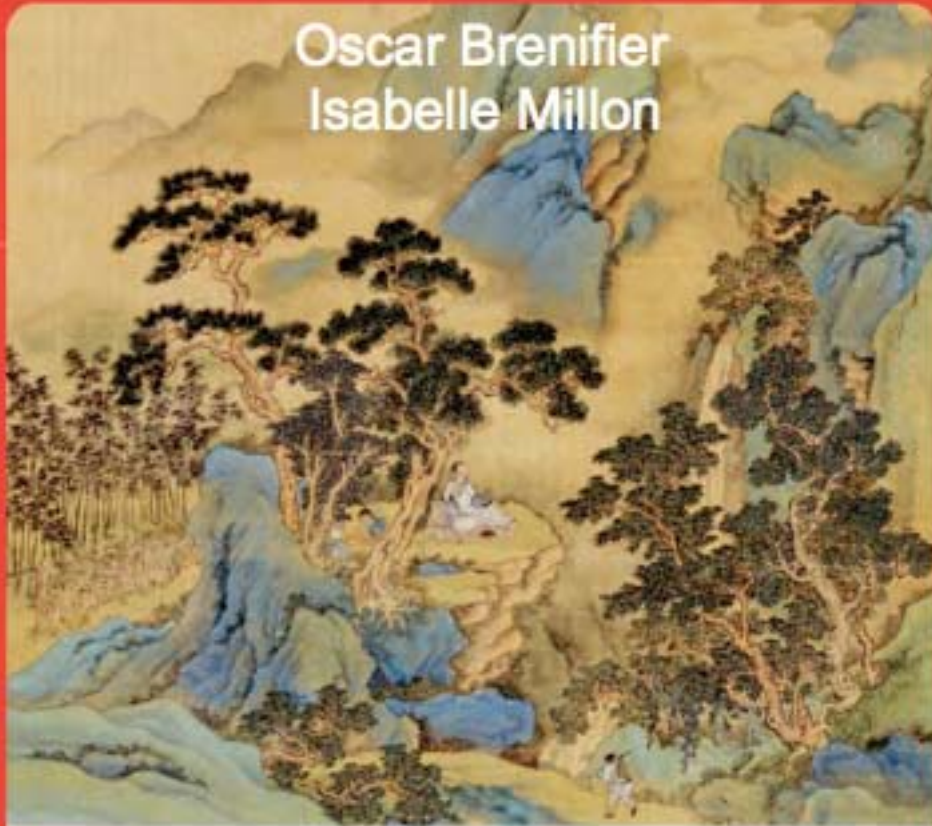


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WISDOM OF ZEN TALES

Philosophical exercises

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THE BOOK

Must we learn how to be bored? Do we thirst for infinity? Should we give up on ourself in order to be free? Does fear prevent us from living? Should we seek perfection? To address these questions, 20 stories from the Japanese tradition of Zen, or Chinese Chan, are proposed as a basis for reflection. Then come ten comprehension questions, in order to deepen the meaning of the various narratives and interpret their content. Ten more questions invite us to meditate on more general issues emanating from these texts. Through this anthology, the reader is invited to discover the meditative wisdom of this branch of Buddhism which particularly cultivates the luminous and liberating simplicity of the mind.

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1/ Breathing

Should we learn to be bored?

A student came to his master to complain.

- Master, this work on the breathing exercise is really getting to me. Inhale. Blow. Inhale. Blow. Breathing non-stop! It's starting to be very annoying. Couldn't I work on something more interesting?

- I understand, said the master, come with me.

He brought his student to the bank of the river, asked him to kneel down and bend over the edge. Then, he took him by the neck and pushed his head into the water. Few seconds after, the student couldn't take it anymore, and started to resist but the master maintained him under the surface. The poor guy was fighting as much as he could, thus the master finally released him, coughing, spitting, and panting.

- So, asked he, is your breathing still annoying?

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the student complain?
- What does the student expect when he goes to see his master?
- What is the purpose of meditating on breathing?
- Why does the master agree with his student?
- Why does the master plunge the head of the student in the water?
- Is the master benevolent?
- Is the master harsh?
- Which pedagogical principles does the master apply in this lesson?
- Does this student need a master?
- Why does the student accept a treatment like this one?

