

**An Interpretation of Twelve Teachings from
Gien Roshi**

Written by,

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How this came to be...

Jinen Nagai Roshi is my teacher. His teacher was Gien Inoue Roshi. During my ten years of study in Japan with Jinen Roshi he always told me that the only book that I needed to read about Zen was *The Essence of Zen* by Gien Roshi.

A few years ago in 2017, Jinen Roshi handed me a stack of papers with an English translation of twelve teachings from his teacher that are at the heart of *The Essence of Zen*. He asked me to correct the grammar. What I found in those pages was an incomprehensible word salad - Jinen Roshi had directed one of his Japanese disciples to type the teachings into Google translate. The results had no meaning from which I could simply correct the grammar.

What I decided upon for this project was to do my best to present these twelve teachings as I understood them from my ten years of experience with Jinen Roshi. We spent many long nights, just the two of us, discussing these very subjects. To these twelve teachings, I have added my voice, my experiences, and my metaphors to flush out the meaning for me.

BREAKING THE ROOT FROM OUR THOUGHTS

There is a root to all of our thoughts. As children, this root began to grow without our awareness. This root is that we believe our thoughts are related to events and other matters. As adults, we are unaware that the root even exists. Therefore, removing this root is impossible.

The Buddha completely realized that this root does not exist. The Buddha realized that when you drink tea, you have a taste of tea. This is not a thought, but the experience of tasting tea. From this, we can see how we are relieved of our need to intellectualize the taste of tea – it is an experience. We are always dwelling in the condition where there is only the result. As such, the Buddha became the taste of the tea itself.

Now look at who you think you are. Is this an experience, or a set of arbitrary thoughts? In this way, you can realize that you are already the One, the Buddha.

Thinking can be used to deceive ourselves of our state. However, when we use our thinking to deceive ourselves about our condition, it creates suffering. Deep down we know we are deluding ourselves; we know we are not accepting our true state. Even if we use reasoning to adjust our thinking to fit the situation, we are still aware of this. Even if all the people in the world stomp their feet, this does not change the truth. If you pretend to see objects you cannot see, you still know you are pretending. Deep down you know the truth, and this is what creates suffering. If we continuously discard our thinking about who

we are and are completely honest with ourselves, we will inevitably attain the moment of forgetting our ego-mind image of ourselves, thus realizing the truth of who we are.

To help others is to show them the fallacy of their thinking. This is Buddhism—to help others by teaching them to discard their thoughts. This is the only way to help others.

LIVING LIFE IN THE NOW

Whatever situations we find ourselves in and whatever conditions we are dealing with, none of us is without the ability to live in the present moment. In fact, all of us are living in the present moment all the time. Every memory we have is still taking place in the present moment. The present moment is the Now, where there is no separation of body and mind. The Japanese word for this is *Genjyo* – the present condition, or state of existence. This moment, this state, exists at all times. It exists before we can label objects, situations, or people as something we like or dislike. It exists before we label actions as good or evil. This is the state within which we live. Whatever we encounter, whomever we meet, and wherever we are, our true self is always in this state.

In any situation that we feel lost and unsure of what course to take, we still have not lost our true self. No matter what our perceived magnitude of a problem is, our true self is not lost; our present moment reality always exists. Master Dogen and other Zen adepts realized this truth—that the no-mind state exists before thinking takes place. This reality exists before our understanding takes place. Again, this is the state of no-mind, and without this realization, our zazen practice will be in vain.

Genjyo Koan: The manifestation of ultimate reality is to recognize on our own whether or not what we think is real.

From this koan consider:

For when I want someone to behave in a certain way, this means I have a desire to interfere with them.

Stress arises when I have an attachment to circumstances, people, and beliefs, such as labeling an action or thought as good or bad due to my conditioning and beliefs.

Every moment is our reality. If we get angry and lose our temper, or if we feel virtuous and joyful, this is our reality. It is normal that we want to look for facts or evidence as to why we feel this way, but this is the thinking that causes us trouble. The reality—anger or joy—already exists prior to thought.

