

Practice and Theory in Buddhism

Many people think that Zen Buddhism is a special kind of Buddhism which has found a unique path to the truth which does not rely on the intellect; that the Zen way is the “straight path up the mountain.”

People who believe this maintain that because reality is outside of the intellectual area, there is no need to have a theory to explain what Buddhism is.

They say that we must deny the intellect in order to find the truth. Their way is to try to break through to something they call “enlightenment.”

One of the reasons that this belief has continued is because in Japan, the country of origin of “Zen,” priests have for more than one hundred years been unable to explain what Buddhism is, to themselves and to others.

There are a number of reasons for this. possibly the most important of these is historical. During the Meiji Restoration, Japanese society threw itself into the task of becoming westernised. Because spirituality was seen as one of the main characteristics of western religions, it was thought important to reject the emphasis that Buddhism placed on practice in place of a more spiritual approach.

During this time, Buddhism in Japan underwent profound changes, becoming in some peoples minds a religion centered on a belief in the divine nature of Gautama Buddha. It was impossible for people to believe that a normal person could become a buddha.

This eventually led to the rather amusing current situation where, in modern Japanese society, a person becomes a buddha after they die. The name which Buddhists receive when they enter the religion has become, for Japanese, a name given to someone after death. In fact, Buddhism in Japan had largely become a religion of funerals. Priests are so busy conducting funerals and anniversaries of deaths that they have no time to practice Zazen, the practice which once formed the center of the priests' lives. This is a sad fact.

It is very important that people in the west take a realistic look at the actual state of Buddhism in Japan. It is only too easy to imagine that in the misty, aesthetically appealing mountain temples, amongst the incense smoke and the robed practitioners, that there is the real truth of Zen.

This is a dream. Many young people go to Japan and are attracted by this romantic face of Zen. They are following rainbows!

If Buddhism is to be found in the romantic scenes of temples in the mist, how can we say that it is searching for the truth? If the truth exists only in romantic temples, or in strange and mysterious ceremonies, if it is necessary to wear clothes which come from another age and culture, then how can Buddhism claim to be the truth of the universe.

If what is true cannot be found here and now in whatever we are doing, in whatever society we are living, then how can we have any faith in the words of Gautama Buddha when he said that the whole universe is beautiful?

In order for us to see what it is exactly that Buddhism is talking about, believing in, we need a philosophy, a theoretical structure in which to think about what the truth is.

This is the reason why Dogen Zenji wrote the 96 chapters of the Shobogenzo. It is the reason why the Chinese masters of old passed on their Koan stories. They needed a way to teach, to discuss, what the meaning of Buddhism is.

In recording their discussions as short koans, they were constructing an implicit philosophical system. Master Dogen collected a great many of the koan stories and used them to make the system of thought used in Buddhism more explicit. He put all his energy into finding the words to describe what the truth is, what Buddhist practice is, and how we should live.

It is impossible for us to live without thinking. It is impossible for us to stop our thoughts at will.

The modern world is an intellectual world. It is a world in which we need explanations for everything we do. Without explanations which satisfy us, we cannot believe something.

In this way, to try to stop the mind working is a waste of time. Instead we should be looking for a way to explain to our own satisfaction what life is about.