Reflection

- Can we really learn by ourselves or do we always need a teacher?
- Do we have to teach children to be bored?
- Are we responsible for our own boredom?
- Is complain a necessary evil?
- Is meditation always a profitable exercise?
- Is it the exercise of meditation itself that matters, or its purpose?
- Does the learning always have to go through a crisis?
- Can violence be useful?
- Does kindness have limitations?
- Should a teacher explain his pedagogy to his students?

2/ The turtle and the two herons

Why are we sensitive to words?

Two herons and a turtle were living peacefully together on the shore of a pond. One summer fell on them a terrible drought. The pond was severely shrinking and famine started. The two herons decided to fly to better lands.

- What about me? What about me? Yelled the turtle. What I am going to do?

After a common reflection, in order to bring the turtle, it was decided to use a stick that both herons would carry, and the turtle would suspend herself by holding it with her mouth.

- However, be careful, said one of the two herons, you know how you love to talk!

The turtle answered with a nod. And the three friends flew away.

Somewhere on the way, a group of shepherds noticed this rather particular crew.

- How intelligent is this turtle! One exclaimed. She gets herself carried by these two herons!

The turtle was of course very pleased to hear those words, but was careful about not letting go of the stick.

A bit later, some peasants who were working in the fields pointed a finger at them. The turtle listened attentively.

- Look at this two herons, said one of them, how smart are they. What a brilliant idea to carry this turtle like this for their dinner tonight! "Stupid peasants! It was my idea!" wanted to answer the turtle."

But she didn't have time: she barely opened her mouth that she fell and crashed on the ground.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Are the three animals friends?
- Is the turtle self-centered?
- Are the two herons selfish?
- Did the two herons have to take the turtle with them?
- Why does one of the heron ask the turtle to beware of herself?
- Why do the people who see the flying crew feel the need to comment out loud?
- Why do the peasants and the shepherds say different things about what they see?
- Why does the turtle only answer to the peasants?
- Why does the turtle listen to everything that is said?
- Did the turtle get what she deserved?

Reflection

- Do we have to sacrifice ourselves for the well being of our friends?
- How do we recognize friends?
- Is true friendship possible?
- Why do we have friends?
- Is the human being fundamentally self-centered?
- Is it possible to have no expectations from others?
- Why do we care about what others say about us?
- What are the reasons that make us speak?
- Do words have power over us?
- Is spontaneity a good thing?

3/ Hell and heaven

Is reality generated by our consciousness?

A samurai appeared once in front of a Zen master, and asked him:

- Master, is there really a hell and a heaven?

The monk watched his interlocutor for a minute.

- Who are you? Asked he.

- I'm a samurai.

- You, a samurai! What lord would want to at his command? You look like a beggar!

The samurai started to get upset, and grabbed his saber.

The monk pursued:

- Oh, you even have a sword! But you're probably too clumsy and too inexperienced to cut my head!

Full on anger, the samurai screamed, and brandished his saber, ready to hit.

As he was hesitating for a moment, the monk said, with a calm voice:

- Here open the doors of hell.

The samurai, speechless, put away his saber and bowed.

- Here open the doors of heaven.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the samurai want to know if hell and heaven exist?
- What does the samurai expect from the monk?
- Why does the Zen master observe the samurai before answering him?
- Do hell and heaven exist for the monk?
- Why does the Zen master call the samurai a beggar?
- Does the samurai act like a samurai?
- Does the master trust the samurai?
- Why does the samurai, before hitting, hesitate?
- Does the samurai understand the teaching of the monk?
- Does the monk answer the samurai's question?

Reflection

- Why do we worry about life after death?
- Can we live without faith?
- Do we fear to be punished for our sins?
- Why do we need certitudes?
- Is provocation an efficient instrument?
- Is honor a legitimate value?
- Can we always be a calm person?
- Why do we question others?
- Do hell and heaven exist?
- Can we answer without answering?

4/ Little elephant

Do we learn to be free?

A student was complaining to his teacher that he couldn't meditate to long, because his mind was jumping all over the place. So the teacher told him a story. It was the tale of a little elephant, found by a hunter in the forest, and brought to the village. Once the calf overcame his fear of this new situation, he took habit of running everywhere as he liked, and started to do stupid and crazy things. He overthrew, hustled, broke, and crashed, without even noticing it. He was constantly jumping and running, and all his frantic gesticulations were provoking disasters. And of course, he would continually accompany his antics with strident noises from his trunk.

The villagers, angry, who couldn't stand anymore this cumbersome animal, went to see his master, and asked him to do something about it.

