
Questions about Zen and Buddhism

Answers by Claude É Mon Cannizzo, July 2020

Is Buddha a God?

No... Shakyamuni, Siddhartha Gautama (the names of "the man", before he became Buddha, the Awakened One), is not a God. Buddha was a human being like any other. Gautama left home to understand what was this suffering he experienced when he became aware of old age, illness and death. Where did this suffering come from? He left his palace and set out to find the answer. To search for the origin of suffering and find what would give joy to human beings.

He perfected himself until he reached the Awakening (*bodhi*) and taught the path he took, path we still follow today. By following his example, we too can realize our Buddha nature.

Do Zen Buddhists believe in God?

There are some questions that Buddha did not answer, and in particular the question of the existence of God. Not because Buddha did not know the answer, but because - for him - this subject was not fundamental. God is a concept invented by man for man. In Zen Buddhism, we don't believe in a deity who reigns over men (or over anything else, in fact).

Why is the Buddha so fat?

The fat and smiling man represented by some statues is not the Buddha. These statues represent a Chinese deity called "*Budai*" (or "*Hotei*" in Japanese). It is a deity of joy, happiness and a protector of children. It has nothing to do with the historical Buddha.

Do Zen Buddhists worship statues?

Zen practitioners pay homage to Buddha's representations, but not in the form of idolatry or prayers. Statues such as Kannon (*Avalokitésvara*) for example, represents the emanation of the Buddha's compassion, or Manjusri, represented with the sword of wisdom in his hand, is the one who cuts through illusions. Both are Bodhisattvas. By bowing to a statue of Buddha, the practitioner shows his gratitude and pays homage to the transmission of the practice and the teaching (*Dharma*).

Do Zen Buddhists pray?

Since Buddhists do not believe in a God, obviously Zen Buddhists do not pray. In Zen teaching, everything exists in an interdependent way. There is no separation between the order of things and the self, so there is nobody or nothing to whom address a prayer.

Is Zen a religion?

Zen goes beyond what we usually understand by "religion". It is the religion before all religions. There are no dogmas as there are in religions. Some people present it as a religion, others as a philosophy, and others also as a way of living. All this is neither really wrong, nor exactly right.

Zen is a path which integrates man, nature, ethics, wisdom and compassion. If we gather all these things, we can call it a "religion" in the spiritual sense of "achieving non-separation".... Connect!

Is there a difference between Zen and Buddhism?

The origin of Buddhism is Indian and therefore culturally influenced by Indian culture. A few centuries after the Buddha's death, his teaching was passed on to China, then to South East Asia. Unfortunately, through all these migrations, Buddhism became a dogmatic religion with beliefs, rituals and ceremonies...

Zen remained as the Buddha originally taught it, with the *Dhyana*. It has been transmitted from Buddha's successors to Patriarchs and Matriarchs, first in India, then to China by Bodhidharma (the 28th Patriarch) where Zen was called "*Chan*". Then to Korea to arrive in Japan, where it was called "Zen". Master Dogen reintroduced it there, including the roots of the original *Dhyana*, then it has been transmitted from successor to successor until the 20th century, with Kodo Sawaki. Finally, it was introduced in Europe by Master Deshimaru who remained faithful to Dogen's teaching by emphasizing the practice of Zazen, and not the rituals or theoretical concepts.

Why in Zen do we prostrate ourselves?

Prostrations in Zen are called "*pai*" or "*gotai-tochi*". "*Go*" means five, "*tai*" means body. Thus, the five parts of the body: two knees, two elbows and the head. "*Tochi*" means to bring to the ground.

Pai are practiced in the following way: stand straight and bow in *gasshō* (joining hands) from the waist down. Then bend your knees until they touch the ground. Bend forward from the waist to touch the ground with your hands, forearms and forehead. Raise your palms up to the level of your ears and hold this position for a moment. Bring your hands back in *gasshō*, stand up and bow once, as you did at the beginning. Bowing in this way three times is called *sanpai*. Prostrations are a sign of gratitude and respect for the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha himself and the Masters of the transmission.

Is it necessary to abandon one's religion to practice Zen?

Is it compulsory to become Buddhist? Is it necessary to convert?

Leaving one's religion, or one's ideology to plunge into another is not a good solution. Neither Buddha, nor the Patriarchs who succeeded him wanted to convert anyone, because of their respect of each person's beliefs.

