

The Zen masters all proclaim that there is no enlightenment whatever which you can claim to have attained. If you say you have attained something this is the surest proof that you have gone astray. Therefore, not to have is to have; silence is thunder; ignorance is enlightenment.

D. T. Suzuki

This chapter presents Zen Buddhism's vision of enlightenment. At one level, it attempts to present the vision with the simplicity and quiet humor that the vision deserves and which is true to the form of Zen.¹ Therefore, the fact that the chapter represents a belief system, that there are blinders within the belief system, and an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the vision are discussed elsewhere.^{2,3}

Of all the branches of Buddhism, Zen is perhaps the most challenging to Western intellectual assumptions. Indeed, the master may refuse to even begin intellectual discussion about Zen; may deny there is any such thing as Zen, enlightenment, or illusion; may respond to apparently reasonable queries with apparently irrelevant nonsense; or may pile paradox on paradox until the inquirer either leaves in disgust or begins to intuit that the nature of Zen is to be sought through experience rather than through the intellect.

On those occasions when they do talk about Zen and enlightenment, one of their most frequent metaphors is a mirror. Mirrors have qualities of reflecting reality without distortion, judgment, or attachment—qualities which Zen believes are characteristic of the clear mind. Mirrors and mirrorlike minds are thus the subject of this chapter by Deane Shapiro.

*Besides being interested in mirrors, the author of this chapter is also an avid detective fan. Combining these interests, he is quite attached to, and wants to recommend to readers, the works of Janwillem van de Wetering. Van de Wetering wrote *The Empty Mirror*⁴ (from which this chapter title is borrowed), a first-person account of his experiences of studying Zen while in Japan, and also writes Zen detective stories, in which the essential mirrorlike Buddha nature of policemen and criminals is in evidence.*

As editor of this introduction, I am reminded of the parable of Ungan:

When Ungan was making tea, Dago asked, "To whom are you serving tea?"

Ungan: "There is one who wants it."

Dago: "Why don't you make him serve himself?"

Ungan: "Fortunately, I am here."⁵

In Zen, in the timeless moment, subject/object dichotomies disappear. The editor now introduces the author.

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Zen and the Art of Enlightenment: Reflections on an Empty Mirror

Deane H. Shapiro, Jr., Ph.D.

Zen may be seen as a dewdrop, reflecting the world. It has variously been called philosophy⁶ and non(anti)-philosophy, a religion and a non-religion,⁷ and a psychology with no content to teach. Zen has been compared with existentialism,^{7,8} Sullivanian interpersonal theory,⁹ psychoanalysis,^{10,11} behavior therapy,³ humanistic psychology,^{12,13} and transpersonal psychology.^{3,14}

Historically, Zen came to China through Bodhidharma who was traditionally thought of as the twenty-eighth patriarch of Buddhism, counting from the Buddha himself.¹⁵ The Indian idea of *Dhyana*, a system of religious practices centering around quiet meditation and quiet contemplation, came into contact with both Confucianism and Taoism. It was this intermingling, called Chan Buddhism, which later found its roots in Japan as Zen.¹⁶

Alan Watts has warned, however, that we need to distinguish among square Zen, a formal, rigid Zen dogma; beat Zen, which is the "anything goes" Zen of the Kerouac generation of the 1950s; and the actual "spirit" of Zen.¹⁷

The teaching, such as it be, is that experience is more important than words and intellect. As D. T. Suzuki said,

A special transmission outside the scriptures. No reliance on words and intellect.¹⁸

There is a story about Suzuki Roshi, the late Zen Master who founded the Zen Center in San Francisco, which illustrates this need to teach by experience. According to the story, he gave a one-hour lecture at Stanford University. He began by saying that in Zen, one must experience directly, and that meditation is a vehicle to develop that direct understanding. In meditation, he said, one sits with legs crossed in a half or full lotus (which he then did). One puts one's hands in a mudra* position in one's lap (which he did); one sits with one's back erect, but not tight, focuses the eyes a few feet ahead, and breathes gently and with awareness (which he did for the next hour). He then got up, bowed, and left. He was, so the story goes, never invited back!

How would we react to such a teaching? In truth, normally we are used to speech and words as teaching tools. Even a book of this nature, which talks of extreme visions of health, is filled with lots of words. Yet, much of what the spiritual traditions in general, and Zen in particular, emphasize are the qualities of emptiness, nonanalysis, and ceasing the word play of the mind. Yet again I ask how we would react to this. To a blank page in a book? Would it have meaning for us, or would we think the printer, editor, or writer left something out or made a mistake?