In order to solve the problem, the hunter tied the animal to a big tree with a very strong rope, and left him there with some food and water. Obviously the calf was quite unhappy. He vainly tried to pull on his rope, but he could neither untie it nor break it. So he flew into a terrible rage. He furiously trampled on the ground, pushed the tree with all his strength, violently hit it, kicked the rope, and scattered the food and water all over. Periodically, the trunk straight in the air, he would trumpet his pain heartbreakingly. But to avail! Neither the rope nor the tree yielded, nobody came to help, and the poor elephant exhausted himself in useless efforts.

This ordeal lasted for a few days. But as time went on, little elephant displayed signs of fatigue. Hungry, thirsty and tired, his efforts slowly faded away. He started to calm down. Finally, he totally quit fighting and even accepted his fate.

Noticing this, his master came to him, fed him, and freed him. Then, slowly and quietly, little elephant walked into the village, happy of his newly recovered freedom. Since this day, nobody ever complained about him anymore.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the teacher tell this story to his student?
- Is attaching the elephant a punishment for his wrongdoings?
- Is little elephant bullied by the hunter?
- Is the elephant educated or tamed?
- Was the master right to tie up the elephant calf?
- What changed in the elephant during the process?
- Why did little elephant calm down?
- Is little elephant no longer himself?
- Did the master help his student by telling this story?
- Does the student look like little elephant?

Reflection

- Is it good to follow our impulses?
- Can we learn to tranquilize our mind?
- Why are we irritated at being constrained?
- Are constraints a condition for freedom?
- Can others prevent us from living our life?
- Do we have to submit to the requirements of the society?
- Do we necessarily have to impose in order to educate?
- Is education always accompanied by crisis?
- Is someone who does only what he wants a free person?
- Does freedom come from learning?

5/ *The cat*

Is possession a source of violence?

The master was strolling in the yard, when he met two monks arguing violently because of a small cat they had found, and each one wanted to keep for himself.

When they saw the master, the two men asked him immediately to settle their dispute. The master asked them to him over the animal.

- Are you fighting about this cat? Asked he.

The two monks, rather wound up, answered in a simultaneous flurry of words, each one trying to justify himself.

Seeing this, the master swiftly twisted the cat's neck, threw him on the ground, and walked away.

The two monks stared at each other, staggered. Then, one of them ran after the master.

- Master! Master! He shouted. Why did you do that?

The master looked at him, raised his stick, knocked the monk on the head and went his way.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why are the two monks arguing?
- Do the monks care about the cat?
- Why doesn't the master decide between the two students?
- Why doesn't the master explain the problem to his students?
- Why does the master kill the cat?
- Why does the master hit his student?
- Did the monks need the master?
- Is the master a good pedagogue?
- Is the master more violent than the two monks?
- Is the master fair?

Reflection

- Why do we fight?
- Is it illegitimate to want to own something?
- Is possession a source of violence?
- Can violence be pedagogical?
- Can violence be beneficial?
- Is violence necessary in order to stop violence?
- What do we look for in pets?
- Can animals replace human beings?
- Are we allowed to kill animals?
- Are explanations always appropriate?

6/ *The challenge*

Must we learn to die?

A young monk was coming back from a trip, entrusted with an important message for his abbot. On his way he met a samurai, who challenged him into a duel. The monk begged him to let him go, promising to return after delivering the letter. The samurai accepted, and the monk went to accomplish his task.

Once the letter delivered, before going back to his fate, the monk asked for advice to his superior.

- What can I do! I have never touched a weapon before. I will be killed!

- Indeed, you are going to die, there is for you no chance of victory. But I can teach you a good way to die. You will simply brandish your saber above your head, close your eyes, and wait for a cold feeling on the top of your head: it will be death.

The monk thanked the abbot and went to find the samurai. The man gave the monk a saber and the duel started. Since he had nothing better to do, the monk did what his master told him: he raised his arms with his saber and waited.

His impassive attitude totally surprised the samurai. Indeed, the monk was so focused on the top of his head in order to know when he would die, that he was not paying attention at all to his opponent.

