

Zen Koans

Ancient Wisdom for Today

2nd Edition

David Tuffley



"The Ensō (or circle) symbolizes absolute enlightenment, strength, elegance, the universe, and mu (the void)."

*We cannot see our reflection in running water.
It is only in still water that we can – Zen proverb.*



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I acknowledge Lao Tzu and the Buddha and the hundreds of mentors in my life who have shaped my Zen practice since 1970.

Also the *Turrbal* and *Jagera* indigenous peoples, on whose ancestral land I write this book. This ancient continent has a profound story for those who would listen.

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Introduction

The kōan is an enigmatic or paradoxical question that defies logic, and forces you to break out of conventional modes of thinking and use your imagination and intuition to arrive at a paradigm-shifting answer that moves you closer to enlightenment.

A clichéd example that is commonly quoted is *'what is the sound of one hand clapping?'*

On the face of it, this seems like nonsense. Logic suggests that it takes two hands to make a sound. Many 'correct' answers have been suggested, but it is a mistake to think there is just one right answer; there are many. Some suggest that it is the same sound as two hands clapping, or that the answer lies in non-verbally outstretching one's hand to the questioner, inviting them to a reciprocal clap.

See the end of this section for an example of how this book presents explains it.

With kōans you are simply going through a process of recognizing that logic, while useful, works by placing your thinking on a confining box with limited option. In Zen, you are invited to recognize that the only way out of this box is to shift the paradigm by thinking imaginatively with your right brain.

There are many answers because everyone will come up with their own unique solution. It is the act of transcending the worldly mind that is the important part.

This chapter presents *some* of the classic kōans from traditional Zen, originally written hundreds of years ago in Japanese, and re-interpreted from early English translations into early 21st Century English. The underlying meaning remains, so they will still work as a kōan should, but they are expressed in language more easily understood by people in the 21st Century.

Each kōan encapsulates a profound truth worthy of deep reflection over a not-insignificant period of time. There are no quick answers, silver bullets here. There is great value buried deep in the kōan. Your job is to patiently dig for it.

It should be apparent by now that Zen is a practice dedicated to lessening the influence of your ego which is the prime impediment to your uncovering your own true nature. The ego is so strong that you could go your entire lifetime without even suspecting there is something deeper that is forever obscured by the ungoverned ego.

Therefore we should *listen to the voice of pines and cedars when no wind stirs*. When you perceive that silent voice, you have entered the field of pure being that is behind the phenomenal world and which is your true nature.

Example - the sound of one hand

What follows is an illustrative example of how a plain English version of the ancient kōan is expressed.

A 12 year-old boy lived in a monastery. Every morning and evening, he saw the older monks go to the master's chamber, there to receive instruction in Zen. The boy asked to be included, but was told by the master that he was too young. He should wait awhile.

But the boy was determined and somewhat impatient. He repeatedly asked the master if he might receive instruction too. Finally the master consented.

In the evening, the boy went to the master's chamber. He struck the gong to announce his presence, and waited respectfully at the thresh-hold to be invited in. Upon receiving permission, he entered, bowed three times and sat before the master in silence, waiting for him to speak.

The master said *you can hear the sound of two hands clapping, now show me the sound of one hand.*

The boy thanked the master and went to his room to consider the meaning of this kōan. In the distance he could hear the music of the geishas. *Ah, he thought, I have it!*

The following evening he went to the master to report his findings. When asked to illustrate the sound of one hand, he began to play the music of the geishas.

No, no that is not it at all! Keep trying said the master.

So the boy went to a quiet place to consider, away from the sound of music. The only sound audible in this place was the sound of dripping water. *Ah, that must be it* he thought.

When next he appeared before the master he imitated the sound of dripping water.

What is that? inquired the master. *That is the sound of dripping water, but not the sound of one hand. Try again!*

Again the boy meditated on the koan. This time he heard the sound of the rustling wind. This too was rejected.

He heard the cry of an owl – but that was not it.

He heard the chirping of locusts – but that was not it either.

Again and again he tried. For more than a year he meditated upon what the sound of one hand might be.

At last the boy entered true meditation and transcended all sounds. *I could collect no more, so I reached the soundless sound.*

The boy had realised the sound of one hand.

The cup of tea

A Zen master received a visit from a university professor who wanted the master to add to his knowledge by telling him about Zen.

The master politely offered the professor some tea. The professor accepted and the master poured the tea from the pot into the cup. When the cup was full, he kept pouring. The tea overflowed, much to the consternation of the professor who said, *there is no more room in the cup, it is overfull.*

The master replied, *the cup is like your mind, already full of opinions and beliefs. How can I teach you Zen unless you first empty your mind?*

Is that so?

A Zen master lived in a village and was respected by all for his virtuous ways.

One of his neighbours, a grocer, had a teenage daughter. One day, her parents discovered she was pregnant. They demanded angrily to know who the father was. Eventually the girl told her parents that it was the Zen master.

The parents were furious. They confronted the master with the accusation. All the master said was *is that so?* The parents went about the district, spreading blame to destroy the

master's reputation. When word of this reached the master, all he said was *is that so?*

Months passed. When the child was born, the mother's parents took the baby to the master saying he was morally obliged to care for the child. The master replied, *is that so?* He embraced the baby, and took good care of him.

When the baby was a year old, the mother could stand it no longer. Tearfully she told her parents that it was the butcher's boy who is the baby's father, not the master.

The baby's grand-parents were ashamed of the harm they had caused the master. They went again to the master's house and begged forgiveness. They wanted to return the baby to his mother who was to be wed to the butcher's boy. The master willingly gave them the baby, saying only *is that so?*

Obedience

A certain master was known for his down-to-earth talks that were aimed not just at students of Zen, but to people from all backgrounds. He did not quote from the Holy Scriptures; instead he spoke in everyday language from his heart to the hearts of those that listened.

A serious-minded priest from a certain sect known for its hard-line attitudes heard about the master. He was angered by what he heard. Members of the sect were leaving because they found the master more inspiring than he.

The priest intended to confront the master and humiliate him. So he went to the master's forum, and in front of the assembled listeners challenged the master to a debate. The priest said *those who respect you might obey you; but I do not respect you. See if you can make me obey?*

The master said *come up and sit beside me and I will show you.*

The priest muscled his way through the crowd to where the master sat. The master smiled, saying *come and sit here on my left.* The priest obeyed.

No, said the master, *on second thoughts it would be better if you sit here on my right.* Again, the priest obeyed.

You see, said the master, *you are obeying me, and I think you are basically a good person. Now sit down and listen.*

If you love, love openly

Twenty monks and one nun were studying meditation with a master.

The nun was a beautiful woman, a fact not lost on the male monks, despite her head being shaven and her clothes shapeless and plain. Such was her inherent beauty that several of the monks became infatuated with her. One went so far as to write her a letter, insisting that she meet him secretly.

The nun did not respond to the letter. The next day the master gave a lecture to the group. When it was finished, the nun stood up and addressed the monk who had written her

the letter. *If you love me so much, embrace me now in front of everyone.*

No loving - kindness

An old woman had supported a reclusive monk for 20 years. She had built a modest hut for him, and provided food so that he might have the means to achieve enlightenment.

The old woman wondered whether the monk was making any progress after all this time. To find out, she asked a friend, a young woman who enjoyed sex, to go to the monk to see if she could seduce him.

The young woman went to the monk and tried to seduce him, saying (in effect) *if you want me, you can have me now.*

An old tree grows on a cold rock in winter, the monk replied somewhat cryptically, *Nowhere is there any warmth.*

The young woman reported to the old woman what he monk said.