Zen is the way to experience reality As It Is.

NO PLACE GOING FORWARD

The way to practice zazen, is without any purpose or any expectations. Whatever stimulus we receive, whether it is the sound of a barking dog outside or the chatter in our own minds, let it go. There is no reason to label these stimuli as good or bad. Letting them go is enough. When we practice in this manner our minds gradually become quiet. Our practice takes us into the no-mind state of just being. At times we are aware of this Self

that disappears and reappears, but eventually we become lost to our sensations. This is the experience of our true self that comes from practicing zazen in this way.

Over time our practice evolves to the point where we simply become whatever sensations that arise from our senses. When the sound of the car comes to the ears, we are that sound. When the smell of lunch comes to the nose, we are that smell. And, when the pain in our legs from sitting comes to the body, we are that pain. This is how the sages practice. They become the sensation, the experience.

Consider a baby. Do babies have a reason to justify when they eat, sleep, see, or cry? Babies do all of these actions without thought or judgement, yet as adults we are bound to our minds; any action we take brings a reason and a judgement. As adults we think we need a reason to live for and motivation to work hard. A baby exists perfectly without reasons, judgements, and motivations. We often seek to be free of our human desires. However, the point we fail to see is that the biggest human desire is to be free of our desires.

LEAVE ALL AS IT IS

If I clap my hands together once, it creates a sound. It is just a sound that reaches your ears. We leave the sound as it is received by our ears. In this sense, the hearing of the sound is complete. What follows next, almost simultaneously, is the labeling of the sound by our minds. The sound is too loud, too sharp. Or, the sound makes me angry because I want to sleep. And so on.

The reality of this is that there is no separate person listening to the sound. It is only sound. This is true for all senses of the human body – our eyes see, our ears hear, our noses smell, our tongue tastes, our body feels. We can add to this our consciousness – that our minds think. We can leave all we experience through our senses, even our thinking, as it is. This means to be without judgement or attachment to what our senses experience.

What our senses experience is our reality in that moment. If you truly want to know your true self, then cultivate this present moment awareness of experiencing each input to your senses. This is the path of all sages, from all countries.

THE ORIGINAL FACE / THE TRUE SELF

We often encounter people and circumstances that we like. It also stands to reason that we also encounter people and circumstances that we dislike. If we allow either of these conditions to manifest as it is, we will have no trouble at all. The human mind cannot be in two states at the same time. In the case of the state of like or dislike, no matter what our intention is, we can only be in one of those states at a time. Whichever state we are in, that is our perfect reality at the time.

As adults, the mistake we make is thinking that we are separate from the reality in the moment. This leads us to judgement of what *is*. It is this idea of separation that creates the space for judgement to take place in our minds.

The teaching of the Dharma is that our five senses create our reality in the present moment. This reality exists without thought. However, as adults we label our experiences with our minds when our senses alert us. This is where likes and dislikes are created.

The realization that there is no separation between our sensations and our reality is what separates the sages from the rest of us. The sage accepts all people and circumstances as they are. If you practice in this way, you are walking the path of a sage.

The subtle and beautiful original face of the human being is to always hear, see, smell and taste for the first time. There is no thinking – there is only experiencing. In fact, it is the reality we are experiencing right now.

EMPTY YOUR MIND AND EVEN FIRE WILL BE COOL

When we feel fire, when we touch a hot stone, we say it is hot. The situation doesn't require us to say hot, or anything else. The experience takes place without the need for any label from our minds.

As children we cultivate our language, our beliefs, and our conditioning from the world around us. It is for this reason we say “Hot” or “Cold” when we lay our hand on an object. Yet, the sensation of touching a hot object is an experience. The word “Hot” is just a concept in our minds. Therefore, touching a hot object and saying it is cool is just as arbitrary as saying it is hot. This is why in Buddhism we say, “If you empty your mind, even fire will be cool.”

