

# B U D D H I S M

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*Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Editor*



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## A Discussion of Seated Zen

*Carl Bielefeldt*

One of the most important pioneers of Japanese Zen was the Kamakura-period figure Enni (or Ben'en, 1202–1280). Originally a monk of the Tendai school, he took up the study of the newly imported Zen religion under a disciple of Eisai (or Yōsai) and then spent several years in China, where he trained under the prominent master Wuzhun Shifan. Upon his return to Japan in 1241, he won the support of the powerful court politician Kujō Michiie, was appointed by Michiie as the founding abbot of the great new monastic complex Tōfukuji, and became instructor to both emperor and shōgun. Such was his renown that he was posthumously honored by the imperial title National Teacher First of Sages (Shōichi Kokushi).

Unfortunately, little of Enni's Zen teaching is preserved for us. We know that, like his forebear Eisai, he retained broad interests in other forms of Buddhism, especially the esoteric tantric systems popular in his day. Aside from a brief collection of his sayings, his teachings on Zen are best known from a little tract usually referred to simply as *A Discussion of Seated Zen* (*Zazen ron*). This is a work in a genre that might be called "vernacular homily" (*kana hōgo*), which was often used by the first Japanese Zen teachers to spread the new faith among their countrymen. Hence, the text has received its more formal alternative title: *A Vernacular Dharma Talk by the National Teacher Shōichi of Tōfuku* (*Shōichi kokushi kana hōgo*).

Enni's *Discussion* is usually said to have been written for his lay patron, Michiie, but there is reason to doubt this tradition. In fact, the origin of the work is quite mysterious. The vulgate version as we now know it was not published until the seventeenth century and differs considerably from a recently discovered early manuscript. Moreover, whatever their differences, both these versions are largely reworkings of material in another text of the same title, written in Chinese and attributed to the first Song Zen missionary to the Kamakura, Lanqi Daolong (Rankei Dōryū, 1213–1278), who arrived in Japan only a few years after Enni's return. This fact in itself, however, does not necessarily mean that Enni's work is

spurious; for, whoever wrote the first version of the *Discussion*, it was probably not the Chinese master Daolong: both the content and style of this text seem clearly to stamp it as a work of Japanese authorship.

Throughout the brief introduction and two dozen questions and answers that comprise the vulgate version of the *Discussion*, we find a number of interlocking themes that recur in other early Japanese texts on Zen. These themes, as well as the language through which they are discussed, remind us less of the contemporaneous Chan literature of the Southern Song than of the old Tang writings of early Chan long familiar to Japanese Tendai scholars. At the outset of the text, Zen is defined as the “buddha mind,” a name by which the Zen teachings had long been known in Japan and a term that is central to the entire argument of the *Discussion*. The “buddha mind” as used here designates at once the ultimate reality, or “emptiness,” of all things and the enlightened state, or knowledge of that reality, characteristic of a buddha.

Since Zen is this buddha mind, it represents the very essence—both the highest truth and final goal—of all Buddhism. Since the buddha mind is empty of all “marks,” or distinguishing characteristics, it cannot be described; since Zen specializes in this mind alone, it is beyond (and looks down on) all other forms of Buddhism that seek to describe reality and the means to its knowledge. Hence, like much of traditional Chan literature, the *Discussion* is dismissive of the standard categories of Buddhist teaching and the traditional practices of the bodhisattva path.

Since the buddha mind is the reality of all beings, the enlightened state of a buddha is our own true nature—a “subliminal self-consciousness,” so to speak, of ultimate reality that is present in all awareness, however seemingly distorted or “afflicted”; since Zen is concerned only with this enlightened state, it has no need to overcome afflictions or gain virtues but only calls on us to see our natures and be our true selves. In the *Discussion*, this call takes two forms regularly found in the classical literature of early Chan: one that urges the reader to a “sudden awakening,” or recognition of the truth of the buddha mind; the other that enjoins what might be called the “imitation” of the markless character of that mind through the cultivation of a state of detached, preconceptual awareness called “no-mind” or “no-thought.”

