

# Zen, Satori, Enlightenment & Truth

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**Abstract:** Satori Zen is of immense interest to anyone pursuing authentic metaphysical knowledge because it claims to offer an astonishingly straightforward path to full Spiritual Enlightenment. And in terms of outright simplicity and immediate applicability, there is no other spiritual technique quite like it, in any other tradition anywhere. But does it do what it claims to do ? Can you really 'power your way into heaven' by brute meditative force ? And does this then mean that satori is equivalent to Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment ? This essay will examine the key elements and claims of Satori Zen in the light of independent and objective metaphysical knowledge.

## The conceptual perspective

For the purposes of this study, we are only interested in Zen insofar as it is a substantial means to spiritual knowledge. All other considerations are secondary, trivial, and of recreational value only. It does not much matter where Zen comes from, or when it originated, or what its history is. What matters is what it teaches. Who cares how scholarly accurate various Zen studies are ? Only people with nothing better to do. It's not the scholarship that counts, it's what's being said. And the situation with regard to an ordinary popular understanding of Zen is much more problematic than interested observers might be inclined to think: Zen practitioners are often highly partisan and combative, yet intellectually retarded; Zen scholars, on the other hand, tend to be dismissive of practitioners<sup>1</sup>, believing their lack of scholarly diligence to mean they are most likely misinformed and deluded, and probably not even practicing an authentic Zen at all; though these same scholars are unable to contribute any metaphysical insights of their own to the whole process, nor are they the least interested in doing so, and their pronouncements never amount to much more than a misguided obeisance to an entirely self-serving vision of academic rectitude. It is the equivalent of a group of spectators pontificating confidently on the finer points of a game they have never played, and don't fully understand.

None of this would matter were it not for the fact that Zen, as a readily available technique anyone - given a certain level of instruction and supervision - can practice, makes provocative claims of considerable interest to those of us pursuing metaphysical knowledge and insight. It is to these claims that we want to direct our efforts.

## What is Zen ?

This is not as easy a question to answer as might first appear. Zen does not refer to a single teaching, or a single spiritual practice. There are at least two main schools, Rinzai and

Soto, and both approach the idea of Enlightenment from radically different standpoints. They have long been in competition with one another. And over the last hundred years, thanks to the way in which various western New Age groups have also found themselves competing for attention, Zen – as a very distinctive approach to spiritual matters - has been keen to promote an image of itself as disciplined and purposive, in contrast to the kind of mystical airy-fairness likely to be found elsewhere. Of course all New Age groups will, at a nudge, actively denigrate their competition, but this tends to be from within a relatively easy going, relaxed and indulgent vision of what religion is supposedly all about, whereas the Zen schools are keen to be seen as hard-headed and uncompromising. Which means that representing an authentic Zen has come to be seen as an important achievement in its own right, and something active supporters can be justly proud of. Which means in turn that it is almost impossible to present a widely accepted and uncontested view as to exactly what Zen is.

Yet we can still identify its main features, focussing on those ideas we consider to be metaphysically crucial, while disregarding the rest. Zen appears to have a long and potentially contradictory and confusing history, if we approach it as a series of conflicting spiritual claims of equal value. But if we take a ‘Zen approach’ to Zen, and ask appropriately blunt and pointed questions, the story becomes much simpler, as well as much more metaphysically interesting and informative. Because Zen history then becomes a matter of the extent to which each competing school is able to offer an authentic route to spiritual wisdom, as opposed to yet another merely delusory religious doctrine.

The whole saga begins in China around 500 AD, some thousand years after the time of the Buddha himself. The actual mythical and historical elements of the Zen story can be studied elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, and they are not particularly important, if we accept and stick to the plausible idea that Buddhism arrived in China as a ‘barbarian import’, most likely from India, and that it underwent a series of transformative adaptations along the way. Indian verbosity, hyperbole and transcendentalism was discarded in favour of a simple practicality which sought direct answers to basic questions such as ‘what is Buddhism actually proposing, and what are its practices?’ and ‘what is the ultimate goal in Buddhism, and how is it to be achieved?’

Buddhism has at its core the story of a person’s quest for the ultimate in metaphysical wisdom. The legend has it that a seeker – Prince Gautama – having learned through his own grim experience the inadequacy of all forms of traditional religious teaching and practice, was forced to confront the truth of the human condition as it is, objectively and independently, without recourse to any doctrinal intermediary. He had to disregard traditional yogas and austerities and meditations, and to seek a possible solution to his spiritual predicament on its own terms. The situation looked hopeless, yet somehow, through persistent reflection, he discovered – in the depths of his mind – the special insight he had been looking for. The problem was resolved, and his searching was over. He then went on to tell people that what he had discovered was deep and profound and indescribably difficult to put into words, but that the discovery was decisive and complete and once-for-all. He had realised the Supreme Truth about life and existence. He had thereby become the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

The story of the Buddha is, in essence, a narrative illustration of the necessity of radical renunciation – abandonment, if you like – of all received beliefs and patterns of thought about life and existence, if one is to achieve metaphysical insight and knowledge. You don’t have to believe in the historical veracity of the story to appreciate its metaphysical validity. It is simply trying to tell us that one has to renounce all forms of received ideas, and habitual patterns of thought, not because they are wrong in themselves, but because they need to be radically improved upon through the attainment of insight, or wisdom. The extent to which one clings to certain conceptions is the extent to which one is trapped in a certain ‘condition’, the only way out of which is through the actualisation of insights which help you transcend the limitations of that condition. These insights can only be achieved through a steady and persistent independence of mind, quietly reflecting - objectively and impartially - on all aspects of our human metaphysical predicament, observing how it functions, and how it captures our

attention, and how it might offer avenues of escape. These insights never come about as a result of a belief in certain doctrines, no matter how profound and penetrating and encompassing those doctrines might be, and no matter how passionately people might claim that their belief in these doctrines has helped them, because doctrines amount to the imposition of distorting mental templates on a basic and necessary clarity of mind, and on a basic and necessary clarity of intellectual sight. If you can't see your situation clearly for yourself, then all you can see is other people's thoughts about your situation, and if that's the only thing you can see, you might as well not bother looking at anything at all. And this, when it comes down to it, seems to be a condition most people are reasonably happy to accept. In other words, people are not much interested in exploring the reality of their metaphysical situation for themselves, they are happy just to believe in one doctrine or another, and to leave it at that.

