



LION'S ROAR

Deep
Dive *into*
Zen



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The word Zen is a Japanese transliteration of the Chinese word *Ch'an*, which derives from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning meditation. Zen is the Japanese lineage of a meditation-oriented Buddhist tradition that includes Ch'an (China), Seon (Korea), and Thien (Vietnam). In the West, the word “Zen” is often used as shorthand for the entire tradition.

Zen traces its origins to two events in the Buddha's life. The first, and best known, is the Buddha's enlightenment while meditating beneath the Bodhi tree, an awakening available to anyone who takes up the practice. The second is the event known as the Flower Sermon, in which the Buddha simply held up a flower before a large assembly. When his student Mahakasyapa smiled, the Buddha transmitted the dharma to him, establishing the Zen lineage that continues to today.

A thousand years after that famous encounter, the spirit of Zen was summarized this way by Bodhidharma, the legendary Indian monk credited with founding the Ch'an lineage:

*A special transmission outside the scriptures;
not depending on words and letters;
directly pointing to the mind;
seeing into one's true nature and attaining buddhahood.*

Bodhidharma is said to have sat in meditation in a cave for nine years, so not surprisingly a strong emphasis on meditation practice in Zen carries through to this day. But Zen practice also includes chanting, making offerings, doing manual labor, reciting gathas, and generally paying attention to one's actions in the present moment.

In North America, Zen is most often associated with its two main Japanese schools, Soto and Rinzai. Soto emphasizes the formless meditation approach of shikantaza, while Rinzai also includes the contemplative inquiry of koan practice.



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What Is Zen Buddhism and How Do You Practice It?

Zen teacher **Norman Fischer** takes you through the principles and practices of the major schools of Zen Buddhism.

What does “Zen” mean?

The word “Zen” is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese “Chan,” which means “meditation.” Chan came to Japan and became “Zen” around the eighth century. Today, the word “Zen” is in more general use in the West.

What are the characteristics of Zen Buddhism?

Zen Buddhism is a stripped-down, determined, uncompromising, cut-to-the-chase, meditation-based Buddhism that takes no interest in doctrinal refinements. Not relying on scripture,

doctrine or ritual, Zen is verified by personal experience and is passed on from master to disciple, hand to hand, ineffably, through hard, intimate training.

Though Zen recognizes—at least loosely—the validity of normative Buddhist scriptures, it has created its own texts over the generations. Liberally flavored with doses of Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese poetry, and written in informal language studded with Chinese folk sayings and street slang, much of classical Zen literature is built on legendary anecdotes of the great masters. The Buddha is rarely mentioned.

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What is Zazen? It literally means “sitting Zen.” Put simply, it’s “seated meditation” as done in the Zen style — upright in good posture, paying careful attention to breathing in your belly until you are fully alert and present.

What are the methods of Zen practice?

ZAZEN, OR ZEN MEDITATION

Although Zen Buddhism eventually developed traditions of study and ritual, its emphasis on personal experience has always made it a practice-oriented tradition. The practice is meditation. “Sitting Zen” (Jpn., zazen) has always been central in Zen training centers,

where monks rise early each morning for meditation practice and do long retreats consisting of many, many silent unmoving hours on the cushion.

Zazen is an intensely simple practice. It is generally taught without steps, stages, or frills. “Just sit!” the master admonishes, by which he or she means, sit upright in good posture, paying careful attention to breathing in your belly until you are fully alert and present. This sense of being present, with illumination and intensity, is the essence of zazen, and although there are many approaches to Zen meditation, they all come back to this.

In the Zen monastery, life is entirely organized around sitting in the meditation hall. But zazen is also understood to be something more than this sitting. It is conceived of as a state of mind or being that extends into all activities. Work is zazen; eating is zazen; sleeping, walking, standing, going to the toilet — all are zazen practice. In Soto Zen, the Japanese school practiced extensively in the West, there is an especially strong emphasis on this “moving Zen.” Soto monastic life tends to be highly ritualized, so as to promote concentration in all things. There is, for instance, a special elegant and mindful practice, called oryoki, for eating ritualized meals in the meditation hall.

KOAN PRACTICE

In koan Zen, contemplation of a koan begins with zazen practice. The practitioner comes to intense presence with body and breath, and then brings up the koan almost as a physical object, repeating it over and over again with breathing, until words and meaning dissolve and the koan is “seen.”

This practice is usually done in the context of an intensive retreat led by a qualified Zen koan teacher, whom the practitioner visits for private interviews. The student presents their understanding of the koan (however lame it may be) and receives a response from the teacher (however understated it may be) that reorients the search.

Eventually, with luck, diligence and a few judicious hints, the koan’s essence is penetrated.

Like all systems, the koan system can degenerate into a self-protective and self-referential enclosure. It’s the teacher’s job to see that this doesn’t happen, but sometimes it is not preventable. There are many different systems of koan study, but most of them emphasize humor, spontaneity, and openness. The koan method, is, at its best, a unique and marvelous expression of human religious sensibility.

How did Zen Buddhism come to be?

Through the centuries, India, the first Buddhist country, gradually spawned hundreds of sects and sub-sects, and thousands of scriptures, and tens of thousands of commentaries on those

scriptures. When Buddhism spread over Central Asian trade routes to China, all this material came at once. The Chinese had long cherished their own twin traditions of Confucianism and Taoism and were resistant to ideologies introduced by barbarians from beyond the borders of the “Middle Kingdom.” There was also a severe linguistic challenge for the Chinese in digesting the Buddhist message from abroad. The Sanskrit language was so different from Chinese in sensibility and syntax that translation was almost impossible.

Gradually, Indian and Central Asian Buddhism began to be reshaped by its encounter with Chinese culture. This reshaping eventually led to the creation of Zen, an entirely new school of Buddhism, which eventually became by far the most successful school of Buddhism in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam.

If Zen is its own school, who was its founder?

Though we can't be sure if he truly existed, Bodhidharma is the legendary founder of Zen Buddhism in China. He is said to have arrived in China about 520. (Buddhism had by then been known in China for about 400 years.) He was soon summoned to the emperor, who had questions for him.

“According to the teachings, how do I understand the merit I have accrued in building temples and making donations to monks?” the emperor asked.

Bodhidharma, usually depicted as a scowling, hooded, bearded figure, shot back, “There is no merit.”

“What then is the meaning of the Buddha’s Holy Truths?” the emperor asked.

“Empty, nothing holy,” Bodhidharma replied.

Shocked, the emperor imperiously asked, “Who addresses me thus?”

“I don’t know,” Bodhidharma replied, turned on his heel and left the court, to which he never returned. He repaired to a distant monastery, where, it is said, he sat facing a wall for nine years, in constant meditation. A single disciple sought him out, and to test the disciple’s sincerity, Bodhidharma refused to see him. The disciple stood outside in the snow all night long. In the morning he presented Bodhidharma with his severed arm as a token of his seriousness. The monk became Bodhidharma’s heir, and thus began the Zen transmission in China. So, at least, the story goes.

Schools of Zen Buddhism

Zen schools are more or less divisible into those that emphasize a curriculum of verbal meditation objects—like koans—and those that do not.

Emphasizing daily life practice as *zazen*, Soto Zen centers generally do not work with a set koan curriculum and method, though koans are studied and contemplated. Because of this, Soto Zen has sometimes been criticized by the koan schools (the best-known of which is the Rinzai school of Japan) as dull, overly

precious, and quietistic, in contrast to the dynamic and lively engagement of the koan path. But the koan way also has its critics, who see the emphasis on words, meaning, and insight as working against real non-conceptual Zen living. Koan training systems also have the disadvantage of fostering competition and obsession with advancement in the system.

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It is remarkable how essentially similar the various teachers within a particular Zen “dharma family” can be in personal style and mode of expression, even though, paradoxically, each one is quite distinctive and individualistic.

Zen Buddhism has had a long and varied history in several different Far Eastern cultures. Each culture has produced a tradition that is recognizable as Zen, but differs slightly from all the others. Vietnamese Zen is the one most influenced by the Theravada tradition. It tends to be gentle in expression and method, to emphasize purity and carefulness, and to combine Zen with some Theravada teaching and methodology.

In China, Zen eventually became the only Buddhist school, inclusive of all the others, so contemporary Ch’an includes many faith-based Mahayana practices that existed initially in other

Buddhist schools, especially faith in and repetition of the name of Amida Buddha, the savior Buddha who will ensure rebirth in an auspicious heaven to those who venerate him.

Especially stylized, dramatic, and austere, Korean Zen includes prostration practice (repeated, energetic full-to-the-floor bows of veneration) and intensive chanting practice, and has a hermit tradition, something virtually unknown in Japanese Zen.

Within each of the Asian Zen traditions there are several schools, and within schools the styles of individual teachers often differ greatly. Still, it is remarkable how essentially similar the various teachers within a particular Zen “dharma family” can be in personal style and mode of expression, even though, paradoxically, each one is quite distinctive and individualistic. This uncanny fact – radical individuality within the context of shared understanding – seems to be an indelible feature of Zen.

Zen teachers and teaching lineages

A key Zen story, shared by all the schools: Once, the Buddha was giving a talk on Vulture Peak. In the middle of the talk he paused and held up a flower. Everyone was silent. Only Mahakasyapa broke into a smile. Buddha then said, “I have the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, the ineffable mind of Nirvana, the real form of No Form, the flawless gate of the Teaching. Not dependent on words, it is a special transmission outside tradition. I now entrust it to Mahakasyapa.”

This story, however historically unverifiable, represents the beginning of the Zen transmission, said to start directly with the Buddha. The story tells us two things: first, although the Buddha taught many true and useful teachings and techniques, the essence of what he taught is simple and ineffable. Holding up a flower is one expression of this essence. Second, the very simplicity and ineffability of this essential teaching requires that it be handed on in a lineage from master to disciple in mutual wordless understanding. There can't be a Zen training program with exams and certifications, with objectives, goals and demonstrable, measurable mastery.

“ That the teacher is to be appreciated as a realized spiritual adept and at the same time as an ordinary individual with rough edges and personality quirks seems to go to the heart of Zen's uniqueness.

(Though wordless understanding may seem a bit mystical and precious, it's not really so strange. We are all familiar with the transformation that takes place in apprenticeship and mentorship relationships, processes that involve a wordless give and take between individuals, and in which something quite hard to define is passed on. My own teacher once made me a calligraphy that

read, “I have nothing to give you but my Zen spirit.” Although the “Zen spirit” may be hard to define, measure and explicitly verify, it can be appreciated when you feel it.)

While Zen practice can be done without benefit of a teacher, having a teacher is important, and, in the end, crucial if one is to realize the depth of Zen practice and make it completely one’s own.

Although the Zen teacher must embody Zen and express it in all their words and deeds, a Zen teacher is not exactly a guru, a Buddha archetype at the center of a student’s practice. To be sure, respect for and confidence in the teacher is essential if one is to undergo the transformation in consciousness that Zen promises. But the Zen teacher is also an ordinary, conditioned human being, simply a person, however much they have realized of Zen. This paradox — that the teacher is to be appreciated as a realized spiritual adept and at the same time as an ordinary individual with rough edges and personality quirks — seems to go to the heart of Zen’s uniqueness. Through the relationship to the teacher, the student comes to embrace all beings, including himself or herself, in this way.

It was typical in the early days of the transmission of Zen to the West for teachers of different lineages to be scornful of each other. There were centuries of tradition behind this prodigious failure to communicate. In Asia, lineages through the generations tended to be separate and usually of opposing congregations. Thankfully, in the West there is now much more sharing between

the various lineages. In recent years in America, two organizations have been created to promote warm communication between the Zen lineages: the American Zen Teachers Association, which includes teachers from all lineages, and the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, which is made up of teachers of the various lineages of Soto Zen, the largest Zen tradition in the West.

Taking the Path of Zen in the West

For someone who is interested in taking up Zen practice in America, the approach is not difficult: surf the web or the phone book, find the location and schedule of the Zen establishment nearest to you, show up, and keep showing up as long as it suits you. Eventually you will learn the formalities of the local Zen meditation hall (most groups offer special instruction for beginners), and if you feel comfortable you will continue to attend meditation when you can.

Eventually you will sign up for dokusan (private, intense, formal interview with a teacher). At some point you will hear about a one-day sesshin (meditation retreat) and you'll try it out. You'll no doubt find it a daunting and at the same time uplifting experience. After some time you'll be ready to attend a seven-day sesshin, and that experience will feel like a real breakthrough to you, regardless of how many koans you do or do not pass, or how well or poorly you think you sat. Sesshin is a life-transforming experience, no matter what happens.

From there, if you continue, you will deepen your friendships with other practitioners. These relationships will seem to you, oddly, both closer and more distant than other relationships in your life. Closer because the feeling of doing Zen practice together bonds you deeply, and more distant because you may not exchange personal histories, opinions and gossip as you might do with other friends. As time goes on you will establish a relationship with one or more of the local Zen teachers, and you will find these relationships increasingly warm and important in your life, so much so that perhaps someday you will want to take vows as a lay Zen practitioner, joining the lineage family.

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What will all this effort do for you?
Everything and nothing.

If you go on practicing, as the years go by you may attend monastic training periods at one of the larger centers. If your life permits, you might want to stay at this center for a while — perhaps for many years, or for the rest of your life, eventually taking on the teachers and lineage there as your primary lineage. Or you may come back home and continue your ongoing practice, going back to the larger training center from time to time for more monastic experiences. Or, if it is impossible for you to get away from your family and work life for longer than a week at a time, or if you do not want to do this, you will continue with the practice of week-long sesshin, and that will be enough.

It is also possible that you do not ever want to go to week sesshin, and that Zen classes, one-day retreats, meetings with the teacher from time to time, and the application of all that you are learning to the daily events of your life is the kind of practice you really need for your life, and that nothing more is necessary.

What will all this effort do for you? Everything and nothing. You will become a Zen student, devoted to your ongoing practice, to kindness and peacefulness, and to the ongoing endless effort to understand the meaning of time, the meaning of your existence, the reason why you were born and will die. You will still have plenty of challenges in your life, you will still feel emotion, possibly more now than ever, but the emotion will be sweet, even if it is grief or sadness. Many things, good and bad, happen in a lifetime, but you won't mind. You will see your life and your death as a gift, a possibility. This is the essential point of Zen Buddhism. 🌸



You Are Already Enlightened

Guo Gu, a longtime student of the late Master Sheng Yen, presents an experiential look at the Chan practice of silent illumination, of which Japanese Zen’s *shikantaza* is a part.

SILENT ILLUMINATION is a Buddhist practice that can be traced back not only to Huineng (638–713), the sixth patriarch of Chan, and other Chinese masters but also to the early teachings of the Buddha. In the Chan tradition, silent illumination is referred to as *mozhao*, from the Chinese characters *mo* (silent) and *zhao* (illumination). It’s a term that was first used by a critic of the practice, Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), an advocate of the method of “observing critical phrase” (*huatou* in Chinese; *wato* in Japanese). Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091–1157), the Chinese master most often associated with the practice of silent illumination, liked the term and adopted it.

