Foreword

What Is Enlightenment?

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In *The Ways of Zen*, C. C. Tsai wonderfully depicts with humor as well as wisdom students looking for enlightenment in the wrong place or the wrong way. Enlightenment is an attractive notion. Nowadays, as in ancient times, people want to attain enlightenment or declare that they have done so. But what has actually been attained? When you meditate, you can experience various states in which you feel different from your usual self. Are these enlightened states? Do they give you enlightenment permanently? Modern Zen Master Kusan used to say that these were not an experience of awakening but merely a perception of the luminous nature of the mind.

The Buddha achieved great meditative states through concentration exercises, but he did not feel that they were the answer to his predicament—life, death, suffering. The Buddha's enlightenment was based on the dissolution of hatred, greed, and delusion, not on achieving any specific meditative states. In *The Ways of Zen*, Tsai's illustrations and commentary make these challenging Zen stories accessible to new generations while pointing out that saying one is enlightened might prove the contrary. As Nagarjuna, a second-century philosopher monk, said very clearly:

"I am free! I cling no more!
Liberation is mine!"
The greatest clinging
Is to cling like this?¹

¹ Stephen Batchelor, trans., *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).

A poem by an early Buddhist nun who was practicing at the time of the Buddha expresses well what the practice and the goal are:

Although I left home for no home
and wandered, full of faith,
I was still greedy
for possessions and praise . . .

Life is short.
Age and sickness gnaw away.
I have no time for carelessness
Before this body breaks.

And as I watched the elements of mind and body
Rise and fall away
I saw them as they really are.
I stood up.
My mind was completely free.
The Buddha's teaching has been done.²

On the Zen path one must be careful of the expectations one has about enlightenment. As Zen Chinese poet Hanshan said:

Body clothed in a no-cloth robe,
Feet clad in turtle's fur boots,

² Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Translation and Commentary on the Therigatha* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991).

I seize my bow of rabbit horn
And prepare to shoot the devil Ignorance.³

Enlightenment is often associated with certain mystical images. People imagine that if they become enlightened suddenly it will be like pressing a switch and light will surround them, or that they will start floating in space. Or they might think that enlightenment will bring them ultimate peace and utter contentment, that it will solve all their problems and that they will never encounter any difficulties anymore.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, an important text for the Zen school, it is stated: "Sentient beings are Buddhas, Buddhas are sentient beings."⁴ This implies that all beings have the nature of a Buddha and can awaken to it at any moment, which is a point that Tsai emphasizes in *The Ways of Zen*. But Buddhas must be humble and remember that they are also sentient beings and can make errors. In one second, you can be a Buddha; in the next second, you can be a deluded sentient being.

At the root of Zen meditation, there is the moment of enlightenment of the Buddha. The root of the word "Buddha" is *budh*, which means "to awaken." In the Zen tradition, there is a debate about whether practice and awakening are sudden or gradual. This debate is referred to several times in *The Ways of Zen* (e.g., pp. 46, 49, and 145). I would like to suggest that this is a false debate, as these two aspects, gradual and sudden, encompass the two essential facets of Zen practice.

Zen meditation stands at the crossroads formed by the two dimensions intersecting. The gradual dimension represents the width of practice, and the sudden represents the depth. There is a gradual aspect to the practice. You put in effort, with patience and a long-enduring mind. This bears fruit and you see some progress. Over time, meditation becomes easier, the mind is calmer and clearer. You become wiser and more compassionate. There is also a sudden dimension to the practice. Suddenly you have a flash of insight and you see clearly the

way things are. As you let go of certain mental and emotional habits, you have a glimpse of states of liberation. You do not consciously force yourself to do this; it just happens.

Korean Zen Master Bojo advocated several sudden awakenings followed each time by gradual practice. He pointed out that before you can really step confidently and surely on the path, you need a sudden insight, however small, to show you the way and to give you faith. Because delusions and habits are powerful, you must patiently cultivate gradual practice to actually put into action the breakthrough you've had and embody it in the world in an experiential way. Two Chinese Zen poems describe these two dimensions. The first one is by Master Shenxiu and the second one by the sixth Zen ancestor Huineng, as mentioned in *The Ways of Zen* (pp. 29–30):

The body is the wisdom tree,
The mind like a bright mirror stand;
Always strive to wipe it clean,
Making sure that no dust lands.

Wisdom has never been a tree,
The bright mirror has no stand;
There has never been anything,
So where can dust land?

Both dimensions are needed. If the practice is only thought about in terms of gradual development, you can become deterministic and narrow. There is a very fixed set of instructions and results, and everyone has to fit into it. This approach can become too mechanistic and does not always allow for people's differences. Following only the sudden dimension approach, on the other hand, could lead to ignoring ethics and morality. One way to reconcile the two could be to practice regularly without expecting any definite result while at the same time being open to awakening breaking through at any moment.

Enlightenment cannot be reducible to a single experience and replicated as such. As shown in *The Ways of Zen*, enlightenment is a process of de-grasping, of letting go, of shedding. It is not a permanent state that is transcendental and outside the conditions that one inhabits. One awakens to one's own nature, not to something outside of it. One awakens to what

³ Han-Shan, *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet Han-Shan*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

⁴ Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1984).

is there and at this moment cannot be clearly seen. As Tsai comments on p. 127:

By seeking the Buddha, we lose the Buddha; in seeking Bodhidharma, we lose Bodhidharma. The most precious thing there is resides inside you—it is yourself. In pursuing external objects, we tend to lose sight of that.

As illustrated in *The Ways of Zen*, awakening, or enlightenment, might not actually be what one thinks or hopes it is. In the opening panels of this book, Tsai depicts a fish surprised to learn that it is living in water. Looking for enlightenment is similar to a fish looking for water, and awakening is when it realizes it is already swimming in it.