Belief and faith are the essential elements of everyday religion. Religion can only work if people are prepared, in the interests of soothing their innermost fears and anxieties, to cling on to the hope that religious practice will somehow see them right in the end. Anxiety gives rise to hope, and hope is formalised into faith and belief. Religion would have no meaning if this elemental relationship did not obtain, because religion would then simply amount to a series of speculative theories – fascinating, perhaps, and well worth taking a look at - but by no means convincing or decisive. Without a 'hopeful faith' to give it credibility, and override everyday rationality, religion would look very fanciful and strange, and likely be considered as the product of a very troubled imagination. Yet if people feel comforted by such imaginings - as they clearly do - then there is no good reason to stop them from reassuring themselves in this way, but if they are after 'the truth' – the unadorned facts of life and existence - then they need to follow a different path, and head in a quite different direction. And this different direction is what the story of the Buddha is all about, and what Buddhism ought to be trying to teach us.

But as we already know, Buddhist religion – as practiced by millions worldwide - is not a call to independence of thought and objective metaphysical observation and reflection, it is a call to Buddhist belief. Buddhism became just another religion the very moment it was formalised, and all the Buddha's good intentions were reduced – almost – to dust. 'Almost', because the Buddha's message is loud and clear in the story of the Buddha himself<sup>3</sup>, even if not many people can be bothered to see that. How can we be sure that the essential message was reduced to dust ? Because Buddhism doesn't produce Buddhas, or even aspirant Buddhas – except nominally - it only ever produces more Buddhists, more faithful believers. And Buddhism must be content with that, otherwise it would reform itself.

Yet we have obviously cornered ourselves with something of a paradox here, because if people find themselves comforted by Buddhist beliefs, and we have already said that they should be allowed to indulge themselves - if that is the best they can do – then Buddhism should be left to go its own sweet way. But Buddhist metaphysics was meant to offer special knowledge specifically to those few who were determined to find 'the truth'; it was not meant to replace the Indian religion of its day with another variant form. That Buddhism has become something of a world religion – offering comforting doctrinal faith to the masses - only reminds us how deeply distorted and obscured its original teachings have become.

Where does all this take us ? To the interesting fact that when Indian Buddhism hit China, the Chinese set about trying to get to the point of Buddhism, in exactly the way that the Buddha would have wanted. At least, this is what D.T. Suzuki has argued<sup>4</sup>, and it makes for an interesting historical talking point. There is certainly something about Chan, as a characteristically Chinese form of Buddhism, which is 'fundamentalist' in the best possible sense, in that it reduces the whole Buddhist project to its elements, in identifying a certain simple purposive meditation as the key method, and an enlightenment experience as the ultimate goal. That doesn't mean that Chan got it right, but at least they tried.

And in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, a thousand years after its origins in China, Chan reached Japan, where it began to evolve into what we now know of as Zen. And a thousand years after

that, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zen reached the West. And by that time, 'Zen' had long since become an umbrella term which covered at least two major and separate schools of thought, Rinzai and Soto, which, though both emphasised formal sitting meditation, had very different ways of defining 'Enlightenment'. Without going into details, Rinzai has emphasised a very particular, sudden, distinctive, transformative cosmic experience called 'satori' – described as 'sudden enlightenment' – whereas Soto believes that we are already enlightened, and that our everyday experience is an ongoing manifestation, and confirmation, of it. So formal sitting meditation in Soto was conceived of as a kind of symbolic testament to your already existing enlightenment, and it basically adds nothing to the sum of metaphysical insight which you already possess, which, if Soto sounds credible to you, is no insight at all. The self-contradictory absurdity of Soto is plain to anyone capable of even a rudimentary scepticism, but the very existence of it as a tradition is an important illustration of how some people can be lured into accepting metaphysical nonsense if it is presented to them in a way which makes them think it might actually be quite profound. This is because they are not interested in exploring metaphysical reality for themselves - they feel more comfortable embracing and then hotly defending<sup>5</sup> a specious creed that celebrates both doublethink and intellectual imbecility.

It might appear that we are now arguing for the 'superiority' of Rinzai Zen over Soto, insofar as Rinzai has a substantial and distinctive feature – satori - to promote, whereas Soto is no more than a delusional fellowship of fools sitting around wasting their lives. Would that it were that simple. The truth is that Rinzai – with a highly formalised system of koans and mondo<sup>6</sup> – is effectively as vacuous and theatrical as Soto, and can no more deliver satori to its aspirants than a casual yoga class which throws in a few minutes silent meditation at the end of all the posturing. Because Rinzai practitioners soon learn how to play the Zen game, and how to speak in fatuous gibberish, and how to blurt out supposedly spontaneous – but in fact highly stylised – responses to supposedly searching mondo questions<sup>7</sup>, making the whole undertaking a monstrous charade, with gormless teachers leading gullible students in what amounts to no more than playroom antics. If the quest for metaphysical wisdom is reducible to this sort of thing, what hope for those questers starting out who really want to learn something ?

But if workaday Zen – irrespective of the school - is an instance of religious theatre for those who can't be bothered to explore things for themselves, this does not mean that no one ever achieved anything through Zen practice. Some have clearly found exactly what they were looking for. Strange and wonderful experiences are definitely there to be had, and there is a wealth of believable testimony to this effect. And it is well worth our taking a hard look at examples of this testimony and judging them in an objective way, as a means of increasing our insight into Zen mysticism, both Soto and Rinzai.

## **What is satori ?**

As we have seen, Zen amounts to something of a fundamentalist reworking of Buddhist principles, reducing everything to a bare minimum, with a minimal technique – sitting meditation – and minimal doctrine – achieving Enlightenment. This is true of both the Rinzai and Soto schools, although with Soto there is nothing to do but 'sit', and with Rinzai there is a supposed advance towards satori.

And as we have also tried to make clear, Zen is – in practice – no more than a form of religious theatre, with a great deal of silly roleplaying by all concerned, staff and students. This is of course true of all human activity, from law to medicine to the police, and is not restricted to those pretending to seek enlightenment. But if we disregard all the stupidity and concentrate instead on those who have actually had mystical experiences as a result of their Zen practice, we end up in a considerably more interesting situation.

Mystical experiences used to be very rare phenomena, and were largely confined to those who had made a commitment to a strictly religious life. But after the advent of New Age religious thinking in the late 1960s, and the massive amount of spiritual experimentation – and

drug taking - that grew out of it, genuine mystical experiences became much more common, and this time they were not contextualised by traditional religion and monasticism. It was as if merely being open to the possibility of mystical revelation – an attitude strongly encouraged and endorsed by all the New Age religions - increased the likelihood of such an experience exponentially, and so the floodgates opened. Some accounts of such experiences may have been fictional and designed only to impress, but many were not.