In the West, silent illumination is usually presented through the lens of Soto Zen practice as *shikantaza*, a term coined by Dogen Zenji to describe the embodiment of awakening. However, *shikantaza* is not a distinct category of practice, and while it is a part of silent illumination, it cannot encompass it.

Silent illumination is the simultaneous practice of stillness and clarity, or quiescence and luminosity. It is similar to the practice of shamatha and vipashyana, as long as we don't consider these sequential to each other, first practicing shamatha and then practicing vipashyana. In silence there is illumination; in stillness, clarity is ever present.

We Are Already Enlightened

The Chan tradition does not usually refer to steps or stages. Its central teaching is that we are intrinsically awake; our mind is originally without abiding, fixations, and vexations, and its nature is without divisions and stages. This is the basis of the Chan view of sudden enlightenment. If our mind's nature were not already free, that would imply we could become enlightened only after we practiced, which is not so. If it's possible to gain enlightenment, then it's possible to lose it as well.

Consider a room, which is naturally spacious. However we organize the furniture in the room will not affect its intrinsic spaciousness. We can put up walls to divide the room, but they are temporary. And whether we leave the room clean or cluttered and messy, it won't affect its natural spaciousness. Mind is also intrinsically spacious. Although we can get caught up in our desires and aversions, our true nature is not affected by those vexations. We are inherently free.

In the Chan tradition, therefore, practice is not about producing enlightenment. You might wonder, “Then what am I doing here, practicing?” Because practice does help clean up the “furniture” in the “room.” By not attaching to your thoughts, you remove the furniture, so to speak. And once your mind is clean, instead of fixating on the chairs, tables, and so on, you see its spaciousness. Then you can let the furniture be or rearrange it any way you want—not for yourself, but for the benefit of others in the room.

The Teachings of Master Sheng Yen

The ultimate way to practice silent illumination is to sit without dependence on your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind. You sit without abiding anywhere, fabricating anything, or falling into a stupor. You neither enter into meditative absorption nor give rise to scattered thoughts. In this very moment, mind just is—wakeful and still, clear and without delusion. However, for many practitioners, such a standard can prove too high.

My teacher, Master Sheng Yen, first introduced this way of practicing silent illumination in the 1970s. His students liked the method very much, but no one was able to practice it—they just couldn’t get a handle on it, so the method fell into obscurity. In the early 1990s, through trial and error, Sheng Yen began to break down the practice into stages. He spent a decade teaching and exploring silent illumination with his students during seven- and ten-day intensive retreats in both the West and Taiwan. I

translated many of Hongzhi's teachings on silent illumination to accompany Sheng Yen's commentaries, which are now published in several books. The latest and most representative of his teachings on silent illumination, *The Method of No-Method: The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination*, was published in 2008. Master Sheng Yen died soon afterward, in February 2009.

As Master Sheng Yen's personal attendant monk, I was one of his first students to begin following his method of silent illumination as my main practice. He would often use me as a guinea pig: I would report to him whatever state or experience I was going through as I went deeper into the practice. I practiced silent illumination under his guidance for about sixteen years, until I began using the *huatou* or *gong'an* (Jpn., koan) method.

The stages of silent illumination as taught by Sheng Yen are not set in stone. They are a means to an end and signposts. It's important to have a teacher to guide you, as each individual will have a different response to this method, growing according to his or her own spiritual capacity and karmic disposition.

Three Stages of Silent Illumination

The practice of silent illumination taught by Master Sheng Yen can roughly be divided into three stages: concentrated mind, unified mind, and no-mind. Within each stage are infinite depths. You need not go through all the stages, nor are they necessarily sequential.

Concentrated Mind

The first stage of practice is learning to sit in an uncontrived way, not trying to get this or get rid of that. You just sit with clarity and simplicity in the moment. In Chinese, this is called *zhiguan dazuo*, which means “just mind yourself sitting.”

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When you mind your sitting, your body and mind are naturally together. You don't watch the body or imagine it, as if you're looking in from the outside, which is some kind of mental construct.

To just sit is to be aware that you are sitting. When you're sitting, can you feel the presence of your whole body—its posture, weight, and other sensations? “Just sitting” means, at the very least, you know clearly that the whole body is there. It doesn't mean minding any particular part of your body—just your legs, arms, or posture—or feeling every sensation of the body. The idea is to be aware of the general *totality* of your sitting experience. The body is sitting; you know this. This means your mind is sitting, too. So the body and mind are together as you're sitting. If you don't know you're sitting, then you're not following the method.

This method is subtle; it's not like counting breaths from one to ten, which is very concrete. But that doesn't mean there is nothing to do. There is definitely something to do: Sit!

This method does not involve contemplating, observing thoughts, or continually scanning the body. Instead, it involves minding the act of sitting, staying with that reality from moment to moment to moment. When you mind your sitting, your body and mind are naturally together. You don't watch the body or imagine it, as if you're looking in from the outside, which is some kind of mental construct.

When you practice single-mindedly and intensely, with no gaps, for half an hour, your body might become drenched in sweat. But this traditional, tense way of practicing the method is not suitable for most present-day practitioners because so many are already stressed out in daily life. (Another limitation of the tense way is that it cannot be sustained for a long period of time, half an hour to an hour at most.) So it's generally advisable to practice the method in a relaxed way, while continuing to be fully aware that you're sitting.

Getting to know and learning to relax your body can free you from habitual tendencies and negative emotions. You may notice that when wandering thoughts arise, some parts of your body tense up. The same is true for deep-seated emotions, which are lodged in particular places of the body. Often, people live their lives in such a way that their bodies and minds are split; they do one thing with their bodies while their minds are elsewhere. Practicing this first stage helps body and mind be more unified.

When you are wakeful and clear in each moment and not caught up with wandering thoughts, they subside of their own accord. They subside because your discriminating mind, which is tied to self-grasping, lessens. Your discriminating mind lessens because you're aware of the totality of the body as you are sitting. Without wandering thoughts, you are not grasping at this and that, nor attracted to or repulsed by particular sensations. The concentration developed in the first stage of silent illumination is not a one-pointed focus of mind but an open, natural, and clear presence. It is concentration accompanied by wisdom.

Unified Mind

When your discriminating mind diminishes, your narrow sense of self diminishes as well. Your field of awareness—which is at first the totality of the body—naturally opens up to include the external environment. Inside and outside become one. In the beginning, you may still notice that a sound is coming from a certain direction or that your mind follows distinct events within the environment, such as someone moving. But as you continue, these distinctions fade. You are aware of events around you, but they do not leave traces. You no longer feel that the environment is out there and you are in here. The environment poses no opposition or burden. It just is. If you are sitting, then the environment is you, sitting. If you have left your seat and are walking about, then the

environment is still you, in all of your actions. This experience, the second stage of silent illumination, is called the oneness of self and others.

Can you still hear sounds? Yes. Can you get up to have a drink of water or urinate? Of course. Is there mentation? Yes. You have thoughts as you need them to respond to the world, but they are not self-referential. Compassion naturally arises when it is needed; it has nothing to do with emotion. There is an intimacy with everything around you that is beyond words and descriptions. When you urinate, the body, urine, and toilet are not separate. Indeed, you all have a wonderful dialogue!

In this stage, you see clearly what needs to be done. You see how to respond, but without any reference point or opposition. If you hear a bird, you are a bird. When you interact with a person, your mind is not stirred. You see things as one; they are part of you, and you are part of them. It's not that you think, "They are part of me and I'm really big! I include the whole world!" Nor is it that you dissolve into the external environment, not knowing who you are anymore. It is just that the sense of self-reference is diminished and the burdens of normal vexations have temporarily vanished.

There are progressively deeper states of this second stage. When you enter a state in which the environment is you sitting, the environment may become infinite and boundless, bringing about a state of oneness with the universe. The whole world is your body sitting there. Time passes quickly and space is limitless.

You are not caught up in the particulars of the environment. There is just openness of mind, clarity, and a sense of the infinite. This is not yet the realization of no-self; it is the experience of great self.

At this point, three subtler experiences may occur, all related to the sense of great self. The first is infinite light. The light is you, and you experience a sense of oneness, infinity, and clarity.

The second experience is infinite sound. This is not the sound of cars, dogs, or something similar. Nor is it like music or anything else you have ever heard. It is a primordial, elemental sound that is one with the experience of vastness. It is harmonious in all places, without reference or attribution.

The third experience is voidness. But this is not the emptiness of self-nature or of no-self that would constitute enlightenment. This is a spacious voidness in which there is nothing but the pure vastness of space. Although you do not experience a sense of self, a subtle form of self and object still exists.

These progressively deeper states are all related to samadhi states. When you emerge from them, you must try not to think about them anymore because they are quite alluring. Say to yourself, "This state is ordinary; it's not it." Otherwise, it will lead to another form of attachment.

You might be in the initial phase of the second stage of silent illumination for a few minutes or a few months. During this time, nothing obstructs you—when you are sitting, you feel the environment is you, sitting; when you are walking about, you feel

connected with the environment. In the later phase of the second stage, you may even think you are enlightened because the deeper levels of oneness are so profound. Practitioners sometimes think they have suddenly become smarter or understood all the scriptures.

All these states of clarity are wonderful; they give you a strong conviction in the usefulness of buddhadharma and the possibility of a state free from vexations. However, they still do not represent the clarity of the third stage—the realization of silent illumination. Become attached to any of these states and you will be further from them. All of them must be let go.

No-Self, No-Mind

The clarity of the second stage is like looking through a spotless window. You can see through it very well, almost as if the window were not there, but it is there. In the second stage, the self lies dormant but subtle self-grasping is present. In other words, seeing through a window, even a very clean one, is not the same as seeing through no window at all. Seeing through no window is one way of describing the state of enlightenment, which is the third stage. In utter clarity, the mind is unmoving. Why? Because there is no self-referential mind.

The third stage of silent illumination is the realization of quiescence and wakefulness, stillness and awareness, samadhi and prajna, all of which are different ways to describe mind's natural state. Experiencing it for the first time is like suddenly dropping

a thousand pounds from your shoulders—the heavy burdens of self-attachment, vexations, and habitual tendencies. Prior to that, you may not know exactly what self-attachment or vexations are. But once you are free from them, you clearly recognize them.

Self-attachment, vexations, and habitual tendencies run deep. So practitioners must work hard to experience enlightenment again and again until they can simply rest in mind's natural state. The key is to practice diligently but seek no results.

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By practicing in this way, our life gradually becomes completely integrated with wisdom and compassion, and even traces of “enlightenment” vanish. We are able to offer ourselves to everyone, like a lighthouse, helping all those who come our way, responding to their needs without contrivance.

By practicing in this way, our life gradually becomes completely integrated with wisdom and compassion, and even traces of “enlightenment” vanish. We are able to offer ourselves to everyone, like a lighthouse, helping all those who come our way, responding to their needs without contrivance. This is the perfection of silent illumination.

You might ask, “I’ve been practicing for ten years now—exactly when is this going to happen to me?” The difference between delusion and enlightenment is only a moment away. In an instant, you can be free from the constructs of your identity and see through the veil of your fabrications.

Remember that practice is much more than following a particular method or going through stages on a path. Practice is life and all of its “furniture.” Practice helps us see the room and not attach to the furniture. Enlightenment is not something special—it is the natural freedom of this moment, here and now, unstained by our fabrications. ❁



Koans for Troubled Times

How do we as Buddhists meet the challenges of our time? **Joan Sutherland** shares the history of koans, which were created to deal with a difficult period in Chinese history.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, in the face of a creeping despair about the state of the world, I began to reread my favorite twentieth-century Russian and East European writers. Those folks knew how to keep small embers alive in a fierce wind: Anna Akhmatova, who turned love into a revolutionary act, and Adam Zagajewski, reassuring us that the good always returns, though at the maddening pace of an old gent on a bicycle, the day after the catastrophe.

People are worried, and we're looking for ways to climb onto our bicycles and pedal out to see what we might do to help. Recently, I've been exploring what my own Zen koan tradition has to say about unending conflict, environmental disaster, the starvation of millions, and the small figure in the corner of the painting, tipping her head back to take it all in.

It turns out that the koan tradition was born at a similarly urgent moment in Chinese history. Twelve hundred years ago, a few Chan innovators had a fierce desire to leap out of the usual ways of doing things and into new territory—not to escape the catastrophe looming around them, but to more fully meet it. If they were going to be helpful they had to develop—and quickly—flexibility of mind, an easy relationship with the unknown, and a robust willingness to engage with life as they found it. Perhaps most importantly, they needed a really big view. For them, Chan practice wasn't about getting free of the world; it was about being free in the world. The first koans are field notes from their experiment in the getting of this kind of freedom.

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What does it mean for each of us to be wholeheartedly part of this world? How do we fall willingly into the frightened, blasted, beautiful, tender world, just as it is?

In the eighth century, Chinese culture was flourishing. It was an age of art and philosophy, prosperity and trade. At the same time, the strains of empire were beginning to show. A huge country with an imperial foreign policy has a long border to defend; the constant warfare took a lot of money to pay for and many soldiers to fight. The people were being taxed into poverty, and

able-bodied men were on the borders making war rather than on the farms making food. Authority outside the capital began to break down, and life was growing harsher and more capricious.

Eventually the Tang government had to bring in mercenary armies from as far away as Asia Minor. For a while it worked just well enough: the mercenaries would come in and crush the latest incursion or rebellion, the government would pay them for their services, and they would head back home. But at mid-century this precarious status quo crumbled when one of the foreign armies refused to leave. They set up a rebel stronghold in the ancient capital of Changan, the City of Everlasting Peace.

This An Lushan Rebellion ushered in a decade of civil war, famine, and disease so devastating that two out of three Chinese died. Two out of three. And it happened in the blink of an eye. China went from being one of the greatest empires the world had ever seen to a nation devastated by conflict and starvation, and its population had shrunk by two-thirds in about ten years. A kind of order was eventually restored, but it would be centuries before the country fully recovered.

The great poet Du Fu was trapped in Changan during the An Lushan Rebellion, and he wrote a poem about it called “The View This Spring.” The poem contains two spare lines that sum it all up:

*The nation is destroyed,
mountains and rivers remain.*

Some Chan practitioners saw what Du Fu saw, from their own perspective: In our world things are always getting broken and mended and broken again, and there is also something that never breaks. Everything rises and falls, and yet in exactly the same moment things are eternal and go nowhere at all. How do we see with a kind of binocular vision, one eye aware of how things are coming and going all the time, the other aware of how they've never moved at all? How do we experience this not as two separate ways of seeing, but as one seamless field of vision?

Mazu (Ma) Daoyi and Shitou Xiqian, who became Chan teachers around the time of the An Lushan Rebellion, pushed these questions further. They asked, What does it mean for each of us to be wholeheartedly part of this world? How do we fall willingly into the frightened, blasted, beautiful, tender world, just as it is? Because, as Peter Hershock formulates it in his wonderful study of Chan¹, "It's not enough to see what buddhanature is; you have to realize what buddhanature does."