For thousands of years, Greek philosophers, Christian mystics, Sufis and other Buddhist masters invited us "to know ourselves". Simply because this is the starting point for making a spiritual connection. It is the necessary condition for a human relationship to be created. For me, this is what I call "religion"! Zen is beyond religion; therefore, this decision is yours alone. Please note that many Christian priests and monks practice Zazen in daily life.

How to become a Zen Buddhist?

To enter Zen, you don't need to become a Buddhist. You just have to practice Zazen, here and now, because fundamentally Zen is Zazen. All you have to do is find a Zen dojo, where you can

learn the posture as well as the rules of a dojo. This is a kind of "lay Zen" that revolves around your daily life.

Later on, if you feel the need to embark on the path of Zen Buddhism and perhaps to ask for the ordination as a monk or nun, all you have to do is accept that - from that moment on - it will be your daily life that will revolve around Zen.

What about sexuality in Zen?

Sexuality is the basis of life. Fundamentally, no sexuality, no humanity. In Zen Buddhism, there are ten Precepts and one of them is about sexuality: "do not covet". In this case, it means: "do not have bad sexuality". Sexuality should not just satisfy an impulse or a selfish pleasure, without caring about the partner. Zen does not prohibit love, but true love is not lust, it is not wanting to possess the other, but wanting his happiness. Otherwise jealousy, anger and even violence will arise. When we practice Zazen, true love for all existences develops itself naturally.

What about desires in Zen?

Desires, as sexuality, are an integral part of human nature. In the "12 Interdependent Co-arising" or "Co-dependent Origination" (*innen*), desire is in 8th position. But at the same time, among these twelve causes, it is the first one generated by our own actions. From this point in the Co-dependent Origination, the difference between ordinary beings and wise beings appears, as the latter know how not to create new karmic imprints.

Desire, like sexuality, is part of life. The Buddha never taught that we should suppress desires. On the other hand, he makes us attentive to the attachment to our desires. Desires - like sex - must not become a prison and we must not become their slaves.

What is Buddhism's point of view about money?

Money is a means that can be used skillfully. Having money is not a problem. What can become a problem, however, is the attachment to money. If you take money as a means to be used in a right way (as we are invited to do in the Eightfold Path of "right livelihood"), then it is not a problem at all. How to earn money and provide for one's needs without harming living beings is crucial. We need to have a professional activity that does not betray what we have been able to realize from the Path through our practice of Zazen. But we have to always remain vigilant and not allow money to use us.

How can we live our daily life in a Zen spirit?

Nothing more normal: you must not disturb others with Zen. Live an ordinary life, but with intensity, because each moment is unique: don't miss a single thing! Be totally present at every moment of your daily life, at work with your family, your children, your friends, so that you will have nothing to regret. Take the teachings of Buddha as rules for your life, for example the Eightfold Path, the *paramita*... Harmonize yourself with your surroundings. Zazen will undoubtedly help you there.

What is Zen Buddhism's point of view about reincarnation?

In Buddhism, there is often mention of "reincarnation" in relation to *samsara*, but to avoid confusion, I will rather call this cycle "rebirth". Fundamentally, the most important thing is not

to worry about whether we have already lived before or will be reborn after death, because this need is still related to the fear of death (which is the mother of all fears). These are assumptions that are not very important. The Buddha taught the notions of *karma*, *samsara* or rebirth, because he experienced them during his awakening and understood the sequence of causes and conditions of rebirth (*innen*). Thus, he was able to make people attentive and responsible for the effects of their actions, words and thoughts, because they leave traces and cause the conditions of their rebirth.

In Zen, we don't care much about rebirth, but without rejecting it. On the other hand, what deserves our attention more is to know, once we rise in the morning, how to live the new day while respecting the principles, the path of Zen. Because what matters most is the present moment, here and now, as it is the only one that really exists.

What about karma in Zen Buddhism?

Whatever happens in our daily life, in each of the moments we go through, we produce what will come. In a way, we build our future. This functioning is, moreover, the very mechanism of cause and effect that we call *karma*, and we cannot escape from karma, it is inevitable. Even if Zazen cuts off *karma*, this fact is also a *karma* manifestation.

The most important thing is to take care of what is happening today, here and now. Not to run away from the present moment, to be totally in what has to be done, to the end: "*zanshin*". And also, see that what is finished is finished. Even if what we have to do something difficult, if we really have to do it, we have to do it to the end. Even if today we are in the process of building the conditions for the future, what has not yet happened does not exist. However, because of what our actions and words are likely to generate, it is preferable to act and speak in harmony with the Dharma, the Eightfold Path, the Precepts or the *paramita*!