

# *Mokusho Zen and Kanna Zen*

## (Silent Illumination Zen and Koan Zen)

Rev. Seijun Ishii  
Komazawa University

Silent Illumination Zen and Watching Koan Zen are the two currents of Zen that developed in twelfth century Song China.

As represented by Baso's "The mind itself is Buddha," Zen thought is based on a complete affirmation of the self, considering the mind (discriminating mind) as being, as it is, the Buddha. This was expressed in various distinctive ways and methods by the Five Houses of Zen in Tang China which then converged in Song China as the Soto Zen School and the Rinzai Zen School. Roughly speaking, Silent Illumination (*Mokusho*) Zen was established and developed by the lineage of ancestral masters in the Soto Zen School and Watching Koan (Kanna) Zen was established and developed by Daie of the Rinzai Zen School.

### 1. Silent Illumination Zen

Following after Baso's affirmation of the self, Silent Illumination Zen was a style which taught that steadily looking at the essence of the self is to be a buddha, and this was fused together with the practice of zazen. The character for "moku" of "Mokusho" means "silent" or "quiet." This matter of "keeping silent" is in contrast with speaking. Specifically, this is a reference to the practice of zazen. The character for "sho" in "Mokusho" means "enlightenment" or "verification" by "illuminating or enlightening" by itself. "Verification" appears at the place where "zazen" is practiced and for this reason a fundamental way of thinking in Silent Illumination Zen is that the moment of sensing "I'm enlightened" (the enlightenment experience) is not set up.

Two representative figures in Song China who advocated for the practice of Silent Illumination Zen were Shinketsu Seiryo (Zhenxie Qingliao) (1088-1151) and Wanshi Shogaku (Hongzhi Zhengjue) (1091-1157). I would like to show some of the characteristics of Silent Illumination Zen by quoting from Wanshi's *Inscriptions on Silent Illumination*.

When sitting in the zazen of the buddhas and ancestral masters, it is precisely because words are cut off that enlightenment (satori) clearly appears. When those things directly in front of you are illuminated by looking at them, the substance of those things clearly exists without the least care or concern.

This clear world, which is illumined by enlightenment, transcends the world of speech and discrimination.

(Text abbreviated)

Zazen itself is the ultimate linguistic expression; it is the world illumined by enlightenment itself and is connected with all things. This is a teaching which is parallel with a person in training as it is the function which is not caused and not conditioned which transcends rules

and regulations.

This condition is like the capital governed by the emperor; it is like the frontiers subdued by the military general.

The important matter about my school of Silent Illumination is in accordance with these standards. When it is conveyed in various places, it must not be misunderstood.

(Quoted from *Studies of the History of Zen in Song China* by Shudo Ishii)

In this way, Wanshi clearly says that “Silent Illumination” is, when sitting in zazen, the appearance of the “essence” which transcends words and intellectual understanding.

However, within this style of Zen, there was one problematic point which is that the need for training became weakened or lax. In Wanshi’s *Inscriptions on Silent Illumination*, it clearly says that zazen is an indispensable practice. However, if “zazen” is taken away from the broad meaning of the principle that “essentially (the mind itself) is Buddha,” then all that remains at the end of the passage which I quoted above is “a condition where there is no intervention or contrivance on the part of the self.” For this reason, it is easy to fall into the argument that Zen training is unnecessary because the self as it is is the best condition and that practice or training detracts from its essential brilliance.

In Shinketsu’s *Record beyond This World* (*Kogairoku*), he wrote, that (our way of practice) is beyond the superficial tricks and methods. It is beyond discriminatory thought. Since his thought is based on this truth which exists before the world came into existence, the significance of practice or training in a positive or constructive way is lost.

It was the movements of Daie Soko (Dahui Zenggao) (1089-1163) and his Watching Koan Zen and the Zen of Dogen Zenji (1200-1253) which sought to correct this.

## 2. Watching Koan (Kanna) Zen – It is through enlightenment experience that makes us Buddha

The character for “kan” in Kanna Zen means “to pursue through study.” The character for “wa” (which is pronounced “na” in “Kanna”) is a reference to koans. This form of Zen was established by its founder Daie Soko. He denounced “the uncaused, unconditioned” Zen of “Silent Illumination Zen” as being heretical. In particular, he was critical of Shinketsu’s *Record beyond This World*, because it was taught in this text that Zen is to dwell peacefully in the self and Daie thought the significance of training was thereby lost.

Daie stood, first of all, on the premise that people are confused about reality. For that reason, his teaching was based on the idea of “turning around delusion and realizing enlightenment.” This meant that Daie thought it was necessary to have the experience of attaining enlightenment by means of training. In order to attain this experience of enlightenment, Daie used the method of “wato” or “koan.”