How can we understand this emptiness as fullness? As in the Zen *koan*,* what does the "sound of one hand clapping" mean? Or what is the sound of a stringless harp, as in the following *mondo*?†

A monk came to Shuzan and asked him to play a tune on the stringless harp. The master was quiet for some while, and then said, "Do you hear it?"

Monk: "No, I do not hear it."

Master: "Why did you not ask me to play louder?"⁵

How, then, are we to proceed? What is the best way to understand the sound of the stringless harp? Certainly, words, though they may be necessary, do not seem to be sufficient.

Pupil: Whenever appeal is made to words, Master, there is a taint. What is the truth of the highest order?

Master: Whenever appeal is made to words, there is a taint.⁵

Again, how can we be guided in our efforts to conceptualize and understand the Zen "true self," particularly when Zen suggests that we are already

*Thumbs touching together, with one palm holding the back of the other hand.

*A koan is an intellectual riddle of the Rinzai school of Zen, which has no intellectual answer.

†Mundos are discourses between masters and monks, used as teaching tools.

whole and enlightened, and the very task of *searching* for understanding is illusory and unnecessary?

Pupil: Where is the one solitary road to being oneself?
 Master: Why trouble yourself to ask about it?⁵

In this brief article we are going to use the concept of a "mirror" to help us understand this Zen view more fully. Many authors and traditions in this book make reference to the mirror analogy. For example, Smith talks about the sacred unconscious as being like a mirror, the Tibetans talk of a "crystal" mirror, Deikman suggests Sufi stories can help us attain enlightenment by providing a mirror for us, and both Walsh and Wilber also use mirror analogies.

How does the concept of the mirror help us? To clarify this, we will use four tools: (1) a parable to set the stage, (2) a more refined discussion of the mirror as an analogy, (3) an experience, and (4) additional reflections on the empty mirror.

1. A Parable

Strivata stood in front of the oak panel door, waiting for Naciketas to come with the key. Strivata waited anxiously at first, looking quickly over both shoulders for Naciketas' arrival. Several minutes passed, and still there was no sign of Naciketas. Realizing the anxiety within, Strivata decided to sit at the base of the door, wait patiently, and meditate on the intricate carvings which extended in coiled fashion from the upper right-hand corner. Naciketas approached from behind, and his shadow climbed over Strivata's and ascended the door.

"I am glad you have come," said Strivata. "There is no way for me to enter without the key." Naciketas laughed. "Do not laugh," Strivata responded angrily. "The sun is setting, I am becoming cold, and I have waited long for you."

"I thought you would return before me, so I left the door unlatched," Naciketas replied. Strivata entered the unlocked door. The sun went down, casting all in dark shadows. Yet, even before the fire was built, Strivata saw more clearly.

There are several points worth noticing in this parable. For example, notice that the door (symbolizing the barriers to Strivata's true self) was unlocked and that Strivata could have opened it without help; the "key" (to enter the door, to enter the self) was within all the time. However, although Strivata needed no teacher to open the door—to find his "real self"—it seemed that a

teacher was, in fact, needed, if only to point out that no teacher was needed. Once Strivata realized this lesson, even though the room was becoming dark, he "saw more clearly."

2. The Mirror Analogy: A Refinement

Historically, the mirror as a teaching tool has been quite important in Zen. In fact, it determined the successor to Hung-jen, the fifth Zen patriarch. To determine who would be his successor, Hung-jen had each contender submit a poem. The leading contender Shen-hsiu's poem went as follows:

Let the body be a Bodhi tree,
 Let the mind be a looking glass;
 Take care to keep it always clean,
 Lest it attract the dust.¹⁹

This view is an expression of the gradual enlightenment approach (what becomes known as the Northern school or Northern Zen in China).

Hui-neng, on the other hand, submitted the following verse:

There was never a Bodhi tree,
 Nor was the bright mirror on its stand.
 There was never anything,
 Whence then should the dust come?¹⁹

Hui-neng's poem suggests an altered state of consciousness which maintains a holistic, nondichotomous view. There is no good and bad, no opposites, and Shen-hsiu's distinction between a "dirty mirror" and a "clean mirror" is a relativistic mistake. The enlightened mind does not make such distinctions between dust and nondust. Thus, Hui-neng became the sixth patriarch and his school is referred to as the school of sudden enlightenment.

