

Zen Master Lin-chi's Guest and Host Perceiving our Changing Roles in Zen Practice and Life

*Shout for shout, shout for shout for shout—
That instant tells if it's life or death?
Wicked devil, his ogre eyeballs
Bright, bright as any sun or moon.*

Zen Master Lin-chi, the founder of Rinzai Zen was described in this poem by a Japanese Zen Master. Why? What is all this shouting about? Lin-chi wanted us to wake up to our true nature. He used penetrating actions to break through words and thinking to attain the immediacy of enlightenment.

Lin-chi was one of the oldest and most authentic voices in early Chinese Chan (Zen). Lin-chi died in 866 AD in his mid fifties. He traced his teaching lineage to Zen Master Mat-Su (d.788) and Zen Master Huang Po (d.850). He lived in an era of political strife and therefore it seemed that the harsh nature of his teachings reflected the need to be clear and respond to opposing forces.

It is important to see Zen in its cultural and political context. Roles of Zen Master, monks, and students were sometimes a threat to the establishment, or sometimes an instrument of stability. Thus, the importance and clarity of Lin-chi's teaching was essential if it was to break through the cultural and economic barriers of the time. A great deal of society depended on different roles and respect for them. So his position that penetrating the dualism of absolute and relative, guest and host, subject and object, teacher and student was quite radical. His teaching focused directly on understanding the distinctions and breaking through these roles to attain a True Person of No Rank!

Lin-chi is especially noted for emphasizing Shunyata or emptiness or non-dualism. Insisting that the highest truths cannot be expressed by formulations, words or teachings. Rather that truth is based on an undifferentiated whole and the minute we apply terms to it we create dualisms and opposites.

Lin-chi was particularly concerned that students be able to discern guest and host; a true teacher from a false one and to understand the changing roles in Zen practice and life.

“Students these days haven’t the slightest comprehension of the Dharma. They’re like sheep poking with their noses – whatever they happen on they immediately put it in their mouths. They can’t tell a gentleman from a lackey, can’t tell a host from a guest.”

This admonition reflected Lin-chi’s focus on understanding roles and also transcending them. He says: “True followers of the way are never concerned with the way of the Buddha”. So by understanding the different roles and acknowledging them we are able to transcend them. Guests are students and willing to be taught. If one does not understand the role of student then it is very hard to learn. Similarly, hosts have an important role to teach – to be clear, to be gracious, and yes sometimes to shout. Leadership is a very important quality and hosts embody it. “Whenever you play the role of host then any place can be the true one”.

Another framework helps to understand roles and relationships in Zen:

Correct Situation: What is occurring just now in the situation?

Correct Relationship: What is the nature of the relationship.

Student/Teacher, Subject/Object, Near/Far, High/Low, etc.

Correct Function: What wisdom and compassion is needed in this relationship?

We have an important Kong An in our tradition:

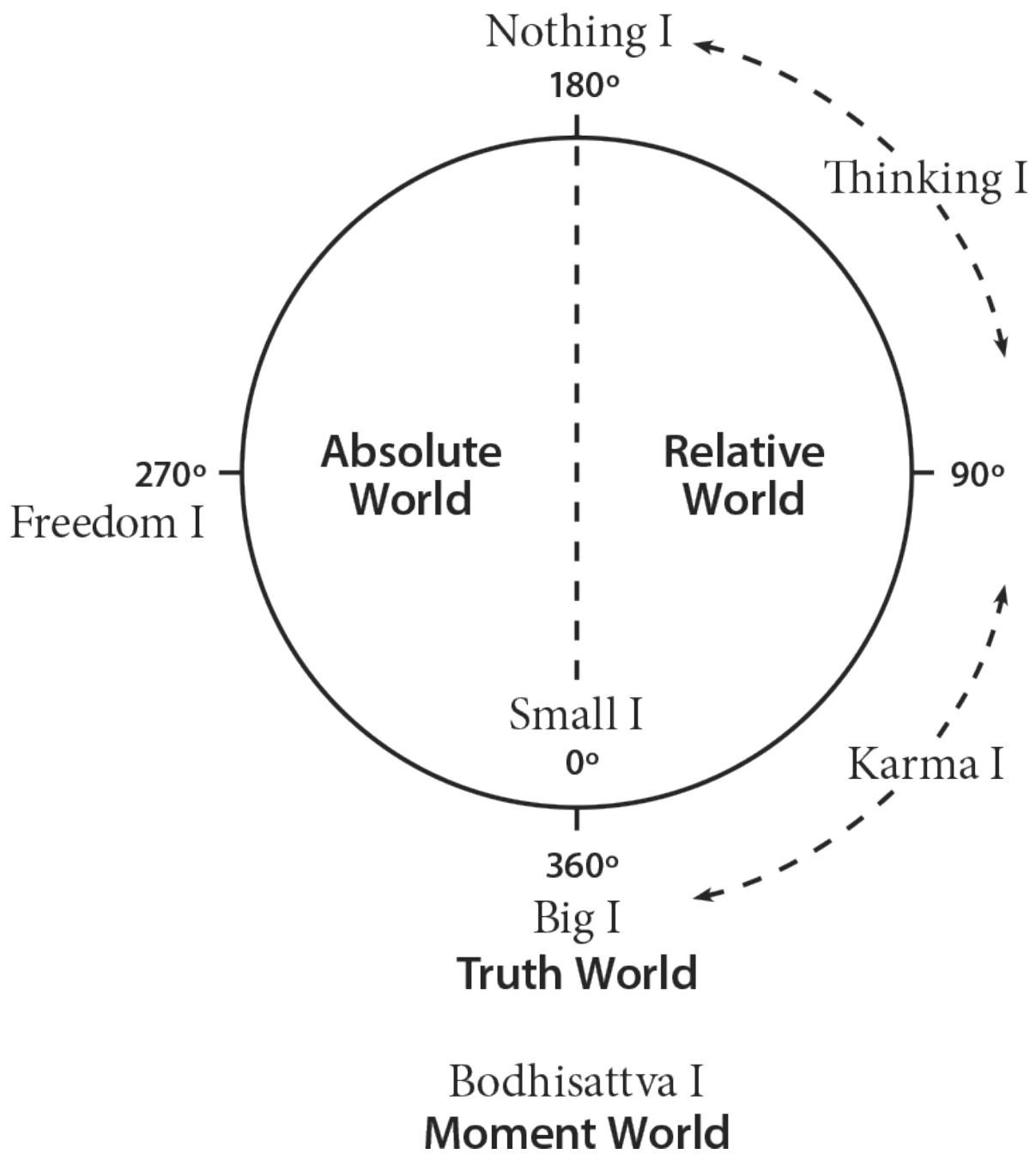
Lin-chi’s “Katz!”

One day during winter retreat the monks were doing walking meditation practice around the temple grounds. Lin-chi and the head monk were observing from the porch of Lin-chi’s quarters. Two monks with their heads looking downward were walking straight towards each other. They both suddenly saw each other and simultaneously shouted “Katz!”.

