

# *What is it which thus comes?*

Zen Weekend

17th - 18th December, 2022

at Bristol Zen Dojo

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## Notes

1. This one and a half day sesshin included a *mondo* on Saturday afternoon. On the advice of the *godo*, this has not been transcribed. However, an mp3 file is available for the personal use of those who actually attended the event. Please contact [helpdesk@zenbristol.co.uk](mailto:helpdesk@zenbristol.co.uk) to request a copy

2. Because a technical error meant that no recording was made of the final *kusen*, Maitre Guy kindly reconstructed it from his notes. It may, therefore, be at slight variance from what was actually delivered on the day.

## Zazen 08:30 Saturday 17th Dec 2022

Meditation is a necessity for beings. There is an urgent need to find peace once again. And many different kinds of meditation appear today. The practice of zazen - Zen meditation - isn't a new practice. It has been practised by generations of monks and nuns. In fact true meditation doesn't have a beginning, it doesn't have an end. It's not so easy to understand this. For some it can be painful to sit with the legs crossed. There's no need to force suffering. But it's clear that this posture taught by the Buddha himself unceasingly returns us to our own presence and teaches us to remain in the here and now, knowing that we are in the here and now. We truly live Presence in being the Presence itself. We see things arising and passing, at one and the same moment in our body and around us. When we are completely open, without trying to grasp or reject, there is no longer a duality between us and the world, the universe, things.

This is what a Chan master expressed in a poem:

*Contemplating with the ears,  
Listening with the eyes,  
There is no doubt  
That the drops of rain,  
Like jewels flowing from a pipe,  
Are nothing but myself.*

We practise the art of non-doing, which means simply to observe and perceive, Simply sitting doing nothing; we listen, we feel, we breathe, consciously. We simply receive that which comes to us. In this *now*, before anything comes, we are in this openness, this availability, where perception is immediate, direct. We are in the living of things, life itself, relaxed, the back upright, gently breathing, the thumbs horizontal, the nose vertical.

This brings anyone to the question of what to do with the flow of thoughts that constantly arise in the mind. We want to stop thinking, we want to make our mind empty, we want to remain in peace. And constantly we are captured by thoughts, by stories, by emotions, by scenarios and experiences from our lives, hopes.

The teaching which has helped me most in my practice for dealing with thoughts has been the words of Master Daoxin, the Fourth Patriarch, who says:

*"In the interval when your mind has just left one thought and is not yet caught by another, you are a pure being."*

This teaching helped me understand and see that there is a space between thoughts; that the thoughts in the mind are chained from one to the next - but there is a space between them that we can discover and enlarge; which is an entrance-door to inner peace.

We remain in this space before the next thought arises. And if another thought does come, then we let it come and go. So, we remain in this moment which is before the arising of things and thoughts. What's needed is simply total attentiveness. It's this attentiveness which brings us back to a peaceful, luminous consciousness. In this space between thoughts we know that we Are, and we need nothing else. There are no words; there is simply Presence. It is infinitely restful. So, practice is to understand how you can by yourself, without effort, stay in this *now* before the next thought.

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## Zazen 11:30 Saturday 17th Dec 2022

Human beings like to run after everything that moves, bright shiny things, things that appear to be real. They think that this will bring them health and happiness. In fact running after things and wanting to grab hold of them only brings suffering, pain, frustration. And we can see this constant game taking place in our own mind, in our own thoughts. We are often exhausted with them, we want to stop running after thoughts and things, to not be forever wanting to quench a thirst. This is what meditation offers. Zazen is altogether special because it advises us to do nothing.

How can we do nothing? How can we have no expectation with regard to what we do? It seems pointless, but it's a pointlessness that is the gateway to our own peace. This space that exists between thoughts, this space in which we find once again our own Presence, our own nature, our own identity, that which is always there after, before and even during any thought or experience. So the question is: How can we hold ourselves in the space before the next thought?

In one of his recommendations for the practice of zazen, Master Keizan recommends that when we find ourselves in *kontin* or *sanran* - in other words sleepiness or the constant agitation of thought, we remember a *koan*, which is a questioning or the reply of a master, one of the Masters of Transmission. The *koan* allows us to return to a question that needs no response, a question without an answer, or a question to which the answer is silence.