What is meant here by a mystical experience ? This would be any type of strong, emotionally-based and overwhelming inward sense – an inward experiential perception – of something beyond one’s ordinary, everyday objective sense of self, and objective everyday experiential possibilities. It would be an intense subjective experience of a ‘something beyond’ one’s ordinary state of being, and often extending outwards to include the cosmos as a whole, yet mysteriously including the cosmos as an intimate part of oneself. Yet it is not the subjective intensity of the experience which is mystical, it is the way such experiences seem to testify to the reality of a transcendental ‘force’, or a ‘presence’, or a ‘power’, or ‘state’ beyond the ordinary, which somehow connects, as it were, the ordinary self to a very much greater cosmic Self.

Mystical experiences are invariably – though not always - viewed as intensely positive, and euphoric, and, for the time that they last, cosmically and intellectually decisive. They seem to answer all the questions one could possibly ask, as well as many one hadn’t even thought of. One’s sense of cosmic abandonment is obliterated, and a whole range of unforeseen – and unimagined - inner vistas reveal themselves, and one feels oneself, albeit briefly, to be the ruler of all one surveys. Everything is in your mind, and your mind is in everything. Everything has a place, and is perfect in itself, and nothing remains to be done. Nothing can be added to, or subtracted from, this perfection, and you really believe you have reached the end of the spiritual road. And everything is permeated by a divine cosmic love.

At least, this is how mystical experiences are experienced, especially in their full intensity. In their positive guise, they very much conform to recognisable patterns, and these patterns are easily identified by those who have already experienced them. They may seem to be ineffable and indescribable, but mystics have no trouble recognising them in others.

Even more surprisingly, mystical experiences can be categorised according to their flavour. There is at one extreme an intoxicating, rapturous, overwhelming variety; and there is at the other a clear-headed, cerebral, and intellectual sort. There are slow, insidious and long-lasting versions, and there are sudden, momentary and elusive ones. There is a deeply-satisfying variety, and a deeply perplexing one. There are all sorts of experiences for all occasions, and for all character types.

Where does satori fit into all this ? In a word, satori is a very distinctive type of mystical experience, brought about, and promoted, by a very particular meditative technique, and a very particular mental context. Satori is characterised by a sudden, explosive, inner perceptual transformation, connecting the everyday self to the larger Self underling the cosmos, and this experience is usually accompanied by a surprisingly clear-headed euphoria, and a powerful sense of certainty. And it is this sense of certainty that gives the Zen practitioner the confidence to answer the nonsense exchanges of mondo without hesitation, and validate their attainment in being able so to do.

Satori is not that easily achieved, but the mental brutality of a traditional Rinzaï Zen setting - in the hands of an experienced satori-realised master - is certainly conducive to it. It is a ‘do or die’ environment – either you achieve satori or you have failed. Your mind is pushed to its limits - and beyond - in a refined form of physical, mental and spiritual torture, as a kind of ongoing meditative Russian roulette, in the hope that satori will rescue you from further mental horror with its longed-for arrival. You might be lucky, or you might not, and some people literally lose their minds in the process. Traditional Rinzaï satori Zen is not recommended for the faint-hearted, or for the sensitive soul. In fact, it oughtn’t to be recommended to anyone, as the whole nightmarish process is all quite unnecessary. If you want metaphysical insight you

can just sit comfortably somewhere with a pad and pen and do some serious thinking. It will take time, but you don't have to undergo mental and physical torture to get the insights you need.

Not all meditation is of the Rinzi Zen variety. There are many other kinds of purposive meditation, involving all kinds of imaginative possibilities. Yogic mystical meditation, for example, whether Indian or Tibetan, doesn't lead to satori, or to any kind of sudden intellectual realisation, and with good reason. Yogic explorations operate according to different intuitive principles, and are intent on very different and far more rapturous experiential states. Satori Zen prizes a clear head and a functioning intellect, whereas yoga and Tantra are looking for deeply immersive modifications of experiencing, leading to what they believe will be a permanent state of transcendental divine consciousness. It doesn't often work out that way, and tends to lead only to a schizophrenic self-absorption, but that's what they are trying to do. Zen is inherently restrained in its ethos, built on total self-denial, whereas yoga and Tantra are mystically Dionysian.

Satori, then, is a very particular experiential achievement, arising out of a very specific type of meditative quest. Doctrinally though, in Zen, satori is viewed as the same as the Buddha's Enlightenment, and is therefore equivalent to Supreme Metaphysical Wisdom, beyond which no further wisdom is either necessary, or possible.

But is this true? Is a satori-realised person a Buddha? To answer this we need to have at least a working idea of what would qualify as Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment, even if only a definition by default, based on what we can plainly see it is not.

## **What is Spiritual Enlightenment ?**

'Enlightenment' as an idea simply represents an imagined endpoint in a spiritual quest, a vaguely intuited objective without real content. The more one thinks about Spiritual Enlightenment, the less one can imagine it, or conceptualise it. And if one is serious about metaphysical knowledge, one has sooner or later to acknowledge that postulating an endpoint to one's questing can never be more than a conceptual 'device', a mere construct designed to help give intellectual shape and coherence to one's direction. Any supposed content to the idea of 'Enlightenment' can really only be based on imaginings which, as soon as you try to substantiate them, turn out to be quite meaningless.

Of course one can't help but indulge in metaphysical fantasy, and imagine Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment as a combination of permanent omniscience and unassailable well-being. Then you tend to move on to think about the things that you will put right in your life, and how you will use your enjoyable 'omniscience' to enhance your situation, perhaps to get to work on your bucket list, and buy yourself a few nice things, and all the rest of it. This type of silliness is unavoidable, at least in the early stages of one's metaphysical quest, and it demonstrates how, when all is said and done, we are unable even to imagine ourselves free of our condition, because we always return to some grossly material and vaguely adolescent ideas of what authentic metaphysical knowledge will do for us. But the fact is that the quest for metaphysical wisdom takes you to a different order of knowledge, where worldly significance no longer obtains, and this is very difficult to appreciate when your imagination is only ever able to supply you with imagery of worldly advancement.

And this line of thought can even put some people off the search for spiritual wisdom altogether, because they feel that if they can't use their wisdom to advance and enhance their situation, what's the point? Why bother? Yet in facing this paradox - of 'worthless knowledge of supreme worth' - you can take the opportunity to try to grasp - as well as to accommodate yourself, however badly, to it in the process - the important fact that the direction of travel is not really in your hands, and that metaphysical knowledge is not only not yours to play with, it also has a dynamic of its own which is not necessarily to your liking. Well forget it then, might come the reply, but if the yearning for metaphysical knowledge and wisdom is awake in you,



you won't be able to disregard it, and forget it, even if you think you might want to. And even if you can see that it is not going to benefit you materially, or psychologically, or socially: that's not what genuine wisdom is about.

