

September Study Group

“The Rinzai Sect and the Soto Sect”

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In the Soto sect, however, the issue of kensho (seeing one's original self-nature) is seldom discussed for it is already evident in

Shakyamuni's enlightenment attained under the bodhi tree. The content of his enlightenment later developed and was incorporated into Buddhist teachings. In view of this fact, everything should be correctly perceived in samadhi by all Buddhists.

Therefore, in the Soto sect, one is expected to sit in zazen, not out of necessity for seeing one's true self, but for the sake of discipline in enlightenment. All one is expected to do is to forget and abandon both mind and body, throw them into the house of Buddha and act as Buddha in every move of one's hands and in every step of one's feet. In this sense, one sits in meditation in such a way that by doing so one is regarded as a Buddha. It is for this reason that, in the Soto sect, neither koan nor kufu for the sake of enlightenment is required. Only in sitting with all one's might will Dharma be realized. Zazen anticipates nothing. The physical form of one in zazen in itself is the form of the enlightened Buddha. Very broadly speaking, the characteristics of Zen practiced in the Soto sect today seem to consist in what I have just briefly mentioned above.

In Master Shibayama Zenkei's *Rinzai Zen no Seikaku*,⁷² the styles of the Soto sect and the Rinzai sect are respectively described as honkaku (original awakening) and shikaku (primal awakening). He writes, “It may be said that, as similar as they are, they are different. Rinzai Zen principally stresses discipline for enlightenment, whereas Soto Zen is principally concerned with discipline for descent from the height of enlightenment.” Strictly speaking, then, it may be necessary to differentiate honkaku and shikaku by looking up these words in such books as *Daijo Kishin Ron* (Ta-ch'eng-ch'i-hsin-lun).⁷³ However, as this book you are reading is meant for the everyday reader, I am

going to avoid their detailed differentiation in favor of their practical definitions.

Honkaku alludes to “the original existence of the equally and spiritually awakened bodies.” In simpler words, it means that one’s mind is originally endowed with an enlightened character. This character, however, remains concealed because of one’s unenlightenment, that is, one’s ignorance of the principle of things. Thus, one wanders aimlessly in the world of dualities. As for shikaku,

it pertains to one who becomes awakened by some chance or other after having been in the state of unenlightenment. The reason why Soto Zen is characterized by honkaku (original awakening) is because it recognized zazen as the samadhi of various Buddhas in enlightenment, as mentioned above. If we carry this idea too far, however, we may risk over-stressing our belief in our “natural enlightenment” at the cost of our need of discipline.

Moreover, “discipline for enlightenment” means strenuous endeavor for the attainment of enlightenment by denying and transcending this reality filled with agonies in which human beings are lost. “Discipline for descent” means the acceptance of this profane reality as the world of Buddhas under strict Buddhist discipline for reunion with this reality in enlightenment.

I hope that the general characteristics of the Soto and the Rinzai sects, briefly delineated above, are now clear. What we should discuss next is the problem of which sect we should choose.

If these two different sects vied with each other for superiority, nothing would be more deplorable. Each of these sects has its own merits as well as its own weak points, as we can plainly see. The Rinzai sect regards kensho (seeing one’s original nature) as the indispensable condition in enlightenment. In the Soto sect, which emphasizes the body of the enlightened mind, the minutest care is taken to enhance the effects of discipline and to maintain Dharma for the creation and salvation of human beings. For this reason, it may fall into the danger of turning zazen into something inflexible, inert, weak, or even lifeless.

The Rinzai sect, if excessively inclined to seeing one's original nature and action, may likewise fail to prevent zazen from becoming the mere means of attaining enlightenment. For the one who is truly awakened to the truth of being, discipline and proof of enlightenment, as well as body and action, are originally one.

Having read some of the merits and weak points of these sects, we should choose either one according to our own dispositions and preferences. Thereafter, there is no other way for us but to leave ourselves to the care of Heaven in our belief in causation. I would like to point out in conclusion that apart from the above-mentioned

differences between the two major Zen sects, it is essential for us to choose our right teacher, that is, to choose the right Zen master as our teacher.

By the way, the Rinzai sect once prided itself on having as many as twenty-four schools, of which only one is surviving today in Japan. This school is in the line of Priest Hakuin. The greatest Zen master that lived in the past five hundred years, Master Hakuin led a simple and rustic life in the Shoin-ji Temple in Hara near Numazu. We are impressed with his unusual spiritual power which indeed overwhelmed the whole Zen world. Master Hakuin's religious heir was Master Gasan Jito (1727–1797), whose outstanding disciples Inzan Itan (1753–1816) and Takuju Kosen (1760–1833) originated the two major currents of Zen teachings, namely, the Inzan School and the Takuju School, respectively.

It is into these two schools that Hakuin's Zen is divided at present. The teaching of the Takuju School is characterized by the mysterious symbolism of words, whereas that of the Inzan School is reputed for the severity of its dynamic action. They say there used to be another school, that of Master Suio in the line of Master Hakuin, but it seems to have dwindled down to almost nothing today. Additional genealogical trees, similar to the foregoing one of the Five Houses and the Seven Schools of Zen Buddhism in China, have been placed in the Appendix.