The rather uneasy relationship between these two forms is probably reflected in the text’s seeming ambivalence toward its title theme of *zazen*, a term I have rendered here “seated zen.” The word *zen*, of course, derives from a Chinese term for *dhyaṇa* and can be rendered “meditation”; the word *zazen* is widely used for Buddhist contemplative practice and usually translated as “seated meditation.” At the outset, the *Discussion* identifies Zen as the “school of seated meditation” and the traditional Buddhist “gate of meditation,” and it goes on to identify the practice of *zazen* with buddhahood itself. Yet, like many of the texts of early Chan, it also emphasizes that Zen is beyond seated meditation and strongly rejects the notion that this practice should be seen as the focus of Zen religious life. Given this ambivalence, I have opted in the following English version of the text to leave the term *zen* untranslated.

The translation is based on the vulgate text of the *Discussion* published as *Shōichi kokushi kana hōgo*, in *Zenmon hōgo shū*, vol. 2 (rev. ed., Tokyo: Kōyūkan, 1921), pp. 411–22. For ease of reference, I have supplied section numbers to the text.

## A Vernacular Dharma Talk by the National Teacher Shōichi of Tōfuku

The school of seated zen is the way of the great liberation. All the various dharmas flow out from this gate; all the myriad practices are mastered from this way. The mystic functions of wisdom and psychic powers are born from within it; the life of men and gods have opened forth from within it. Therefore, the buddhas have resided in this gate, and the bodhisattvas practice it and enter into this way. Even those of the Lesser Vehicle and non-Buddhists practice it, although they do not yet accord with the true path. All the exoteric and esoteric schools have their self-verification by attaining this way. Therefore, the [Third] Patriarch [of Zen] has said [in *Believing in the Mind* (*Xin xin ming*)], “All the wise men of the ten directions enter this school.”

[1.] Q: Why do you say that this zen gate is the root of all the teachings?

A: Zen is the buddha mind. The precepts are its outer marks; the teachings are its explanation; the recitation of the [Buddha’s] name is its device. These three spiritual practices have all come from the buddha mind. Therefore, this school represents the root.

[2.] Q: The dharma of zen has no-marks as its essence. How, then, [does it explain] the appearance of the spiritual virtues, and what does it take as the verification of seeing one’s nature?

A: One’s own mind is the buddha. What spiritual virtue is there beyond this? And what verification should we seek beyond the recognition of our own minds?

[3.] Q: If we cultivate this one mind, this is but one practice. If we cultivate the myriad practices and good works, how could the merit from this be inferior to that of one practice?

A: An ancient has said [in the *Song of Enlightenment* (*Zheng dao ge*)], “When you suddenly recognize the zen of the Thus Come One, the six perfections and the myriad practices are complete within your own body.” Thus, the one dharma of zen includes all dharmas. Even in the secular world, we have the saying, “Myriad talents cannot match one mind.” Therefore, although we cultivate myriad practices, if we do not put an end to the delusion of one mind, we will not attain awakening; and, if we are not awakened, how can we become buddhas?

[4.] Q: Why are we to cultivate this buddha-mind school? Even if we do so, it is not certain that we will attain awakening; and, if it is not certain, what use is there in cultivating it?

A: Because this school is the way of inconceivable liberation, for one who

but hears it, it forms the surpassing cause of enlightenment; and if he cultivates this school, it represents the ultimate of the buddha mind. The buddha mind is basically without delusion or awakening; it is the mystic practice of [Śāk-yamuni's] six years of erect sitting in the Snowy Mountains that is clear in this school. Even if you have not attained the way, when you do seated zen for one period, you are a one-period buddha; when you do seated zen for one day, you are a one-day buddha; when you do seated zen for one lifetime, you are a lifetime buddha. To have this kind of faith is to be one of great faculties, a great vessel of the dharma.

[5.] Q: In practicing this way, how are we to employ our minds?

