



Z E N

Q U E S T I O N S

*Zazen, Dogen,*  
*and the Spirit of*  
*Creative Inquiry*

T A I G E N D A N L E I G H T O N

# More Praise for *Zen Questions*

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“Taigen Leighton is one of the West’s most important Zen scholar-priests and one of our foremost exponents of bringing out into the world the insights we find on the meditation cushion. This book contains some enormously important reflections on the nature of the Zen practice of just sitting, through a close reflection on the great master Dōgen, the Sufi poet Rumi, as well as Bob Dylan, Marianne Oliver, and the American Zen original Gary Snyder. Perhaps even more importantly, Leighton offers a number of reflections and pointers for finding our way amid the messiness of life. This is an incredibly valuable book, useful for anyone who wishes to integrate their heart-work with work in the world.”

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“Taigen Dan Leighton has done his homework—he digs deep and comes up with treasure.”

—David Chadwick, author of *Crooked Cucumber*

*Zazen, Dōgen, and the Spirit of Creative Inquiry*

by Taigen Dan Leighton



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About the Author

ZEN IS ABOUT QUESTIONING. Zen continuously questions. Zen questioning does not necessarily involve finding answers, but it does involve finding a space in which to sustain questioning, being willing to remain present and upright in the middle of questions. To persevere in Zen practice requires faith, but not a fundamentalist, literalist faith that merely believes in some easily digestible dogma. Zen totally relies on some external being to provide answers and tell us how to live. Zen faith is alive, with the willingness and readiness to persist in questioning. Of course at times insights and responses appear, sometimes more frequently as we settle into the open spaciousness of meditation. But if the answers are worthy they allow more questions, or they help foster readiness for the new questions offered by the world, by life, and by our own insights. This book offers questions, and provokes more questions, and hopefully may encourage the willingness to question, thereby supporting more creative open awareness.

In the title *Zen Questions*, the second word is a verb, at least as much as a noun. Actually, from the Buddhist context all words—and all beings—are verbs, in dynamic activity. But provisionally in our language we need to utilize words as nouns or adjectives, even at the risk of producing deadened objects. Indeed, Zen questions; it questions our world, our experience, and reality itself. I remember the old bumper sticker, which I still see sometimes, “Question Authority.” Certainly received authorities, whether cultural, spiritual, or the authority of corporations or governmental institutions, need and deserve to be questioned. This is certainly congenial with the traditional questioning in Zen practice and literature. But in the phrase “Question Authority” I also hear “questioning” as an adjective describing a type of authority. True authority and integrity derive from the willingness to be questioned and to continue the activity of questioning. Much of Zen lore consists of questioning of the venerable old masters by their students. Indeed, questioning creates genuine authority.

The material in this book is based on my articles and Dharma talks from the time span 1994–2010. This book also encompasses the scope of my own life-interests and of my Dharma teaching beginning with the practice of zazen, or Zen meditation. I received my first formal zazen instruction on the Upper West Side of Manhattan when I was twenty-four, from a Japanese Sōtō Zen priest. I immediately felt like home, and I have been enjoying everyday zazen practice since, leading over many years to becoming a Sōtō Zen priest and transmitted Dharma teacher myself. That first evening of instruction, Rev. Kandō Nakajima also spoke about Eihei Dōgen, the thirteenth-century founder of Japanese Sōtō Zen. Dōgen’s insightful writings have become instrumental in the introduction of Buddhism to the West and have remained my touchstone along with meditation practice. The inspiring quality led to my studying Japanese and Chinese and eventually working on collaborative translations of many of Dōgen’s profound, provocative, and deeply nourishing writings. This book provides an opportunity to offer some of my own commentaries on writings from Dōgen that I helped translate.



My study of Dōgen's writings reflects my general appreciation of literary and other creative expression. I see such expression as the natural extension of meditative awareness. This book includes, sporadically throughout and focused in one of its sections, commentary on some of the varied writers who inspire me. Especially I mention the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, whose songs, through his long career I confess to rather uncritically valuing and whose wisdom has often been a helpful guide.

In addition to practicing Zen Buddhism and Dōgen study, I have intermittently engaged in social activism, stretching back to organizing against the Vietnam War in high school and now with concern for our environment. My interest in social justice and peace has always seemed to me deeply in accord with, and a responsibility arising from, Buddhist studies and bodhisattva practice and the implications for compassionate response to our suffering world. The last section of this book offers Buddhist-influenced perspectives on several current world issues.