Perhaps it's significant that these two creative geniuses came from the margins of Chinese society; in unprecedented times, no one is an expert yet, and anyone might become one. Both lived long lives that spanned the eighth century, and both had connections to Huineng, the sixth Chinese ancestor; from Ma's heirs came the Linji (Rinzai) school, while some of Shitou's descendants formed the Caodong (Soto) line. They never met but had great respect for each other; in their day it was said that you didn't really know Chan until you had studied with both of them. They

had a sometimes spooky connection that had unsettling effects on the students who passed between them. Here's a typical story: Once a monk went to see Shitou. The monk had carefully prepared for all the challenges he could anticipate, but Shitou caught him off guard by crying "Alas! Alas!" as soon as he saw him. Unable to respond, the monk consulted Ma, who slyly suggested that the next time Shitou cried "Alas! Alas!" the monk should puff twice. The monk went back to see Shitou, but before he could say anything, Shitou puffed twice.

In middle age, Shitou settled down on South Mountain in Hunan province. At first he built a meditation hut on top of a large flat rock, which is where he got his name, Shitou, or Stone Head. When the Buddhist temple next door invited him to live there, he refused, preferring the independent life of a mountain recluse. "Better to drown at the bottom of the sea for eternity than to seek liberation by following the wise," he once remarked.

Shitou might have been a hermit, but he was a hermit in a lively neighborhood. South Mountain was one of the Five Holy Mountains of Chinese Buddhism and also the home of Taoist temples and a Confucian academy. Hundreds of recluses lived and practiced in the area, and Shitou also attracted many students over the years. Open-minded and curious, he was deeply influenced by Taoism and Huayan Buddhism, and the An Lushan Rebellion apparently only deepened his conviction that sectarianism causes nothing but suffering. He had seen where grand schemes and big ambitions could lead, and while differences

between people were natural, he taught, when we start attaching values to the differences, we open the door to heartache. “In the Way, there are no Northern or Southern ancestors,” he said; there are only ancestors common to us all. No red states and blue states, he would say today, just Kansas and California and Georgia, in all their complexity.

Mazu Daoyi was born in the far west of China near the border with Tibet, the son of the town garbage man. He began studying Chan when he was still young, and his studies eventually brought him to central China. For more than twenty years, during the time of the An Lushan Rebellion and its aftermath, Ma walked from one temple to another through the devastated countryside. Eventually he settled down in Jiangxi province, and his monastery became the great Chan training center of the age. Chan teachers usually take their name from the place they live and teach; Ma is the only one who is known by his family surname (Ma) and an honorific usually translated as Great Master (Zu).

Ma’s teaching style was direct, uncompromising, and often physical. It was clearly influenced by what he saw on his long walk through a devastated land. In those days, people came to the monasteries for a lot of reasons, from spiritual turmoil to the promise of steady food. But anyone who was looking for escape at Ma’s monastery was in for a shock. When he was once asked about the essence of his school, he replied, “Oh, it’s just the place where you let go of your body and your life.” That was quite a statement during a time when everyone knew people who had

lost both. From Ma's perspective, the situation was so urgent, and the need was so great, that there wasn't time for people to despair or lack confidence or run away. It's as if he were saying, "We need you to get clear right now about your own nature and the nature of life, so that you can roll up your sleeves and start doing something about it."

Shitou and his descendants tended to emphasize reconciliation and the restoration of peace and stability in times of chaos. Ma's line valued Chan's independence from the mainstream, which allowed it to offer both a critique of the status quo and an alternative to it. Neither thought he had the one true way or tried to impose his view on the other. Ma and Shitou had different temperaments and ways of teaching, but they shared something fundamental: both were deeply affected by the sorrows of their age, and as a result both were determined to reimagine what Chan was for.

Until then, Chan was largely an introspective meditation practice; you looked inward to find your true self. Huineng, for example, described meditation as "clearly seeing your original nature inside yourself." Shitou and Ma raised the eyes of Chan to the horizon. In Shitou's words, "What meets the eye is the Way." This true self you are looking for, they said, is not just here, in your own heart/mind, but everywhere. Everything you see is buddhanature; everything shines with that light. Everything you see is you—and this at a time when what you saw included blighted

fields, refugees starving by the roadside, deserted towns, parents mourning their children killed in the wars. There's something moving about the large and generous spirit of these two men who responded to the devastation around them by saying, This is all me. This is all you. They showed that the way to come to terms with life's pains is not by turning away from them but by moving deeper into life and encouraging as many others as possible to join you. They embraced the great matter of their time: What do we do now, we one in three who survive?

Before Ma and Shitou, formal Chan teaching had consisted largely of lectures given to groups of students. The heart of Shitou's and particularly Ma's teaching was something new: an intimate meeting of two people, either alone or in front of a group. Awakening, they saw, happens in relationship. We meditate together and talk together, we hear birds calling and cars laboring up a hill. We tend a feverish child and recite the words of the ancestors. As Ma and Shitou did with each other, we find a deep communion with someone we've never met.

We spend a lot of time in the company of our thoughts and feelings, and sometimes we are a companion to silence. Even a hermit sits in a web of connections with things visible and invisible. Our meditation is made not just of the vastness and the deep engine of concentration; it is also made of these relationships. And then one day, for no apparent reason, something in particular

comes to fetch us: the cook coughs or the morning star rises, and we fall open. A particular intimate meeting with a particular other opens us to an intimate relationship with life itself.

Practice is about making us fetchable. It helps us to recognize what gets in the way of our being fetched, and then it gives us a method to deconstruct the obstacle. Most people find this difficult to do on their own, and for Ma and Shitou, that's where the power of intimate meetings comes in.

The earliest koans are records of Ma's encounters with his students—encounters that could be mild, probing, or literally upending, but are never about winning an argument or making someone feel stupid. Over and over again—tirelessly, relentlessly—they are an invitation to freedom. In a time of crisis, talking about freedom or even modeling a free life wasn't enough; these intimate meetings allowed people to experience freedom for themselves.

When Shitou was helping his questioners recognize and dismantle what stood between them and freedom, he tended to ring variations on *Are you sure about that?* His method was to take nothing for granted and to question everything, especially someone's most cherished beliefs.

“What about liberation?” asked a monk.

“Who binds you?” countered Shitou.

“What about the Pure Land?”

“Who corrupts you?”

“What about nirvana?”

“Who keeps you in the cycle of birth and death?”

Ma, on the other hand, startled people out of their habitual thoughts and into another territory entirely, where the thoughts just didn't exist anymore—the method of a high-risk demolitions expert compared to Shitou's plank-by-plank approach. Once, when a questioner named Shuiliao asked Ma the meaning of Chan, Ma kicked him in the chest, knocking him down. This awakened Shuiliao, and he stood up grinning and clapping. Later he said, “Since the day Ma kicked me, I haven't stopped laughing.”

Neither Ma nor Shitou allowed his questioners to remain for a moment in the position of someone who doesn't get it. But they weren't interested in replacing that position with a better one: *I didn't used to get it, but now I do*. Their project was more radical: *What's it like to have no position at all?* Shitou would challenge his questioner's self-doubt, which is often the unacknowledged basis of a position.

Someone asked Shitou, “What am I supposed to do?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Where else can I find what I'm looking for?”

“Are you sure you lost it?”

Shitou's responses aren't dismissals; he really means what he's asking. Why do you assume that you need to ask me, and what's it like when you do? What is your deepest longing, and what if you realized that you already have what you long for?

In a similar way, Ma would challenge the assumption that if you don't understand something, that's a problem to be fixed. Someone once told Ma that he didn't understand one of Ma's famous sayings, that mind is Buddha. Ma replied, "The mind that doesn't understand is exactly it. There's nothing else."

When we think there's something wrong with not getting it, when the mind makes up commentaries about what it means not to get it—well, that's mind being Buddha, but it's usually hard to see it. To be wholeheartedly unsure, to sincerely take up a question like, *What does it mean that mind is Buddha, I wonder?* without veering off into commentary—that, Ma found, was a much more direct way for people to experience for themselves the mind that is Buddha.

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When we think there's something wrong with not getting it, when the mind makes up commentaries about what it means not to get it—well, that's mind being Buddha, but it's usually hard to see it.

But even that was sometimes too much chitchat for Ma's taste. When someone froze because they didn't know how to respond to his question, or tried to present the answer they thought displayed their accomplishment or would please him, Ma was likely to hit or kick or brusquely send them away. He'd put his hand over someone's mouth just as they were about to speak. He tweaked

noses and shouted so loud it deafened people for days. This style of teaching later became a menace and a cliché, but originally it arose from the urgency of the times.

Ma knew the power of our habits of bondage, and he also knew the power of being free of them, if only for a moment. He pulled the rug out with the hope of surprising us into free fall. The art critic Peter Schjeldahl once described the encounter with beauty in a way that Ma would entirely recognize: Beauty stops you in your tracks, so that it's suddenly impossible to continue in the direction that a moment before seemed inevitable. Something pleasurable or attractive (like replacing old, flawed positions with new and improved ones) enhances the feelings you already have (NOW I've got it). On the other hand, genuine beauty, like suddenly having no position at all, stops the flow of your feelings (*Nothing I thought applies anymore*), and when they resume they're moving in a different direction entirely.

Behind the shock tactics, Ma's perspective was deeply optimistic and encouraging. Right here and right now, he invited, find your footing as a realized human being. Meet me eye to eye, as an equal. Drop the notion that there's something to get. You already have it; let's see it. In the language of his descendent Linji, let us be true persons without rank together, and let us see what becomes possible when we do.

Once we've done some serious deconstruction and experienced falling freely, we have to do something with that experience. A monk who carefully observed Ma's method wrote about

the time Ma kicked Shuiliao in the chest: “Emptiness, that idle land, is shattered. The iron boat sails straight onto the Ocean of the Infinite.”

Even the purity of emptiness, in which nothing ever happens, has to be left behind. There is a boat to build and sail, a vast sea to navigate. There are refugees to feed and orphans to rear, art to rescue from the bonfire and songs to write so people won't forget. Ma was passionate that responding to our time is an essential part of realization. He once said that from the point of view of the bodhisattva, burying oneself in emptiness and not knowing how to get out is like suffering the torments of hell. As our hearts and minds open in meditation, it is actually painful not to open our hands as well. For Ma, hell wasn't the trouble he saw all around him; hell was turning away from it, trying to escape into a separate peace.

Why is it an unfloatable iron boat that we have to sail? In Chan, iron boats take their place next to flutes without holes and stone women who get up to dance, representing the moment-by-moment miracle that emptiness appears as all the things of the universe—as redwood trees and freeway overpasses and the dark matter we can't even see. We're participating in the same miracle when, having experienced the free fall of emptiness, we step back into the thick of life to turn our awakening into matter.

How do we do that? Well, Shitou and Ma didn't think it was by way of a practice that requires all kinds of special conditions to do it correctly. This may be the place where you lose your body

and your life, but there's nothing special about it, and certainly nothing that you can control through fear and fussiness. Ma maintained that "a person bathing in the great ocean uses all the waters that empty into it." We launch that iron boat by truly understanding that wherever we find ourselves, whatever we're faced with, that's the Way. There are no detours from the Way; we can't lose our Way. To engage and entangle ourselves with whomever and whatever we meet, to care about them, to throw our lot in with them—that is the Way. Every moment, every circumstance, is another chance to experience things as they are, rather than as we wish or fear them to be.

We turn the same warmth and curiosity toward our own heart/minds. Ma famously said that ordinary mind is the Way. We don't reject our own thoughts and feelings; even in a desperate time, the grieving, the rage, the flashes of bravery and generosity in ourselves and in others—all of that is the Way, too. Even, maybe especially, the mind that doesn't understand is exactly it. In our own time, anyone who claims to have an explanation for what's going on probably doesn't, whether it's from a political or metaphysical or conspiratorial or any other perspective. It's a good time to be asking questions, to appreciate the grounding of the ordinary mind in its impulses to make a warm breakfast on a cold day and to research what it would take to become carbon-neutral. In other words, there is a unity between our inner lives and the outer world, a continuum that only appears to be separated into pieces that are sometimes in conflict. Turn too far toward your

own heart/mind and you become self-obsessed; turn too far in the other direction and you burn out. Bring an attitude of warmth and curiosity to both and the Way begins to open on its own. This is what Ma called living a natural life according to the times. Be part of what's going on around you, and "just wear clothes, eat food, always uphold the way of the bodhisattva." We might chuckle and think, Oh sure, clothes, food, way of the bodhisattva—nothing to it, right? Just so, according to Shitou. "Your essential mind is absolutely still and completely whole, and its ability to respond to circumstances is limitless."

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Every moment, every circumstance, is another chance to experience things as they are, rather than as we wish or fear them to be.

This fundamental wholeness and responsiveness is what Ma urged people to experience for themselves; it's where Shitou invited us to rest. It's the freedom of having no position; there's no running around in circles waving our hands, no updating the inventories of everything that's missing, and no illusion that what we're capable of is determined solely by our will. Put all that down and things get big and alive. Our essential mind isn't bounded by our skull, and our capacity to respond isn't either. This aspect of realization also has everything to do with relationship: we feel

whole and at peace and able to respond because we know we're part of something very large. Remembering this even some of the time can make a huge difference; it can make us bold.

Many people feel that, at least as far as global warming is concerned, we're entering uncharted waters. As in Ma and Shitou's time, some of what we already know will continue to be helpful, a lot of it won't, and we'll often feel desperately inadequate to meet the work ahead of us. In eighth-century China, how did people get up every morning and pitch in, knowing that they wouldn't be able to feed the vast majority of starving people or restore most of the ravaged land? The kindly, implacable Ma told them to go out and "benefit what cannot be benefited, do what cannot be done." When they took his advice, his words became a kind of encouragement: Just because something is impossible, don't let that stop you. Put down your despair and your hope, begin from no position at all, and look for what becomes possible when you do.

I have two quotes over my desk, that one from Ma next to Eleanor Roosevelt's "Most of the work in the world is done by people who aren't feeling very well that day." These words encourage and console me, reminding me that doing what cannot be done gets done by people with all the ordinary human frailties. It gets done by us. For the times when we really get stuck and can't find a way through, Ma suggested that we make ourselves into a raft or a ferryboat for others. Neither Shitou nor Ma offered any detailed blueprints for constructing such a raft, because it would be different in every situation; there's no way to know ahead of time. But

when we're well and thoroughly stuck, if we help others to discover a way across, they'll bring us along. Eleanor Roosevelt's own life of service also turned out to be her way through a desperate personal unhappiness.

When all is said and done, how well did Shitou and Ma respond to their time? One of Ma's heirs said that his teacher taught him two crucial things: First, that each of us is already endowed with the treasure of everything we need. Our enlightenment is already here, as is our kindness and our curiosity and our courage. Second, each of us is free to use that treasure to respond to the life around us. Our freedom to fall willingly into the frightened, blasted, beautiful, tender world, just as it is, is already here. To know for ourselves that we have that treasure and that we're free to use it, no matter the circumstances—that, Ma's heir concluded, is a happy life. 🌸



In Accord with All Time

If you can know yourself as the unity of past, present, and future, says **Geoffrey Shugen Arnold**, then you see you're right where you ought to be.

