



In the Zendo

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*T*hey say Zen is an awareness, in accord with reality as it is. But how can we be more aware and why should we bother? Is life richer, more full and alive when consciousness shifts? And if we never begin to awaken, what meaning can we find in this life? Viewed sultanically from some distant space, mankind in the abstract seems full of glory and woe in equal measures—each one poetic and seemingly derived from such inspiring flourishes of Nature’s brush. But individually, through these very eyes, the grandeur of this life is often drowned in what the mind perceives to be a vast ocean of mundane experiences that the ego always wishes to outstrip, transcend and move beyond to some greater, more alive time in the future where freedom and success make life fuller. But can we really be more alive than we already are? Can we be fully present in some future time where we have achieved some measure of what society or our minds deem to be finality?

Most people are barely aware of their surroundings. If they were, they would recognize that there is no lasting freedom or finality to any achievement. The people who society claims have “made it” to that place of financial success or fame and renown themselves don’t feel as if their journey is complete or in any way finished. Every manipulation of situations leads only to more temporary configurations of reality, and achievement of any kind is always limited. As soon as one set of circumstances is “in order” another becomes chaotic and upsets the balance. There is no life situation that can bring a more complete experience of the life which you are living.

In self-observation, you realize that as each perception is immediately labeled, interpreted and evaluated it becomes a part of a category of past experience. This often happens so fast that all of your experience in a day is just a reaction to the labels, rather than the actual reality of your surroundings. The rattling, rambling voice in the head is all-consuming

and so much of life is thus lived in the mind, unconsciously. Watch the people around you, on the streets and in the cafes: caught up in an endless monologue of thoughts about the world, they rarely connect to the world. For that reason, we enjoy travel—the new experiences and exotic sights and sounds can often take us back to pure experience without the head-trip.

Without direct experience life lived through a mental construct is burdensome. Being only peripherally aware of the world, life becomes stressful, as the voice in the head calculates, interprets and often distorts our reality. As soon as something is perceived, the mind immediately names it and likes or dislikes it, compares it to past experience, distorts and reacts to it. This happens so quickly and so consistently, that most people never experience life without the constant stream of mind, like a drone behind the melody. They are completely possessed. Unfortunately, this has become the human condition for the most part.

People seek any means of putting down the mind for some time, like taking drugs, drinking alcohol or even watching senseless TV for hours a day. But such temporary relief comes at a cost to the body and/or mind. Also, the relief is achieved by dropping further into unconsciousness, beneath the level of thought. If you drink enough you can even reach complete unconsciousness, the plant realm.

Wouldn't it be better to rise above thought? To have the peace and calm of direct experience, untainted by the mad voice running on and on in the head? And need we abandon the mind and all its wonderful skills to achieve peace? It should be obvious that our goal, personally and collectively is to rise above thought—to transcend and evolve beyond this consciousness and reach the state where we can still utilize our minds, but are not trapped within them, servants of their madness.

For this we need only settle down and practice experiencing the world around us directly. Breathe deeply and set the dialogue down. While any object of the senses will do, a bowl of tea functions perfectly and helps translate this pure awareness to other aspects of life.

Try holding the bowl without deconstructing your tea into parts, like the mechanics of a machine. Use all your senses but the mind. If it rattles on for some time, let it be—focusing instead on the direct contact with the bowl: the actual feeling of heat in your hands, flowing up your arms. Close your eyes and feel the heat, without even calling it “heat”. It is just a sensation, pure and affective. There is nothing good or bad about it, comfortable or uncomfortable. It is just warmth. Look at the bowl, purely and radi-

antly aware of all that it is, without analyzing or judging it, and without separating it into parts. It is just pure colors, shapes and designs. There are no other bowls here and now to compare it to. This is the only bowl in the world. It is as it is. Accept it completely.

When we live in the mind and project our aliveness into some future realm where we have whatever we need to feel complete, we are in essence arguing with reality. But you cannot really fight with what is. What is, is. There is no wishing away what is happening now. There is only an acceptance or a frustration with life as it is.

This doesn't mean that we should become inactive, like rocks. But pure and effective action comes from a crystal clear evaluation of the situation as it is; and that can only happen when the environment is perceived directly, without the mind's distortion; and furthermore, when a deep acceptance of the situation as it is has preceded all action. In clearly recognizing the situation and accepting it for what it is, there is a calm bearing that provides whatever action is necessary with a greater and more effective power.