So the samurai started to feel insecure. "Only a true saber master would take a position that strange. And even more, he is closing his eyes!" As the monk was still waiting, without moving, the samurai, completely distraught, did not dare to attack. He finally burst into tears, imploring the monk:

- Please don't kill me! Have mercy on me! I thought I was the best, but I never met a master like you. I am begging you, please, take me as your disciple, and teach me the true way of the saber.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the samurai want to fight?
- Why does the monk accept the fight?
- Why doesn't the master propose the monk to escape from the fight?
- Is the monk naive?
- Why doesn't the samurai hit the monk?
- Why does the samurai start to cry?
- Is the monk really a saber master?
- Do the monk and the samurai fear the same thing?
- What was the samurai looking for?
- What did the master teach the monk?

Reflection

- From where comes the desire to fight?
- Why do we fear to die?
- Are there "good" ways to die?
- Should we learn to die?
- Is cowardice reprehensible?
- Can we dominate our fears?
- Do we always have to keep our word?
- Are others a challenge for us?
- Is naivety a recommendable posture?
- Is attitude more important than the action itself?

7/ Because I am here

Is present the primordial reality?

An old monk was sweeping the monastery's yard, under a blazing sun.

A young monk was passing by. Curious, he asked:

- How old are you?
- Eighty-two years old.
- You are really old! Why do you keep working this hard?
- Well, because I'm here.
- But why do you work under this blazing sun?
- Well, because it is there.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the young monk question the old monk?
- Is the young monk worried?
- Does the old monk really answer the questions?
- Does the young monk understand the answers of the old monk?
- Is the old monk logical?
- Is the old monk fatalist?
- Why does the old monk work that hard?
- Does the old monk ask himself questions?
- What characterize the philosophy of the old monk?
- Can the young monk understand the old monk?

Reflection

- Is curiosity a quality or a defect?
- Why do we worry about others?
- Is worrying a good thing?
- Do we have to answer logically the questions that we are asked?
- Is it better to ignore suffering?
- Do our actions always need finality?
- Is present the primordial reality?
- Do we have to accept reality as it is?
- Do we necessarily have to question everything?
- Is old age an asset?

8/ The way

Do we miss the essential?

A disciple asked the master:

- Where is the way?
- Right in front of your eyes.
- But why don't I see it?
- Because you keep inside yourself the idea of "self".
- Really! Because I have in me the idea of "self", I can't see it! And you master, did you see it?
- The idea of "you", beside the idea of "self", keeps you even more to see it.
- And if the idea of "you" and the idea of "self" disappear, then we can see it?
- If there is no more "self" and no more "you", who would then like to see the way?
- Well me, of course!

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why is the disciple looking for the way?
- Does the disciple know what he is looking for?
- What is keeping the disciple from answering his own question?
- How can the path be just in front of our eyes?
- Why are “selves” an obstacle to see the path?
- Can we escape the concept of “selves”?
- Should we want to see the path?
- What is the student’s main problem?
- Does the disciple understand the words of the master?
- What is the message of the master?

Reflection

- Why do we want to give meaning to our existence?
- Is thinking, judging?
- Can thinking not be conditioned?
- Is it possible to ignore our self in order to think?
- Does too much thinking keep from thinking?
- Should we see in order to know?
- Is reality in the world or in the mind?
- Is it true that “the essential is invisible to our eyes”?
- Is it difficult to distinguish the secondary from the essential?
- Do we always know what we are looking for?

9/ The young woman

Does true morality mock morality?

Two monks were travelling together to rejoin their monastery. As they arrived to a village, they met a young woman, stopped in the middle of the way. Prettily dressed, she was standing at the edge of a pothole blocking the whole path, which she couldn't go through without getting dirty. As one of the monks understood the situation, he offered to carry her on his back, in order to get across. After a slight hesitation, throwing furtive glances at her right and left, the woman accepted the offer. After it was done, the two monks went their way.

At night, once they arrive at the monastery, the second monk couldn't help to make a remark to his comrade.

- You are a monk! You are not supposed to be in contact with women. Especially a woman like that, young and pretty. It's risky!

The monk hesitated, and then answered.

- As for me, I let the girl by the roadside. As for you, it seems that you still carry her inside of you.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the young woman hesitate to accept the monk's proposal?
- Why shouldn't the monk help the young woman cross?
- Why does the monk decide to help the young woman cross?
- Why does the young woman finally accept?
- Why is the woman "throwing furtive glances at her right and left"?
- Why does the second monk wait so long before making a remark to his comrade?
- Why would carrying a young and pretty woman be dangerous?
- Why does the first monk hesitate before answering?
- What kind of criticism makes the first monk tell the second?
- What is the difference between the two monks?

