

# A Shadow of Zen "Mind"

David Center

Words directed at explaining Zen cast only a shadow. A shadow because words aim for intellectual understanding, while Zen is about direct, intuitive knowing.

The mind feeds on three things: sensation, perception and thought. Sensations arise both from the external and internal environments and reach the mind through our various sensory systems. Sensations are aggregated into perceptions. For example, we receive sensory input related to form, color, smell and texture and perceive banana. Our mind then operates further on this perception through thought and classifies it as fruit. We might then further make an evaluation that this fruit is inexpensive. Building on that we might bring forth a belief that it is inexpensive because greedy corporations exploit defenseless labor in impoverished countries. Finally, we may judge that we are more righteous than corporations and believe that a righteous person should set a moral example for others and therefore promote a boycott of the store selling the bananas.

It is in the realm of thought where things become confounded, especially ego-centered thought. It is alright to employ thought creatively to bring something of value into existence, such as a musical composition, painting, labor-saving device or whatever. It is alright to employ thought to work out the solution to a problem such as how to best move a heavy object up an incline or to find an effective way to treat an illness. It is alright to use thought to plan a curriculum for a class or plan a trip. However, when thought is captured by personal or social beliefs, a filter is placed between us and immediate reality. This is conceptual thinking. The illustration with bananas in the paragraph above is such an example. It illustrates how we often play a role that is rooted in beliefs about reality rather than in reality as we directly and immediately experience it.

When thought employs memory of things already past to spin fantasies, we become absorbed in the fantasy and lose sight of perceptual reality. For example, suppose someone said something to you at work that you believed was a criticism, and you spent the rest of the day fantasizing about what you could have and should have said and how that would have shown this person up. Or, suppose you spend a lot of time fantasizing about all the things you'd do, places you'd go and things you'd buy if only you could win the lottery. This is ego-centered thinking. Getting absorbed in fantasy rooted in memory of the past or rooted in imagination about the future both cause us to lose sight of perceptual reality. It insulates us from life and allows us to avoid being.

According to Zen, we should live in the immediate moment and that means spending most of our time at the level of perception. Even when we employ thought it should be in the service of things that have relevance to immediate reality. The shedding of ego-centered thought reduces our entanglement in dualism and the delusions that follow. Living in the perceptual moment allows a more spontaneous and natural interaction with the events that comprise our immediate reality. To get there we must strip our entangled mind down to its original nature.

Thus, Zen first emphasizes the elimination of ego-centered thought as the path into a life more focused in perceptual reality. Meditation or *Zazen* is the method that is used to facilitate this

change in focus. It is called "practice" because focus is what you practice in Zazen -- you practice bringing your attention fully to bear on your perception of the immediate moment. When thoughts arise, one simply lets them drift through and out of awareness. The trap to be avoided is seizing a thought and becoming entangled in it.

Zazen or sitting meditation is practiced under restrictive conditions such as sitting quietly alone or in a small group. The goal is to become focused or absorbed in the perceptual moment. Later one begins expanding the conditions of practice into the normal flow of daily events. Such an expansion of practice requires one to fully attend to what is being done at the moment. This means being attentive to the details of activities that normally are on automatic as well as the one's that actually require your attention. Living one's normal daily life fully in the immediate present is a significant change in awareness. It is finding one's natural mind, or some would say Buddha nature. In Zen, finding one's natural mind or recognizing one's Buddha nature is called **Samadhi**.

Samadhi then opens the doorway to **Kensho** or enlightenment. The seventh century Zen master Huang Po advised that the experience of Kensho requires the elimination of all conceptual thought whether ego-centered or not. The stilling of all conceptual thought during Zazen opens the possibility of the natural mind directly experiencing its continuity with Mind or, as modern speakers might say, the Universal Mind or the Unified Field of Consciousness. Kensho is coming into an intuitive and harmonious resonance with All That Is. It is the bliss found only in transcending physical reality and knowing directly a singular, infinite and eternal reality.

Experiencing Kensho is sudden, brief and intense. It is a transformative experience that folds back into Samadhi or the natural mind, for no mere physical being could remain in such a state for any length of time and continue a mortal existence. A person who has undergone Kensho returns to the state of Samadhi but as an awakened one.

Huang Po commented that his awakening might happen in the mere twinkling of an eye or absorb one's life. However, there is nothing to achieve. One need only open oneself to Mind and know. Zazen is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition, for there is no path that in itself can lead one anywhere.