

# Rinzai Zen Now

## An Interview with Jeff Shore

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From the International Symposium on *The Record of Rinzai*, commemorating the 1,150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passing of Zen master Rinzai (Chan master Linji), held in May 2016 at Hanazono University in Kyoto. The session was in Japanese with Chinese interpretation; the Japanese will be published in October in the autumn issue of *Zen Bunka* (*Zen Culture*).





## **Rinzai Zen Now**

Yasunaga: Following the academic presentations on this first day of the conference, we would like to end with a change of pace by turning to the theme of Rinzai Zen in the modern world, especially in the West. Let me introduce Jeff Shore: He is professor of Hanazono University, but he also spent 25 years practicing under Kôyûken Fukushima Keidô Rôshi at the Tôfukuji training monastery here in Kyoto and completed the koan curriculum of Hakuin Zen. Guiding others for years in Europe and the United States, he knows very well the situation of Rinzai Zen in the contemporary world. Excuse us for not standing at the lectern, but he specifically requested that the two of us sit in zazen instead.

Shore: Thank you for your kind introduction. I am neither a scholar nor a monk. But I owe my life to Rinzai Zen practice. It is an honor to be invited to speak today, and I am delighted if I can be of some small service in return.

Yasunaga: Let's begin with the theme of Rinzai Zen Now.

Shore: It was Shaku Sôen, former head abbot of Engakuji and also president of Hanazono University, who is credited with introducing Rinzai Zen to the modern world at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, although he did not use the word Zen in either of his talks. For our theme today, however, the crucial figure is Shaku Sôen's lay disciple D. T. Suzuki. He is the one who opened the gates of Rinzai Zen to the world. By the way, D. T. Suzuki also taught here at Hanazono University. His wife Beatrice Lane Suzuki and Sasaki Shigetsu's wife Ruth Fuller Sasaki were two American women who also played leading roles. By 1972 an American psychotherapist borrowed an already well-known phrase from Rinzai for the title of his bestselling book, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*

Yasunaga: Considering this historical background, how is Zen taking shape now?

Shore: The word Zen is already an international word listed in English dictionaries. In fact, current English-Japanese dictionaries now offer the following definition for the English adjective Zen: "Calm and relaxed. Allowing things to be as they are without interference." The meaning of the word itself has been altered as it spread across the globe. Zen has become cool.

All kinds of things are now called Zen; yet at the same time there are many people around the world seriously dedicated to Rinzai Zen practice. Doing zazen daily despite job and family responsibilities, then taking much of their vacation time to devote themselves to intense retreats, even coming to China, Korea, and Japan to deepen their practice. The next task is how to bring this to life on our own home ground.

Yasunaga: Speaking of cool, I've heard that in France young people say "That's Zen" meaning it has a certain appeal or attraction. I've also heard that in France the Soto teachings of Deshimaru Taisen and in Germany the Sanbo Kyodan are popular. Why are Westerners so attracted to Zen?

Shore: Zen tends to appeal to those who think that something is lacking—and yet Zen feels somehow very familiar at the same time. Oddly

enough, I came to realize the greatness of the Christian faith through my contact with Zen Buddhism. The idealized image of the Zen school as a pure spirituality completely free of doctrine and dogma also fascinates us. Many are captivated by the cultural expressions that bring Zen to life, such as tea culture, gardens, architecture, crafts and fine arts, the subtle beauty of “empty space,” wabi and sabi – the way that all of this is alive in daily life through customs, manners, and forms. I am also one who has been so captivated.

### **First Encounter with Zen and with Rinzai**

Yasunaga: What was your first encounter with Zen?

Shore: Listening to pop music in my junior high school days! I didn't even know it at the time, but the refrain of a hit song was borrowed from a Zen expression: “*First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.*” Sound familiar?

Yasunaga: Yes! Probably some symposium participants gathered here recognize it as well. The classic expression of Zen master Seigen: “Before I started practicing, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. [After I had made some progress, mountains were not mountains and rivers were not rivers. Now that I've come to rest, mountains really are mountains and rivers are rivers.]” There's a similar Zen expression in the poem for the Oxherding Picture known as *Return to the Origin, Back at the Source*: “Rivers blue, mountains green. Sit and see through the change of things.” I wonder was this the first time Zen words were used in pop music?