It can be seen that both teachers taught of the empty mirror. One said that we gradually uncovered our true Buddha nature, and the other said that we need to enter directly into our Buddha nature.

The mirror can be understood as part of Zen's "real me" or Buddha nature, based on four qualities (or wisdoms). These are the qualities of emptiness, acceptance, accurate discrimination, and nonattachment.*

Quality of Emptiness. When a mirror is clean and free from dust, dirt, and stains, it reflects clearly, accurately, and without distortion. It is then

*The author wishes to express his thanks and appreciation to Nishimura Roshi for his lecture, comments, and discussion about this.

said to be empty. In psychological terms, when our "minds" are empty (that is, free of verbal statements and images), there is an absence of preconceptions, strivings, and thoughts. Since, as many authors in this book have pointed out, preconceptions influence the way we interpret reality, the "emptiness" of the mind allows us to see "what is" without the ordinary cognitive chatter and constructs.

According to the Zen way, we are born with this wisdom of emptiness, and are therefore able to interact fully and "clearly" with whatever is around. Thus, in the words of the *Prajna Paramita Sutra*, "the emptiness [of the mirror] is actually [its] fullness." However, our mirrorlike nature subsequently becomes "stained" by words, labels, desires, and aversions, and reality soon becomes distorted to meet one's preconceptions of it. Therefore, one aspect of finding the "real me" is to return to a state of emptiness by wiping the preconceptions from the face of the mirror.

Quality of Acceptance. The second quality of a mirror might be referred to as acceptance or nonevaluation. The mirror accepts everything into itself without evaluations or judgments (wisdom of equalness). Any object put in front of the mirror—a big ball, a red cat, a poor person, a rich person—is reflected with equal accuracy. The mirror does not comment on whatever is around it; it merely accepts it into itself.

In psychological terms, the mirror reflects in a manner that Carl Rogers would call *nonjudgmental*—what social learning theorists would call *without evaluation*. A person who has this "mirror nature" would be able, in Paul Tillich's words, to "accept that you are accepted."

Naranjo and Ornstein have elaborated on the concept of consciousness as a mirror as follows:

The mirror allows every input to enter equally, reflects each equally, and cannot be tuned to receive a special kind of input. It does not add anything to the input and does not turn off receptivity to stimuli. It does not focus on any particular aspect of input and retune back and forth but continuously admits all inputs equally. . . .²⁰

Quality of Accurate Discrimination. The third quality of a clean mirror is that it is able to differentiate and discriminate, for example, large from small, green from red, a happy face from a sad face. This has been referred to as the *wisdom of accurate reflection*. Thus, at the same time the mirror accepts everything into itself (quality of nonevaluation), it is also able to tell the difference between the objects that it is reflecting (quality of discrimination). In other words, our true selves, according to Zen, are both able to see and

able to accept everything into themselves equally and fully, while at the same time making discriminations about different objects.

Quality of Nonattachment. Finally, the clean mirror may be characterized by the wisdom of nonclinging or nonattachment. As we saw above, the mirror reflects instantly and without distortion. Further, as soon as the object is taken away, the mirror is able to immediately "yield," or let it and its reflection go. Thus, the "real me," according to Zen, fully and completely interacts with whatever is in front of it, and yet does so in a nonpossessive, nonclinging manner.

Thus, we see that our true nature, according to Zen belief, is like the empty mirror: it interacts fully with the environment, accepts all into itself without evaluation, is able to discriminate, and is yielding and nonpossessive. As Chuang-Tzu noted, "The perfect man employs his mind as a mirror: it grasps nothing, it receives, but does not keep."

3. An Experience

Publisher's Note: To clarify any misconception, it should be noted that the blank page represents the experience.

4. Reflections on and Implications of the Empty Mirror

What is the experience of emptiness like? According to the Zen view, once we remove our preconceptions, we will see our true self, and this "real me" is positive, unifying, and innately good. In D. T. Suzuki's words, every human being is "so constituted by nature that he can become an artist of life," and "Zen, in its essence, is the art of seeing into the nature of one's being—giving free play to all the creative and benevolent impulses inherently lying in our heart."⁵ This basic, good, and real self is quite different from Freud's warring, aggressive id. Rather, it is similar in certain ways to the Jungian integrated, *individuated self*, to Bucke's *cosmic consciousness*, and to Rogers', Maslow's, and Goldstein's *self-actualizing ego*.

