

What is Zen?

There are several ways of answering this question. From the point of view of training and practice, we can say that Zen is a spiritual discipline to realize one's true self. Zen accomplishes this through silencing the body and the mind using a basic tool: *zazen* – sitting contemplation centered on the breath. The more one perseveres in Zen, the more one discovers that contemplation can be practiced in all circumstances – whether it is washing dishes, changing a diaper or coping with rush hour traffic.

Our founding Roshi, Sr. Elaine MacInnes gave one definition as “experiencing fully at all times ... On the cushion, Zen is to sit in a prescribed position, concentrating in one-pointed breath awareness. Away from the cushion, Zen is awareness of being.” We may add that Zen is experiencing and responding appropriately to the unfolding total reality.

Zen entails the quieting of sensual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual faculties. This means going deep into one's self and finding meaning in one's life beyond the needs that can be satisfied by physical, social, mental and psychological undertakings.

Practiced with regularity and constancy, Zen is a life-changing process that liberates one from self-centered fears and concerns and opens one to an intimate experience of the True Self. This leads to deep joy, peace of mind and wholeness. One becomes aware of his or her potentials and of a unity with all existence never before thought possible. With enough practice, Zen changes the way we view ourselves as well as all reality itself. Another way of saying this is that Zen is experiencing things just as they are.

Etymologically, the word Zen is an abbreviated form of the Japanese word *zenna*, which is transliterated from the Chinese *ch'an*. *Ch'an* or *ch'anna* in turn originated from the Sanskrit *dhyana*. They all describe a type of contemplation or meditation by which the mind is brought to stillness, one-pointed concentration, and then awakened to the deepest reality.

The classic description of Zen is perhaps that attributed to Bodhidharma, the legendary 28th Zen patriarch who brought Zen from India to China around 520 A.D.:

- A special, living transmission outside scriptures
- Does not rely on words and letters
- Points directly to the nature of mind
- The key is to see into one's True Nature, *i.e.*, to become enlightened

However, the word that best describes Zen is *Zen* itself. It is not a philosophy or a belief system. It is a way of life, a practice, an experience, and an experience of the experience. The only way to really know what Zen is is to practice it.