

# *Zen Mishimi*

*a little bit of zen*



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## The Little Way of Zen

My wife Margaret, a Roman Catholic, had as her spiritual director, the late Mother Superior, Mary Catherine Kenny, RJM at the Bethany Retreat Center in Highland Mills, NY. She was known to all as Mother Catherine. One day Margaret said to Mother Catherine with a little apprehension? “My husband is a Zen-Buddhist Priest.” Then she held her breath. Mother Catherine smiled and responded, “Ah, yes. We have a lot to learn from Zen-Buddhism, don’t we?”

And I say, “Ah yes, we Zen-Buddhists have a lot to learn from Roman Catholicism, and the likes of Mother Catherine.” In particular, one of Mother Catherine’s loved saints: The Little Flower, Thérèse of Lisieux. She is one of the great Zen Masters who informs and inspires me to express my take on Zen. My take is that Zen is, as Thérèse would put it, a Little Way. It is small and insignificant. It is expressed in everyday ordinary things and events of living: mowing the lawn, filling the bird-feeders with seeds, washing the dishes, walking with the dogs in the woods, serving and waiting on tables, driving a truck, brushing one’s teeth. All of the everyday ordinary doings of life that we normally don’t notice. It is so simple. There. All the time. The Little Way that is the Way of No Way.



## The Little Way of Thérèse

She entered Carmel convent when she was fifteen years old. Once inside, she never left the convent until she died at the age of twenty-four. She did nothing special during her short life. She spent her time doing simple everyday things: cooking, sewing, eating, sleeping, going to mass, saying the office, making her confession, receiving Holy Communion. She said nothing extraordinary, wrote no great poems, or great religious texts. Her famous autobiography was not for publication. It was written upon the command of the Mother Superior of the convent. Her life was spent doing the little things. Each little event, each little task—she offered to Christ. When she washed dishes, she washed for Christ. When she made her bed, she made it for Christ. When she lay down to rest, she rested for

Christ. When she swept the floor, it was for Christ. She found Christ in every little act of her uneventful, momentous life. This is the Little Way of Thérèse.

Thérèse was a Zen master of the stature of Chao-chou, the other great Zen Master who informs my take on Zen-Buddhism and the teachings presented in this book. Each taught the Little Way of Zen.

### The Little Way of Chao-chou

The Little Zen Way is beautifully expressed by Chao-chou in a poem he wrote, and in three early koans. The koans are, “Who is your Master,” “Everyday Mind—Ruined and Homeless,” and another version of this koan, “The Way: What is it?”

These koans illuminate and define Chao-chou. He is a simple, modest, and kind man. A man who knows his own self, and is not timid to present it at appropriate times, yet he does not push himself forward in order to gain fame, glory, or recognition. A man who teaches in simple language. Language not fettered with Buddhist clichés. Language that does not begin or end with words. Silence is also the language of Chao-chou. A man who is not interested in “*figura*,” or the presentation he makes. He is not interested in fine robes, brocade *rakusus*, silk kesas, fancy furniture. A man who takes no pride in his accomplishments or achievements. He is open to the learning he can receive from others, no matter who they may be, male, female, young, or old, Buddhist or non-Buddhist. Whoever and whatever can teach him, he will receive their learning. And likewise, he is willing to teach anyone who wants to learn from him. He is not interested in theological speculation. He will not tolerate any form of sham and exposes it as such, directly and immediately. However, he does it with kindness. No thirty blows from Chao-chou. No shouting of obscenities. This is Chao-chou. I hope you get to know, respect, and love him as I do. You will be enriched by this great Zen master. Here is his poem.

The cock crows in the early morning;  
 Sadly I see as I rise how worn out I am;  
 I haven't a belt or a shirt.  
 Just the semblance of a robe.  
 My loincloth has no seat,  
 My pants no opening—  
 On my head are three or five pecks  
     of gray ashes.  
 Originally I intended to practice  
     to help save others;  
 Who would have suspected that instead  
 I would become a fool! (Green 171)\*

The images of this poem are few and simple: a crowing cock, a belt, a shirt, a robe, a loincloth, a pair of pants, a head, and three or five pecks of gray ashes upon that head. Just one simple, yet wonderful, metaphor: those ashes—for hair—a few gray ones on a balding head.

The images are low-level abstractions. They are common, everyday. The only thing uncommon to our twentieth century thinking is the loincloth, for which we could substitute a torn pair of underpants probably of the brief variety and probably old, torn, and a little soiled. All together they portray a shabby old man in tattered clothes. Utmost simplicity. Utmost

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\*This is a rewrite of the first stanza of Chao-chou's poem, “Song of the Twelve Hours of the Day.” The original stanza as translated by Green reads as follows:

The cock crows. The first hour of the day.  
 Aware of sadness, feeling down and out yet getting up.  
 There are neither underskirts nor undershirts,  
 Just something that looks a little like a robe.  
 Underwear with the waist out, work pants in tatters,  
 A head covered with thirty-five pounds of black grit.  
 In such a way, wishing to practice and help people,  
 Who knows that, on the contrary it is being a nitwit.

poverty. And yet, this is the self-portrait of perhaps the greatest Zen master of all time! This portrait reminds me of the self-deprecating self-portraits of Rembrandt as an old man.

Chao-chou never engaged in fundraising for his little sangha, Kuan Yin monastery, where he lived for the last twenty years of his life. When a leg of his chair broke, he took a piece of wood from the firewood pile and used it as the replacement. He would not allow his students to do better. If the roof leaked, it leaked. The walls were drafty. There was little food available. The life at Kuan Yin monastery must have been severe. And yet, when one considers the feeling of the language of the koans involving Chao-chou, there is undeniable humor there. There is no sense of the grim, the dry ascetic. This man is vibrant and joyous. The metaphor of the three or five pecks of gray ashes on his head give a hint of his humor.

This poem probably was written in Chao-chou's latter years. The "gray ashes" indicate that. So, in a way, the poem may be Chao-chou's summing-up of his life. A man who began life with the pretensions of being a bodhisattva and ends realizing that he is a poor, shabby, fool. No opening for his pants and no seat on his loincloth. It is said that Chao-chou always spoke softly. How unlike some of his great peers: Ma-tsu, Lin-chi, and others who shouted and raged and stormed. Chao-chou was just a whisper of a Zen priest. Just a whisper of the Dharma.

Chao-chou is a man truly poor in body and spirit. A man whose way is quiet, nondramatic, little. The way of little things. The way of insignificance, of being small, of being, as Emily Dickinson says, "Nobody." (Johnson. 133)

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—Too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! They'd advertise—you know!  
How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public—like a Frog—

To tell one's name—the livelong June—  
To an admiring Bog!

In the koan, "Everyday Mind—Ruined and Homeless," Chao-chou asks Nan-ch'uan, What is the Way? (Ogata. 347)

Your everyday mind is the Way.

Can I reach it?

If you try to reach it, you will miss it.

If I don't try to reach it, how can I know it?

The Way has nothing to do with knowing it, or not knowing. Knowing is deluded consciousness, and not knowing it is non-differentiation. When you enter the real Way without doubt, it will be like the great sky—like vastness itself. How could it be right to argue within oneself whether it is right or wrong?

Hearing this Chao-chou experienced a deep realization. He was seventeen years old. His description of the experience was: "Suddenly I was ruined and homeless." Then he went to the Precept-Giving Altar at Shao Lin Monastery on Sung Mountain, where Bodhidharma had lived for nine years, and there he received the precepts. Afterwards he returned to Nan-ch'uan's monastery.

The images of the koan are the ordinary, the little things, the low-level abstractions: "way," "aim," "missed," "blindly," "blankness," "space," "clear." The verbs: "is," "aim," "misses," "know," "said," "has," "reached," "force," "was," "was awakened." That's it. Everyday language. Everyday words. No Shakespearean heights here. These are the words and language of a five year old. Everyone can understand these words. No hidden meanings.

And yet like Chao-chou, by aiming, we miss. And we all miss. We all enter the daisan room with the intention of either making a *kensho* illuminating presentation or receiving a *kensho* illuminating teaching. We all aim high.

We think we can reach the way, crack the heart of the koan with our understanding, with our knowledge, with our answers. And we have a hundred answers. A hundred answers for *Mu*. We reach for the moon.

Oscar Wilde in one of his quips says, “To do nothing is the most difficult thing in the world to do. The most difficult and the most intellectual.” He was wrong.

