

# Fundamental Understanding of Soto Zen Buddhism

by  
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## Introduction.....What is Zen?

Before I studied Zen Under the Zen master Kishizawa Ian, the image I had of Zen was totally different from that which I found through my study with him. Our usual image of Zen as represented by Ikkyū, Ryōkan, Takuan, Hakuin, etc., is one of difficulty and strictness. The life which I experienced in Gyokuden-in Temple, however, taught me that Zen was something easy to understand, something understood through daily life, and nothing special. As an example of why Zen is considered difficult, one could cite such *Kōans* as Chao-chou's "tree in the garden", Tung-shan's "three pounds of flax", or Hakuin's "sound of one hand". However, unlike Rinzai Zen, in Sōtō practice there is no special use made of the *Kōan*; rather, the practice proceeds from a faith in Zen based on Zen precepts.

## The Standpoint of Zen.....The Methodology of Zen

As a method for analyzing Zen from the point of view of religious studies, let us compare the methodology of three scholars: Sekiguchi Shindai, Kishimoto Hideo, and Etō Sokuō. Whatever one thinks of his denial of Bodhidharma, Sekiguchi's analysis of Zen from the point of view of the history of the Zen sect as seen through T'ien-t'ai sources comes to a complete methodological dead end when it reaches the time of Shen-hui. Kishimoto treated Buddhism from the point of view of comparative religion. Because he emphasized only its differences from other religions, however, his method ends up ruining the very thing he is trying to consider. Etō's method of Buddhist studies analyzes Buddhism from the point of view of the philosophy of religion. It starts from culture in general and then develops through religious studies (the philosophy of religion), and Buddhism to Zen. In his method the process of this development is synthesized

and systematized as the study Sōtō Zen. Etō's lectures on his "Doctrinal Study System" at Komazawa University were never completed, but he developed the methodology further in his "**Shuso to shite no Dōgen Zenji**" and "**Shōbōgenzō Kenkyū josetsu**". Unlike the Buddhism and Zen of such systems of learning, one can also explain Zen from the standpoint of actual practice. The sense of this actual practice in Zen is shown in the Zen Master Dōgen's words, "If someone asks me about 'the one great cause', I answer, 'Early in the morning, rice gruel, at noon, rice; when healthy, zazen, when sick, sleep,•'" (**Eihei Kōroku**, V.) The *kōans* mentioned above are the answer to this question of "the one great cause" from another angle. But Dōgen's point in answering the question by our daily life is to explain the significance of elevating daily life itself. Dōgen emphasizes the importance of rising above our present life by illuminating our daily life with the light of the *dharma*. This is why the Buddhism of the Sōtō school is called the teaching of the unity of practice and enlightenment.

#### What is Sectarian Study.....The Way of Studying Zen

*Modern Sectarian Study.* As I have mentioned, Prof. Etō systematized Zen as learning. And this method of studying Zen as a system of learning has great strengths. But it also has its weaknesses. There is a method of study which covers these weaknesses: it is *zuishin*, the traditional method of Zen study by committing oneself to a master. Understanding Zen as a system of learning gives the breadth and strength of knowledge, but lacks the power of faith. It is the virtue of *zuishin*, rather than academic study, that allows one to understand Zen not only as knowledge but as faith. Here the unique Zen tradition of choosing the master comes to have its meaning. And this is especially a feature of Sōtō Zen in which the unity of man and *dharma* is emphasized.

*The Traditional Approach to Zen Study.* My Master, Kishizawa Ian, is an example of one who studied Zen through *zuishin*. He started as a brilliant Chinese scholar in the line of Satō Issai, and also studied poetry under Kannami Wataru. When he was thirty-two, however, he decided to become a monk. From that time on he devoted himself solely to the study of Buddhism, without ever seeing his wife and children again. First he studied with the famous master Nishiari Bokuzan. After Nishiari became the head of Sōjiji, Kishizawa was accepted as a student by the

Zen Master Oka Sōtan. After Nishiari's death he continued to study under Oka until the latter's death. In this kind of practice under a master, Zen is studied through the study of one school from beginning to end. Therefore, while on the one hand it is impossible to avoid some sense of lack, on the other hand it is obvious that one gains the power of faith. I myself studied under this traditional *zuishin* approach to Zen study, first under Kishizawa *rōshi* at Gyokuden-in, and after his death, under his disciple, Hakusan Kōjun *rōshi*. Today, however, this system of *zuishin* is neglected as old-fashioned both by the general public and by scholars. But if we only treat Zen materials conceptually, without concerning ourselves with the religious reality and actual practice under a true teacher, we will never catch sight of the fundamental truth of Zen.