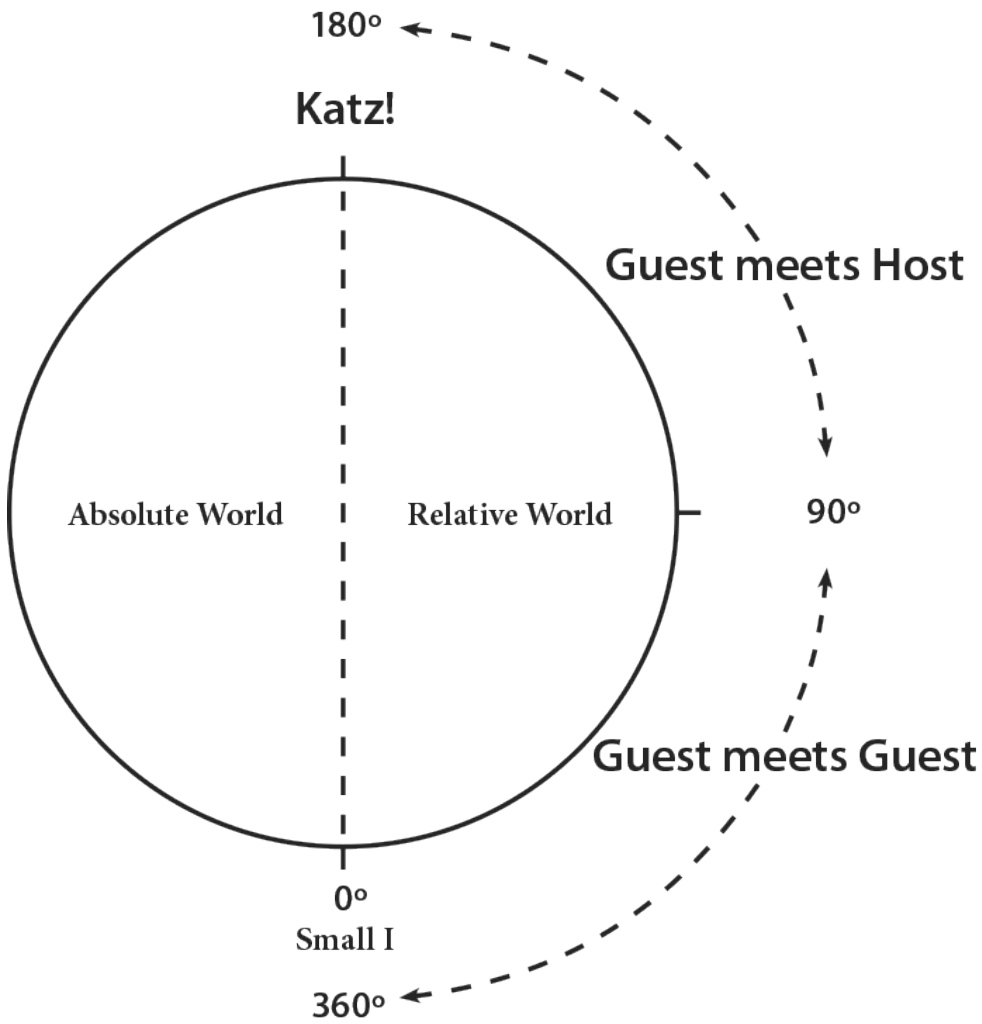
The head monk then asked the Master “Are there guest and host?”

“Guest and host are obvious” replied Master Lin-chi.

While guest and host might seem like an anachronism of the time – the importance of one’s changing position in the process of liberation is helpful to acknowledge. For this changing situation we turn to the Zen Circle.



No Guest, No Host



(Big I/Truth World)

Host meets Host

(Bodhisattva I/Moment World)

Host meets Guest

Relative World (Small “I”)

0-90°: Guest meets Guest (Karma “I”)

We go around and around in delusion.

(Everyone’s always talking about politics, the weather and sports.)

90-180°: Guest meets Host (Thinking “I”)

We shake off drowsiness enough to look for someone who has clarity.

Absolute World (Nothing “I”)

180°: No Guest, No Host

Truth World (Big “I”)

360°: Host meets Host

Teacher and student’s minds meet.

Moment World: Host meets Guest (Bodhisattva “I”)

With insight, compassion and wisdom, we help others. This is our direction!

The practical principal is to develop the fluidity of recognizing different situations and responding with true wisdom and compassion.

Topic for Discussion in Breakouts

- 1. How do guest and host appear at different points on the Zen Circle? See if you can come up with some examples of each point in our world situation right now.**

Reference: The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi

A Translation of the Lin-chi lu

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