", "ryshi", or bodhisattva. I could illustrate all the points here with quotes from original Zen texts but I cannot do that because of copyright. Thus my writing is too theoretical, for which I apologize.

Quick Anticipation.

Recall the Mahayana ideas that ordinary life is valuable and there is little difference between ordinary life and awakened life. Ordinary life and awakened life come from Emptiness and-or Mind. Recall the Taoist ideas of spontaneous action from the heart, this kind of action comes from the Tao, and it leads us back to the Tao.

If ordinary life is valuable and awakened, then all its episodes are valuable and indicate awakening. What size is an episode? It can range from a whole epic, to one story in the Lotus Sutra, to one particular act-and-or-thought. For Zen, it is useful to focus on a particular act-and-or-thought. Each particular act etc. is valuable, can show awakening, and can lead to awakening – like the properly chosen notes in a well-written piece of classical music or well-played piece of jazz. This Mahayana stance leads to the same attitude as a Taoist adept who is spontaneous, accepts each act, feels each act comes from the Tao, and feels each act leads back to the Tao. Distilling valuable life into particular acts, simple episodes, merges Taoism and Mahayana into Ch'an-Zen. Ch'an-Zen does not break life into bits. It points out that valuable life permeates all acts, and so we can begin there and rest there.

The role of episodes comes out in Taoist story about a butcher who never sharpens his knives because he never needs to. He makes each cut at the joints, in between resistance, in emptiness. Each cut freely follows what nature (the animal body) gives him. He needs no more; that is enough. Because each single cut follows nature, the whole process of cutting a big animal is one continuous move. Because each single cut follows nature through hollows, the knife never encounters any resistance, so never gets dull, and so never needs sharpening. The butcher has been using the same knives for decades without ever thinking of a whetstone. In putting together many small movements through the void, the butcher also lives a craft and a life.

The emphasis on spontaneity even in small acts, especially in them, the belief that “local spontaneity” is effective, and the belief that local spontaneity is enough, influenced the marital culture and martial arts of China, Japan, and Korea. I think a similar feeling from Theravada also influenced the martial culture of Thailand but I do not dwell on that point here. Swordsmen, and other martial artists such as Tai Chi or karate adepts, are like the butcher in that they use the emptiness that is given them when it is given them, and that is enough. They are not like other common butchers who hack at their target. Living life in this way leads to one whole way of life. Unfortunately, to make this case for Ch’an-Zen and martial culture requires a long digression that I cannot take here. Many authors have mentioned the connections; I cite a few in the Bibliography.

One downside of seeing life this way is the mistake that everything is all right in itself, everything is part of a plan (Mind), and nothing is misplaced, including badness and evil. Everything already is as it should be; nothing needs adjustment; it is up to us to accept it; and up to us to play our part in the grand scheme. Hinduism comes to a similar stance. For more on this error in Zen, see below in this chapter.

Another issue is relations between each episode, the flow of episodes, and the whole. In the story of the butcher, this issue does not come out but it is in the background. Martial artists strive to excel at many techniques, find the link between techniques, find flow between acts, merge all this in one craft and one life, and, if possible, act spontaneously not bound by any particular style. Bruce Lee was obsessed with “no style”. Martial artists don’t often succeed. This issue is something like the argument over faith versus works in Christianity. By using particular techniques, Zen adepts shock students into getting beyond all particular techniques so do not rely on any particular technique or style but so they can use any technique from any style correctly. I can’t go into this issue here other than a brief mention below of the practices of Zen teachers. I introduce the issue because you will meet it in other places.

Zen and Mahayana.

I explained Taoism with as little mysticism as I could. I got away with that approach because Taoism did not come with historical baggage and because Taoism avoided dogma. I explain Zen also with minimal mysticism but Zen presents a problem because Zen does come with the elaborate historical baggage of Mahayana, and Zen has to accept Buddhist sutras (scriptures) including their mysticism and metaphysics. The best way out is to do as many Zen masters do: ignore the Mahayana baggage. What is important about Zen can stand on its own without reference to Mahayana. What is important about Zen on its own is what I focus on.

Some Zen masters do simply ignore the Mahayana heritage. Some Zen masters demand that students avoid the sutras, stop thinking about Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and stop thinking about mystic ideas because all these ideas are confusing and trap us. Some masters advise to kill the Buddha if you meet him because “Buddha” is a conventional category that blocks understanding of the true message of the Buddha. But some Zen masters do refer to the Mahayana heritage. Some masters refer to aids such as Emptiness and Mind, and some masters refer to specific sutras in which those aids are featured. Some masters advise long hard study of sutras and aids. Some sutras are closely associated with the tradition of direct non-verbal transmission that is key to all Zen, such as the Lankavatara Sutra, Heart Sutra, and Diamond Sutra. Although some masters use Mahayana terms, I still think what is important in Zen does

not depend on those, and we are better off not referring to those here. Sometimes it is useful to refer to a Mahayana idea. I do that without implying that all of Mahayana is correct.

I do not explain why some masters frame their awakening in terms of Buddhist aids other than to say that people in all traditions think of awakening in terms of their traditions. This issue would only matter if Zen and Mahayana gave total full direct access to God ("bigger than me"), yet neither Zen nor Mahayana do that anymore than any approach does, so I do not have to deal with this dispute. Zen is partial truth with its own big value but limited value. I only have to give what is important in useful terms. I do not compare awakening in Christianity, Hinduism, Theravada, Mahayana, and Zen.

Despite disparaging mysticism and Mahayana, Zen does have its own modest mystical vision. I describe it below. I do not explain how Zen's vision is similar to, or differs from, Mahayana mysticism.

Three ideas from Mahayana are important in Zen. First, each individual person counts, and each person comes with the ability to reach awakening by him-herself. Second, the world is as it is and not otherwise. The world after awakening is much as it was before. Awakening is not about awakening from a delusion or awakening to a fantasy. Awakening is about seeing clearly and simply. This life right now is important. Even if this life is embedded in a grand joyous system of many lives, we have to use this life right now. Third, awakening occurs through direct transmission so words are not as important as doing. Just doing is a way of being awake. If you can learn to just do, then you are awake. I believe these ideas are also in Taoism, and it is the Taoist version of these ideas that influenced Zen.

When a person has all this, he-she is mentally free. As with Taoism, for Zen I use "mental freedom" to refer to what is important. The Zen version of mental freedom is the biggest topic of this chapter.

Zen has some long-standing controversies which I don't care about and don't write about, such as: rapid versus gradual awakening, Northern versus Southern, Rinzai versus Soto, emptiness or mind, meditation versus wisdom, words versus no words, private awakening versus the social duties of the bodhisattva, how much we can associate with secular (political) powers, etc. You can find material on these issues in the works in the Bibliography.

Comparison Shopping.

Mahayana features: awakening, the awakened life is identical to the non-awakened life, a joyous system of many lives, a central essential rationale to the system such as Buddha Mind or the Unborn, the identity of the self with central essential rationale of the system, the illusion of suffering, the reality of suffering when we deviate from the system, non-verbal transmission, a lot of writing and other verbiage, verbal games, other games, following the Dharma (system and its rationale) once awakened, non-duality (non-discrimination), especially non-duality of good and evil, pyramid schemes, the bodhisattva, and a good imagination. In theory, the world is as it is and is not otherwise but Mahayana writers love magic, magical powers, tricks, and illusions. Mahayanists follow a bodhisattva so they can live in a paradise with him or her. The world is more like a giant amusement park than an American suburb.

Taoism features: the Tao as the central rationale, trying to follow the Tao and become one with the Tao, people who are at one with the Tao act spontaneously, the Tao flows through everybody and everything

even when they are screwed up, people who do not follow the Tao screw up and cause pain for self and others, non-discrimination, especially non-duality of good and evil, non-verbal understanding, moderate amount of writing, dislike of dogma, and a good imagination. Taoism has nothing like the bodhisattva, and only weakly lends itself to pyramid schemes. There are no other-worldly paradises. Taoism does not appeal to rich or powerful people, or to warriors. The world is as it is. If you are sensitive to the Tao, the world is much more fun than if you are obsessed with wealth and power, but the world is not full of tricks and illusions. Magical Taoism does feature long life, paradises, great magicians, etc. but that is not at issue here.

Zen features: waking up to something bigger than yourself, the identity of true me with the bigger-than-me, awakened people act spontaneously, non-discrimination, non-duality of good and evil, awakened people and non-awakened people are really the same, but non-awakened people can cause suffering through clinging to wrong ideas, suffering is primarily in the mind, non-verbal transmission, verbal games (koans), other games (hitting students, shouting), moderate amount of writing, dislike of dogma, and a good imagination. Zen does not stress the bodhisattva, and only weakly lends itself to pyramid schemes. Zen does appeal to rich and powerful people and to warriors because it can be used to rationalize the world is as it is. After you have awakened, the world is a much more congenial place, but it is less full of magic, power, tricks, and illusions. If there are any paradises, they are not relevant.

A Mahayana joyous system of many lives is not like the Tao, or like living in the Tao, even when the Tao is “unborn and undying”, and even when you can merge with the Tao. I am not sure if the idea of Tao, in Taoism, acts like the “absorbent center”, such as the bodhisattva or the Buddha Mind, of the Mahayana ideological system of many lives that eats the world. I am comfortable with the Tao but not with the long Mahayana parade of candidates for the essential central absorbent spirit of its joyous system.

In theory, as Mahayanists, Zen adepts accept a joyous system of many lives including its metaphysics, absorbent hole in the center (bodhisattva and-or Emptiness and-or Buddha Mind), and its ability to eat the world. In practice, Zen adepts seem hardly concerned with any of that, and seem far more concerned with waking up now in this life. Most Zen adepts obviously accept a “bigger-than-me” and they feel an identity with it. They do not merge into it as with stereotyped mystics and they do not take part in it as a Mahayanist does, as a person in a greater system of many lives. To refer to the “bigger-than-me”, Zen adepts use a “rationale” when they teach including standard Mahayana terms-aids such as Nothingness, the Unborn, Buddha Mind, etc. In Mahayana, this central rationale acts like the core of a system that eats the world but in Zen it does not. Zen masters do not usually see the central rationale as the core of a system of many lives. Instead, for the “bigger-than-me” and the central rationale, Zen adepts have in mind something more like the Tao than what Mahayanists had in mind.

As part of waking up now in this life, Zen and Taoism stress non-dogma and the spontaneous freedom of awakened people and-or of people who have found the Tao; Mahayana does not. Mahayana points out magical powers of awakened people; Zen avoids magic. In Zen, a person does not wake up to the reality of suffering or to the joyous magical system of many lives but to a congenial world as it is. The Zen world is like the world of a Taoist. A Zen master is happy to teach but he-she does not rely on awakening other people for his-her identity, as does a Mahayana bodhisattva. A Zen master is not a savior to the masses, and a Zen master does not derive satisfaction from apparently awakening thousands of people. Even so,

a Zen master is not a solitary self-savior as in some versions of Theravada Buddhism but seeks to merge with the One Whole that is behind everything.

More Mahayana Hangover: Contradictions and System.

Mahayana faces contradictions: This life is not worthwhile but this life is worthwhile; Nirvana differs from ordinary life but the two are the same; a person has to wake up but what he-she wakes up to is that he-she has been saved (awake) all the time but didn't know it; we are particular and general at the same time; and avoid discrimination but do good and avoid evil. Mahayana resolves contradictions by putting them in the context of a joyous system of many lives with a bodhisattva as a spiritual guide. The system allows great joy in the system to make up for this life officially not being worthwhile. The system "eats the world" by explaining everything.

