

WHAT DOES ONE SEE WHEN THE LIGHTS COME ON?

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*The following brief essay appeared originally in Catalan as an appendage to Raquel Bouso's recent book, *El Zen* (Barcelona: Fragmenta Editorial, 2008). It is reproduced here in the hope of refreshing, if only for a moment, the image of the Zen patrimony as a treasure for all religions.*

Zen is first and foremost a discipline for enlightenment. As a social institution in countries like Japan, it has its own rituals for death and marriage, administers universities, and supports centers of scholarly research. It shares with other Buddhist traditions a long and complex cultural and intellectual history, an impressive lineage of great figures, a literature that can stand shoulder to shoulder with that of other great religions of the world, and the power to inspire great art. But the sun around which everything else rotates like planets is enlightenment.

So what exactly *is* this enlightenment? Zen masters may refuse to answer the question in the abstract and insist that it is a matter of personal experience beyond words. Scholars may remind us that “enlightenment” is a Western term for which there is no precise equivalent in the Zen tradition of the Far East, which prefers to speak of seeing, witnessing, grasping the nature of things, waking up, and yes, rarely, of brightness. Well and good, but we still want to know: What does one see when the lights come on?

The answer is as simple as it is disappointing—you don't see anything that was not there before. You just see it more clearly, even if only for a fleeting moment, than you can through the dark glasses of personal bias or expectation or belief about how the world should look. And with time and practice, those flashes of insight can occur closer together and last for longer periods, creating a state of mind and heart like none other, a state in which all the dualities and tensions of

the mind relax into a pure savoring of the present moment, a kind of consciousness of unconsciousness—or what the Buddhist tradition calls nirvana.

Fortunately, the experience of such a state is far less esoteric than its explanation. Like the practice of attentively breathing in and breathing out, of sitting down to meditate and getting up to carry on with life, Zen discipline has two aspects. In the first, one sits down and clears the mind in order to breathe in the whole world, all your memories of it, all the people and places, all the trees and mountains and rivers. You might think of it as entering a hall of mirrors: wherever you look, you see a reflection of yourself. Each mirror has its own quality and shows you something of yourself you had not seen before. Everything, from the smallest flower to the most ferocious beast to the portable phone in your pocket, refracts a ray of truth about who you are, about the concoction of judgments you have come to accept as the objective world. The “I” who sat down, wrapped up in a single skin and preoccupied with my own desires and worries, begins to look more and more like a fiction, a hard shell that not only filters out what is right in front of me but darkens my vision of who I am. Sitting immobile and breathing in whatever happens to pass through the mind’s eye—thoughts, images, feelings, pain, hopes—I begin to see everything as confirming an “I” different from the tangle of everyday habits I am used to thinking of as myself: a simpler, truer self.

But this is only half of the work to be done in Zen practice. The discipline of focusing on all things as negating the everyday self and confirming a truer self remains, in a sense, self-centered. Granted it is a higher form of egoism than the conventional variety, but it is nevertheless fixed on polishing, cultivating, and enhancing the “I.” The very act of sitting in meditation exposes the missing ingredient: the return to the buzzing confusion of the everyday world, there to exhale the “I” that that has been inhaling the world in the calm, centered repose of mind and body. The challenge here is different: the mirrors in which one *sees* one’s truer self have themselves to be *seen through*, stripped one by one of their tain and made transparent so that they become windows to the truer inner self of the things of the world. Though a pale reflection of the “I” remains on the front of the pane, it is diaphanous to the light coming from behind it. Everything and everyone, one after the other, confirm themselves to me just as they are, unimpeded by any care of mine for greater wisdom or insight or self-understanding. The “I” viewing itself in an “other” is transformed into an encounter of self and self at a place where the distinction between “I” and “other” is secondary.

These two phases of Zen discipline—the breakdown of the everyday “I” through its rediscovery as a truer self, and the breakthrough of that truer self to the reality of things just as they are—are not stages along a path leading to enlightenment. In fact, enlightenment is not a destination at all, like some treasure to be possessed or summit to be climbed. It is a way of lighting up the things

of life, seeing as much as one can and as clearly as one can, precisely so that one can be about the things that need to be done with as little self-centeredness as possible.

What does one see when the lights come on? One sees suffering, cruelty, inequality, bias, ugliness—the naked and shameful truth of the abuses all about us, both those that civilized society openly condemns and those that it condones in silence. One sees beauty, kindness, generosity, hope, joy—the naked and glorious truth of what is noblest about our human kind. Either I see this whole tumble of woe and weal or I am being deceived by an illusion. To know the difference between what I can see and what I have been made to see or what I have just gotten used to seeing requires discipline. Zen is one form of it. Zen is neither a strategy for moral action nor does it give us principles for moral judgment. If the social and environmental conscience of the age serves to remind us that enlightenment without moral responsibility is lame, Zen helps strike a balance with the reminder that moral indignation without enlightenment is blind. It has no other purpose than to open our eyes so that we can think and act with a little less illusion and a little less ego.