Prajnatara: Transmission of the Light, Case 28

Main Case

The Buddhist master Punyamitra said to Prajnatara, “Do you remember events of the past?” Prajnatara said, “I remember in a distant eon I was living in the same place as you. You were expounding great wisdom, and I was reciting the most profound scripture. This event today is in conformity with past cause.”

Verse

The light of the moon reflected in the depths of the pond is bright in the sky.

*The water flowing to the horizon is thoroughly clear and pure.
Sifting and straining, over and over, even if you know it exists,
Boundless and clear, it turns out to be utterly ineffable.*

—from Keizan Jokin's *Transmission of the Light*,
translation by Thomas Cleary

Prajnatara was the teacher of Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen school. In addition to the notable role of being Bodhidharma's teacher, Prajnatara is also an interesting figure because there is some evidence that she was a woman. This possibility first came to my attention a number of years ago through a brief article by a successor of Jiyu Kennett Roshi, the founding abbess of Shasta Abbey. When Jiyu Kennett Roshi was training in Japan, her teacher, Koho Zenji, told her that there were female masters in their direct ancestral line. Years later, Jiyu Kennett asked one of her students to try to find them. His research led him to records within the Korean Zen lineage in which Prajnatara is remembered as being a woman, as well as to historical and oral traditions from Kerala in southern India, where Prajnatara lived and is remembered within local historical memory as being a woman. He also learned of archaeological discoveries in Kerala that confirm the presence of a well-known woman master around that time. All of these factors aligned to offer a convincing argument that although within most modern scholarship Prajnatara is assumed to be a man, this important teacher may have actually been a woman.

When I first found out about this, I wrote several Buddhist scholars. One dismissed the matter out of hand, but another said he had heard about this rumor and thought that it was entirely plausible. In fact, he allowed that there may be other female masters within the Zen lineage who have been mistakenly assumed to be male. In written Chinese, gender is inferred from context

rather than stated explicitly. So in the context of lineage within a male-dominated religious tradition and society, there would be an assumption that a master of this stature was male. Prajnatarā's female form may have been lost over time, buried beneath cultural assumptions.

Although historical records don't contain nearly as much information about female teachers as they do male teachers, we know there have been many realized women masters. There are sutras in which the Buddha states that there is no high or low in the dharma and in which he makes clear not only that the four groups in the sangha—male and female monastic, male and female lay—were all capable of realizing enlightenment but he also recognizes individuals from each of these groups as having achieved enlightenment during his lifetime. Although there are other sutras that seem to refute the capacity of women to realize themselves, some modern scholars believe these sutras were added later by conservative male disciples.

Whoever Prajnatarā was, whether male or female, certainly as Bodhidharma's teacher she holds a special place within our lineage. She is said to have been an orphan who lived on the streets and didn't even know her own name—a very good beginning for a Buddhist master. She made her living by begging, and one day she encountered Punyamitra. It seems she had a karmic connection with Punyamitra going back into past lives; he recognized her as a dharma vessel, and she eventually became his dharma heir. To escape the mayhem of the Hun invasions in northern India,

Prajnatara traveled to the southern part of the country. This is where she first encountered Bodhidharma's father, who was a king there, and then later met the son who would become her disciple. Just as her teacher had seen something special in her, she also recognized something in Bodhidharma.

In this koan, Prajnatara is asked by her teacher, "Do you remember events of the past?" She says, "I remember in a distant eon I was living in the same place as you. You were expounding a great wisdom and I was reciting a most profound scripture. This event is in accord with past cause." What is the question in this koan; what needs to be resolved? What does "in conformity with past cause" mean? This can be understood from Buddhism's perspective on karma, but the koan is asking for a deeper, more direct understanding.

"This event today is in conformity with past cause"—this is always the case. This is never not true. Our presence wherever we are is fully and utterly in accord with past causes. We didn't just suddenly get here by ourselves. We should reflect on the multitudes of past actions, just in this one brief flicker of a lifetime, that brought us to this moment. Prajnatara is reflecting in this way on eons past.

One of our cultural identities or myths is of the one who goes it alone and pulls herself up by her bootstraps—the rebel, the outlaw, the self-made person. What a lie. What an ingratitude. What a danger. We are each the recipient of innumerable currents of life—through the lives of others—streaming into and influencing

our own lives. How many thoughts and intentions, how many words and actions of others have influenced us to wonder about things or even led us to the dharma? How many acts of kindness or words of inquiry or concern have we received that helped lead us to this very moment? How is it that on this very day we can study these teachings, learn these practices, be tested in our understanding and be in intimate contact with a spiritual process that began over 2,500 years ago?

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Our presence wherever we are is fully and utterly in accord with past causes. We didn't just suddenly get here by ourselves. We should reflect on the multitudes of past actions, just in this one brief flicker of a lifetime, that brought us to this moment.

For many Western Buddhists, this koan presents a challenge: how are we to understand the Buddhist teachings on past lives and rebirth? We could just dismiss them out of hand because we have no personal evidence to verify them, but is it possible that we just don't recognize the evidence?

Does it make sense to deny something simply because we haven't experienced it as being true? How often do we come to discover things as true that we didn't know were true before? We rely on the observations or reflections of others—thinkers, scientists, explorers—to teach us truths even when we haven't experienced them directly.

Could we just decide to believe in rebirth with a kind of blind faith, simply because it's a Buddhist teaching? That tension between deep faith and direct experience challenges us to hold the deeper truths and greater mysteries that are not easy to understand or verify. Is there another way of holding something that we do not yet know to be true?

We do this all the time. We come into practice not knowing much about the dharma, not having verified it for ourselves. In the beginning, we may not even have experienced the truth of the suffering of attachment, but we take it on a measure of faith and begin practicing. We're constantly practicing with faith in that which we don't yet know to be true, even stretching sometimes to bring that faith forward. Through practice, we discover how to remain open, how to simply not know, and how to let go of our attachment to the certainty of yes or no.

Punyamitra asks Prajnatara to reflect on events from the past. Now, we do this a lot in ways that are habitual, obsessive, and utterly nonconstructive. We can become mired in memories of things that are long gone, continually giving them life and meanwhile missing our own life right here. But there's a different kind of reflection on the past that is in accord with practice: reflecting on the karmic streams, on how "this event today is in conformity with past cause." This is looking at the past to understand our conditioning and how all of those many actions—thoughts, words, deeds—moved us, moved others, and influenced the course of our lives. Each of us can think of pivotal moments—something that

happened, something we saw or read, something someone said—that stand out amid all the others. Sometimes we don't recognize it as pivotal until later; looking back, we realize its significance. This event here, today, is in accord with past cause.

This is why it is so important to understand how in every moment we are changing the course of our lives. In that sense, practice has been happening since we first gained active consciousness and were able to discriminate, understand, and think. Consider the first time you encountered death—that's a decisive moment in a person's life. It may come early in our lives, when a pet dies or we lose someone in our family. We realize something in that moment: this doesn't last forever.

The Buddha said that if we don't understand impermanence, we go through life blind; we don't know what we're in the midst of. Popular culture is all about living on the surface, but practice leads us beneath the surface and beyond the perceived levels of understanding and reality. It's easy to live on the surface—to talk and act, to provoke and inspire in a superficial way. We can think that's enough and have no idea what the possibilities are, what is slipping by, who we really are. But to have encountered the dharma means that we have dipped beneath the surface of things, that we have practiced cultivating enlightened qualities before we even know what that means. If this were not the case, we couldn't have encountered the dharma. We might have come across the teachings, but we would not have turned our attention toward

them. For this to happen, seeds had to have been planted and cultivated. Each of us can look at our own path to practice and see that this is true.

“ The Buddha said that if we don't understand impermanence, we go through life blind; we don't know what we're in the midst of. Popular culture is all about living on the surface, but practice leads us beneath the surface and beyond the perceived levels of understanding and reality.

In his teachings, Bodhidharma speaks about the six realms of existence as the terrain that we inhabit:

Those who blindly follow the precepts and foolishly seek happiness are born as gods in the realm of desire. Those who blindly observe the five precepts and foolishly indulge in love and hate are born as human beings in the realm of anger. And those who blindly cling to the phenomenal world, believe in false doctrines, and pray for blessings are born as demons in the realm of delusion.

In each of these, Bodhidharma speaks about practicing blindly. We can be practicing the precepts and do it without understanding ourselves or the precepts. We can be engaged in the world of love and hate and be led by selfish desires. We can be asking for and receiving blessings and be looking outside ourselves. He says

when our greed is greatest, we become hungry ghosts. When our anger is greatest, we enter into hell realms. And when our delusion is greatest, we become beasts reduced to desire-impulses.

We arrive in a realm of existence due to the strength of our karma. Karma is strengthened by the number of moments or days or years that we've devoted to creating certain desires and mental states, by the energy we've given to it and the degree to which we're caught in it. But that strength can also be a form of spiritual power. When we don't understand, then it's a blind power. We see how people use great power blindly and wreak great destruction all the time. But when we have opened the eye that sees without looking, understands without knowing, and trusts without expectations, that karmic power can be transformed into something that has liberative qualities.

What does this mean? When you find yourself in a difficult place, don't just look for an exit in panic but reflect on how this event right now is in conformity with past cause. We can study and understand how our life is being transformed in that very moment. Who names this place as a hell realm? Someone else might see it differently. Seeing into this, how do we leap free? This is the power that comes with understanding mind directly—not through analysis but through examination.

The wonderful thing about practice is that this ability to see into our mind and to shift is available to us at the very beginning, in the very first moment. That's how powerful we are. Keizan, the second founder of the Soto Zen school in Japan and author of *Transmission of the Light*, says, "Even if you seem to be a beginner,

if in a single moment the mind is turned around to reveal its originally inherent qualities, nothing is lacking at all; together with the realized ones, you will commune with the buddhas.” Since the very beginning, it is this way. Since the beginning and all the way through, nothing is lacking at all. Even in those challenging moments, in the presence of challenging people, sitting with that challenging mind, nothing is lacking. Whether the mind is realized or not, this is so.

This moment is always in complete and utter conformity with past cause. Daido Roshi often used to say, “What you do and what happens to you are the same thing.” I remember hearing that again and again and thinking, “Huh? What are you saying? How can that be?”

What is time? What is today? What is past? Through deep inquiry into this very moment, we can begin to have insight into how it is in accord with all time, all events. Time seems by nature to be dualistic, a witnessed measurement of something passing. What is time without the witness, without passing? How does that change our way of living during our days of time, people, and consequences? We’re all implicated, we’re all exerting our power, we’re all changing the world. The question becomes, how do we use this great power? What do we do with this human life? Realize your very being as all of time—past, present, and future—and the unity of cause and effect. What you do and what happens to you are the same.

My mother visited recently. She's always had a very active, creative life. But she's eighty-seven now and moving a little bit slower, and she spoke of being with the question, "What am I to be doing at this time in my life?" I said, "Maybe this time in your life is about not doing." But not doing can be frightening, perhaps particularly as we approach the end of our lives. From a distance, imagined in our mind, doing nothing might appear too still, too naked. But we should understand, while we're still in the midst of our doing, the profound nature of not-doing: that spiritual power, that kind of influence.

We need activity, but when we look at the state of our world, we can see how essential it is that there be those who know how to stop for a moment, for a day, for a week—how to stop within every moment, how to realize the stillness in activity. Then in arriving, no one comes. Then in living this life, no one is born. Then in facing our death, no one will be extinguished. In facing suffering, fundamentally there's not a single thing. From this place, move amid the many things and intermingle.

*The light of the moon reflected in the depths of the pond is
bright in the sky.*

The water flowing to the horizon is thoroughly clear and pure.

These images and their qualities describe our basic nature, our potential: the radiant moon, the deep pond, the night sky, the fluid, clear, pure water. These are the unknowable, undefinable qualities we each possess.

*Sifting and straining over and over, even if you know it exists,
boundless and clear, it turns out to be utterly ineffable.*

Even if we know it exists—that we are naturally endowed with enlightened nature—we sit on this cushion having faith. We face our mind in trust. We hear the teachings and somehow, inexplicably, we know they're true.

Bodhidharma says, “Do not use your mind to seek mind. Do not look for something.” As Daido Roshi used to say, “It’s not like anything.” Trust deeply, let go deeply. Do you remember how you got here? Do you know how to move forward? You know enough. Practice this. 🌸



Zazen Is Not Limited to the Mind

In the practice of shikantaza, or “just sitting,” says **Josh Bartok**, there’s a lot more going on than one might think.

CONTRARY TO POPULAR understanding, zazen is not a practice of mind. It is not just a thing you do with your mind, even if the thing you’re doing is attending or concentrating. It includes the mind but is not limited to it. In American culture, people tend to identify themselves with the arisings and goings-on of their minds, but zazen is not overly concerned with such things. Zazen also includes the breath and body; even so, we don’t exactly apply the mind to the breath, nor do we focus specifically on bodily sensations. Rather, zazen is simply sitting in presence to breath, sitting in presence to mind, sitting in presence to body. Zazen is body, breath, and mind harmoniously “zazening.” Body, breath, and mind are in fact one thing. Or, more accurately, body-breath-mind is actually body-breath-mind-universe. As Dogen Zenji, the Japanese founder of the Soto Zen sect, wrote in *Shobogenzo Yuibutsu-yobutsu* (“Only Buddha and Buddha”), “The entire universe is the true human body...The entire universe is the dharma body of the self.”

In the lineage in which I teach, as in many others, the tradition is to encourage people who are new to zazen to begin by counting the breath. There are two common methods. One way is to breathe in, counting silently “one,” then breathe out, counting silently “two,” in “three,” out “four,” and so on up to ten, before starting again at one. The other way is to breathe in silently, without counting, and then silently counting “one” on the out-breath, breathing in with no count, then counting “two” on the out-breath, and so on up to ten. It doesn’t matter whether or not you get to ten. It doesn’t even matter if you get to two. The power of breath practice, the utility of the practice, is in beginning to familiarize yourself with the capacity for actively chosen presence—and also in getting to know the vast category of things Buddhists call “mental formations,” and the even vaster category of things we call “arising phenomena.” The value of breath practice is not in staying but in noticing when we’re engaged in any activity other than just touching body-breath-mind and counting. When we see that’s happened, we simply return. We come back to the arbitrary anchors of the breath and “one.”

This cultivates the capacity in our off-the-cushion lives to engage, with the power of intention and choice, with whatever arises. When fear arises, we don’t have to hide in fear. When sadness and grief arise, we don’t have to shrink from them or cover them over with anger. And when anger arises, we don’t need to lash out. Instead, we can choose to remain present and take

action in alignment with our highest values. Zen practice offers us some suggestions for such actions in the form of the four bodhisattva vows and the sixteen bodhisattva precepts.