Zen resolves Mahayana contradictions mostly by ignoring them. Some masters use issues as training aids but do not try to resolve them in the standard sense; see Bibliography. Even when masters write a lot about these issues, in the end, mostly they ignore them. Not many Zen adepts worry exactly how this life and the awakened life are the same, about duality, non-duality, or the unity of particular and general. Masters might force students into impasses over these issues so students stop thinking in these terms but they do not expect students to solve these issues intellectually. This is part of the fun. Sometimes masters hit their students to force their students out of thinking in terms of these issues. I cannot take space to show how Zen masters do all this; books on Zen are full of examples.

By overcoming contradictions, Zen masters can focus on this life right now. By focusing on this life right now, Zen undercuts a system of many lives and so undercuts Mahayana. Zen undercuts the Mahayana system that eats the world. To worry if this life is worthwhile is to trap yourself in ideology. To seek the deep suffering of life is to trap yourself in ideology. Whether this life is worthwhile does not matter if your mind is not free. Once your mind is free, then you can decide worthwhile-ness and suffering. Whether we are embedded in a larger system is not important. Whether the joyous system solves mystical and metaphysical issues is not important. What matters is this life right now. If we can wake up to this life right now then we can decide about a system of many lives. This life right now is a chance to wake up and win mental freedom. We wake up to the fact that we already have the tools that we need to cope and to get along if we quit relying on ideology. If we can't cope, then dying is a better option than lapsing into ideology. We can use ideology, but we should not get trapped in it.

Mental Freedom is Not.

Mental (spiritual) freedom is the core of Zen. If you find mental freedom, you will be enlightened. To be enlightened means to find the mental freedom that is already inside you just because you yearn for it and you are a part of the Dharma (Tao, nature, Heaven). Imagine Taoism stripped of all concern for the state, making a living, getting along in a village, poetry, painting, drinking, and even love of nature; then imagine all Taoist energy focused on mental freedom; that is like Zen. I do not describe mental freedom more. In this section, I say what it is not. Below I suggest what it might be like.

Mental freedom is most important. Without it, you really can't have much else that is important or lasting. With it, you don't care about most silly things, and you can enjoy what you do have.

Americans think of mental freedom in external terms such as freedom from political doctrine, artistic frameworks such as hip-hop or country music, or from media brainwashing. If you can see through the right wing power structure, the left wing conspiracy, or institutionalized religion, then you are mentally free. Those external dogmas are of little concern to Zen, and, regardless of Zen, it is not true anyway that getting on top of those dogmas makes you free. Any external dogma like those would have fallen by the wayside a long time ago for a Zen student. The only external ideas that still plague a Zen student come from the religion itself such as yearning to be a bodhisattva or trying to figure out Emptiness and Buddha Mind. More important than getting rid of any particular external dogma, even one as important as Buddha Mind, is learning to get rid of relying on any kind of dogma at all. That is another issue.

Zen freedom is not political freedom. As with Taoists, Zen adepts know that Zen cannot flourish, and might not survive, during harsh political oppression. Zen needs some political freedom. But that does not mean political freedom is the same as Zen freedom anymore than political freedom is the same as artistic success or commercial success. Zen can get by even when people are not free in the Western democratic sense; China has never been free that way and Japan has only been free that way since after World War Two. I don't know if having a few free Zen masters in a state, and openly teaching Zen, could contribute to political freedom in general but I would not be surprised.

Zen should not be confused with psychoanalysis or any kind of therapy. Some therapies do aim to get you to where you can make up your own mind, and Zen does that too, but otherwise they are not similar. I do not explain why; you can find out by reading. This point is important because the people who first introduced Eastern religion to the West, such as D.T. Suzuki and Carl Jung, did compare Zen to therapy, and, I think, left a bad legacy of confusion.

All other concerns must fall to mental freedom. You can have nothing that interferes: spouse, children, politics, government post, teaching post, dogma, theory, explanation, success, concern with goodness, concern for nature, concern for other people, enlightenment, or the Buddha.

You may have human emotions but you have to let them go if they get in the way. Negative emotions tend to linger and get in the way, so eventually you have to get rid of them. You cannot linger in envy, greed, anger, revenge, jealousy, etc.

If anything interferes, no matter how innocuous or human, it must be cut out. If it does not interfere, you can leave it develop by itself, reach maturity, and go away by itself. If you enjoy success as a scholar, orator, meditation teacher, martial artist, motivational speaker, writer of dharma books, or interpreter of the sutras, and that tempts you, as it probably will, then stop it right now. Zen adepts cannot seek any success or fame. If you have to gouge out your own eyes, then you are better off blind. Jesus knew the importance of soul freedom when he advised sinners to cut off a hand rather than to let a hand lead them astray. Jesus said people would have to treat their families as already-dead if they wished full spiritual success. Socrates had a small spirit that forcibly stopped him if Socrates veered toward error such as seeking pay for his teaching; so Socrates lived poor and harassed much of his life. If the Buddhist scriptures lead you astray, then burn them; the Buddha had no sutras (scriptures). If a teacher leads you astray, leave that teacher just as the Buddha left his. The idea of enlightenment is especially likely to lead you astray, so stop thinking about enlightenment, and stop seeking enlightenment. The ideal of the

Buddha and-or bodhisattva is especially likely to lead you astray, so stop trying to be like a Buddha or bodhisattva. If you have to live alone away from people all your life, do that. If you forget to eat, then starve. If you have to lie to eat, then starve to death instead because even a small lie sets up a huge long-term block to mental freedom.

Zen adepts are not cut off from all normal life. Anti-normal is a temptation too. They walk the middle path of the Buddha. A Zen adept can enjoy an ice cream cone, movie, boat ride, puppet show, or long walk. A Zen adept could be a scientist seeking truths as long as he-she did not actively pursue a career and did not care about success. A Zen adept could interpret sutras (scriptures) as long as he-she expected to be wrong sometimes.

A Zen adept does not envy anybody success in family, business, politics, religion, or life; more precisely, a Zen adept does not hold on to the envy for enough time to count as feeling envy. Usually, when we meet a successful person, we envy them a little bit, even if we are quite successful, and, in fact especially when we are quite successful. Even if the person is a good friend, and we are much more happy than envious, we still envy him-her. That is part of biological comparative competition. It is human nature. Even if we are rich, we envy a lotto winner. If we are a famous scholar, we envy the graduate student who just published her first paper. If we make millions of dollars a year catching passes in football, we envy the baseball pitcher who threw a no-hitter. The painter envies the poet. The middle aged mother envies the new mother. Zen adepts feel no envy at all. They can look a new father in the eye and congratulate him with all their heart. They can look a Christian preacher in the eye and congratulate her with all their heart on her successful telethon.

Mental freedom implies some consistency. It is hard to be free if you are inconsistent. If you envied one minute and did not envy the next, you would not be free. Consistency brings in issues which complicate the story needlessly, so I overlook it.

In the literature on Zen, writers say Zen masters strive for spontaneity. "Spontaneity" is probably as good a way to describe the goal as "mental freedom", but, to an American, spontaneity implies emoting without hang-ups, rebellion, TV talk shows, Jedi masters, doing without effort, doing without thinking, or upwelling creativity of the Spirit. It implies that a master never studies or deliberates. None of this is true. Study and deliberation are part of human nature, and Zen masters did have to think things through. The point is not to get lost in distractions and ideologies.

To an American, the term "mental freedom" implies lawlessness, romantic rebels, people who do wrong as a way to free themselves, magic, people who do not stop to think, people who think outside the laws of physics, and selfishness. All this is wrong. But I don't know of a better term. As long as we get rid of the bad implied ideologies, the term "mental freedom" works.

"Trust your feelings, Luke". "Search your feelings, Luke". That is not right either. To follow dogma is to allow our intellects to mislead us but the cure is not to throw out all ideas and to follow only our feelings instead. Feelings can work like dogma. Contrary to widespread misunderstanding, intellect and feelings are not simply opposed. If we trust only our feelings, we might "ooh" and "aah" at puppies or we might wring their necks. If we trust only our feelings, we might help the neighbor child or might smack it for crying. Feelings run the gamut. We can trust our feelings as long as we have been well trained in both

trusting our feelings and not trusting our feelings. We can trust our feelings as long as we also trust our intellects. Trusting his feelings is what turned Anikin into Darth Vader. Air Force pilots are trained NOT to trust their feelings but to trust the instruments. A good shooter combines a thorough knowledge of the weapon, the situation, and a feel for when to pull the trigger. Marriages work when spouses combine feelings and intellect. Americans romanticize their feelings, and so they want to see Zen as validating romanticized feelings, but that is not so. Zen masters trust their mental freedom, which includes some feelings and some intellect.

In Zen, as other religions, adepts sometimes get to where they know absolutely that they will do no harm, they know they will not explode in anger or simmer in hate, and are sure they will help appropriately. If you wish to call this condition “being filled with compassion” that is fine. You do not get to this point by simply trusting feelings; I offer no advice on how you do get there. After you reach this point, you can trust your feelings. Even at this point, I don’t think you can trust your feelings alone to awaken you. I am not sure what all you trust your feelings for after you reach this point.

Mental freedom does not solve all problems. Mental freedom does not pay the rent and it does not solve problems in the Middle East. Mental freedom does not cure cancer. Mental freedom is not the same as perfect health in mind and body. Mental freedom usually does reduce mental conflict, and a reduction in conflict usually leads to better overall health; but mental freedom does not by itself cure cancer, arthritis, or alienation. Recall what one patriarch said, to paraphrase: “Before I awoke, I was miserable. I hated myself and everybody, my body ached, and the world looked like crap. After I awoke, I am still miserable. People are still assholes, and the world still looks like crap.”

Mental freedom does not necessarily mean you are “tapped into” the bigger-than-me, are identical to the bigger-than-me, have merged with the bigger-than-me, and have full direct contact with the bigger-than-me. I take up the relation between mental freedom and the bigger-than-me in a section below. I do not think any mystic vision or religion has a clear full direct view of God, and so I do not think Zen does either. I don’t hold this limited access against Zen. Disputes about which mystic vision has the best contact with God are not useful. Some Zen adepts accept that they cannot have full direct access to the bigger-than-me, and see that accepting this fact brings them closer to the bigger-than-me as long as they don’t expect it to bring them full direct access via the “back door” of non-expectation. I agree with this Zen acceptance of our limitations and of the results.

Mental freedom does not mean you can answer all questions about past, present, and future, physics, biology, law, and politics. It does not turn you into a psychic. Even if mental freedom does mean you are in touch with the bigger-than-me, it still does not turn you into a psychic.

Mental freedom does not mean you know the meaning of life in general, your life in particular, and the life of anybody in particular. It does not make you better than anybody. It does not mean you can tell people what to do. You still have to work at being a good person and helping out. Even if mental freedom does tie you into the bigger-than-me, mental freedom does not mean you deserve to control the world.

Mental freedom means not acting like any character out of fiction or pop culture. You cannot act like a character in Seinfeld, Star Wars, the Bible, the Koran, a Sutra, the Mahabharata, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Dr. Zhivago, Pride and Prejudice, Shakespeare, reality TV, or media-generated fantasy about

heroic Republicans or Democrats. You are not a character. If you do act like a character except briefly for fun (actors excepted), then you are not awake. Instead, try acting like yourself honestly, including useful roles and codes. Fantasies can work like dogma. You have to commit to fantasies as with dogma, keeping up fantasy requires keeping up some dogma, and dogma is usually based in unrealism like a fantasy. Part of accepting the world is learning good fantasy from bad dogma-fantasy.