It’s not difficult to do nothing. And by no means intellectual. The difficulty is in trying to make something out of nothing! That’s where the intellectual creeps in. It’s crazy, and we do it all the time. Take the self. Shakyamuni teaches that the self is a bundle of what he calls “heaps” or “aggregates.” These heaps correspond to our senses, and the objects of perception of these senses. These heaps—our seeing, feeling, hearing, touching, tasting, et al., are changing constantly. There is nothing static about any of them. Our eyesight is constantly changing. Our hearing constantly changes. Etcetera. This bundle that we call the self has nothing about it that we can really pin down and say, “Hey, that’s it!” “That’s my self!” What’s my self? Is it my seeing, my hearing, my feeling? Is it my nose, my hands, my eyes, my liver, my pelvis, my vagina, my penis? Our attempt to find a self is a fruitless intellectual exercise. For there is no self with a capital “S.” There is nothing there we can rely on. There is nothing there! Can we trust our eyes to really see what we see? Ask five people who see the same thing to tell you what they saw and you get five different visions. The same is true of all of our senses. The same is true of language. We confuse the subject or object of our words with the words themselves. No matter how often we say the words “apple pie” we will not satisfy our hunger for apple pie. No matter how often we say the word “water” we will never quench our thirst.

We need to realize and understand that words are pointers and unreliable ones at that. They are symbols of things that actually have no existence. They point to that which is nothing. You see how ridiculous it gets?

Can I reach it?

If you try to reach it, you will miss it.

That’s the heart of this koan. All our efforts are useless. All our answers miss. All of our knowledge is useless. All our knowledge misses. All our efforts, knowledge, answers will not touch or force it in any way.

Understanding this Chao-chou says that he lost his bearings. He was now without a place. No nail to hang his cloak on. No nail to hang his preconceptions on. Homeless. Ruined. Being so, he became the bright full moon!

The Way of Chao-chou is the way of the ordinary everyday mind. It is the Little Way of Zen. And since each of us has an ordinary mind, Zen is for us. We are able to experience the fullness of Zen in our ordinariness. In our everyday thoughts, words, and acts. Like Thérèse and Chao-chou when we do the little things—washing dishes, making the bed, cooking the soup, making the pizza, chopping firewood, bowing across the guts of a violin, spinning the potter’s wheel, painting a wall, mowing the lawn, shoveling snow—whatever it is we do—Zen happens. We are able to experience the fullness and completeness of Zen.

### *Atta Dipa*

The big bands I used to dance to in my teens, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Woody Herman, Artie Shaw, etc., all had their own “theme” song—a song that identified and defined the character of the band. In a way, the Zen groups I work with have a theme *gatha*, or song. It is *Atta Dipa*. This is an ancient *gatha* I feel close to. It defines what Zen Buddhism means to me. It contains what I believe to be the heart of the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. We chant the *gatha* three times in Pali and once in English, very slowly. The chanting reverberates in my bones. (Zen Services. 3)

*Atta Dipa*  
*Viharatha*  
*Atta Sharana*  
*Ananna Sharana*  
*Dhamma Dipa*  
*Dhamma Sharana*  
*Ananna Sharana*

Look within!  
 You are The Light.  
 Take refuge in yourself.  
 Do not take refuge in others.  
 Look within!  
 The Light is The Dharma.  
 Take refuge in The Dharma.  
 Do not take refuge in anything,  
 Other than The Dharma.

I remember, many years ago, when I was a young Zen student in Los Angeles. I was filled with the first flush of enthusiasm for Zen practice. I felt an overwhelming need to commit myself. To give myself. To abandon myself. In that state I entered the *Dokusan* room (private interview room) of the late Maezumi Roshi. I expressed all of the above to him, and told him I pledged my whole body, heart, and loyalty to him. Outraged, he shouted, NOOOOOOOOOO!

Be loyal to no man!  
 Be loyal only to the Dharma!  
 Give yourself to no man!  
 Give yourself only to the Dharma!  
 Abandon yourself to no man!  
 Abandon yourself only to the Dharma!

To this day, his words ring in my ears and beat in my heart. Then I found the early *sutra* from which *Atta Dipa* comes. It is part of the early writings of Buddhism known as the Pali Canon. It is contained

in a collection of sutras in a volume called the *Digha Nikaya*. The *sutra* describes the very last days and death of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is called the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*. In this *sutra*, Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, asks the Buddha what will happen to the order of monks after his death. The Buddha responds.

But Ananda, what does the order of monks expect of me? I have taught the dhamma, Ananda, making no "inner" and "outer": the Tathagata has no "teacher's fist" in respect of doctrines. If there is anyone who thinks: "I shall take charge of the order," or "The order should refer to me," let him make some statement about the order, but the Tathagata does not think in such terms. So why should the Tathagata make a statement about the order?

Ananda, I am an old, worn out, venerable, one who has traversed life's path, I have reached the term of life, which is eighty. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathagata's body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the Tathagata withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless concentration of mind, that his body knows comfort.

Therefore, Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge.

In the *Denkoroku*, or *Transmission of the Light*, a book that recounts the enlightenment experiences of the early Zen masters, Shakyamuni's enlightenment experience is described in the following words:

Shakyamuni Buddha saw the morning star and was enlightened, and he said, "I, and the great earth and all beings, simultaneously achieve the Way." (Ogata. 3)

Shakyamuni saw all beings as reflections of the morning star. All beings are the Light. All beings are complete. Just as we are. Right now. All beings, and all things: all rocks and trees, and grasses, flowers, and

mountains, rivers, and streams. And the weeds, the slugs, and the snakes. Nothing and nobody is excluded: the sick, the criminals, the rich, the poor, the blind, the beggars, the homeless, lawyers, politicians, blacks, whites, Asians, and Latinos. All beings are, to use a Christian word, “saved.” Not that all beings contain or have a glimmer of the Light within them. They have the Light entire and complete. Not that all beings “contain” the Light. They are the Light. Everyone! No exceptions!

And that is why there is no other way but to take refuge in oneself. That’s why when we do zazen it doesn’t matter if we’re “good” at it. It doesn’t matter if we can’t manage to sit still for a full forty-five minutes. It doesn’t matter if we have an itch and need to scratch it away. It doesn’t matter if we’re drowsy and have to snap ourselves awake from time to time. For we are complete, just as we are. Perfection does not mean “macho Zen.” Sitting like a stone. Enduring unendurable pain in the legs until we’re ready to scream! Perfection means what we are as we are. The Sixth Ancestor, Huineng, said that Zen is the non-separation of subject and object. Being there. Being present. Often Zen Teachers use the qualifier “complete,” or “completely” in Huineng’s definition. They say the “complete” non-separation of subject and object. They say that one must be “completely” there. Completely present. Completely still while sitting in zazen, without moving a muscle, or twitching, or scratching, or whatever.

I have a problem with such qualifiers as “complete” and “completely.” The absolutism of it. The perfectionism of it. The major issue here is: Is it really possible? Is it really so? Can anyone ever be “completely” present at anything? Is not the everyday state of our mind the distracted state of mind? Is not the ordinary condition of humans, such as you and I, distracted, diffuse, ambivalent, and ambiguous? I know mine is. I don’t think I can point to a single moment when I have been “completely” anything. When I have been “totally” anything. Even in the most precious, revelatory, inspirational, possibly even enlightening moments of zazen. In fact I would go further to say that the ordinary everyday mind is the distracted mind.

We don’t have to become macho robots in order to practice Zen. Shakyamuni said we are perfect as we are. No alteration needed. Just as we are. With all of our imperfections. With all of our fatheadedness. With all of our faults. With all of our distractions. With all of our neuroses. With all of our idiosyncrasies. With all of our weakness. Thérèse says,

I need a heart burning with tenderness,  
Who will be my support forever,  
Who loves everything in me, even my weakness...  
And who never leaves me day or night.  
I could find no creature  
Who could always love me and never die.  
I must have a God who takes on my nature  
And becomes my brother and is able to suffer.  
(Fourth stanza of “To the Sacred Heart of Jesus.” (Kinney. 119)

We are perfect! If we are blind, we are perfect! If we are paraplegic, and have lost the use of our legs, we are perfect! If we are overweight, we are perfect! If we are underweight, we are perfect! If we have committed a terrible crime, we are perfect! If we have never committed a crime—in fact never even stolen an apple, we are perfect! We are perfect, just as we are, whatever and wherever we happen to be—be it a vacation resort, a palace, a mud hut, a cave, an upper East Side apartment in New York City, a palatial home in Palos Verdes, California, a prison cell, a monk’s cell, a nun’s cell—wherever and whatever. We are perfect, and the Little Way leads us to the experience of complete perfect enlightenment, what the early Buddhas called *aññutarsamyaksambodhi*.

Perfection does not mean perfection. Perfection means the ordinary everyday mind. Perfection means the everyday mind that is the distracted mind. Taking a cue from the great Bankei, who once admonished the monitors of his monastery for beating and waking sleeping monks in the zendo, “Why do you beat and wake them?” He said to them, “Do you think Buddha-nature is not present when a monk is asleep? Do you think it goes away when they sleep? Leave them alone.”

Similarly, I say, Buddha-nature is present in the distracted mind! Whatever state we are in, is Buddha-nature. Whether we are completely or incompletely present. Whether we are distracted, or in a state of pin-point concentration and focus. I feel we should leave both extremes, and not worry about them. Turn instead to the Little Way. The great secret, the great treasure, is that **It** is here, now, present. In the blue sky, in the whisper of the wind, the opening and shutting of doors, in bowing, *kinhin*, or walking meditation, eating, sleeping. It is in zazen done without purpose, aim, gain, or even meaning. *Shikantaza*. Just sitting. Jesus insisted that the Kingdom of Heaven is within the human heart. Within each person's heart. Just as he or she is. Now. Right here. A couple of stories nail this down.

### The Parable of the Great Pearl

Buddha tells a story about two men who spent the night in a hostel. One was very rich and the other very poor. The rich man decided to surprise the poor man. While the poor man slept, the rich man sewed a valuable pearl in the lining of the other's coat. Next morning he would surprise the poor man with his gift. The rich man went to sleep. Next morning, the poor man was not there. The rich man asked the innkeeper where the poor man had gone. The innkeeper didn't know. The rich man searched everywhere for the poor man. He couldn't find him. Eventually, he gave up his search and went about his way.

The poor man, in the meantime was well away and continued his life as poor as ever. Often he went to bed very hungry. He spent many nights in despair, wishing for stale bread to eat, wishing for something better. Many years later, by chance, the rich and the poor man met again. The rich man was overjoyed and told the poor man what he had done that night. The poor man was aghast. He turned his coat inside out, ripped apart the lining and out popped the precious pearl. He had had it during all those years of poverty and despair! (Reeves. 215)

Martin Buber tells a similar story. It is found in his wonderful series of books of Hasidic Tales.

### The Treasure

Rabbi Burnam used to tell young men who came to him for the first time the story of Rabbi Eisik, son of Rabbi Yekel in Cracow. After many years of great poverty that had never shaken his faith in God, he dreamed someone bade him look for a treasure in Prague, under the bridge which leads to the king's palace. When the dream recurred a third time, Rabbi Eisik prepared for the journey and set out for Prague. But the bridge was guarded day and night and he did not dare to start digging. Nevertheless he went to the bridge every morning and kept walking around it until evening.

Finally the captain of the guards, who had been watching him, asked in a kindly way whether he was looking for something or waiting for somebody. Rabbi Eisik told him of the dream which had brought him here from a faraway country. The captain laughed: "And so to please the dream, you poor fellow wore out your shoes to come here! As for having faith in dreams, if I had had it, I should have had to get going when a dream once told me to go to Cracow and dig for treasure under the stove in the room of a Jew—Eisik, son of Yekel, that was the name! Eisik, son of Yekel! I can just imagine what it would be like, how I should have to try every house over there, where one half of the Jews are named Eisik, and the other Yekel!" And he laughed again. Rabbi Eisik bowed, traveled home, dug up the treasure from under the stove, and built the House of Prayer which is called "Reb Eisik's Shul."

"Take this story to heart," Rabbi Burnam used to add, "and make what it says your own: There is something you cannot find anywhere in the world, not even at the zaddik's and there is, nevertheless, a place where you can find it." (Buber. 245-246)

And what is that something you cannot find anywhere else in the world? And where is that place where you can nevertheless find it? It's the great jewel. It's your own heartbeat. Feel your heartbeat. It's the Buddha! It's Christ! It's the Unborn! And what is the Unborn? The word, "Unborn,"

is first found in one of the old Pali Texts: (Woodward. part iii 8.3) It is a teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha.

There is, monks, an Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded (*ajata, abhuta, akata, ashankhatam*). If there were not this Unborn..., then there would be no deliverance here visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded. But since there is this Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded.

Nagarjuna also, somewhere, writes of the Unborn. He says, “Enlightened Nature is not large or small, not wide or narrow. It has no blessing, no retribution; it is undying and unborn.”

## Bankei

And then we have the great Rinzai Zen Master, Bankei Butchi Kosai, which means Bankei of Beneficent Enlightened Wisdom, an honorary title given to him by the Imperial Court in 1690. Bankei lived in the seventeenth century from 1622 to 1693. His teachings can be found in two books, *The Unborn*, and *Bankei Zen*. The following selections, which present Bankei’s teaching of the Unborn are from these two books. Please, if you read no other Zen books, do read these books.

## Definition and Proof of the Unborn

Well then, what does it mean, you’re endowed with a Buddha-mind? Each of you now present decided to come here from your home in the desire to hear what I have to say. Now if a dog barked beyond the temple walls while you’re listening to me, you’d hear it and know it was a dog barking. If a crow cawed, you’d hear it and know it was a crow. You’d hear an adult’s voice as an adult’s and a child’s as a child’s. You didn’t come here in order to hear a dog bark, a crow caw, or any of the other sounds which might come from outside the temple during my talk. Yet while you’re here, you’d hear those sounds. Your eyes see and distinguish reds and whites and other colors and your

nose can tell good smells from bad. You could have had no way of knowing beforehand of any of the sights, sounds, or smells you might encounter at this meeting, yet you’re able nevertheless to recognize these unforeseen sights and sounds as you encounter them, without premeditation. That’s because you’re seeing and hearing in the Unborn.

That you do see and hear and smell in this way without giving rise to the thought that you will, is the proof that this inherent Buddha-mind is unborn and possessed of a wonderful illuminative wisdom. The Unborn manifests itself in the thought “I want to see” or “I want to hear” not being born. When a dog howls, even if ten million people said in chorus that it was the sound of a crow crying, I doubt if you’d be convinced. It’s highly unlikely there would be any way they could delude you into believing what they said. That’s owing to the marvelous awareness and unbornness of your Buddha-mind. The reason I say it’s in the “Unborn” that you see and hear in this way, is because the mind doesn’t give “birth” to any thought or inclination to see or hear. Therefore it is un-born. Being Unborn, it’s also undying: It’s not possible for what is not born to perish. This is the sense in which I say that all people have an unborn Buddha-mind.

Meister Eckhart spoke of God, using words very similar to the words used by Shakyamuni Buddha, of the unborn, the unbecome, the unmade, the uncompounded. He says “...that which God intrinsically is in the undifferentiated Godhead is unqualified, strictly unconditioned, beyond distinctions and determinations, and in relation to it the entire order of manifestation as such is nothing.” (Kelley. 7)

Kelley further goes on to say, “The essential doctrine, in the name of which Eckhart speaks and which determines all particular aspects of his teaching, is the doctrine of Divine Knowledge. It is the doctrine of ‘unrestricted knowledge itself’ which, being unconditioned and beyond distinctions, transcends all manifest acts of intellection, just as it transcends every possible mode of experience.” (Kelley. 1)

He also speaks of Divine Knowledge as “unknowing knowledge.”  
(Kelley. 2)

The great Paul of Tarsus, wrote about a nameless affliction. He prayed that his affliction may be taken from him so that he may greater serve God. He writes about the response to his prayer. Jesus appeared to him and said, “No, in thy weakness is my strength.”

What a response! What a comfort! We don’t need to be perfect! We don’t need to get rid of our afflictions, imperfections, diseases, illnesses, disabilities, or whatever. These stories and all of the great teachers and Zen masters, the great Hasidic Rabbis, Jesus, Shakyamuni, Bankei, and Eckhart—all point to the same thing. We’re fine as we are! Just as we are is OK!

Please note, however, I am not saying anything about ethics and about our past, present, or future thoughts, words, or acts. Being OK as we are doesn’t mean we can now go ahead and do what we want. That anything goes. This is the mistake the Beat Zen movement of the fifties made. We are OK as we are. And we need to live and govern our lives according to the very best that is within us. To Buddhists, this means to guide our lives according to the Precepts. To Christians and Jews, according to the Ten Commandments. And so forth. But as we are is OK. We are complete. Everything is there.

Therefore, no perfection is needed! Therefore, no macho Zen is needed!

Down with perfectionism!  
Down with the Saints!  
Away with the Arahats!  
Kill the Buddha!

### Why Bother?

Well if this is all so what about the *sutras*? What about liturgical service? What about the Sacraments? Mass? Practice? The practice of zazen? What

about all of the many “Buddhist Teachings?” What are we to make of them? How are we to deal with them? What about the long hard years I spent studying? The long hard years of koan study? Trying to penetrate the meaning of complex, irrational, imponderable koans? The stabs into the absolute? Teachings about the absolute and relative? About the interpenetration of the relative and absolute? Are they all unnecessary? All extra? Is none of it needed? What about the years I spent studying how to perform Soto-Zen Buddhist Services. Copying *kirigami*—documents of transmission? Memorizing *sutras* in Japanese? It took me an entire year to learn the “Heart Sutra” in Japanese! During all those same years I studied various mnemonic *mantras* and *dharanis*. All those years I studied endlessly long Theravadin and Great Vehicle Buddhist texts and *sutras*. Endless psychological, theological tomes of Buddhist hermeneutics and metaphysics. Was it all unnecessary and extra? How are we to deal with the phenomenal corpus of Buddhist literature? What about all this? Why go through all this if it’s extra? If it’s unnecessary do we simply chuck it all? These questions are similar to the dilemma that drove Dogen Zenji, the great founder of Soto-Zen. The question that troubled him was, if, as the *sutras* say, all human beings are endowed with Buddha-nature, why is it that one must train oneself so strenuously to realize that very same Buddha-nature? Dogen went from teacher to teacher with his question and did not receive a satisfactory answer. The Zen Rinzai Master Eisai gave him a partial answer. He said “...all the Buddhas in the three stages of time are unaware that they are endowed with Buddha-nature, but cats and oxen are well aware of it indeed!” In other words, the Buddhas, because they are Buddhas, do not think of having or not having Buddha-nature; only the deluded (in this case represented by the animals) think in such terms. This answer partially satisfied Dogen Zenji. But it was not until he met Zen Master Ju-ching, that he experienced the answer to his question. There he realized that he practiced and studied not to gain Buddha-nature, but that he practiced and studied because he was Buddha-nature. He was perfect. Therefore because of his perfection, he practiced. This goes beyond sectarianism. This goes beyond Buddhism, Catholicism, Islamism, Judaism, etc. Because I am perfect, I practice Zen-Buddhism. Because you are perfect you practice Catholicism.

Because you are perfect you practice Islam, or Judaism, or whatever religious persuasion meets your spirit and condition. Yes, it is extra. And it is unnecessary in and of itself. And we should realize that all the practice in the world will not make us better Buddhists, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, etc. To use a Christian term, it is not practice, but Grace, which perfects us. And grace is something that is given—is inborn—is unborn.

### **The Teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha**

Jesus was once asked to sum up the teachings of the Commandments. He responded with two. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Or, more simply, Love God, Love people.

For me, the teaching of Shakyamuni can be given in three simple sentences:

- Try to think kind thoughts.
- Try to speak kind words.
- Try not to hurt any living thing.

Notice the use of the transitive verb “try.” Shakyamuni’s great compassion is here. He understands that we are fractured, failing, stumbling, barely competent, prone to error—human beings. So he directs us to, at least, point in the direction of kindness. To, at least, make the attempt. Then, there may be some follow-through. Shakyamuni’s great understanding of our flawed nature is again demonstrated in his poignant words, spoken to Ananda, in the Dharmapada. (Dharmapada. 160)

- As an elephant endures the arrows of battle,
- I will patiently endure harsh words.
- For such is the way of the world:
- Human beings are often cruel.

Of course, the elaboration of the above three simple declarative sentences runs into hundreds, probably thousands of volumes, each purporting to contain the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is said

that the Buddhist canon is so large that if a person did nothing else but read every book of the canon, and read for twenty-four hours each day, seven days a week, and read for one-hundred years, she would not complete the canon.

And so with this encouraging preamble I begin the teachings of Shakyamuni. Here are his own words:

### **The Raft**

“Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. Listen and attend closely to what I shall say.”

“Yes, venerable sir,” the Bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

“Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Then he thought: ‘There is this great expanse of water, whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear, but there is no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore.’ And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the farther shore. Then, when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: ‘This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want.’ Now, Bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with that raft?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“By doing what would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Here Bhikkhus, when that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: ‘This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go wherever I want.’ Now Bhikkhus, it is by so doing that that man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So I have shown how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

“Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states.”  
(Ñānamoli. 22 #13.)

In other words, the teachings of Shakyamuni are tools not rules. They are not static. They change according to circumstance. We need to fashion a different set of tools under different conditions. Depending on time, place, people concerned, amounts of money, or other value oriented quantity involved. When we look at Shakyamuni’s teachings in this light, they become alive.

First, I would like to get away from the terms “*Hinayana*,” and “*Mahayana*.” The word “*yana*” means “vehicle.” “*Maha*,” means great, and “*Hina*,” means “lesser.” And guess who invented these terms? Yes, those who gave themselves the term “Mahayana.” So instead of Hinayana and Mahayana I will use the terms Teachings of the Pali Canon and Teachings of the Great Vehicle. In this connection, I came across a quote from Keiji Nichitani recently that illustrates how connected the two “vehicles” or teachings are. He says that the famous formula of the “Heart Sutra” is a summation of both teachings. Form is emptiness represents the teachings of the Pali Canon; Emptiness is Form represents the teachings of the Great Vehicle.

## The Teachings of the Pali Canon

We don’t really know what Shakyamuni taught. He left no writings. Nothing had been written about him by anyone during his lifetime. In fact the earliest written record containing teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, in which he is personally quoted, were written many hundreds of years after his death.

From the time of his death around 500 B.C., until the first Century his teachings were preserved orally. Groups of monks specialized in memorizing different teachings and preserved these teachings within their order. Then around the first century a group of monks settled in Shri Lanka and in their splendid isolation they began to put the teachings into writing, using the language of Pali that they spoke, and gave birth to the wonderful collection of teachings known as the Pali Canon.

Interestingly, around about the same time, between 500 B.C. and 300 A.D. another great literary outburst created what has come to be known as the teachings of the Great Vehicle, and the monumental *Lotus Sutra*, *Vimalakirti Sutra*, and the *Prajñāparamita Sutras*, and many other sutras, were born. Unfortunately, the writers of both sets of documents, the Pali Canon and the Great Vehicle documents were not interested in dates. So none of the works written by these two groups were dated.

However, Chinese Buddhists came to India at around 500 A.D. and they began to copy the new writings of both groups and the Chinese were scrupulous about dating. They completed the *Tripitaka* in 518 A.D. *Tripitaka* means “Three Baskets,” and refers to the Pali Canon. These writings were the Teaching Sutras, the *Vinaya*, or Rules of the order of monks and nuns, and the *Abidharma*, or Commentary on the Teachings and just about everything else.

In addition, there was another great translation project done by the Tibetans. They completed translating the entire corpus of both groups by 1411.

So we have a vast body of written material that presents the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. There are many ways to try to get at “core” or “essential” or “genuine” teachings of Shakyamuni. One such method is that when a teaching is found in each of the various translations one can usually assume some authenticity to that teaching. The interesting thing is that the Chinese translations sometimes contain teachings not found in any of the extant Sanskrit, or Pali texts. This leads one to suspect that they used texts no longer in existence, or of an “Ur-Text.” All of which is very interesting and somewhat confusing. In addition there is the problem of the scribes who were copying down the teachings.

When one reads the *sutras* one is not only reading the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, one is also reading interpretations and understandings of these teachings made by the scribes and editors who wrote the words. So how do we deal with the issue of presenting Shakyamuni’s teachings? How do we know which teachings are his true teachings and which are not? My personal answer is found in one of the old stories.

The Buddha visited a village in India. The people of the village went to him and told him that many teachers had come to them teaching this doctrine and that doctrine. Then other teachers would come and said that those teachers were wrong and only their doctrines were right. And the people said that they didn’t know who is right and who is wrong and that they were full of perplexity and doubt.

The Buddha said:

“... It is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity ... Do not be led by reports, or tradition or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: ‘this is our teacher’... But, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome and wrong and bad, then give them up.... And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them.”

(Found in the Pali Canon, *Anguttara* 1-3, *Kalama Sutta* (An III. 65))

The Buddha even went further and told his disciples that they should examine, and challenge him with their questions, so that they might be fully convinced of his teaching.

In other words, the teachings, the *sutras*, the truth, the Unborn, the Buddha-mind is within our own beings, minds, self, and hearts. We have it within. That is the reason Shakyamuni said he gave no teachings. That is the reason Zen teaching is both easy and difficult. Easy because there is nothing to teach. Difficult because the job of the teacher of Zen is to turn his or her students to their hearts—to help them realize and manifest the power that is within them. This is Zen teaching.

So the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha I present are my take on the Teachings. They are those teachings that have touched my heart—that resonate within me. However, in a very real sense, whenever I, or anybody says, this is a teaching of Shakyamuni, or of Jesus, or of Socrates, or of Meister Eckhart, or of whomever, we lie. For whatever comes out of my mouth is filtered by the totality that is me. Whatever comes out of me is no longer Shakyamuni’s teaching. It has been informed by everything that makes up that which is me. By my background, by my Italian heritage, by my growing up in Brooklyn, by my years as a Catholic, my years as a Quaker, my years as a fundraiser, my years as a jazz musician, by my playing of the Recorder and flute, by my love of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci, Don Quixote, James Joyce, P. G. Wodehouse, Rex Stout, and his Nero Wolfe and Archie—and more—much more—more than I can ever enumerate—by my relationships, by my mother, father, sister, my daughters, the inmates of the prisons I went to. All of this, and more, informs, influences, directs, contaminates, refines, and complicates that which I present, ostensibly, as the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. The same is true of each person in the universe. One sees another dimension of the teaching of one body here.

## Impermanence and Change

This was said by the Exalted One...

“Monks, this body is corruptible, consciousness is of a nature to fade, all substrates are impermanent, ill, and subject to change and decay.”... (Woodward. 166)

“O Brahmana, it is just like a mountain river, flowing far and swift, taking everything along with it; there is no moment, no instant, no second when it stops flowing, but it goes on flowing and continuing. So Brahmana, is human life, like a mountain river.” As the Buddha told Ratthapala: “The world is in continuous flux and is impermanent.” (Rahula. 25-26)

Very simply, the teaching of impermanence is that everything changes. Nothing from the most microscopic to the most gargantuan is exempt. Everything changes. Nothing remains the same. Everything is in motion. It is interesting that in sixth century Greece, a near contemporary of Shakyamuni, Heraclites, came up with a similar teaching. He came to his conclusion by looking at a stream and made the observation that one cannot step into the same stream twice. Whenever one steps into the stream it is different. That is because of the flow of the stream. So is it with all things. Everything changes. Everything is in process. And there are no exceptions.

I find this teaching to be freeing and liberating—the fact that no matter what circumstance we find ourselves in, it will change. If we are sick, we know that our sickness will change. We either will get better or worse. But the miserable cold in the head will not be a permanent condition. It will change. Hopefully, we will get better and not worse. That’s because all things are impermanent. Similarly, we should be careful of situations that are pleasant. They too will change. They may get better, or they may get worse. They will change. All things change. A mountain changes. The great seas change. A grain of sand changes. A blade of grass changes. All things change. This is the teaching of impermanence. Nothing is permanent. There is nothing that will remain as it is.

Since everything is subject to change, including our physical being, it is nonsense to say that there is a discrete being or self. Now, don’t get me wrong! There is a self! But it is a changing self. There is a Stef. He’s always changing, from day to day, from moment to moment. But there is a Stef. There is a Stef who sees, hears, eats, smells, farts, and whatever. There is a Stef. Buddhism does not say there is no such thing as existence. There is existence. But it is a changing existence. It is never static. It is existence that is always new.

This teaching of impermanence has many ramifications. For instance, you may have noted in some of the quotes from the *sutras* that the old Buddhists would say that since everything is subject to change, it is nonsense to attach to anything—to try to hold on to things. Try to make things be as they are—without ever changing. This is nonsense. We get into trouble when we try to keep things as they are. There’s a wonderful song, written by Jerome Kern, “The Way You Look Tonight.” I have an old recording of the song played by a small group of Benny Goodman’s, sung by the great Peggy Lee. Here are the lyrics.

Some day  
When I’m awfully low.  
When the world is cold  
I will feel a glow  
Just thinking of you  
And the way you look tonight.

Oh but you’re lovely  
With your smile so warm  
And your cheeks so soft  
There is nothing for me  
But to love you  
Just the way you look tonight.

With each word  
Your tenderness grows  
Tearing my fear apart.  
And that lamp

That wrinkles your nose  
 Touches my foolish heart.  
 Lovely  
 Never, never change  
 Keep that breathless charm  
 Won't you please  
 Arrange it  
 For I love you  
 Just the way you look tonight.

I cannot convey how beautifully Peggy Lee sings this song. But the wish of the song is impossible! The song is nothing but trouble! It will bring nothing but misery. Because we all change. It's impossible to "keep that breathless charm." It's impossible to "arrange it." There is no such thing as, "Just the way you look tonight!" Because change occurs every moment, not just every night, or day. We are changing right now, before our very eyes. No two moments—no two nanoseconds are the same.

Trying to keep the "same" love we had when we first met our love is crazy. Let the lovers grow. Let the lovers mature with a new love each new loving day of their loving lives. Don't try to keep it "Just the way you look tonight." That's crazy! We regret that, "Things Ain't What They Used To Be," another great song, this time by Duke Ellington. They can't be. Things are constantly new, fresh, vital, alive, and stimulating to the one who is open to life as it is and as it changes. By hanging on to the past we rob ourselves of the present. We rob ourselves of the beauties, wonders, and joys that are at hand right now. The old Buddhists made another ramification of this teaching. They argued, since everything is subject to change, since there is no permanent self, all things are therefore disagreeable, and lead to sorrow, sadness, and unhappiness. This is all wrapped up and bundled in the Sanskrit word *duhkha*. The old Buddhists particularly found the human body repulsive. Consider the following quote.

Now, Aggivessana, this body made of material form, consisting of the four great elements, procreated by a mother and father, and built up

out of boiled rice and porridge, is subject to impermanence, to being worn and rubbed away, to dissolution and disintegration. It should be regarded as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumor, as a dart, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as not self. When one regards this body thus, one abandons desire for the body, affection for the body, subservience to the body. (Ñanamoli, 605.9)

I think this is nonsense! I think this is an interpretation the old scribes placed on the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. I think this is a cultural accretion that the old Indians placed upon Shakyamuni's teachings. Somehow, somewhere, the idea that the body is ugly and that life is miserable because it is impermanent came into being. It's hard to pinpoint how and where this negativity began. We find it not only in the East. We in the West have gone through centuries of this abominable affliction, especially during the Middle Ages. This idea is bundled with the idea that sexuality is wrong, base, evil, and so forth. And the old Buddhists looked upon the teaching of impermanence and change as proof of their negative outlook on life. Sheer nonsense! This is the way the old Buddhists described the body.

This filthy body stinks outright  
 Like ordure, like a privy's site;  
 This body men that have insight  
 Condemn, is object of a fool's delight.

A tumor where nine holes abide  
 Wrapped in a coat of clammy hide  
 And trickling filth on every side,  
 Polluting the air with stench far and wide.

If it perchance should come about  
 That what is inside it came out,  
 Surely a man would need a knout  
 With which to put the crows and dogs to rout. (Buddhaghosa. 203)

I, on the other hand, feel that the very functioning of the body is a beautiful continuing miracle. Just think of the circulation of the blood pumping through our veins, pumping through our heart, our arteries, giving life and support systems to our entire body. Just think of the complicated structure of the nervous system. How it reaches into every inch of our body, informing it, directing it, assisting it. Just think of the regenerative abilities of our body that restores itself after being hurt and wounded. Just think of the miracles of any part of the body: our hearing, our seeing, our tasting. Just think of the growing of hair. Jesus said it. All of our wisdom, all of our knowledge, cannot duplicate the growth of a single strand of hair! I don't think the body is vile. I think it's beautiful—including the snot, bile, feces, and urine. It's all beautiful. And I especially think sex is beautiful. The sexuality of the body is beautiful. The idea that sex is evil is revolting. I do not agree with the old Buddhists in this interpretation of the teaching of impermanence.

### The Four Noble Truths

After the Buddha received his enlightenment, it is said he then went straight away to the five hermits with whom he practiced his austerities and “Turned the First Wheel of the Dharma.” He presented the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Here is a modern translation.

This, O bhikkhus is the Noble Truth of suffering (*dukkha*): Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering, association with the unloved or unpleasant condition is suffering, separation from the beloved or pleasant condition is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

This, O bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the origin of suffering: It is craving which produces rebirth, bound up with pleasure and greed. It finds delight in this and that, in other words, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence or becoming and craving for nonexistence or self-annihilation.

This, O bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering: It is the complete cessation of suffering; giving up, renouncing, relinquishing, detaching from craving.

This, O bhikkhus is the Noble Truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right awareness, and right concentration.  
(Rewata. 17,18)

It is sometimes difficult for us Westerners to read the old Buddhist texts. At least it is difficult for this Westerner. There are several reasons. First, there is the repetition. Before the *sutras*, or teachings, were written down, the old Buddhas recited them. So an oral tradition preceded the written tradition. This oral tradition lasted for several hundred years. In order to remember the teachings, the old Buddhas had to employ mnemonic devices or memory tricks.

One trick for remembering is repetition. And so today we have countless thousands of pages of Buddhist texts with countless thousands of pages of repetitions. Try reading the monumental *Avatamsaka Sutra* for example. Sometimes the repetitions cause my eyes to twirl and I quickly lose the meaning of what I am reading.

Another trick the old Buddhists used was to repeat in verse what they just finished saying in prose. And, mercifully, the verse is terse. It's usually sharp, to the point, and the meaning tends not to wander. A good example of this is Edward Conze's translation of “The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra.” You will sometimes find impenetrable prose followed by clear and precise verse explications.

Another difficulty in reading the old texts is the mania the old Buddhists had to examine each theological point they made in excruciating detail. A practice our own Western theologians seem to be afflicted with as well. But after reading both Western and Eastern Theology, I proclaim the

**Teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha:  
Turning of the First Wheel**



Eastern Buddhists the winners! One has only to cast a cursory glance at a couple of pages of Buddhaghosa's *Vissudimagga*. Or try reading Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*!

