

# Dream Conversations

On Buddhism and Zen



Musō Kokushi • Translated by Thomas Cleary

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Dream Conversations* is a collection of a renowned Japanese master's written replies to questions about the true nature of Zen. In short, simply worded teachings, Muso Kokushi (1275–1351), also known as Muso Soseki, exposes common misconceptions with unprecedented clarity, offering psychological insights designed to lead the reader into the depths of authentic Zen experience. These incisive teachings will be especially valuable for today's Zen students, as they struggle with their own confusion and misunderstandings about the true path of Zen.

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## Translator's Introduction

Eight hundred years ago the history of the Japanese nation and people was altered forever. Impatient with an effete, self-absorbed aristocracy, the upper-class military elite established its own central paragon government, thus inaugurating a series of martial regimes that were to keep Japan in thrall for centuries to come.

Seating their government in Kamakura, hundreds of miles from the ancient imperial capital in Kyoto, the chief warlords of the new order also distanced themselves from the culture of the old aristocracy. Patronizing Zen Buddhism and neo-Confucianism, newly imported from China, the Kamakura government sought to revolutionize the culture of Japan in such a way as to undermine both the material and spiritual foundations of the old order.

This influx of Chinese culture from the splendid Southern Sung dynasty was boosted in the late thirteenth century by the fall of that dynasty to the Mongolian conqueror Kublai Khan. Chinese refugees from the mainland to Japan during those times included people of culture and learning, even some Zen masters, who were cordially welcomed by the leaders of the military government.

Not all of the reverberations of contemporary events in China were welcome in Japan. Once the whole of continental China had been taken by the Mongol warriors, Kublai launched further invasions, to the south and the east. Invasion forces reached southern Japan by sea in the late 1270s and early 1280s, to be repelled once, it is said, by a *kamikaze* ("spiritual wind"), a natural storm defending the rocky coast from aggression, and once by a valiant collaborative defense staged by heroic warriors from all over Japan.

Ironically, the salvation of Japan from the Mongolian invasion also planted seeds of the downfall of the military regime. Under feudal custom, successful valor in battle was rewarded by land grant. So many were the illustrious deeds of the Japanese heroes in the defense of the nation from Kublai's fleets, however, that there was no way to compensate them all adequately in the traditional manner under the conditions of the time.

The resulting drain on natural resources and the inevitable disgruntlement of some warrior clans helped to undermine the stability of the regime. Civil wars eventually broke out, and the imperial house even attempted to recover some authority from the military rulers. When the dust cleared temporarily in the 1330s, a new group of warriors had attained sufficient dominance to establish a new military government. In contrast to the earlier regime, these new shoguns made their capital in Kyoto, the old imperial city, and attempted to further develop the Zen-based new high culture in closer harmony with classical Japanese Buddhist culture.

The first of the Kyoto shoguns was Ashikaga Takauji. While military and political rivalry persisted between the new shogun and his younger brother, Ashikaga

Tadayoshi, the two demonstrated greater harmony in the domain of cultural reconstruction and development. Both warriors became disciples of Musō Soseki, one of the greatest Japanese Zen masters of the age. Under Musō's Zen influence, commercial and cultural relations with China were expanded, the classical doctrines of ancient Japanese Buddhism were reconciled with Chinese Zen and other religious developments, and new schools of literature and art flourished, thus boosting the evolution of Japanese civilization during a critical time in its political history.

This Zen master Musō was teacher not only of the shogun but also of the emperor, from whom he thus received the honorific title of Kokushi, or National Teacher. So great was the repute of Musō Kokushi, in fact, that he was thus entitled by several successive imperial courts; including posthumous honors, Musō was awarded the title Kokushi by no fewer than seven emperors.

Raised from childhood in the esoteric Shingon (Mantric) school of Japanese Buddhism, Musō later studied Zen with both Chinese and Japanese Zen masters. His first Zen teacher, I-shan I-ning, had been an ambassador from Yuan dynasty China; he was also the Zen teacher of Sesson, one of the greatest painters in Japanese history. Musō's main Japanese teacher, Kohō, had been an imperial prince who left the worldly life to learn Zen from Wu-hsueh Tsu-yuan, another transplanted Chinese master. Musō himself became a highly skilled teacher, producing more than fifty enlightened disciples, a most unusual number.

Musō's teaching was largely based on the great *Tsung Ching Lu* (Source Mirror Record), a massive Chinese collection of extracts from the Buddhist canon combining the teachings of the various schools with the message of Zen. Although this comprehensive text still exists, it is unfortunately no longer studied in Japanese Zen schools, which subsequently became alienated from orthodox canonical Buddhism and involuted into cultic sects.

