Zen

Zen is a form of Buddhism that developed first in China around the sixth century CE and then spread from China to Korea, Vietnam and Japan. The term Zen is just the Japanese way of saying the Chinese word *Chan* (禪), which is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word *Dhyāna* (*Jhāna* in Pali), which means "meditation." In the image above one sees on the left the character 禪 in Japanese calligraphy and on the right an *ensō*, or Zen circle. In Japan the drawing of such a circle is considered a high art, the expression of a moment of enlightenment by the Zen master calligrapher.

After Buddhism first came to China from India around the first century CE, it eventually developed into several unique Chinese schools of Buddhism, influenced by the introduction of Mahāyāna Buddhism from India as well as by certain aspects of Chinese culture and philosophy. The tradition known as *Chan Buddhism* in China, and *Zen Buddhism* in Japan, brings together Mahāyāna Buddhism and Daoism. This confluence of Buddhism and Daoism in Zen is most obvious in the Chinese script on the left which reads: "The heart-mind (*xin* 心) is the buddha (佛), the buddha (佛) is the path (*dao* 道), the path (*dao* 道) is meditation (*chan* 禪)." The line is from a text called the *Bloodstream Sermon* attributed to the legendary Bodhidharma. An Indian meditation master, Bodhidharma had come to China around 520 CE and in time would come to be regarded as the first patriarch of Chan Buddhism. In his writings it is evident that Bodhidharma had absorbed something of Daoism. The Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings that are most evident in his writing are the teachings of emptiness
(Śūnyatā) from the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras as well as the notion of the buddha-nature (dharmakāya) that is part of the Mahāyāna teaching of the three bodies (trikāya) of the Buddha. The Daoist influence on Bodhidharma can be seen in the way these teachings are presented.

The Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness (Śūnyatā), summarized most succinctly in the Heart Sutra, holds that not only all the five parts or branches of the self, but indeed all things, are empty of independent or inherent existence. Nothing exists separately. Everything exists in a web of interdependence. This teaching of emptiness was just a dramatic way of restating the fundamental teaching of the Buddha, who taught that everything exists in interdependence (Pratītyasamutpāda). The Daoist philosophers also had a notion of emptiness (wu 無) expressed throughout the Daodejing in images such as an empty clay vessel. In the selection Outline of Practice, Bodhidharma says that "All phenomenon are empty," and this, clearly, echoes the teaching of the Heart Sutra that "all phenomenon are empty (Śūnyatā)"; and yet, in Bodhidharma's Chinese text (wu 無) is used to translate the Sanskrit (Śūnyatā). How similar or different are the Buddhist teaching of emptiness (Śūnyatā) and the Daoist notion of emptiness (wu 無) is one of the interesting philosophical questions that arise in thinking about the philosophy of Zen.

The notion of the buddha-nature in all things is part of the Mahāyāna conception of the three bodies of a buddha. There is first of all the buddha manifested in a particular human being, the "manifestation body" (Nirmāṇakāya), the buddha seen in visions and deep states of meditation, the "body of bliss (Sambhogakāya), and finally the "truth-body" (Dharmakāya) or buddha-nature in all things. Some schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism depict the Sambhogakāya buddhas as god-like beings, celestial Buddhas, which then become the object of devotional worship. The distinctive thing about the Chan/Zen school of Buddhism is its focus on the Dharmakāya. Whereas other schools emphasized devotional practice, knowledge of the sutras, doing good deeds and/or keeping to the rules or precepts, Bodhidharma emphasizes in the Bloodstream Sermon that all one has do to is see one's own nature. If the buddha-nature is in all things, then one does not have to look outside oneself for the buddha; the buddha is within, in the heart-mind (xin 心). Although xin is translated as "mind," it is important to be aware that in the Chinese context, xin is "heart" as well as "mind." This means that it is not a purely intellectual understanding, but rather an experience of the heart as well. The Chan/Zen tradition follows Bodhidharma's teaching emphasizing the experience of enlightenment. Although the tradition would eventually emphasize two different forms of practice, zazen or meditation practice and koan study (koans are a kind of riddle or thought experiment) both aim at bringing about the experience of the buddha within the self, within the heart-mind. Of course, with the understanding of emptiness (Śūnyatā), it is understood that the self is not separate and independent, but instead
arises interdependently with everything else. The Zen tradition thus also emphasizes, with other schools of Mahāyāna, that wisdom leads to compassion, and thus to the bodhisattva vow to be concerned not just for one's own enlightenment, but rather to the liberation from suffering for all beings.

Although its emphasis is on the fundamental teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Bodhidharma's *Bloodstream Sermon* also suggests the Daoist notion of *wuwei* (無為) in teaching "a buddha is someone who does nothing." Bodhidharma also echoes the opening line of the *Daodejing*, "the dao that can be put into words is not really the dao" in teaching that the Way (*dao*) of the Buddha cannot be expressed in language. Like Laozi, the legendary author of the *Daodejing*, Bodhidharma teaches that "the Way (*dao*) is wordless (*wuming* 無名)"; and also like Laozi, Bodhidharma uses words not with the pretention of capturing the *dao*, but rather as a way of suggesting or pointing to it. It is not enough to simply understand the words, one must experience oneself the buddha-nature within the heart-mind.

Tim Freeman

*The University of Hawai‘i at Hilo*