*Rinzai and Sōtō.* Though they both belong to the Zen school, there is considerable difference in the way of studying in the Rinzai and Sōtō. The Rinzai school also has the *zuishin* system, but it puts emphasis on practice through the *kōan* system, with its characteristic features of *dokusan* (individual interview), *nisshitsu* (entering the master's room), and *sesshin*. The *kōan* way is a method of practice which seeks "seeing one's nature and awakening to the Way" through examining the meaning of the words taken from the daily life of previous Zen masters. This *kōan* method came into general use at the time of Nan-yueh's (Nangaku) disciple, Ma-tsu (Baso), whose line led to the Rinzai school. It is said that Ma-tsu had some 1500 students, and because of the great number, he used the *kōan* to "screen" them. In contrast, Ch'ing-yuen's (Seigen) disciple, Shih-t'ou (Sekito), whose line led to the Sōtō school, had only a few students, and practiced without regular use of the *kōan*. Therefore, Ma-tsu was called "the general merchandise store", while Shih-t'ou was known as "the true gold store". Later on this difference in practice between the two schools became clearer, and in the end was formalized in the Sōtō school's "silent illumination" of *Shikan taza*, "just sitting", and the Rinzai's *Kōan Kenshō* Zen, "the Zen of the *koan* and seeing one's nature".

*Fue Buddhism.* The Buddhism of the Sōtō school is *fue* Buddhism, the complete practice of *zuishin*, as seen in the way of Yueh-shan (Yakusan), who was given a cow shed by one of his laymen, and made it into a *zendo* for his few students. Therefore, the Sōtō school in China was always one of the smaller Zen schools. The Sōtō school does not teach directly

what the Buddha Dharma is, but during the practice of *zuishin*, daily life and the Dharma spontaneously become one. In the end, the practice of *zuishin* frees one from his belief in self and leads one to selflessness. It allows one to settle down in his own religious tradition. This method of practice permits no excuses. To the modern eye it may seem an indirect way, but in fact, because it provides a full, complete form for daily life, it quickly leads to the right awakening.

#### Minimum Conditions for the Study of a Sect

*Inner teaching and Ancient Examples.* In the study of a sect's teaching a very important problem is just how to locate the intellectual study of its doctrine. This is, in other words, the problem of knowledge and action or theory and practice. The intellectual study of Zen may seem scientific, but this method does not allow us to grasp the true life, i. e., the Buddha's life, or the total existence of the Zen man. To do this the best way is through the virtue of *zuishin*. Dōgen calls this "the inner teaching of former masters" or "ancient examples". These expressions have the general meaning of a secret transmission or way. Such inner teaching and ancient examples are the core of the Buddha Dharma, polished by generations of masters who made every effort to actually experience the Buddha Dharma with their own bodies. The transmission from master to disciple of those most polished elements gives to Zen Buddhism its unique flavor.

*Zen and the Limitation of Doctrine.* The inner teaching and ancient examples which form the essence of Zen are the Zen man's life rhythm itself. Historically, however, scholars trace the origin of these concepts to the philosophy of the Four Dharma Realms of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the summit of all Buddhist teachings. We should especially note in this regard the "*dharma* realm of the non-interference of things with things", which represents the most important of the four realms. These four dharma realms of the *Avatamsaka* are the "*dharma* realm of things", "*dharma* realm of principles", "*dharma* realm of the non-interference of principles with things", and "*dharma* realm of the non-interference of things with things". This way of thinking divides the whole universe into two: things, or phenomena; and principles, or true substances. "Things" indicate various individual entities in the phenomenal world, while "principles"

indicate the Buddha nature itself, that true substance in which all distinction between various things is eliminated and all things are equal. The thought of the *Avatamsaka* further developed the Mahāyana philosophy of emptiness, which denies the substantiality of material things as individual entities; and it established the concept of the Buddha nature, which affirms as enlightenment itself the substantiality of material things as a whole. Especially the “*dharma* realm of the non-interference of things with things”, in its teaching that things reveal the *dharma*, established an affirmative Buddhist philosophy in which there is not a single thing that is not the expression of the Buddha nature. And it was Zen that extended this philosophy of the “*dharma* realm of the non-interference of things with things” to human existence. This is simply but powerfully expressed in Ma-tsu’s words, “Mind is the Buddha”. Here the Indian concept of the plurality of truth develops through Zen toward the Chinese understanding of the dual concepts of man and *dharma*.