This does not then mean that an imperfect, selfish and obviously flawed idea of Enlightenment is either worthless or completely fictitious. In fact, from the perspective of a demanding and enquiring mind, it is extremely useful, in that it acts as a constant reminder how far there still is for you to travel, and how much remains to be investigated. And the more one explores one's metaphysical condition, objectively and impartially, the harder it becomes to imagine what Enlightenment could possibly be, and the more one comes to question whether anything like it could possibly exist in the first place.

Which brings us on to testimony<sup>8</sup>. There are various people, all over the world, who claim to be spiritually 'enlightened', and therefore to have reached a state of spiritual perfection. Such claims are always worth taking seriously, and worth investigating, as a matter of genuine human interest. And they can be judged, reasonably straightforwardly, at two levels: one, using simple, everyday methods of objective intellectual discrimination; and two, in the light of one's own authentic efforts at achieving metaphysical knowledge and insight. In the first, one assesses the situation in terms of motive, egotism, evidence of delusion, intellectual coherence, and the like. A strong measure of unsentimental objectivity is called for here, because we all tend to overlook a multitude of patently obvious defects in the people we respect, for our own foolish and selfish reasons. Most of the time it doesn't much matter, it's a forgivable weakness, but here we are talking about our spiritual destiny, and in this regard we really need to put in a bit more effort. For example, we pretend to ourselves that our guru is not a vain, lazy, stupid, overweight, egomaniacal idiot, with the spiritual insight of a selfish five-year-old, even when everything he says and does proves it, and the evidence is as clear as daylight, because we don't want to face the fact that our judgement in these matters is lamentable. Because facing that would then force us to confront a situation we don't feel equipped or qualified to. We find it difficult - impossible - to work out who's telling the spiritual truth, so we just go with what we like the sound of. And if it starts to dawn on us that we might have made a mistake, we would rather deny the facts than have the inconvenience of having to start all over again, and having to find another circle of friends, and having to cancel two weeks meditational retreat in the country. But if you're seriously interested in metaphysical knowledge, you need to find a way of grounding yourself so that you can face the truth of spiritual charlatans without feeling any sense of desperate inner confusion and anxiety. Don't tie yourself to a spiritual master or to a group or even to a religion: learn to stand on your own two feet, and develop your own judgement. In fact, don't bother with a master at all: the chances of finding one who knows what they're talking about is zero.

The second form of assessment is obviously more complex, and considerably more demanding than the first. You need to have done some of your spiritual and metaphysical homework, so that you can at least begin to judge certain spiritual claims on their own merits. If someone claims to be enlightened, then assess their claims in the light of what enlightenment would mean by the highest possible standards, standards many times higher than those you might be prepared to accept right now. Authority and status count for nothing when it comes to the quest for metaphysical knowledge, because human beings are easily impressed by appearances, when they ought to look much deeper. Also - as a matter of absolutely fundamental mundane wisdom - you should get used to the idea that people in authority - society figures of great standing - are invariably, beneath the impressive façade, cowardly, stupid, and vain, and their achievements are totally unwarranted. Of course there are exceptions, but you will probably never come across one.

And when it comes to metaphysical knowledge, humans play exactly the same game as they would in any form of show business, basking in the adoration, and letting it go to their heads. As a rule of thumb, it can even be said that authentic metaphysical knowledge, to the extent that it is transforming you, will push you away from making extravagant claims as to your achievements, because you are able to see, with your own eyes, that it is of a completely

different order from that of worldly success, however you might measure such success. Saving the planet, and ushering in a new era of peace, happiness and compassion, is for simpletons and egomaniacs, and for those who have not yet received an inkling as to which direction they ought to be heading in, not for those who are serious about spiritual wisdom. Fortunately human destiny is not in the hands of us humans, otherwise we would all be doomed.

Where does all this take us ? To the important conclusion that you have to set your own standards as to what would 'constitute Spiritual Enlightenment', and disregard what anyone and everyone else has to say. You have to find a way to establish totally objective criteria for what would necessarily be a 'key event', even if the term 'key event' is quite inadequate to describe and contain what you might be heading towards. And these objective criteria have to be independent of your likes and dislikes, and the likes and dislikes of the rest of the world, otherwise you can be sure that you will prejudice your judgements. Spiritual Enlightenment is not necessarily big or small, earth-shattering or trivial, mundane or extraordinary, delightful or horrible: these are human terms for human characterisations of human-interest events, and the point is not to make your task more difficult by misrepresenting the spiritual wisdom you seek by reducing it to something of importance to the world at large. You have to make room in your mind for an empty expectancy – an expectant observing, yet expecting nothing – while keeping it clear of imaginings. Spiritual Enlightenment may never come, but if it appears to come in the form of something your mind can comprehend – even if you would be tempted to characterise it as 'incomprehensible' - then you can be sure that it is yet another false dawn.

As always, a discussion of this kind threatens to slide into nonsense, as it heads towards the edge of rational comprehensibility, yet there is good reason for taking the time and effort to think the key points through carefully. At the core of any possible spiritual illumination is the intellect – our ordinary, familiar and unsurprising capacity to assess and discriminate – though not the intellect in its raw and untrained state as the mere capacity to overthink and get bogged down in repetitive and obsessive trivia, but rather in its most inquiring and perspicacious mode as that capacity which, when fully mature, and fully extended through persistent metaphysical inquiry and impartial observation, is capable of delivering a verdict on whatever is presented to it, whatever form that presentation might take. We can portray this capacity as something like a basic triangulation between evidence presented to the intellect, intellectual observation and assessment, and intellectual judgement.

And perhaps the most interesting features of any intellectual judgement – when it assesses metaphysical significance - is the fact that, despite whatever evidence may be presented to it, it invariably decides, in time, that nothing is quite good enough, and that something is always missing, even from something which appears, to all intents and purposes, to be the ultimate of its kind. In other words, given time, and given space, the intellect always rejects as inadequate whatever you present it with, no matter how wonderful, satisfying and perfect that thing might be. The intellect can always find a flaw with anything, because it knows in its innermost ability that anything graspable or apprehensible or perceivable in any way, is essentially – inherently - less than the intellect itself, and therefore not worthy of finality, and of supreme perfection.

Which means that, when it comes to Spiritual Enlightenment, only that which cannot be disregarded by the intellect will be good enough to satisfy it. So what, in all of experience, good and bad, high and low, subtle and gross, could fulfil such a criterion ? Nothing, obviously: no kind of experience, no kind of thought, no kind of identifiable entity, no kind of perception, no kind of identifiable capacity. Spiritual Enlightenment cannot entail anything apprehensible. So all the accounts of Enlightenment in terms of this or that experience – whether subtle, cosmic, divine, indescribable, wondrous, non-dual, permanent, sudden, or whatever – can be disregarded as mistaken.