Reflection

- Why are we obsessed by some ideas?
- Can we fight against obsession?
- Is modesty a legitimate feeling?
- Is morality always a good adviser?
- Can moral principles contradict themselves?
- Should we judge someone on his thoughts or on his actions?
- Are good and bad necessary concepts?
- Why can the word "moralizing" have a pejorative connotation?
- Should we oppose body and mind?
- Can we escape the feeling of guilt?

10/ The beautiful nun

Should we get rid of our desires or satisfy them?

In a monastery where both women and men resided, lived a nun of rare beauty. Despite her shaved head and her poor closing, she attracted lot of attention. Thereby a lot of monks were secretly in love with her.

Finally, one of them, who couldn't take it anymore, sent her discreetly a gallant letter, asking her for a date. She didn't answer right away. But the next day, at meal, when everyone was there, she asked loudly, showing the letter:

- Whoever wrote me this letter can come to me now and hold me in his arms if he really loves me, and I will be his.

But no one came to try the challenge.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why is chastity a rule in the monastery?
- Why is the appearance of the nun not advantageous?
- Is the nun loved?
- Does the nun want to be loved?
- Why does the nun choose to make a public declaration?
- How come no monk comes to declare his love?
- Does the monk harm the nun by writing to her?
- What does the nun hope by her declaration?
- Would the nun love the monk if he declared himself?
- Is this nun provocative?

Reflection

- Why is love often taboo?
- Can love be platonic?
- Does abstinence allows self-development?
- Can abstinence be an escape?
- Why do we fear to expose ourselves to the eyes of others?
- Does reason have to dominate emotions?
- Is fear stronger than desire?
- Why is it difficult to ignore our desires?
- Is the human more a being of reason or of passion?
- Should we deliver ourselves from our desires or satisfy them?

11/ *Really?*

Should we privilege the tranquility of the soul?

A renowned monk lived in a small town where he was teaching to all those who wanted to listen to him. One day, a young girl from his neighborhood got pregnant. Her parents, furious, assailed her with questions in order to know the identity of the father.

Cornered, the young girl denounced the monk as the culprit. Immediately, the parents rushed to his house and shouted insults at him for his vile behavior. The monk just answered: Really?

Obviously, the rumor of the scandal spread quickly, and practically no one came to hear the monk anymore.

When the child was born, the parents brought him to the monk and said: « since you are the father, take care of him. » He took the child that was given to him and responded: « Really? »

The monk cared for the child as well as he could. A few months later, the young girl finally told her parents the truth and admitted that the father was a young man that had left the city.

Horried, the parents rushed to the monk's house and apologized repeatedly for their mistake. « We are here to ask for your forgiveness and to take back the child » they told him. The monk said « Really? » and he gave them the child back.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the young girl accuse the monk?
- Why do the people believe the rumor about the monk?
- Why does the monk accept to take care of the child?
- Why does the young girl finally decide to say the truth?
- Why does the monk answer « Really? » every time the parents talk to him?
- Why doesn't the monk try to have a dialogue with the parents?
- Why do the parents trust their daughter instead of the monk's reputation?
- Is the monk a powerless victim?
- Why isn't the monk resentful?
- Does the monk's strategy function?

Reflection

- When there is a fault, is it necessary to find the responsible?
- Should we search mainly for peace of the soul?
- Does irony serves to self-protect?
- Is irony an adequate attitude?
- Are emotions bad counselors?
- Can we educate our emotions?
- Can we be without emotions?
- Is wisdom a kind of craziness?
- Why do people easily believe rumors?
- Does truth always overcome?

12/ *Negation*

Is knowledge an obstacle for thinking?

A wise man from the school « Know everything » came to visit a master, and after introducing himself, he asked:

- Dear colleague, with which spirit do you practice the way?
- For me, since I am an old monk, there is no spirit to use; there is no way to practice.
- But then, if there is not spirit to use and no way to practice, why do you bring together all those people every day and why do you advise them to study the Zen and to practice the path?
- Where could I gather people? I don't have any plot of land. And how could I advise them? I don't have a mouth to talk.
- You are saying lies
- How can I tell lies? I don't have a tongue to say them?
- I don't understand your words.
- Don't worry, I don't understand them either.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- What does represent the school of « Knowing everything »?
- Why does the wise man come to meet the master?
- What is the way?
- Does the master mock the wise man?
- Why doesn't the wise man understand the master?
- Is a particular mind needed in order to practice the way?
- Does the wise man try to understand the master's words?
- Does the master tell lies?
- Why does the old monk reject the wise man's questions?
- Is it true that the master doesn't understand his own words?