So I'd like to speak now about one of the most famous of the *koans* of the Chan School. It's a question that Master Eno posed to Nangaku.

Master Eno was the Sixth Patriarch, who was already known as a great master when Nangaku visited him. After the formalities of presentation, Eno asked the following question of Nangaku: *'What is it that thus comes?'* Nangaku did not know what to reply.

*'What is it that thus comes?'* is not a question referring to a particular person, event, or the town where Nangaku originally came from, nor his name, his age, his curriculum vitae or his position in society.

*'What is it that thus comes?'* is asking 'What is the true nature of things that arise and disappear thus'. How can one reply to this? This *koan* is truly vital in helping us to clarify and pacify our mind during zazen. When you are in *kontin* or *sanran*, it's enough to remember this *koan* *'What is it that thus comes?'* and to receive, to remain open, to listen to what is the next perception you can have. Sounds are perceived, sensations are felt as they come to us. Thoughts too come to us and we can see them arising as simply thoughts, like passing clouds.

*'What is it that thus comes?'* is a question which takes us to an opening. There's no need to respond with words, simply remain vigilant. At each moment something arises and disappears in the field of perception and it's this that we observe, the impermanence of all things, of all feelings, of all thoughts. Nagarjuna says that *'Awakening is simply to hold oneself in the gaze where we see the arising and the disappearing of things'*.

*'What is it that thus comes?'* What is the nature of that which presents itself in our mind? The sound of the passing cars, the sound of the *godo's* voice, of the ventilation system of the restaurant beneath us, of Adrian's cough... Everything passes. Remaining in this moment you see the passing of things. It's only

in the *now* that you see it. Meditation is learning simply to remain in this silence before words, without doing anything - just being attentive, listening, watching, feeling, observing, without grasping anything, without rejecting anything. We *are* the vast space that embraces everything that arises and disappears.

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## Zazen 17:30 Saturday 17th Dec 2022

*'What is it that thus comes?'* This is a *koan* to which it's unnecessary to respond to with words, other than by simply opening the doors of your own perception. *'What is it that comes to me?'* Sounds, people talking in the street ... We just let this *koan* to act upon us in ourselves, on ourselves. We can hold it like a mantra that we can draw on when there are too many thoughts. It returns us to our own Presence, where there is no struggle against thought, where one is already beyond thought.

It took Nangaku eight years to understand this *koan* and to be ready to reply to Master Eno's question. So he went to visit his Master and said to him, *'To attempt to explain the nature of Buddha is to completely miss the target'*. Words always come afterwards, after perception, after that which comes thus. When we use the thinking mind to explain a *koan* we cloud our perceptive mind, fog it. We distance ourselves from immediate vision, we miss the target. The *buddha-nature* is our mind itself with no duality with that which comes to us spontaneously and goes spontaneously - as soon as it's come. This is what we see during zazen.

So Master Eno asked Nangaku, *'Can you tell me if it's practice-realisation?'*

Nangaku replied, *'It's not that it's not practice-realisation - it's that it cannot be stained or explained through words.'*

It's in our own minds that thoughts appear. That's where, too, that we perceive all things, the entire universe. It's our own mind which is the *buddha-nature*. So whatever the words are, it cannot be stained. The words cannot stain our own mind, you know that, just as no screen images can colour the white of the screen.

Master Eno concluded, *'That which cannot be stained by words, is that which the Buddha protects, and of which He takes care. This is what I am. This is what you are, and the patriarchs are this, too'*.

That which holds itself before all things, before *that which comes thus*' is our true nature.

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Zazen 08:30 Sunday 18th Dec 2022

If you're stuck in your stories or dreams, remember the koan '*What is it that thus comes?*'. And remain open to hear the silent reply. The response is life which comes to us in our body, all around us in this space, in the street, in the dojo, in the entire universe. Just stay open to hear, to perceive. Remain in Presence.

... *silence* ...

When we come to the dojo, we start a journey toward ourselves. In some ways there is no goal, each moment of the journey is the goal.

I hope that you will remember the *koan*, '*What is it that thus comes?*'; that you will use it often, because it has the power to return you to your own openness, in zazen but also in each moment of your daily life.