But why do people endlessly make this kind of basic error ? Because they haven't set themselves standards, and they haven't done their metaphysical homework: they simply grab



hold of the first 'altered state' that comes their way, luxuriate in its glory, and declare themselves sanctified. They have no interest in knowledge or insight, only in some kind of spiritual currency, and being the proud recipient of an altered state fits that bill nicely. Then, if you want to become a guru, you learn how to perform in public, making it up as you go along, pinching useful phrases from those already ahead of you in the game, and the rest will take care of itself. No one is going to come out of the crowd and question your worth, and if they do, you can gently humiliate them in front of your followers, who will be eager to laugh at your self-serving jokes.

## **Is 'satori' Spiritual Enlightenment ?**

In line with what has been said, no, it is not. Not even close. How could it be ? Satori is just a very powerful mystical experience, not to be denied, doubted or taken lightly, but it is no more the Supreme Truth – the supreme insight into insight - than a magnificent landscape, or a nuclear holocaust. Just because it is intense, and revelatory, and positive, doesn't mean that it is anything other than an intense, revelatory and positive experience. Anything apprehensible or experienceable is not Enlightenment. Enlightenment is of a different order of insight altogether.

And there is more. Striving for satori in a traditional Rinzai setting, with monastic discipline, keisaku<sup>9</sup> blows, intense sesshins<sup>10</sup>, and mystifying mondos, is, for any westerner with a flexible, agile, educated and inquiring mind, asking for real trouble. Satori Zen is a form of torture, combining sleep deprivation, physical and mental pain with sensory deprivation, and all specifically designed to push you over a mental cliff; and it would take a very unusual kind of psychological makeup to thrive in such an environment. You would have to be made of steel. And what for ? If you pursue the path of metaphysical knowledge, you get to realise that intense, transformative and revelatory experiences are no more intrinsically significant than mundane, trivial and uninformative ones, and that our instinctive human desire for something cosmic and wonderful is just a siren call to nowhere in particular. This is not to deny cosmic consciousness, or divine rapture, or the unio mystica – all these are real experiences, anyone can have them, given the right circumstances - it is instead to deny their metaphysical significance. They are simply intense experiences – altered states of consciousness – which tend to get accorded special significance by those who have them, because they are unusual and intense. Yet in terms of a source of metaphysical insight, they are really not that important; they are just things that happen to some people some of the time, and it is a mistake to think they are more than that.

## **The New Age<sup>11</sup> response**

There will be many New Age mystics who, if presented with this whole discussion, will respond by saying that they've known for decades that satori is not enlightenment, and that they've long since reconceptualised the whole issue. There are books to this effect, and they've been in the public domain for some time. There is also a doctrinal acknowledgement in Zen itself about this<sup>12</sup>, so the subject is well-known. It has been dealt with, they would say.

But before analysing their response in detail, it is important to put the whole New Age spiritual movement into perspective. We have to remember that until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, mystical spirituality was the exclusive preserve of traditional religion, and that it was extremely difficult to get hold of mystical doctrines, and accounts of mystical experiences. Mysticism was, in effect, secret knowledge, and you had to work hard to get anywhere near it. You had to go to unknown libraries and spend days there hunting through dusty stacks, so that you could take out books that no one else had ever taken out, because no one else even knew these books existed. But come the social revolution of the 1960s, and the ubiquity of Hindu and Buddhist missionaries from the East, combined with a real thirst for all things esoteric, mystical experiences were everywhere to be had. There was a genuine continuum from drug taking to yoga classes to reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead to eating wholefood or to just immersing yourself in the new Bohemia. People really wanted to be on a cosmic, mystical high.

Over the decades New Age thinking has become more formalised, and more organised, and more competitive, but certainly no less mystical. Spiritual luminaries are everywhere, and they're offering a fast track to Enlightenment. Esoteric doctrines have been streamlined, and modernised, and adapted to appeal to modern sensibilities, and made as user-friendly as possible. And thanks to the wonders of the internet, you can now, in a matter of minutes, be certified a Sufi mystic, or a Tibetan Buddhist, or a Kriya Yogi, or a Red Indian shaman. There is something for everyone, so no excuse for not attending to your spiritual self.

This has all been very good news for anyone interested in authentic metaphysical knowledge because the spiritual marketplace is well out in the open, and you don't have to feel under any obligation. You can pick and choose at will. And you can change your mind as often as you like. It's simply a matter of trying things out. The only problem with all this – and the problem will increase with the passage of time – is that ease of access to esoterica means that no one appreciates the fact that genuine metaphysical insight is extremely hard to come by. It is not to be had by merely signing up for some classes, or going on a weekend retreat. You have to put in some serious work. It takes decades to clarify even the basics, unless you are super special, and most of us are not. Being able to buy books on esoteric doctrines and obscure scriptures is only the first of many steps, and of itself doesn't guarantee anything. We have to understand that it was not 'the authorities' that made advanced spiritual knowledge a rarity, it was the fact that advanced spiritual knowledge is a genuine rarity in itself, and just not that easy to achieve at the best of times, despite the fact that many hundreds of gurus claim to be enlightened, and have uploaded grotesque self-aggrandising videos on YouTube to prove it.

So we now have a New Age spiritual mentality which is decidedly casual about advanced spirituality, and reaching the highest forms of wisdom. Everything has become so easy, so available. The planet can be saved, Enlightenment can be had, and life seems to be getting better and better. And nothing to stop you writing a book, or making a video. All of which means the evidence is out there, unrestricted, for anyone interested to take a look at, and come to a conclusion about.

### **'Supreme Enlightenment' as a bit of a disappointment**

And the evidence is that the idea of Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment has confused a lot of the big names - the New Age gurus - and put them on the back foot. Accounts differ widely in the detail, but the logic remains the same in every case. Yes, all the big names are fully Enlightened, no question about that, but there seems to be something inherently wrong with the Enlightened 'state' itself, and it has not lived up to its billing. In fact, Enlightenment has turned out to be a great disappointment. Something really not quite right. So the big names have put their mystically-infused New Age intelligence to the task, and come up with a solution: Enlightenment on its own is not enough; it must be combined with spiritual living, and then the equation will be perfectly balanced. Spiritual wisdom + a spiritual lifestyle, meaning you need to understand in advance that after your Supreme Enlightenment, you will still need to 'practice'. You will still need to practice your meditation, and your mindfulness, and your compassionate thoughts; you will still need to join your local social groups, so as to save the planet, and humanity. You will have to carry on as before, only this time glowing with compassion and wisdom.