As babies we arrive without intellectual knowledge and conditioning. These two elements have to be taught. On the other hand, who teaches a baby to feed, to crawl, and to run? These are but a few examples of what is bestowed upon us by nature.

We need to recognize this difference between our natural abilities and those that we cultivated through our education and societal influences. This is the difference between our experiential knowledge and our intellectual knowledge. In a broader sense, this is the difference between what is real and what is created in our minds.

Do zazen without the conditioning of the mind. Zazen is our natural state. If I slap this table, it makes a loud, sharp sound. A baby cannot label the sound as loud and sharp. Yet, no matter if we are young or old, the sound is the same experience for all of us. The sound is a sensation reaching our ears without any effort; no labels are required.

Are we coexisting with what is real and what is a delusion? Or can we choose which way to exist? The answer is that we are our true self at all times regardless if what we see is real or a delusion. If you want to know your true self, just watch your actions. This is your true self. Witness yourself without thoughts and labels.

To study zazen, one does not need a teacher. One only needs to study oneself. We study by letting go of who we think we are – we are not what is printed on our business card. When we see ourselves without labels, we taste enlightenment.

YOUR MIND CANNOT BE IN TWO PLACES

Let us consider a person who is struggling to make a decision. One moment he is thinking: “What should I do?” In the next moment he is thinking: “Should I do this?” It is seen that this person is wavering between two thoughts. However, this is not the case. When I ask: “What should I do?” only this state exists. Then when I ask: “Should I do this?” only this state exists. My mind cannot be in both of these thoughts at the same time. This is illustrated by an old Zen saying: “To step on a stone bridge.” For if you want to cross a stone bridge, you have to first step on it. If you do not have to cross the bridge, you have no reason to consider stepping on it.

As we grow, we become accustomed to looking ahead at the future. We can spend a tremendous amount of time thinking about a situation that does not exist. And, it may never exist. If the action is not taking place, we have no reason to think about it.

Our actions precede our thoughts. What we are doing right now is our reality. When we feel pain, our thoughts say: “It hurts.” When we are unsure, our thoughts say: “I don’t know what to do.” The action or sensation arises and then the thought follows. There is no need to think about what has already passed. If another moment does not exist, the future does not exist. This is enlightenment. Those who find dissatisfaction in the moment have yet to realize enlightenment.

THE ESSENCE OF ZEN

To do zazen, I say to just do it. By this I mean that you accept all experiences that come up without reservation and without judgement. Please become the person who does not care one bit about what is taking place within or without the body or mind. This is the essence of zazen.

Our thoughts are endless. This only becomes a problem when we become identified with, or believe, there is a separation between thoughts and a thinker. Please realize that there is no separate person or subject who is thinking. The more we come to realize that there is no separate thinker, the more we encounter the state of our true self.

As we practice Zen, we have the capacity to become a person who doesn't get angry. Anger is intimately connected to attachment - our need to control, our need to get what we want.

The teaching of the Buddha is for us to see through the illusion of human thinking that creates separation and to become the whole universe itself. Our practice is not to seek the root of suffering in others, but to find it within ourselves.

CESSATION OF THOUGHTS

Our reality – called being a human being – is to accept all experiences as they are. In this manner, anger is just anger and the sweet smell of a rose is just a sweet smell.

Whatever thoughts arise, there is no need to agree with or deny the experience; it is our reality as it is.

Our five senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch are all pure. They are all honest. Our senses perceive our reality as it is. Our practice is to become the state that our senses perceive. Our reality, our true self, is always dancing with our senses from one experience to the next.

Our state is always in flux as our sensations continually appear and vanish. The sound of a conversation fades into noticing a colorful shirt, which in turn transforms into the smell of dinner coming from the kitchen—this is our moment to moment reality.

Unfortunately, our mind is always following closely behind each sensation in an attempt to understand, justify, and label each experience. We are conditioned to believe that our mind protects us by its logic and analytical ability. However, our mind is dependent on the past and the future to compare and judge our experiences. In this process we create untold amounts of worry and confusion.