Reflection

- Why do we like to say « no »?
- What is the difference between paradox and contradiction?
- Can absurdity make sense?
- Why do we fear not understanding?
- Is lying necessarily a negative concept?
- Why do we accuse people of lying?
- Can knowledge be an obstacle for the mind?
- Is it possible to "unlearn"?
- Is it true that all affirmations are negations?
- Can a proposition be true and false at the same time?

13/ The cook

Is obligation a factor of emancipation?

A young man was walking through the market, when he met a monk examining the display of a merchant.

Since Zen interested him, he invited the holy man to stay with him in order to discuss. The other answered that it was not possible because he was a cook.

- I am sorry, but I have to go back to the monastery as soon as I finish shopping. Otherwise, meals won't be ready on time. Anyway, I don't have the permission to stay here.

The young man tried to persuade him to stay.

- Why do you work in the kitchen for? Is it not better to meditate, study the koans and discuss them?

The monk started laughing:

- Young man, it seems that you ignore the real meaning of Zen.

- What is the real meaning of Zen you are talking about? Asked the young man, taken aback.

- Cooking, answered the monk
And he left.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why doesn't the monk want to stay and have a talk?
- Is the monk hiding behind authority?
- Why does the monk start laughing?
- What is the young man looking for?
- What is the interest of meditating and studying « koans »?
- Why does the young man want to have a dialogue?
- Is the monk "playing" at being a cook?
- How can cooking represent the "real meaning of Zen"?
- Can the young man understand the monk?
- Is the monk a free man?

Reflection

- Why do we like to discuss?
- Is obedience a virtue?
- Can we lose ourselves by dedicating ourselves to others?
- Does a hierarchy exist between theory and practice?
- Is cooking an art or a craft?
- Why is obedience a problem for some people?
- Can we accomplish ourselves through work?
- Do we all have a mission to accomplish?
- Are we only responsible for ourselves?
- Why do we give ourselves obligations?

14/ *The silence*

Does silence generate fear?

Four monks were staying in a lost temple, on the top of a mountain. They decided to hold a retreat for a few days, in absolute silence. They had to stay from morning to night in Zazen, the meditation position.

After the first day, came a very cold night.

- The candle is extinguished, said the youngest monk.
- You cannot speak. We have to be in a total silence, said an older monk, with a severe tone.
- Why are you speaking instead of being quiet, like we said we would? Said testily a third monk.
- I am the only one who did not speak! Concluded aloud the last one with great satisfaction.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why do the monks decide to practice absolute silence?
- Why have a common retreat, if talking is forbidden?
- What is the purpose of meditation?
- Why does the first monk talk?
- Why does the second monk talk?
- Why does the third monk talk?
- Why does the fourth monk talk?
- Why do the monks fail to be in silence?
- Do the monks understand what is going on?
- Could the monks not speak at all?

Reflection

- Why do we feel obligated to answer to others?
- Why are other's questions disturbing?
- Do we always know why we speak?
- Can we be prisoner of our own words?
- Do we make rules for ourselves or for others?
- Why do we violate the rules that we make?
- Why do we look for calm?
- Why do silence and calm bother us?
- Is it possible to quiet down our internal fuss?
- How can silence be truth?

15/ The wisdom

Do we thirst for the infinite?

A man asked the master:

- Is wisdom big?
- It is.
- How big?
- Without limits.
- Is wisdom small?
- It is small.
- How small?
- Even if you want to look at it, you cannot see it.
- Where is then the truth?
- Where is not the truth?

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the man ask the master for his advice?
- Why does the man use sizes to elucidate wisdom?
- Can wisdom be big and small at the same time?
- Why does the man look for a location to apprehend wisdom?
- Is truth somewhere?
- Why does the master answer the last question with another question?
- Does the master answer the questions?
- Could the master simply define wisdom?
- Does the man understand the master's answers?
- Is truth always paradoxical?

Reflection

- Is wisdom universal?
- Is it to know wisdom that causes problems, or to practice it?
- Why do we want to measure things?
- How can anything be big and small at the same time?
- Are we fascinated by infinity?
- Can we know infinity?
- Is the principle of non-contradiction always valid?
- Should we be able to overcome oppositions?
- Is reality rational?
- Is transcendence a reality in itself or a mental construct?