What does this tell us ? Quite a number of interesting things. To begin with, it tell us New Agers have very much felt the need, right from the start, for some sort of 'ultimate' concept which would underpin, and validate, their spiritual achievements. You need to be able to say 'I've gone as far as it is possible for anyone to go, so I'm Enlightened', rather than 'I'm still on the journey', because an intermediate status won't allow you the make decisive pronouncements as to what is what. Worse still, an intermediate position is always under threat from a higher position, so some grizzled yogi emerging from a cave – or more likely some glib Californian emerging from a TV studio - might be able to destroy your status by claiming that there are still higher realms than those you have managed to reach. Scientology, for one, has been prepared to

add new Operating Thetan levels to the top of their special knowledge tree whenever they believed they had discovered them<sup>13</sup>, and will probably continue to do so, why not. Competitive spirituality is not as uncommon as you might think<sup>14</sup>, even though it is frowned upon, as we humble and ignorant seekers are all meant to be a part of one big mutually supportive family.

If we accept the need for a supreme, definitive spiritual realisation - some sort of decisive experience - how do we know when we have reached it? This is well worth assessing objectively, and following it to the bitter end. It says much about the total lack of exigence characteristic of all New Age mysticism. Because it turns out, when you drill through the self-justifying fluff, that your decision about the quality of your realisation is entirely - entirely - dependent on how convincing it feels to you. In other words, if your mystical experience contains a strong sense of certainty and finality, then that is what it must be, surely. If it tells you, 'this is it', and feels like it as well, then you can be sure that you've got that right<sup>15</sup>. If you see God, then what you see actually *is* God, not your mind playing tricks.

We could try to get round the gaping elephant trap of self-justification by introducing the concept of 'validation'. Under the old Catholic system, you had to have your experiences investigated by your superior. If he or she was jealous and vindictive - a genuine occupational hazard<sup>16</sup> - you could well be told you were wrong, and that what you had experienced was not God, but probably the Devil. In Rinzai Zen, you are expected to check your satori with your master, who will ask you searching questions. If you answer swiftly and confidently, regardless of what you may say, you will probably get the all clear, and a paper certificate to go with it. In Hinduism, past and present, if you make mystical claims of any kind, that alone is often enough to justify your elevation to the status of a divine oracle. Robert Forman for example, a Transcendental Meditation practitioner, asked his long-time friend and fellow mystic Richard 'Ram Dass' Alpert to confirm his enlightenment, and Dass, after asking some key questions, was able to oblige<sup>17</sup>. That's that sorted, then. It's a complete mockery of the whole quest for definitive spiritual insight if you need to ask someone else what you yourself are up to.

Neither system of mystical judgement - whether New Age or traditional - is of much direct help to us here, because it doesn't even attempt to solve the problem at the heart of the human metaphysical predicament, namely, how could you know - objectively - that what you are experiencing, or witnessing, or cognising, is exactly what it is, and not something distorted by your subjective grasp of it? In other words, how can you know objectively what you know subjectively? And is what you think you know subjectively what you *need* to know? Is it the truth? What is 'the truth'? The predicament of consciousness looks to be an impossible mess, and it is not even remotely solved either by having a mystical experienced permeated by a heavy conviction of certainty, or validated by one of your friends. How could it be?

The other key advantage to undergoing a specific - or nearly specific - revelatory mystical experience is that you can tell others about it, and gain status thereby. You can go on television and proclaim yourself, and make reference to a series of events which would, by some sort of common consent, mean that you were now party to secret, transcendental, cosmic knowledge. Not being able to point to a specific event, or series of events, doesn't make for a good narrative and, in the New Age discourse, means you don't have anything particularly interesting to share. It means you only have your 'ideas', and anyone can claim to have spiritual ideas. New Age mystics are therefore invariably able to recount an easily understandable chronicle of their transition from ordinary Joe, via difficult times, involving drugs and drink and promiscuity, to a realised soul<sup>18</sup>.

Once again, this is not to deny that many people have had transformative and decisive mystical experiences; it is simply to try to work out what they amount to. And the more we investigate, the more often we see that these experiences never amount to more than intense changes in consciousness - altered states, in other words - which, although they may be accompanied by all sorts of rapturous thoughts of finality, divine wisdom, cosmic love and all the rest, don't stand up to any kind of scrutiny, and, what's worse, don't even fully satisfy the

people who underwent them. As Robert Forman put it, 'Enlightenment ain't what it's cracked up to be'.<sup>19</sup> Jack Kornfield titled a book of his 'After the Ecstasy, the Laundry'<sup>20</sup>, and Jed McKenna has quoted Ramesh Balsekar<sup>21</sup> to this effect:

'If you have the choice between enlightenment and a million dollars, take the million dollars! Because if you get the million dollars, there will be somebody there to enjoy the million dollars; but if you get enlightenment there's no one there to enjoy the enlightenment.'

before adding, 'The first thing to understand about the term Spiritual Enlightenment is that it's a clunker. (The term, not the state, though the state has nothing to recommend it either.) No one actually in this state would ever have decided to call it Spiritual Enlightenment, yet no other state merits such a title.'<sup>22</sup>

So what we have in the case of Zen is a crucial state – satori – and in the case of New Age mystics crucial mystical experiences, and in the case of McKenna an 'Abiding Non-dual Awareness'<sup>23</sup>, and in the case of other mystics all kinds of other states, experiences, consciousnesses, events and so on. These states are meant to represent an endpoint, a decisive conclusion, a final resting place, yet those who have 'managed it' are disappointed, and inclined to disparage what they discover. Does this make sense? Can you reach the ultimate only to find that it is not the ultimate? Can you reach the end of the road only to find there is more road ahead? Not if you've bothered to do some of your basic homework.

## **'Practice' as the solution**

And having discovered they've been following the wrong map – or most likely no map at all – our happy-go-lucky mystics, rather than trying to find out where they went wrong to begin with, have decided that a repetition of their initial experiences is what is called for, though it should now be combined with 'practice'. 'Practice' basically means subscribing to a New Age prospectus whereby you commit yourself to saving the planet, and to advancing human spirituality, and to sending out waves of loving compassion to the furthest ends of the universe.

Now the need to resort to a concept of 'practice' – as we've described it here – is both an admission of defeat - meaning a failure to somehow realise and thereby 'secure' an ultimate metaphysical insight which could decisively and permanently sustain itself without recourse to the vagaries of life and existence – as well as an indication of the triumph of a sentimental, humanistic, and altogether adolescent idea as to what, in the end, constitutes both a fulfilled and meaningful life, and metaphysical enlightenment itself. It's like saying that you can only achieve adulthood by remaining a child. In other words, having to 'underpin' or 'supplement' Supreme Enlightenment with the clunking idea of 'practice' – meaning a return to the wholefood, eco-friendly, enthusiastically concerned world of the spiritually 'Integral'<sup>24</sup> citizen – is really the equivalent of saying that you've failed dismally, and that metaphysical exploration hasn't advanced your insight at all, and that you are still a beginner, even though you've somehow also achieved Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment along the way. All thanks to that ecstatic kensho<sup>25</sup> that hit you as you were putting on your shoes. It doesn't make sense.