To think I fed and housed that fellow for 20 years said the old woman angrily. He shows no compassion towards you. He need not have allowed himself to be seduced, but he should have at least shown you kindness.

She went that same day to the hut of the monk and burned it to the ground.

The moon cannot be stolen

A master lived a very simple life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One night, when the master was not home, a thief came to the hut to steal anything of value that he could find.

The master said, *you have come a long way to visit me; I cannot let you leave empty handed.* So he gave the thief his clothes.

The thief was astonished but took the clothes and slunk away into the night.

The master sat naked, looking at the moon. *Poor fellow, he thought, I wish I could give him this beautiful moon.*

The Laughing Buddha

Visit Chinatown in cities outside of China, and you are likely to see statues of a big-bellied fellow carrying a sack. He is known as the Happy Chinaman, or the Laughing Buddha.

This fellow originally lived during the T'ang Dynasty. He had no ambition to be known as a Zen master, or to attract followers. Instead, he would go about the streets gathering sweets, fruit, and treats of various kinds. These he would give to the children who played in the streets. He established a kind of kindergarten of the streets, doing what he could to keep the children safe, fed and happy.

When he met a Zen devotee, he would hold out his hand and request a penny.

One day, a Zen master saw him in the street and asked him, *what is the significance of Zen?*

Without a word, the fellow dropped his sack on the ground as if to discard it.

So then, replied the master, *what is the actualisation of Zen?*

Without hesitation, the fellow picked up the sack, slung it over his shoulder and ambled away.

A Buddha

In Tokyo in the Meiji era lived two teachers who were very different. One, Unsho, kept to the Buddhist precepts in every way. For example, he never drank alcohol or other intoxicants. The other teacher, Tanzan, was a professor of philosophy at the Imperial University. Tanzan observed none of the Buddhist precepts.

Unsho visited Tanzan one day, finding him drinking wine in his room at the University. Tanzan offered Unsho some wine. Unsho refused, saying *I never drink wine.*

Tanzan replied, *one who does not drink is not human.*

Are you suggesting I am not human since I do not indulge in intoxicating drinks, Unsho said angrily. *If I am not human, what am I then?*

A Buddha, replied Tanzan.

The muddy road

Tanzan and Ekido were making their way along a muddy road in the rain.

Coming round a bend they encountered a beautiful young woman in a spotless silk kimono. She was trying to cross the muddy road but was reluctant to get mud on her fine clothes.

Tanzan said to her, *come on my dear*, and offered to carry her across.

Ekido did not speak again for many hours. When they reached the lodging temple where they would stay the night, Ekido finally said, *we monks are not supposed to have any contact with women, particularly beautiful women. What were you thinking?*

I left the girl there, said Tanzan, *but you are still carrying her.*

Not far from Buddhahood

A student visited a master and asked *have you read the Christian Bible?*

No, read it to me, said the master.

The student opened the Bible and read from St. Matthew. *And why take ye thought for raiment (clothes)? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not*

arrayed like one of these...Take therefore no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.

The master considered and finally said *whoever uttered those words I consider to be enlightened.*

The student continued reading: *Ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened.*

The master remarked *that is excellent. Whoever said that is not far from Buddhahood.*

No-thing in teaching

A young doctor met an old friend from medical school who was studying Zen. The doctor asked his friend what Zen is all about.

I cannot really say for sure, replied the friend, but one thing I do know is that if you understand Zen, you will not be afraid to die.

Hmm, that sounds interesting. I will try Zen, said the doctor. Where would I find a good teacher?

His friend directed him to a master of good repute. The doctor went to the master.

To test the master, he had a long dagger with him that he planned to brandish. This would tell the doctor truthfully about the master's attitude towards death.

But before the doctor could brandish the dagger, the master greeted him warmly, saying *hello friend, long time no see*.

Pardon me, replied the doctor, *we have not met before*.

Ah my mistake, you remind me of another doctor who studies here.

This threw the doctor's plans into disarray, and having lost the opportunity he simply asked the master if he might receive Zen teaching.

The master replied, *Zen is not difficult. As a doctor, simply treat your patients with kindness and compassion. That is all. That is Zen*.

Three more times the doctor visited the master. Each time, he was told the same thing. The master admonished him to spend more time with his patients instead of coming here.

The doctor was bemused. *My friend told me that Zen would remove my fear of death. Yet all you say is to spend more time with my patients. I know that much already. If that is all you have to teach then I will not come again*.

The master smiled, and patted the doctor on the shoulder. *I have been too strict with you* he said. *I shall give you a koan to meditate upon*.

So he gave the doctor the *Joshu's Dog* koan in which a master is asked *has a dog Buddha-nature or not?* To which the master replies *Mu* (meaning 'no-thing')

The doctor pondered this for two years. Finally, when he thought he understood he returned to the master, but the master said *you are not there yet*.

For another year and a half the doctor pondered the question of whether a dog has Buddha-nature. And the reply of *no-thing* gradually became true for him. His mind grew calm. Problems dissolved. He served his patients well, and without even realising it he had become free of concern over life and death.

After that, when he visited the master, the master just smiled.

A parable

The Buddha told a parable; a man travelling through wild country encountered a tiger. In fear he fled as the hungry tiger pursued. His flight ended abruptly at a precipice so high that it would be fatal to jump. So he grasped hold of a root that grew nearby and let himself over the edge, out of the tiger's reach. Looking down, he was horrified to see another tiger below, waiting for him to fall. Only the vine was keeping him alive.

Two mice began gnawing upon the vine. A white one and a black one; together they gnawed away the root, little by little as the man hung on with increasing desperation.

He saw a strawberry growing nearby. With his free hand, he plucked it. How sweet it was.

The first principle

Above the gate of the Obaku temple in Japan is a much-admired carving of the words *The First Principle*. The calligraphy of this carving is acknowledged as being of the highest standard, a masterpiece. They had been written by the master calligrapher Kosen several hundred years earlier.

When the Kosen had written the words, he had done so on paper. From the paper, craftsmen transferred the words into much larger wood carvings. As the master was doing his work, a student who had made a large quantity of ink and who could always be relied upon for a strongly worded opinion kept him company.

That is no good, said the student after the first draft.

How is this one?

No good either, worse than the first pronounced the student.

The master patiently repeated the process until 84 First Principles had been done, none of which met with the approval of the student.

The student stepped outside briefly to attend to something. The master thought *now is my chance to escape his keen eye*, so he wrote hurriedly, without thinking '*The First Principle*'.

A masterpiece said the student on his return.

Mother's advice

A young soldier-turned-scholar was well-known in the world as an expert on Sanskrit literature. He travelled the land giving lectures on the meaning of this ancient literature.

His mother heard of this, and wrote him a letter.

My son, I do not think you became a Buddhist so that you could become a walking dictionary for others. There is no end to how much discussion and commentary you can enter into about this. It may earn you a reputation as a learned man. Titles may be bestowed upon you. But I wish you would stop this lecturing business. Find yourself a little temple on a remote mountain. Close yourself away from the world and meditate upon the true meaning of life. This is the only way to attain enlightenment.

The sound of one hand

A 12 year-old boy lived in a monastery. Every morning and evening, he saw the older monks go to the master's chamber, there to receive instruction in Zen. The boy asked to be included, but was told by the master that he was too young. He should wait awhile.

But the boy was determined and somewhat impatient. He repeatedly asked the master if he might receive instruction too. Finally the master consented.

In the evening, the boy went to the master's chamber. He struck the gong to announce his presence, and waited respectfully at the threshold to be invited in. Upon receiving permission, he entered, bowed three times and sat before the master in silence, waiting for him to speak.

