

CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION

There is a huge amount of unnecessary suffering in the world—unnecessary because it does not arise directly from our life circumstances, but from the conditioned way in which we react to our own memories, stories and beliefs. From the ego’s perspective, emotions such as anger, shame, depression, and anxiety appear to be involuntary and automatic. We seem to be “at the mercy” of these emotions. But, in fact, they are not just emotions, but reactive forms of violence, directed against self and others. Because of our ego confusion, we waste tremendous amounts of time and energy in self-defeating emotional patterns.

In order to alleviate this suffering, we need deeper insight into and understanding of our minds. We need to access our deeper feelings and understand the information contained within our deeper feelings. We need to see through our ego and experience our true nature. We need to meditate long enough and deep enough to experience/realize our *Clear Deep Heart/Mind* (also called Zen, Ch’an, Dhyana and meditative mind). We will then experience the fear, sadness/grief, and concern that underlie all of our habitual, negative emotional reactions. To accomplish this, we need to change our philosophical understanding and experience genuine insight. Once we change our understanding and realize this truth, we will be able to recognize violence expressed as anger, shame, disconnection and other self-defeating patterns as confused immature emotional reactions masking our deeper feelings of fear, sadness and genuine concern. In this way, through the Mondo Zen koan practice, we can transform negative emotional reactions into wise, compassionate responses and alleviate suffering.

Our angst becomes our liberation.

Jun Po Kelly Roshi
Abbott, Hollow Bones Zen

HISTORY

The historical Buddha was a man named Siddhartha Gautama, born in the sixth century BCE. He was an Indian prince who renounced his throne and his wealth to find wisdom and liberation that transcended power, money, or egoic satisfaction, all things he had been handed at birth. He abandoned his family, studied and practiced yoga for eight years, and then asceticism for four more. After twelve years, frustrated with his inability to liberate himself from his own suffering and mental delusion, he sat down in meditation and vowed to stay in meditation until he found the truth. Legend holds he sat for forty days. However long he really sat, it was long enough to awaken from the dream of his own suffering. Siddhartha is remembered with the name “Buddha,” which simply means “awakened one.” He awakened from the dream of a permanent self that had kept him, like so many of us, in bondage. He awakened to discover the deeper truth and cause of our reactive emotional nature. Once he awakened, he founded his own yoga school. He taught the philosophy and practical disciplines that he had used to liberate himself and end his ego suffering. Remarkably, he taught for about fifty years, traveling around northern India teaching with his disciples. The Buddha taught that a new view was essential. He taught that we must first understand these three truths: impermanence, suffering, and selflessness.

Impermanence: When we truly *realize*—understand and embody—*impermanence*, we no longer grasp and cling to that which is eventually going away no matter how tenaciously we cling. This realization brings gratitude as we now fully experience, appreciate and radically accept the ephemeral nature of this life, this very moment, this fleeting gift.

Suffering: One understanding of this truth is that when we truly *realize* that the *pain* we experience in sickness, old age and death is an unavoidable and natural part of living, we come to radical self-acceptance. We no longer try to flee when pain inevitably arises. We work with it. We discover the delightful truth that, while physical discomfort is inevitable, psychological *suffering* is always optional.

Selflessness: When we truly *realize selflessness*, we experience the deeper pure empty nature of our deepest consciousness. We experience our ego’s thinking and feeling as just temporary sensing at the mind’s surface and not as a permanent fixed self. At last we experience genuine insight and know who we really are - Buddha!

These three truths must become realizations, not just philosophical concepts! Not just another book for your coffee table.

Cleaning up our language—Philosophical reorientation

We use the term “ego” to identify all activities of the superficial self-referencing mind – all thoughts, feelings, emotions, and memories, both positive and negative. We consider the ego to be a wholly-

conditioned process or function, an ego structure that arose in infancy, formed in an empty unobstructed mind.

In Mondo Zen practice, we relate to our thoughts and emotions as just another sense, the same as smell, touch, taste, sight and sound. Our emotions have the same function as our other senses; they bring us information.

We have been taught and have chosen to believe that our ego is permanent, and all we really are. But we are not just our thoughts, feelings, memories and emotions. At a deep level, we intuitively know this, and we subsequently long to understand our deeper nature. Evolution has its own mysterious timetable. Now is the time to evolve! Our time!

You sit *there*, I sit *here*. We seem to be two. This temporary experience of a separate self naturally and continually arises. The error in logic causing this is simple – “I think, therefore I am.” But is it possible that “I think, therefore I am” is not deep enough? Is it possible that it is an upside down view? If something arises in my mind, I assume there must be a separate subjective self experiencing what arises. But is it not more accurate to say: “I am, therefore, there is thinking,” since we remain “ourselves” even when no thoughts arise?