A: The buddha mind is without marks and without attachments. The *Diamond Sūtra* says that the buddhas are free from all marks. Therefore, where we have no-mind and no-thought in the midst of the four attitudes of walking, standing, sitting, and reclining, this is the true employment of the mind, the true concentrated effort.

[6.] Q: This kind of cultivation is difficult to believe in and difficult to practice. How would it be if one were to seek the merits of reading the sūtras and reciting spells (*dhāraṇī*), or keeping the precepts, or recollecting the Buddha and calling his name?

A: The sūtras and spells are not words: they are the original mind of all beings. They are speech, intended for those who have lost their original minds, that teaches through various similes in order to bring about awakening to the original mind and put an end to birth and death in delusion. One who awakens to his original mind and returns to the origin reads the true sūtra. If we keep on reciting words with the mouth and say that this is the ultimate, are we then supposed to get warm by saying "fire" when we are cold, or get cool by saying "breeze" when we are hot? Or when we are hungry, are we supposed to get full by intoning the name of the food that we want? Therefore, though we say "fire" all day, it will not make us warm; though we say "water" all night, it will not wet our mouths. Words and speech are like the picture of a rice cake: though we intone them with our mouths our entire lives, our hunger will not be assuaged. What a pity that the ordinary man, his deluded concepts of birth and death deeply [rooted], is always thinking of attainment in regard to the dharmas. This is great stupidity. To practice all dharmas without the mind of attainment is called the *prajñā* of the Great Vehicle. This is the wisdom of the buddhas, immaculate and without concepts. Because this wisdom cuts the root of birth and death, it is called the sword of *prajñā*.

[7.] Q: If we do not accumulate the merits and good spiritual roots [of the bodhisattva path], how can we become a buddha, perfectly endowed with the myriad virtues?

A: One who seeks buddhahood through accumulating the merits and good roots may become a buddha after three great incalculable eons; but one who cultivates [the Zen way of] direct pointing at a person's mind, seeing his nature and becoming a buddha, [knows that he] is himself [a buddha] from the beginning: it is not that he initially verifies the fruit of buddhahood.

[8.] Q: Then does one who cultivates zen reject the power of the merits and good roots?

A: Although he cultivates the good roots for the sake of benefiting others, since he has no aspirations, he does not seek merits. For he has no-mind at all times.

[9.] Q: If this no-mind represents the ultimate, who is it that verifies the seeing of his nature and awakening to the way?

A: The ultimate no-mind means to put a stop to all wrong knowledge and bad views, all the discriminations of thinking. Since it does not produce any [false] view of cultivation, it does not aspire to become a buddha; since it does not produce any view of social intercourse, it does not rejoice in respect and reputation; since it does not produce any view of love and hate, it makes no distinction of intimacy and distance between self and other. Do not think of any good or bad—such [a person] is called the one on the way of no-thought. This way is not something known to the ordinary person or those on the two vehicles [of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha].

[10.] Q: In the [Buddhist] teachings, the merits of the myriad good works and practices are often explained; why is it that the merit of no-mind is not directly explained?

A: Since the bodhisattvas of original enlightenment already value and understand it, it is not explained. This is the sense of the *Lotus Sūtra* statement, “Do not teach this sūtra among those without wisdom.” Although the teachings have eighty-four thousand dharma gates, if we seek their source, they do not go beyond the two dharmas of form and emptiness. “Form” means the substance of the four great [physical elements] and five aggregates; “emptiness” is the nature of the afflictions and enlightenment. Because this body has shape, it is called “form”; because the mind is without shape, it is called “emptiness.” In all realms, there is nothing to be explained beyond this body and mind.

[11.] Q: Are the shape and substance of the four great [elements] originally something deluded or something awakened?

A: There is from the beginning no distinction of ignorance and enlightenment in either body or mind. Everything merely appears provisionally, like a dream or an illusion. Do not think about any of the myriad things.

[12.] Q: The two vehicles also have this no-mind, as well as enlightenment and nirvāṇa. How is the Great Vehicle different?