The master said *you can hear the sound of two hands clapping, now show me the sound of one hand.*

The boy thanked the master and went to his room to consider the meaning of this koan. In the distance he could hear the music of the geishas. *Ah, he thought, I have it!*

The following evening he went to the master to report his findings. When asked to illustrate the sound of one hand, he began to play the music of the geishas.

No, no that is not it at all! Keep trying said the master.

So the boy went to a quiet place to consider, away from the sound of music. The only sound audible in this place was the sound of dripping water. *Ah, that must be it* he thought.

When next he appeared before the master he imitated the sound of dripping water.

What is that? inquired the master. *That is the sound of dripping water, but not the sound of one hand. Try again!*

Again the boy meditated on the koan. This time he heard the sound of the rustling wind. This too was rejected.

He heard the cry of an owl – but that was not it.

He heard the chirping of locusts – but that was not it either.

Again and again he tried. For more than a year he meditated upon what the sound of one hand might be.

At last the boy entered true meditation and transcended all sounds. *I could collect no more, so I reached the soundless sound.*

The boy had realised the sound of one hand.

My heart burns like a fire

The first Zen master to go to America, Soyan Shaku, said *my heart burns like fire, but my eyes are as cold as dead ashes.*

The master lived by these practices:

In the morning before dressing, light incense and meditate.

Retire at a regular hour. Eat nutritious food at regular intervals. Eat in moderation and never to the point of satisfaction.

Receive a guest with the same attitude you have when alone. When alone, maintain the same attitude you have when receiving guests.

Watch what you say, and whatever you say, practice it.

When an opportunity comes do not let it pass you by, yet always think twice before acting.

Do not regret the past. Learn from it and look to the future.

Have the fearless attitude of a hero and the loving heart of a child.

Upon retiring, sleep as if you had entered your last sleep. Upon awakening, leave your bed behind you instantly, as if you had cast away a pair of old shoes.

Reciting prayers

A grieving farmer asked a Zen master to recite some prayers for his recently deceased wife so that her prospects in the after-life might be improved. The master obliged. Afterwards, the farmer asked *do you think these prayers will help her?*

The master replied that *not only his wife would gain merit, but that all sentient creatures would gain merit from reciting these prayers.* The farmer grew worried at this. He thought that if the prayers were benefiting all creatures, then the stronger among those creatures would take the benefit meant for his wife. *Please recite the prayers just for her,* he pleaded.

The master replied that it is the sincere wish of the Buddhist to offer blessings for the benefit of all living beings.

That is all very well, said the farmer, *but my neighbour has been mean to me in the past. Can you not exclude him from all those living beings?*

The voice of happiness

After the master Bankei had passed away, a blind man who lived near the master's temple told a friend *Because I am blind I cannot see a person's face, so I can only know them by the sound of their voice. Most of the time when I hear someone congratulate another on his happiness or success, I also hear a secret tone of envy. When I hear condolences expressed for the misfortune of another, I hear pleasure and satisfaction, as if the one condoling was secretly happy at the other's misfortune.*

'In all my experience, however, the master Bankei's voice was always sincere. Whenever he expressed happiness, I heard nothing but happiness, and whenever he expressed sorrow, sorrow was all I heard.'

Open your own treasure house

A seeker after Zen truth and enlightenment came to the master Baso who asked *what is it you seek?*

I seek enlightenment replied the man.

You have your own treasure house already, said the master, why do you seek another?

The man was puzzled, *where is this treasure house?* he asked.

It is within; it is what you are asking.

The man was delighted. Afterwards he would say to his friends, *open your own treasure house, and use those treasures within.*

No water, no moon

A certain nun who studied Zen under the master Bukko was unable to realise the fruits of meditation after much practice.

One night she was carrying water from the well in an old bucket that was bound together with bamboo. The bamboo split and the bottom fell out of the bucket. At that moment, the nun achieved enlightenment. To commemorate the occasion, she wrote this poem:

*In this way and that I tried to save the old pail
Since the bamboo strip was weakening and about to break
Until at last the bottom fell out.
No more water in the pail!
No more moon in the water!*

Calling card

Keichu was a renowned Zen master and the head of a temple in Kyoto.

One day, the Governor of Kyoto came to the temple to visit Keichu. The Governor's calling card listing his name and title was presented to Keichu as protocol in government circles requires. The master looked briefly at the card and said to the attendant who brought it *I have no business with such a fellow. Tell him to go.*

The attendant returned to the Governor and conveyed the message. *Ah my mistake* said the Governor. Taking a pencil he crossed out the title 'Governor' on the calling card. *Here, take this to your master.*

On seeing the amended card, the master said *Oh, is that Kitagaki? Tell him I want to see him.*

Everything is best

A Zen monk was walking through the market place one day. As he passed a butcher's shop he overheard a conversation between the butcher and a customer.

Give me the best piece of meat you have said the customer.

Every piece of meat in my shop is the best, there is no piece that is not the best, replied the butcher,

On hearing these words, the monk was enlightened.

Inch time, foot gem

A Lord asked the master Takuan for advice on how to pass time more enjoyably. The Lord was required to sit stiffly for long periods, receiving official visitors. The master composed a poem of eight characters (that translate as)

*Not twice this day
Inch time foot gem.
This day will not come again.
Each minute is worth a priceless gem.*

Every minute Zen

Students of Zen normally spend at least two years with a master before they presume to teach. The student Tenno, having passed his apprenticeship was about to commence teaching. Before doing so he visited a master.

The day was rainy, so the student had an umbrella with him that he left with his foot-wear before entering the master's chamber. The master said to Tenno, *which side of your shoes did you leave your umbrella – left or right?*

Tenno was unable to answer. He realised in that moment that he was as yet unable to carry his Zen every minute. He became the master's pupil for six years before he accomplished every-minute Zen.

Flower shower

Subhuti was a disciple of the Buddha who had truly come to understand the meaning of emptiness.

He understood that nothing exists in its own right. For something to exist, it must be placed next to something else so that it is seen in context. There is a subject-object relationship.

One day as Subhuti sat beneath a tree in a state of sublime emptiness, a shower of flowers began to fall all around him. In answer to his unspoken question the gods whispered *we are praising you for your discourse on emptiness.*

But I have said nothing about emptiness.

You have not spoken of emptiness. We have not heard emptiness. This is true emptiness replied the gods, as the flowers rained down upon him.

Publishing the Sutras

A Zen devotee named Tetsugen decided to publish the sutras in Japanese. At that time the sutras were only available in Chinese. He wished to make the sutras accessible to people in Japan.

Tetsugen's plan was ambitious. He planned to produce 7,000 copies – a tremendous undertaking for the times. He required a large sum of money to do this. While some donors

were generous, many donations were small. It took nearly ten years to collect enough money.

Tetsugen was about to begin printing when the river burst its banks. Widespread flooding was followed by famine. Seeing the suffering he could not in good conscience spend the money on printing, instead he spent it on food for the starving people. Then he set about collecting the required money again so he could publish the sutras in Japanese.

Some years later, an epidemic spread throughout the country, and again, Tetsugen used the collected money to relieve the suffering of the people.

After 20 years, Tetsugen finally achieved his goal of printing the sutras in Japanese. They may be seen today in the monastery of Obaku in Kyoto.

The people tell their children that Tetsugen made three sets of Sutras, and the first two sets are invisible and surpass the third.