In Chapter Three of *Daie’s Lectures*, he speaks about the details of using koans to instruct the monks who were training under him.

Later, I lived at Yosho-an. From March 5<sup>th</sup> through March 21<sup>st</sup>, I led, in quick succession, thirteen people to enlightenment. I also taught an elderly monk who was 84. His name was Great Compassion Elder.

I asked him, "What sort of person is it who has no relations with all other things?" (This is the original person according to Silent Illumination Zen.)

He replied, "This is a person who cannot be woken up."

I asked again, "What sort of person cannot be woken up? Well, speak up, speak up!"

In that instant, he clearly had enlightenment. Sweat was pouring down his back. Here was a person who, from the beginning, had no belief at all in enlightenment, but who was enlightened at that moment. It was from that time on that I started to use koans. From then on, I always used koans to teach people.

(Quoted from *Studies of the History of Zen in Song China* by Shudo Ishii)

Here, we must consider the influence of the "lamp anthologies", a trend that began in Song China of writing collections of biographies of important Zen monks and priests, as part of the background in which Daie used koan to teach monks in training. These "lamp anthologies or histories" were the many records of dialogues and talks (specific words which had brought about enlightenment) that later functioned as koans. The very first of these compendiums was the *Keitoku Dentoroku* which was published in 1004.

Furthermore, collections of commentaries on koans began to appear in which masters would pick up the main words and stories from the lamp anthologies that were particularly important to the masters themselves. One representative example is the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Bukka Engo Zenji Hekiganroku*), the editor of which was Engo Kokugon (Yuanwu Keqin) (1063-1135), who was Daie's master. Regarding the background in which Koan Zen was established, it can be said that these historical trends and Dharma lineages were relevant.

### 3. The Development in Japan – Dogen Zen and Hakuin Zen

Silent Illumination Zen and Koan Zen were brought to Japan during the Kamakura Period. Koan Zen was brought from the continent by many Zen priests. Silent Illumination Zen was brought to Japan by Dogen Zenji. However, Chinese Zen did not become established in Japan just as it was in China. Zen became established in Japan after the various lineages developed in a Japanese manner.

During the Middle Ages of Japanese history, Koan Zen became popular within in the Five Mountains system as well as with the tradition of passing down written notes about the answers to koans. While there was a time during which training in groups of monks died out (in Rinzai Zen), it was rebuilt and restructured during the Edo Period by Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768). His Zen teaching was a return to the fundamental Zen notion that "Essentially, we are all buddhas." It was by means of this teaching that he built his own koan system which has subsequently become known as "Hakuin Zen."

By contrast, Dogen Zenji repudiated Daie's Zen saying that it went against the fundamental Zen

teaching that “the self is essentially pure.” Dogen Zenji especially despised the word “kensho.” In addition, he promoted a new Zen style (Dogen Zen) by correcting Silent Illumination Zen which had lost the significance of Zen training.

Although Dogen Zenji did not formally criticize Silent Illumination Zen, at the same time, he did not completely accept it either. This is clear from the way Dogen Zenji restated the following words of Wanshi:

– *“For a luminous jewel without flaw, if you carve a design on it, its virtue is lost.”*

(*Wanshi’s Extensive Record*, Chapter One)

A sparkling jewel (from the beginning) has no flaw. (If you attempt to make it sparkle even more) by carving a design in it, its (originally endowed) virtue will be lost.

– *“For a luminous jewel without flaw, if polished its glow increases.”*

(*Dogen’s Extensive Record*, Chapter Five)

A sparkling jewel (from the beginning) has no flaw. (However), if it further polished, the sparkle will increase.

In this comparison, in the second half of this phrase, Wanshi restrained the effort made to polish the self in saying that the luminous virtue of the self is lost through it. Dogen Zenji, on the other hand, restates the second half of the phrase by saying that the act of “polishing” itself makes the self shine and he thereby promotes “polishing” in a positive way. In this way, Dogen Zenji corrects the “unconditioned, uncaused” aspect of Silent Illumination Zen, which tends to have a negative view of training. In Dogen’s Zen, there is a shift in direction for Silent Illumination Zen such that greater value is put on training in a positive way. This is precisely the teaching of “shikantaza.” In the final analysis, the Zen style of Dogen Zenji was definitely formed on top of this conflict with Silent Illumination Zen, therefore we must pay attention to uncritically equating his teaching with Silent Illumination Zen.

Originally written in Japanese by Rev. Seijun Ishii

Translated by Rev. Issho Fujita and Rev. Daigaku Rumme

Assisted by Rev. Tonen O’Connor and Rev. Zuiko Redding