

Turning the Light Around and Shining Back

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Certain basic patterns can be discerned in expressions of Zen meditation techniques designed to bring about transformation of consciousness. For example, a recurrent image in Zen literature is that of death and rebirth, referring to the process of stripping away the accretions of conditioning and then returning to the ordinary world purified and free. An analogy may be drawn with the famous line of scripture which says “form is empty, emptiness is form”; experientially, “form is empty” corresponds to detachment from appearances, while “emptiness is form” corresponds to the fullness of the field of perception accessible to the opened mind. This twin aspect of enlightenment experience is also referred to by such terms as “the heart of nirvana and the knowledge of differentiation”, “silence and illumination,” “dismantling and constructing,” and a host of similarly structured metaphors.

Sozan, one of the early masters of the Soto Zen tradition, expresses this process in the following terms: “As a beginner, knowing there is something fundamental in oneself, when one turns the light around (shifts attention from sense experience to the essence of mind) one ejects form, sound, smell, flavor, touch, and phenomena, and attains tranquility. Then, after fully accomplishing this, one does not grasp the sense data but descends among them without being blinded, letting them be, without interference.”

Dogen’s teacher Nyojo provides a vivid description along similar lines: “You should ‘gouge out’ your eyes and see nothing at all—after that there will be nothing you don’t see; only then can it be called seeing.... You should ‘block off’ your ears and hear nothing at all—after that there will be nothing you don’t hear; only then can it be called hearing.... You should ‘knock off’ your nose and not distinguish smells—after that there will be none you can’t distinguish; only then can it be called smelling.... You should ‘pull out’ your tongue, so that the world is silent—after that your ebullience will be uninterrupted; only then can it be called speaking.... You should ‘slough off’ the physical elements and be completely independent—after that you manifest forms adapting to various types; only then can it be called person.... You should permanently stop clinging thought, so the incalculable ages are empty—after that arising and vanishing continue unceasing; only then can it be called consciousness.”

In an early treatise on *zazen*, Dogen says, “You should stop the intellectual practice of pursuing words and learn the ‘stepping back’ of ‘turning the light around and shining back’; mind and body will naturally ‘drop off,’ and the ‘original face’ will appear.” The Zen “art” of looking into the mind source instead of pursuing thoughts or external stimuli is called *eko hensho*, turning the light around and shining (or looking) back.” In this same treatise, and in *Shobogenzo*, Dogen uses the following story to illustrate the method of this practice, which he calls the essential art of *zazen*. As the Zen master Yakuzan was sitting, a monk asked, “What are you thinking of, so still and intent.” Yakuzan said, “I am thinking of that which is not thinking.” The monk said, “How can one think of that which is not thinking.” Yakuzan said, “It isn’t thought.” * In his *Zazenshin* essay in *Shobogenzo*,

Dogen writes, “In thinking of *what isn't thinking*, one always uses nonthought. In nonthought is 'who'—'who' carries 'I'.”

The word “who,” or some phrase like “who is carrying around this corpse?” is also one of the “words” (*wato*) that have been traditionally used in Zen meditation (particularly since the late Sung dynasty) to evoke the “doubt feeling” (*gijo*) of looking into the innermost self. There are numerous sayings and stories in the records of the classical Zen masters alluding to this practice of “looking back.” A monk once asked Master Isan, “What is the Path?” Isan said, “No-mind is the Path.” The monk said, “I don't understand.” Isan said, “You should understand that which doesn't understand.” The monk asked, “What is that which doesn't understand?” Isan said, “Just you are it. It is not someone else.” Isan continued, “People of the present time should just directly realize that which doesn't understand. This indeed is your mind, this indeed is your Buddha. If you externally get a piece of knowledge, a piece of understanding, and consider that the path of Zen, you're out of touch. This is called carrying excrement in—it is not called taking excrement out. It defiles your mind-field, so I say it is not the Path.”