In Dreamland

A master tells of his experience as a child at school. *Our schoolmaster would fall asleep every afternoon after lunch. We asked him why he did it, and he replied that he went to Dreamland, there to speak with the Enlightened ones, just as Confucius did.* This was a reference to the way Confucius was said to dream of the ancient sages and later tell his followers what they had told him.

One hot afternoon, some of us children also fell asleep after lunch. *The schoolmaster scolded us. We told him we went to Dreamland, just as Confucius did. And what did he tell you?* demanded the schoolmaster.

We asked the Enlightened ones if our schoolmaster came to Dreamland every afternoon, but they said they had never seen such a fellow.

The dead man's answer

A student went to see a master, in search of wisdom. The master asked him *what is the sound of one hand clapping?*

The student considered this for a long time. The master eventually said, *you are too attached to the things of this world, food, wealth, sensations. It would be better if you were dead. That would solve your problem.*

The student went away for a time and returned. The master asked him about the sound of one hand clapping. The student immediately fell over as if he were dead.

So you are dead, observed the master, *but what about the sound of one hand?*

I have not solved that yet master.

Dead men do not speak, get out now!

Zen in a beggars life

A well-known Zen master was an excellent teacher, attracting hundreds of students at several temples. Finally, the master said to the students, *I will no longer be a teacher. Go wherever you want.* After that, he disappeared; no-one knew where he was.

Some years later, the master was recognised by a former student. He was living the life of a homeless beggar, under a bridge in Kyoto. The student implored the master to again teach him. The master replied, *if you can live as I do for several days, I might consent to teach you.*

So the student dressed as the master and joined him under the bridge. During the evening of the first day, another beggar living under the bridge died of malnutrition. The master and student carried his body at midnight to a burial place on the mountain-side. Afterwards they returned to the shelter under the bridge. The master slept the remainder of the night, but the student could not sleep at all.

In the morning the master said, *no need to beg for food today. Our departed friend has left us some food.* The student could not eat a single bite, though he was hungry.

I have said you could not do as I, said the master, go now and do not bother me again.

The thief who became a disciple

A master was reciting sutras one night when a thief entered his dwelling. Armed with a sharp sword, the thief demanded money with menaces. The master said *do not disturb me, you will find money in that drawer*. Then he resumed his recitation.

As the thief was about to leave, the master said, *do not take it all. I must pay my taxes tomorrow*. The thief left some money behind.

Thank someone when you receive a gift, said the master. The thief thanked him and made his escape.

A few days later, the thief was caught. He confessed, among others, to the theft from the master. The prosecution called the master as a witness.

The master said at the trial, *this man is no thief, at least as far as I am concerned. I gave him money and he thanked me for it*.

After the thief was released from prison, he went to the master and became his disciple.

Right and wrong

When the master Bankei held his meditation retreats, a great many students from around the country attended. At one of these retreats, an attendee was caught stealing. The

matter was reported to Bankei with the request that the thief be expelled. Bankei ignored the matter.

A day later, the same young man was again caught stealing. Again Bankei disregarded the matter. This angered the other attendees, who drew up a petition demanding the expulsion of the thief. If their demand was not met, they threatened to all leave as one.

So Bankei gathered everyone together and addressed the congregation, *You are wise, O brothers. You know the difference between right and wrong. You can go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother does not know the difference between right and wrong. Who will teach him if I do not? I am going to keep him here even if all of the rest you leave.*

The cleansing tears flowed down the cheeks of the brother who had stolen, He had lost all desire to steal.

The Stingy Artist

There was an artist-monk named Gessen who was known to be a good artist, but also one that demanded a high price to be paid before the work was done. He thus acquired the nick-name *The Stingy Artist*.

A geisha-courtesan approached Gessen with a commission. *How much can you pay?* enquired Gessen. *Oh, any amount replied the geisha, but on condition you must paint it in my presence.*

The geisha summonsed Gessen to paint on the day she held a feast for her patron at court. With consummate skill Gessen completed his finest work, and demanded the largest sum he had ever charged.

The geisha paid him without complaint, and turning to her patron said *All this fellow wants is money. His work is fine, yet his mind is dirty, his thinking has become muddied with thoughts of wealth. His work is not fit to exhibit. It is just about good enough for one of my petticoats.*

Deftly removing her petticoat she requested Gessen to paint another picture on the back of it.

How much will you pay enquired Gessen.

Oh, any amount.

Gessen named a high price, painted the picture as requested, received his payment and went upon his way. He cared nothing about people's opinion of him.

Some time later it was discovered by the geisha and her sister courtesans that there were three reason for Gessen's apparent greed.

It was learned that Gessen's home province was often beset by famine, and with no benevolent lord to provide relief, Gessen established a secret granary that contained enough food to help his fellows during the famines which he knew were coming. The second reason was that the road between his home town and the capital was rough and in poor repair. He wanted to make repairs so people and freight might move more freely. The third reason was that Gessen's master had wished to establish a temple, but had passed

away before being able to build it. Gessen wished to complete his master's work and build the temple.

Once he had achieved these three goals through his high-priced art, he put aside his brushes and paints and never touched them again, retiring instead to the mountains to lead a quiet, contemplative life.

Accurate proportion

A renowned tea-master wished to hang a wire flower basket on a column in his tea room in order to beautify the space. The tea-master sat in his position and engaged a carpenter to help him locate the flower basket in exactly the right place. The tea-master directed the man to move it *a little higher, a littler lower, a little to the left and a little more to the right*. After considerable pains-taking effort, the tea-master said *Yes! Exactly there*.

The carpenter, testing the master, secretly marked the spot, and pretended to forget. *Was this the place, was that the place?* He kept asking.

But so accurate was the tea-master's sense of proportion that it was not until the marked spot was reached that the tea-master approved.

Black-nosed Buddha

A Buddhist nun who was devoutly searching for enlightenment made a statue of the Buddha and covered it with gold leaf to make it look nice and shiny. Wherever she went, she carried the statue with her.

Years passed. The nun came to live at a temple where there were many statues of Buddha, each with its own shrine.

The nun wanted to burn incense before her golden Buddha, but did not like the idea that the perfumed smoke should stray onto the other statues. So she built a funnel arrangement that conducted the smoke only to her statue.

The arrangement blackened the nose of the golden Buddha, making it especially ugly.

Ryonen's clear realization

The Buddhist nun who came to be known as Ryonen was born in 1797. She was of noble birth, the grand-daughter of the famous Japanese warrior Shingen.

Ryonen was possessed of the rare gifts of poetic genius and great beauty, such that at 17 she was selected to be a lady-in-waiting to the Empress herself. It appeared a future filled with fame and fortune awaited her.

The beloved Empress died suddenly. Ryonen's dreams of celebrity vanished overnight. Reflecting on this, she came to

clearly understand the impermanence of worldly life. Thus she decided to become a Zen practitioner.

Her family refused to allow her to become a nun. They forced her into an arranged marriage. She was able to negotiate an agreement; she was to bear her noble husband three healthy children. After she had fulfilled this condition, she would be allowed to leave and become a nun.

By the time Ryonen was 25, she had borne her husband three healthy children. They could no longer stop her from leaving. Ryonen shaved her head, and taking the name *Ryonen* (which means to clearly realize) she started upon her pilgrimage towards enlightenment.

Ryonen approached the master Tetsugya with the request to become his student. The master refused, saying that her beauty (shaved head or not) would only cause trouble. She tried a succession of other masters, all of whom refused her on the same grounds.