Mental Freedom is Similar to.

I am not an enlightened Buddhist so I cannot describe mental freedom as Buddhist enlightenment. All I can do is relay my ideas of what might be going on based on my experiences and reading.

Mental freedom appears when we combine our natural abilities with reasonable training and then act out what we have learned. Acting includes thinking. We have to act without worrying too much about what we do. Mental freedom is like what happens when our training bring us to a new level of performance, we know we have achieved something different, we are not likely to fall back (we might), and we know it does not matter if there are other levels.

Mental freedom occurs when you can tell a good discrimination from a bad discrimination, and when you see that most of the time you don't have to.

Mental freedom is like what athletes do once they have been well trained and are ready. You have to do. You can't think too much. The time for thinking and training is past. Even if somebody beats you in a competition, you have done your best, and have proven yourself. In Japan, soldiers studied Zen as a way to act without thinking once they had been trained. Mental freedom is like good driving by a good driver, over familiar roads at first, and then over unfamiliar roads.

Mental freedom is like riding a bicycle. You have to try for a while before you get it. Training is important. Then suddenly you just get it. After you just get it, you don't ever quite forget. If you don't do it for a while, then you are not smooth. To do it again smoothly, you might have to practice, but you should be able to get back to adept level pretty well. To stay good at it, you have to practice a little bit continuously. But, if the bicycle becomes part of your life, then you should have no trouble getting the practice that you need naturally as part of daily life. After you are adept at the bicycle, there is no specific purpose to the bicycle; it is just a part of your life.

Mental freedom is like seeing one day that you can deal with nearly all the problems that will come up in your normal life. You can't deal with all of them. The problems that you can't deal with don't matter, not even if they kill you. You just go from problem to problem, coping pretty well.

Imagine you are an adult hunter-gatherer from 30,000 years ago out hunting. You are mature enough, and have been trained over a lifetime. You know what you are doing, and you do it. You do have to worry about snakes and even some big predators such as lions, hyenas, and leopards; but you don't have to worry too much. So far, all your life, you have gotten enough game. If a snake or predator gets you, or you come home empty-handed, then so be it, that is part of life. Imagine you are out gathering. You know where the fruits, vegetables, and nuts usually are. You know when a snake is likely to be around or when a predator might be waiting for you or your children. So far, you have managed to bring

home enough food to feed your family for years, and to avoid death, so you just do what you have to do without worrying too much about it.

You are in a citizens' meeting over a civic issue such as property tax. You have heard all kinds of facts, theories, ideas, opinions, and bullshit, and you are tired of it. Gradually at first, then suddenly, you realize you can sift through all this crap, think for yourself, and come to the best conclusion. You need not be an expert. You are not perfect. But you can do it. Not only can you do it in this case, but, with practice, you see that you will be able to do it in every case, with other issues such as bonds for new sewers, guards in schools, traffic cameras, and the whole city as a smoke free zone. You gain confidence. As you gain confidence, you become even better at it. Confidence and performance feed on themselves. You learn to trust your native natural mind. You see that everybody could learn to trust their native natural mind but that very few people ever will learn to do it. Most people who think they can do it never really learn to do it, as any civic meeting or any news channel shows clearly.

Mental freedom is like shopping in a farmers' market, large grocery store, mall, or big department store. You have been through this before. You know what you like. You are ready to pick up a bargain if you see one, and ready to switch from your usual brand to another brand if the price on your brand has gone up too much. If somebody beats you to a sale item, so be it. If the store is out of something you wanted, so be it.

Mental freedom is like waking up one morning, remembering you have to go to work, but it is OK. Mental freedom is like working in a job you like. You can have mental freedom even in a job as long as you are willing to give up advancement, raises, and competition with co-workers. You focus on doing the job well. If you never advance, and even if someone steals an idea from you, you live with it. Of course, you advance or get a raise, and you might out-perform fellows, but those are not concerns. You just do what you do well, come up with ideas when you can, and enjoy it too.

In the Classical World of Greece and Rome, Cynics were not "cynical" as we think of it today. Cynics doubted conventional morality and conventional ideas. Cynics wandered around, usually they were quite poor, and they taught people how to think well and act freely. They taught people how to be free. Some people think of Jesus as a Jewish Cynic. Stoics accepted what came their way, endured as much as they could, and worked as they could for integrity, dignity, morality, and political improvement. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius ("Golden One") was a Stoic. Stoics taught much the same ideas as Cynics but Stoics accepted their places in social life and their duties. I don't know if Taoist freedom, Zen freedom, Cynic freedom, and Stoic freedom are similar or how they might differ.

Mental freedom is not exactly like these examples, or exactly like any examples, because, in all these cases, there is a clear goal in mind: kicking a field goal, scoring high in gymnastics, breaking a big run, winning an account, eating well within a tight budget, not getting eaten by a leopard, etc. Mental freedom has no particular clear goal in mind. It cannot be measured, scored, or verified. It is more "subjective" even than a judged event like gymnastics. Mental freedom can take in all the example goals, and many other goals, without being any particular goal. That distinction makes many differences but it would take too long to explain here and might not be explainable. It is like a swimmer trying to explain swimming to somebody who had never done it, but even more so.

If you substitute any particular goal for mental freedom, then you have erred. You have erred even when the goal is especially laudable such as “do unto others” and “work hard to make the world better”, or when the activity is highly valued such as martial arts. An advanced black belt is not mental freedom.

Few people speak the truth consistently. Among the few, nearly all speak the truth not mostly because it is the truth but mostly because they want to prevail. A very few people speak the truth because they want to be right, that is, in line with truth. On my good days, I aspire to this. Even fewer people speak the truth because it is true and for no other reason. Among a very rare few, the truth speaks through them without their having to consider if it is truth. Zen people aspire to be among the last group but, as long as they aspire, it is hard to do.

So how do you know if you have mental freedom? That is a good question, a question that figures large in Zen, but which I cannot take up here. The easy answer is: you just know it, almost anybody else who has achieved mental freedom can see it in you too, and you can see it in them.

Zen uses examples from the natural world to show mental freedom, such as clouds drifting, birds flying, water flowing, turtles crawling through the mud, or mountains looming. These examples don't work well in the modern world because modern people see nature through a veil of false romantic glamour, if they have ever seen it at all outside the TV screen. Even in the time of classical Japanese Zen before about 1820, these examples had become so clichéd that masters used them to show what to avoid.

Amazingly, some Zen adepts seem really to achieve mental freedom. There is no point trying to describe what they are like. I have never met someone like this so I have to relate what I know from reading and from my imagination. I can't imagine what it is like not to dwell in envy and spite. When you are like this, you can see the world as it really is as much as any evolved sentient being can see the world as it really is. You just do. You can understand dogmas without succumbing to them. You can accept the accidents of the world. You can accept aging and dying and injustice. You can learn to be useful in ways that are consistent with your nature.

Mental freedom in Zen might be like Western ideas of acting honestly, not being phony, and being true to your true self as long as your true self is not bad. Similarities between the two ideas are one driving force behind outbreaks of Zen popularity in the West. I am not sure about relations between the ideas because I can't get far enough away from my American ideas to judge well.

You are Enough, and the World Is As It Is.

The Christian version of the Zen ideas above and below might be “Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened for you”. Most answers are there if you simply accept them.

Probably the most famous story in Zen is about the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch, Hui Neng. According to the story, Hui Neng was a poor illiterate boy who was taken to the monastery because he showed much talent, rather like Jesus at the Temple when Jesus was twelve years old. Hui Neng's job was to clean up, and he was never considered a real monk. When Hui Neng was a young man, the abbot (Patriarch) was dying, and sought an heir to lead this monastery and all of Ch'an, someone who saw the truth (Dharma) directly. In the usual way in Ch'an, the abbot held a poetry contest to find his heir. Everybody expected

the brilliant protégé of the abbot, Shen Hsiu, to win the contest. The protégé entered a poem which said that inside everybody is a mirror that reflects the world without bias, anybody can awaken if they polish their mirror diligently, but they have to keep polishing even after awakening. Hui Neng anonymously posted a poem saying the mirror already was clear enough by nature, and there was no need to polish it ever; all we have to do is find the mirror and look into it, or, more accurately, just let the mirror reflect back through us. The abbot found out who posted the poem, and, because the abbot feared reprisal against Hui Neng, the abbot gave leadership to Hui Neng secretly. The temple hierarchy didn't understand Hui Neng. They were so upset that Hui Neng had to flee and hide for several years before returning to lead what became a great school of Ch'an. Shen Hsiu founded his own school, which, with the school of Hui Neng, became the two great schools of Zen. In fact, there are two great schools which divide roughly along these lines but it is unlikely that Hui Neng ever had to flee for his life.

The standard Mahayana reading of Shen Hsiu's poem is that, deep down, we already are awakened. We already are at one with the world. But we need the expedient means of Mahayana, including help from the Dharma, Buddha, monks, and bodhisattvas, to know we are at one with the world and see correctly. We must polish. Hui Neng was not denying that we are one with the world and we already are awake. Hui Neng was not saying we need do nothing or that effort is pointless and misleading; if so, he would not be Patriarch of a school that stresses hard meditation and free action. Hui Neng warns against getting caught up in dogmas, distinctions, yourself, and the interface between yourself and the world. That is polishing. While polishing removes a few big scratches it also makes thousands of little scratches that it cannot remove. Once we begin to polish, we have to polish endlessly. Instead, simply accept that you are enough as you are. Let the mirror work on its own. If you polish it, you get in its way. If you stop, it reflects on its own without any extra help.

The following "take" on the story supports Hui Neng: As in Taoism, a Ch'an-Zen adept is already at one with the world when he-she follows the Tao (Dharma) because the Tao created the world and runs the world. To understand the Tao is to understand that the world is as the world is and that you already are a part of it. What the Tao does with you, the Tao does with you. To polish your mirror is to fall back on dogma. It is gilding the lily. It is mistrusting the Tao, and trying to impose your ideas on the Tao. It is screwing up what was already fine.

The fact that there is a mirror does not mean there are no distinctions. Distinctions are endemic to the mirror and the world. They are natural. If you don't fight them, they do not mislead. In trying to remove a little dust, don't also try to polish away what is natural. Fall back on your original nature rather than try to make your nature out of ceaseless polishing.

Regardless of polishing or not polishing, both stories agree that, deep inside us, we correspond to the most real world, and the most real world corresponds to us. For this correspondence to hold up, there cannot be a big difference between what is most real about us and what is most real about the world. We must be able to see the world as it is. We ourselves are part of the world as it is. The mirror is simple. It is not a funhouse mirror, powerful microscope, or kaleidoscope. Once we see this, nothing else matters. Whether the world is fantastic as a movie or plain as a cup of tea does not matter because the world is as it is, we are as we are, and we can see the world as it is.

Maybe the most often quoted saying from Zen is “eat when hungry, sleep when sleepy”. In a monastery where many people had to coordinate their lives including food and sleep, students had to hear lessons from teachers, monks had to serve the local people, and high ranking monks had to receive important visitors, in fact, people could not “eat when hungry and sleep when sleepy”. The saying arose because students wanted their teachers to give them magic formulas for how to run their lives and how to awaken, including when to eat, what to eat, when to sleep, how to sleep, when to meditate, how to meditate, what books to read, etc. I have found in teaching that people still want the same magic. You can see the craving for magic formulas every ten minutes on TV. The saying “eat sleep” does not deny regularity and does not sanction total self-indulgence but it does deny magical regimens. It reinforces the idea that we have what it takes to awaken already inside us because we are in accord with the world, and we should rely on ourselves and the world rather than rely on magic dogma formulas.