Gyozan asked Isan, “What is the abode of the real Buddha?” Isan said, “With the subtlety of thinking of no thought, think back to the endlessness of the spiritual flame. When thought is exhausted, you return to the source; essence and characteristics always abide, phenomena and noumenon are not two—the real Buddha is thusness as is.”

A monk asked the adept Shijo, “Whenever I sit at night, my thoughts are in a flurry, and I don't know how to subdue them. Please give me some guidance.” Shijo said: “When you sit still at night and your thoughts are in a flurry, then use the flurried mind to investigate the place of the flurry. Investigating this thoroughly, you find there is no place—then how can the flurry of thoughts remain? Then turn back to investigate the investigating mind—then where is the mind which can investigate? Furthermore, the perceiving knowledge is fundamentally empty, so the object focused on is also quiescent. Quiescent yet not quiescent, because there is no stilling person; perceiving yet not perceiving, because there is no perceived object. When object and knowledge are both quiescent, mind and thought are at rest. Outwardly not pursuing ramifications, inwardly not dwelling in concentration, both roads having disappeared, the one nature is tranquil. This is the essential path of returning to the source.”

This technique is also part of the battery of meditation practices of Tendai Buddhism. For example, one meditation manual says, “Since we know observation comes from mind, or from analyzing objects, this is not merging with the fundamental source: so one should turn back to observe the observing mind.” This type of introspection is also found in the technical literature of the Pure Land school in China:

“Outwardly not clinging to objects, inwardly not dwelling in concentration, ‘turn the light around’ and observe once—inside and outside are both quiescent. After that subtly invoke the name of Amitabha Buddha three to five times. Turn the light around and introspect—it is said that seeing nature one realizes buddhahood; ultimately, what is my inherent Amitabha Buddha?” Then also watch and observe that which has just brought this

up—'where does this one thought come from?' Seeing through this one thought, then see through this seer—who is it?"

A useful Zen story illustrating the technique of “turning the light around and looking back”—its application and limitations—is found in the *Book of Serenity* (in Japanese, *Shoyoroku*), a classic collection of Zen lore compiled and expounded by outstanding Chinese Soto Zen masters. The master Gyozan asked a monk, “Where do you come from?” The monk said, “From Yun-chou.” Gyozan said, “Do you think of that place?” The monk said, “I always think of it.” Gyozan said, “That which thinks is mind, that which is thought of is object. In that place are various things—mountains, rivers, land, buildings, houses, people, animals. Think back to the mind which thinks—are there so many things in there?” The monk said, “When I get here, I do not see their existence at all.” Gyozan said, “This is right for the stage of faith, but not yet for the stage of person.”

Basically, in this technique the exercise is to turn away from the preoccupations of the mind and back to the mind itself. Since mind or awareness as an object in itself cannot be grasped, the exercise of focus on an ungraspable object, or objectless focus, has a particular effect. The teacher says that the monk’s state of disentanglement from objects and absorption in the objectless mind is right for the stage of “faith.” In Zen literature, the expression “entry by faith” appears occasionally in reference to an initial stage of enlightenment. Faith here does not mean belief in an idea or object; rather it has the sense of acquiescence. The Zen master Rinzai refers to insufficient faith or “trust” in oneself as the reason for restless external search and the consequent failure to realize intrinsic enlightenment.

In the aforementioned treatise on meditation, Dogen also writes, “Even if one can boast of understanding, is rich in enlightenment, gains a glimpse of penetrating knowledge, attains the Way, clarifies the mind, and becomes very high spirited, yet even though one roams freely within the bounds of ‘entry,’ one may lack the living road of manifestation in being.” Here what is referred to as “entry,” a common Zen term for initiation into enlightened consciousness, might be equated with what Gyozan refers to as the “stage of faith” in the foregoing story, while Gyozan’s stage of “person” might be equated with what Dogen refers to, using a familiar Zen expression, as the “living road of manifestation in being,” a step beyond preliminary disentanglement from objects.

