

## WHY WE SIT

As you know, I keep postcards and flyers about our group on the back table of my bookstore. From time to time a customer will come up to me and ask, “what is Zen, exactly.” We then get into a conversation about what it is that they are looking for. Sometimes they will shrug their shoulders and say, “I’m just curious,” and sometimes they will say that they are looking for a new way to deal with the everyday tensions of their lives. And sometimes a person will get a faraway look in her eyes and say something like, “I don’t know, but I just feel that there is something more that I should be doing with my life.” Everyone has his or her own reason for making the effort to come here on Monday evenings. Perhaps, you’ve been asked by friends for your reasons for coming. What do you tell them?

And of course meditation, any kind of meditation, will help you feel better; it will help you with stress reduction or how to deal with loss and disappointment and sadness and almost any kind of negative emotional state. But that is not the point of Zen meditation. We don’t sit to accomplish anything. So what exactly is Zen?

Well, the answer is very simple—it really is one word in Japanese and two words in English: *shikantaza* or just sitting. Zazen is above tension and relaxation; sadness and happiness; ignorance and understanding; delusion and enlightenment. Or maybe I should say that it includes all of those things. My suggestion to all of us is to let go of all of those very interesting goals, and just take a seat and sit and see what comes up. You see, Zazen is not about escaping from or fixing the problems of your life; it is about facing your life, honestly and wholeheartedly. Nothing could be more simple; nothing could be more challenging.

So, when you take your seats you will be immediately aware of thoughts and emotions coming and going. This is okay. As Suzuki Roshi said, “It’s okay to have thoughts just don’t invite them in for tea.” The point is just to be aware of what is going in your mind without reacting. In Zen, we often compare thoughts in our heads to clouds in a wide open sky. Some thoughts are light and feathery and others are black and threatening. But the sky just lets the clouds come and go as they please. The sky is never carried away by clouds as we are often carried away by our thoughts. To live fully, to practice Zen, we need to settle into the wide openness of our minds without being distracted by the view. In the deepest sense, we are the limitless open sky.

In many schools of Buddhism there are wonderful things to try when you meditate. In some schools, such as Tibetan Buddhism, there is a meditation technology which includes mantras, visualizations, and discursive contemplation. In some schools a lot of attention is paid to the breath—counting inhalations or sensing how the breath feels as it enters and exits the body. All of these techniques can be helpful and I invite you all to try them from time to time as a support.

I often tell new people that they should try to count their breaths for a while. From time to time you may need more or less than support. I've been told that Suzuki Roshi went back to counting his breath towards the end of his life. But, whatever you do as a support, you must not do it to accomplish anything. That is not the point of our practice. There is nothing, really nothing to accomplish. When we sit, we just sit in total awareness of everything.

Eihei Dogen, the founder of our lineage in Japan, says that everything we need is already here, and there is no need to do anything or go anywhere. Our life is fundamentally perfect and reaches everywhere. Truth and beauty are always right there where you are—they are never elsewhere. So we do not sit zazen to change what we are; we do not sit zazen to gain enlightenment or anything else. We do not sit to become a Buddha. We already are a buddha.

I've told this story before, but it bears repeating. One day, as the monk Baso sat in zazen, his teacher passed by and asked him what he was doing. "I want to become a Buddha," said Baso.

His teacher immediately picked up a tile and started polishing it.

"What are you doing," asked Baso.

"I'm polishing this tile to make a mirror," said his teacher.

"Ridiculous," said Baso. "How can your polishing make that tile a mirror?"

"How can your zazen make you a Buddha," replied his teacher.

Zazen is not a means to an end. It is the means and the end, the alpha and the omega. It includes everything. Dogen says that zazen is the truth of this universe and great Nature. 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, which is hidden from us by layers of delusion. When we sit we breathe in total awareness and let everything else fall away. This total awareness, is our true nature.

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.” There is no need to improve ourselves or go someplace else. We sit not to achieve something over time but to immerse ourselves in the activity of our sitting, in the true immensity of our self. When we sit, we become aware of the *immensity of what we are*.

And yet, we do have to practice—why? The central question of Dogen’s life was, “We are Buddha nature, so why do we need to practice?” He responds by saying, *if there is even a hairsbreadth of deviation*, you will be lost in delusion and confusion. Our practice is about eliminating any space between our temporal identity and our fundamental nature. When we sit there should be no gap between us and zazen. Think about it—we are Zazen. Our practice is about eliminating any sense of limit and discrimination between self and other; between inside and outside. It is about experiencing the deepest interconnectedness of everything.

If we practice to gain something, we are ignorant of what we are. The moment we turn away from ourselves, we are headed in the wrong direction. The important point to keep in mind is that we have to experience this for ourselves. In my practice I have experienced how “insights” come not from mental interpretations of ideas but from some unknown place in myself. It feels like they come “from nowhere.” I have talked to poets who say the same thing happens to them. I think that a lot of what we call artistic inspiration is really our deepest nature appearing and expressing itself in words or colors or sounds.

In dharma discourse 319, Dogen says “We should know that zazen is the decorous activity of practice *after* realization.” Realization or enlightenment is simply just sitting in complete awareness of who and what we are. We do not sit to become a Buddha—we already are—we sit to express our Buddha nature.

Consider the life of the Buddha. Although he had intrinsic wisdom at birth, he sat for six years. He sat not to become wise, but as an expression of his wisdom. This is the very heart of Zen practice. Suzuki roshi said that the posture we take in zazen is the posture of enlightenment. Zen history from the time of our first patriarch, Bodhidharma, is filled with stories of enlightened women and men who sat for extended periods of time, not to attain anything but rather to express their original nature. Now it is our time. As Dogen says, we must not “dispense with wholehearted practice.”

So, that is our practice. It's okay if you feel better after your zazen, but that is not the point. The point is simply that we must learn to take the backward step and look within ourselves to face our life and death and everything else as mindfully as possible. When we sit we include everything in our awareness. We are everything. There should be nothing left over, not a trace.