

Zen Mind

Zen Master Dae Kwang

The monk Damei Fachang once asked Mazu Daoyi, “What is Buddha?”

Mazu replied, “Mind is Buddha.”

Zen mind is just another name for our original Buddha nature. Buddha nature has many names. In the sutras it says that there are 36,000,119,500 names for Buddha and they are all the same! When I first encountered Buddhism in the United States, one of the most popular books about Zen was *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. I don’t remember much about the book, but the title is quite striking. During its history Buddhism has used many terms to talk about our Buddha nature: nirvana, pure land, original nature, true nature, mind . . . many, many names. Mazu’s student, Nanquan Puyuan, even called it “everyday mind.” The intent of these terms is not to define but, rather, to point us toward a direct experience of what we really are. In the above example our Buddha nature is likened to a “beginner”: it doesn’t have any predetermined idea about how things are or how they should proceed. It’s not attached.

Buddha taught that the reason we suffer is because we don’t know what we really are—we’re ignorant of our true nature (another name for Zen mind). We are attached to our thinking. If we can just let go of our mistaken idea then we can return to what we already were, our Buddha nature. The Sixth Patriarch got enlightenment when he heard just

one line from the Diamond Sutra: “When thinking arises in your mind, don’t attach to it.”

Our original Buddha nature is not a thing, so applying a term to “it” can just increase the problem. People can easily become attached, even to the term that is designed to free them. However, we do have to talk about “it” if we are going to help the world. Buddha talked about it a lot—that’s where the sutras come from. Their purpose is not explanation. Their job is to point us toward what we truly are. That’s why Zen is known for its iconoclasm. It wants to remove every idea, even a good Zen idea, so you can have an authentic experience.

A monk once asked Mazu, “What is Buddha?”

Mazu answered, “No mind, no Buddha.”

Here is a kong-an for you: Bodhidharma sat facing a wall. The Second Patriarch, standing in snow, cut off his arm and, handing it to Bodhidharma, said, “My mind cannot rest. Please, teacher, rest my mind!”

Bodhidharma replied, “Bring me your mind and I will put it to rest.”

The Second Patriarch said, “I cannot find my mind.”

“There,” said Bodhidharma, “I have already given your mind rest!”

So, the question is: What is rest mind? If you want to attain that you have to do what Zen Master Seung Sahn said: “Throw your mind in the trash can!” ♦

[15

If the Ancient Barbarian Could Do It, So Can You—Letter to a Student

Ken Kessel JDPSN

Thanks for your letter. Your strong intention to practice is marked with despair at the persistent habits that reflect and cause discomfort. Intentional practice makes anchor points, so that you have an experience of persistent effort. You have an anchor that reflects this, even if at times it feels like the rope has detached from the anchor. Even at the end of your rope, you still have the rope. So find something to connect it to. Having an anchor point in the midst of despair is one core element of practice.

Bodhidharma speaks of bearing the unbearable. Now you know what he’s talking about. If the ancient barbarian could do it, so can you. One suggestion—don’t increase formal practice beyond what your daily routine allows in order to fix this. That has several errors.

First, the idea that there’s something to fix.

Second, the belief that doing something at one point in

time will fix something that either already happened or hasn’t happened yet. Sometimes that may be possible, but that doesn’t dispel demons. Rather, gain strength by practicing ordinary things. Find simple everyday tasks and make them your practice as well. That cultivates a mind habit of continuous practice. At the moment of attentive engagement, there is nothing to fight. There is not a thing to hold on to and not a thing to push away. Just be with what you’re doing. If you take that mind into other moments, they become that way too. When you see that your demons are originally your own true self, their power becomes your power. Don’t be deceived by power; it’s only swallowing juice, when you drink it. Refrain from looking for truth. Just see. Then your mind, my mind and Buddha’s mind are the same. If you feel like your own worst enemy, consider that that’s also what makes you your own best teacher. ♦