A: From the start, the arhats of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha [vehicles] consider body and mind as the afflictions and hate them. They seek to extinguish body and mind, becoming like dead trees, tiles, and stones. Though they practice in this way, they [merely] become heavenly beings in the formless realm. This is not the true dharma; it is [merely] the fruit of the Lesser Vehicle. The no-mind of the Great Vehicle is not the same.

[13.] Q: Do the bodhisattvas of the Great Vehicle have this way of no-mind?

A: Until they reach the tenth stage [of their path], bodhisattvas have the afflictive and cognitive obstacles and therefore do not yet accord [with no-mind]. [To say that they have] the afflictive obstacles means that, because until

the tenth stage they have aspirations to seek the dharma, they do not accord with their original lot. It is only when they attain the virtual enlightenment [following the tenth stage] that they reach this way of no-mind.

[14.] Q: If it is difficult even for the bodhisattvas to accord with it, how could beginners easily accord with this way?

A: The true dharma is inconceivable. The establishment of the three ranks of the wise and ten ranks of the holy [that define the stages of the bodhisattva path] is for the sake of those of dull spiritual faculties. Those of acute faculties awaken to the true enlightenment of no-mind when they first produce the thought [of seeking supreme enlightenment at the outset of the bodhisattva path].

[15.] Q: Why is it that, though one who sees his nature and awakens to the way is immediately a buddha, he does not have the psychic powers and radiance [of a buddha] or show the mystic functions [of a buddha] that would distinguish him from the ordinary person?

A: Because this body has been constructed from past deluded conceptions, though we see our nature, it does not show the psychic powers and radiance. Yet, is it not a psychic power to master the six dusts [of the senses] and the deluded conceptions? Without depending on difficult, painful practices, without passing through the three great incalculable eons, to cut off birth and death, see directly one's nature and become a buddha—this is the mystic function. To use the light of wisdom of the immaculate dharma body to save all beings from the darkness of ignorance—what use is there in any radiance beyond this? To want psychic powers other than the great wisdom and penetration is the way of Māra and the non-Buddhists. Foxes have psychic powers and transformations, but should we honor them? Just cultivating no-mind, we should extinguish at once the three great incalculable eons and abruptly see our natures and become buddhas.

[16.] Q: What kind of wisdom are we to use to awaken to the meaning of seeing our natures and becoming buddhas?

A: The knowledge gained by studying the sūtras and treatises is called [the knowledge of] seeing, hearing, recognizing, and knowing. This may be knowledge for the ordinary, stupid person, but it is not true knowledge. To recognize the inherent buddha nature by turning the light around and shining it back is called the wisdom eye. We use this wisdom eye to see our natures and become buddhas.

[17.] Q: What is this inherent buddha nature? And what do you mean by "turning the light around and shining it back"?

A: All beings have a self-nature. This nature is intrinsically without arising or cessation; it constantly abides without change. Therefore, it is called the inherent self-nature. Both the buddhas of the three worlds [of past, present, and future] and all beings have this nature as the dharma body of the original ground. The radiance of this dharma body fills the entire dharma realm, turning the light and shining it back on the darkness of the ignorance of all beings. Where this light does not reach is called Māra's realm of ignorance. In this



realm of Māra dwells the spirit of the afflictions, seeking to devour the dharma nature. Those injured by this spirit of the afflictions, believing that their deluded thoughts are their original mind and taking delight in the seeds of desire, revolve through the four [kinds of] births in the three evil [destinies]. When will they ever cut off birth and death?

[18.] Q: Birth and death arise from deluded thoughts. If one awakens to the source from which deluded thoughts arise, will birth and death naturally stop?

A: Throughout the twenty-four hours of the day, beings are perverted by deluded thoughts, and their original buddha nature is naturally buried by the afflictions. It is like the bright moon hidden by clouds. Once they have awakened to the source of these thoughts, it is like the bright moon emerging from the clouds. It is like the mirror that, when clean, clearly reflects the myriad images. It has full mastery in regard to all dharmas and, though facing the myriad objects, suffers not so much as a hair's breadth of defilement. This is because the original buddha nature has freedom of psychic power.