Students asked masters question such as “Where is the great Storehouse Mind from which all things come and all things go?” Masters might respond, “The peach tree sleeps in winter and blooms in the spring”. Students asked, “Does the Great Buddha Mind know right from wrong?” Adepts might answer, “The bird eats worms while the squirrel eats nuts” or “water and ice”. The point is not to stop thinking entirely. The point is to not get lost in dogma but to accept that the world is as it is, learn to live in it, and accept that it gives you most answers. The answers of the masters “do not follow” the logic of the student questions and are “out of the box”. This tactic forces students to think well. Asking questions based on ideas such as “Storehouse Mind” and “Buddha Mind” imposes bad discriminations that, ironically, ideas like “Storehouse Mind” and “Buddha Mind” were intended to get rid of. You cannot get rid of bad ideas by using them. You have to rely on the world as it is, and get rid of them that way. Learn to see the world as it is rather than the world cloaked in dogma. This too is Taoism.

To me, the idea of always polishing the mirror also suggests the system of many lives. Not polishing is to reject the idea of needing many lives. That we do not need to polish the mirror suggests this one life right now is enough, and we need not worry about the system of many lives. Focus on what is here right now.

Zen Modest Mysticism.

Zen disdains mysticism and metaphysics but Zen offers its own modest mystic vision. Zen mysticism is a version of its basic message, and is familiar: (1) The world, with you in it, is one. The world is both seamlessly whole and gives rise to all various individuals, at once. You are both you and the “bigger than me” at the same time. Sometimes, following Mahayana, Zen calls the one world “Emptiness”, “Void”, or “Mind”. (2) You and the world correspond. Because the world and you are the same, you can “get” the world. (3) The world is as it is and is not otherwise. The world is not bizarre, threatening, or evil. Often the world is interesting. (4) Just as you are, you have enough native ability to cope with the world most of the time. You can figure it out. The world will help.

You might think these ideas are not mystical, are self-evident, and necessarily true; but they are not. To believe in them is to have a mystic vision of the world, selves, and being in the world. Zen mysticism is a minor vision compared to most other elaborate mystic visions but it is a mystic vision anyhow because it is not verifiable except by direct feeling. It is not verifiable by experiment even though an accumulation of experiences can give it great weight. I think it is as true as other partial visions.

This modest mystic vision is a far cry from most Mahayana elaborate visions. This modest vision goes along with the vision that I suggested is common in many religions, is common to people who have strong experiences, and might be at the heart of the Mahayana jump from the original Buddhist ideas: We are all connected to the bigger-than-me (there is a correspondence), we are all connected to each other (our minds are alike and mirror the bigger-than-me), and life is all OK most of the time (we have enough ability to cope most of the time). Even if this vision was at the heart of the Mahayana feeling, Mahayana always went past this vision to elaborate alluring visions and systems.

The Zen ideas of “the world as it is” and “we can ‘get’ the world” go along well with modern science. I do not say Zen and modern science are the same or that one can displace the other. Modern science also sees a correspondence between the world and the minds of naturally evolved selves. Neither expects the correspondence to be exact. Both expect it to be close enough. Scientists express amazement at how well mathematics can model the world, and how people can continually come up with new and better ideas about the world. We can understand the world because we are of the world too. Zen forces us to “think outside the box” so we can overcome dogmatic habits so we can simply see. After we overcome dogmatic limits, then we go back to living in the ordinary world of common experience. Commentators say Zen masters force us to think “irrationally”. I think “irrationally” is a poor choice of words but let it stand. Science does value reason and rationality highly, and is suspicious of irrational mumbo jumbo, but science also encourages people to “think outside the box” so people can have ideas that later can be tested in rational reasonable ways. It encourages imagination that can later be tested. It encourages speculation that then goes back to the ordinary real world. That is not much different from Zen. See below for more.

Mahayana faced two contradictions: “life is not worthwhile yet life is part of a joyous system of many lives” and “ordinary life and awakened life differ yet are the same”. Mahayana reconciles these contradictions in the idea of “heaven on Earth”: badness and ugliness can be absorbed into a greater sense of beauty-rightness-and-joy. This life has some ugliness and badness but ultimately this life is amazingly beautiful, especially when we see this one particular life is only one particular life in a system of many lives. Really, everything is alright with this world after all. Everything always has been just as it should be, and is now just as it should be. As part of Mahayana, Zen inherited these contradictions, and it often resolves them in the same way, in a feeling of “heaven on Earth”. We will see that resolution just below. I believe this is a wrong resolution.

Mahayana spins big systems. Mahayana excuses its systems as expedient means for teaching people who have not yet awakened to their identity with the One. But, in fact, Mahayana dwells in big alluring systems both before and after. Zen differs from Mahayana in the extent to which it sees a system. Zen seems to want to get rid of system entirely, and, instead, just have people be and act. Zen sometimes succeeds but not often enough.

In its early history, Zen relied on the Mahayana idea of “Emptiness” or “Void”. Later, it relied on “Mind”. Any difference between “Emptiness” and “Mind” is not relevant here. These ideas refer to the one great system of which we are all a part, seamlessly whole and particular at the same time, moral and more-than-moral, and “heaven on Earth”. In Mahayana, this one whole is always a system.

Here issues get complicated. Even original Zen masters did three things with these terms. How they used the terms is not always clear, not even with the great masters.

First, Zen masters used the terms much as non-Zen Mahayana did, including the idea of an elaborate alluring system, including other ideas that go along with it such as dharmakaya, eons, storehouse mind, etc.

Second, Zen masters used the terms to mean their particular vision, which is simpler and more direct than most other Mahayana. They used the terms to refer to the mystic vision that I described above. When Zen masters used the terms this way, they disparaged and-or explained away other Mahayana, and they did not imply a system. They disparaged other Mahayana.

Mahayanists and most Zen students would disagree with me that Zen differed from other Mahayana in how it meant these terms. They try to find ways in which the Zen sense corresponds to the standard Mahayana sense. They explain away Zen disdain for other Mahayana. I do not dispute the point here. I merely assert my opinion.

Third, Zen masters used the terms to mean something even simpler and more direct, something that is not really in the terms "Void" and "Mind". They used the terms to try to get past the terms to something even better. This vision carried little sense of system, and did not necessarily imply the idea of "heaven on Earth". It is similar to the idea I have about God and his relation to the world, although I do not stress that point here.

Mahayanists and most Zen students would disagree with me that Zen ever meant anything other than the well-known Zen ideas associated with "Void" and "Mind" (second sense), and that these Zen ideas were exactly the same at heart as standard Mahayana ideas (first sense). Again I differ, do not dispute, and merely assert.

To the extent this chapter refers to modest Zen mysticism, I have in mind two and three. I try to explain how Zen masters felt about the world as Void and Mind, and how they felt about the world as something else, simpler, and better. Even when I try to get across that "something else", even when the Zen view and mine largely coincide, I do not simply endorse the Zen view. Zen and I also disagree. I try to convey the disagreements as well. I disagree with Zen for the same reasons I disagree with Taoism.

Clarifying all this is hard because Zen masters themselves were confused and unclear. Zen masters are notorious for being hard to understand, but that is not what I have in mind here. I do understand them when they are clear in their own minds. But they are not always clear in their own minds or their writings. They waiver between the three stances. They are trapped in the terms. Sometimes they try to explain away differences between Zen and Mahayana, sometimes they insist on differences. When they insist on differences, it is not always clear if they are making point two or three. To assert that Zen masters might be confused even in their own minds is great blasphemy in Zen circles. It will be taken as great pride on my part. I can only assert what I think is true.

Zen masters were clear that Mahayana ideas of "Void" and "Mind" are misleading traps, and did urge students to go beyond those dogmas to direct experience of the "Void" and "Mind"; but, too often, I think

Zen masters themselves lapsed back into the dogmatic trap entailed in the terms. Too often, even great masters failed and even they got mired in the terms “Void” and “Mind”, even Hui Neng, Ma Tzu, Huang Po, Hui Hai, and Lin Chi. Even in their lapses, I still sense dimly something better than “Void” or “Mind”. Reading even great Zen masters, I get tired of constant references to “Void” and “Mind”, the dogma of identity of self and mind, and dogma of the identity of whole and part. I feel relief when, briefly, masters take their own advice to go beyond their ideas to something more direct and simpler than wondrous Mind and more direct and simpler than wrestling with false dichotomies of whole and part, subject and object. Think for yourself. Then they lapse again.

I don't know how the Zen idea of Mind differs from ideas of Mind in other traditions. It would be fun to compare the Zen idea with the Greek idea of Nous and its descendants, and to compare the Zen idea with my childhood idea of “a mind behind it all”. I don't know how Buddhist ideas of Mind differ from Tao or Heaven. I don't know if various ideas of mind come from the same mystic feeling, are basically the same, and only appear to differ because they developed in different traditions. These questions are too far afield. I do know that different traditions draw different conclusions although they share a seemingly similar idea of Mind. My idea of mind does not lead me to think we are all part of the mind, the bigger-than-me is the same as me, we are all intimately the same, subject and object are the same, we always vastly overstress differences between particulars, we always vastly overstress principles of morality to the point of blind dogma, it is all really alright, there is no Great Risk to the world, and this world always really is Heaven on Earth. I am not sure what differences these issues make as long as we act well, especially because I am sure any idea of mind (Mind) is only partially accurate.

I advise you to read the works of Zen masters directly – they are not hard – to look for these issues, and to make up your own mind about how the masters fare, what you think, and what to do. You don't have to share a vision of “Void”, “Mind”, “heaven on Earth”, or of something simpler and truer, to get what is important in Zen, to get acting in this reality right now, acting with your best evolved abilities, unimpeded by dogma. As with assessing Mahayana, if you share the vision of “heaven on Earth” somewhat but not fully, if you can see persistent beauty despite ugliness and badness, then use your sensitivity to better assess Zen. If you do not share the sense of “Heaven on Earth” at all, then assess in any terms that make sense to you and are fair to everybody.

A Modern Zen Story.

Misunderstanding the story of Hui Neng, and misunderstanding modest Zen mysticism, lead to error. Here, I tell, and then contradict, a cherished story of modern Zen in Japan. Because I am not an adept, and Japanese Zen cherishes this story, I might be wrong. D.T. Suzuki (Daisetz Teitaro) was a leading explainer of Zen to the West, and is a hero in Japan. He, among others, told this story. A young woman is mortally ill with a few years to live. She uses them studying Zen. On her deathbed, with a few hours to live, she awakens. As part of awakening, she sees that the world is exactly as it should be, and nothing is wrong, including herself and her illness. The world is beautiful. She is no longer miserable. She dies in peace. This feeling is common when people review their lives, in Zen and in all religions: “I wouldn't change a thing, not even my stupid mistakes”.

Her feeling is similar to the feeling of “heaven on Earth”, of a world in which beauty assimilates ugliness and badness. Although the feeling can be graceful, the feeling is wrong if it implies any of this: we can

overlook all the evil of the world; all details of the world are necessary; her illness was necessary, likely so she could awaken; her particular illness was necessary as part of the beauty that overcomes evil; all good and bad is necessary; suffering is good; good and evil require each other; good and evil are in balance; good and evil need each other; nothing can be changed; everything returns to what it was; the system is what counts; I am part of the system; as I die, I return to the system; I never really had left the system to which I return; and it is a mistake to make the world better such as by curing my illness.

