Selfless Insight

Zen and the Meditative Transformations of Consciousness

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Preface

Familiarity with the workings of the emotional household is the first step in the training.

Irmgard Schloegl (Myokyo-ni) (1921–2007)

Certitude is not the test of certainty.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841–1935)

This is a book of words about Zen. Neither our usual English words nor the old Sanskrit and Sino-Japanese words make it easy to understand where contemporary Zen is coming from. Could new words clarify this situation, at least with regard to the emotional household in which we live every day?

Two new words did enter the English language in 2006. One word was "truthiness." It helps to recall that Stephen Colbert introduced this word during his Comedy Central television program. He used it in a tongue-in-cheek context to refer to a slippery truth, one that "comes from the gut, not from books." Viewers understand that Colbert employs satire in his make-believe act as an archconservative. He mostly pretends to hold an opinion that his visceral emotions have told him is true. Therefore, his emotional "truthiness" is neither real, nor true, but patently false. These layers of falsity aside, Merriam-Webster, the dictionary publisher, still declared "truthiness" to be its word of the year for 2006.

So truthiness is only what seems to be true. It is not really true. Can this new word serve a useful function on these pages? It can, if we allow its usage to remind us of the source of the most troublesome workings in our emotional household. They arise from exaggerated, error-prone conditionings in our emotional brain. Often, the more our ideas and opinions seem to shine with the veneer of certainty, the more likely it is that we are being deceived. Let that sobering fact remind us: Zen comes from a direction oriented toward a different value system. In any search for existential truth, the emphasis in Zen will fall on clear, objective, insightful comprehension, not on visceral emotionality, as the major avenue. Do such insights necessarily convey "ultimate truth?" No, because Zen also practices skepticism, and uncertainties abound. All insights must run the gauntlet of doubt, like other beliefs. Ultimate truth remains eternally elusive.

The second new word of the year came from the American Dialect Society. In 2006, its new word was "plutoed." The choice was influenced by the earlier official decision of the International Astronomical Union to exclude Pluto as a planet. For decades, we had grown up confident in the belief system that when the trio of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto came together, Pluto was just as much a planet as the others, only smaller. However, professional astronomers had just
rejected that belief. So how did this dialect society define their new word? To pluto is “to demote or devalue someone or something.”

Humans had survived a previous belief-shattering experience of astronomical proportions. Their planet Earth had once undergone a similar demotion. Before that, earthlings had felt grounded in the certainty that they occupied the very center of the whole universe. All other planets had seemed to revolve around them, as did the Sun itself! (Of course, in ignorance and arrogance, they had first positioned themselves at the hub.) After Copernicus (1473–1543) overturned that premise of truthiness, people awakened to a stark new reality: the Sun was the true center of the solar system. In one stroke, Earth was no longer at the axial hub of a geocentric universe. Even Mercury and Venus deserved a place in line before their own planet in this heliocentric system.

So we now have this second new word, “plutoed,” to remind us what Zen awakening means. It means that Selfhood’s old fictions have been devalued. Indeed, “Selfless” occurs in the title of this book because selflessness is the pivotal fact when the emotional household undergoes a spring cleaning and consciousness shifts toward insight-wisdom.

Part I begins by revisiting the Zen emphasis on paying attention, a major theme in earlier volumes. We will discover many subtleties in our networks of attention. They enable us to direct attention voluntarily—from the “top down”—or reflexly—from the “bottom up”—and to focus it either internally or externally.

Part II returns to a second major Zen theme, the origins and nature of our private Self-consciousness. We are programmed to distinguish our personal Self (inside) from that other world “out there” in the environment. Meditative training cultivates attention. As it begins to reprogram attention, the results become the prelude to key issues considered in part III: How can meditation train a calm, mindful awareness in general, come to a one-pointed mode of attention during the absorptions, lead the trainee toward more selfless behavior in daily life and then finally to let go of all Self-centered physiological biases and enter the deeper states of kensho-satori?

In part IV, we take up a topic of universal human importance: the nature of insight in general. Insights are key ingredients in the lengthy process of creative intuition. Recent research hints how ordinary insights that instantly unveil so much can also strike anonymously.

Part V inquires: Do similar principles of ordinary insight extend into the extraordinary realms of insight-wisdom? Notably, the special insights celebrated in Zen flash in selflessly, fearlessly, timelessly, and they illuminate existential issues with stark objectivity.

Part VI considers how meditative training can favorably influence the normal developmental trajectory of emotional maturity.

Part VII briefly reviews and updates selected topics of research.
Page xvi lists chapters that contain testable hypotheses. For the reader’s convenience, helpful background information on many topics herein is cross-referenced (using brackets) to earlier pages in the two preceding books in this series: Zen and the Brain [ZB: ] and Zen-Brain Reflections [ZBR: ].

Zen is no simple topic. Neither is the brain. In my role as a secular guide to the ways these two topics are interrelated, I invite you to read slowly, skim when appropriate, and to refer often to the figures, tables, glossary, and mondo summaries at the end of each part.