So Ryonen took the drastic action of disfiguring her face in order to ruin her outer appearance of beauty. Thus she was accepted by a master. To commemorate the occasion, Ryonen wrote this poem on the back of a mirror:

*In the service of my Empress I burned incense to perfume my
exquisite clothes, Now as a homeless mendicant I burn my face to
enter a Zen temple.*

When Ryonen was about to pass from this world, she wrote another poem:

*Sixty-six times have these eyes
Beheld the changing scene of autumn.
I have said enough about moonlight,*

*Ask no more.
Only listen to the voice of pines and cedars
When no wind stirs.*

Sour miso

The cook-monk Dairyo at Bankei's monastery decided to take extra care of his old master by providing for him only the freshest of miso (a paste of soy beans mixed with wheat and yeast which ferments if not consumed fresh). Bankei, noticing he was being served better food than everyone else, sent for the cook.

Dairyo told Bankei that according to his age and status, he should be eating only fresh miso. Bankei said *So you think I should not eat at all.* With this, he entered his room and locked the door.

For seven days Dairyo remained outside Bankei's door, asking his pardon. Bankei would not answer.

Finally, in desperation another student called to Bankei inside his room *Master, you may be alright, but this young monk here has to eat. He cannot go without food much longer.*

At that a smiling Bankei opened the door. He told Dairyo: *I insist on eating the same food as the least of my followers. When you become the teacher I do not want you to forget this.*

Your light may go out

A student of Tendai, the philosophical school of Buddhism, came to a master, seeking to be his pupil. As the student was departing several years later, the master said *Studying the truth speculatively is a good way to gather material with which to teach people, but remember that unless you meditate regularly your light may go out.*

The giver should be grateful

A master attracted so many students that his school was too small. Hearing of this, a local merchant who liked the idea of being seen as a philanthropist, decided to give the master 500 gold pieces with which a larger school might be built.

The merchant came to the master, and presented him with the gold. The master said, *Alright, I will take it.*

The merchant handed over the gold, but the master's attitude annoyed him. After all, a person might live a whole year on 3 gold pieces. He had not even been thanked for 500.

In this sack is 500 gold pieces, hinted the merchant.

You told me that before, replied the master.

Even though I am a wealthy man, said the merchant, *500 is still a lot of money.*

Do you want me to thank you for it? asked the master.

You ought to, replied the merchant.

Why should I? inquired the master, *it is the giver who should be grateful.*

The last will and testament

Ikkyu was a well-know Zen teacher who was also the son of the Emperor. When he was very young, his mother left the palace and went to study Zen in a temple. In this way Prince Ikkyu also became a student of Zen. When this mother passed on, she left him this letter:

Dearest Ikkyu:

I have finished my work in this life and am now returning into Eternity. I wish you to become a good student and to realize your Buddha-nature. You will know if I am in hell and whether I am always with you or not.

If you become a man who realizes that the Buddha and his follower Bodhidharma are your own servants, you may leave off studying and work for humanity. The Buddha preached for forty-nine years and in all that time found it unnecessary to speak one word. You ought to know why. But if you don't and yet wish to, avoid thinking fruitlessly.

Your Mother,

Not born, not dead.

September first.

P.S. The teaching of Buddha was mainly for the purpose of enlightening others. If you are dependent on any of its methods, you are naught but an ignorant insect. There are 80,000 books on Buddhism and if you should read all of them and still not see your own nature, you will not understand even this letter. This is my will and testament.

The tea-master and the assassin

Taiko was a warrior who wished to find inner peace. He went to a tea-master to learn tea-etiquette and perhaps find calmness and contentment.

Taiko's attendant Kato was a young warrior who could see no value in his master's study of the tea-ceremony. He regarded it as a dereliction of his duty as a soldier. So he decided to kill the tea-master. He visited the tea-master on the pretence of a social call, and was invited to take tea.

The tea-master was perceptive. He understood the real purpose of Kato's visit, so requested Kato leave his sword outside. *The tea-ceremony represents peacefulness itself* he said to Kato.

But Kato refused, saying *I am a warrior. I take my sword wherever I go.*

Very well. Bring your sword and have some tea, replied the master.

The kettle was boiling on the charcoal. Suddenly, the tea-master tipped it over. The air was filled with hissing steam and ashen smoke. Startled, the young warrior ran outside.

The tea-master apologised. *My mistake, he said, come back in and has some tea. I have your sword all covered in ashes. I will clean it and give it back to you.*

Kato realised that he could not now kill the tea-master, and gave up the idea altogether.

The true path

An old monk was close to death. His master came to see him, asking *shall I lead you on?*

The dying monk said *I came here alone. I will go alone. What help could you possibly be to me?*

The master answered, *If you really think you come and go, you are deluding yourself. Let me show you the path on which there is no coming and going.*

The master's words revealed the true path so clearly to the dying monk that he smiled and passed away.

The gates of paradise

A soldier asked a Zen master *Is there really a heaven and a hell?*

And who are you? asked the master.

I am a samurai, replied the warrior.

Ha! You a soldier, said the master, *what kind of lord would have you as his guard, your face looks like that of a beggar!*

Angered, the soldier began to draw his sword. The master continued, *So you have a sword. It is probably much too dull to cut off my head.*

As the soldier drew his sword, the master observed *Here open the gates of hell.*

The soldier understood the master's words. Sheathing his sword, he bowed to the master.

Here open the gates of heaven, said the master.

Arresting the stone Buddha

A travelling merchant carrying 50 rolls of cotton on his shoulders on a hot day stopped to rest in the shade of a stone Buddha. The merchant fell asleep. When he woke, he saw that his rolls of cotton had disappeared. Outraged, the merchant reported the matter to the police.

A court of enquiry was convened. The judge declared that *the stone Buddha must have stolen the cotton. He is supposed to care for the people, but he has failed in his sacred duty. Arrest him!*

The police 'arrested' the stone Buddha and brought it to the court-room. A large crowd of towns-folk followed,

curious to hear what kind of sentence a judge could possibly impose on a stone Buddha.

The judge addressed the noisy court. *What right do you people have appearing in my court laughing and making so much noise? You are in contempt of court. You are now subject to a fine and imprisonment.*

The people quickly calmed down and apologised. The judge said, *I will still need to fine you. But I will waive the fine if each of you brings one roll of cotton to the court within three days. Anyone failing to do so will be arrested.*

One of the rolls of cotton brought by the people was recognised by the merchant as part of his missing consignment. Thus was the thief identified. The merchant recovered his goods, and the cotton rolls were returned to the people. The stone Buddha smiled his inscrutable smile.

Soldiers of Humanity

A unit of the Japanese Army was engaged in training exercises in the countryside. The unit commander decided to locate his headquarters at a certain Zen master's temple.

The master instructed his cook to serve the officers the same food as the monks.

The army officers were insulted, being used to the superior food of the officers mess. *Do you know who we are?*, the commander demanded of the master. *We risk our lives for our country. You should treat us with more respect.*

The master replied *And who do you think we are? We serve all sentient beings.*

Subjugating a ghost

A young wife was mortally ill. *I love you so much* she told her husband, *I do not want to die. After I'm gone, do not take up with another woman. If you do, I will haunt you.*

Not long after this, the wife died. The husband respected her wishes for three months. Being lonely, he found a woman with whom he fell in love. Soon marriage was discussed.

After the engagement, the ghost of the dead wife appeared to the man. She reproached him for not keeping his promise. The ghost was clever too, repeating conversations between the man and his intended wife. This annoyed the man. He was unable to sleep. In desperation he sought the advice of a Zen master.

Your former wife became a ghost and knows everything you do, remarked the master. Yes, a very wise ghost. You should praise her cleverness at knowing everything you do. Next time she visits you, bargain with her. Tell her that she knows so much that you can hide nothing from her and that if she can answer one question, you will keep your promise and remain single.

