

This is an older article of mine from my previous blog:

A few months ago I was reading a free online book that contained a lot of short Zen stories. Wish I could remember where that link was as I would point you to it. There was one Zen story that caught my eye, not so much for the story itself but the peoples commentary on it. Just to clarify in this book, there was a Zen tale followed by peoples impressions and interpretations of the tale.

The gist of this story goes something like this.

One day there was a enlightened teacher who when asked where enlightenment could be found would point with his finger into thin air. A student of his saw his teachers behaviour and began to mimic it to the towns folk. This went on for many months, and each time the student was asked where enlightenment could be found he would point his finger into thin air in a mimic of his master.

The enlightened teacher saw this. He went up to his student and asked him where enlightenment could be found. The student pointed his finger into thin air to which the enlightened teacher responded by pulling out his sword and chopping the students finger off in one clean cut.

As the students finger lay on the ground and blood oozing from where his finger once was, the enlightened teacher asked once again, where can enlightenment be found?

In that moment the student was enlightened.

Peoples reactions to this story were interesting to read and was certainly the one tale that seemed to spark the most controversy. In general most did not understand the point of the tale and were comfortable in just stating so. That is good; it s a measure of honesty. Others were remarking on the cruelty of the teacher. Others still were focused on the potential loss of a finger. Granted losing a finger is not an ideal by any stretch of the imagination, but to lose a finger for enlightenment? I would venture to guess that if the prize was 100 million dollars at the expense of losing a finger, there would be quite a few people taking up that offer?

There are a couple of points to be made about the Koan which may be good to consider.

To my way of thinking there are a couple of salient points contained in the Zen tale. The obvious one to me was that the student was pointing to the finger pointing at the moon. His mimicking behaviour was borne from ego s need to impress the town s folk. Further he

was attached to that behaviour as it went on for some time. When literally his attachment was severed by his enlightened teacher it forced the student into a place of NOT being able to know at an intellectual level. The student did not know how to react when asked where enlightenment can be found. His mind shut down in other words which in turn allowed him to see enlightenment directly because it was no longer in the way.

The other point is that enlightenment is not about mimicking another human being. That is what the student was doing. Mimicking the behaviour of his teacher was not enlightenment. It is the same with any teacher who has walked the earth. Copying your favorite teacher only denotes that a person is still relatively in spiritual kindergarten and as yet has not forged their own pathless path.

Enlightenment cannot stand upon a structure of a teaching, irrespective of how appealing that teaching may be. The reason it cannot is because it is beyond words, beyond knowledge, beyond behaviour and beyond everything in perception.

The final point to be made is that Zen is not about understanding tales and koans. It is about stopping the mind, so that mind doesn't know how to respond. It is at that moment of not knowing that the greatest opportunity for something new to occur transpires. It should be noted it's an opportunity not a given.