Shore: Seems to be. It's already 49 years ago that Donovan sang this refrain. He himself said in an interview that it was the first time pop music lyrics incorporated the language of Zen.

Yasunaga: That's really interesting. Now, what was your first encounter with Zen master Rinzai Gigen?

Shore: That would be about 40 years ago, during my college days. Before coming to Japan, when I was in utter darkness. At the time, the words of Rinzai, in English translation, struck my heart: “Years ago, when I was

not enlightened, I was in sheer darkness altogether” (Case 41, Shibayama Zenkei, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*). The arrow shot by Zen master Rinzai over 1,000 years ago pierced right to the bone. That single phrase transformed me; it revealed to me that I must not run, but rather dive in.

## **Misunderstandings of Zen in the West**

Yasunaga: So that’s how it happened to you. Introducing Zen to Westerners of all ages as you have, what do you find are some of the common misunderstandings?

Shore: First, I would say that without some understanding of Buddhism you cannot pursue Zen, and without mastering basic Buddhist meditation methods it’s very difficult to do sustained zazen. Next, Zen is not some special state of mind. While it is most helpful to enter and sustain samadhi through right mindfulness, this in itself is not Zen.

Zen is “Inquiring into the matter of self”; in other words, seeing into, illuminating, **this here**. Thus, the koan is not some kind of magic or magical formula. Unfortunately, there are those who mistakenly think that if only they receive a koan then they can get enlightened. Such thinking actually hinders inquiry into the matter of self. The root of the koan must be pulled out of oneself. The notion that, “If only I receive a koan and get satori-enlightenment, then all of my problems will be solved” is itself a big problem.

By the way, the term koan does not appear once in *The Record of Rinzai*. And when similar terms do appear, they are, without exception, severely criticized. And yet, in Japan, Rinzai Zen tends to be seen as so-called koan Zen.

Fifty years ago in an interview commemorating the 1,100 anniversary of Rinzai’s passing, D. T. Suzuki stressed: “What is it that makes you do zazen?” When I explain this to Westerners, they invariably respond in terms of “Oh, you mean **why** I do zazen?” That is, the **reason** for doing zazen. But it’s not a matter of theory or logic. The point is, what really makes you do it, in the sense of not being able to do anything else. Some special posture such as full lotus is not necessary, of course. But what finally makes us do it is **this** [*sitting in zazen*].

At the same time, sitting together with other like-minded people is precious.

## Spreading Dharma Practice in the West

Yasunaga: How are you actually introducing Rinzai Zen in today's society?

Shore: Both zazen as well as koan practice are a matter of awakening. Awakening is the original meaning of Buddha. To simplify a phrase from Rinzai: "Do you want to know the real Buddha? None other than you!"

However, I would like to stress what Rinzai said just before that. Again, put simply: "When your seeking mind stops, you're a Buddha just as you are!" The heart-mind races around in vicious circles. So, as a process, we learn to slow down. But slowing down is not enough. The point is, all of this comes to its own end: the very mind that is seeking to slow down, the very attempt to stop itself – it all stops.

Recently it's almost impossible to think of daily life without computers, smart phones and the like. The virtual screen itself is becoming our actual world. The moment the screen goes blank, we are lost: "Where did it all go?" However, right then and there is the opportunity to realize: "Oh, I'm **here!** [*striking chest*] And you're **there!**" We're not the images on the screen. Right here the real Buddha awakens.

Yasunaga: As you said earlier, it's really ironic. The word koan does not appear once in *The Record of Rinzai*, yet we who devote ourselves to Hakuin Zen have to struggle with koans taken from *The Record of Rinzai*. Please tell us more concretely about how you use traditional koans with people nowadays.

Shore: Rather than use the traditional koan curriculum with everyone, I get each individual to pull the koan out of themselves – the koan that they are. For example: "Right here and now, what are you lacking?" This can be brought to life and worked with by just about anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Zen questions such as "When you were born, where did you come from? When you die, where will you go?" do not refer to past or future lives. Inquiring all the way, I – and everything – can't help but fall into

one marvelous, inconceivable doubt: “Mountains are not mountains, rivers are not rivers.” The point is awakening from this utter darkness, then there is a completely new beginning.