But what question should I ask? inquired the man.

Take a large handful of soy beans and ask her exactly how many beans are in your hand. If she cannot say, then you

know she is a figment of your imagination and will trouble you no longer.

The next time the ghost appeared to the man he flattered her in the way suggested by the master.

Indeed, replied the ghost, and I know you visited the Zen master yesterday.

Since you know so much, how many beans am I holding?

The ghost had vanished, never to reappear.

One note of Zen

The first Japanese monk to visit China and study Zen settled on a remote mountain and avoided contact with people.

When people found him, they recognized his wisdom and asked him to teach them. The monk would say a few words, and then move to a more remote part of the mountain where he was harder to find.

On the monk's return to Japan, the Emperor heard of it, and requested that he come to court and teach them what he had learned in China.

The monk came to the capital and stood before the Emperor and his courtiers. After a long silence the monk produced a flute from his robe, and placing it deliberately to his lips, blew one short note.

With that, he excused himself and disappeared.

Learning to be silent

There were four young students of meditation who decided they would observe seven full days of silence in order to deepen their meditation practice. The young men were good friends and enjoyed each other's company.

On the first day, all were silent and the day went well. But later that evening, as the lamp grew dim for want of fuel, one could not help but exclaim to a servant *Fix that lamp!*

His companions were surprised to hear him speak. *We are not supposed to say anything* one of them said.

You two are foolish. Why did you speak? admonished the third young man.

I am the only one who has not spoken said the fourth, smugly.

True reformation

A man had devoted his life to the study of Zen. One day he received word from his family that a nephew was living the life of a playboy. *He is spending the family fortune of wine, women and song* complained the family. *Soon there will be nothing left.*

The family expected the monk to do something, since the nephew had been appointed to manage the family estate after the man withdrew from society to become a monk.

The monk had a long journey to visit the nephew, who seemed pleased to see him, inviting him to stay overnight.

The monk sat up all night meditating. In the morning he said to the nephew, *I must be getting old, my hand shakes so. Would you mind helping me tie my shoe-laces?*

The young man helped him willingly. *Thank-you*, said the monk. *You see, a man becomes older and feebler day-by-day. Take good care of yourself.*

The monk left, not having mentioned a word about the family's complaints, yet from that morning on, the nephew ceased his wastrel lifestyle.

No attachment

The renowned Chinese Zen master Zengetsu gave this advice to his students:

Live in the world, but do not become attached to the things of the world (for they are impermanent and attachment to them causes suffering).

When you see a good example, resolve to emulate it. When you see a bad example, resolve to avoid that behaviour.

Even when alone in a dark room, conduct yourself as though you are facing an honoured guest (with dignity and modesty). Express your feelings, but no more than is natural for you (so avoid putting on airs and graces that are not part of your true identity).

Poverty is your greatest treasure. Do not exchange it for a life of ease. (The less you have, the less you have to lose. Most possessions are encumbrances that keep you from becoming aware of what is real)

A person may appear to be a fool, yet not actually be one. He or she might be guarding their wisdom carefully. (Those who know, don't say, those who say don't know.)

A virtuous character is the fruit of self-discipline and good habits. Virtue must be worked for; it does not fall from heaven like the rain and snow. (Good habits are difficult to form but easy to live with. Bad habits are easy to form but difficult to live with).

Modesty is the foundation of all virtues. Let the people in your life discover you for themselves before you make yourself known to them.

A noble heart never forces itself forwards into the world. Your words are like rare gems, seldom seen and greatly valued.

A sincere student of Zen regards every day as a fortunate day to be alive. Time passes, but you never lag behind, nor does glory or shame have any effect. (You are beyond caring what people think or say about you).

Censure yourself, but never another. Do not discuss right or wrong. (You should live and let live, and mind your own business, avoiding a judgmental mindset that likes to categorise people and situations as either good or bad).

Some truths are considered false for many generations. Since the value of truth may not be recognised for centuries,

one should not look for approval or recognition for one's works.

Live at the level of cause. Leave the consequences to the great law of the universe. Pass each day in peaceful contemplation.

The real miracle

A Zen master was teaching at a temple when a priest from a doctrinal sect, jealous of the master's large following, challenged him to a debate, hoping to discredit him.

The master was in the middle of a lesson, but the priest made so much noise that he was forced to stop.

The founder of our sect, boasted the priest, had such miraculous powers that he could hold a paint brush up on one side of a river while an attendant held up some parchment on the other side of the river. Such was his power that he could write the holy name on the paper, through the air. Can you perform such miracles?

The master replied lightly, *Perhaps your fox can perform such a trick, but that is not the way of Zen. My miracle is that when I feel hungry, I eat. When I feel thirsty, I drink.*

No work, no food

A venerable 80 year old Zen master worked alongside his students every day, tending the gardens, cleaning the grounds, pruning the trees.

His students felt sorry for the old man, but they knew he would not listen to their entreaties to rest, so they hid his tools instead.

That day the master did not eat, nor did he eat the next day, nor the next.

The students grew alarmed at this, and quietly replaced the master's tools. That day the master worked and ate as usual.

In the evening, the master said to them *No work, no food*.

The tunnel

Zenkai, the son of a samurai, went to the city and became an employee of a senior government official. He fell in love with the official's wife and had an affair. On being discovered by the official, Zenkai murdered him, and together with the woman, fled to a faraway place. There they became beggars, then thieves in order to survive.

The woman was so greedy that Zenkai became disgusted with her after some time. Leaving her, he journeyed to an

even more remote part of the empire, there to live as a wandering mendicant.

Zenkai wanted to make amends for his wrong-doings, so he resolved to accomplish some good deeds in what remained of his life. He knew of a dangerous mountain road that had claimed the lives of many travellers. He decided to dig a tunnel through the mountain so that travellers might travel safely from one side of the mountain to the other.

Begging for food in the day-time, Zenkai worked at night, digging the tunnel. After 30 years, the tunnel was nearly three kilometres long, six meters high, and ten meters wide.

Two years before the tunnel would be complete, the son of the murdered official heard of Zenkai's whereabouts. The son planned to avenge his father's death by killing Zenkai.

I will give you my life willingly, said Zenkai, only please let me finish this work. On the day it is complete, then you may kill me.

So the son waited for the day that the tunnel would be complete. Months passed, and he grew tired of waiting, so he began to help with the digging. After a year of helping, the son came to admire Zenkai's strength of character.

At last the tunnel was complete and travellers were able to pass safely through the dangerous terrain.

Now cut off my head, Zenkai said to the son. My work is finished.

How can I cut off my own teacher's head?, replied the young man with tears in his eyes.

Gudo and the Emperor

The Emperor was studying Zen under the master Gudo. The Emperor asked *In Zen, this very mind is Buddha. Is this correct?*

Gudo replied, *If I say yes, you will think you understand without understanding. If I say no, I might be contradicting a fact that you might already know quite well.*

Another day, the Emperor asked *Where does the enlightened man go when he dies?*

Gudo answered, *I don't know.*

Why don't you know?

Because I have not died yet.

The Emperor hesitated to inquire further about the things that his mind could not grasp. So Gudo smacked the floor with his hand as if to awaken him. At this, the Emperor became enlightened.

The Emperor developed a great affection for his old master after he became enlightened, even allowing the old man to wear his hat indoors in winter to keep his head warm.

When Gudo was over 80, he would fall asleep while delivering a lecture. The Emperor would go quietly outside so the old man might get the rest he needed to keep living.

