

*One day, Nansen found Joshu sitting in meditation and asked, "What are you doing?"
Joshu replied, "I am meditating to become a Buddha."
Nansen then picked up a brick and started polishing it.
Joshu, curious, asked, "Master, what are you doing?"
Nansen replied, "I am polishing this brick to make it into a mirror."
Joshu said, "But Master, you can't make a mirror by polishing a brick!"
Nansen responded, "And you can't become a Buddha by sitting in meditation like a sack of rice!"*

Comment

The story of Nansen and Joshu is a profound Zen koan that illustrates the essence of Zen practice and the nature of enlightenment. In this narrative, Nansen challenges Joshu's understanding of meditation and the path to becoming a Buddha.

Setting the Scene

The dialogue begins with Nansen encountering Joshu in meditation. When Joshu states that he is meditating to become a Buddha, Nansen responds by polishing a brick, claiming he is making it into a mirror. This action serves as a metaphor for the futility of merely sitting in meditation without engaging in the active process of enlightenment.

Key Themes

Active Engagement vs. Passive Meditation:

- Nansen's action of polishing the brick symbolizes the necessity of active engagement in one's practice. Joshu's response highlights a common misconception in Zen that sitting still is sufficient for enlightenment. Nansen's retort emphasizes that enlightenment requires more than passive meditation; it necessitates action and understanding[2]

The Nature of Enlightenment:

- The story suggests that becoming a Buddha is not simply about achieving a state of being

through meditation but involves a deeper understanding and transformation. Nansen implies that enlightenment cannot be attained through mere intention or desire; it requires a profound shift in perception and action[6].

Symbolism of the Brick and Mirror:

- The brick represents something ordinary and unremarkable, while the mirror symbolizes clarity and reflection. Nansen's act of polishing the brick can be interpreted as transforming the mundane into something meaningful, reflecting the Zen principle that enlightenment can be found in everyday life[4][8].

Joshu's Response

When Joshu questions Nansen's actions, he is met with the assertion that one cannot become a Buddha merely by sitting idle. Joshu's confusion reflects the struggle many practitioners face in grasping the true nature of Zen practice.

Conclusions

This koan embodies essential elements of Zen philosophy, highlighting that enlightenment is an ongoing journey, combining insight with action. The exchange between Nansen and Joshu illustrates that genuine understanding goes beyond words and forms, encouraging practitioners to live their insights through everyday actions. Not only on solid ground...

The koan about Nansen and Joshu indeed reflects the idea that true enlightenment is not just about sitting in meditation or adhering to rituals, but about integrating that understanding into every aspect of life. It challenges practitioners to transcend mere intellectual comprehension and manifest their insights through practical, real-world actions, even when faced with the seemingly mundane or the paradoxical.

This koan also emphasizes the dynamic nature of Zen practice, reminding us that enlightenment is not a static state but a continuous, evolving journey. The dialogue between Nansen and Joshu serves as a powerful reminder that true understanding often lies beyond conventional reasoning and that sometimes, a direct, unfiltered experience can lead to profound realizations.

Citations:

[2] <https://www.fuorimag.it>

[4] <https://terebess.hu/zen/Chao-chouHoffman.pdf>

[6] <https://philarchive.org/archive/OXENAT>

[8] <https://www.fuorimag.it/nansen-e-joshu/>