Though we initially rely on the scaffolding of counting the breath, we can also gradually begin to dismantle that scaffolding. There are several different approaches to practice, and none is any more advanced than another. They are simply different, and differently valuable at different times. To dismantle the scaffolding of counting, we begin to practice just following the breath without attaching a number, bringing our full attention to the physicality of breathing. When we notice our minds doing something other than being with the physicality of breathing, we desist from adding fuel onto that fire of doing. We unhook from it and bring our attention back to embodied breath.

We don't try to control the breath. We're not trying to force ourselves to have slow breaths or long breaths. Rather, we simply release some of the tension from the upper chest and let our breath fall down into the diaphragm. As we allow the breath to come and go, the belly naturally rises and falls.

Ordinarily, we locate our consciousness in the center of our head, behind the eyes, and we attend to our breath from there. But in zazen, we breathe from the hara—a spot about three fingers below the navel—and hold our center of attention in that place. It can be helpful to imagine pulling the single point of awareness that seems to be located in the center of the head down into the hara, and attending from there. When the mind moves, the

attending tends to pop right back up to head. When we notice this has happened, we can imagine taking hold of it inwardly, bringing it back down, and commencing to breathe from the hara. It might be helpful to imagine a plunger descending on the head, a piston pushing gently down.

It's important to understand all of these images are simply tools, useful contrivances, scaffolding for the practice of just following the breath, being the breath. Moreover, in all forms of breath practice, whether counting the breath or following the breath, we engage in a preference for breath as the object of mind. Whenever we notice the object of mind is not the breath, we replace it with the breath. This is a powerful, liberating practice.

“

Shikantaza is not accomplished by you; it is accomplished by the entirety of the universe inclusive of you.

All of these scaffolding elements—preferring the breath, counting, following, holding the hara, depressing the piston, replacing the object of mind—are effortful strivings and, as such, at some point they may start to feel contrived, like too much doing. When we start to notice that dissonance, there's another practice we can move into called shikantaza, or “just sitting.”

Ultimately, shikantaza is absolute, radically nondual non-doing. It's relying on no contrivance. Unlike breath practice, shikantaza does not prefer one object of mind over another. Like

breath practice, it is still done with this one thing that is body-breath-mind-universe. We might say, “The entire universe of the true human breath, the entire universe, is the dharma body of the self.” In beginning shikantaza, we may find ourselves relying on the scaffolding of subtle strivings. At some point we may use less scaffolding, and at some point we may use none at all. Even within shikantaza, it isn’t the case that some version is “more advanced” than another version. Having no scaffolding is not inherently better than having a little. One subtle form available to us in shikantaza is discerning when the mind is engaged in the fires of doing, then desisting from adding more fuel. This is still an active thing we do. What differentiates shikantaza from breath practice is that we do not engage in the doing of bringing attention specifically to the breath; we do not enact a preference for breath as object of mind. We simply desist and carry on sitting with breath-body-mind-universe as the true dharma body of the self.

Another piece of scaffolding within shikantaza is the intimate, inward gesture of turning toward whatever is arising right here, toward what the universe is doing right now. This is the true human heart of body-breath-mind-universe. This turning toward is so small as to be almost nothing, but it is not nothing. A line from Shakespeare’s *King Henry V* captures both the smallness of this gesture and its power: “A very little little let us do, and all is done.”

Shikantaza is not nothing. Shikantaza is not a practice of just watching thoughts, though a mind-moment may arise in which one is aware of mental formations. Shikantaza is not practice of just spacing out, though a mind-moment may arise that has the content of “I have just been spacing out.” These mind-moments are neither themselves the practice of shikantaza nor do they negate or break shikantaza.

Dogen refers to the practice of shikantaza as being “unstained.” He tells us, “To be unstained does not mean that you try forcefully to exclude intention or discrimination, or that you establish a state of non-intention.” Touching on the radically nondual and non-do-able nature of the practice shows us, in fact, that “Being unstained cannot be intended or discriminated at all.”

In shikantaza, we use body-breath-mind-universe to receive the entirety of body-breath-mind-universe. But don't imagine this is accomplished by “you” alone, and don't imagine it is accomplished by “mind” alone. This receiving is only ever accomplished with body, breath, mind, and universe together. We might also call it entrusting: entrusting the body-breath-mind-and-universe of this moment to this moment of body-breath-mind-and-universe, right here. This receiving and entrusting are also subtle scaffoldings.

Sometimes what we receive takes the form of understanding; sometimes what we receive takes the form of no-understanding. Regarding this, Dogen tell us, “When you understand, a moment of

no-understanding does not come and hinder understanding, and understanding does not break no-understanding. Instead, understanding and no-understanding are just like spring and autumn.” In one moment of body-breath-mind-universe, it is spring, and understanding bursts forth. In another moment of body-breath-mind-and-universe, it is autumn, and understanding falls away.

“ To practice in free fall in this way is to practice becoming comfortable with not-knowing, comfortable with uncertainty, comfortable with discomfort, with doubt, with our raging minds.

Another piece of the scaffolding in shikantaza is expressed in “Affirming Faith in Mind” (or “The Heart of True Entrusting”), a poem by Jianzhi Sengcan, the second ancestor of Zen in China: “Immediately affirm not-two.” Whatever arises—whatever story of mind gone away, mind come back, focused, not focused, confused, not confused—immediately affirm not-two. Self/other, awake/asleep, vivid/dull, enlightened/deluded, good zazen/bad zazen, doing/not doing, present/absent—immediately affirm not-two. But make no mistake, this affirming not-two is not verbal. It is not necessarily even mental. It is the simple fact of the matter. With body-breath-mind-universe, immediately affirm not-two.

The phrase rendered as “just sitting” can also be stated as “simply getting on with sitting,” which is Dogen’s continual message. Shikantaza is not a thing you can *do*; nonetheless, right now, get on with doing it. Or rather, precisely because shikantaza is not a thing you can do, get on with doing it. Shikantaza does not accomplish anything, and so we sit in affirmation of that truth. Shikantaza cannot be done by your small mind and small intentions alone, but get on with doing it.

In shikantaza, we receive everything that arises into one category: stuff that arises. There aren’t two categories. There isn’t good stuff and bad stuff. There isn’t stuff we’re trying to have and stuff we’re trying not to have. There isn’t breath and body and sensations and traffic. It’s all just stuff that arises. Shikantaza is the embodied receiving of all that stuff into one category. It’s worth noting the recursive quality of this. Receiving is itself just another category of stuff that arises. And receiving everything that arises into the one category is another form of immediately affirming not-two.

One form shikantaza takes is releasing even the contrivances of *receiving* and the scaffolding of *turning toward*, of *immediately affirming not-two*. This is stepping off the cliff of the known, of the doable, of all certainties and entering the free fall of just sitting with this one thing that is body-breath-mind-universe. Shikantaza is not accomplished by you; it is only accomplished by the

entirety of the universe inclusive of you. Practicing in this free fall of shikantaza lets us engage with the subtle mental formations of *willing, intending, striving, and knowing*.

In this free fall, we may try to grab on to some form of certainty to stop our fall, like Wile E. Coyote grabbing on to a branch as he falls off a cliff. Inevitably, that branch will break. In shikantaza we simply see the impulse to grab, without buying into the story of grabbing or the story of needing to stop our fall, of needing to apply an antidote to what we're experiencing. To practice in free fall in this way is to practice becoming comfortable with not-knowing, comfortable with uncertainty, comfortable with discomfort, with doubt, with our raging minds. But make no mistake: this comfort isn't some limited state of mind. It's not some other state of mind.

Just this—always and inevitably—is it. And so we just get on with sitting. ❁



Notes on Dogen's *Being-Time*

It's natural to assume that practice comes first, and realization after, but Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen in Japan, said otherwise. **Shinshu Roberts** explains.

The title of *Uji*, translated as “Being-Time,” essentially contains the totality of the text. Unpacking the meaning of this hyphenated word opens a vast interconnecting vista of practice. The two characters *u-ji* are usually translated as *arutoki* or “for the time being.” Dogen separates the two characters (*u* meaning being, and *ji* meaning time) and reassembles them as the one word *uji*, often translated in English as being-time or existence-time. As Hee-Jin Kim writes:

Dogen...transforms such an everyday phrase as *arutoki* (“at a certain time,” “sometimes,” “there is a time,” “once”) into one of the most important notions in his Zen—*uji* (“existence-time”). This metamorphosis is executed by way of changing its two components—the *aru* and the *toki*—into *u* (“existence,” “being”) and *ji* (“time,” “occasion”), respectively, and recombining them as *uji* so that it unmistakably signals the nondual intimacy of existence and time.

—Dogen on Meditation and Thinking: A Reflection on his View of Zen

This new word *uji* becomes a shorthand for bundling all aspects of reality into one word/thought: being–time. Being–time embraces many of the key teachings found in Dogen’s writing. Among several words or phrases found in *Uji* that express these teachings are dharma position (*ju-hoi*): the fully embodied totality of myriad things/beings as a moment of being–time; continuous practice (*gyoji*): the completely realized activity and effort of each being’s time as all being–time; fully expressing the Way (*dotoku*): the enlightened expression of practice realization; manifesting ultimate reality (*genjokoan*): the totality of the actualization of the fundamental point; penetrating exhaustively (*gujin*): complete expression of a moment; practice–realization (*shojo no shu*); this very mind is Buddha (*sokushin zebutsu*); and buddha–nature (*bussho*): the totality of life’s activity, among others. Dogen’s descriptions of practice, expression, mind, and reality are also designations of actualized being–time. These words are a rich mosaic illuminating our being–time, each aimed at helping us find deep awakening as we express our rich, intimate life.

An old Buddha said:

For the time being, I stand astride the highest mountain peaks.

For the time being, I move on the deepest depths of the ocean floor.

For the time being, I’m three heads and eight arms.

For the time being, I’m eight feet or sixteen feet.

For the time being, I’m a staff or a whisk.

For the time being, I’m a pillar or a lantern.

For the time being, I’m Mr. Chang or Mr. Li.

For the time being, I’m the great earth and heavens above.

—translation by Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, *The Heart of Dogen’s Shobogenzo*

Uji begins with four couplets introducing the meaning of the text. The first two lines are attributed to Zen master Yaoshan Wei-yen, from a text called the *Jingde chuandeng lu* (“Jingde Era Record of the Transmission of the Lamp”), a series of stories about Zen masters compiled in 1004 by Daoyuan. The rest are thought to be Dogen’s own composition.

There are two important elements in these opening verses: the repeated phrase “for the time being” and the unique moments, things, or events that it modifies. The individual moments, things, or events are called *ju-hoi* or “dharma positions.” A dharma position is a singular moment, state of being, or occurrence that has no fixed duration and about which we intuitively understand something of its particularity. Standing on the highest mountain peak, moving along the ocean floor, being a wrathful deity with three heads and eight arms or a golden buddha of eight or sixteen feet, a staff, a whisk, a pillar, a lantern, Mr. Chang, Mr. Li, the great earth, and the heavens above are all dharma positions.

In short, the four couplets opening the text depict unique particular situations that are illustrative of being-time’s totality. Dogen’s examples and their metaphoric meaning encompass reality as both particular and universal.

The translations of *uji* as “for the time being,” “sometimes,” “at a certain time,” or “once” can be read as a kind of throwaway line, especially in English. Our tendency may be to skip over these

words and move on to what seems to be the meat of each sentence. But for Dogen, “for the time being” is the whole basis for his discussion of time’s relationship to being.

In conventional use, “for the time being” seems to indicate a specifically limited demarcation of time, as in “at the moment” or “just for now.” Dogen’s use of the phrase, however, has a deeper meaning than “at this time.” Reading the two characters that comprise the phrase as the compound term *uji*, rather than as an idiomatic phrase, yields the more universal reading “being–time.” Grammatically, the characters *u* and *ji* do not indicate singular or plural. We can read the compound “being–time” to mean either a being’s time, a time’s being, or all being–time. Understanding the multiplicity of meanings within the phrase “for the time being” reveals new depths in Dogen’s opening lines. For Dogen, “for the time being” encompasses all states of being–time. Rereading the opening of *Uji* in light of this understanding, we find several meanings within each situation: “a particular time-being stands on the highest mountain peak,” “the time when one stands on the highest mountain peak,” “all being(s)-time(s) stand on the highest peak,” or “all time’s being and/or all beings’ time is now standing on the highest peak.” We can read the remaining lines in the same ways. No single thing and no moment of time is left out of this very moment of being–time.

Dharma Position as All Being-Time

We can't really penetrate what Dogen means by being-time if we don't understand the unique particular moments, things, or events called dharma positions or dharma stages. A dharma position, understood as a unique independent moment, also has multiple aspects, which, when taken together, are being-time. Without understanding the encompassing nature of a dharma position as a being-time and all being-time, we mistakenly experience unique particular moments like the Buddhist parable of the blind men examining an elephant. One man said the ears were like a basket, another said the tusk was a plow's blade, and a third thought the foot to be a pillar—you get the idea. Since the examiners were blind, not one of them was able to see the whole of the elephant, so they grasped what they could and compared it to something they already knew, not understanding that each thing they touched was a part of a larger unseen whole.

A dharma position is a moment, thing, or event of being-time that is also definable as transitive and impermanent. A person is a dharma position. Since nothing ever stays the same and all things are in flux due to their interactive, interpenetrating nature, it would be folly to say that a dharma position or a moment of being-time begins here and ends there. Dharma positions are not finite in this sense, nor are they sequential way stations along a continuum of past, present, and future. Although Dogen does not deny the conventional, everyday sense of time as a horizontal line of sequential events that we experience as past, present, and

future, in Uji Dogen is concerned with the nondual nature of time and being as expressed in the presencing moment. From the point of view of practice, a linear view of time can impede realization.

A dharma position has a past, present, and future, but it is freed from being defined by that past, present, or future. Each dharma position is particular and independent. We are aware of past experience and future desires when actualizing our enlightened mind, but such ideas do not obstruct our ability to respond fully to the totality of each situation as it is. This nonobstructive awareness is important because the independent nature of a dharma position allows us to choose how we will respond to them. We are not caught up in some fatalistic, predetermined course of action. Dogen writes in *Hotsu-Bodaishin* (“Establishment of the Bodhi-Mind”):

In general, establishment of the mind and attainment of the truth rely upon the instantaneous arising and vanishing of all things. If [all things] did not arise and vanish instantaneously, bad done in the previous instant could not depart. If bad done in the previous instant had not yet departed, good in the next instant could not be realized in the present.

—translation by Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross, *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*

From the perspective of nonduality, past, present, and future are present in this moment, yet at the same time each moment must have the freedom to express its individual flavor. In the example

above, Dogen is describing how we are not trapped by unskillful behavior. This “instantaneous arising and vanishing” is the dharma position as fluid and all-inclusive.

At the same time, it is an independent dharma position. Dogen famously expresses this idea in the *Genjokoan* (“Manifesting Suchness”), where he writes about the nature of firewood:

Firewood becomes ash; it can never go back to being firewood. Nevertheless, we should not take the view that ash is its future and the firewood is its past. Remember, firewood abides in the place of firewood in the Dharma. It has a past and it has a future. Although it has a past and a future, the past and the future are cut off. Ash exists in the place of ash in the Dharma. It has a past and it has a future.