[19.] Q: What does it mean to say that, in employing the mind in seated zen, we "should not think of any good or bad"?

A: This phrase will directly cut off the root source of birth and death. Do not think it is limited to seated zen. One who reaches [understanding of] this phrase is a buddha without beginning or end, is [practicing] zen whether walking, standing, sitting, or reclining.

[20.] Q: What are big thoughts and small thoughts?

A: Small thoughts are thoughts that arise from conditions; big thoughts are [the three poisons of] the desire, aversion, and delusion of beginningless birth and death. One who stops the thoughts of the three poisons, big and small, only in seated zen, one who lacks the authentic mind of the way, does not clarify the root source of the beginningless birth and death and does not exhaust the consciousness characterized by the three poisons. When one has clarified this root source, the afflictions become bodhi, the three poisons become the three pure precepts [of avoiding evil, cultivating good, and benefiting others], birth and death become the beginningless nirvāṇa, and the six dusts become the six psychic powers.

[21.] Q: The mind of one who has long cultivated seated meditation will clearly be pure, but how should one just beginning to cultivate put a stop to the perversions of deluded conceptions?

A: Do not detest the perversions of deluded conceptions; just clarify the nature of the mind. Because we are confused about the one mind, we think that, where in fact it is originally pure, there are the perversions of deluded conceptions. For example, though during sleep we see various things in our dreams, when we wake from the dreams, all these become merely deluded conceptions to us. When we awaken to the one mind, all things are empty, and not a single thing remains.

[22.] Q: What does it mean to say "the afflictions are bodhi; birth and death are nirvāṇa"?

A: The afflictions mean stupidity and ignorance; bodhi means the buddha

nature of all beings. Beings, not knowing their own buddha nature, seek it outside themselves; they see good and bad outside themselves and form attachments to the marks [of things]. This is great stupidity. Then those who abandon these marks and seek their own buddha nature may produce some view of clear awakening and, when they have some slight measure of difference from ordinary men, often become proud of themselves and fall into the way of Māra. This is ignorance. Not knowing that the one mind is originally no-mind, we rouse the mind to seek the mind and, in the process, produce the ongoing perversions. This is the seed of birth and death. When we have awakened to the fact that from the beginning the one mind neither arises nor ceases, then there is no distinction between self and other, there is no good or bad, no love or hatred; we are completely no-thought and no-mind. This is what is meant by "birth and death are nirvāṇa." Failing to awaken to the root source of the one mind, we lose our constant self and obscure our buddha nature. If we seek the source of the afflictions, [we find that] they are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, or shadows. Arriving at the fact that the one mind is originally pure is [what is meant by] "the afflictions are bodhi." And when we reach the source of the one mind, the radiance of inherent wisdom will be manifest. At this time, the myriad dharmas will be at rest, and we will attain the import of the ultimate emptiness of all the buddhas. For example, suppose there is a dark cave, into which the light of the sun and moon does not reach; yet when we take a lamp into it, the darkness of long years is naturally illuminated. Similarly, when the dark night encounters the light of the moon, space naturally becomes bright without changing its substance. The dharmas of the mind are like this: when beings, lost in the dark of ignorance and afflictions, encounter the light of wisdom, they are naturally purified without changing body or mind. This is what is meant by saying "the afflictions are bodhi; birth and death are nirvāṇa."

[23.] Q: Although the nature of the mind constantly abides without changing, and buddhas and sentient beings are one and equivalent, sentient beings, who have yet to master and awaken [to this fact], cannot avoid suffering and, for this reason, must cultivate and awaken to the way. Now, after they have seen their natures, should they still employ the mind [in cultivation]?