I think standard Mahayanists make many of these mistakes. These mistakes negate the Big Risk of the world. These mistakes diminish her life right here right now and diminish all life right here right now. As far as I can tell, this is the mistaken sense that Suzuki and modern Zen interpreters offer both East and West. If we want to see her in a better light, a Taoist might say she is like the twisted men sitting at the café or she is like a gnarled tree. She sees that she has to make do with what she has and that what she has is good enough for her situation. Although she makes the best of her situation, still there are other people who are not in accord with the Tao, and the Tao does not prevail in the world. I do not think that is the intent of the story as it is usually told. I think original Zen is more in line with the Taoist version, and in line with what I see, but that original Zen has been covered over by Mahayana metaphysics again, even by good-hearted smart modern scholars such as Suzuki.

The ideas that you should rely on yourself, and that there is a correspondence between yourself and the world, lead again to the mistaken idea of "Trust your feelings, Luke". They lead to the mistaken belief that human emotions, human imagination, and the world as it is are exactly the same, that is, they lead us to believe in the fantasies that we make up. They lead us to believe in a Force of the world because there is a power in our imagination. They lead us to a wrong view of "heaven on Earth" in which we are tempted to overlook strong evil. Just because the world is as it is, and we can live in it if we want to, does not mean we can be self-indulgent and ridiculous. "The world is as it is" means you need to eat regularly and you need a warm place in winter.

Ikkyu.

Ikkyu (1394 to 1481 CE) was a Japanese Zen master. Due to his history and character, he was soaked in the ideas that awakened life and normal life do not differ, and we are all capable of awakening in this life; and he acted on the ideas. To me, he seems more like a seeking indulgent Taoist than an austere Zen master, and he seems like an adept poet-painter caught in the wrong profession. He spent most of his life in the "Bohemian" sections of Japan (the "floating world"), including brothels, when Japan was in turmoil and when the Bohemian sub-society was booming. His friends were painters and writers. He loved the wooden flute. He indulged emotions. He had a mistress and a child; the mistress was a blind "folk" singer much like an American blind blues singer. He did this not because it was trendy or as an ideological expression of Zen freedom but for love of her; he was like "Siddhartha" of the Herman Hesse novel. Ikkyu is not typical of Zen but he is not right or wrong just because he is not typical. I do not offer him as a role model for Zen but he is worth knowing about. His poems are short, and, once you get the allusions, good. Likely Ikkyu helped create the style of short Japanese poems that Americans like, such as haiku. His artistic style contributed to the artistic view that later led to the great prints of the "floating world" in the 1700s and 1800s such as of Hokusai and Hiroshige.

After Ikkyu died, the Japanese made up stories about him as a “wonder kid”, like Jesus at the Temple, or as a Trickster confounding enemies and doing miracles. Now, the Japanese see him as a beloved rascal. That view is not right but it is not far off and it shows how images of prophets get remade to suit the needs of the people. The Japanese did an animated series about a boy monk named “Ikkyu”. That Ikkyu solved puzzles and mysteries, like a mix of Martin Gardner and Sherlock Holmes. The series was a hit all over Asia, it is a lot of fun, and it is well worth watching if you can find it dubbed in English (I saw it dubbed in Thai, and it is dubbed in many languages).

More on Dogma: Mental Freedom and Categories of Thinking.

Like Taoists, and coming from an explicit Buddhist tradition of non-duality, Zen adepts said discrimination is bad and so, with some irony, we should avoid distinctions, especially of good and bad. Like Taoists, Zen adepts were not idiots about non-discrimination. They stressed non-discrimination because that was the mistake that people make more often than too much mixing and blending of categories or too much spontaneity.

Discrimination depends on mental categories. Mental freedom is not giving up all categories. To commit to not using any categories at all is to commit to a dogma (category), and so is a trap. It is to burn your mind out for no good end. It is to go against human nature, and thus to go against natural nature. As with most traps, the best strategy is to avoid it. If you fall into the trap, then just step out. Don't go along. People evolved the ability both to make the traps and to step out of them.

If you want to learn archery, you start with a bow, arrow, and target. Those are distinct. You cannot blend them in any glib way although you can merge them in a better way through practice. You have to practice. Practice is not the same as sleeping. When I think of food, I see the grocery store and farmers' market in my mind's eye. When I think of food, I see fruit. So even to eat, I need categories of stores and of food. Some people see a deer blind and meat. There is no art without a medium, and no art without categories. The great artists of the “floating world” painted specific scenes, often in specific places, they knew how to use wood blocks as a medium, and knew the difference between a prostitute and the men who came to her. It usually helps to have categories more than it hurts. Categories are useful tools. If we got rid of all categories, we would sit like puddles of slime, and we would starve.

The trick, of course, is to use categories without becoming lost in our categories. When I go to market, I pick apples from the bin without using any complex algorithms; I do use rules of thumb. In the 1970s and 1980s, when I saw how state policies of both the Left and Right fail, I changed my ideas accordingly. The need not to get lost in dogmas is not news nor is the idea confined to Zen. The idea is, or should be, part of any good training in any discipline from picking fruit to martial arts to global statesmanship. Evolution gave us the ability to use categories, make categories, and re-make categories; we can improve ability with training; and we should.

Don't think usually of dogma and not-dogma, discrimination and non-discrimination; don't discriminate about dogma and discrimination. Think in terms of dogma and not-dogma when it is useful. Instead of non-discrimination, learn to use your mind adeptly. That is all.

Zen adepts think more clearly, and suffer fewer traps, than normal people. This comparison implies that a Zen adept could be free of all traps, could be totally consistent, and could think with absolute clarity on all issues. As long as we are finite humans who have to think with finite minds using categories, then we necessarily live in some traps. I don't think Zen aimed to be free of all mistakes and all illusions. That is a dogma and a mistake itself. If the awakened life and ordinary life are the same, then the awakened life has to have some mistakes in it too. Ikkyu saw this. Zen did aim at a certain plateau, on which you are free enough, and from which you are not likely to fall too far back, but which is not entirely without limits or mistakes. Reaching that plateau is the same as waking up. Ikkyu might not have seen this. Right away people ask: "How free is free enough?" "What mistakes can I make and still be awakened?" "Can I carry on my normal life and still be free enough of mistakes?" Because I am not a Zen adept, I can only guess. To ask such questions shows that you are still far from free enough. You cannot live a normal life and still expect to be free enough. At the least, you have to live like a Taoist character or Buddhist monk.

Words, Words, Words.

Officially in Mahayana, the message cannot be conveyed in words, but Mahayanists still wrote a lot. Zen adepts did not usually suffer from this Mahayana problem. Usually they wrote little and they did not like too many words. All this leads to a common silly Western mistake about Zen: Zen has nothing to do with words, words are necessarily misleading discrimination, all words are irrelevant, all words are necessarily a betrayal, and we must stop talking. Moreover, the intellect is like words, it is an enemy, and we should not use the intellect at all. Some Zen masters, such as Dogen, did write quite a bit, and were usually lucid and helpful in what they did write; and all Zen masters could think well.

Zen masters have nothing against words or the intellect as long as they are used properly. When words and the intellect are used properly, they make fine tools. They can bring us up to awakening even if they cannot make us awaken. They are part of human nature like eating, drinking, and smelling flowers. You cannot write poetry without words even when the point of the words is to get us beyond words. It is hard to smell and appreciate flowers if you can't recognize one. Words cannot capture the One but they can help us get to the point where we can see for ourselves. To react against words is to fall into the dogma of hating dogmas, and is as much a mistake as embracing dogmas. If you can't make your peace with words then you are not likely to achieve mental freedom and awaken.

Now that we don't have to mindlessly fear categories and words (discrimination), we can use them to develop a proper attitude and to gain insight into mental freedom.

Imagine some villagers talking about where to build a rural cabin and how to build it.

Most people prattle. They don't know what they are talking about but they talk anyway. They say too much, assert unfounded opinions, assert many false points, but never get to the heart of issues. I think Mahayanists would not stress that the lives of these people are really awakened. They might be part of the joyous system, and might be awakened somewhere deep down, but I hope Mahayanists would not argue that their prattle was the wise talk of a Buddha or bodhisattva.

Some people theorize too much. They talk a lot about magical location, water flow, clouds, wind, will of God, harmony, and conflict. Again, I think Mahayanists don't want to stress that the lives of these people are really awakened on any obvious level.

These first two groups are the monkeys in Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Books".

A few people know the subject. They say what needs to be done in plain simple words. They explain to the extent that they have a basis for explanation and to the extent other people need them to explain. If they can convey ideas by referring to concrete situations, they do. They bring in only as much theory as needed and as people can understand without getting more confused. If they need to explain the north wind to make people build thick walls, they do. They don't offer a theory of quantum gravity to use a plumb line, and they don't care that two plumb lines are never exactly parallel. They don't repeat often, not even to make people listen. If you leave them alone, they do what needs doing.

I don't have to stress that Zen is like the last group. If you are hungry, and you have an apple, eat it. If you have to go pick the apple first, then go pick it. If you have to use science to figure out where apples might be growing, use science. If you have to explain to hungry people what an apple is, where the apple trees are, and which apples are ripe, then explain to them.

It sounds easy to do this but it is not. It is very hard. Only a few rare and wonderful people ever master the art of plain simple speaking or writing. Jesus and Chuang Tzu were masters of the art. Even Zen masters who clearly knew what was what sometimes could not explain themselves, and resorted to other means such as shouting, striking, walking away, and riddles. Here it is not relevant whether "it" can be explained or not.

Zen masters knew the sutras thoroughly. Zen students were expected to study the scriptures. When Zen masters said to study the scriptures or to ignore the scriptures, they had the above points in mind. The scriptures can be useful tools to be taken up and put down as needed, or can trap students in Buddhist aids. Students and teachers have to make sure of proper use.

Buddhism, Zen, and Doing Good.

Zen has all the same problems with goodness that Taoism had – Taoists said the Tao was beyond good and bad but tacitly expected conventional goodness in following the Tao - although Zen does not usually extend its ideas of goodness into politics. In Zen the problem might be a little less embarrassing because Zen inherited the Buddhist idea that goodness is in the basic nature of the world. Zen still preached that discriminations of good and bad are misleading yet still expected goodness to result from people doing what they will. Zen wants goodness to result from people not thinking about goodness and not trying to do good. Zen has no answer to the fact that goodness does not always blossom when people simply do what they will.

I think the following story takes place sometime around 800 CE (AD) in China. The character "Po Chu-I" might be the famous poet "Bai Chi-I".

BEGIN STORY

Po Chu-I asked Master Bird Nest (Niao K'o): "What is the core meaning of Buddhism?"

Bird Nest answered: "Do no evil, do much good".

Po Chu-I said: "But a three-year old child understands that."

Bird Nest said: "A three-year old child can say it but many eighty-year old people cannot do it".

In commenting on this story, Master Ryozen said: "If not for this one phrase from Bird Nest, our followers would get stuck in wrong dogmas such as:

- From the Beginning, not one thing
- Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil
- Good and evil are not two
- True and false are the same"

END STORY

This exchange bothered Ikkyu a lot. It goes dead against standard (dogmatic) Mahayana and Zen ideas of non-discrimination, non-duality, no morality, and unity in one great Mind. If the essence of Buddhism is "do good, avoid evil" then Buddhism is no different than naïve common do-gooder religion with mundane distinctions of good and bad, that is, Buddhism basically does not differ from what I (Mike Polioudakis) follow. Then why is Buddhism supposed to be about suffering, ending suffering, cause-and-effect, mind, emptiness, etc. To do good and to avoid evil, we have to discriminate between them, accept distinctions between general and particular, and accept self and other. Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen all say we should not practice discrimination, especially not between good and evil. If we allow in these discriminations, it seems we allow in all discriminations and dogmas. If we allow this discrimination and all discriminations, then what is the point of the Tao or of Zen?