—translation by Nishijima and Cross, *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*

Here we have what appear to be two opposing ideas: the future of firewood is ash and the past of ash is firewood, and yet the past and future of firewood and ash are cut off from what seems like their natural progression. Each statement is equally true and important to our understanding of a dharma position or a being-time. We do have a past and future, but we are not bound by a fossilized past or future. We use our past experiences and future desires as tools for discernment. If we can engage with the present moment in this way, we are freed to respond to this moment unobstructed by motivations that might hinder a skillful response.

A dharma position holds all being–time—a being’s time and time’s being—in this very moment. This is the complete nonduality of things, existence, and time. A particular being–time expresses two states. First, there is the universal state of all being–time. This is the inclusive nature of everything taken as a whole. Second, a being’s time is a particular event, person, or thing, which is expressed as an independent dharma position. Simultaneously, a dharma position is both universal being–time and a particular being–time. Everything is present at the same time without hindering the universal and particular nature of any other. This is also true of time’s-being.

“Dogen does not deny the conventional, everyday sense of time as a horizontal line of sequential events that we experience as past, present, and future, but from the point of view of practice, a linear view of time can impede realization.

When we include everything in our understanding, we are more cognizant of the intrinsic value of each thing, and we are more aware of the place each being or event has in relationship to us. We don’t exclude anything, recognizing that everything is already present. Accepting things as they are is predicated upon knowing that the present includes all those things we want and those things we don’t want. We cannot reject anything merely

because it causes us discomfort or does not fit our idea of how it should be. Our suffering arises from this overlay of likes and dislikes, but truthfully there is nothing obstructing the fully realized moment because nothing is excluded and all things arise simultaneously.

Furthermore, everything interpenetrates everything else and is all other beings and times, within a particular dharma position. This idea is articulated in the Huayan phrase “to know one thing is to know all things.” If you understand this foundational truth about a thing’s essential nature, you will also understand the basic truth of all things. Our interconnecting, interpenetrating, unobstructed nature is the basis for intelligent empathy resulting in compassionate and wise action.

Since a dharma position is interconnecting, interpenetrating, impermanent, and fleeting, it functions within the context of all other dharma positions. In concert, these dharmas practice together and make the world. From this perspective Dogen writes in *Zenki* (“All Functions”) “life is what I am making it, and I am what life is making me...life is the self and self is life.” Lest we get too anthropocentric in our views, he also writes in *Uji* “each grass and each form itself is the entire earth...each moment is all being, is the entire world” (Nishijima and Cross).

Included in each moment is the entire world and the individual being-time-ness of each being making the world. Dogen calls this all-inclusive activity *gyoji*, or continuous practice. Continuous practice is the practice-realization of the Buddhist ancestors,

and it also includes the continuous practice of all other beings: trees, rocks, insects, etc. It is the wholehearted effort and total presencing of each being in the ten directions within the context of each dharma position or being-time. Dogen writes in *Gyoji* (“Continuous Practice”):

The working of this activity-unremitting upholds the self and the other. Its import is such that through one’s activity-unremitting the entire earth as well as the whole heaven of the ten directions share in its working. Even if others are unaware of it, and you may be unaware of it, that is the way it is.

—translation by Kim, *Flowers of Emptiness: Selections from Dogen’s Shobogenzo*

When does this practice happen? It happens within a particular dharma position as one, all, and everything as it is right now. As Dogen writes in *Gyoji*, “The time when continuous practice is manifested is what we call ‘now’” (Francis Dojun Cook, *How to Raise an Ox: Zen Practice as Taught in Master Dogen’s Shobogenzo*).

Line-by-Line Reading

Again, the opening verses are presentations of being-time as dharma positions. The occasion of the verses themselves are being-time. They are the being-time of Dogen, Yaoshan, the reader, and all beings. As soon as we read these words, the connection comes forward:

*For the time being, I stand astride the highest mountain peaks.
For the time being, I move on the deepest depths of the ocean floor.*

The top of Mount Everest as the world's highest peak and the deepest point of the ocean in the Mariana Trench seem very far apart. Since the verses are written in couplets, it is understandable that we would interpret them as being in opposition to and separate from each other. They seem to be linear in time and position, an idea further strengthened by the phrase “for the time being,” as if this were just a temporary state, definable in a dualistic scheme.

Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of being-time, although they may appear to be different, they are not. Perhaps we think the highest peak is some rarefied place and the deepest ocean is mysterious and unknowable, but both of these states are within the realm of our experience. Nothing is left out. The mountains are our world, and the oceans are our world. When we stand on the highest peak, it is just this moment, and when we stand on the ocean floor, it is just this moment.

Dogen associates both dharma positions with realization. He writes in *Kai-in-zanmai* (“Ocean Seal Samadhi”):

Encountering the buddha face...is nothing other than fully recognizing myriad things as myriad things. Because myriad things are all-inclusive, you do not merely stand atop the highest peak or travel along the bottom of the deepest ocean. Being all-inclusive is just like this; letting go is just like this.

—translation by Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*

Both the mountain peak and the ocean floor are the territory of realization. “The buddha face” is our life seeing the true nature of “myriad things.” Even if you are on the mountaintop or at the bottom of the ocean, the myriad things, times, beings, and events are never absent in your present now. Actualizing this place includes the peak and the ocean floor, and at the same time it has the independent nature of making oneself present for the “right now” of either state without holding on to anything.

For the time being, I'm three heads and eight arms.

For the time being, I'm eight feet or sixteen feet.

We again seem to have two ends of the spectrum. There is the being with three heads and eight arms: the demon of delusion. Opposed to this image is the golden body of the buddha, often described as sixteen feet or eight feet tall. If we look more closely at Dogen's teaching on these two apparent opposites, we find that he writes later in Uji:

So even that three-headed, eight-armed creature makes a passage as my being-time. Although it might seem as if it were somewhere else far away, it is the time right now. The sixteen-foot Buddha-body also makes a passage as my being-time. Although it might seem as if it were somewhere else over there, it is the time right now.

The “right now” of our experience holds both realization and delusion. From the perspective of nonduality, both must be included in our understanding. When we are responding with our buddha-mind, where does the demon mind go? When we are responding with delusion, where does our realized mind go? Or we could ask, “when we respond skillfully to a situation, where does our selfish mind go, and when we respond unskillfully, where does our compassionate mind go?” Both are present, although we generally experience either one or the other.

“

Accepting things as they are is predicated upon knowing that the present includes all those things we want and those things we don't want. We cannot reject anything merely because it causes us discomfort or does not fit our idea of how it should be.

Hee-Jin Kim writes, “The relationship between delusion and enlightenment is such that one is not the simple negation or absence of the other, nor does one precede or succeed the other.” If both were not present, we could not respond so readily with one or the other. One aspect comes forth and the other aspect is hidden, yet both are still part of the other's appearance. The world of myriad things is all of being-time fully presencing itself. This world has no labels, although there is delusion and enlightenment.

We should not say, “Oh, I’m enlightened, so everything I do is okay.” Nor should we say, “Oh, I’m so unskillful, I will never be compassionate or wise.”

When we realize the nondual nature of a dharma position or particular being–time, we can include everything and avoid getting caught in a constricting story about our current situation. Making up a defining story line takes us further away from the true state of our experience. For example, we may find ourselves wanting to deny our own unskillfulness (the three-headed demon) because it doesn’t fit our idea of a Buddhist practitioner. Denying our difficulties will only draw them forward, often when we least expect or want them to arise.

It is only when we accept and investigate our experience as flawed human beings that we begin to exhibit wisdom and recognize the totality of our life.

Dogen writes in *Sesshin Sessho* (“Speaking of Mind, Speaking of Essence”):

From the time we establish the bodhi-mind and direct ourselves toward training in the way of Buddha, we sincerely practice difficult practices; and at that time, though we keep practicing, in a hundred efforts we never hit the target once. Nevertheless, sometimes following good counselors and sometime following the sutras, we gradually become able to hit the target. One hit of the target now is by virtue of hundreds of misses in the past; it is one maturation of hundreds of misses.

—translation by Nishijima and Cross, *Master Dogen’s Shobogenzo*

We will never hit the target if we refuse to realize that our arrows are missing. Missing the target is not about being a good or a bad person; it is just our sincere effort to hit the target of skillful means. Our human life, the arrow, and the target are not different. Missing and hitting are not opposites, as long as we are sincerely present for our life as it unfolds within the being-time of self and others practicing together. Including both is the key concept here. If we only think of this moment as a reflection of our individual needs, then we miss the mark. We must include the totality of both self and other, then act in accord. This is the basis of sincerely shooting the arrow. In this way, our ideas about having three heads and eight arms or standing sixteen feet tall will not obstruct our actualization of the Way.

For the time being, I'm a staff or a whisk.

For the time being, I'm a pillar or a lantern.

The staff and whisk are symbols or tools of the realized teacher. The outdoor pillar and stone lantern represent the monastic structure and garden, respectively. Pillars and lanterns are a metaphor for monastic training. These objects point to our spiritual training or the path we follow in order to actualize our understanding. The everyday interpretation would be that “at a certain time” we are a teacher and “at a certain time” we are students. In this way of thinking, “for the time being” I am this or that. But being-time is larger than our definition of our experience and our quantification of spiritual progress. At the time

of being a student, the teacher is already present. At the time of being a teacher, the student is also present. There is the dharma position of student and the dharma position of teacher, distinct states, but simultaneously present within each other's position. The key to skillful response is seeing and acting from the appropriate position.

“ We are not waiting for realization to arrive, as it is manifest in the now of being-time. Being fully present ourselves, here and now, in company with others, is realization.

Dogen writes extensively about equating the four objects—a staff, a whisk, an outdoor pillar, and a stone lantern—with realization. The staff, whisk, outdoor pillar, and stone lantern may be understood in the same dynamic relationship as Dogen's well-known paring of practice-realization (*shusho-itto*). Conventionally, we understand practice as the stone lantern and outdoor pillar and realization as the whisk and staff; we think of practice as before and realization as after. In truth, realization is fully expressed in practice. Even as we endeavor to learn practice, we are exhibiting the mind of realization. Our efforts to understand and enact realization are driven by realization. In this way, the

pillar and lantern do not represent steps along the path to attainment of the whisk and staff but are already fully engaged with actualizing the Way.

On one hand there is practice, as expressed in the above quotation, about shooting an arrow at a target. On the other hand there is realization—hitting the target. But when we look at the totality of the activity of making the effort to hit the target or enact realization, this can only come from the mind of realization. It is realization, fully present, that is the foundation of our sincere effort. Dogen expresses this when he writes in *Bendowa* (“Wholehearted Practice of the Way”):

To suppose that practice and realization are not one is nothing but a heretical view; in buddha-dharma they are inseparable. Because practice of the present moment is practice-realization, the practice of beginner’s mind is in itself the entire original realization. Therefore, when we give instructions for practicing we say that you should not have any expectation for realization outside of practice, since this is the immediate original realization. Because this is the realization of practice, there is no boundary in the realization. Because this is the practice of realization, there is no beginning in practice.

—translation by Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*

We are not waiting for realization to arrive, as it is manifest in the now of being-time. Being fully present ourselves, here and now, in company with others, is realization. The whisk-staff representing realization and the pillar-lantern representing dharma training are not so far apart.

They are all speaking the truth of realization as it is actualized in practice. This practice is in and of itself realization.

For the time being, I'm Mr. Chang or Mr. Li.

For the time being, I'm the great earth and heavens above.

“Mr. Chang or Mr. Li” is the same as saying “every Tom, Dick, or Harry” in English. Yet, as common as we are, when we look into the night sky, do we also recall that we too are made of stars? The true nature of our life is that we are not separate, we inter-are (as the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh would say). We know from scientific study that the carbon from the Big Bang is also in us and in all things. We know from observation that in this very moment we are dependent upon heaven, earth, and everything in between for our very life. We cannot live without air and water. We are dependent upon and enmeshed with all beings for all time, at this moment. Yet we persist in thinking there is a disconnect between ourselves and others. What a trick our senses play on us! This great life of the cosmos is just the everyday life of the common person.

Practicing with Being-Time

The verses opening this fascicle present particular dharma positions, being-times, or individual moments. These moments are examples of particular events: standing on a mountain, holding a whisk, viewing the temple pillars, or being an ordinary person. None of these situations obstructs the complete expression

of the other examples given. Each situation is an opportunity to fully enact our being-time, as it is right now. If our worldview is a being-time that entertains all possibilities, this enables us to let go of our attachment to any particular ideas about our situation and thereby actualize the totality of the moment. Our being-time's moment must include all being(s)-time(s). When this inclusivity is actualized, we are fully present with whatever is happening in its totality and we respond. This response is unobstructed. It alleviates suffering.

I am walking on the sidewalk; next to me is a bike lane in the street. Approaching me on the sidewalk is a person on a bicycle. Without thinking and without judgment, I step into the bike path and let the bicyclist pass me on the sidewalk. My response is immediate and without thought. I don't feel angry or have some idea of how it is supposed to be. I just respond to what is, at that moment. There is the being-time of a bicycle and the being-time of a person walking. Each is a particular manifestation of two being-times sharing and expressing their mutual, unique, fully realized being-times as one being-time. ❁

From *Being-Time: A Practitioner's Guide to Dogen's Shobogenzo Uji*,
by Shinshu Roberts (Wisdom 2018)



What If Our Ordinary Experience is All That Matters?

When he was training as a Seon monk in Korea, **Stephen Batchelor** was taught to practice with the question “What is this?” The answer, he says, is right in front of you.

EACH TIME I sit down on a cushion and pay attention to what is happening, I find myself utterly incapable of putting whatever it is I’m experiencing into words. There’s something about the practice of meditation, be it Seon or any exercise in which we are asked just to pay attention to what is happening, in which we find ourselves confronted with what philosophers call the sheer facticity of our existence.

This is the inescapable fact of being this being that I am.

When I look inside, or say to myself, “I’m looking inside,” whatever that might mean, I seem to hit up against something that is intimately present to me but impossible to define. It always strikes me in the first instance as a particular sensation in the body, in the chest or stomach somewhere. It depends. I was reminded a few days ago of a passage by William James, who said:

[I]t maybe truly said that...the “Self of selves,” when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat...[I]t would follow that our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked.

Anyone who has spent time doing such introspection, whether in meditation or just out of curiosity about who you are, can probably recognize what James was on about. It’s curious that in pursuing such “deep” questions about the nature of who I am, in the end, if I’m utterly honest with myself, what presents itself is a completely banal physical sensation.

Some years ago I spent a couple of days in Nagi Gompa, a nunnery up in the hills above Kathmandu in Nepal, where I went to study Dzogchen with a teacher called Urgyen Tulku. From him I received the “pointing-out instruction” in which the teacher points out to you the nature of your mind, or—even more than that—the nature of *rigpa*, a primordial, pristine awareness that is more than your ordinary, everyday mind. But the problem was that no matter how much Urgyen Tulku tried to point this out to me, what I found myself actually aware of was a physical sensation somewhere in my body.