Inhale the tea deeply, and the aroma fills your head. It isn't “like tea” and need not be compared to any other smells you've ever experienced. Even the same tea smells differently each time it is drunk. There is just this very smell, right now as it is and without any need for labels, reflection or explanation. Any discussion you could have of this smell would be after the fact, and based on a distorted memory. If you are already busy articulating this smell in your mind, you have drawn energy away from the pure act of smelling itself. This pure experience cannot be communicated anyway, and there is little point in doing so. Just experience it fully. That is your connection.

Drink deeply of the tea, let the outside world flow into your body. It is an instrument of consciousness. The more conscious energy in your body, the less is feeding the stream of mind. The body doesn't travel to the future to find its completion, constantly feeling that the present moment is lacking something. Only the mind does that. The body doesn't compare these flavors to other kinds of food, or teas. It doesn't deem the tea as low or high quality. It just drinks. The awareness of the heat, flavors and Qi spreads throughout your form and fills it with peace. What was a moment ago outside of you has now become a part of who you are and what you are experiencing. See how long you can go on feeling the tea course through you before you take another sip, like the reverberations of a distant bell slowly blending into silence—follow the tea there to the Gateless Gate. That is the flavor of Zen.



Without a connection to the senses—direct and flourishing wisdom and awareness—tea is just another compulsive habit the ego uses to try to fulfill itself, never succeeding to escape the lack and always projecting peace and happiness to some future time when there is “more than this”. Whether it be more or different teas or teawares, better experiences or life situations, the ego endlessly seeks to escape what it is experiencing now. It argues with reality as it is. The resulting suffering is obvious, for what else beyond pain and frustration could result from arguing with reality?

A spiritual path can also become a slave to this same master, seeking some special, future state of peace and fulfillment. It doesn't matter whether the completion is spiritual or material: judging what is in this moment as lacking and relying on an imaginary future to complete it is the core habit pattern behind our inability to live fully. There is actually nothing lacking from this moment. The universe is full and complete as it is right now. What could possibly be added to or taken away from the universe to make it any more or less than what it is right now? Reality is as it is right now, and there is no arguing with that. Suchness.

If you are searching for certain flavors, smells or feelings from tea, you are chasing an experience rather than living it. These special sensations will come and go from your life, and you can't go on experiencing them all the time. Their comings and goings are a part of their beauty. And if you look closer you'll see that each one is unique—each tea session is an unparalleled moment of your life that will never occur again in all of time and space. Embrace it. Don't run from it to a future you dream of as purer. Don't compare it to past experience, labeling it and taking the mental map of your tea session and breaking it down into categories and parts, which you analyze and compare to communicate to others. A much greater communication with this world would be the direct experience of the tea, the doorway to Zen.

This bowl you have before you is such a treasure. It holds the sun and moon, mountains and clouds. The tea has within it the essence of Nature, undivided and unadulterated. You are that same essence, though you've forgotten. This bowl is a reminder of your true self—a pointer beyond the form to the “darkness within the darkness”, the shadowy portal to immortality. This is what the ancients meant when they called tea the “Elixir of Life.”



This is your life, right now before you. It is not somewhere else. If you don't live it now, when will you be alive? This very tea is the Tao expressing life through you. The energy that motivates your body, mind and life has always been here and always will remain: energy cannot be destroyed, only transformed. Connect to that energy and identify with it, for it is your true self; not the mind-made voice that ever seeks some form of satisfaction in order to feel bigger, while really making itself smaller and smaller in the process.

“Zen” is only a word, a sound, or perhaps a kind of Buddhism in books and discussions, dialogues and explanations. More truly it is an experience of the moment, first with awareness and then even a step beyond that to the ineffable ordinariness of what is—letting go of even the awareness, in other words. Zen isn't in a meditation hall, temple or bearded mountain sage. It is before you now, in the tea that steams—each thread a whispered invitation to follow the tea's breath back past the steam to the liquor, the leaf; turning over the mountains and rivers it has come from to find your very self.

The Zen masters always asked their students to show them Zen without a single word and without staying silent. One answer is this very tea. Another is:

