

Green Mountain Zen Center Newsletter

5014 Sunset Bluff Drive, Huntsville, Alabama 35803

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ZEN BUDDHIST SYMBOLS

by **Matsuoka-San**

MARCH 1, 1964

A Buddhist religious service is not to pay homage to a god or to the Buddha as if he had been a god, but to enter into that spirit that will enable us to be Buddhas ourselves. A Buddhist does not worship the Buddha; we only admire the Buddha's enlightenment and resolve to follow his way. Our purpose is to be a Buddha ourself. To enter into the spirit of the Buddha, the Buddhist follows the way of the meditating Buddha and sits silently in meditation. This is our Soto Zen Meditation – sitting with empty minds, erect posture, facing the wall, entering into the world of Enlightenment.

Many people question whether or not a person of another religion can sit in meditation. Why not? Meditation is to empty your mind and to purify it. It does not presuppose a religious creed. People also ask about the rituals and symbols of the Zen Buddhist Way. They think that adhering to them would be like professing a new faith. Visitors, in particular, feel that if they participate in them, they would be disowning their own religious faith. Others feel self-conscious in doing them and fail to understand their deep significance.

In Zen Buddhism, all is one. The mind and the body cannot be separated, and the Enlightenment of the mind cannot be had without some effort of the body. Sitting motionless with erect posture and correct breathing aids in clearing the mind. The movements and actions of the body have their effect upon the attitudes of the mind.

For this reason, in Zen, there are a number of rituals and symbols that are part of our minds' entering into the spirit of enlightenment. They are, as it were, aids to enlightenment, just as sitting in the posture of the Buddha at the moment he became enlightened is also an aid to it. Sitting in Meditation causes us to enter the Enlightened world and helps erase the barriers between this world of Enlightenment and the world of Illusion which captures so much of our attention during our everyday lives.

The Bow (*Gassho*)

Please recall the bow, or *gassho* – the placing of the palms of the hands together in a prayerful position accompanied by a slight bow. This is a custom giving outward expression to an inward feeling of respect. In Zen Buddhism, the *gassho* is performed twice before beginning meditation – when facing the other members of the session and toward the place where you will be meditating. This shows the respect you have for both.

In Zen monasteries, a monk will make the *gassho* before even eating a meal or entering a room. The idea is not to idolize everything, but to respect and to be grateful for it. When the body is reminded to show this respect and gratitude many times each day, the inner attitude will gradually be applied to everything, and will become a frame of mind rather than merely a ritual.

In most religions, when a man prays, he does so to a supernatural being or power for help or deliverance. He puts his trust in this being or force, or perhaps tries to persuade, or even deceive it. So when Buddhists are seen making the Buddhist bow, it is frequently misunderstood.

In making the Buddhist formal prostration bow, we first *gassho* and then kneel on the floor. Next, the arms are extended in front, and the forehead is touched to the floor. In this position, the palms of the hands are extended, turned upward, and then slowly closed to form a loose fist. The position is held for a few seconds and then the form is reversed, the person rising to his/her feet, preparing to repeat the bow.

The Buddhist bow is made before the altar and is usually performed three times. The first bow is in honor of the historical Buddha; the second, in honor of his teachings (*dharma*); and the third, for the community (*sangha*). These Three Jewels of Buddhism are not worshipped in the usual sense, but are honored to show our respect for them, to express our gratitude for their wisdom and guidance, and to actualize our devotion to them. This bow is a way of our recognizing our "Buddha-nature", our need to follow the Buddha's teachings, and our part in the community.

In Zen, nothing is worshipped, for in Zen, there is no supernatural. Instead, we recognize the unity of all existence, and with our extended palms, we symbolize holding the feet of the Buddha or the whole universe.

The Buddhist Bow is a beautiful expression of our deepest beliefs and quiet action in our effort to find our Buddha-nature and become One with the Universe.

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Matsuoka, cont'd. **Chanting (*Hannya Shingyo*)**

Just as meditation and the receiving of the stick are preceded by the sign of the *gassho*, the chanting is conducted before meditation begins. The chant can be done by anyone because it is not a religious statement. It is not a creed or a dogma. The chant speaks of the conquering of life and death and could even be called a philosophy for life. The *Makahannya Shingyo* chant prepares your mind for the silence of meditation and testifies to the emptiness your own mind will experience.

Altar (*Butsudan*) and Gong (*Kane*)

The artistic expression of this can be seen in the altar. The Buddha sits silently in meditation. The serene figure is surrounded by golden flowers. Incense slowly rises before it, and candles give it light. The gong echoes its sound at the beginning of the meditation. With their aid, we can see the oneness of the world and the nearness of enlightenment. We should be able to recognize ourselves in the image of the Buddha. The statue should remind us of what we are and may become, and of the seed of Buddhahood within us.

The flowers remind us that we have our roots in the mud of darkness and ignorance, but that if we rise above them, we can also see with the eyes of the Buddha. Just as the incense is worthless unless it is burned, we are reminded that the potential within is also worthless, unless it be developed. With the echoing sound of the gong, we remember that our life is fleeting with time that knows no stopping. We are reminded of the present moment and that it is in this present moment that we must begin our meditation, in order to rise above life and death. We know that it is in this moment when we must empty our minds and fulfill our potential to be a Buddha!

The unity of life is seen in the altar. We must think of ourselves and the world as being One. We must also not separate our inner feelings and attitudes from our outward behavior, nor think of ourselves as separate from the objects in the world surrounding us. We must perfect our lives — inner and outer — in order to live a life of an Enlightened One. An Enlightened One lives in Reality. Everyone is urged to continue their meditation in this spirit!

Buddha Statue

The Buddha statue which sits upon this altar has an interesting and significant story behind it. This particular statue was given to Elliston Roshi by his teacher, Matsuoka Roshi, in the early eighties. In recognition of the value of this statue, the Japanese Air Lines arranged special transportation for it to the United States free of charge when Reverend Matsuoka returned to this country after a lecture tour in Japan and Korea.

The Buddha statue is not worshipped as an idol, or bowed to as an act of obeisance to a god. The Buddha was an historical figure who is admired and respected for his accomplishment, but is not regarded as a deity. The statue is an artistic representation of the Zen ideal of the seated figure of a Buddha, or of the Buddha in one stage of his life, such as the baby Buddha, which is included in the Buddha's birthday ceremony. The serene depiction of the Buddha in profound samadhi is an image of our original nature which is meant to inspire and encourage us.

Incense Offering

In Zen, the offering of incense at the Temple altar is of the highest significance. Offering incense is an unselfish act in which we express our conviction of the Oneness of all things and the transient nature of all existence.

In the incense, we see the potential that is in ourselves, just as the incense itself is worthless until it is put to the flame. We know that our lives are useless, too, unless our potentials are fulfilled. In the incense, we recognize too that our lives are as fleeting as its sweet smoke.

In offering incense, we should approach the altar in a dignified manner, bow in *gassho* before it, light the stick or take a pinch of granulated incense, placing it on the burning part of the charcoal. After placing the incense in the bowl, and bow again in a graceful manner.

The bow during the incense offering symbolizes unity — of ourselves, the Buddha and the world. One hand symbolizes our everyday self, and is placed palm to palm with the other hand symbolizing the Buddha. Our slight bow at the time of the *gassho* is a sign of the respect we feel for the benevolence of the Universe with which we are One. In the act of offering incense, the true nature of our self is expressed.

The Stick (*Kyosaku*)

Many have asked that the Zen custom of the *Kyosaku* be explained. The *Kyosaku* is a blow on the shoulder during meditation with the light stick carried by a Zen priest. The blow is given during the meditation sessions when we feel ourself becoming drowsy or is having difficulty concentrating. The *Kyosaku* is given only to those who request it, is not painful, and is very beneficial in clearing the mind and in making meditation more meaningful.

To signal the priest that you want to receive the *Kyosaku*, you make the *gassho*. That is, place the palms of your hands together in the position of prayer, and bow your head slightly in a respectful manner. The Zen priest will see the signal and arise from his seated position. He will come behind you and tap your shoulder with the *Kyosaku* stick two times lightly to let you know that he is about to give you the blow. You must then bend your neck and head slightly to the left so that your shoulder can be struck without obstruction. After you have received the *Kyosaku*, it is proper to *gassho* once more to show your gratitude for it, and the priest will do the same behind you.

The purpose of the blow on the shoulder with the stick, or *kyosaku*, is to perfect the spiritual life. Like the *gassho*, anyone can make use of it. The *kyosaku* is to awaken one who has fallen from a high level of concentration because of drowsiness or distraction, or to help one concentrate who is having difficulty doing so from the onset. Its purpose is to further the entering into the world of enlightenment, and it is far from being a ritual devoid of meaning. It is a painless means of self-discipline, of which everyone should avail themselves during meditation. The *gassho* is used to request the *kyosaku*, to show respect for its use, and afterward, to show gratitude for its benefits.

It is important that everyone understands that this *Kyosaku* is not a punishment, but should be considered a means to help you improve your meditation. It is administered only at your request and is given solely for your benefit. For you, it should correct your posture, clear your mind, and be an excellent form of self-discipline. Without it, it is not Zen.

These things — chanting, receiving the stick, as well as offering incense, and making the deep Buddhist bow in honor of the Buddha, his teachings, and the community — all are in the manner of Zen. In Zen Buddhism, your manner is a reflection of your inner spiritual life, just as the moon is reflected in a pond of water. If your inner life is calm, your movements and manner will be a perfect reflection of your serenity, just as a still pond reflects the shape of the moon perfectly. But if the water is rippled, the reflection of the moon will be distorted. It is important that you perfect your inner life, so that your whole being can never be separated from it. This is the life of the Buddha — one that is lived in true accord with the inner nature!



GMZC Schedule of Events:

- ◊ Zazen Services Every Sunday @ 7:00pm
- ◊ Newcomers' Instruction @ 6:00pm Every Second Sunday of Each Month

Next Newcomers' Session -- June 12, 6:00pm

Contact: Jim Gordon
(256) 882-0513 (home)
(256) 426-3344 (cell phone)

29 May 2005, 7:00 pm:

Dharma Discussion: Red Pine's *The Heart Sutra*
Part Two: *Abhidharma*, pp. 97 -- 127

22 & 23 July 2005:

Friday evening (7:30pm - 9:30pm), all day Saturday (7:00am -- 7:00pm)

Zazenkai - Meditation Retreat

(tbd) October 2005:

Weekend Sesshin (Friday pm - Sunday Noon)
Featuring Guest Teacher *TaiUn* Michael Elliston, Abbott,
Atlanta Soto Zen Center

**A Great Pilgrimage** by Kabir

I felt in need of a great pilgrimage
so I sat still for three
days

and God came
to me.

**The Fish** by Mary Oliver

The first fish
I ever caught
would not lie down
quiet in the pail
but flailed and sucked
at the burning
amazement of the air
and died
in the slow pouring off
of rainbows. Later
I opened his body and separated
the flesh from the bones
and ate him. Now the sea
is in me: I am the fish, the fish
glitters in me; we are
risen, tangled together, certain to fall
back to the sea. Out of pain,
and pain, and more pain
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
by the mystery.

**Wild Geese** by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love
what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.



CREATIVITY AND ZEN
BY ELLISTON-ROSHI
16 MARCH 2005

Creativity in Zen is as much a matter of attitude, or experience, as of behavior. In fact, this is true of any genuine creative activity. Conventionally, creativity is linked to certain types of behavior, such as the performance arts, or the production of objects in specific, defined media. Painting, acting and stage performing, composing music, and writing (of certain kinds), are "creative," whereas other activities, such as digging ditches or crunching numbers, are not. The creativity is seen to inhere in a class of activities, rather than in the state of mind, or being, of the person engaged in any given activity.

This convention brings about a comparison and social tension between the creative "elite" and ordinary people, and evolves to the celebrity worship widely indulged in today. In the extreme, it begets an absolute division of those who comprise the consuming audience of "non-performers," passive recipients of arts and entertainment (either not capable of performing, or waiting their turn to perform, as at the Oscars), and those who are "on." One of the perhaps unintended results of the current vogue of "reality" shows on TV, and the "news-ification" of celebrity, is the blurring of this line. This is similar to the effect of 1960's avant-garde experiments in street theater, intentionally erasing the line between what is the performance and what is not.

In Zen, we are called upon to discover the root source of creativity, and to apply it to the greatest, broadest and deepest medium of all — life, or existence itself. Artistic activity in Zen is simply pointing at, or documenting, a more elusive creativity, that of the mind itself. Let me recount my experience of this.

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I developed an interest in drawing before I was seven years old, probably as a way to get attention. My older brother was a musical prodigy, which got him a lot of notice and praise from parents, family and friends. The bar was raised high in that arena, so I found another path. Several of my uncles stored belongings in our attic while they were in service in WWII. I slept in the room next to the attic, and so naturally spent considerable time snooping through their stuff. One of them was a commercial artist, who left some really seductive drawing supplies and tools. This was my first exposure to real professional drawing pencils, the kind that had natural wood bodies and mysterious codes marked on them — 2H; 2B; 4H — which I discovered indicated the degree of hardness or softness of the “lead” — and thus the quality of the line they made. Heady stuff for a seven-year old. I can still remember their unique smell.

In the early years, I was self-taught, encouraged by parents who provided materials on a severely limited budget. My discovery of the existence of drawing was prompted by comic books and Walt Disney movies, particularly those with lush cartoon drawings of natural settings. I was intrigued by the difference between the illustrated scenes and the actual woodland vistas where I grew up. Sometimes, gazing at a familiar meadow, it was strangely like the movie image. The idealized illustrations helped me to “re-see” the reality in my vision.

I began drawing by copying Disney cartoons, such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. I did a crayon drawing of these characters in the third grade that I could not do as well today. It was surprisingly accurate, when I looked at it some years later. Through the process of carefully copying by eye, the way I saw things changed. I learned to see the relative angle and distance of the various shapes and features of an image, and to translate that directly onto a blank sheet of paper on a smaller scale, with considerable trial and error, of course. The smaller I drew, the more control I seemed to have. I did comic strips featuring my dog, making the transition from copying to originating images.

Through grade school and high school, I continued with this activity, and as a consequence, was recognized as being “creative” by my teachers and peers. I designed the high school parade float, the environment for my senior prom, even the gown my date wore (my mother was a seamstress and my father made sure the carousel on the float actually turned). When it came time to apply to go to university, these activities, along with my good grades, pushed me in a predictable direction, toward the visual arts or design, and helped me secure scholarships, without which I could not have afforded the tuition.

A year or so after graduating with my Bachelor’s degree, I was hired to teach a course at the University of Illinois, and shortly thereafter also at the School of the Art Institute, both in Chicago. It looked like I was on the ideal career path, but actually it proved to be all too academic for me. Each institution wanted me to make a full-time commitment to it, instead of working in both, but I was interested in avoiding the politics of each. My family life with my first wife and children was under increasing stress at the time as well, and lent to the inadequacy I felt with what might have been the ideal creative position for many.

In teaching design and art courses at the university, I was exposed to all manner of group dynamics, brainstorming and other methods, in a laboratory setting with an interdisciplinary group of colleagues from many creative fields. It was a process of complete immersion in the possibilities, and after some six years going on seven, I felt it time to get out into the “real world” of business and commerce. When I did, I was surprised at the lack of understanding of business colleagues, especially “creative” ones, of these same group processes.

As an insider to the business of design, I have seen the limits to creativity in the “real world,” where constraints and criteria often reduce the creative process to a rather desultory series of compromises. Otherwise creative and idealistic individuals were often co-opted by political competition within the corporation, or the necessity for compromise determined by sales people and clients. Often the objective was not developing the best solution, but jockeying for position in the corporate hierarchy, even if it required working against the interests of the company. So I left to establish my own consultancy.

As a design professional, I have spent my career engaged in what most people would consider creative activities — problem solving and innovation for a wide spectrum of clients in manufacturing and retailing, helping develop new products and approaches to marketing them.

But I also noticed that while the clients and I are certainly solving the identified corporate problem, we are not confronting the deeper, underlying problems of the individuals involved. Many times, though the program we develop is undeniably successful, the client team does not get credit for it, so it does not help their career paths. In other cases, the individual persons are clearly suffering from pressures that have little or nothing to do with the problem at hand, and in any case there is always a long inventory of corporate problems following immediately behind. As soon as this one is solved, along comes another.

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So it has become starkly clear to me that no matter how good I become at the profession of design as it is applied in business, it will not ultimately or permanently solve the real problems of the individuals with whom I work, who pay me well to do what they think needs to be done. And they are largely unaware of, or at least not prone to discuss, the fact that there is something missing in the process, something that cannot be fulfilled by success at work. This is why I find sharing Zen practice to be so satisfying.

While I have witnessed the uncreative side of the creative profession, I have also become aware of the corollary — that all activities are inherently creative. That is, that the creativity itself has little or nothing to do with the actual behavior. I can hear some of you responding, Yeah, like the creative accounting we have seen lately in big business. But this kind of creativity, while deserving of our scorn, is based on a motivation — greed, that is far removed from the kind of creativity found in Zen, which has little or no direct commercial value. And it must be said that creativity itself is no warranty against commercialism. Professionals in creativity often struggle with the same ethical dilemma, that they don't want to "sell out," compromise their principles or art, for mere financial gain. This demeans their contribution. But they must make a living in order to continue creating.

Applied creativity itself, however, in particular the kind of design training in the Bauhaus method that I was exposed to in my early schooling, has a kind of integrity of process and an open-ended, scientific investigation that is akin to the attitude in Zen. There is not enough space to develop this fully here, but suffice it to say that my regard and respect for the methodical development of creativity has not been reduced one iota by my experience of the limits to its application in commerce. In fact, I feel sure that its true value is to the individual undergoing such training, and only secondarily to those in his or her community, although it certainly has demonstrable value there as well. Same with Zen.

In creative exercises, there is a built-in duality — a subject and an object. The problem we are solving in design, the content of the work, is the object of the exercise; and we, the individual or group with the assignment, are the subjects. We apply methods of defining the problem, generating alternative solutions, and analyzing and identifying the most fitting of our choices. We then proceed to elaborate and implement the solution or solutions of choice, and repeat the above process through various levels of testing until we have attained the agreed-upon requirements of success.

But the object of the exercise for the true artist is not the resulting work of art. It is more the engagement with the process itself. Thus, it is said that good drawing is simply good seeing. The object of drawing as a creative act, in other words, is not the drawing produced, but the experience of the act of drawing. Through an intense relationship of hand-to-eye coordination, we come to see differently. We come to "re-see," just as I did as a child affected by Disney's animated cartoons. The act of drawing trains the eye. The training of the eye results in better drawing. The same can be said of photography, and the relevance of this principle to musical and other sense-training is obvious. It is a self-evolving process, involving feedback through the sensory, brain, and sensory-motor network, in effect rewiring the interface for greater sensitivity. This can have a profound and lasting effect on the artist, and in fact is the hallmark of the true artist, and the work produced can have an immense impact on others as well.

Similarly, through the practice of Zen, and particularly in the experience of zazen, we refresh our experience of the world. We relearn it. First, we must unlearn previous misconceptions and opinions, after which, in their stead a fresh view, unfettered by opinion, emerges. This is much like the attitude of a child, which is usually very creative, and full of potential. However, in recovering this childlike outlook as adults, we also benefit from the wisdom of our accumulated experience. Thus, the rebirth of our creativity is richer and deeper than that we experienced as children.

Ordinarily, our efforts at creativity are hampered by the idea that it is dependent upon an activity, or upon specialized pursuits. Only once we have tasted actual creativity, not limited to specific behaviors, does it become possible to express it through creative media, and even then it engenders another degree of difficulty. This explains the magic felt in the paintings and calligraphy of the Zen masters — they not only "have it" — they also have "the use of it." This living grasp of creativity is, also, I think, in Western art. I speculate that it is what drove Van Gogh mad. When you look at his paintings, you can see that he was trying to capture his actual experience, but found it impossible to catch up to it in the maddeningly slow medium of paint. Reality is too beautiful, too dynamic, and too real. Fortunately for us, his paintings are also real, and clearly point to the vision he could not capture.

So in Zen, the most important thing is to come to experience creatively, to experience creativity directly — regardless of the particulars of our circumstances. This creativity is innate in us, and inherent in ordinariness.