Kasan's sweat

The master Kasan was asked to officiate at the funeral of an important lord. Kasan had never met lords and courtiers before. He felt somewhat overawed by them, such that he broke out in a nervous sweat at the funeral.

Afterwards, Kasan assembled his students at the temple and said to them, *I am not qualified to be your teacher. I lack the sameness of bearing in the world of fame and celebrity that I have here in the seclusion of this temple.*

So Kasan resigned and became the student of a master at another temple. Eight years later, he returned to his former students, enlightened.

Your Majesty's children

Yamaoka was a tutor to the Emperor who was a champion swordsman and a profound student of Zen.

He lived modestly, with a minimum of possessions. What little he had he shared with people in need. His house was a refuge for homeless people. He had but one suit of clothes.

The Emperor gave Yamaoka some money with which to buy some new clothes, but the next time the Emperor saw him, he was still wearing the same old clothes.

Yamaoka, where are your new clothes? asked the Emperor.

Your Majesty, I provided clothes for those of your children who needed them.

What are you doing, what are you saying?

There is widespread misunderstanding in the modern world about how a Zen master passes on his or her teachings to the follower who will carry it forwards. The real wisdom of these teachings is passed from heart to heart. The process is characterised by silence and humility. There should be no assertion by a teacher that he is the authorised recipient of a master's teachings. Such a claim would prove the contrary to be true.

The recipient of Zen teachings might keep the matter secret for as long as 20 years or more. Not until another person discovers through their need to receive such teaching that a suitable person was at hand would the teacher be revealed. Without ceremony, the process would flow quite naturally as the teaching makes its way in its own right.

The Zen master Mu-nan had only one successor. His name was Shoju. When Shoju had completed his study of Zen, the master called him to his study for a private conversation. *I am getting old, said the master, and as far as I know you are the only one who will carry on this teaching.*

The master produced a very old, leather-bound book. *This book has been passed from master to student for seven generations.*

I have added several points, according to my understanding. It is very valuable. I am giving it to you to signify that you are my successor.

If it is so valuable master, you had best keep it yourself, replied Shoju. I received your Zen without writing and I am satisfied with it as it is.

Yes, I know that, said the master, but even so, this work has been passed from master to master for seven generations. You should keep it is a symbol of having received the teaching. Here.

The two men were sitting beside an open fire-place. As the master thrust the book into his hands, Shoju instantly dropped it into the flames, where it was reduced to ash. Shoju had no desire for any possessions.

The master, who had not felt anger for many decades, yelled *what are you doing!?*

Shoju shouted back, *what are you saying!?*

Eating the blame

At the temple of a Zen master, it came about one day that the cook was delayed with the preparation of the evening meal. In haste, the cook went into the garden and with a shard knife sliced the tops off various vegetables, and made soup out of them. The cook was unaware that he had accidentally included part of a snake in the soup.

The monks expressed the opinion that they had not tasted such good soup before. But the master, finding the snake's

head in his bowl, called the cook over and demanded *what is this?*

Oh, thank you master, said the cook, and taking the morsel, ate it quickly.

The most valuable thing in the world

What is the most valuable thing in the world?, asked a student.

The head of a dead cat, replied the master.

Why is a dead cat's head the most valuable thing in the world? asked the student.

Because no-one can name its price.

The blockhead Lord

Two Zen masters were invited to visit a Lord. On arrival, the first master said to the Lord *you are wise and have an inborn ability to learn Zen.*

Nonsense said the second master, *why do you flatter this blockhead? He may be a Lord, but he knows nothing of Zen.*

On hearing this, the Lord decided to build a temple for the second master in which he might study Zen.

Ten successors

Students of Zen in old Japan took a vow that even if they are killed by their master, they still intend to learn Zen. To signify this vow, the custom was to prick a finger and seal the vow with a droplet of blood. Over time though, this practice became a mere formality, such that when a student of the master Ekido died, he became a martyr.

Ekido was a severe master. His students feared him. One student, whose job was to strike the to keep the beat was distracted by a pretty girl walking past. The master, standing behind him, struck him with a stick. The shock which was intended to focus the student's mind gave the young man a heart attack.

The student's parent, hearing of the accident, went directly to Ekido. The parent said *I do not blame you. Your severe approach to teaching Zen is wise and effective.* Ekido acted as though the dead student was still alive.

As a result of this incident, Ekido was able to produce no less than ten enlightened successors. An unusually high number.

Temper

A student of Zen asked his master for some advice. *Master, I have an ungovernable temper. What can I do to cure it?*

The master said *Hmm, you have something very strange. Let me see it now.*

Well I don't feel angry now, so I can't show it to you, replied the student.

When can you show it to me? asked the master.

It arises unexpectedly.

Then, replied the master, *it cannot be your true nature. If it were, you could show it to me any time. You were not born with it. Your parents did not give it to you. Ponder on that for a while.*

The stone mind

A Zen master lived alone in a small temple. One chilly day, four travelling monks arrived and asked the master if they might build a fire in the courtyard, over which they might warm themselves.

As the monks were building the fire, the master heard them arguing about the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. The master joined them, asking *See that big stone over there? Is it inside or outside your mind?*

A monk replied, *From a Buddhist point of view, everything is an objectification of the mind, so I would say that the stone is inside my mind.*

Your mind must feel very heavy, replied the master, *if it carries that big stone around in it.*

Real prosperity

A wealthy man asked a Zen master to write something for the continued prosperity of his family so that it might be treasured from generation to generation.

The master obtained a large piece of paper, and wrote upon it *Father dies, son dies, grandson dies.*

The wealthy patron angrily said *I asked you to write something for the continued happiness of my family. Why do you make a joke of this?*

No joke intended, replied the master. If before you yourself dies, you son should die, this would grieve you greatly. If your grandson should pass away before your son, both of you would be broken-hearted. If your family, generation after generation, should die in the order I have named, it will be the natural course of events. I call this real prosperity.

Incense burner

There was a woman called Kame who was renowned far and wide as a consummate artist who specialised in making beautiful incense burners. These burners were used for sacred ceremonies, and were highly prized throughout the country.

Kame was a party-girl who enjoyed drinking, smoking and the company of men. When she made some money, she

hosted lavish social gatherings, inviting artists and artisans of all kinds. Her partying with these men was an integral part of her artistic process. They allowed her to evolve her designs.

Kame worked very slowly, but her incense burners were always master-pieces of the highest quality. They were treasured in homes where the women-folk never drank, smoked or associated with men other than their husbands, fathers or grown sons.

The mayor of city where she lived asked Kame to make an incense burner for him. She accepted, but was very slow to begin work on the commission. After six months with no progress the mayor visited her. They had a lively discussion involving much drinking and smoking, and at last Kame had the inspiration to begin.

When it was finished, Kame placed the burner on a table and observed it closely, looking at it from every angle for a long time. She had a drink, then another, then a smoke, then another drink and more smoking. She treated that burner as though it were human company with whom she could enjoy social intercourse.

Finally, Kame found a hammer and smashed the incense burner to pieces. It was not the perfect creation that her mind demanded she create.

Nothing exists

A young student of Zen visited one master after another. One day, he called upon the master Dokuon.

Showing off to the master, the student said *The mind, the Buddha and all sentient beings, do not actually exist. The true nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realisation, no delusion, no wise-ones, no mediocrity, no giving and no receiving.*

The master, who was smoking his pipe quietly, said nothing. Suddenly he whacked the student unexpectedly with the bamboo pipe. This made the youth angry.

If nothing exists, inquired the master, where did this anger come from?