When I told him this, he said, “No! Look! It is without form, without shape, without color, without sensation,” and so on. But however much I was told what *rigpa* was, I could not get beyond a physical sensation somewhere in my body. Before I could think of mind or consciousness or awareness I felt this strange,

indefinable sensation—like William James’ funny sensations in the back of the throat. I wasn’t cut out to be a Dzogchen practitioner. I experience exactly the same thing when doing mindfulness or any meditative practice that supposedly brings one into a greater understanding of one’s mind or mental states. In my Seon training in Korea, my teacher Kusan Sunim was very keen on what he called *shin* (or *maum* in colloquial Korean), which is the Chinese/Korean/Japanese word for the Pali word *citta*—“mind,” or “heart-mind” if you wish—but in his teaching it was really not very different from the *rigpa* of Dzogchen. When Kusan Sunim taught us to ask “What is this?” for him the “this” meant *shin*.

He made it very clear that *shin* was not our ordinary, everyday consciousness or awareness. *Shin*, like *rigpa*, was somehow far more. It lay behind the scenes, hidden from view, and the purpose of meditative inquiry was to break through to it, to experience it directly. And such would be—in my teacher’s understanding—the experience of enlightenment. But from the beginning of my training I found myself highly skeptical of this language. I was resistant to the idea of there being something more, something beyond what we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and know with our ordinary mind.

There is a tension in the Seon tradition between an emphasis on the everyday specificity of experience—all the talk about cypress trees in the courtyard, pounds of flax and so on—and a rather mystical teaching about a transcendent or universal mind or consciousness, similar to what you might find in Advaita

Vedanta: the notion of some nondual awareness. As much as I've tried to figure out what my teacher meant by shin, I'm still just as confused about it as I was on day one. I'm not at all persuaded that it is a useful way of presenting this practice.

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What often creeps into Buddhism is the notion that there is something more than this experience that we're having right now, that we need to break through into this something else. It's a seductive idea.

By “this practice” I don't just mean the particular meditation we on retreat, but practice in the wider sense of trying to be fully human, to lead a life in which I'm completely honest with myself. A practice in which I'm cautious about taking on trust claims about the nature of some transcendent awareness or reality that I consistently fail to have any immediate sense of in my life.

What often creeps into Buddhism, including Seon, is the notion that there is something more than this experience that we're having right now, that we need to break through into this something else. It's a seductive idea, one that's characteristic of most traditions that would consider themselves to be “mystical.” Whether they speak in terms of God, the Absolute, or the Unconditioned, there's often an underlying assumption that what we're experiencing now is somehow not enough, it's inadequate, at best

only a tiny bit of something far vaster. The practices taught in these traditions provide us with a methodology, which, if we follow it, enables us to reach this “something else.”

I’m reminded here of the *Sabba Sutta* (*sabba* means everything or “the all”). Gotama says:

Mendicants, I will teach you the all. Listen to this. And what is the all? The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile sensations, the mind and dharmas. This is called the all. If anyone, mendicants, should speak thus: “Having rejected this all, I shall make known another all,” that would be a mere empty boast on their part. If they were questioned they would not be able to reply and, further, they would meet with vexation. For what reason? Because, monks, that all would not be within their domain.

You find a similar approach in the writings of Nagarjuna and Madhyamaka philosophy, where there’s also a deep suspicion of the idea that the purpose of practice is to lead us to something outside of what we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and know within our own moment-to-moment, ordinary consciousness. It’s this, I feel, that characterizes the early Seon tradition. My sense is that Seon started life in China as an explicit rejection of a grandiose mysticism that had begun seeping into Buddhism. The early Seon masters had no time at all for notions of an ultimate truth that lies beyond our ordinary experience. Instead, it sought to recover the simplicity and the primacy of the experience we’re having in this body, in these senses, in this flesh, right now. That’s where we begin.

The legend of the Buddha himself points to the same thing. It was by waking up to the existential facts of his own life that he was prompted to embark on his quest. The fact of birth, the fact of sickness, the fact of aging, and the fact of death became questions for him. These experiences are utterly of this breathing, feeling body. That's where we begin too. That's what we come back to, again and again and again when our minds wander off into the past, into the future, or simply into unstructured threads of associated thought. We come back to the dull, blunt immediacy that is intimate but inarticulate—in other words, what we are experiencing right now.

“Early Seon sought to recover the simplicity and the primacy of the experience we're having in this body, in these senses, in this flesh, right now. That's where we begin.

When I ask myself the question “What is this?” by “this” I don't mean some sort of mystical citta, or shin, or rigpa. I mean the totality of what I'm experiencing in this moment right now, whatever that might be.

To try and understand better what Kusan Sunim meant by shin as the object of “What is this?” I went back to the Ming edition of the Chinese text of the *Platform Sutra*, where the account of the story behind “What is this?” is found. I discovered that the

text makes no mention at all of shin or mind. It simply speaks of this “thing”—*bulgon*, in Korean. The question “What is this?” is presented as “What is this *thing*?” I like the word “thing.” It has a kind of gritty immediacy to it. It’s one of those words we use all the time, but rarely stop to consider what it means. What is a *thing*? It’s a difficult question, just as hard to answer as “What is consciousness?” or “What is the mind?”

So what is a thing? What is this thing? What is this thing in all of its stripped-bare vulnerability, ineffability, banality? What is that? What is this thing that was thrust into the world at birth? This thing that will get sick, that will get old, that will die. What is it?

As far as possible, let go of any ideas about this that you may have acquired, whether they be Buddhist or Seon doctrines or other theories or beliefs you may have picked up from different religious or philosophical traditions. Just try to put all of that stuff out of your mind, particularly transcendent or mystical ideas to which you might have become attached.

After three or four years of training in Tibetan Buddhism in India, I had one of those experiences that come upon you out of the blue. I was walking through the woods above McLeod Ganj, lugging a bucket of water, and all of a sudden I found myself stopped in my tracks, simply overwhelmed by the utter strangeness of what was happening—the incredible weirdness of just being there, of standing in that forest with a bucket of water hanging from my right arm. This experience has informed pretty

much everything else I've done in my practice, my writing work, and my teaching since. It struck me very strongly then—long before I knew anything much about Seon—that this must be the primary questioning and wonder that give rise to philosophy or religion in the first place. If we are open to it, we realize that life itself in its gritty simplicity is profoundly and overwhelmingly mysterious.

Yet as creatures who have been designed by biology and evolution to survive, we're not, I think, really prepared to experience things this way. I suspect such moments as these are an unintended consequence of having evolved brains sufficiently complex for the emergence of language and self-reflexive awareness to emerge. Unlike other animals, we are conscious of the fact that we will die. As a byproduct of a consciousness that may have evolved for entirely different reasons, we have acquired the capacity to become questions for ourselves.

And this practice of Seon—in fact the practice of the dharma, period—is a practice of coming to terms with the question of who and what we are. This requires that we allow ourselves to be a mystery for ourselves rather than a set of more or less interesting facts. I suspect most human beings at certain moments in their lives experience something similar. It might come about through being in nature, through art, through falling in love, through studying philosophy, or when coming close to death—any moment when we are suddenly overwhelmed by the fact that we are here at all, rather than not here.

In the Western tradition, this way of thinking goes back at least to Socrates, who said that “wonder is the beginning of philosophy.” Leibnitz, and then later Heidegger, pondered the question “Why is there anything at all, rather than just nothing?” That question has always functioned for me as a *kongan* (Jpn., koan). It may not have the same effect for everyone, but when I first read this question, it sent a shiver up my spine. This is very similar, I think, to what in Seon is called “cultivating the sensation of doubt.” There’s something physical about it, something that reverberates through one’s body. We’re not talking here of a purely mental or spiritual experience. We’re talking about something that is palpably somatic.

In *The Gateless Gate*, the compiler Wumen Huikai says that you must question with your entire body, “making the 360 bones and joints and 84,000 pores into a solid lump of doubt.” Of course, that’s not meant literally, but we probably all know what he means. It’s that kind of questioning that goes beyond intellectual curiosity or puzzlement and has become a vital, embodied perplexity in which we can no longer meaningfully distinguish between body and mind. It feels as though the whole of us, every cell of our body, is seized with this sense of doubt.

What I also like about the early teachings of the Seon tradition is their repeated emphasis on the specific details of ordinary life. You are probably familiar with some of these kongans:

“Why did Bodhidharma come from the west?”

Zhaozhou answers: “The cypress tree in the courtyard.”

“What is the Buddha?”

Dongshan said: “Three pounds of flax.”

“What is the teaching that goes beyond everything the Buddhas and the Patriarchs ever said?”

To which Yunmen replies: “Cake.”

If you think these are answers to those questions, you completely miss the point. They're shock tactics, ways of jolting the student's attention away from those kinds of questions altogether and bringing it back to what is right before her eyes, to whatever is visibly, tangibly present at the moment she asked the question.

“The cypress tree in the courtyard”—I can only imagine that this took place in a room, outside of which there stood a cypress tree. By getting drawn into speculative questions about Bodhidharma's motives for coming to China from India, which could no doubt lead to some fascinating discussions, we are taken away, in increasingly rarefied steps of abstraction, from the actual situation at hand so that we don't even see the cypress tree in the courtyard anymore. We've gone off into the land of metaphysics and doctrine and theory. Terribly interesting, but we've lost sight of the tree.

As for the business of the three pounds of flax, I imagine the monks sorting through the flax that they had harvested that day in the monastery's fields. One of them asks the teacher Dongshan a question about the Buddha. But the teacher abruptly turns the monks' attention away from such theorizing and back to what they're doing there and then. They're sorting flax.

And I imagine Yunmen sitting on a chair or platform, with a low table in front of him. As is often the case in those monasteries, there would be a cup of tea, a plate of cakes—in this case, probably pounded rice cakes of some kind. But rather than get drawn into the question that's being asked about some special, esoteric teaching, Yunmen turns the monk's attention to a lump of rice cake.

I think all these stories—of which there are many—are basically doing the same thing. They cut through a particular habit of the human mind. As soon as the student gets drawn into questions about truth, the meaning of life, philosophy, and religion, the teacher bluntly and abruptly severs the tendency to speculate and points to the immediacy of what's actually at hand. What is at hand is what is truly mysterious and worthy of questioning: a piece of cake, a pile of flax, a cypress tree.

We see this in early Buddhism too, in the Pali texts. I think something similar is going on. In Indian tradition there's a general tendency—why, I don't know—to avoid referring to specific objects in the world, like a piece of cake, a pile of flax, or a particular tree. Instead, the emphasis tends to be placed more on subjective

states of consciousness. Yet when the Buddha speaks of meditation in the early texts—for example, in the *Satipatthana Sutta*—he does not instruct his monks and followers to meditate on the nature of mind, the experience of emptiness, or anything abstract and transcendent like God. Instead, he says: go into a forest, sit cross-legged at the foot of a tree, and when you know you're breathing in, know that you're breathing in, and when you know you're breathing out, know that you're breathing out.

That is a shocking thing to say—it goes completely against the stream of metaphysical thinking that is so characteristic of Indian religion and philosophy, which emphasize realization of Brahman, God, atman, the true self. In order to experience such transcendent things, one is instructed to disassociate oneself from the physical and phenomenal world. Then this teacher comes along and says, “No! Just sit down at the foot of a tree and when you breathe in know that you're breathing in, and when you breathe out know that you're breathing out.” Again, as in Seon, it's a shock tactic that brings us back to what is immediately at hand.

The *Satipatthana Sutta* goes even further, telling the meditator to then contemplate all the different parts of the body: the hair on the head, the brain, the eyes, the skin, the flesh, the mucus, the lymph, the urine, the feces, and so on. Sometimes these reflections are explained as a way of putting the monks and nuns off sex or having sexual fantasies, but I think that's missing the point. It's

about coming back to the sheer facticity of our physical existence, in its most basic and irreducible sense. Our guts, our shit, our skin, our sweat, our blood—that’s where we focus attention.

Only from there do we go into feelings, but again, feelings that are triggered by our encounters with the physical world. Then perceptions, the way that we make sense of that. Then impulses, and so on, until we arrive at what Gotama simply calls *sabbe dhamma*—all things. And all things are, as we’ve seen, what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, feel. For many “spiritual” people, to turn attention away from mystical truths back to the brute simplicity of where we are in our bodies, in this moment, right now, is deeply counterintuitive.

Nowhere is this more beautifully expressed than in the Epicurean poem “The Nature of Things” by the Roman poet Lucretius. This is how it appears in A. E. Stallings’ translation:

*Behold the pure blue of heavens, and all that they possess,
The roving stars, the moon, the sun’s light, brilliant and sublime—
Imagine if these were shown to men now for the first time,
Suddenly and with no warning. What could be declared
More wondrous than these miracles no one before had dared
Believe could even exist? Nothing. Nothing could be quite
As remarkable as this, so wonderful would be the sight.
Now, however, people hardly bother to lift their eyes
To the glittering heavens, they are so accustomed to the skies.*

Lucretius could just as well have spoken of a cypress tree, a pile of flax, or a rice cake. It makes no difference. If you had never seen any such things before and were suddenly shown them, it would have the same shock effect as seeing the night sky for the first time.

“The arts that come out of Zen articulate an understanding prompted not by some deep insight into the nature of ultimate truth, but rather a new relationship with the ordinary objects of our daily life.

This is what the Seon tradition does—it’s about recovering the primary experience that we are encountering in this very moment right now, the stuff that feels somehow dull, inert, maybe a bit boring, overly familiar. But that’s where we begin, and—I would argue—that’s also where we end. Except we end up discovering how what we look upon as ordinary is, in fact, utterly extraordinary. There’s nothing I can think of that is stranger than just being here now—nothing more mysterious, nothing more transcendent. The problem is that we get stuck in a kind of thinking that denigrates ordinary life as somehow inferior, somehow just a pale shadow of reality.

This goes back all the way to Plato. In Plato’s parable of the cave, people find themselves in a dark cavern; there is just a little fire burning that throws shadows onto the walls, and people think

that that's the nature of reality. "But no!" some smart person says. "You can get out of this cave! And then you will get to another realm altogether, with brilliant sunlight and colors. What you see in this cave is at best just a very poor copy." This kind of idealism, I think, has characterized much of our Western tradition in philosophy and theology—the idea that there's a truer world somewhere else.

The parable of Plato's cave reinforces the very habit that Gotama and Seon seek to overcome. It serves to diminish this world in which we actually live. We don't live in Plato's cave, we live in this world, which is not a pale copy of some truer reality. Yet both in India and in the West, our traditions of thought have often rendered it as such.

If we could just learn to pay attention to the ordinary things: our breath, our footsteps, the trees around us, the sounds of the rooks in the trees. If we could attend to this mundane world in a different way, with a greater stillness and clarity of mind, and if at the same time we could open our hearts and our minds to just notice what we see, what we hear, what we smell, what we taste, what we touch, how we feel—this, of course, is the practice of mindfulness.