For anyone with a demanding, inquiring and independent mind, encouraged and strengthened by decades of reflective thought, the idea of 'Enlightenment + practice' would be a most pitiable and unconscionable outcome to the whole metaphysical project. It would be the triumph of the kind of infantilism that the quest for metaphysical knowledge is trying to improve upon in the first place, and an endorsement of every kind of sentimental silliness that has characterised counter-cultural thinking since the 1960s: all you need is love; love until it hurts<sup>26</sup>, and all the rest of it. You go into metaphysics to try to transcend this kind of juvenile hippy-mindedness, not glory in it.

For example, a few minutes concentrated thinking, now and then, will soon tell anyone that taking seriously the idea of saving the world is a waste of time, and completely futile, not

because it's not a worthy ideal – which obviously it is – but because you can't know – ever – which bits to save, and which bits to discard. We all try to do our best, but that's as far as it goes, because nobody knows how things will turn out. What if global warming - to take one instance – turns out to be the best thing that's ever happened to the planet, and results in millennia of storm free settled weather, causing deserts to bloom, and plants to grown like they never have before, and the seas to flourish, and the air to be the cleanest it has ever been ? No one – not even an omniscient being - will ever know the unintended outcomes of the heavily intended paths of action we take. This is the way of things, and it always will be, and no amount of mystical input is ever going to change that. That doesn't mean that we oughtn't to do what we think is best – we have no choice but to do that - but it does mean that we oughtn't to delude ourselves that this means we know how things are going to turn out. The unfolding of the universe is not under human control; never has been, never will be. It's just plain daft to think otherwise; no great insight required.

And even more to the point, what if the entire world became utterly selfless and holy and compassionate ? Would we all get instantly absorbed into a colourless, flavourless spiritual mush, with nothing to react to ? Certainly sounds like it. And we would surely all die of boredom in the first few hours of this tedious and dreadful New Order. What would life be without something negative to fight against ? Let's face it, you don't have to be a genius to be able to entertain simple thoughts like these, and to be inspired to think further along the same lines.

We have ended up in a situation where New Age mysticism is facilitating mystical experiences in large numbers of people, and the transformative intensity of these experiences is making at least some of these people believe they have been Enlightened. Something like this has always been the stated intention of Rinzai Zen, which has perfected what it believes is an effective Enlightenment technique, combining formal meditation with mondo. And New Age mystics – Zen trained or otherwise - are relatively easily able compare their experiences with those of others, decide the currency value of their own, and come to a decision as to where they want to place themselves in an overall spiritual hierarchy. Yet even if they place themselves near the top of the pyramid, and declare themselves Enlightened, something still seems to be missing, and Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment turns out to be a damp squib. Amazing. And instead of returning to the drawing board and looking harder and deeper at the metaphysical realities of the situation they are in, and giving themselves a chance to rethink what obviously went wrong, they go straight back to their mystical roots, determined for more of the same. This ongoing participation in the very misjudgements and false trails that led them astray in the first place, is now called 'practice'.

## **Then where do we go from here ?**

Spiritual Enlightenment is hard work, and elusive, and mysterious. It is 'real' in the best sense of the term, and is not an imaginary fiction. It goes beyond apprehensibility as we normally understand it, and so is almost impossible to specify and label. It is something you have to work towards, and will not happen by accident. It goes beyond conceptualisation and fantasy. It is a function of transcendental insight, not of experiential modification. This is the crucial fact you learn by trial and error. It has nothing to do with altered states of consciousness - that is, unusual states of consciousness - even though all of religious mysticism, traditional and New Age, predicates itself wholly on such states. All the famous mystics in history, from St John of the Cross, to St Teresa and beyond - with the single exception of Meister Eckhart<sup>27</sup> - have fallen into the trap of believing that their altered states were metaphysically significant, when in fact they were no more than 'unusual' experiences dependent on the distortion of certain rather ordinary experiential capacities, and not messages from beyond. If you stay awake for many days, eating badly and punishing yourself with religious torment, who knows what your mind will come up with ? And if you experience divine visions, you will surely, if you are mystically inclined, be convinced you have opened up a hot line to cosmic consciousness, but you could

just as easily achieve the same psychedelic effect by taking psychotropic drugs<sup>28</sup>, or by catching a brain damaging virus.

These conclusions may be very hard to take for those who have convinced themselves of the value of certain New Age practices - from meditation, to mindfulness – but these conclusions will, at the same time, also have a certain basic commonsensical and level-headed feel to them. They are, in a way, kind of obvious, if you take the trouble to work through the ideas they contain. The problem is that New Age religion is wholly mystical, and not given to objective and impartial self-analysis. New Agers want to believe that their special experiences are important and revelatory and divinely instigated, not that they can be achieved by mechanical means, and are not especially meaningful in themselves.

And as we have seen, satori is one such mystical experience, achievable – though by no means guaranteed – by means of Rinzai Zen technique. Other mystical experiences, just as intense and transformative and extraordinary, are achievable by other means, say through intense prayer, or fasting, or meditation. Put yourself through a series of demanding, mentally disturbing practices, and you will probably get a result. But if all that is normally understood to be spiritually revelatory is simple mystical – psycho-physical - ‘cause and effect’, what on earth do we do to find authentic spiritual knowledge ? Where on earth do we look ?

### **An independent quest for an objective ‘Truth’**

The whole phrase may sound very pretentious, and affected, and faintly ridiculous, but it is not. There is nothing to be embarrassed about in wanting to know what the hell is going on with life and existence. And all aspects of such a quest can be kept very simple and straightforward, and unassuming, and with no worldly currency to them at all. In other words, for what it’s worth – and in material, substantive and worldly terms, that would be nothing at all – the search for authentic metaphysical truth can be kept a private matter, and quite detached from the public arena. Nobody needs to know. Let the saints and the swamis and beautiful people parade themselves; you can keep this to yourself.

If you want to know where to begin with metaphysics – which is simply a heavyweight term for the careful observation and appreciation of those capacities of your being which inform you not only as to ‘what you are’ but also as to ‘what’s going on’ – you have to learn to turn your attention to your ‘thinking mind’, and your ‘mind’s eye’. Everything that you know, as well as everything that you don’t know, is presented to you by your mind. Your mind also presents ‘you’ to you. Yet it is difficult to tell exactly which bit is which. And why so confusing ? But even confusion is presented to you by your mind, with absolutely nothing left out. Find a bit that has been left out, and you will find that your mind has presented that to you as well. Everything is always all there, all the time, right in front of you.

