

## SHIKANTAZA

I am often asked how what we are doing compares to the kind of Theravadinist meditation done at Spirit Rock. So I'd like to say a few things about our practice of Zazen, or *shikantaza*, and how it differs from some other forms of Buddhist and non-Buddhist meditation. Most of what I will say is based on the writings of Dogen Zenji, the founder of our lineage of Soto Zen Buddhism.

Dogen says that *shikantaza*, or just sitting, is the king of *samadhis*. So we have Japanese and Sanskrit, just as our lineage can be traced back from Buddha's enlightenment in India to China with our First Patriarch, Bodhidharma, and to our first Japanese ancestor, Dogen. And we have a lot of English words as our tradition has moved to America with our first American Patriarch, Suzuki Roshi. Seeing ourselves in the context of this ancient lineage is so important that we chant it at every one of our daily services.

So *shikantaza* is Japanese for just sitting, or just doing Zazen and Samadhi is a Sanskrit term which means several things. First, it means to see all things equally. Another definition is that mind and environment are intimately one. This latter idea is expressed as "The Buddhadharma should be grasped so that mind and object become one."

So let's look at the components of *shikantaza*. "*Shikan*" means wholeheartedness; it means to become one with the process itself. "*Ta*" means to hit, as in to hit a bull's eye, and "*Za*" refers to Zazen. So from moment to moment, from breath to breath, we need to hit the bull's eye of the process of zazen. That's it. We try to be present right in the middle of what we are doing. What could be more simple?

If you look further into the etymology of *shikantaza*, you will see that the "shi" in "shikan" comes from the Japanese word, for mind. And how we understand "mind" will greatly affect our understanding of what we are doing in Zazen. Is mind only to be understood in its ordinary psychological sense as conscious awareness or the seat of discursive thought and emotion or does it refer to something incomparably greater and more comprehensive?

If we use the more limited understanding then Zazen would be some sort of mental exercise of concentration or method for training the mind to attain a state whereby all of one's thoughts and delusions would disappear, leaving a person free and

undisturbed. This is what Theravadan meditation and non religious forms of relaxation meditation are supposed to do. They assume that the natural state of our mind is disorder and they try to clear it and harmonize it. And of course this kind of method has wonderful effects on our lives.

But Dogen tells us that what we are trying to do is completely different because he understands mind in a much broader sense. He says, “The meaning and scope of mind that has been directly transmitted from Buddha to Buddha is that mind extends throughout all phenomena , and all phenomena are inseparable from mind.” The meaning of this statement is total and non-dualistic. It surpasses mental or psychological implications. As Uchiyama Roshi, a contemporary zen teacher, puts it, our mind is the life force of the universe. In our practice, we need to maintain the attitude of purely manifesting this universal life.

When we sit we should not try to get rid of our thoughts, but we only have to be aware of them and let them go. That is we need to be alert and not let our minds wander. Whatever happens, whatever thoughts or emotions appear, all we have to do is be aware of the process of Zazen. If thoughts or emotions or memories come it is okay. As Suzuki Roshi said, “It’s okay to have thoughts, just don’t invite them in for tea.”

We should let go of all thoughts—even the thought of enlightenment. We are not trying to become enlightened. It is a simple letting go of all that comes up without trying to work out solutions, without trying to improve ourselves. We are inherently perfect just the way we are. We sit in order to make contact with this, the deepest part of ourselves, our original nature. Dogen says that zazen is not step-by-step learning meditation or a meditation technique which we make effort at in order to reach a special state of mind. To sit in zazen is nothing other than expressing the original way of human life.

In the technical language of Zen, he says that there is no duality between practice and realization. This is the secret of Zen practice. Sitting is an expression of our original nature, our original face, which is hidden from us by layers of delusion. In Bendowa, Dogen says that a “beginner's whole-hearted practice of the Way is exactly the totality of original enlightenment. For this reason, in conveying the essential attitude for practice, it is taught not to wait for enlightenment outside practice. . .”

Our practice is enlightenment itself; it is the wholehearted practice of this enlightenment that we need to carry on. I have been told that a more accurate translation of the Sanskrit, *bodhi*, is enlightened activity. As Dogen says, “Buddhas keep on becoming Buddhas.” So we need to become aware of the *immensity of what we are*, not just once or twice, but continually with each and every breath.

Suzuki Roshi said, “You are perfect the way you are. But you could use a little improvement.” What he means is that our original nature is perfect, but we need to *actualize* it with our practice. If we do not sit diligently with our whole mind and body we will not be able to end the delusions that keep us from contacting and actualizing our true nature. For us beginners, we need great effort. We need to keep practicing even though our legs hurt and we fidget. We need to continue even though we daydream and make plans. We shouldn’t be disturbed by our limitations; instead we need to include them in our practice. As Suzuki Roshi said, “Just to continue should be your purpose. When you do something, just to do it should be your purpose. Form is form and you are you, and true emptiness will be realized in your practice.”

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