

Wind Bell

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“A Ceremony for the Encouragement of Zazen”

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Zazen is the source of all the teachings and practices of the Buddha way. Although the word “zazen” literally means “sitting in concentration,” it is not limited to concentration practice. All enlightened concentration practices emanate from and return to zazen. Here, one’s mind is concentrated without relying on any contrivance and is not necessarily continuously focused on any particular object. There are concentration practices and if one is practicing thus, zazen is just being upright and unmoving in the midst of such practice. If we are not practicing concentration, it is just sitting still in the middle of not practicing concentration. It is simply pure presence untouched by all human agency. Many people attempt to concentrate their minds and, according to their own definition, are unsuccessful. Practicing concentration in this way often leads to feelings of frustration and upset. Even if one is successful in achieving concentration by personal effort, the mind is still somewhat disturbed by such striving. In Buddha’s meditation there is no such striving. Giving up the desire to pacify the mind, pacifies the mind.

For this reason, if I give beginner’s zazen instruction, although I usually suggest that they sit upright with a straight spine, eyes open and hands in the cosmic concentration mudra, I do not encourage bending the mind into concentrating on the posture or breathing, nor do I discourage it. If someone asks for instruction on how to concentrate on posture or breathing, I am happy to give detailed instruction on how to practice that way. Although concentration practices may be wonderfully beneficial and develop great mental skill, trying to concentrate on some object like the breath may activate a gaining idea. Gaining ideas are antithetical to the whole project of Mahayana Buddhism, which is to be concerned for others’ welfare rather than our own self-improvement. However, we may not realize this right from the start of our practice. As long as we are engaged in a self-improvement meditation we continue to be trapped in our selves. When we are free of self-improvement projects, we are free of our self.

Although it may be difficult to wholeheartedly concentrate on an object without getting caught in some self-serving gaining idea, it is also true that having a gaining idea may be an important step in one’s cultivation and realization of a practice which is free of all such gaining ideas. Such practice may help us to forge a strong enough container to tolerate a non-gaining approach to meditation. It frequently happens that if a practitioner pushes personal effort to the limit in a wholesome way, as in concentration practice, they can realize the futility of depending on personal power and then find another entrance into zazen.

The zazen I speak of is neither concentration practice nor not concentration practice. Zazen does not prefer success over failure. Zazen does not prefer enlightenment over delusion. If we are enlightened, we sit still in the middle of enlightenment with no preference for it. If we are deluded, we sit still in the middle of delusion with no aversion to it. This is Buddha’s zazen.

The goal of zazen practice is the enlightenment and liberation of all beings from suffering. That’s the goal of zazen, but the goal is exactly the same as the practice. In realizing this goal, one becomes free from self-concern and personal gain; becoming free of self-concern and personal gain realizes the goal.

Although one might joyfully practice concentrating on posture and breathing with no gaining idea, still, zazen is not limited to this form of practice. As our ancestor Dogen said, zazen is “totally culminated enlightenment. Traps and snares can never reach it. Once its heart is grasped, you are like the dragon when he enters the water, like the tiger when she returns to the mountain.” In other words, zazen survives every reduction. It cannot be reduced or trapped into mindfulness or mindlessness of the breath or of the posture. It cannot be captured by any activity of the human body or mind.

Zazen doesn't start when we start making effort, doesn't stop when we stop. However, when practicing zazen, there is complete mindfulness and we may very well notice that we are breathing. It's not that our ordinary awareness isn't going on, it's just that the practice does not abide in and cannot be defined by the things we are aware of at the moment. As the great teacher Prajnatara said, “This poor wayfarer, when breathing in, does not abide in the realms of body or mind, when breathing out, does not get entangled in the various objects of experience. I always recite this scripture.” The breath of zazen is to be thoroughly intimate with and liberated through all realms of experience. This is the breathing of the Buddha. Still, one may need to familiarize oneself with and become proficient in the forms of concentration on breath and posture in order to develop enough confidence to selflessly practice the formless breathing of “this poor wayfarer.”

Zazen is formless like vast space, yet, it manifests forms in response to living beings, like the moon reflected in the water. Since we may need forms to help us relate to the formless, when people first come to learn about zazen at a Zen center, they are given instructions in how to perform a formal ceremony of zazen. Beginners usually want to have some activity they can do, so we give them something to do. The ceremony is for tempering our tolerance for a formless practice that we cannot do. Strictly speaking, awakened Buddhist meditation is not an action done by a person, it is not another form of doing, not another form of karma. It is the function of enlightenment, the concerted activity of the entire universe.

Conventionally speaking, Zen students say, “Now I am going to the meditation hall to do zazen.” However, the formal actions which you or I perform in assuming the traditional bodily posture of sitting meditation are not actually the zazen of buddha ancestors. Their zazen has nothing to do with sitting or lying down. These ritual forms which we humans practice are a ceremony by which we express and celebrate our devotion to the actual reality of zazen.

The ceremonial forms are opportunities for persons to embrace and be embraced by the inconceivable totality of zazen. They are Dharma gateways for the body and mind to manifest the truth of zazen. The forms are ways for zazen to come into the body and accord with the mind.