Another memory enhancing trick of the old Buddhists was to make numbered lists. They numbered everything in sight. Just offhand I can think of the Three Treasures, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Twelve-fold Chain of Causation, the Three Bodies of the Buddha, the Five Skandhas, the Four Alternatives, the Hundredfold Negations, the One Vehicle, the Two Extreme Views, the Two Vehicles, the Three Periods of Time, the Four Dhyanas, the Four Immeasurables, the Five Desires, the Six Paramitas, the Six Sense-Organs, the Ten Directions, the Thirty-two Auspicious Signs (which identify one as the Buddha) etc.

It would be a labor of love if some scholar, somewhere, would round up all of the numbers of lists and make a book of them. Gharma C.C. Chang, in his *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras* has a numerical glossary at the end of his book. The glossary begins with "One Vehicle" and ends with "Billion-word Universe."

So, finding a suitable text of the Four Noble Truths was no easy task. You will find texts in several of the old sutra books: the *Majjima Nikaya*, and the *Digha Nikaya* in particular. A new book, *The First Discourse of the Buddha*, translated by Dr. Rewata Dhamma, was my choice, as the clearest and most concise presentation of these truths.

But one would think that it would be an easy thing to try to come to some terms with a simple list of four. But as you go into these four, supposedly, simple-to-understand Noble Truths, they turn out to have complex and detailed ramified branches. In fact, speaking of numbers, I counted thirty-two of these branches. So Shakyamuni's original, simple four truths swelled into thirty-two interior sub-truths of the original four. I finally had to try to put some order to the interweaving complexities of these branches and resorted to a chart of the Teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha—The Turning of the First Wheel, shown on p. 30.

## Impermanence

Looking at the chart you can see that impermanence is the ground of the First Wheel of the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. You see that impermanence gives birth to the Four Noble Truths. That the First Noble Truth gives birth to the teaching of the *skandhas*, or the aggregates. The Second Noble Truth gives birth to the teaching of the Twelve-fold Chain of Causation. The Fourth Noble Truth give birth to the Eightfold Path.

### The First Noble Truth: *Dukkha*—Life is Suffering

*The Shambala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, defines *dukkha* as follows:

Dukkha. suffering; a central concept in Buddhism, which lies at the root of the four noble truths.... Dukkha not only signifies suffering in the sense of unpleasant sensations; it also refers to everything, both material and mental, that is conditioned, that is subject to arising and passing away, that is comprised of the five skandhas, and that is not in a state of liberation. Thus everything that is temporarily pleasant is suffering, since it is subject to ending. Dukkha arises because of desire and craving and can be overcome by the elimination of desire. The means to bring about the extinction of suffering is shown by the eightfold path.

The quote from the Four Noble Truths above nails *dukkha* down.

This, O bhikkhus is the Noble Truth of suffering (*dukkha*): Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering, association with the unloved or unpleasant condition is suffering, separation from the beloved or pleasant condition is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

We can see that the major condition for a thing to be *dukkha* is that it is impermanent! Therefore, whatever is impermanent is suffering! One of the problems I have with this teaching is that, on the face of it, it

seems to be so grim! It seems to be so negative! And indeed, the grim, negative, passive, and, pessimistic is certainly a possible interpretation of the teaching of impermanence and of the teaching of *dukkha*. But need it be so? I don't know about the old Indian Ancestors, but many of the Chinese and Japanese Ancestors certainly were not given to grimness. In fact, I find many of the old Buddhas to be very humorous. Based on a reading of the old koans, I think many of the old Zen masters had a twinkle in their eyes. And I find no passivity at all. I have met only a few Theravadin Monks. But all of the ones I have met radiated simplicity and joy. And when I read some of these masters, like the recently deceased wonderful Ayya Khema, a Theravadin nun, there is no grimness, passivity, or negativity. Her writings are rich, exuberant, joyful, passionate, and full of hope. Finally, one has just to look at the photos of the face of the Dalai Lama to see the lie that the Dharma is grim.

The fact that a thing is impermanent doesn't mean we can't enjoy it! The problem is not the joy. The problem is trying to extend the enjoyment after the party is over! I certainly enjoy a chocolate ice cream cone. But after I finish with my cone, that's that. I enjoyed every lick of the cone. It would, however, be crazy to keep licking the air that replaced the cone in the hope of continuing my enjoyment. And just that craziness, licking the empty air, in the hope that it's an ice cream chocolate cone is *dukkha*.

Same thing is true of happiness. Since all joys and all happinesses change and end they are *dukkha*. The Second Noble Truth informs the first. The cause of suffering is craving, greed, and thirst. We long for pleasure. We long for satisfaction. We long to achieve. But whatever we achieve, whatever satisfaction we have, whatever pleasure we get, is short lived, is impermanent. Because it is impermanent, the logic of the old Buddhas is that it is therefore a source of suffering. We get into problems because we attach to these short lived experiences of pleasure. We want that wonderful experience or feeling of peace we got doing zazen to continue. To last, To not end. As soon as it comes we tighten our inner fists and try to keep it and not let it go. Instead of enjoying it when it is there. Instead of luxuriating in it when it is there. Instead of abiding and resting in it

when it is there. By trying to hold on to it we change the experience. And it no longer is the peace that came to us. We rob ourselves of the presence of peace for a future of no peace. Licking the air that was once a chocolate ice cream cone.

### **The *Skandhas*—The Aggregates**

As we see in the chart, the First Noble Truth leads to the *Skandhas*—the Aggregates.

The *skandhas* are a description of that which we call the self. That is, the changing, temporal, impermanent self. I can really see how the first Noble Truth, because of impermanence, is *duhkha*, or suffering, and how this leads us to the teachings and descriptions of the *skandhas*, or the aggregates. The reason why I see this is because perhaps what we most resist is growing old and dying. Just look around. Our culture, not only in the USA, but all over the world, enshrines youth. The search for continued youth, indeed the search for immortality, is a search, and thirst, or craving (the second noble truth), which humanity has had from the beginningless beginning. Entire industries and billions and billions of dollars pass hands in the search for youth—the search for immortality. Witness the health clubs, all over the country, all over the world. Look at the “Style” section of the *New York Times* and other publications. All glorify youth—the young. We fear to grow old. (I can’t resist the temptation to insert at this point Oscar Wilde’s quip that “Youth is wasted on the young!”) We want to stay perpetually young. When a few wisps of gray hair appear around our ears we—female and male—rush to the dye bottle! We fear disease. Disease will decay us. We fear decay. And most of all we fear death. We cling to life tenaciously, in the secret hope, perhaps that within our limited lifetime, the secret of immortality, the fountain of youth, which so cleverly eluded Ponce de Leon, will be found.

The old Buddhas classified the *skandhas* into five categories: matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Each of these five groups contains various subdivisions: for instance,

matter contains the four elements, fire, water, heat, and movement. The sensation group contains the senses—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and these senses are further classified into pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The perceptions include the senses, and mental objects. The mental formations are the psychological, or mental activities of volition, attention, discrimination, joy, happiness, equanimity, resolve, exertion, compulsion. The consciousness group contains six aspects of consciousness, which relate to our senses, i.e., the consciousness of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching—all of which arise out of contacts we make between the senses and the objects of those senses. The aggregates are not static. They are constantly in flux. They are impermanent. One way of thinking of them is with the image of the atom. The neutrons are in constant motion around the nucleus. Constantly shifting, changing. Indeed, if we really look at who and what we are we see that each aspect of our personality is similarly shifting and changing. That is the beauty as well as the frustration of the personality. And the cause of *duhkha*. For we don’t want things to change, especially when we finally get somewhere, when we finally achieve something. But all things are impermanent. Our desire to keep it is *duhkha*.

### **The Second Noble Truth—*Samudaya***

The second noble truth, *Samudaya*, tells us the origin or cause of *duhkha*. There is a twofold connection or ramification to this truth. The major cause of *duhkha* is the Three Poisons: Greed, Hatred, and Ignorance. In a way I feel the twelve-fold chain of causation is a highly developed form of the Three Poisons and they are contained within that chain. We crave and wish to possess—to own. In a very real way, it is impossible to possess anything because of impermanence. We always knock our heads against the ground of impermanence. We build a house. We want it to be there forever. For our family. For our children. For our children’s children. In many cases this actually happens. But witness the devastating calamities that tear through our world. An issue of the *National Geographic* had as its insert, a vast panoramic description of the “Natural Hazards of North America.” Earthquakes, hurricanes,

hailstorms, volcanoes, tornadoes, drought, landslides and avalanches, tsunamis, wildfires, winter storms. Each of which causing vast devastation. Wiping out entire villages, thousands of homes, thousands of acres of forest. Hurricane Andrew, alone, with winds up to 175 miles an hour, in just three hours on August 24, 1992, left 160,000 people homeless and caused twenty-five billion dollars in damage. The deadly earthquake of 1906 killed 3,000 people in San Francisco, as well as virtually destroying that beautiful city. Late on October 29, 1959, rain-soaked soils slid off the hills of Minatitlan, Mexico, burying 800 villages.