*Man and Dharma.* There is a sense in which Chinese Zen Buddhism, in its understanding of man’s life, of total existence, through the two concepts of man and *dharma*, unified the opposition that had existed between the different schools of Mahāyana Buddhism. These doctrinal schools were opposed to each other on the basis of their different texts, but the Chinese Zen sect advocated “a special transmission outside the sutras, no dependence on words and letters, pointing directly at the human mind, seeing the nature and becoming a Buddha”. And through these teachings it sought to fill the gaps between the various schools with the concept of man. This “man” of the Zen school is man as the unification of knowledge and action; it is not the man of attachment based on the belief in a self. This is man after the complete realization of his original nature, the thorough penetration of the Buddha nature.

Through these two concepts of man and *dharma*, Chinese Zen developed Indian and Chinese Mahāyana Buddhism. And depending on the emphasis given to the two concepts, or to the differences in their use, Zen was divided into the two schools of Rinzai and Sōtō. The Rinzai school may be said to stress the importance of *dharma*, and thus, it encourages us first of all to penetrate the Buddha nature. On the other hand, the Sōtō school puts emphasis on man, and gives primary importance to the study and practice of the “inner teaching” and “ancient examples”.

This is, however, not an absolute distinction, and the great masters of both Rinzai and Sōtō teach their students through a vital, free activity. Still, the difference between the two can be seen in the discussion between Ting-shan (Jōsan) of the Rinsai school and Ch'in-shan (Kin-zan) of Sōtō. The circumstances of Hsiang-yen's (Kyōgen) enlightenment through the sound of a breaking tile provides a characteristic example of how Rinzai does not put such strong emphasis on the human master. Rather, it considers both man and nature as the master. Therefore, although in Hsiang-yen's words, "*san futoku, shi futoku*" (i. e., the disciple may not fully understand the teacher until after the teacher's death) we can see that Rinzai also respects the human master, the process of relating to the master is different in the Sōtō school.

*The Master Gives and the Student Receives.* The Sōtō school considers the relations between man and man to be especially important, and holds that the complete transmission of the inner teaching and ancient examples depends on this relationship. This is because man is the embodiment of the absolute truth of the *dharma*.

#### Dogen Zenji from the Historical Point of View

*Dōgen and Kamakura Buddhism.* In discussing the various schools of Buddhism that arose in the Kamakura Period, Prof. Ienaga Saburo regards the Pure Land school established by Hōnen and Shinran as the highest. Of the three core elements of Buddhism.....precepts (*Sīla*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) .....Pure Land Buddhism especially selected and developed wisdom. And it is for this "historical and social" development of wisdom that Prof. Ienaga highly regards Pure Land as an especially Japanese development of Buddhism. He criticizes Dōgen's Buddhism for not being free from Chinese influence. But this idea of "Japanese development" should be re-examined. For the special feature of Dōgen's Buddhism is precisely that it is beyond all historical limitation. And this feature is in fact the Buddhism of Shakyamuni himself. There were degenerate monks who used the idea of the Last Age of The *Dhama* popular at the end of the Heian Period as an excuse for not practicing the way of the Buddha (precepts, meditation and wisdom). But such monks also existed at the time of *Shakyamuni* Buddha. It is precisely in the transcendence of such historical limitations as this Last

*Dharma* Age that the true meaning of the essence of Buddhist practice is to be found. If one tries to understand Buddhism only historically and phenomenologically, and fails to understand it essentially, beyond history, one destroys the marvelous unification of knowledge and action of the Buddha *Dharma*. Thus, for example, by phenomenology alone one could never grasp the true meaning of Dōgen's retirement to Echizen Province.

(Translated by Carl & Fumiko Bielefeldt)