Conceptually, it is important to recognize that the ego changes over time; it disappears in deep sleep; it loses the ability to access memory in old age; it can become demented or neurotic, and eventually dies when the body dies.

The problem of ego, this self-maintaining illusion, is that it formed within us before our brains were developed enough to consciously recognize our deeper nature. One way to understand this truth is by going through an ego time regression, going back through time recalling your adolescent, your young child state, then to your infantile state into unconditioned mind, where you experienced only instinctual reactions like hunger and discomfort. Here you had no words, no names, and no signifiers for anything, not even *mama* or *dada*. You are unable to walk or control your bowels. You are *in* a state of mind with no distinction between inside and outside, no self and other. You are just naked consciousness – empty of ego.

Reversing this process, as you grew out of infancy, at some point you became aware of “the world out there,” creating a “self in here.” A temporary construct – *you* – grew at the surface of fundamental empty witnessing awareness, creating the self-illusion. You were conditioned by your culture, by your parents, or whoever reared you, either mimicking or rejecting their patterns. Over time, your preferences and reactions became habitual, memorized and ingrained, as neurological brain structures.

These programmed memories, stories and beliefs, all formed in reaction to your genetic makeup, animal drives, psychological and cultural conditioning. You now live through the beliefs and stories you

remember and continue to believe and then project onto the world. Your ego constantly references and reacts to these memorized patterns. Concentration/meditation practice allows us to actually witness this process, so that you can begin to see where your conditioned, reactive patterns are arising.

It is only because deeper meditative mind – Pure Awareness – exists that ego mind has a place to arise and continue to arise. Ego mind is at the surface of deeper mind. Without a deep pure empty mind, ego cannot arise.

It's important to remember that your temporary ego, this sense of "me" that you have constructed does not need be annihilated and is not "bad." You must develop a strong and healthy ego to function in this world. Liberation comes when we see through the delusion of an ego as a permanent, separate self. In Mondo Zen Practice we deconstruct the ego, re-inform it and reconstruct a new ego that includes the realization of its essential empty nature. Because our ego is a *wholly-conditioned process and not a separate self*, it can and must be *reconditioned* to become liberated. When we experience genuine insight and realize who we truly are we can answer the knock at our door. Knock, knock! Who's there? Nobody!

*I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.
I've been knocking from the inside.*

~ Rumi

What is enlightenment? Enlightenment is awakening to the pure consciousness within us that is deeper than our thoughts, emotions or feelings. Enlightenment is experiencing and understanding emotional feelings as information. Enlightenment is the experience of the deep truth of clarity and unconditional loving compassion within the human psyche. Enlightenment is not an experience of angels or devils, heaven or hell, mystical visions, bells and whistles, or subtle lights and sounds. Enlightenment is not a belief or a sustained, transcendent, blissful *experience*. A moment of spiritual bliss is the *beginning*, not the end, of spiritual practice. Experiences come and go. States come and go. Views come and go. Blissfulness comes and goes.

Remember, to continue existing, the ego must continually reference itself – me, me, me, me, me, me, me -- with an ongoing stream of thoughts, feeling and emotions. If you stop this self-referencing, as we are training ourselves to do in concentration meditation practice, you will "die upon your cushion" and discover the truth of emptiness (Shunyata). Do you think you can be reborn without dying?

If you are truly willing to allow for the *possibility* that your deep mind is purely aware, never blinks, never turns away, never reacts and that your emotional feeling, like all of our senses, is actually a process informing consciousness, you have taken a huge step towards liberation.

Why does all this matter? It matters because meditation with an incorrect understanding not only limits our insight but can lead to suppression of feelings, rigid self-identification, ego-inflation, mania, nihilism and spiritual materialism. Having various “spiritual experiences” or “insights” is only the beginning of true and sustained Enlightenment. Having a strong and consistent meditation practice is one of the most important steps you can take to awaken. But knowing exactly *why* you are meditating, having the right philosophical context is just as important.

As Jun Po Roshi says: “*If you have a bad script for your life, fire your scriptwriter! Hire a new one.*” Through this Mondo Zen process you write a new “script.” We call this shift in understanding moving your perspective from egocentric to Buddha-centric, or to be more precise, Buddh-centric (Awareness-centric)!