When people are sitting during the ceremony of zazen, I sometimes walk around the room, adjusting their posture. This adjustment is intended as a silent “comment” on their posture. Although I am inspired by the beauty of people's effort in sitting upright and still, nevertheless I may have some suggestions which I feel might encourage more wholehearted devotion to the ceremony of zazen.

The posture of our body reflects our participation in the ceremony, and our participation in the whole universe. Giving our posture entirely to the ceremony, we give ourselves entirely to the universe. Total devotion to one is total devotion to the other. Resistance to one is resistance to the other. If our spine is

curved or humped backward, the chest is caved in, the lungs are constricted and the heart is withdrawn. On the other hand, if our spine comes deeper into the torso so that we are sitting more upright, there is more room for breathing and the heart comes forward. We feel more alive, we are more open to suffering, and enter more deeply into the joyful and vital realm where the wheel of the Dharma is turned.

When a person fully accepts her suffering by assuming this upright posture, she is released. Working with our posture in this way encourages us to fully experience what it means to have a body, to fully enter our own physical presence.

However, when people take the ceremony for zazen itself, they may develop a sense that there is a right and wrong way to practice zazen. Thus they may be uncomfortable entering a meditation hall because they don't want to do the wrong thing. For such people the trap of thinking in terms of right and wrong can be undermining and distracting, so I might refer some of these people to a less formal or ceremonial form of meditation so that they can relax into sitting and walking meditation, without getting caught up in worrying about concepts of right and wrong. Perhaps after body and mind are calm and stabilized by practicing a less ceremonial form of meditation, one might be able to return to formal Zen practice and deal fruitfully with any complications around issues of right and wrong which might arise in response to these formalities.

On the other hand, for some people, the ceremonial forms provide a structure or refuge in which they can tolerate the formless, the objectless practice of zazen. The ritual forms are a vessel in which One may enter into the inconceivable activity of enlightenment.

The meaning of zazen is not limited to the ceremony, but manifests in response to our devotion to the ceremony. As the Jewel Mirror Samadhi says, "The meaning is not in the words, yet it responds to the arrival of energy." It manifests in response to the arrival of our energetic effort and devotion.

One of the fundamental texts of our school is the great teacher Dogen's *Ceremony for the Universal Encouragement of Zazen (Fukanzazengi)*. The Chinese character for "ceremony" in the title of this work is composed of two other characters. The first character means "person" and the second means "justice, righteousness or meaning." The ceremony provides the opportunity for the person to be united with the meaning of zazen. Zazen is the selfless practice which comes to meet our sincere devotion to the ceremony of zazen. The instructions are basically established procedures for a formal ceremony that we may perform in a meditation hall or at home. But zazen survives every reduction. Zazen is happening all the time everywhere; we do the ceremony within particular limits of time and space to celebrate the limitless, all-pervasive reality of zazen. This ceremony is the central ritual act of the Zen school. In a Zen monastery, we may practice this ceremony all day long, but it is still just a ceremony, not the totality of zazen itself. Performing the ceremony heals any gap between our life and the true zazen practice of Buddha.

In this ceremony, we try to be thoroughly mindful of every detail of our bodily posture and movement. We have a formal and traditional way of entering the meditation hall, walking to our seat, bowing to our cushion and taking our place. We sit on our cushion according to instructions on seven points of posture

that we find in meditation texts throughout Buddhist history. And then we “Take a deep breath, inhale and exhale, rock your body right and left and settle into a steady, immobile sitting position.”

Zazen practice is selfless. Its meaning, the enlightenment and liberation of all living beings, is not brought forth by the power of personal effort and is not brought forth by the power of some other. We can't do it by ourselves, and nobody can do it for us. The meaning is realized interactively in the context of our wholehearted effort. As the “Jewel Mirror Samadhi” says, “The inquiry and response come up together.” The meaning arises at the same moment as our devotion to the ceremony. Since the meaning arises simultaneously with the performance of the ceremony itself. Therefore, although the meaning of zazen can be realized, it is inconceivable. Since enlightenment is realized right at the same time as the selfless practice of this ritual, it is a ceremony of inconceivable liberation.

The stillness of Buddha's sitting is not merely stillness, it is complete presence in stillness. In such presence, there is not the slightest meddling with what is happening. It is a physical and mental non-interfering with our experience. It is a thorough intimacy with whatever is happening. This is an infinitely flexible stillness that can adjust to the impermanent nature of all things, harmonizing with all situations.

While this upright stillness is an essential awareness, nevertheless, it is an initiatory awareness. It opens the door to a full understanding of how self and other dependently co-produce one another. This understanding of the interdependent arising of all beings is the samadhi of all Buddhas. In this realm of awareness that is the culmination of Zen practice, the liberation of all beings is realized.

Zazen is completely free; it is formless and no person or school owns it. Yet the most essential and intimate aspect of training in the formless zazen of the buddha ancestors occurs in the realm of form. In this regard I deeply appreciate how the forms of sitting practice can help us develop wisdom and compassion.