

INTERNAL ARTS

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ZEN IN DAILY LIFE

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PEACE OF MIND



STRENGTH OF BODY



Pierce Watters

Literature is full of references to the second sentence in Mumon's comment. "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," is perhaps the best known. In *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, the first Zen story, "A Cup of Tea," tells us of a man who is so full of knowledge that he can learn nothing. The more we know, the less we know.

There comes a time in life, for some people, when the realization hits that, now, just now, enough knowledge has been gained so that one might recognize one's own ignorance. A great Japanese artist, acclaimed by the government of Japan as a national treasure, consented to an interview. At this time he was well past the age of 80. He commented that he had only, just now, progressed in his art to the point where he could produce worthwhile works.

Add to this starting point my own ignorance of Zen, and of everything, for that matter, and that what is written about Zen is not the true Zen. In my extreme youth I was a knowledge miser, a Silas Marner of information. A goal, set at the age of ten, was to live forever with the purpose being to learn *everything!*

This led to many problems, self-made roadblocks on the way to personal development. If a bit of knowledge proved difficult to assimilate, or another bit already considered assimilated was lost, self-anger and depression followed. Thus, considering the way of the world, I spent most of my time either angry or depressed or both. Then, in my late twenties, I encountered my first master. He was in the publishing business. He had much experience and, for reasons unknown to me, began my education. Actually, he had to begin at the beginning and uneducate me, first.

The process was neither quick nor easy. No sudden enlightenment came. It was more like the sea wearing down a stubborn rock. I was so full of myself, there was no

LEARNING

Pierce Watters

When one ignorant attains realization he is a saint.

When a saint begins to understand he is ignorant.

*"A Buddha Before History," Mumon's comment -
Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*

time for him. Nor was I alone in labelling him a "fool" or a "silly old man." However, he persevered. What rock can persuade the ocean to change its course? This Lao Tse was always cheerfully even-tempered and no little rock could dissuade him. Finally, after several years, I began to see the truth in what he said. At last, I began to listen. Of course, the progress consisted of three steps forward and two back, but it nevertheless continued.

Throughout the unlearning process, the rock never ceased to plot against the ocean. At one point, this rock, in a rather feverish state, decided he would never know as much as the teacher. The only recourse was to kill the master. Although the resolution never went beyond the thought stage, it does not matter, it was still the same thing.

At any stage in life there are things one is ready and able to understand and other things that can only be incomprehensible. My teacher knew this. In a way, his teaching was done in cycles, or, to continue the analogy, it came in waves. If my overfull head could not grasp a particular point, it was repeated a week or a month or a year later. When the time was right and the student was ready, the point was understood and absorbed. In many ways, this learning process was a string of little enlightenments. None were, on their own, vast and powerful, but as they grew, one by one, the sum became greater than the parts, like a gathering of fireflies at sunset. I did not realize it at the time, but the instruction was very much in the Zen manner.

Learning, growing, any process which contributes toward the unification of mind, body and spirit, tends to behave in a wave-like manner. There are backslidings and there are plateaus. Students go through phases where the master is the Devil, and through phases where the master is God. Well, not one to miss any step along the way, there came a time when this ocean became deified in my mind, in my *mind*. He was consulted on

everything! Of course, the answers often made no sense, but this was not the fault of the teacher. In a movie, some years ago, an American consulted a Zen master. The master's answer to every question was to throw a cup of tea in the American's face. The tea-soaked man left, none the wiser, but this does not imply that the answer was worthless.

After many years, when my reliance on the master's advice was almost obsessive, he said, "The time has come when you must lead and I must follow." For me, the time had come to panic. I did not want to lead, for it is always much easier to follow. During this period stress was a constant as were sleepless nights. I tried running and hiding and screaming and silence. The ocean was, as usual, ineluctable. So, more than reluctantly, kicking and heel-dragging all of the way, I led. And...and it wasn't so bad. "The child is father to the man." Of course, it was not easy. At least, in the beginning. The leader is the most visible. The leader is responsible, not only for himself, but for the followers. The master was an excellent follower. He guarded my back and picked me up when I fell. He kept me to the middle path and boxed my ears when necessary. I might be the leader, but I was still just a rock to his ocean.

"When a student is ready to learn, a teacher will appear." This first teacher opened the way for this student to find other masters. But, if not for the first teacher, the instruction of the other masters would most likely have fallen on deaf ears, unseeing eyes and an unfeeling body. That "a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step," has new meaning. You cannot take the second step without preceding it with the first.

Now, thanks to the ocean, and many, many other teachers of things large and small, it has become much easier to keep to the center, and the middle path is lighted with thousands of fireflies.