Most of what is known of National Teacher Musō's teaching is today found in *Muchū Mondō*, or *Dream Conversations*, which is a collection of Musō's written replies to questions of Ashikaga Tadayoshi about Buddhism and Zen. Written in an easy, nontechnical style, *Dream Conversations* explodes misconceptions about Zen with unprecedented clarity, replacing standard myths with fundamental psychological insights and exercises designed to lead the lay individual into the depths of Zen experience.

This volume presents the first English translation of National Teacher Musō's letters. Although the language and style of the original text are very easy for those well versed in Japanese culture, nevertheless some of the material deals with matters of strictly local concern, and the diction is often somewhat prolix in order to buffer the impact of the Zen barb on a military leader in a feudal regime. Some discussions, therefore, bear on issues that are no longer relevant, or are couched in terminology proper to a world view that no longer exists in Japan and has never existed in the West.

Most of the psychological and spiritual problems outlined and resolved in this text are, nevertheless, common to people of all cultures and times who attempt to conquer the self and master the mind. The confusion into which modern Buddhism has fallen, particularly in the West, makes the incisive teachings of Zen master Musō not only relevant but critical to the rediscovery and effective application of Buddhist spiritual technology. In order to preserve and pass on the effective content of the text without

the excess baggage of outdated material, therefore, the concern of this translation has been not merely to render the work into English but also to extract and present the quintessential message in such a way that it is not obscured by the medieval trappings of its historical origins.

# Dream Conversations

## Liberation

Those who seek liberation for themselves alone cannot become fully enlightened. Though it may be said that one who is not already liberated cannot liberate others, the very process of forgetting oneself to help others is itself liberating.

Therefore those who seek to benefit themselves alone actually harm themselves by doing so, while those who help others also help themselves by doing so.

## Compassion

There are three kinds of compassion. One kind is compassion whose object is living beings as such. Another is compassion whose object is elements. The third is objectless compassion. These three kinds of compassion are very different.

The compassion whose object is living beings as such is the compassion of one who thinks beings are real and their delusions are real, and who wishes to liberate these real beings from their real delusions. This is sentimental compassion, which is limited by feelings. It is still just emotion and desire, not real liberative compassion.

The compassion whose object is elements is the compassion of one who sees all beings as conditional productions of causal relations, as compounds of elements that have no real person or thing in themselves. This is illusory compassion for illusory beings, using illusory means to liberate illusory beings from illusory delusions. Although it transcends the sticky emotion of sentimental compassion, this dreamlike compassion still retains the image of illusion, so it is not yet truly liberated compassion.

## Aim in Life

There is ultimately no means of safeguarding anything in this world; anything you gain can be lost, destroyed, or taken away. For this reason, if you make the acquisition and retention of goods or status your aim in life, this is a way to anxiety and sorrow.

## Past, Present, and Future

It is a characteristic tendency of human beings to indulge in emotions such as happiness, grief, or anger in response to present conditions, failing to balance these feelings with the awareness that present conditions are results of past causes. It is

illogical to face the present only as an object of enjoyment or tolerance, neglecting to use it as the opportunity to create the future.

## Causes

Causes are complex and have different time scales. The efforts of the individual are not the sole determining factor in the individual's condition in life, because everyone is part of the nexus of society and nature and the continuum of time. It is common for people to attribute causes wrongly because of misperception of real relationships.

Every cause is the effect of something else, and every effect is the cause of something else. What may seem a curse may be a blessing, and what may seem a blessing may be a curse. Hardship is a blessing when it spurs effort and development; ease is a curse when it increases complacency and self-indulgence.

## Enlightenment and Feelings

If you forget your feelings about things of the world, they become enlightening teachings. If you get emotional about enlightening teaching, it becomes a worldly thing.

## Contamination of Virtue

Doing good seeking rewards is contaminated virtue. Doing good without thought of reward, dedicating it to enlightenment, is uncontaminated virtue. Contamination and noncontamination refer to the state of mind of the doer, not to the good deed itself.

## The Inexhaustible Treasury of Potential

There is a vast potential, latent within human beings, that remains undiscovered because of the limitations placed on consciousness by habitual preoccupations. The recommendation that all cravings be relinquished does not mean that detachment itself is a goal; it is a means of breaking through self-imposed restrictions and opening up this inexhaustible treasury of potential.

## Greed

Just as greed for worldly things is inhibiting and self-defeating, so also craving for otherworldly things prevents the opening of the mind.

## [Help in Disguise](#)

When people are unsympathetic to you and the world does not go as you wish, this should be a help to detachment of feelings from the repetitious cycle of becoming and decay, gaining and losing.

## [Answer to Prayer](#)

The withholding of divine aid from those who would become presumptuous, more attached, more indulgent, and more shameless if their wishes were fulfilled is itself divine aid to such people. In a corrupt age, when prayers are not answered, that is itself the answer.