A: The oneness and equivalence [of buddhas and sentient beings] is what is illumined by wisdom. The teachings of the sūtras are like a finger pointing at the moon. If we have not yet seen the moon, we should rely on the finger; after we have seen the moon, the finger is of no use. When we have yet to awaken to the buddha mind, we should rely on the teachings; when we recognize the buddha mind, the eighty thousand dharma gates are all clearly apparent in one mind. After we have awakened to the one mind, there is no use for a single teaching. The words of the patriarchs are like a tile used to knock on a gate. Before you enter the gate, you take up the tile; once you have entered the gate, why take up the tile? Therefore, so long as we have not awakened to the original meaning of the buddhas and patriarchs, we should take up and examine the expression "see your nature and become a buddha." When we have already

opened the gate of the great liberation and thoroughly awakened to the original meaning of the buddhas and patriarchs, [we recognize that] seeing one's nature is nothing special and becoming a buddha cannot be grasped. There is no buddha, no sentient being; from the beginning there is not a single thing, and the three worlds cannot be grasped.

[24.] Q: When we face the end without having clarified the import of "seeing our natures and becoming a buddha," how should we employ the mind at the last?

A: When one mind arises, there is birth and death; when there is no-mind, there is no body that is born, and when there is no-thought, there is no mind that ceases. When there is no-thought and no-mind, there is no birth and cessation whatsoever. This body is like the dew that forms on the grass: the dew is originally without subjectivity. When we stop the mind that thinks we have a body and turn toward the fact that from the beginning there is not a single thing, when we do not think that there is either birth or death and have no-mind and no-thought, this is equivalent to the great nirvāṇa of all the buddhas of the three worlds. Although the good and bad marks appear to us in their variety, we should take no notice of them. If we produce even a hair's breadth of mind, it is the seed of cyclic existence. If we just cultivate no-mind and do not forget it, whether walking, standing, sitting, or reclining, there is no special way to employ the mind at the last. When we truly reside on the way of no-mind, [we go] like blossoms that fall and leaves that scatter before the wind, like the melting of frost and snow in the morning sun. What is there that employs the mind in such events as these? When we truly attain no-mind, there are no three realms [of existence] or six paths [of rebirth], no pure lands or defiled lands, no buddhas, no beings, not a single thing.

Of this mind that resides on the way of no-mind and puts a stop to birth and death, the Buddha said at the last [in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*], "All constructed things are impermanent; they are dharmas that arise and cease. When arising and ceasing cease, their calm cessation is joy." "All constructed things are impermanent" refers to the conditioned dharmas of all beings; they are all like dreams, illusions, reflections, like the moon in the water. "They are dharmas that arise and cease" means that, from sentient beings to plants, all things that are born necessarily die; and further, the mountains, rivers and great earth of this world will break down and disappear in the end. All dharmas, wherever they are established, are dharmas that arise and cease. This is merely birth and death from the ongoing transformations of one thought; none of it is real. "When arising and ceasing cease" means that when, based on [the fact that] the original lot of all beings is immaculate and without marks, we reach the source of our original marklessness, the beginningless, endless birth and death, coming and going, cease all at once, and the openness of the mind is like empty space. "Their calm cessation is joy" means that the buddhas are no-mind, beings are no-mind, mountains and rivers and the great earth, the myriad phenomena all arrayed are no-mind. When all beings are no-mind, hell is no-mind, paradise

is no-mind; there is no joy and no sadness. Trusting in the way like this, we see all dharmas without seeing them in the mind, we hear all things without hearing them in the mind; and so too with the minds of tasting and smelling. Just have no-mind in all circumstances. The mind of no-mind is the original teacher of all the buddhas of the three worlds. It is the cardinal buddha. The realization of this original buddha of no-thought is what is called the supreme perfect enlightenment of the buddhas. To awaken to the meaning of this is what is called "their calm cessation is joy." Trusting in the dharma like this and abandoning this body, we should not think of any dharma for a single thought.

With all respect.

A Discussion of Seated Zen intimately revealed to the Great Minister Kujō by the National Teacher Shōichi.