

## **A Story from Chan(Zen) --- A Message to Fresh Math Undergrad**

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As the head of department a duty I gladly carry out is to welcome new students at the beginning of the academic year. In a short speech which opened a student-staff tea gathering we held on September 25, 2000 I borrowed a short story from Chan(Zen), of which readers of EduMath may find some interest. I use the word "borrow" because a Buddhist would see the story in quite another light. But for that matter, each individual may see a different facet of the same story from Chan(Zen) and experience a different sentiment. Below is an extracted version of my speech.

"Dear students,

On behalf of all teachers in the Department of Mathematics let me extend to all of you our official but sincere welcome in this beginning of the academic year. ....

As a teacher the most saddening response I get from a student is to be told that the student loved the subject mathematics in school but now loses all interest in it after studying with us for one year here! Unfortunately I have heard

remarks to that effect more than once. Some students even told me that they felt unhappy and could not cope with mathematics courses because they failed to follow the advice given by some seniors, viz. memorize the notes by heart. This makes us reflect: What have we done wrong to give you this very incorrect impression on how to study mathematics? On our part, we will definitely try our best to offer you a meaningful education in mathematics. But please promise us to do your part as well; be prepared to THINK, to read, to do and to talk mathematics. Do not expect that you will simply learn one algorithm which enables you to solve all problems of a certain type, then another algorithm to solve problems of another type, and so on.

Let me conclude with a little story from Chan(Zen).

The monk Ju Zhi (or Koti) [in the Tang Dynasty] was renowned for his "Yi-Zhi-Chan" (Chan in One Finger). Whenever anybody asked him any question about Buddhism, he would simply hold up one finger. It seemed to work all the time. A young disciple, having watched his teacher doing that for so long, thought that he too had learnt the Way. To see whether this young disciple was really enlightened or not, Ju Zhi asked one day, "What is the Way of the Buddha?" The young disciple held up one finger. Without saying one word, Ju Zhi brandished a knife and chopped off that finger, inflicting such severe physical pain that the young disciple wailed and turned to run. Just as he was about to leave, Ju Zhi shouted the same question, "What is the Way of the Buddha?" Upon hearing the question, the young disciple involuntarily held up his finger, only to find nothing in its place! Then he experienced a sudden enlightenment.

I hope and I am sure you all will do much better than that young disciple of Monk Ju Zhi. You will be enlightened without going through the finger-severing pain (otherwise known as a grade F in a course). Let us now go to something much more gleeful and share in congratulating some of your classmates who are to receive prizes in mathematics. I will now invite Professor Mok, our Chaired Professor and Director of the Institute of Mathematical Research, to present the prizes. .... "

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