But metaphysical confusion, that is to say, our lack of clear knowledge as to what we really are, and what we amount to, and what experience is all about, and what our destiny is, is real, and genuine, and not an imaginary state. How exactly do we tackle it ? By working slowly through the information that we have at our disposal, and reflecting on it, and trying to see how the whole thing – that is, the whole of our basic experiential capacity – holds together, and how it does what it does, and how it inform us about our experiencing. The information in question here is that which is provided to us as a result of our own direct observation of our own experience, and not ideas which have been given to us by other people. We have to learn to see what our own mind’s eye tells us directly, and not have it mediated through other people’s ideas, otherwise we are not exploring our reality directly, we are exploring it secondhand, through conceptual templates. Now of course exploring things through conceptual templates does constitute a reality of its own, and this is a separate and fascinating issue on its own terms, but suffice to say at this stage that it does not lead to direct insight, but only to mediated insight. You don’t need other people’s ideas to see what your own mind tells you; and in just the same way you don’t need someone to tell you what your own eyes see.



And it is insight – direct insight - into the workings of our own experiential matrix - that is to say, our own manifest experiential capacity - which is the path to metaphysical knowledge, and ultimately to Spiritual Enlightenment. Metaphysical insight will not deliver Spiritual Enlightenment of its own accord, but it is the path to it, and the more one pursues metaphysical knowledge, the more it will validate itself in the achievement of insights into our human condition, as well as confirming how mistaken it is to follow a religious path in which everything is inherently distorted by received ideas, many of which are wholly false in the first place. This is why the story of the Buddha so clearly illustrates the need to abandon received ideas and learn to think for ourselves.

## Conclusion and summary

Satori Zen is a highly specialised meditative technique specifically designed to awaken a satori experience in a suitably receptive person. Satori is an extremely compelling and transformative cosmic experience, leading to a powerful sense of transcendental knowledge. There is believable testimony to the effect that the Rinzai Zen system works in practice, and brings about satori in some practitioners. And in Rinzai Zen doctrine, satori is believed to be equivalent to Supreme Enlightenment. But Spiritual Enlightenment is not an experience, and has nothing to do with any kind of apprehensible experience, perception or concept, so Rinzai Zen is quite mistaken in equating satori with it.

The path to Spiritual Enlightenment is entirely centred on an impartial and objective reflective observation of one's experiential matrix – as it appears in one's mind's eye - independent of all forms of received ideas, no matter how profound these ideas may appear to be. Spiritual Enlightenment can be approached only through metaphysical insight, and not through meditative states and techniques. Just sit quietly on your own in a comfortable chair somewhere, armed with a pen and pad, and do some serious thinking. Start at the very beginning. Keep it simple. What's going on in your mind? Where is your mind, exactly? Why are questions like this so difficult to answer? And so on. It may take some time to get results, so be prepared for that, but don't give up. The results you get from this will be more valuable to you than all the Zen meditating – or any other kind – that anyone has ever done in the entire history of the world. Forget about all you've read, and all you've been told. Forget about Zen and all other forms of dazzling meditative and mindful distraction. Just learn to see what you see, with your own mind's eye, and your own intellect. It's all there.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Sharf "Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited," in Heisig and John (1995), pp. 40-51; and more or less anything by Sharf on Zen.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Dumoulin (2005).

<sup>3</sup> For a lucid explanation of the principles of Buddhism, see Suzuki (1957): 'The Basis of Buddhist Philosophy.'

<sup>4</sup> Suzuki on the Chinese approach to Buddhism in *Essays* (1970), eg in Vol 3: 'Zen and the Chinese mentality'.

<sup>5</sup> Soto Zen forums on the web, where people squabble over their 'already enlightened state' by quoting huge chunks of scriptural text in support of their opinions, are well worth a visit: try [zenforuminternational.org](http://zenforuminternational.org) for a start.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Koan’ is an impossible question, eg ‘what is the sound of one hand clapping’, designed to baffle – and silence - the intellect; ‘mondo’ is a formalised exchange of question and answer, between teacher and aspirant, also designed to push your mind out of its normal patterns.

<sup>7</sup> A classic example is the exchange in Brazier (2001) p11.

<sup>8</sup> YouTube is a good place to start for examples of self-declared Enlightened beings, but from our bibliography we have Forman, McKenna, Wilber, Suzuki, Tolle.

<sup>9</sup> A stick used to beat Rinzai meditators who appear to be dozing off or not concentrating properly.

<sup>10</sup> Insanely intense all-day and all-night meditation sessions, sometimes lasting for weeks. Entertaining accounts of things going wrong can be found in Wetering (1974).

<sup>11</sup> ‘New Age’ is a shorthand for the religious and mystical thinking that emerged in the West in the 1950s and especially the 1960s. The myriad of religions and cults that grew out of this thinking is sometimes referred to as the ‘New Religions’.

<sup>12</sup> Centred around the Mahayana concept of the need to Enlighten the whole universe, not just yourself.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis and Hammer (2007), p36.

<sup>14</sup> For example, more or less anything by [UG \(not Jiddu\) Krishnamurti](#) on YouTube.

<sup>15</sup> Eckhart Tolle is the archetypical example; see him on [YouTube](#).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Merton (1948), and many other examples from Catholic monastics.

<sup>17</sup> Forman (2011) p72.

<sup>18</sup> See myriad accounts on Conscious.tv.

<sup>19</sup> Eg Forman (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Kornfield (2000).

<sup>21</sup> An Indian guru teaching Advaita ‘non-duality.’

<sup>22</sup> McKenna (2007), p21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid p22.

<sup>24</sup> [A Brief History Of Integral](#) with Ken Wilber.

<sup>25</sup> Kensho is supposedly a ‘glimpse of Enlightenment’, or something like that.

<sup>26</sup> Let Ken Wilber explain: [Ken Wilber - Love Until It Hurts](#) on YouTube.

<sup>27</sup> See Kelley (1977); a very difficult book but an excellent study of spiritual metaphysics for those who take the subject seriously.

<sup>28</sup> For a contemporary account, see Pollan in The New Yorker (2015) which also contains academic references.

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A note about books on Zen. Much has been written, but very little is of value, in the sense of helping anyone gain metaphysical knowledge. D.T.Suzuki's works are far and away the best reading, not only in terms of interesting and accessible scholarship, but also for detailed accounts of his personal experience. The famous names in Zen scholarship, Yampolsky and Dumoulin, have no metaphysical knowledge of their own - none at all - and so, despite their scholarly prowess, are wholly unable to distinguish between profundity and outright stupidity. And with regard to the slew of populist Soto Zen books of the last three or four decades - and there are now a number of Soto books disguising themselves as mainstream Buddhism - Hagen (1999), for example - there is hardly a paragraph in any of them the worth a glance. Avoid, unless you find copies for pennies in your local thrift shop.

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