## [Pity](#)

The pity of great saints for ordinary people is not necessarily because of the wretchedness of the human condition in itself but more because of the great potential humanity has and does not use, the high estate from which humanity has fallen.

## [The Central Benefit of Zen](#)

The central benefit of Zen, in the context of the ordinary ups and downs of life, is not in preventing the minus and promoting the plus but in directing people to the fundamental reality that is not under the sway of ups and downs.

## [Virtue without Wisdom](#)

Virtue without wisdom is said to be an enemy for three lifetimes. When the time is passed in ignorance, doing only contaminated good, virtue in hopes of reward, it is therefore not possible to clarify the true ground of mind. This is the enemy of the first lifetime.

As a result of contaminated virtue, pleasurable states eventually develop. Still in the

realm of emotion, they occasion a deepening of mundane attachments. These attachments become influences toward greedy and possessive behavior. This is the enemy of the second lifetime.

When the pleasurable states are worn out, while the force of ignorance has not been diminished but rather increased by habitual attachment to the rewards of virtue, the fall from the state of elevation of feeling produces negative reactions. This is the enemy of the third lifetime.

## Religious and Secular Institutions

Religious institutions might be supported for secular ends, while secular institutions might be supported for spiritual ends. It is important to discern this distinction in reference to both types of institution.

## The Ground of Mind

As long as people have not realized the basis of mind, even if they do good works their virtue is contaminated. This is why teachers of Zen and other schools of Buddhism have recommended that people first clarify the basic ground of mind and then cultivate virtues after that.

The good cultivated by people who have not realized the essence of mind is only the cause of fabricated results. Therefore it is not the essential way to liberation. Even if they teach and initiate others, they fall into sentimental compassion, so it is not true guidance.

## Demons

There are various mental phenomena and mental postures that obstruct the potential for true understanding. Because of their harmful and destructive nature, they are called demons or devils.

These demons include greed, hatred, conceit, opinionated views, addiction to meditation states, pride in knowledge, desire for personal liberation for one's own sake alone, sentimental compassion, anxious haste to attain enlightenment, idolizing teachers, rejecting the teaching because of finding fault with teachers' external behavior, indulging in passions, and fearing passion.

Anyone who wants to realize Buddhist enlightenment is obliged to examine his or her mind and heart for these devils.

These demons may arise because of incorrect application of mind. They may also flare up in a correctly applied mind in which they are about to die out, just as a candle flame will flare up just before it goes out. In any case, do not allow the mind to be



stirred by demons, because this agitation perpetuates their influence.

## Spiritual Malpractice

One may enter into the sphere of influence of demons as a result of spiritual exercises and experiences. This may be likened to the case of a warrior who is rewarded for achievement in battle, then develops an exaggerated sense of self-importance as a result of that reward, eventually to be punished for presumptuous behavior.

When a person takes pride in spiritual practices or experiences, that individual is certain to fall into the sphere of influence of demons. This is not the fault of the practice itself but of the attitude of the practitioner. Those who undertake spiritual practices with wrong ideas, or develop wrong views in the course of practice, and those who become conceited and oppose the doctrines or methods of others, enter states of mind and modes of being that may be referred to as “hell.”

## Religious Practice Obstructing Enlightenment

A scripture called *Obstacles of Pure Action* explains how religious practices can in fact obstruct the path of enlightenment: this occurs when those who practice almsgiving despise the selfish, when those who observe moral precepts are critical of those who do not, when those who practice forbearance belittle the impatient, when those who practice vigorous diligence look down on the indolent, when those who practice meditation reject the distracted, and when those with knowledge make light of the ignorant.

It is not that the practices are themselves the work of demons but that acquisitiveness in the practitioner converts religious practice into self-approval and condemnation of others, which obstructs the course of enlightenment.

## Possession

People who undertake spiritual exercises with a sense of acquisitiveness, even with regard to “spiritual states,” are really doing the work of demons, even if they feel they are being spiritual. Those who seek knowledge and extraordinary powers for the sake of personal gain and fame are also doing the work of demons.

When people are possessed by such inner demons, they may become receptors of external forces that artificially boost their intellectual or psychic powers for a time. Not realizing that it is a false and deceptive condition, such people attribute this to themselves and become all the more conceited and possessed by their demons.

## Meditation and Madness

People sometimes go mad from doing Zen meditation. This may happen when some perception or understanding arises through meditation, and the practitioner becomes conceited about it. It may also happen when the practitioner has unsolved psychological problems. Then again, it can happen through excessive physical and mental strain due to greedy haste to attain enlightenment.