The story goes on. The monk asked, “Do you have any other particular directions?” Gyozan said, “To say there is something particular or not would not be accurate. Based on your view, you only get one mystery. You get the seat and wear the robe—after this, see on your own.” If one applies the model of the “seat,” “robe,” and “room” of Buddha according to the *Hokke (Saddharmapundarika)* scripture, the “seat” is the emptiness of all phenomena, the “robe” is forbearance. These fit the story rather well, considering that the effect of the exercise of looking into the mind is disentanglement. The “room” of a Buddha is compassion, and this is the essence of being in the world, of active expression; this also fits the story as well as Dogen’s admonition, representing the next stage of development.

The poem recorded in the *Book of Serenity* illustrating this story, composed by Wanshi, acknowledged as one of the great masters of Soto Zen, clarifies these points most

beautifully: “Containing without omission, penetrating without obstruction. Gates and walls high and steep, barrier locks doubled and redoubled. The wine always sweet, it lays out the guests; though the meal is filling, it ruins the farmers. The wind supports the condor’s wings as it bursts out in space; thunder accompanies the dragon as it treads over the ocean.”

“Containing without omission, penetrating without obstruction” characterizes the mind; “gates and walls high and steep, barrier locks doubled and redoubled” characterizes objects. “The wine always sweet, it lays out the guests; though the meal is filling, it ruins the farmers”—this refers to absorption in mind-introspection; total indulgence in this at the expense of participation in the world produces a lopsided, partial development. In Buddhist scriptures concentration is sometimes referred to as “wine,” meditation as “food”—indulgence in “intoxication” and “tasting” is forbidden to the bodhisattvas, who are to balance detachment and identification, transcendence and being in the world. Here being in the world, the active personality, is symbolized by “guest” and “farmer,” and this is seen as a necessary part of the total balance of the whole being.

“The wind supports the condor’s wings as it bursts out in space; thunder accompanies the dragon as it treads over the ocean.” Here the “condor” and “dragon” represent the awakened person; the “wind” and “thunder” refer to the world, which becomes a vehicle for the awakened. The phrase “bursts out in space,” which can be taken to refer to emancipation, emptying, can also be read “bursts out of empty space,” suggesting going beyond the stage of emptiness. The phrase “treads over the ocean” is literally “treads on and turns over the ocean,” conveying a similar sense of going beyond the oceanic realm of pure consciousness. So in the end the exercise of “turning the light around and looking back” can be seen as a means of “entry,” to be replaced by a more comprehensive realization or integration. An ancient teacher said, “If you haven’t attained entry, first attain entry; if you have attained entry, don’t turn your back on me,” suggesting again that there is more to learn after awakening.

Accordingly, Dogen describes this technique as “the essential art of *zazen*,” but does not refer to it as the whole art of *zazen*. Clearly, there is more content in the total program of meditation in Zen schools, and a function of the teacher’s contact with the students is to provide material for contemplation. Dogen’s *Shobogenzo* provides numerous examples of outlines for meditations presented to his disciples to work through, and he repeatedly urges them to ponder his questions and statements carefully.

* From *Fukanzazengi*. “Thinking about that which is not thinking” (思量箇不思量底) can read “thinking about who isn’t thinking” or “thinking about what doesn’t think.” The particle (底) after “not thinking” in the original story makes it attributive, and by convention refers to the unexpressed subject modified by the attributive verbal expression; thus it means contemplating the mind source, the technique of “turning the light around and looking back” (*eko hensho*), which Dogen states he is recommending in this treatise as the essential art of *zazen*. The story goes on further to point out that the contemplation which is done in *eko hensho* is not thinking; that is to say, it is not conceptual or discursive thought. Besides the stories quoted in the text following, there are many such pointers to be found in Zen lore, using terms such as “before any traces appear,” “before a single thought arises,” “before the Buddha appears in the world,” “before the universe is differentiated,” and so on, to orient the mind in the *eko hensho* technique.