16/ *Nothing*

Do we have to abandon our self in order to be free?

A monk went to see the emperor, reputed to be pious, at the capital, in his palace. The emperor said to the monk:

- I built many temples, recopied many sutras, and helped a huge number of monks. What merits can I expect from these accomplishments?

- None, said the monk.

The emperor, unsettled, asked:

- So what is the sacred principle of such a truth?

- A fathomless void and nothing sacred.

The emperor started to get a bit angry.

- But then, who are you, to introduce yourself like that to us?

- I don't know.

And the monk went to meditate facing a wall.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why does the emperor do the “good”?
- Why does the emperor can’t hope any “merits or rewards”?
- Why is the emperor surprised?
- Why does the emperor get irritated at the monk?
- Why would a truth be unfathomable and devoid of sacred?
- Why does the emperor doubt of the monk?
- Why does the monk declare to know nothing?
- Why is the monk abrupt with the emperor?
- What prevents the emperor from understanding the monk?
- Why does the monk choose to meditate in front of a wall?

Reflection

- Why do we do “good things”?
- Should a “good action” be disinterested in order to be good?
- Is it legitimate to expect rewards for our actions?
- Why do we want to be recognized?
- Is it true that “hope springs eternal”?
- Do we need foundations to justify our actions?
- Can we have nothing sacred in our existence?
- Is it possible to reconcile with uncertainty?
- Is desire an obstacle to happiness?
- Do we have to give up on our self in order to be free?

17/ *The wrapping*

Is reality a mere appearance?

Since many years, a couple had a small shop with little objects. The woman was receiving the clients and the man was doing the wrapping. He was now an expert in this art, and this is why clients were coming from far away to buy a present with these amazing tissue wrappings, made so handily.

The wife was proud of her husband. Since she wanted him to be recognized by everyone, she proposed he would go to the temple in order to visit the great master, that would make him pass the ultimate test. The husband was so much in love with his wife that he accepted and went.

- The destiny of a wrapping is to disappear in order to free its content, explained the master. - Yes, master, answer the trader

- Could you overcome destiny and create a beautiful wrapping that no hand would ever be able to violate? Asked the master.

The man could not forbid himself to think immediately of his wife's beautiful body, and he decided to conceive the wrapping not as a cloth but as a skin.

- Great, said the venerable man, you conceived a live wrapping that nobody will be able to undo. You are a real master. However, he added, your secret is cursed. Every day somebody will hate you with all his soul and will curse your name. This is the price you'll have to pay for your art.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why is the wrapping an important element of the gift?
- Why do the clients care about the package?
- Why does the man pass the ultimate test?
- Why does the man have to defeat destiny?
- How is skin a wrapping?
- Why is skin an unusual wrapping?
- Why does the invention of the skin as a wrapping would be «a curse»?
- Why does the master want from his student this terrible achievement?
- What does the woman represent in that story?
- Is the man in that story a “sorcerer’s apprentice”?

Reflection

- Is the package an element of deception?
- Is reality a mere wrapping?
- Does skin serve to hide or to render visible?
- Is the body a wrapping of the soul?
- Do we love someone, or his appearance?
- Are there certain competences that we would rather not acquire?
- Is internal reality not accessible to us?
- Do things have their own unalienable nature?
- What is the most important: appearance or reality?
- Does appearance hide or reveal reality?

18/ *The stick*

Is something something else that what it is?

The student arrived at the monastery, proud of his new stick.

- What is it? Asked the master, pointing to this new object.

- I don't know, answered the disciple, taken aback and suspicious.

His master recommended him to go out and meditate, in order for him to answer the question. While he was walking outside, the disciple met a peasant so he asked him the same question.

- It's a stick, answered the simple man, astonished.

A bit later, he met a well-dressed man, visibly a scholar. Again, he asked the question.

- It's a tree branch cut and polished, used to lean over, to walk or to defend oneself, which is called a stick, replied the scholar.

Then the student met a monk, wearing a dress and carrying his bowl. Once more he asked his question.

- It's just a sign of impermanence of things, a manifestation of universal vacuity, answered the religious man.

The disciple came back to his master, and when the master asked him about the result of his meditation, the disciple answered:

- It's a stick, master.

The master got angry.

- You give me the official answer. You want to show that you are a good student of the Zen. Then what do you practice meditation for?