This is why Buddhism is inherently moral despite making a show of not following simplistic conventional morality. This is why you have to learn to manage ideas, not to avoid ideas altogether. The real world is made of distinctions such as "good" and "bad". They are real and important. To think they are unreal and unimportant is as much a bad distinction and a trap as to think they are clear and gigantic. To strongly assert either end of the dilemma is to remain trapped in both ends of the dilemma. This is why Obiwan Kenobe said "Only Sith believe in absolutes". Without the comment by Bird Nest, Zen would be trapped in the dilemma by denying the reality of morality and other useful distinctions. This is why Zen stresses "the world as it is" and "every particular person is valuable and capable". This is why hating dogma is as bad as following dogma.

From this exchange and commentary, it would be easy for me to argue that Buddhism and all religions are merely variations on what I believe. Besides being selfish, that outlook is just as much a mistake as over-stressing differences. Even if "do good, avoid evil" is the essence of Buddhism, and that essence is pretty much what I believe, there is much to practiced Buddhism that is not in the formula, including the ideas that life is not worthwhile, cause-and-effect, and the self is not a simple soul-stuff. You have to

decide for yourself how much is really in Buddhism, how much is added on by smart people, how much is added on by common people, and what is true regardless of why it is there. You have to decide not just for Buddhism but for all religions, including what I profess. To decide, you have to come to grips with Bird Nest, Ryoken, Ikkyu, good, bad, concepts, words, and doing.

Zen Self and the Greater Joyous System.

Before briefly getting to this subject, I revert back to one of the enigmas in Mahayana. The self and the bigger-than-me are both distinct and the same. Before awakening, usually we do not feel the sameness. After awakening, we feel both sameness and distinction. Which we stress when we are awake depends on the situation and on what mood we are in. Just because a Mahayana or Zen adept extols the joyous system does not mean he-she does not feel the self. Just because an adept talks about how much he-she likes to drink sake and play Go does not mean he-she does not feel the system. I do not resolve this issue. It is a non-issue, and can mislead. It takes up too much mental energy of Buddhists. I think the Zen idea of the self and its changes is different than the Mahayana idea but here I can only sketch the differences. I make this point so people think for themselves better and people do not get “hung up” on either Mahayana or Zen terms about the self and its changes.

Some Zen masters, such as the Japanese Hakuin, do have a great experience of their self as strongly “in tune” with the essence at the core of a joyous system such as the Unborn or the Buddha Mind. Even Zen masters who do not have a grand experience of union still feel that they and the bigger-than-me are the same even if different, and are different even if the same, such as the Japanese Dogen or Ryokan. This attitude of having both self and bigger-than-me can be part of Mahayana theology that nirvana (awakened world) and samsara (asleep world) are one. When people make contact with the bigger-than-me, then their self changes, or, at least, the idea of their self changes. They see more truly the relation between self and bigger-than-me, and see more truly the status of the self as not-self, bundle of features, Buddha, bodhisattva, or whatever.

Feeling a relation between the self and the bigger-than-me, feeling change in ideas about them, or feeling a change in their relations, does not have to be exactly what Mahayana tells us even when Zen adepts use Mahayana terms to talk about it. Mystics outside Mahayana have a similar experience, and they do not explain it in Mahayana terms. People talk in the terms of their tradition even if those terms are not exactly the same as their vision. People outside Mahayana who have a “Grand Canyon” experience do not usually explain in Mahayana terms. Because I think all mystical experiences are only partial contact at best, I do not have to accept the Zen explanation that uses Mahayana terms. This is another instance of society, culture, history etc. conditioning what people think even about tremendous experiences. All I have to accept is that Zen adepts have an important experience that involves feeling close connection between the self and bigger-than-me, and that this changes ideas of the self, and of relations between the self and bigger-than-me. Then I take out of that what I think is most true and most useful. That is what I do with all mystic experiences.

Many Zen masters, including Lin Chi (Chinese) and Hakuin (Japanese), reported great healing of doubts, and great healing of a formerly sad self, to go along with meeting the bigger-than-me. Even masters who did not need much healing still felt a better sense of self and fewer doubts, such as Dogen and Ryokan. The change of self and healing of self when in contact with the bigger-than-me is true in other traditions

such as Sufism, as with the poet Rumi, and in Christianity, as when Martin Luther felt close to God. I do not have to explain why. It is just true, and that is fine. The fact that it is true still does not mean we have to accept the metaphysical terms that people themselves use to explain change of self and improvement of self. It is best if we do not impose the metaphysical terms of our tradition but just accept that this happens. If you like to speculate on metaphysics, again, go ahead, but don't expect to be exactly right and don't force other people to follow you.

The Mahayana feeling of self and bigger-than-me is: I am part of a joyous system of many lives. I am the system. I control the world. I want to be a bodhisattva. I am a bodhisattva. Out of my great compassion, I will help other lesser beings. Good for me.

The Zen feeling is: Don't worry about systems. Big deal if I am a bodhisattva or a Buddha. The system got along without me knowing about it before, and it will get along fine with me knowing about it now. Do what comes naturally for me and is most useful in general. Help out other seekers in a way that does not hurt their integrity.

People who have contact with the bigger-than-me usually report strong feelings of compassion and caring for all other beings and for nature. This is true regardless of their original religion, culture, society, history, etc. This is true even when the original culture etc. might not be very "sweet" such as Theravada, Islam, Mahayana, or market worship capitalism. The fact that the feeling of compassion bridges religions etc. does not necessarily make it truer or falsier, and does not necessarily mean that the person who had the feeling was in full contact with the bigger-than-me. I take the feeling as truer than usual human narrow self-interest and I take it as evidence of partial contact if it also gives rise to compassion. If you have this experience, and you love people more as a result, then you were closer to God. What you do with this experience in the real world, and over the long run, is another story.

Sometimes people go into Zen so they can have great feelings, change the self, find the bigger-than-me, unite with the bigger-than-me, heal the self, or have robust health and a long life. I am not sure if people go into Zen so they can feel greater compassion. I would rather people go into Zen because it is useful and fun in itself, like riding a bicycle, and accept those other effects as beneficial side effects; but people are not like that, and going into Zen for such motives is not bad (even if it might impede progress), so I don't say anything against doing that. People seek the Tao, seek Rumi's "companion", or go into Tai Chi Chuan, for the same reasons. If anyone is sick, and changing the self through contact with the bigger-than-me helps him-her find healing, then I am genuinely glad.

Zen Games.

Zen stresses practice as part of meditation. Zen ideally avoids useless disputation but Zen has a lot of disputation too as part of practice. This is part of using words adeptly.

Much has been written about Zen "games" such as koans, tricks, verbal battles, and physical shocks like a shout or a slap to the side of the head. Such "games" are an instance of Mahayana direct teaching, especially teaching that defies words even when it uses words. Such games are a good holdover from Mahayana. The games are an instance of expedient means wherein skillful teachers adjust techniques for particular students. Saying much about these "games" only prolongs confusion, so short is better.

The point of the games is to shake up people so that people achieve mental freedom. There is no other point. If a person can reach mental freedom without games, then the person does not need games, games would not do any good, and games might do some harm.

The Japanese term “koan” (“cone” or “ko-an”, from Chinese “kung-an” or “gong-an”) originally meant a public verbal dispute, especially a court case. In the West, it now means an absurd riddle, such as the sound of one hand clapping. A koan is more. It is how a teacher helps free the mind of a student by giving him-her a mental issue, often an issue that cannot be solved in the terms given. Westerners have called it inducing a mental “cramp” so you stop doing the bad things that lead to stress in the first place. It is the Zen way of forcing the young James T. Kirk into an impossible battle simulation, so he must go beyond the boundaries. When he learns to do that, then he can escape similar situations in the future. Koans have a feel of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”. The best way is to read them. Several fun anthologies are available. You can find a few examples on the Internet for free. Don’t get hung up on koans. Some Zen masters, such as Bankei, did not like them and seldom used them.

To get you started, here is a classic koan. You have to respond right away or the master might hit you. You need background. This background is tedious, and the tedium is part of the point. Bodhidharma was a monk from South India who lived about 500 CE (AD). He went to China to teach Buddhism. He is the founder of Ch’an. On the one hand, in Buddhism, the truth will out, including dharma (dogma). Dharma controls all, the world works according to dharma, and some sentient beings must become aware of the dharma even if other sentient beings stay ignorant. If people in China were destined to know the dharma, then people in China would have learned the dharma whether Bodhidharma went there or not. While it might be a person’s karma to be a monk, it seems odd to say it is a person’s karma to go to China. Not China, nor Bodhidharma, nor the Dharma, gained by Bodhidharma going to China. On the other hand, if Bodhidharma had not gone to China, you can say that China would not have gotten Ch’an. In Buddhism, everything happens by cause-and-effect. Nothing happens without a cause, that is, without a reason, including travels to distant lands. If we say anything just happens by itself without a cause, then we deny cause-and-effect, deny karma and dharma, allow for independent origination, deny dependent origination, allow for the self-subsistence of the self-determined soul self, and so deny Buddhism. China and the world benefitted because Bodhidharma went to China. If Bodhidharma had a reason for going to China, then the meaning of his life and of all lives was tied to it. If Bodhidharma did not have a reason for going to China, then we have to re-assess our attitude toward meaning and life. If we are all already saved, we are all already bodhisattvas, if ordinary life is the same as the awakened life, then it makes no difference if somebody tells us that. If somebody has to tell us that, then there must be a difference.

The koan: Why did Bodhidharma go to China?

For a Taoist, this is a silly question. For a Buddhist, this is a serious question. For a Zen adept, this is an opportunity to get past simplistic misleading discrimination while pondering issues. This koan is roughly the analog of the Western riddles of free will versus determination, why we have prophets who help us but they don’t save us, or why God would allow his joyous creation to get so screwed up. All the jargon that led up to the koan is only a taste of the metaphysical baggage that the average monk carries in his-her head, that impedes mental freedom, and would have to be dealt with. You could try screaming, “I don’t give a damn why Bodhidharma went to China but I am glad that he did” or “I wish that blue-eyed devil had stayed home”.

Zen Sweetness.

Zen masters were not known for being sweet, and were known for being hardnosed and cranky. Yet they often were sweet in deep ways that mattered. They cared about their students and they cared about the common people. They cared in ways that a simplistic Buddhist or diffident Asian might consider too much or consider clinging. Zen masters could yell at an ignorant selfish person who was trying to distort true ideas, but more often they yelled at students as a way to get them to improve. They worked on students not only to get them to mental freedom but to make them better people in many ways, such as to make them more responsible, less compulsive, stop stealing, not drink too much, and care for other people too. Zen masters did this not only by yelling at them, hitting them, and disputing with them but also by setting a personal direct example, giving chores, telling stories, and even helping animals. Zen masters wanted people to get along. Zen masters taught people to be honest, responsible, and caring. They taught people in authority not to misuse their authority, to be aware of subordinates, and to use authority for general public good. Zen masters were like the “tough but fair” coach of sports myth. Regardless of the source of sweetness, and regardless of whether it is orthodox, this sweetness is a credit to Zen and it enhances the idea of mental freedom.

Modern Western Buddhists focus on Zen sweetness as much as on the idea of mental freedom, without realizing how important Buddhist sweetness is and without giving it the right context. Westerners call it “being mindful”, that is, what used to be called “caring” and “good manners”. Westerners refer to cases where great Buddhists of the past showed sweetness. I simply praise modern Western Buddhists for their concern for human kindness.

