

Zen Teachings through Metaphors and Stories

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Once there was a well known philosopher and scholar who devoted himself to the study of Zen for many years. On the day that he finally attained enlightenment, he took all of his books out into the yard, and burned them all.

Stories have long been used to teach lessons of life. Metaphorical stories like fables are both intriguing and carry important meanings. But unlike fables such as the race between the tortoise and the hare which aims at giving us a moral message (slow and steady will win the race, or it isn't over until you cross the finish line), Zen metaphors and stories try to explain something about us. Perhaps one of the main reasons Zen is known for being a weird and enigmatic religion is that most of its teachings do not come directly to the student of Zen. To understand Zen, one must extract meaning from metaphors and stories, or *koans*. This is in fact quite an appropriate way to teach a religion like Zen. Many stories related to Zen and Zen masters are difficult to interpret, and in trying to understand them, we can get deep insight into the structure of Zen. Here, I will give *my* interpretation of several metaphors and stories and what Zen reveals about itself as a religion, about the nature of the mind, and about how we interact with the world.

Whether it is to avoid hell or to have a pleasant life, people not surprisingly care a lot about what religions have to offer them. What Zen says it offers,

however, is not a belief system that can lead to salvation or Buddhahood. Instead, every one of us already has Buddha within us, and can be enlightened, only if we knew it, says the Zen teachings. Zen is only a finger pointing at the moon. A finger is needed to point out the moon; once the moon is recognized the finger is no longer necessary. Consider this story that makes this point:

Whenever anyone asked him about Zen, the great master Gutei would quietly raise one finger into the air. A boy in the village began to imitate this behavior. Whenever he heard people talking about Gutei's teachings, he would interrupt the discussion and raise his finger. Gutei heard about the boy's mischief. When he saw him in the street, he seized him and cut off his finger. The boy cried and began to run off, but Gutei called out to him. When the boy turned to look, Gutei raised his finger into the air. At that moment the boy became enlightened.

A lot of meaning can be derived from this story, and each person could interpret it differently. But as it relates to Zen and the finger pointing to the moon, it seems to in a graphic manner show that you don't need the finger to reach enlightenment. In fact, only after you lose the finger and the teachings can you truly attain enlightenment. The first story above also has the same message. Zen teachings say over and over that you don't need Zen, once you have become enlightened. It is a strange religion indeed that undermines its own authority in this way.

Yet, perhaps that is why Zen is so popular. It gives people the dream of achieving what is already within themselves. To do this, Zen must explain what it is we already have within each of us and how we should use it. Through its stories, Zen reveals a lot about how it views the mind and the process we should take towards self-enlightenment. The general message of Zen is to clean the mind. To have a "beginner's mind" is the ability to always see things as

new. We should have an open mind and accept things as they are. Shunryu Suzuki uses the metaphor of cleaning a house to describe the cleansing of the mind. “Before you put something in your room, it is necessary for you to take out something” (*Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, p. 112). True enlightenment cannot come without first emptying the mind of all thoughts, even the thought of enlightenment. Thinking about Zen and enlightenment not only doesn’t help, it is one of the major obstacles that *must* be overcome to reach enlightenment.

A student went to his teacher and said earnestly, “I am devoted to studying with you. How long will it take before I become enlightened?” The teacher’s reply was casual, “Ten years.” Impatiently, the student answered, “But I want to master it faster than that. I will work very hard. I will practice everyday, ten or more hours a day if I have to. How long will it take then?” The teacher thought for a moment, “20 years.”

This view of the mind as overflowing and needing to be emptied fits in nicely with how Zen views itself as a religion. That is, the enlightened mind has nothing and needs nothing, not even Zen. Once the mind is clean, it is ready to accept everything as it is. The enlightened takes nothing for granted, not even the self. This mindlessness is a distinguishing characteristic of Zen and Zen masters.

Zuikan was a Zen master who always used to address himself. “Zuikan?” he would call. And then he would answer. “Yes!” “Zuikan?” “Yes!” Of course he was living all alone in his small zendo, and of course he knew who he was, but sometimes he lost himself. And whenever he lost himself, he would address himself, “Zuikan?” “Yes!”

One should wonder why Zen, or anybody for that matter, would consider the above situation as desirable. What would it be like to not know where you

were? But although in some sense the truly enlightened would always be lost, always searching for himself, he would also be able to see all possibilities and everything with a clear mind and no prejudices. He would be able to see himself the way he actually *is*. The Zen notion of enlightenment, then, is one where all barriers to the truth, all of which are constructed internally, are destroyed.

Zen also has something to say on the role of each individual in the context of the bigger world. S. Suzuki describes us as swinging doors. With each breath, the door opens and closes. There is no inside or outside. At one moment, it may appear that I am me and you are you, but with the next breath, with the opening of the door, we see that you and I are really the same. Zen eliminates all dualistic views of the world. Everything and everybody are all the same thing, and have the same nature.

Suzuki explains this with a great metaphor of life as a railroad track. A railroad track is always the same along its length and *that is a good thing*, since it would be disastrous if the track changed width in the middle. Similarly, with our lives and the world around us, we must see everything as one track. Although we may see different sights as we move along the track, we must realize that we have always been and always will be on the same endless track. Our past, the present, and our future all fall on the same track. Not only can we not separate ourselves from other people, we can't separate ourselves from our past or our future. Everything has been and always will be the same.

In this way, Zen stories in a vivid manner demonstrate the core doctrines of Zen. The enigmatic and sometimes amusing stories are a perfect tool for describing how Zen understands itself, the mind, and the world. If anything can't or shouldn't be summarized, it would be Zen. But some of the main points that Zen tries to teach are that Zen is itself only a finger, and merely a tool to reach a state of enlightenment. Enlightenment is when you have removed everything such that you have nothing left, except what *is*. And everything is one and the same. There is no you or me. That is the essence of Zen.