

Zoom Zazen Saturday 12 October 2024

It is impossible to understand what Zen is and to realise its essence by using words. Many of the Enlightened Ones, Patriarchs and Masters of our lineages have found a personal way of expressing the truth without using words. The Buddha twirled a flower between his fingers, many Masters remained completely silent, or this one simply continued to fan himself, that one pinched his disciple's nose hard and another let his guest's cup overflow as he filled it. Many striking, astonishing, amazing stories to express the inexpressible.

Gutei Isshi lived alone in the mountains, meditating and chanting daily the *Kannogyō*, the 25th chapter of the Lotus sutra, a hymn dedicated to *Kanjizai* bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara.

A nun named Jissai visited him in his small hut-dōjo. She walked three times around his meditation chair without even taking off her headwear and told him that if he could express Zen in a single word, she would take off her *kasa*, her bamboo hat. Gutei was unable to answer her and felt ashamed and dismayed. As she was about to leave, and it was already late, he asked her if she wanted to stay the night. Jissai replied that if he could express Zen to her in a single word, she would stay. And once again Gutei was unable to find that word. Jissai left Gutei, smiling mischievously.

Later Gutei went to Master Tenryū, known for his wisdom, and asked him the same question. Tenryū simply raised his finger without saying anything. Gutei suddenly awakened.

Thereafter, whenever he was asked a question about the truth of Zen, Gutei raised his finger in silence. In the temple, a young monk began to imitate him whenever someone asked him what his master taught. Gutei heard about this. He summoned the young monk and cut off his finger with a knife. As the young monk ran off crying, Gutei called him back. As he turned round, Gutei raised his finger. The young monk awakened immediately.

Beyond words. It is the limitless space of *hishiryō*, consciousness liberated from any notion of self, united with its own truth, returned to its source. This is Zen beyond words. This is where zazen takes us, in spite of ourselves and with ourselves. This is where the master propels us, without even saying a word.

One might think that Gutei's behaviour was cruel and devoid of compassion. The same goes for Nansen, who cut a cat in two. None of his disciples had been able to dissuade him from doing so by expressing the truth of Zen with a single word or even without using words. But the price of awakening is incalculable. Many disciples awakened through these radical means. [These radical means] enabled them to emerge in a single leap from their preformed beliefs, the gratuitous or pretentious conceptions that the conditioned mind manufactures. At last, they saw instantaneously open the space of their own inner light, long hidden behind the veil of ignorance.

Let's hear how Wanshi expresses this truth through poetic images:

"The flowers of the reed are sprinkled with snow, the bright moon illuminates the autumn. This is an inspirational opportunity to return to the source. Do so with courage, and make it your practice to follow the path of awakened attention. There is no other place to be than within yourself, and no other place to embrace you.

Leap over the ten thousand things in a single bound. Gutei's one-finger Zen has not been damaged in 30 years of service. The subtlety of his answer lies in its simplicity which, silently, wordlessly affirms the answer, totally coinciding with the feeling of the moment. Such an answer does not latch onto things."

Not to latch onto [things] is to leave oneself completely open to living and understanding the truth of Zen. It's simple, and you do it by abandoning yourself to the silent presence of zazen.