Awakening, Clear Thinking, Plain Speaking, and Bigger-than-Me.

Nearly all Zen adepts tied clear thinking and plain speaking, that is, awakening, to a feeling of a bigger-than-me. They could not think and speak clearly until they felt the bigger-than-me. When they felt the bigger-than-me, then they automatically thought and spoke clearly. I can make a case that a few Zen adepts did not have to refer to the bigger-than-me but so many adepts obviously did refer to the bigger-than-me that there is no use arguing about the record one way or the other.

Zen adepts often referred to bigger-than-me by a term inherited from Mahayana, such as Nothingness, Buddha Mind, Unborn, or Storehouse Consciousness. I think this was more a matter of convenience than evidence that Mahayana mystic visions and metaphysics are correct. When I read what the masters said and did, it does not seem to me that they had in mind Mahayana ideas even when they used Mahayana terms. If anything, they had in mind more something like the Tao, and just as often used the term “Tao” as any term from Mahayana.

Is it possible to separate clear thinking and plain speaking from any feeling of the bigger-than-me? This is the atheist ideal. It is not the ideal in Mahayana, Zen, or Taoism even when adepts make clear that what they feel is not the same as any historical standard idea in Mahayana, Zen, or Taoism. Among atheists that I have read and spoken with, only David Hume in the 1700s in England came close to this ideal. All modern atheists seem, to me, to yearn for the bigger-than-me but to exclude any stereotyped idea of God. Even Hume felt morality quite strongly. Feeling morality forces an atheist into contact with

the bigger-than-me, or with modest metaphysics, as I explained in the chapter on atheism. All modern atheists feel the bigger-than-me and metaphysics of morality.

In my own thinking, I find it almost impossible to separate clear thinking, plain speaking, and the bigger-than-me. Clear thinking and plain speaking are what God wants me to do, and, when I feel most in touch with God, then that is what I do naturally. Sometimes I try to separate them. I can do it as an exercise in my head but not convincingly from my heart. I understand that evolution likely made it hard for me to do. If I do succeed, I will write about it in another venue.

Does the fact that evolution likely made close ties between clear thinking, plain speaking, and a feeling of the bigger-than-me mean that the bigger-than-me is only a delusion? No, it does not.

Does the close tie between clear thinking, plain speaking, and the bigger-than-me prove that the bigger-than-me exists or that the bigger-than-me is necessarily like my idea of God, the Judeo-Christian-Muslim idea of God, the Tao, the Mahayana joyous system, the Hindu joyous system, or any idea in Zen? Not, it does not prove any of those ideas. If we take for granted the bigger-than-me, then we have to decide the relation between the bigger-than-me, clear thinking, and plain speaking. Looking at how the Zen masters and Taoist masters dealt with these issues is a great place to start because they are likely the most free of confounding problems of dogma, mysticism, and metaphysics. Jesus was pretty free of side issues as well and is also a good place to start too.

Waking Up in Zen.

Waking up in Zen is much like waking up in Taoism. You awaken when you find your mental freedom; if you find mental freedom, then you are awake. I can't say much more about it than I said above. I do not compare waking up in Zen to waking up in other forms of Buddhism or to Hinduism.

Talking about waking up in Zen is annoying because of the Mahayana baggage that Zen carries. As said above, some Zen masters do refer to Buddhist aids such as Mind, Emptiness, Storehouse Memory, the bodhisattva, and the great joyous system, when they talk of waking up. However, some masters insist you not refer to aids at all, and that you avoid them altogether. Waking up to become a bodhisattva is nothing at all. Waking up to the great joyous system is nothing different than waking up to fix breakfast. It is best if you read the original masters and decide for yourself.

Good Government.

Zen was not born out of political conflict. Unlike some Taoism such as of Lao Tzu, Zen does not offer a political theory. Zen is like the Chuang Tzu form of Taoism that was not political. Zen does not expect to change the state or to change the hearts of people. Zen accepts that only a few people can achieve Zen insight. So few people achieve Zen insight that it will make no difference to the workaday practical world. In this, Zen is like the Buddha and like Theravada Buddhism. Zen cannot serve as the basis for political institutions that I think important such as democracy. Zen would not disdain good institutions, and would not oppose them. To the extent Zen adepts could approve of any institutions without fear of hurting their freedom, Zen adepts would see the goodness in political freedom, democracy, charity, education, and paying it forward. But I could not, and would not, seek their endorsement.

Although Zen was not born in an atmosphere of political seeking, did not endorse any particular theory of government as Taoism and Confucius did, and feared getting entangled in politics as much as getting entangled in dogma, Zen adepts still had moral sense, and still scolded bad politicians. Immorality blocks awakening, the Buddha had sympathy and empathy, Buddhists should try to lessen suffering, and bad politics is immorality that leads to suffering. So, when a fiscal policy led to hunger, high taxes, and war, a Zen master might scold the politicians that carried out the policy, and call for better policies. Zen masters did not like ostentatious display that sucked money away from the people and that forced the people into stealing and prostitution. Zen adepts did like moderation in courtly life that allowed for lower taxes, did not tempt young women into becoming concubines, and allowed the common people to be comfortable enough to be moral. The Zen masters Bankei and Hakuin were blunt and colorful in addressing officials about these matters.

Human Nature.

Everything I said about the Tao applies to Zen. Everything that disqualifies you from being a Taoist adept also disqualifies you from being a Zen adept.

Although Zen, modern biology, and me, all stress our natural capability, Zen and modern evolution do not have the same view of human nature. Zen does not have the same view that most people hold of human nature even apart from ideas from evolution.

As noble as Zen might be, Zen is not in line with the nature of most humans. It is not human to be able to give up all dreams of success and to erase all envy. This discrepancy between Zen and normal human nature does not make Zen bad but it should give pause to people who romanticize Zen or who praise Zen as the cure for all that ails us. Zen is not encoded in any genes, but, like all major stances, the ability for Zen is built on inherited capacities. I do not go into what those capacities might be. Zen is an extension of our abilities in ways that are not usually done and that seem to subvert us. Zen seems like a self-negation of human nature.

Other human activities take us beyond the bounds of our original evolved "design specifications". Almost all performance sports, such as swimming, take people outside what our original evolution intended for our bodies. Mathematics takes people outside what our original evolution intended for our minds. Hard martial arts such as karate certainly exceed our design specifications. Golf exceeds what we might have expected while hunting and gathering. Movies and theater are outside the drama that was enacted around ancient campfires. Whether this is good or bad depends. Zen differs from most of these other activities because it negates a core part of our potential even while extending other parts of our potential. Other activities do not usually negate our core potential and might be ways of reaching our core potential. Most athletes and scholars do fairly well in the mate-and-family market. Even Taoist adepts had families. Zen monks do not.

Sometimes we need people who go outside the bounds to show us what is out there even if we do not go outside the bounds ourselves. These extraordinary people do not necessarily negate human nature even when they seem to do so. They enhance human life through their sacrifice. Great artists can be like this,

such as Seurat and Beethoven. Whether Zen adepts are people who reveal our full nature by negating important parts of it, you have to make up your own mind.

Although Zen negates some key aspects of human character, such as envy, it does not leave the mind a "heap of dead ashes". Mahayanists accused Theravada monks of seeking not real enlightenment but to make themselves a heap of dead ashes; by its goals and rigor, Zen seems to do that; but it is not so. Zen adepts were lively interesting people. By removing commitment to dogma and by removing bad feelings such as envy, Zen adepts made themselves great people in other ways.

If we romanticize Zen, then Zen adepts still gain much from their self-sacrifice but we throw away what they might have done for us. Romanticizing Zen wastes it. People are much more at risk of falling into a romantic delusion about Zen than of pursuing it so far that they negate their humanity. That is a different problem. The cure for that problem is not specific to Zen but is a part of general human silliness.

Buddhism developed an elaborate theory of human nature to explain not-awakening and awakening. As a branch of Buddhism, Zen has access to those sutras. But Zen does not use it much. Zen is not about explaining human nature or developing human nature. Zen accepts the ability for Zen in human nature, and goes from there.

Humans evolved with the propensity to deceive other people, a considerable tendency to self-deception, biases in how we see the world, and some inconsistency. Zen mental freedom implies not being limited in those ways. Even if a Zen adept does not achieve perfect mental freedom, Zen implies that an adept rises above deception, self-deception, biases, and inconsistency. Again, to rise above those tendencies is to negate a big part of our humanity. Natural selection would have made sure that people who could rise above those tendencies in the past did not succeed and did not leave children to carry on their odd freedom – always recall that Zen adepts are celibate. In that case, could any real humans actually free themselves of these limitations? Does it make sense to even consider that success in Zen is possible? I can't say. I doubt people can reach total freedom from evolved limitations-biases but I think people can achieve enough freedom to make Zen practice worthwhile and for some people to succeed. Apparently people can lose envy, and, if they can lose envy, they can do almost anything.

Worthwhile Life Again.

Taoists consider the world worthwhile. When not plagued by the state, Taoists consider the world a lot of fun. This life, right now, as it is, is worthwhile and fun. In Christian terms, life is good. Zen, as Buddhism, should not have this attitude, but, in fact, Zen adepts do seem to have this attitude. They seem to enjoy life. In their eyes, life is worthwhile, not only because it gives you a chance to awaken, but because it is worthwhile in itself. If you take seriously the idea that there is no difference between the awakened life and the sleeping life, that suffering is only an illusion, then you can enjoy this life. The Zen attitude does not seem to come out of such an intellectual approach but is a more immediate enjoyment of this life right now – as befits non-dogmatic Zen. Zen adepts are more like Taoists in this way than like Buddhists. In Taoism and Zen, this life matters right now, not the system of many lives or the Tao of long ago and far away and everywhere every time. This coincidence of Tao and Zen enjoyment of life does not mean that the Tao is the same as the Buddha Mind, the Unborn, or any of the other metaphysical ideas at the heart

essence of Mahayana many-life systems. Of course, because I am not a Zen or Taoist adept, I could be wrong on these issues, and I welcome the reader to seek for him-herself.

Zen Not Hokey; Not only Life but Zen Can Be Worthwhile.

Zen and Tao adepts try to be fearsome but often they appear more hokey or nerdy. Tao adepts get drunk and write poetry. Zen adepts say they can bring you to awaken if you let them starve you, beat you, yell at you, torment you with puzzles, force you to sit in cramped positions for hours, and make you do their laundry and cook their food. In the end, what reward do you get? Trees look like trees, and flowers smell like flowers; the world is as it is. You can't take that to the bank, and you can't even use it to amuse your friends. You don't learn to use a sword to kill enemies, as in the movies "Kill Bill". It isn't just that Zen is impractical, it seems silly too. Because Zen seems so hokey, we have to ask if Zen is worthwhile.

Suppose Zen monks are extraordinary people who build on human potential to push past what ordinary people could achieve or would want to achieve. Zen achieves but only by negating part of what is most important to being human. Zen is not for ordinary people. Then how is Zen useful for ordinary people? Can ordinary people learn from it? Can they learn enough to make Zen a commendable human activity? We can learn from great pianists even though we cannot play like them. The issue with Zen is different. We can appreciate almost fully what a pianist does even if we could not do it ourselves. Playing great piano does not negate core aspects of human nature even if to achieve it requires sacrifice. We cannot appreciate what a Zen adept does unless we commit to Zen. We have to be willing to erase some core aspects of our human nature even if we do not succeed. There is only so much we can learn from Zen unless we commit to it, and few people do that, or should do that.