However, within the Zen framework, if we conceptualize these potentials in terms of positive traits, we are distorting reality. Traits, even positive traits, are but *descriptions* of reality, and not reality itself. Thus, in Zen, the "real me" is often referred to as "no-self" or "egolessness" or the Tao: that which is beyond words.

The Zen tradition includes many of the qualities associated with the humanistic tradition (e.g., developing inner directedness and a strong sense of oneself), but it also has qualities representative of the transpersonal.²¹ Maslow,²² for example, referred to the goal of therapy as not only learning how to build a strong sense of ego, but learning how to surrender the ego. Eventually, the individual is taught how not to identify with his or her thoughts, including the thoughts of "self." As Goleman noted, "The phenomena contemplated are distinct from the mind contemplating them: the

goal of therapy is to develop a high degree of perceptual clarity about one's thought patterns, habits, behaviors without accompanying affect: a mindfulness of each moment."²³

Thus, in Zen the goal is to help the person to develop a nonintellectual understanding of the world and of oneself. This nonintellectual understanding—satori, enlightenment, nirvana—is an experience of oneness or wholeness which goes beyond ego boundaries and teaches one a sense of harmony both with oneself and with the world around. This "self-nature" is represented by three characters in the Chinese language. The first character is the one for "sun," and the second is for "rising." Those two characters—"sun rising"—mean "sound." The third character refers to heart, so self-nature is the sound of one's heart or hearing the sun rise in one's heart. By allowing the silence of emptiness, the fullness of one's "Self" can be heard.

Some implications. Zen posits that the mirrorlike nature of our *self* is innately good and positive. Further, this real self is within all of us now, if only we are willing to see it. There are three important implications of this view of personality. First, the individual who is searching for the "real me" is able to *trust him/herself* in the very act of searching. Believing that our inner nature is good, we are "content to let behavior bring out a self which cannot be fully conceptualized. One trusts this self enough to suspend conscious reflective control over it."¹³ This allows us not only to trust ourselves more, but also to be more willing and able to see the spark of goodness within others.

Secondly, this Zen view of the self implies a possible causal relationship between the individual's self-perception and his/her behavior. That is, if we believe in ourselves, we may be more likely to act skillfully and fulfillingly. We might, for example, trust ourselves enough to take more risks, try new paths, let ourselves be free to act creatively, and listen to and trust our body signals regarding physical and emotional health and healing.

Finally, this Zen view of the person has important implications for the therapist and educator. If these professionals believe and trust in the innate ability and goodness of the individual, they will be more likely to allow their students/clients room for personal exploration and latitude for acting creatively. For example, within the therapy practiced by Carl Rogers, the client is treated as a person competent to direct his/her own actions and healing process. Likewise, a physician "healer" of psychosomatic complaints who believes in innate abilities will be more likely to encourage the patient to take an active role in healing him/herself.

Thus, the relationship between mind and body, between our view of ourselves and our subsequent behavior, and between the educator/therapist's

view of the individual and his/her subsequent style of healing and teaching are all areas that may be affected by the Zen view of the "real me."

Summary

Analogies, parables, personal anecdotes, and even blank pages are tools to help us understand and experience the essence of the "empty mirror." For some, they may provide helpful guideposts. However, guideposts must be thought of in Zen terms as:

A finger pointing to the moon: once the moon has been seen, the finger is no longer necessary.⁵

The mirror can be a useful metaphor, or finger pointing to enlightenment. However, as Huston Smith noted, if there is this sacred unconscious layer and it's like a mirror, then we can't really call it ours. "Even if it were there, in what sense could we call it ours? For when we look toward it we see simply—world."²⁴

We can see liberation and enlightenment as qualities of the empty mirror in the following passage from Walsh and Vaughan:

Finally, states of consciousness may emerge in which identification of awareness with some objects to the exclusion of others is permanently dismantled. Shorn of dualism and exclusivity, awareness now experiences itself as transcendent to both time and space, as pure consciousness and yet one with the universe, transcendent to the limitations and suffering which seem so real, absolute, and inescapable from its former perspective.²⁵

Ultimate enlightenment is being and experiencing in the here and now. It is both detached observation (nonattachment) and feeling the sorrow and pain. It is reflected in Huston Smith's story of the Zen master who cries at life's suffering, while also observing it, and maintaining the "yes" experience of the East.

Finally, as Wilber notes,²⁶ Brahman hurls himself back into the formless void to take on another life game, knowing that mirror and reflections are one and the same. Or, in the words of the birthday present from my wife several years ago:

The puddle reflects
Rain drops dissolving
In the image it contains.

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