## Quelling Demons

A simple method of quelling demons is to refrain from clinging to anything mentally. This is illustrated by an ancient story, in which a strange person used to roam around the grounds of a hermitage of a certain meditation master. Sometimes he would appear as a Buddhist saint, sometimes as a celestial king, sometimes radiating extraordinary light, sometimes uttering strange sayings. This continued for ten years, and then it stopped.

The meditation master told his disciples, “A celestial demon had been coming here to bother me, but no matter what appearance it created, I dealt with it by not looking or listening. The demon’s manifestations had an end, but my not looking and not listening have no end.”

## Passing through the Death Experience

A principle similar to that of quelling demons may be applied to the problem of passing through the experiences of dying.

An ancient Zen text recommends that when people are dying they should contemplate their mental and physical elements as being void of ultimate reality, having no independent being and no identity of their own.

Further, they should contemplate the true mind as being formless, neither coming nor going, the essence of mind not coming into existence at birth and not going out of existence at death, being forever tranquil.

By this means, people can leave the world; they will not be drawn to beatific visions or frightened by horrific visions, such as they may experience at death according to their mental states. The mind will be forgotten and merged with the cosmos.

## Aversion and Attachment

Aversion or fear of demonic states is itself a demonic state. If you have emotional attachment to the appearances of the state of Buddhahood, then it is actually a

demonic state. If you are unconcerned by the appearances of demonic states, then they are the realm of Buddhahood.

True practitioners of Buddhism are not emotionally attached to the realm of Buddhahood and do not fear the realms of demons. If you work in this way, without conceptualizing realization yet without becoming bored, obstructions will vanish of themselves.

## Inherent Knowledge

A primary aim of Zen is the uncovering of what is known as inherent knowledge. This is not the kind of knowledge that is produced by thinking based on conditioned consciousness. It is said that the ignorant are obstructed by ignorance, while intellectuals are obstructed by intellectual knowledge.

One way of getting past these obstacles and approaching inherent knowledge is to let go of whatever comes to mind.

## Supersession

Even the many grades of spiritual knowledge progressively realized on the Way are to be superseded. All these stages of spiritual progress are like medical treatments for ailments, which are no longer to be used after they have taken effect and health is restored.

Thus it is said that knowing previous errors along the way is what makes the subsequent superseding states.

## Scholastic Learning

Scholastic learning can be a definite hindrance to real knowledge, especially when it is associated with self-importance. This applies both to literalists and to theoretical interpreters.

In Buddhist terms, to be learned in the real sense means to understand meaning. The real meanings of Buddhism are beyond conceptual images and verbal expressions.

## Types of Knowledge

There are various kinds of knowledge as defined in Buddhism. There is genuine knowledge and false knowledge, temporal knowledge and true knowledge. People often think of religious knowledge as understanding of doctrines; conventional

knowledge or ignorance, however, are not knowledge and ignorance in the true sense.

It has been said that the Path is not in knowledge or nonknowledge. Enlightenment is not merely a matter of intellectual understanding, nor yet of obliterating intellectual understanding and being empty and calm.

A way to approach the fundamental knowledge is to set aside all such interpretations and focus intensive nonconceptual inquiry on the state where this setting aside has taken place.

## Practices and Stages

The definition of practices and stages is for the benefit of people of middling and lesser faculties. The development of knowledge is an important practice insofar as it is an instrument for those who cannot as yet merge directly with inherent fundamental knowledge.

Instrumental knowledge is likened to a raft that carries you to the shore of the fundamental. Those who cling to the raft and will not let go of it are those who do not know the real importance of the raft.

People of the highest potential are as if able to fly and thus are not in need of a raft to get to the other shore beyond delusion. They can reach the fundamental directly, without using the knowledge of the various stages. To encourage such people to acquire scholastic learning of religion is like giving a raft to someone who can fly; it will only be a hindrance.

## Wrong Approach

Because it is said in Zen teaching that academic intellectual knowledge is not attainment of truth, there are those who think they will accord with the true Way by abandoning learning and intellectual understanding. This is also a wrong idea, which blocks the Way.

*The Flower Ornament Scripture* says, "All beings have the knowledge and virtues of Buddhas, but they cannot realize this because of wrong ideas and attachments." Suppose there is a man who is strong and talented but because of a serious illness becomes weak and forgets his abilities. Seeing a healthy person exercising skills, no longer realizing he himself originally had this ability and strength too, the man becomes envious and attempts to train himself to perform. This just tires him out and aggravates his illness.

If this man would first cure his illness, believing that he originally had these skills and strength, now suppressed by illness, then his powers would become manifest as before.

So it is with Buddhist study. Although the knowledge and virtues of Buddhas are inherent in everyone, people are unable to experience and use them because they are obstructed by the illness of wrong ideas and delusions. If they do not realize this fact