So, should normal people spend time on Zen? The answer, of course, depends on the person. All in all, a study of Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen is good for many people. Study as much as you can to the point where you know you are not getting any more out of it, then quit. Keep an open mind toward people who get further along than you are. Don't disparage it.

I don't recommend Zen or meditation as therapy, weight loss, mind expansion, cancer cure, tension relief, or for any other immediate practical benefit. Zen can have those benefits, but I have found that light low-impact exercise, such as swimming or walking, has more long-term benefit, and is easier. Do some Zen because it is interesting. Take it as far as you like it. Don't make more of it than it is. It is only hokey if you make more of it than it is, if you turn it into something you see on TV or in recreation courses.

I have the same comments for Taoism, although I recommend that you stay away from ideas about chi, flow of chi, yin and yang, etc. until you are familiar with good solid basic simple Taoism. You cannot drink your way to the Tao.

Yoga originally was a way of meditation but now is taught as a health exercise. If we do Zen or Taoism without intending to awaken but for the good effects along the way, don't we reduce Zen and Taoism as modern yoga has been reduced? Yes. That is a danger. The difference is that you should be aware of what you are doing and of your limited goals from the beginning, and you should respect people who strive for more even if you do not understand them.

As Time Goes By.

Until about 1700 CE (AD), the world was like this: You got up early in the morning to work hard all day long. The vast majority of people made a living working the ground. Mostly the air and water were clean. The aristocrats rule over peasants arbitrarily. Sometimes there was war. Sometimes the ruling class changed. Sometimes there was disease, flood, famine, fire, or even a bountiful harvest. You had about ten kids. Your parents died, your friends died, sometimes you children died, and then you died. You got what you could out of life, which could be a lot or little. Nothing really changed.

In the world before 1750, traditional religions make sense. It makes sense, as in Buddhism and some Hinduism, to step outside the world to let it go by. It makes sense, in Taoism and some Christianity, to step outside the main flow of politics and conniving to enjoy the world as much as you can. It makes sense, as in the Kingdom of God of Jesus, to work to build a distinct just world of well-intentioned people within the bigger political world. It makes sense, as in Islam, to work for a real Kingdom of God in the bigger political world.

Then about 1750, the world began to change, and kept on changing, faster and faster. I don't go through the changes. Here are a few: Democracy arose. Capitalism arose. The air and water got dirty. We had a mechanical revolution, chemical revolution, electrical revolution, and atomic revolution. We are still having revolutions in biology, artificial intelligence, and micro devices. The new world demands that we participate in a way that the average peasant never dreamed of.

In this new world of change and participation, stepping outside the world, as in Buddhism, Taoism, or some Hinduism, does not make as much sense. Trying to change over the world unilaterally, as in some Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, does not make much sense either. It makes more sense to change the world as much as you can to conform to good principles. You have to find the best principles to live by.

Only if you give up entirely even on the modern world of change and participation does it make sense to step outside the world to watch it go by. Nowadays, few even of Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians really want to do that.

Even if the traditional religions don't make sense as originally intended, still, they were built by smart people on solid experience with human nature and the real world, and contain many valuable lessons. We might not be able to follow them as originally intended but we can still learn from them, and apply what we learn to make the new world as good as possible.

You have to decide if the traditional religions make sense in the modern world. You have to decide what to take from them for the modern world.

No Relativism.

If no one path gets us to full complete contact with the bigger-than-me, and all paths get us some contact, then it seems I have drifted into relativism. Maybe I have drifted into relativism to some extent but I don't like the idea that I have drifted into relativism, and I argue against that.

Precisely because no path gets us full direct contact with God (bigger-than-me), it is easier to argue that some paths are better than others. If all paths led to full direct contact, then all would have to be equally good even if they seemed different. That is not so.

Not surprisingly, I still think following the teachings of Jesus, mixed with practicality and Western values, is the best path, and is basic, although I do not disparage other paths. Unless you are in a monastery, or you live quietly somewhere, even while you are doing Taoism or Zen, you still have to work to make a better world and you still have to be a good citizen of a pluralistic modern democracy. You have to try to be decent. At first while you are working for at finding the Tao or waking up, you can ignore the teachings of Jesus and ignore being a good citizen. At first, you might have to shut out distractions until you are adept enough to relax and assess. After then, if you choose to follow Taoism or Zen while not working to make the world better and while not being a good citizen, then you diminish the other path and yourself. Sooner or later, in the modern world, you have to see that you have to do Buddhism, Zen, Taoism, Islam, and Hinduism in the context of the modern world, and, to do that, you have to face the message of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. You do not have to accept that Jesus was the one and only God, although I invite you to think about it.

It is not necessary that the best path be one that almost everybody can follow but I think any path that almost everybody can follow is more likely to be better than other paths, and more likely to be basic to other paths. While in theory, almost everybody can understand, follow, and succeed in Theravada, Mahayana, Taoism, and Zen, in fact, that is not so. Usually only a minority of smart people can do well in those religions and fully succeed, unless we allow that simplistic devotional worship primarily in your own self-interest is full success. Those religions account for the fact that not everybody can follow them by use of ideas such as karma and dharma but that response is not very satisfying. So they are not good candidates for a basic path that everybody can follow. Maybe everybody could be a fundamentalist idiot, but I hope that is not an acceptable alternative. Not everybody wants to be a Jew, nor should they have to be a Jew to be acceptable to God. The same is true of Islam. I don't think people should have to accept Jesus as the one and only God to be acceptable to God - as long as they act well. Everybody might be able to act well along the lines originally imagined by Mohammad but not along the lines that real practiced Islam has turned out. The same is true of most real practiced Christianity. In contrast, the teachings of Jesus, practicality, and basic Western values are easy to understand, and everybody can follow them to some extent. God does not expect perfect success. If, from that base, you want to do more, such as mystic discipline, and you want to try another path, for a while or for a long time, such as Zen, mainstream Islam, of Sufism, then I see no reason why you can't do that. If your heart tells you to go on, or to turn around, then do so. Never lose sight of the basic values of Jesus, practicality, and Western good government.

Think of it this way: You have become enlightened through some form of Buddhism or you have come to know and follow the Tao. Now what exactly are you going to do, stand around and spit at polliwogs? Get drunk every night and write poetry? Read abstruse sutras? Watch too much TV? Complain about how bad everyone else's Zen is and how they are all frauds screwing the masses? If you follow the Tao, the official answer is that the Tao will lead you. If you follow Buddhism, including Zen, the official answer is that you play out your last karma, and that last bit of karma will lead you. Both those answers are glib and lead to a boring life. That is not what the Buddha did. Either Buddhist or Taoist, if you are an adept, you are now able to discriminate correctly, and you are unlikely to be led astray by dogma. You might as

well use your talent and energy to help people, make the world a better place, promote the rule of law (“applies equally to everybody”), and be a good citizen of a modern government. In his time and place, that is what the Buddha did. Or, you can do science and art. If you find yourself getting trapped by life and clinging, then you are able to back off. The Buddha did not get misled when he went back into society somewhat. Maybe doing this is what the Buddha meant by taking awakening back into society and back into the marketplace.

True, helping society is not what the Taoist Chuang Tzu did; in fact, he refused the leadership of a large state in non-democratic China. We don’t all have to be exactly like Chuang Tzu; to imitate him slavishly is to fall into dogma. I would like to try talking Chuang Tzu into helping out a little bit in the different context of a modern pluralistic democracy and in a world where nature desperately needs help. When nature dies, the Tao likely will die too.

Optional Theological Indulgence.

In this section, I return to ideas of mind or Mind.

In the play “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder, a character shows off his erudition to his fellow rural “townies” by addressing a posted letter something like: “John Doe, This Number, This Street, This Town, This State, United States of America, North America, Planet Earth, Milky Way Galaxy, Universe, Mind of God”. In some official Christian theology, the universe exists in the mind of God. In Classical philosophy, all of Western philosophy until the 1700s, and most Western philosophy even after, the world was evidence of a mind at work. The play “Our Town” is worth reading, and movies of it are worth watching.

I have a similar attitude as Wilder although I hope I am not quite as pretentious as his character. The world is evidence of a mind at work. The mind is moral. We do well when we go along with the mind, including when we follow its moral principles.

Buddhism, to some extent Taoism, and Zen, all have a similar attitude. The world is evidence of a mind at work, the mind is moral, and we have to follow its morality. The world is Buddha Mind. The world is also Emptiness, but it is not too hard to merge the ideas of Mind and Emptiness.

Then what is the difference? In the Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Western tradition that I follow, we have to actively live out the moral principles. In my version, we have to follow the teachings of Jesus. We have to be proactive. We have to actively follow the Golden Rule and actively work hard to make the world a better place. Simply thinking of the world as the realization of a moral mind at work does not lead us to embrace Jesus’ moral principles. The people in “Our Town” would have felt this tacit assumption without Wilder needing to make it explicit, and they lived it in the play.

In stressing the need for action, the Judaic-Christian-Islamic-Western tradition too often gets caught up in zealotry. People feel they need to justify and save themselves, and turn to self-serving zealotry to do so. They end up doing more harm than good.

The East somewhat escapes the curses of justification and zealotry by not requiring that people live out the moral principles that I have described. People do not actively have to work hard to make the world a

better place along the lines of Jesus' morality and Western political ideals. The East has its zealots but the role of religion might be different than in the West and in Islam. Yet, in not stressing these principles, the East never built the kinds of people and institutions that I value.

On one side, Theravada avoids active morality. Mahayana also does that, gets caught up in the joyous system of many lives, and puts its trust in the golden bodhisattva too. In contrast, Zen ignores the joyous system of many lives and does not rely on the bodhisattva. In Zen, people should be moral on their own. It is tempting to see in Zen a useful compromise between the West and East. Because Zen people are so adept at using dogma without getting caught up in dogma, Zen people can be moral along the lines of the best principles while not feeling the need for justification and not becoming zealots. We can have the best of both worlds.

Traditionally Zen did not see itself this way. I don't know how modern Zen adepts think when faced with the need to engage a single world in economic, ecological, and political distress. As far as I can tell, the people who gave Zen to the West, especially D.T. Suzuki, did not think of Zen this way, perhaps because the world then was not one, did not share similar problems of economy and ecology, and problems then seemed amenable to science. The generations of Westerners who took up Zen after them might have seen Zen this way, as a base for limited moral action. I have in mind the Beat generation, Alan Watts, and the people that I met on the West Coast in the 1960s and 1970s. I have not reviewed the work of recent Zen writers to make a case either way. If recent Zen writers did not think that ideas of mind could serve as a correct base for moral action, they were well-intended but wrong. If they thought that ideas of mind could serve as a correct base for limited moral action, then I would have to know more about their ideas of limited moral action.

As far as I understand Zen, it can't be used as an appropriate base for moral action in the modern world way, and Zen alone can't serve as the basis for the kind of moral action that we need, for all the reasons listed above. Zen clearly stresses Mind as the basis for the world, it avoids the inaction offered by faith in the bodhisattva, and it clearly expects high moral standards; but it cannot alone serve as the basis for the principles, people, and institutions that I have argued for. Those ideas have to be added to the idea of mind that prevails in Zen, at least as Zen is now understood.

I don't know if, in the long run, the Zen stance of mind and morality is a good thing or a bad thing. When the world gets worse, and as the world changes in response to bio-technology and artificial intelligence, it might be that the stance of Taoism and Zen is more useful than the stance of simple the "gung ho moral principles" and "make the world better" that I take. I don't know what that will imply for the mind of God and the teachings of Jesus.