*'What is it that thus comes?'* and just to listen to the response that arises itself, without words. Return to the silence of one's own mind, and see the running of the film of '*Births and deaths*'.

We have to protect this space within ourselves which embraces all that comes to us. It's also the place where we take refuge, an eternal welcoming *now*. The *koan* returns us to our own Presence.

Master Keizan says,

*'Once you leave the stillness of zazen, lengthen this stillness into your everyday activity - without thinking, without hesitation. What comes to you in the present moment is the koan, 'What is it that thus comes?' The koan is simply the present moment. That which is before the arising of things is that which is on the other side of the time's erasure, and is just this unique reality from which flow the activities of the Buddhas and the ancient awakened ones. That*

*which cannot be stained by anything is our own mind in which the world arises'.*

So when we respond to this *koan* it is simply to open, to embrace our everyday life, grounded in this complete hearing which is the practice of *zazen* itself. We hold our attention in the place just before things arise. There's no need to make an effort to do this. There's no need for a self to see, to hear, to contemplate. When we are in the *koan*, all effort to be, to see, to hear, to feel is totally pointless. In the heart of *zazen* there is nobody.

*... silence ...*

When we remember the *koan*, '*What is it that thus comes?*', it's like coming back to the Source.

*'Listen and see as if you were new-born,'* says Master Bankei. *'This would be like always hearing or seeing for the first time. If you have no preconceived idea in your mind, the least sound, the least word would be for you complete realisation.'* This is what it is to harmonise with all phenomena. It's simply to live the total impermanence of things. Don't forget reality by getting tangled up in your fictional stories. Be like the new-born who has not yet submitted to conditioning. He just sees things as they are, in their ungraspable wonder.

There is no effort to make in order to see, to hear, to feel, '*And this is the proof,'* says Master Bankei, '*that the buddha-nature is always already there.'*

There is nothing which you *are* that is outside *buddha-nature*. As simply as blinking your eye, you can return to your true nature, to this gaze which - without effort - sees.

In the heart of your meditation, there is no-one who does anything. There's no self, no mysterious entity, not even a Buddha. All things appear and disappear without *self*.

So, we return to the simplicity of this *koan*, '*What is it that thus comes?*' and we allow the silence to bring us back the answer.

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## Zazen 11:15 Sunday 18th Dec 2022

*Shikantaza* is attention without intention, that unfolds in the space of the mind without conscious effort. Everything is open to receive *that which comes thus*. Just settle, and keep yourself, in the space between thoughts. The back straight, the breath quiet and conscious.

*Only the mountain remains.  
The clouds float at ease,  
The bird plays with the wind,  
The sound of the river....*

Everything that *is* - objects of the world or objects of the mind - cannot be perceived apart from this very moment. Perfect simultaneity between That which perceives and that which is perceived.

There aren't *things* on one side and *us* on the other. There aren't Buddhas on one side and human beings on the other. All beings, as they are, are always in perfect unity in a single Presence.

*'On foot, I reach the place where rivers are born. Seated, I see the moment when the clouds are born,'* says Master Mumon.

During zazen, the koan brings us back to the very Source of perception and helps us to stay there. The Source is the heart of zazen, and by allowing ourselves to be absorbed into it, we

disappear into a sensitive, living perception which is sufficient in itself and which unites us with the pulse of the world. We forget everything and finally remember who we are. No more references to the past, no more projections into an imaginary future. We wipe out all our expectations and all our regrets. Not even the idea of letting go or accepting, and not even the feeling of meditating. Just feeling ... Presence ... Just the space between thoughts that expands to infinity. Master Dogen says:

*"Depending on nothing and not attaching myself anywhere,  
Like a carp that leaps from the water, its whole body arcing,  
Sky above, sky below,  
Self, cloud, original water, I let go."*

We remind ourselves who we are by entering the heart of the *koan*: 'What is it that comes thus?' In the heart of silent Presence, there is just a simple gaze, free of all attachment. When *That which within me gazes* is free of self [*me*], the ten thousand things look at me and I look at them. There is pure vision without anyone who looks, perfect unity between me and the ten thousand things.

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