True friends

A long time ago in China there were two friends. One could play the harp skilfully, the other could listen skilfully.

When the one would play a piece about a mountain, the other would say *I can see the mountain there in front of us.*

When the one would play about water, the other would say *Here is the running stream.*

But the listener fell sick, and died. The player cut the strings of his harp and never played again. Even now, the cutting of harp-strings signifies true friendship.

Time to die

A certain Zen master was very clever, even as a boy. When he was a young student he was fond of playing with his teacher's beautiful antique tea-cup. One day he accidentally broke it.

The boy heard his teacher approaching, and gathered up the pieces of the shattered cup in great consternation. When the teacher appeared, the boy asked *Why do people have to die?*

The master replied that *It is natural; everything has a life-span and must eventually die.*

The boy held out the broken pieces and said *It was time for your cup to die.*

Three kinds of student

A certain Zen master used to say *There are three kinds of disciple; those who impart Zen to others, those who maintain the temples and shrines, and then there are the rice-bags and clothes-hangers.*

Another master expressed the same idea in different words. When the master was a student, his teacher was very severe. Sometimes the teacher beat him with a bamboo cane. Most of the other students refused to tolerate this kind of treatment and left the temple. The young student, who was to become a master, remained with the severe teacher. He

summed it up by saying *A poor student utilizes his teacher's influence. A fair student admires his teacher's kindness. A good student grows strong under his teacher's discipline.*

How to write a Chinese poem

A well-known Japanese poet was asked how to compose a Chinese poem.

The Chinese poem is usually four lines, he said. The first line contains the initial phase; the second line, the continuation of that phase; the third line turns from this subject and begins a new one; and the fourth line brings the first three lines together.

This poem is an example:

*Two daughters of a silk merchant live in Kyoto.
The elder is twenty, the younger, eighteen.
A soldier may kill with his sword.
But these girls slay men with their eyes.*

Fire-poker Zen

A Zen master told his students about an old woman who ran the local tea-shop. He praised her understanding of Zen. Many students found this difficult to believe and would go to the tea-shop to see for themselves.

When the old woman saw people entering her shop, she would know at once whether they were there for tea, or to test her understanding of Zen.

If the visitor was there for tea, she always served them graciously. If they were there for the other reason, she would invite them to step behind the screen. The moment they did this, she would strike them with a fire poker. Very few of them could escape her blows.

Story-teller's Zen

A famous storey-teller was so expert at his craft that he could make people feel as though they were actually there in the action of the story.

One day the storey-teller met a Zen master. The master said *I understand you are the best storey-teller in the country. Please tell me the story of the Peach Boy. When I was a little boy, I used to sleep beside my mother, and she would tell me this story. Before she could finish it, I was always asleep. Tell it to me just as my mother did.*

The storey-teller needed time to prepare, so he asked the master for some time. Several months later, the story-teller went to the master and said *may I have the opportunity to tell you the story now?*

Some other time, replied the master.

The storey-teller was keenly disappointed. He went away and prepared further. Over and over he went to the master,

and each time he was told, *not now*. But he was not to be put off. The storey-teller worked hard to be ready for when he could tell the master the story of the Peach Boy.

It was five long years before the master gave the story-teller permission to tell the story. This is how the master imparted Zen to the story-teller.

Midnight excursion

A certain student was one of many studying Zen with a master. This student used to get out of bed late at night, climb out of the dormitory window and go into town where he would get drunk and enjoy the company of women.

The master noticed he was gone one night. Discovering that the student had used a stool to stand on and climb out of the window, the master moved the stool away and stood in its place. Eventually the young man returned, and climbing back in put his foot on the master's head before jumping down.

The student was aghast to see what he had done. The master merely said to him *it is very chilly at night, be careful you do not catch a cold*.

The student did not go out again.

Letter to a dying man

A master wrote this letter to one of his disciples who was about to die:

The essence of your mind is not born, so it will never die. It is not an existence, which is perishable. It is not emptiness, which is a mere void. It has neither colour nor form. It enjoys no pleasures and suffers no pains.

I know you are very ill. Like a good Zen student, you are facing that sickness squarely. You may not know exactly who is suffering, but ask yourself: What is the essence of this mind? Think only of this. You will need no more. Covet nothing. Your end which is endless is as a snowflake dissolving in the pure air.

A drop of water

A master asked his student to bring a bucket of water with which to cool his bath.

The student brought the water, and poured most of it into the bath until the temperature was just right for the master. What was left in the bucket, the student then threw onto the ground.

You fool! exclaimed the master. *What right have you to waste that water? You should have poured it onto the plants.*

The student experienced Satori in that moment. He changed his name to *Tekisui*, which means *drop of water*.

Teaching the ultimate

Bamboo and paper lanterns were carried at night by travellers in old Japan. So it happened that a blind man visiting a friend one night was offered a lantern to carry home with him.

Darkness and light are the same to me, what use have I for a lantern? said the blind man.

But if you don't have one, replied his friend, *someone else may not see you, so you must take the lantern.*

The blind man set off towards his home. Before he had gone very far, someone ran squarely into him. *Watch where you're going!* Exclaimed the blind man, *can't you see the lantern?*

Your candle has burned out brother, replied the stranger.

Non-attachment

A Zen master, the respected abbot of a well-known temple was 92 when he passed away. His whole life he had endeavoured to remain non-attached to the things of the world.

When he was twenty, someone introduced him to tobacco. He found smoking a very pleasant practice, but he thought, *such pleasant things may disturb my meditation. I should stop*

before I become dependent on it. So he threw the pipe and tobacco away.

A few years later, he discovered the truth and power of the I Ching, the Book of Changes, to divine the future. This proved to be very useful for various practical matters, but again, he thought, *using such a marvellous device as the I Ching may disturb my meditation*, so he gave it up and never used the I Ching again.

A few years later, he found that he had a talent for calligraphy and poetry. He was so good at it that people praised him, but again he thought, *if I don't stop now, I will become a poet and not a teacher of Zen*, so he set aside his pen and never wrote another poem.

The silent temple

A one-eyed master taught Zen at a temple.

Day and night, the temple was silent. The students did nothing but meditate. They recited no sutras, rang no bells, and conversed with each other not at all.

When the master passed away, an old neighbour heard the bells ringing and the recitation of the sutras coming from the temple. She knew then that the old master was gone.

The Buddha's Zen

The Buddha said I consider the positions of kings and rulers as that of specks of dust. I see treasures of gold and gems as so many bricks and pebbles. I look upon the finest silk robes as tattered rags. I see the thousands of worlds in the universe as no more than small fruit-seeds, and the greatest lake in India as but a drop of oil on my foot. I consider the teachings of the world to be the illusion of magicians. I discern the highest conception of freedom as a sheet of golden brocade cloth in a dream, and view the holy path of the illuminated ones as flowers appearing in one's eyes. I see meditation as a pillar of a mountain, Nirvana as a nightmare of daytime. I look upon the judgment of right and wrong as the serpentine dance of a dragon, and the rise and fall of beliefs as but traces left by the four seasons.

Epilogue

The essence of Zen is to take away, not add to your knowledge; therein lays the paradox of the 21st Century in which education and knowledge is considered the way to success, if not liberation.

The End

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About the Author

David Tuffley PhD combines a career as a university lecturer and researcher with his very personal search for spiritual enlightenment over the past 40 years. 21st Century Zen is the fruit of that journey. David's academic interests range across Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology, Literature, History, Software Engineering and Architecture. He blends his broad academic knowledge with the ancient practice of Buddhism and Taoism to create a truly unique work of timeless value.

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