

Zen and Compassion

Transcending dualism doesn't mean doing away with dualistic discrimination. It means doing away with right and wrong from a self-centered perspective.

ALL BUDDHISM, including Zen, leads practitioners to enter the world with great compassion. To become a priest without any social sense is not good. Zen is not separate from society; Zen is concrete and based in daily life. All great religions ask us to live with great compassion. It's quite natural and good for Zen practitioners to oppose war and meet social problems with compassion. Monks eventually come to understand this as a result of their training. After constantly stripping away your own egotism you develop compassion for others. It arises naturally. Those who sincerely engage in training develop in such a way.

In Seoul there was a big conflict over who would be the successor to a large temple. Monks were fighting with each other. Monks and nuns should never fight. This happened because they didn't truly realize no-ego. Of course, in the real world we sometimes have conflict. If we've attained a state of no-ego, we can see clearly what's right and what's wrong, but if we're egotistical, we think of right and wrong in terms of our own self-centeredness. We can see without prejudice with no-ego. When two groups have a fight, we should say which is right and which is wrong. Transcending dualism doesn't

mean doing away with dualistic discrimination. It means doing away with right and wrong from a self-centered perspective. Instead, we see the duality, we see both sides, and from our own free mind perspective we are able to freely adapt to both sides.

There is sunny weather and rainy weather. Transcending dualism doesn't do away with rainy days. Instead you dress appropriately for warm weather and take an umbrella when it rains. Sometimes it's warm, then it's cold, and then it's raining. Sometimes people complain about the weather, but I don't think anything of it. Zen is a religion that teaches us how we should live appropriately, here and now, just as ourselves. When the weather's cold we should respond to the cold. If it's cold I should wear a scarf. And when it rains, here and now, I should bring an umbrella.

Transcending dualism means to adapt within discrimination and dualism, to see both sides. Zen teaches this kind of transcendence, and this teaching includes freedom from attachments. When there's conflict you treat good as good and bad as bad. If one side is doing good, encourage them. If there's a group doing the wrong thing, tell them to stop. But adapting to these situations with true freedom—not from a self-centered view—this is practicing empty mind instead of indulging the ego.

The path to attaining no-ego is the religious person's path. Dealing with conflict before attaining no-ego is difficult because we put ourselves first, we see conflict subjectively in terms of our own situation, our own interests. If our egos are active, something that's essentially bad may feel to us as if it's good, because we have a self-centered perspective. Colorful flowers, for example, belong to the dualistic world. There are white flowers and red flowers. We should see the white flowers as white and red flowers as red. The distinction is clear in the case of flowers. But in complex situations things that are clearly black, clearly bad, may appear to be white and

good, due to the influence of ego. We may even say that something good is bad.

Of course there are Zen priests who go through the training yet remain egotistical. When a monk is still in the monastery, the master can see his egotism, warn the monk, and work with him on it. But there are those cases where, without doing away with his ego, a monk leaves the monastery to assume the role of the lone priest of a small temple. One monk I know was like this. He trained for a very long time but still had a very strong ego. We once held a meeting of thirty priests at the monastery. As head abbot I sat in the uppermost seat. The priests were arranged by age; if two priests were the same age, they were seated according to years of training. The priest in question arrived late. If he'd been on time, he would have been just three seats away from me. But since he arrived late, he took the furthest seat. At first he said nothing. Then we had a meal and a little sake. Finally, he stood up in front of everyone and angrily complained about having to sit in the furthest seat. The other priests scolded him, saying that all his time in the monastery hadn't gotten rid of one iota of his egotism. He's actually a good temple priest, but he has a very strong ego. One of the other priests at the meeting told me how upset they all were that their colleague was so self-centered and suggested that as head abbot I should say something to him. I refused. I said that it wouldn't help; until he realized for himself what a strong ego he had, there was no point in me saying anything about it. There was nothing to be done. I said we would just have to wait until he died. Such cases occur when a monk doesn't get adequate training under a good master.

The same stubborn egotism applies in lay life. I will tell you a story about an old lady who lives near my monastery. She has come to every public meditation session and has attended many of my lectures since I became Zen master there. I sometimes run into her

Zen Is a Matter of Awareness

Whether we are Buddhist or Christian, we must keep in mind that religion is a matter of awareness, of awakening to something.

WE COULD CALL ZEN “the religion of the self” or “the self of Mu.” In other words, we can say that Zen is realizing one’s own no-ego for oneself.

Imagine a lit candle with a flame. Let’s say you put your finger into the flame. I don’t think anyone would be so stupid as to think that, because it’s Sunday or a holiday, their finger wouldn’t be burned. When you put your finger into a flame, even without intending to, you immediately pull it away. There is no ego at that moment. It’s not that there is nothing whatsoever. It’s just that there’s only the experience of pain in that moment. In Zen we call this “pure experience.” If you realize no-ego with that pure experience, that’s the satori enlightenment of Zen.

You may think that pure experience sounds like some kind of regression to primitive instincts, but I’m speaking about something different. It’s *realizing* no-ego in the experience. We could say that an infant lives purely in that world, but the infant isn’t aware of it, she doesn’t realize it. That’s the difference. Whether we are Buddhist or Christian, we must keep in mind that religion is a matter

in the neighborhood. At one such encounter she told me about a woman living across the street from her who didn’t like her and had never greeted her. “You’ve been listening to these lectures for a long time,” I advised her, “Enter a state of empty mind. You must be able to greet anyone, including this woman across the street.” The old lady said she’d tried saying hello but got no response. She said that when the woman left her house across the street in the morning, she would always look away so that it was really impossible to greet her. I slapped her on the back and said, “You just have to do it!”

The next day she phoned to say that she’d done it. “It’s been twenty years since I said hello to the lady across the street. I saw her this morning and said ‘Good morning’ in a loud voice. She was so happy her face lit up and she said good morning right back!” This is what the old lady told me over the phone.

Of course, the woman across the street had really been a perfectly good person all along. But the old lady had been stuck with her own prejudice. Empty mind is a good way to work on prejudice and selfishness in everyday life and to discover compassion.

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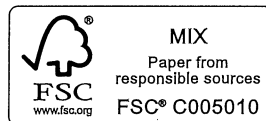
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