

## WHAT IS ZEN?

Zen is the Japanese word for the Sanskrit Dhyana (Meditation). When Buddhism made its northward journey from India to China, the word Dhyana became Chan in China and then when it finally reached Japan through Korea, it became Zen. Since meditation forms a central practice of this form of Buddhism, it is called Zen Buddhism.

Zen is unique. It is not a philosophy; nor is it a doctrine or a system of metaphysics. Zen is truer to the spirit of Buddhism as was taught by the Buddha who himself was extremely averse to philosophical speculations and metaphysical enquiries. He maintained that knowing the answers to the great philosophical riddles is not going to mitigate the problems of disease, old age, suffering and death. The way out of this suffering is what he taught and accordingly, he strove to keep his teaching, simple and bare. But ironically, after his death, Buddhism developed one of the most intricate metaphysics under its various schools and produced an immense body of philosophical literature surpassing in volume the sacred writings of any other religion! Even modern-day scholars go into convulsions to interpret and explain those complex philosophical doctrines. But peculiarly, Zen is free from all that metaphysical baggage. Probably because Zen developed in China and matured in Japan where it remained sanitized from the infectious philosophical and intellectual ferment that was brewing in India in the first millennium CE. For the Chinese

mind is extremely practical whereas the Indian mind has always been highly philosophical. Hence a discipline like Zen could not have grown in India – because it goes against the grain of the Indian philosophic mind. Zen, shockingly, is anti-philosophy.

Zen doesn't respect any authority or any hallowed tradition. It doesn't have any sacred scriptures. It even refuses to worship the Buddha as a god which other schools of Buddhism are in the habit of doing. It is so radical and iconoclastic that sometimes, for the orthodox minded, its assertions would sound like blasphemy! Thus, we have the Zen master Lin-chi saying, "If you encounter the Buddha on the way, kill him....for this is the only way to deliverance." In other words, being fixated to the personality of the Buddha may become an obstacle on the path and if need be, we should be prepared to kill that idol! This kind of revolutionary, radical and supreme disregard for tradition and for the hallowed icons of the past, is unthinkable and unheard of in any other spiritual discipline. Zen is fiercely independent and with the sharpness of a razor cuts away all the non-essentials to arrive at the root of the matter.

An extract from my book AN OAK TREE IN THE GARDEN – Exploring the World of Zen