Nothing is permanent! Everything changes! No matter how firm the foundation, it shakes! Our craving for more—for bigger and better—to have and to own things is a very deep root of suffering. This is greed.

Then we have hatred. The Buddha said hatred is like picking up a burning red-hot coal with our bare hands and throwing it at our enemy. Of course we burn ourselves and probably miss the enemy. Hatred destroys us. It eats up our inside. It distorts our outside as well. Just look at a face of a person who is gripped by hatred. Hatred is a great cause of suffering.

Ignorance is very interesting. Note that ignorance is at the top of the list of the twelve-fold chain of causation. While ignorance is the third of the three poisons, it is most interesting that it is there. I know of no other religion that puts such importance upon the suffering caused by ignorance. The Sanskrit words for ignorance are *avidya* and *moha*.

In the Theravadin or Pali Canon tradition, to be ignorant is to hold wrong views such as clinging to the non-self as the self. Holding the view that the self and things are permanent rather than impermanent. Ignorance of the “Four Noble Truths.” “The Three Poisons.” The Skandhas. The “Twelve-fold Chain of Causation.” The “Eightfold Path.” Ignorance of the teachings of the Dharma. In the Great Vehicle tradition there are two aspects of ignorance. The first is as above. The second is

lack of knowledge and wrong knowledge. It is everything that prevents us from attaining true wisdom. Therefore, the elimination of ignorance involves not only eliminating wrong views but acquiring wisdom. Learning the Dharma. I would further add that ignorance is ignorance of the Dharma. Ignorance of the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. That’s why it is important that we read and we study. It is important that we study with a teacher. That we work. That we memorize the *sutras*. That we memorize the “Heart Sutra.” ”The “*Sandokai*.” The “*Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*.” The *Gathas*. That we know them in our bones. That they become part of our being.

Ignorance also means not being present where you are. Not being awake and aware of what you are doing. Doing a thing in ignorance means not paying attention. Being sloppy. It means not walking on the stepping stones of a beautiful garden but instead tramping on the flowers and the grasses and the ferns. Ignorance includes all of this. It therefore becomes one of the most important of the defilements to work on—to get rid of.

### The Twelve-fold Chain of Causation

The central teaching of the chain is that everything happens as a result of the combination of relative insubstantial causes and conditions. The original formula of this teaching is as follows:

When this is, that is.

This arising, that arises.

When this is not, that is not.

This ceasing, that ceases.

*Imasmim sati idam hoti.*

*Imassupada idam uppajjati.*

*Imasmin asati idam no hoti.*

*Imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati.*

Walpola Rahula also puts it in modern form:

When A is, B is;

Also, there is a full exposition of the teaching in (Rahula. 52. ff.)

A arising, B arises;

When A is not, B is not;

A ceasing, B ceases.

From this simple presentation, the old Buddhists developed the twelve-fold chain of causation.

The chain of causation is a way of describing how we live. Each link of the chain is relative, conditioned, and exists because of another link. Is this really so? Can we think of anything that exists independent of anything else? An existence not caused by something else? I can't. I experience the truth of this most profound teaching.

Not being able to find anything that has an independent existence we run smack into some of the major conceptions of Western religions and philosophies, namely, the ideas of the soul, God, free will, the ego, the self. Looking at the self. Is there such a thing? We saw when we considered the aggregates that there is no permanent self. The self of a human being is the result of the sexual union of a male and female. And the actual body of the self exists because of other factors outside the body. Others built the houses we live in. The wood in our homes came from trees. And so forth. The functioning of our body is due to other causes—down to the circulation of the blood. The major principle at work is, “When this happens, that happens.” So we see when we look at this that everything is relative and everything is conditioned or exists because of something else.

We are connected. We are connected to the whole universe. In this connection (pardon the pun) there was an article in the *New Yorker*

about connections that unite people in the entire universe. For instance, the connections between anyone who personally knows me and Queen Elizabeth are only three! One, to me. Two, there is a step between me and many of the people I know who personally know the Dalai Lama. Three, the Dalai Lama knows Queen Elizabeth. Three steps between everybody connected with me and Queen Elizabeth. The *New Yorker* article further states that at the most only five or six steps connect all of humanity with one another!

We are all connected! So we see how this chain of causation works. We also see that it isn't a chain at all. More it is a web. A circle. Or many circles. It is the entire universe. It is all that is, has been, and will be. In this chain there simply is no discussion of concepts like free will, or God, or ego, or soul, or self, or the absolute. For the idea of free will is subject to causes and connections. Our will is due to many factors that are on the chain of the six sense fields—feeling, craving, seeing, hearing, smelling, and, thinking. The same is true of concepts such as the soul, ego, God, the absolute. These concepts are high-level abstract concepts. When Shakyamuni Buddha was asked about them he responded with the story of a man who was wounded by a poison arrow.

A man was interested in the Buddha's teachings. He wanted to have some questions answered before he would follow the Buddha. He approached Buddha and told him just that. Shakyamuni told him to fire away. The man asked questions such as,

Is there a soul?

Is the soul immortal?

What happens to the soul when the body dies?

Is truth eternal?

Does the truth apply under all circumstances?

Is the truth absolute or is the truth different according to circumstances?

In one version of the story it is said the Buddha responded with “noble silence.” In another version, Shakyamuni responded by telling a story about a man who had been struck with a poison arrow. His friends immediately wanted to remove the arrow. The wounded man stopped them, saying, “Wait. Before you remove the arrow, let’s study it. Let’s look at the feathers on the end of the shaft and so determine the tribe of the man who shot the arrow. Then let’s study the shaft and type of wood used and in this way we can find out the family of the man who shot the arrow. Let’s take a sample of the poison and discover exactly how to treat the injury with the correct antidote.” “This is all well and good,” said the Buddha, “but if we wait until we find the answers to these questions, the man will be dead. Better to act quickly, remove the arrow, and save his life.”

And so it is with these questions. We could spend many years discussing the existence or non-existence of the soul, the immortality or mortality of the soul, the nature of truth. Indeed philosophers and theologians have been discussing and disputing, and writing many books about these issues from time immemorial and continue to do so today.

Instead, the Buddha was interested in the daily facts of human living existence. When you see someone hurting you comfort him. When you are see someone hungry you feed her. When you are hungry you eat. When you need to go to the bathroom you do so. When the grass needs mowing you mow. When the dishes need cleaning you wash them. When you’re tired you rest. When your heart and mind tell you this is a good thing to do you do it. When your heart and mind tell you this is not such a good thing to do you don’t do it. When you don’t know what to do you wait until you are clear.

It’s not that concepts like the soul or the Absolute are not important. But it is difficult to understand what such concepts are about. It is difficult to put such concepts into words.

The closest I come to some language of the soul, or God, is in Shakyamuni’s description of the “unborn,” “uncreated,” “unconditioned,” “uncompounded,” which was cited earlier. Then again, Bankei’s teaching of the Unborn has a similar feeling of that which is ineffable. A feeling of something that is “unconditioned.” Indeed, a feeling approaching that which one may consider, or think of as the Absolute—as God. Some of this language is very similar to the language Meister Eckhart uses. But this gets us into the realm of the Great Vehicle Buddhists, who definitely speak of the Absolute, particularly in the “Heart Sutra.” So we will deal with it later on. Sufficient to understand the twelve links of the chain of causation is that we realize that everything in the chain— everything in the universe is conditioned—or happens because of something else. Everything is connected. Everything is related. As for the Absolute, as for God, as for the Soul, I will also maintain noble silence at least for the time being.

In discussing this section with Margaret, my wife, on one of our daily walks, she suggested that perhaps the twelve-fold chain of causation itself, that is, the entire universe, with all of the connections within it, as a package—that that is the Absolute. That that is God. This is similar to the position taken by Nishijimi Roshi, the translator of Dogen Zenji’s *Shobogenzo* into modern Japanese. He believes that “God” means the Universe. However, this reminds me of a computer error Number 12, which is called an “unimplemented core routine” and causes a computer to crash and possibly lose all of its data. This error happens when a program attempts to execute a certain procedure that has not been adequately defined. The result is a crash. We really don’t have an adequate definition of the Absolute. But more later on this.

### **The Third Noble Truth—*Nirodha***

The Third Noble Truth is *Nirodha*, or *Nirvana*.

This, O bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth  
of the cessation of suffering:

It is the complete cessation of suffering; giving up, renouncing, relinquishing, detaching from craving.