Seon practice injects *curiosity* into mindfulness. This is a term you don't really find in the early Buddhist tradition. You have the idea of *dhamma vicaya*, one of the factors of awakening, which is usually translated as "analysis of things," but curiosity in Seon has nothing much to do with analysis. In Seon, you hear little about

investigating the three marks of being— impermanence, dukkha, and not-self (though such investigation is certainly worthwhile)— but rather the need to valorize and cultivate an innate astonishment or puzzlement, that sense of how odd things are.

In Korean it's called *uisim*, which is usually translated as “doubt,” but that doesn't quite get it. It's really more like perplexity or puzzlement; we might even say bewilderment or confusion. Kusan Sunim often used to repeat this verse:

*Great perplexity, great awakening.
Little perplexity, little awakening.
No perplexity, no awakening.*

In other words, the degree to which your practice resonates at a certain pitch of perplexity or doubt is the pitch at which your insight or awakening will also resonate.

If you come to your practice with a mere intellectual curiosity then, as a correlate, any insight that occurs will likewise be intellectual in nature. But let's imagine you come to the practice with a deep existential perplexity—an urgent confusion and puzzlement about what it means to have been born, to get sick, to get old, to die. If that's the pitch at which your practice resonates, then you are allowing the possibility of an insight or an understanding, maybe even a cathartic resolution of that confusion, to emerge at a comparable level of intensity.

Such an insight is unlikely to present itself in doctrinal terms or as a carefully articulated theory. It's far more likely to be expressed as a physical gesture, a line of verse, a spontaneous brush stroke. Sometimes in Seon texts you have the monk express his understanding as a shout, a yell: "HAK!" At least that's how it's transcribed in Korean; in English it might be "Aha!" or "Holy shit!" The trouble is that this quickly gets zenny. These gestures become clichéd and predictable, the exact opposite of the spontaneity they were originally meant to display. There is no point in just aping a kind of language and behavior.

Consider the works of the eighteenth-century Japanese painter Sengai. They are just ink sketches of a frog, a cat, a snail on a leaf, a bereft old man, a laughing monk, or simply a square, a triangle, and a circle, executed with very rapid brushstrokes. Utterly ordinary things. But what Sengai achieved, and what other Seon artists achieve, are great works of art. They may just depict frogs, brooms, and persimmons, but in such a way that enables you to see these things as if for the first time. With simplicity, economy, and spontaneity, they do not merely represent these objects but allow them to echo the specific situations in which they belong. It's an aesthetic of poignancy that somehow resonates in our bones. We are moved by it; there's something about the painting that speaks to us at a deep, visceral level and engages our attention. And it brings the mind to a stop. This is true, of course, with great art in all traditions. The arts that come out of

Chan or Seon or Zen articulate an understanding prompted not by some deep insight into the nature of ultimate truth, but rather a new relationship with the ordinary objects of our daily life.

I hope that we can practice and learn from some of these examples. When we're eating, or when we are washing our mug after having had a cup of tea, or while working in the garden or the kitchen, we can incorporate these activities of ordinary life into practice. These are concrete opportunities to deal with the banal objects of the everyday, yet with attention, so that we might experience them in a completely different light.

To experience ourselves—our breath, the sensations in the body, the pain in the knees, the feeling of the wind or the rain on our cheeks—all of this is utterly pertinent to the question I am suggesting you ask: “What is this?” But please remember that “this” refers to what is so close to you that you tend to completely overlook it. ❁

From *What is This?: Ancient Questions for Modern Minds*,
by Martine and Stephen Batchelor (The Tuwhiri Project, 2019)



Zen Math Will Never Add Up

Nagarjuna's four propositions tell us that something may be what it is or it may not; it may be neither or it may be both. This is Zen math, and it's not always easy, says **Judy Roitman**, but it's essential to understanding how our ordinary calculations fall short.

There is only one thing from the very beginning, infinitely bright and mysterious in nature. It was never born and never dies. It cannot be described or given a name.

But originally there is no thing, no light, no dark, no birth, no death, nothing to be named and no one to name it.

Yet $0 = 0$, $1 = 1$, $2 = 2$, in daytime it is light, at night it is dark, my name is Judy, my husband's name is Stan.

FORMAL DHARMA SPEECHES in the Korean tradition often begin with three introductory comments, which generally fit into a form that can be traced back to the early first-millennium Buddhist sage from India, Nagarjuna, who deeply influenced all of north Asian Buddhism—Mahayana and Tibetan—with his relentless and meticulous philosophical exploration of *shunyata*, emptiness, and

pratityasamutpada, or codependent origination. His arguments, rich with ethical implications, point us to a freedom beyond categories.

Nagarjuna's method of liberation is threefold: to look carefully at language and thinking, completely deconstructing them so that nothing is left; to point to our original mind by exhausting the contradictions of our ordinary, thinking mind; and to reveal the inherent contradictions we face every time we try to speak. Every time we try to say something, we are making a big mistake—we are pointing away from truth. Nagarjuna's method is to analyze things so closely that our discursive thought just vanishes. When, as he says, "emptiness is the relinquishing of all views," what are we then left with?

There is a vast literature analyzing Nagarjuna's thought. But how can we manifest Nagarjuna's teaching directly? This is exactly the purpose of those quirky little stories that form Zen's basic texts: to challenge us to respond right now, with no hesitation, neither forgetting the profound ethical possibilities of *pratityasamutpada* nor the falseness of any categories we use to analyze reality.

Central to Nagarjuna's technique is the *tetralemma*—essentially, a dilemma with four options—otherwise known as the four propositions. The tetralemma traces back to ancient India and the sixth-century BCE Jain sage Sanjaya, possibly earlier. There are many ways to express the tetralemma. Here's one:

X is Y, Y is X.
 X is not Y, Y is not X.
 No X, no Y.
 X is X, Y is Y.

In case you were traumatized by your middle school algebra class (full disclosure: I'm a retired math professor), another way to understand this is by taking two arbitrary nouns—I'll pick *form* and *emptiness* because that's traditional—and substitute them for X and Y:

Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.
 Form is not emptiness, emptiness is not form.
 No form, no emptiness.
 Form is form, emptiness is emptiness.

We can summarize the first line as 1, the second as not 1, the third as 0, and the fourth as 2.

Going back to the first three lines of my talk, then, we have:

There is only one thing from the very beginning, infinitely bright and mysterious in nature. It was never born and never dies. It cannot be described or given a name.

These first lines are also the opening lines of the great sixteenth-century Korean master So Sahn Hyu Jong's *Mirror of Zen*. They point to 1.

But originally there is no thing, no light, no dark, no birth, no death, nothing to be named and no one to name it.

This negates everything from the first line, much as the *Heart Sutra* negates the classifications of the Abhidharma (the extensive Buddhist analysis of mind attributed to Buddha's disciple Shariputra). This points to 0.

Yet $0 = 0$, $1 = 1$, $2 = 2$, in daytime it is light, at night it is dark, my name is Judy, my husband's name is Stan.

This negates the negation. As one version of what the Buddha said when he woke up has it, each thing is exactly what it is, complete in itself. This points to 2, which in this context means 2 or more.

Here we find the unmistakable stamp of Nagarjuna: three-fourths of the tetralemma shaping a rhetorical form that has lasted into the twenty-first century.

There is a story from the early *Transmission of the Lamp* records about the eighth-century Chinese master Shi Tou. In this story a young monk, Ya Shan, comes to Shi Tou and says, "I understand the Buddha's teaching. But I heard that around here, you all just sit in silence. What does this mean?" And Shi Tou says, "This way won't do. Not this way won't do. Both this way and not this way won't do. How about you?" (Hearing this story, Ta Hui's great female dharma heir Miao Tsung awakened.)

Again, we have three-fourths of the tetralemma, in a different form: X; not X; and neither X nor not X. The part left out is: X and not X.

The story of Shi Tou and Ya Shan brings us to the middle way (which is what *Madhyamaka*, the school Nagarjuna founded, means). This middle way is not about living your life between the extremes of asceticism and luxury; it is a philosophically technical stance with vast ethical ramifications. “Is” is false; “is not” is also false; “is and is not” is false; “neither is nor is not” is also false. You cannot assert any of them. You can’t assert anything. Each statement of the tetralemma is, respectively, false, false, false, and false again. This holds true for any form the tetralemma might take. It also holds true for any view you might hold.

The great Zen monk Mu Mun expressed this clearly in his response to the thirty-seventh case of *The Gateless Gate*. In this case, a monk comes to the great Zen master Zhao Zhou and asks, “Why did Bodhidharma come to China?” Zhao Zhou answers, “The cypress tree in the garden.” Mu Mun responds with this poem:

*Words cannot show truth.
Speech cannot point into nature.
One who holds words is dead.
One who attaches to sentences is lost.*

Does this seem a little extreme? It’s not. Look carefully at how sentences, any sentences, are constructed, and there is always a problem. “I am standing here. You are sitting there.” By the dictates of English grammar (and every language has its grammatical

exigencies), we've got I, you, standing, sitting, here, there. The specific grammatical demands of Navajo or Bantu might be different, but they are there, guaranteed.

And grammar necessarily distorts things. Nagarjuna's methodology is to point out the distortions. How can there be a "here" without a "there?" How can there be a "there" without a "here?" How can we distinguish here from there? Where does here begin, where does there end? And so on.

Consider, for example, the tenth chapter in the *Mulamadhya-makakarika*, "On Fire and Fuel." Nagarjuna shows that fuel cannot be fire and fire cannot be fuel, but fuel cannot not be fire and fire cannot not be fuel. Fire cannot be dependent on or independent of fuel. Fuel cannot be dependent on or independent of fire. He writes:

*I do not think that
Those who teach that the self
Is the same as or different from the entities
Understand the meaning of the doctrine.*

Such seemingly dry logic has profound ethical consequences—this is Nagarjuna insisting on codependent origination, or dependent co-origination, or interbeing, or interpenetration, or whatever you want to call it. You can't assert anything because assertions necessarily separate, and things are not separate. It is our actual perception—not intellectual analysis, but direct perception—of

no separation that truly reveals and necessitates ethical behavior. Nagarjuna's logic invites us past our own ideas and into that direct seeing.

Nagarjuna explores his logic in meticulous detail. He uses language to go deep into a substrate that is more fundamental than language or ideas. Everything in the universe—what we know and what we don't know, what we're aware of and what we're not aware of—everything comes together like that, before speech, before thinking, no distinctions, impossible to name, impossible to describe—and yet you cannot call it nothing.

Or, as the *Mirror of Zen*, paraphrasing the *The Sutra on the Questions of Brahmavisesacinti*, says, “The Buddha did not appear in this world to save sentient beings. Rather, the Buddha appeared in order to liberate this world from the mistaken view that there is life and death, and nirvana or salvation.”

One can make the case that any *kong-an* (Jpn., koan) is designed exactly to help us navigate this middle way, rejecting “is,” “is not,” and all the rest of the tetralemma. In one famous example, a monk asks Zhao Zhou, “Does a dog have buddhanature?” Zhao Zhou replies, “Mu,” which means “no,” and this mu has rung down for over a millennium, itself an object of deep inquiry. But asking, “What is mu?” is different from asking, “Does a dog have buddhanature?”

How could you answer this second question? Here's a hint: "Yes" won't do. "No" won't do. "Yes and no" won't do. "Neither yes nor no" won't do. As Shi Tou says: How about you? In that moment, asked that question, how can you respond?

Similarly, when asked, "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" Zhao Zhou responded, "The cypress tree in the garden." Bodhidharma was, in legend and possibly in fact, the Indian monk who brought Zen to China, but Zhao Zhou did not answer, "To spread Zen Buddhism!" This would have missed the point.

“Every time we try to say something, we are making a big mistake — we are pointing away from truth.

Which brings us to the way in which Zen deals directly with Nagarjuna. Doing so involves a bit more math in the form of the "one hundred negations," but we needn't spend much time on it. (According to Shunryu Suzuki, we arrive at one hundred negations by negating the singular, plural, existing, and nonexisting versions of all four logical forms from the tetralemma, multiplying by three for past, present, and future, then multiplying by two—nuomenal and phenomenal—and adding the original four: $4 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 + 4 = 100$.)

Consider the twenty-fifth case of *The Gateless Gate*. In a dream, Yang Shan goes to see Maitreya Buddha. Everyone is already seated in meditation, and Yang Shan is directed to the third seat. This is a very high seat, the third seat. It's not the first,

not the second, but still, it's pretty good. So he sits in the third seat and an announcement is made: "The talk today will be given by the monk of the third seat." Unfazed, Yang Shan gets up, hits the table with the gavel, and says, "The dharma of the Mahayana goes beyond the four propositions and transcends the one hundred negations; listen carefully, listen carefully." The four propositions and the one hundred negations—that's a direct reference to Nagarjuna.

Consider also the seventy-third case of the *Blue Cliff Record*. In this case, a monk says to Ma Tsu, "I'm not asking you about the four propositions and the one hundred negations. But please tell me why Bodhidharma came to China." Ma Tsu answers, "I'm tired today and can't explain it to you. Go ask Xi Tang." So the monk goes to Xi Tang, who says to him, "Why didn't you ask Ma Tsu?" The monk says, "I did! But he told me to ask you." Xi Tang says, "I have a headache today and can't explain it. Go ask Bai Shang." So the monk goes to Bai Shang who says, "I don't have anything to say about this." The monk goes back to Ma Tsu, tells him the whole story, and Ma Tsu says, "Xi Tang has white hair and Bai Shang has black hair."

Yang Shan, in his dream, says, "The dharma of the Mahayana goes beyond the four propositions and the one hundred negations." Going beyond the four propositions and the one hundred negations is exactly what Ma Tsu does when he says, "Xi Tang has white hair and Bai Shang has black hair." In fact, he went beyond

them earlier when he said he was tired, as did Xi Tang when he said he had a headache, as did Bai Shang when he said he had nothing to say.

Like those Chan monks and masters up in the Chinese hills a thousand years ago, Nagarjuna did not always live in abstractions. He was a famous guy after all, an advisor to kings. In one famous letter to a patron, he wrote in graphic detail about the suffering or pleasure that results from negative or positive rebirth. But it is his abstractions that have the power to change our lives.

Since I discovered the *Mulamadhyakakarika*, it has been my companion on solo retreats. When obsessions, fears, distractions take over—and over weeks or months they will, guaranteed—to be reminded that “is” is not, “not is” is not, “is and is not” is not, “not (is and is not)” is not, this is liberation, this is the way out of the hells we so easily fall into. “Oh, it isn’t like that.” Whatever it is, it isn’t like that. And when you think it’s something else, it isn’t that either. My teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, called this don’t know: “Just keep this don’t know mind!” Then, like Ma Tsu, we can see that Xi Tang has white hair and Bai Shang has black hair. We know when to step forward and when to step backward. We know when to reach out a hand and how to use it. Subject and object no longer blind us; the interpenetration of all beings becomes completely ordinary. Everyone has moments like this. And then everyone forgets. Nagarjuna reminds us, with all his negations: oh, yes, this. 🌸