Yasunaga: Yes. In *The Record of Rinzai* as well we find: “Originally there is not much to [my master] Ôbaku’s Buddha Dharma!”

Shore: That’s Zen master Rinzai’s statement upon awakening, isn’t it? I take the term “not much” to mean “nothing at all!” It’s like learning to ride a bicycle. What had seemed impossible becomes the simplest and most natural thing in the world. Now it’s nothing at all – I can freely go wherever I want.

Yasunaga: Indeed. What are the essential teachings of *The Record of Rinzai* in terms of contemporary society? Could you say something about that?

Shore: For example: “not bound by anything,” “free from everything,” as well as “carefree, nothing to do.” The actual working or activity of this “carefree, nothing to do” is described as eating when hungry, resting when tired. That is, the “ordinary mind” – doing what needs to be done. In the beginning, one may practice for one’s own benefit. That’s fine. But eventually this naturally opens up to practice for all, to compassion for all. Rinzai as well as Hakuin were extremely critical Zen masters. From where does that critical attitude arise? Is it not from a profound compassion?

Yasunaga: Quite right. “Carefree, nothing to do” and “freedom” are essential keywords in *The Record of Rinzai*. Another wonderful phrase, this one from the Preface to *The Record of Rinzai*, is one that we young monks had to memorize: “Pines grew old and clouds idled.”

Shore: That expresses Zen master Rinzai in ripe old age: “As pines grew old and clouds idled, boundless contentment found within.” I am now sixty-two years old; my physical stamina, memory, and the like sure aren’t what they used to be! I’d like to be of some help to others, yet I don’t wish to return to my younger days. Following nature’s law, the physical energy of my younger days is no longer needed. I feel that the way it is now is fine as it is.

Here is a phrase from the Analects of Confucius: “At fifteen, I was set to learn; at thirty, stood firm. At forty, doubt gone; at fifty, Providence known. At sixty, ear open come what may; at seventy, follow my heart’s desire without going astray.” A fine koan for life, isn’t it?

### **On Striking and Violence**

Yasunaga: In the Zen tradition, Rinzai has been described as “Rinzai the Shogun.” I myself have been told by westerners: “I want to study Zen but have no need for the samurai spirit.” There is this image of the Rinzai school as rough or even violent; as a teacher guiding Westerners in Zen, what do you think about this?

Shore: Here I think Zen master Rinzai differs from others like Zen master Jōshū, who lived at the same time in China, or the Japanese Zen master Bankei. Rinzai was superb at using his entire body and mind to help others awaken – no matter what. But now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is that necessary?

I think it’s best to inspire others so that what is needed comes naturally from within themselves, rather than forcing it from without. Practicing together, then when needed one naturally becomes a formidable wall, or a mirror, for the other. To help awaken the other to what is really lacking – is it necessary to hit them though?

### **Can Zen Contribute to Today’s World?**

Yasunaga: Wherever you look nowadays, there are horrible things happening in the name of religion. In such a world, can Rinzai Zen really contribute something?

Shore: There’s no need to even criticize blind belief. Faith, on the other hand, is precious. Rinzai Zen does not deny our actual worries and fears; on the contrary, they are accepted so that a true resolution can be found. That is the religion of Zen, and it has much to offer today. I trust that the marvelous Rinzai teachings of not being bound by anything, of being free from everything, and so on, can emerge today as holding out our hands for the other in need, with a deep sense of thanks and appreciation for the other.

Yasunaga: Thank you. Can you please give one final word?

Shore: Zen is not difficult. Fighting with yourself is extremely difficult! That's like Rinzai's "using your head to seek for your head," or like a cat chasing its tail. Thus proper guidance is precious. It certainly can seem difficult from the outside. But once we awaken, there's nothing easier.

Fukushima Rôshi liked coffee; even when it got cold he would drink what was left. Do you know the taste of coffee? You can learn a lot by reading about its history, varieties, ways of brewing and so on. But if you don't finally taste it yourself, you don't really know, do you? This is true not just of Zen, but of any experience. In the one-on-one practice of traditional *dokusan* or *sanzen*, Fukushima Rôshi never taught or explained. When I realized this, it dawned on me: "It's the real thing." I'm afraid I've said nothing that you don't already know, but thank you for listening anyway.