

## *The 3% Solution*

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The teacher of Zen has been called someone who “sells water by the river,” while the student looking for Zen is “like a man in the midst of water, crying in thirst so imploringly.” It is an absurd and crowded situation: the teacher hawking water by a river, while the student, in the middle of the stream, is dying of thirst. Each one of us is immersed and permeated by Buddha Nature: “It” hears and tastes and breathes, yet we’re looking to “get a life”—to become vital, because something is missing.

Turn a corner in the street, and a whole new world opens up. You listen, and all these sounds come to you. But we’re still asking, “*What’s the meaning of this? Why? What’s the secret of Zen?*,”

There is a story in the Rinzai Roku that points to the absurdity of this question.

*Lung-ya (a monk) asked Rinzai, “What is the purpose of the Patriarch’s coming from the West?”*

*Rinzai said, “Hand me the backrest.”*

*Lung-ya handed the backrest to the Master. The Master took it and hit him with it.*

*Lung-ya said, “It’s all right that you hit me, but there’s still isn’t a purpose in the Patriarch’s coming from the West.”*

The monk Lung-ya’s question means, “Why did Bodhidharma (The first Patriarch, who brought Zen to China) come to China? What was his purpose?”

The Buddha said that the cause of suffering is desire. “The mind is on fire (with desire), and all the senses are on fire.” We always want more than we have, and more than we could possibly consume in a lifetime. We are living hungry ghosts. Buddha says that for the anguish to stop, the wanting has to stop.

Why is it so difficult to be free from want? Now think: Why is this? In the face of it, nothing could be simpler than to sit still and live the moment. But why is it difficult? We’re so tuned in to our internal monologue that if it stops for a minute, we don’t quite know what to do with ourselves. We’re like the teenager plugged into earphones who can’t live without the beat of music to animate his life.

Somebody told me, “Why is it, whenever I start to practice zazen at home, I always think, “Oh, I gotta do the laundry? And I get up, and do everything but Zazen.” People get up; anything to escape. We feel imprisoned in the posture, fettered by the silence. We get antsy.

Perhaps the kind of peace were looking for is to be found in being “contained.” You can’t find it when you’re running around. You have to be still, and you have to accept the condition of being contained in stillness and get over the feeling of being imprisoned. You can’t find it by getting on the phone and talking to somebody. If you want to find it for yourself, you actually have to settle down and accept the condition of stillness.

I was talking to a college class, and they asked, “What have you learned from Zazen?” I said, “I think that, when I’m in a really bad traffic jam, I don’t get impatient.” When we begin Zazen, we all want to get someplace and can’t get there fast enough.

When I was a college student, I couldn’t understand some of the poems that we were reading. And the teacher told me, “You have to keep reading them and reading them and reading them.” He said, “It’s like chipping at a rock. You get little chips out, and then you start figuring out the grain of the rock.. At first you attack the rock blindly with a chisel and sledge and find you can’t crack that rock. You have to study and keep trying, and finally it will just cleave open.”

What you do the first time you sit is Zazen. The practice is so simple that I can’t add anything extra to your orientation. It involves sitting down, breathing quietly, watching your breath. You need to channel your breath. You need to give it your complete attention, and it will open up to you. There are no secret mantras. We don’t go through stages where we say, “Okay, pay an extra \$25 and we’ll get you through the next stage, then the next stage...” We don’t have certificates for completing the third or fourth stage of samadhi!

Just keep doing Zazen, and you’ll find stretches when the sitting is sweet. These stretches come when we’re not frustrated or perplexed. Think of Zazen as a learning process, not as a means or an end. When you’re doing Zazen, you’re learning Zazen. “Paying attention” to your breath means you do take note of each breath; you need the edge of attention to “be present”.

I sometimes say that Zazen is the 3% solution. I think that the simple practice of sitting can lighten the burden of life (when life feels burdensome, and painful) by about 3%. Over the long haul, it’s a great advantage. It’s like going on a hike with a 60-lb pack and 6-lb boots. If you reduce the weight of your boots by 2 pounds, you travel many more miles.

Let me finish the Rinzai story.

Later, Lung-ya (after his encounter with Rinzai) went to see Ts'ui-wei and asked him,

*What is the purpose of the Patriarch's coming from the West?"*

*Ts'ui-wei said, "Hand me the mat." Lung-ya handed him the mat and hit him with it.*

*Lung-ya said, "It's all right that you hit me, but I still don't see any point to the Patriarch coming from the West."*

*After Lung-ya had become master of a temple, a monk entered his room to receive instruction. And the monk said, "I have heard that when you were making a pilgrimage, you had the opportunity to interview two eminent elders" (Rinzai and Ts'ui-wei). "Did you acknowledge them?"*

*He said, "Yes, I met with them, and they hit me, and there still isn't any purpose in the Patriarch's coming from the West."*

Lung-ya is saying, "Wasn't Bodhidharma's mission pointless? Wasn't he trying to sell water by the river?"

And you, dear reader, are you buying? Are you waiting for Mr. Bodhidharma to bring you the purest water?

"Drink, and be whole again beyond confusion."