The interesting thing is that the Buddha refused to make any statement regarding the nature of *Nirvana*. And so, of course, who am I to write about it? So I will proceed to do so, being a headstrong fathead. I want to point out something that I find striking in looking at the diagram I made of the Turning of the First Wheel, without realizing I was doing it. That is, that *Nirvana* falls on the ground of impermanence! If you therefore look at *Nirvana*, from the point of view of impermanence, and conclude that *Nirvana* itself is impermanent and always changing what do you have? I think you have something akin to what Jesus was always talking about: that the Kingdom of Heaven is within you. That the Kingdom of Heaven is here. It is nearby. Now. Here. And the here and the now is impermanent! That *Nirvana* is a state we possess within us. It is not a state up there! *Nirvana* is the here and the now.

When we are at peace we get a whiff of *Nirvana*.

When we love, we get a whiff of *Nirvana*.

When we connect we get a whiff of *Nirvana*.

When we receive an insight—and able to say, “That’s it!” we get a whiff of *Nirvana*.

When there is no ignorance, we get a whiff of *Nirvana*,

When there is no greed, we get a whiff of *Nirvana*.

When there is no hate, we have a whiff of *Nirvana*.

*Nirvana* is letting go.

*Nirvana* is being present

Without precondition.

Without thinking about it.

I say in all of the above—a whiff—because, of course, there’s no way to know what *Nirvana* is.

## The Fourth Noble Truth—*Magga*

The Fourth Noble Truth: *Marga* (Pali: *Magga*). The remarkable thing about the teaching of the Eightfold Path of Shakyamuni Buddha is that there is nothing remarkable about it! In fact, I would go so far as to say that the Noble Eightfold Path is probably the biggest letdown in religious history. When one considers the first noble truth: *dukkha*, and the immensity of the all-pervading catastrophe of suffering—disease, the corruption and decay of the body, indeed of the human spirit, the problems of evil, of crime, pollution, hatred, greed, ignorance. The problems enumerated in the twelve-fold chain of causation—craving, attachment, old age, and death; when one considers the immensity of these problems—the catastrophes that Shakyamuni delineated and described—I am astounded at his resolution, namely, the Eightfold path!

Right View,  
Resolve,  
Speech,  
Conduct,  
Livelihood,  
Effort,  
Mindfulness, and  
Meditation.

### That’s it????!!

This unremarkable answer is so pedestrian! So undramatic! I have always found it difficult to memorize these eight steps. There’s so little to it! One would have expected some impenetrable, racked in mystery, theological doctrine, such as the Trinity. (Parenthetically, that came later when the Great Vehicle Buddhists devised the doctrine of the Triple Body of the Buddha—the *Trikaya*. Probably these Buddhists were similarly unimpressed with Shakyamuni’s pedestrian teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path.)

But is not the genius of Shakyamuni Buddha the very pedestrian, down-to-earth, undramatic, anyone-can-do-it, Noble Eightfold Path? It is noble because it is so pedestrian! Back to Thérèse of Lisieux and her Little Way. Is not the eightfold path a Little Way? What is most remarkable about the life of Shakyamuni is that there is very little that is remarkable about it! OK, so he was born a Prince and gave up all that and became homeless and went off into the woods and mountains and practiced the ascetic life. But just about everybody was doing that in India at that time! No big deal. India then was full of people who left their homes and families and went into the hills to become hermits to live the ascetic life. India, today, is still full of these people. It's also happening all over the world. Shakyamuni made no extraordinary claims about himself. He did not claim his teachings were divinely inspired. There is no burning bush. There is no Mount Sinai. There is no angel dictating to him. There are no extraordinary visions. There are not even "voices." He said that everything he taught came from his own mind and his own being. That he figured it all out for himself. And he went further to say that each of us can do it! Whatever it is that I can do you can do.

### **Anything I Can Do, You Can Do—Better!**

Whatever it is that I have, you have.  
It is possible for everybody to do it.  
Yes, even you.

To do what? To overcome the anguish of *duhkha*. What is remarkable about Zen is that there is nothing remarkable about it. There is nothing to it. That's another reason I call it the Little Way. And I really feel the Buddhists of the Pali Canon and Great Vehicle found Shakyamuni's teachings in some ways a little short. A little too simple. And so they compounded the great Buddhist canon we have today: the massive documents of the *sutras* and the *shastras* or commentaries on these *sutras*, the massive theological and psychological explications, such as Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa's, *Visshudimagga*. They may have done this to gain "respectability" among their contemporary religious peers.

Shakyamuni's teachings were so ordinary. Doesn't this strike a Zen bell? "Ordinary is the Way." The Way is the way of "everyday mind." It is the Little Way of eating and drinking. The Way of the ordinary humdrum things of our daily lives. This reminds me of a Zen story.

A famous philosopher had spent all of his life studying and amassing knowledge. He heard that there was a monk living many miles away, teaching a new doctrine called Zen-Buddhism. He decided it would be worth while to travel the great distance in order to meet this monk and exchange and compare teachings. So he set off on his long journey. Several weeks later, he finally arrived at the distant location where the Zen monk was living, quietly and alone in a hut. He was cordially met by the monk. The philosopher proposed that they share their respective teachings and he begin with his. He very carefully and expertly, over a course of several hours, presented his philosophical system. Then, tired from his presentation, he stopped and asked the monk to present the teachings of Zen-Buddhism.

The monk gladly agreed. He said the teaching of Zen Buddhism is to "Try to do good, and try not to hurt any living thing." The philosopher smiled and waited for the monk to continue.

"There's no more," said the monk, "that's it."

"That's it?" said the philosopher. He was outraged. He shouted at the monk, telling him that he traveled many hundreds of miles? And what does he get? A little jingle! A jingle that can be said by any three-year-old child!

The monk smiled, and said, "Yes, a three-year-old child can know this truth but it seems an eighty-year old philosopher cannot."

### **The Eightfold Path**

And so with all of this in mind let's look at the Fourth Noble Truth: *Magga*, The Noble Eightfold Path.

**What is right view?** It is seeing things as they are. Seeing the Four Noble Truths. Seeing that the skandhas are symbolic of the personality and are constantly changing. Understanding the connections of the Twelve-fold Chain of Causation. Not being blinded by our own ego and projections.

**Right resolve or thought**, similarly, means having positive thoughts that are unselfish, loving, and kind.

**Right speech** means paying attention to our language. Using language that doesn't hurt others. Caring language. Not slandering others. Not lying. Using language that is not harsh or abusive. We all know it is possible to use words that can hurt others. Equally we can use words that heal. That are loving. I find it touching that Shakyamuni urges us to pay attention to our language. To use beautiful words. To this day I find the use of profanity offensive. Not that there's something evil about it. What is offensive is that they are harsh. The common use of the word "shit" as an expletive is simply offensive. It's has dank, odiferous connotations. It belongs in the toilet bowl, not in our mouths. Right speech means not using such language. Using language that soothes, heals, is helpful, is kind, and loving. It means not speaking carelessly. It means using language that is appropriate to the time and place. It also means when there is nothing to say, to keep "noble silence."

**Then we have right conduct or action.** Right action means being a peaceful person, and living one's life in an honorable way. Doing peaceful and honorable things. Things that bring joy and happiness to others. Not engaging in the destruction of others, either by stealing, or lying, or cheating, or engaging in offensive sexual abusive acts. Right action means, as with right speech, doing things which are helpful, not only for oneself but for others.

**Right livelihood** means earning our keep in a way that does not hurt others. In a way that is not exploitative of others. What this has meant to the early Buddhists, and I believe it still applies to our time, is not

earning our keep by prostitution, or having a job in such places as the arms industries, or gun factories, liquor stores, slaughterhouses, selling of abusive, dangerous, and illegal drugs like cocaine and heroin. Right livelihood means carefully selecting how we live our lives and support ourselves.

**Right effort** means putting our will behind our Little Way of living a wholesome, harmonious life that is helpful to others. It means making the effort to prevent evil and unwholesome acts to take place.

**Then we have right mindfulness.** This also has the same feeling of the preceding steps of the eightfold path, namely, to be aware of what we are doing. To be attentive to our view, thought, speech, conduct, livelihood. To be conscious of the effort we expend. Live a wholesome life. Think wholesome thoughts. Perform wholesome acts. Not to cause offense to others. Not to cause offense to our environment. Not to carelessly litter as we hike the mountain trails. Not throw beer cans, plastic bottles into the bushes. Not dumping garbage on the roadside. Being sensitive to the needs and concerns of others.

**Finally we come to right concentration, or meditation, or zazen.** For Shakyamuni the best way to achieve a stable and happy life is to include the practice of zazen, or meditation, in our daily life. Shutting our mouths. Being quiet. Not thinking.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the Little Way.

The Little Way of Shakyamuni Buddha.

The Little Way of Zen.

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January 29, 2018