A common form of the delusion of thinking is to judge others or to seek to help others because we know what is best. It is a mistake to believe our thoughts about another person or their circumstances are real, or right, or good. When we focus outside of ourselves on the condition of other people, we abandon our practice. When we accept others and their circumstances as they are, this is when we experience our true self.

NOT THINKING

“Settle into steady, immovable sitting. Not thinking—but how do you think of not thinking? It is nonthinking. This is the essence of the art of zazen.” From: *Fukanzazenji - The Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen* by Zen Master Dogen

“Sit straight and alert. Now think of what is without thoughts. How can you think of this? Be before thinking. This is the essence of zazen. Shatter obstacles and become intimate with Awakening Awareness.” From: *Zazen Yojinki - Notes on what to be aware of in zazen* by Zen Master Keizan

Master Dogen is describing the artificial approach to zazen while Master Keizan is illustrating the way of zazen. Either of these two descriptions is correct, but the most important action is doing zazen.

We learn the etiquette of zazen – the posture and breathing – in the zendo. As we sit quietly, following these techniques, is that all there is to do? Please carefully consider this question as you practice on your own. I sincerely doubt anyone can correctly explain how to do zazen, or correctly do zazen.

The truth is that whatever we are doing, we are already doing it perfectly as it is. This is our reality in the present moment. There is no need for judgements of the right or wrong way to practice. This is to think of not thinking.

NOT THINKING - TO LEARN BY THE EXPERIENCE

Master Dogen said, “Think of not thinking.” We hear the Zen master say, “Just sit.” We often hear that it is best, that it is correct, to sit in zazen without any thoughts. Yet do we really know what it means to just sit?

When an object appears before our eyes we see its true nature. This realization takes place before our thoughts arrive. This is the same for the sound of a car or the cry of a baby. In all cases, the experience takes place before our thinking. This is our reality. In the zazen hall, the smell of incense reaches our nose. This is our experience, our reality. We have no need to use our thoughts to label this experience.

This is the moment, the state, of not thinking. Unfortunately, once the experience arrives the mind follows closely behind to label the experience. Once our mind is involved—good or bad, right or wrong — we are no longer in the experience. We have descended into the world of the mind.

Soku in Japanese means immediate. It is the immediate realization of the experience. It also means the immediate realization that we have moved into the human condition of our thinking. At this moment of realization, we can discard those thoughts.

To learn Buddhism is to learn this self. This is how the sages practice.

NOT THINKING - TAUGHT BY EXPERIENCE

We hear the sound of a bird. Without taking any action, this sound is heard. This sound is our reality right now. It is who we are. I would say that most of us see events in the opposite fashion. Since we have the ability to think about an event, this is what makes it real to us. This is what gives it meaning. This fallacy stems from our conditioning and the belief that logic and reason create the experience.

In this sense there is an illusion of a separate self that experiences something like the sound of laughter. If we continue with our practice, we will find that this illusion breaks down. We will no longer hear laughter – we realize that we are laughter.

This is the true nature of our five senses. We always experience our magnificent surroundings before the mind begins to think.

The present moment is the action itself. In the present moment everything vanishes except the sensation in that moment. As our senses move from one sensation to another, the prior one vanishes and the next one does not exist. One moment, one sensation. This is the true nature, the true understanding, that all objects, events, and sensations are mutually co-arising.

When we experience a sensation such as joy, it is an easy matter to become attached to joy. Our mind begins to move into fear about losing this state of joy and searches for a way to hold on. However, when we experience joy without attachment, fear of losing this

state does not arise. Our mind has no work to do in finding a way to hold on. Enlightenment is to be free of the mind and its attachments.

In today's world people seem to focus on intellectual knowledge, an external focus. As a result, people do not know themselves. Zen is the Japanese spiritual practice that enables people to know their true self.