ABOUT MONDO ZEN

Are you aware that as conceptual beings, the language we use defines - and limits - our experience? We embody our thoughts. At the foundation of our egos lie core beliefs about who we think we are. The language we use in this manual engages a process of philosophical re-education to enlighten a confused ego-view. This new view cannot be merely *understood*. That’s philosophy. It must be experienced. This is what we call *realization*. In this way we experience how a disciplined awakening mind actually thinks and feels. This change in view, as reflected in the language we use, is essential if we are going to interrupt our ego’s immediate, habitual reactivity.

Incorrect philosophical understanding blocks insight and realization. We are trapped. Our beliefs translate and limit our experiences. Put simply, there is a thinking/feeling memory problem that is preventing you from just awakening right now, in this moment.

For this reason, we ask that you temporarily set aside your ideas and beliefs and freely experience what arises without immediately filtering it through a religious or philosophical context. You might consider yourself Christian, Muslim, Jew, Scientific Materialist, Buddhist, Atheist, Hindu, or Wiccan. We ask that you become a temporary agnostic during this practice, to be open to the possibility of discovering a deeper, more encompassing truth in which these contexts arise.

Allow yourself the freedom to *experience directly*. Temporarily surrender any preconceptions you might have about what is *supposed* to happen. Openness (agnosticism or “beginner’s mind”) permits un-programmed experience, unconstrained by previous concepts. During this process we ask that you leave old beliefs at the door with your hat and shoes. You can always pick them up again on the way out, if they still fit!

Mondo Zen Koan Practice

The word “Mondo” translates into English as “the way of dialog.” The word “Zen” we translate as *Clear Deep Heart/Mind* – a knowing of our consciousness deeper than our thinking, feeling and sensing mind. The word “koan” means an enigmatic question designed to bring your rational thinking mind to one point – a question that points to a deeper truth.¹ When we put the words “Mondo Zen Koan Practice” together, we are referring to a dialog practice that uses enigmatic questions to awaken one to *Clear Deep Heart/Mind*, our deepest self, as well as to unconditional compassion.² At first, these concepts and koans may seem confusing to you. Know that they are meant to challenge you, to deconstruct your current philosophy, to induce insight and establish a new philosophical understanding. To answer these koans, you must *realize* the answers, not just have an intellectual or speculative understanding. This experience transforms the ordinary way in which we understand ourselves and our world.

Please know and remember that throughout this Mondo Zen Dialog **you are your own teacher**. You are led in Mondo to new insight experience, and **you claim these insights and experiences** as your new understanding.

No one can do this for you!

¹ **Facilitator’s Note:** Mondo dialog incorporates four divisions of koan study from our Rinzai school: insight, spontaneity, verbal articulation and precept koans. Our emotional koans are an addition to the traditional precept koans. During this dialog, confused answers to koans must be challenged to be sure there is correct understanding.

² **Facilitator’s Note:** The Mondo Zen dialog practice works like this: (1) We help to deconstruct the participant’s current philosophical view, which leads to insight, (2) Standing within this insight, they can see how they have been blocking realization of their true nature by holding a confused, illusory and ignorant view, (3) This insight transforms their understanding of the nature of our mind, (4) With this experience confirmed as their foundational perspective, they construct and choose a new, liberating philosophy, and (5) They then, through their emotional koan practice, integrate this new understanding into their everyday lives.

In the Buddhist tradition, we refer to this sharing of an insightful conscious state as “transmission.” The truth is that this teaching transmission travels in both directions—from student to facilitator as much as from facilitator to student.³ Let us now take our first step together!

“Virtuous Ones, do not use your minds mistakenly. The great sea does not need more dead bodies... You yourself raise the obstructions that impede your minds. When the sky above has no clouds, the bright heavens shine everywhere.”

~ Master Rinzai

³ **Facilitator’s Note:** It is important to recognize and remember that the Mondo Zen process is a full, heart-mind collaboration between “student” and “facilitator.” The facilitator will need to remain deeply grounded and present in Clear Deep Heart/Mind. From Clear Deep Heart/Mind, the facilitator invites the participant to join in and remain in this state of clarity throughout the dialog. A vital function of the facilitator is to transmit the state we are investigating and hold the integrity of the container, keeping everyone from getting lost in philosophical chatter or attempting to do therapy. **Do not do any therapy!** Do not wander off into shadow work, voice dialog, etc. The koan process is distinct from all these approaches. **The koan process is an awareness practice.** Also, as facilitator, be sure to monitor your teaching skills using the TRUCK method: Did you **Transmit** the koan? Did they experience **Realization** (insight)? Did they **Understand**? Did they **Claim** this understanding by articulating it? If so, you both **Know!**