After those words, he took the stick and stroke the shoulder of his disciple.

- That is what this object is! Said he.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why is the student proud of his stick?
- Why does the master ask him what is this object?
- Why is the student suspicious in front of the master's question?
- Why does the master tell the student to go out and meditate?
- Why is the peasant astonished?
- What distinguishes the peasant from the scholar?
- What distinguishes the answer of the religious man from the others?
- Why does everyone have his own definition of the stick?
- Why does the master mentions an « official answer »?
- Did the student understand why the master strokes him?

Reflection

- Why do we get attached to objects?
- Is it possible not to have certainties?
- Is the human being rather conformist?
- Should beware of evidences or trust them?
- Which are the obstacles that forbid seeing the reality of things?
- Is it always necessary to think before answering?
- Is a thing only what it is?
- Should we find the answers in ourselves or in others?
- What distinguishes a good answer from a bad one?
- What is the role of a good master?

19/ *The tempest*

Does fear prevent us from living our life?

A young novice and his master were crossing a river in a rowboat. It was winter, the wind was strong and the water agitated.

The novice was worried, because under the wind, the skiff seemed very fragile. It started raining, the day was falling, the visibility was quite bad, and the young man started feeling fear.

The two men were rowing in silence, when suddenly they saw another bark. The novice dropped his oars, indicated the other bark to his companion and said:

- Look master, this boat is coming straight on us. With this heavy wind, it's hard to steer, we are going to have an accident!

Since the master was not answering, the novice stood up and started yelling:

- Hey you! What are you doing? You are coming right onto us!

Nobody answered.

- It's insane! Who is the crazy man piloting this boat?

As the craft was approaching, one could see a vague and motionless form, close to the rudder. The novice accosted it.

- Hey pilot! Wake up! You are going to make us sink.

Since he received no answer, he became very angry and started yelling some insults, imprecations and threats.

- Idiot! Fool! If you make us sink, you will see what will happen to you!

The bark continued approaching inexorably. But happily, at the last moment, thanks to a swirl of the current, or through a swift gesture of the master, the collision was avoided.

When they looked into the other boat, the two monks realized that nobody was inside. What the young novice took for a sleeping person was just a big bloated bag.

The master looked at his novice and asked:

- Tell me, who were you angry against?

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- Why is the novice worried since the beginning of the story?
- Why does the novice drop his oars instead of rowing?
- Why does the master doesn't respond to the warnings of the novice?
- Why doesn't the master try to calm the novice down?
- Why does the novice get angry?
- How did the crew avoid collision?
- Who did the novice get angry at?
- What does the boat without pilot symbolize?
- Which mistake did the novice commit?
- What distinguishes the master from the student?

Reflection

- Are we victim of circumstances?
- Is anger necessarily a bad adviser?
- Is life worrisome?
- Can we avoid listening to our worries?
- Is fear a necessary reaction?
- Do our fears come from ourselves?
- Should we overcome our fears?
- Why do we feel the need to insult others?
- Is it possible and desirable to always remain calm?
- Is it recommended to trust providence?

20/ Polish the tile

Should we seek perfection?

- What are you doing? Asked the master to his disciple, who was seated on the ground.

- I am doing zazen, answered the disciple.

- And why are you doing zazen?

- I want to become Buddha.

Hearing this, the master sat next to his disciple, picked up a tile from a floor, that he started to carefully rub.

Intrigued, the disciple asked him:

- Master, why are you polishing this tile?

- I want to make it a mirror, quite simply.

- But, said the student, perplexed, that's impossible!

- And becoming Buddha by doing zazen, do you think it is possible? Answered the master.

Some questions to deepen and prolong

Comprehension

- What is the goal of zazen practice?
- Why does the disciple want to become Buddha?
- Can the disciple become Buddha?
- Does the master think that the tile can become a mirror?
- Does the analogy of the master function?
- Why is the student intrigued?
- Why does the master choose this way to express himself?
- Is the master sarcastic with his student?
- Does the master think one can become Buddha by doing zazen?

Reflection

- What is the interest of meditation?
- What is the difference between meditation and reflection?
- Why do we want to be perfect?
- Can we reach a sort of perfection?
- Is it good to search for perfection?
- Is it desirable not to know perplexity?
- Should we always see the derisory nature of things?
- Is it absurd to desire the impossible?
- Is irony an appropriate way to teach?
- Can we provoke illumination in someone else?