The chapters in the first of the five sections of this book, "The World of Zazen," deal with the essential physical practice of zazen. Although this term is commonly translated, as I do herein, as "meditation," or literally "sitting meditation," zazen is not a meditation program with a process or stages of development or accomplishment. Rather, zazen is the physical realm for enacting and expressing the fundamental insight and kindness of buddha nature, the omnipresent capacity for awakened awareness. Zazen is the posture and attitude in which we actually meet the totality of our true life. As expressed above, and developed in the first chapter, Zen is a practice of questioning, an attitude of sustained inquiry. This practice and the awareness it involves does lead to transformation in various ways, even if these never match the outcomes we might seek. Zazen is also a ritual as performed in the religious context of the bodhisattva path, concerned with realizing interconnectedness and supporting the communal aim of reciprocal awakening. Zazen is thus a kind of performance art, a mode of expression that supports and mutually informs all of the other particular creative activities in our lives and offers us an entryway into true repose and joy.

I am extremely grateful that I have had the opportunity to work on many translations from the brilliant founder of Japanese Sōtō Zen, Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253). In the second and third sections of this book I offer commentaries on Dōgen and some of his works, although he is also mentioned several times in the other sections. Commencing with my "Reflections on Translating Dōgen," the second section includes comments on a few specific essays from one of Dōgen's two masterworks, *Shōbōgenzō* (The True Dharma Eye Treasury), composed in its longest form of ninety-five essays, expansively and poetically elaborating on Zen themes, images, and koans. I discuss Dōgen's view of enlightenment and delusion in his celebrated essay "Genjōkōan." Then I discuss works I have translated, including Dōgen's account of the awesome work of active buddhas and the awakened expression of dream as our life. Lastly I consider startling aspects of Dōgen's writing on monastic practice and standards, curiously relevant to contemporary Zen lay practice.

In the third section I discuss six specific selections from the other major work by Dōgen, *Eihon Kōroku*, which I translated with Shohaku Okumura as *Dōgen's Extensive Record*. This massive work includes a number of elements, but its bulk is the usually short formal talks, or Dharma talks, discourses, mostly from the second of his two decades of teaching, after he had departed the Japanese capital of Kyoto for the remote mountains near the north coast. Although brief and formal, these talks are paradoxically more revealing of Dōgen's own personality, sense of humor, and his training of the monk successors who went on in the next few generations to widely spread Dōgen's tradition in the countryside, such that Sōtō Zen became the second largest branch of Japanese Buddhism. Most of Dōgen's teaching, including almost all of Dōgen's writing, is occasional, not presented as timeless principle.

but addressed to particular people at specific times and places, and this is especially evident in *Eihei Kōroku*. My commentaries herein also are edited from talks given to specific audiences. Many of Dōgen's talks and several of the six I discuss herein consist of his commentaries on the traditional koan literature. Dōgen achieved extraordinary mastery of this koan material, and he was instrumental in introducing this literature to Japan. He also developed his own mode of teaching with koans, which are often associated in modern times exclusively with the contrasting Rinzai approach to koans. The talks from *Eihei Kōroku* further illuminate the dynamics of Zen training and the unfolding of its expression.

The fourth section, "Zen Expressions," honors the creativity of Zen awareness and practice, and the fact that most Zen teaching is not discursive but rather poetic and imaginative. In China, Chan (pronounced *Zen* in Japanese) developed through the influence of Chinese and Daoist culture to convey Buddhist teaching using nature images and poetry as a primary mode, along with the colloquial dialogues used as koans. Zen employs imagery, metaphor, and the arts to intimately convey awakening teaching, beyond the conventional logic and rational, philosophical discourse used by many spiritual traditions, including much of Buddhism. This section consists of discussions of writings that express Zen reality from several of my favorite poets, the first three not at all formal "Buddhist." I start with the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Rumi, who addresses fundamental Zen questioning, providing useful perspective and language about the complexities of love. I discuss from the lens of Zen Mind the sublime song "Visions of Johanna" by the brilliant American Dharma bard Bob Dylan. Nature poet Mary Oliver addresses many contexts of Zen questioning in her work, including what Buddha really wished for us. Finally, American Zen pioneer Gary Snyder in his *Practice of the Wild* has presented an illuminating image for practice through the dynamics of wilderness, including our environment, our language, and our minds.

In the final, fifth section of this book, "American Zen Engagement," I shift to reflect on the relevance of Zen awareness and practical engagement to contemporary societal concerns. Zen is a living tradition, enacted as appropriate here and now. Zen is firmly rooted in the way of the bodhisattvas, the awakening beings dedicated to relieving suffering and to universal liberation. Bodhisattva practice reveals that awakening can never be a private, self-centered matter, as in reality all beings are intricately interconnected. If Buddhism were only about finding personal inner peace it would not have survived for twenty-five hundred years, and it would not deserve to survive today in the West.

Zen Buddhist values apply in three realms: First, bringing awareness to the complexity and suffering of this body and mind on our own seat. Second, when we return from formal practice to everyday activities, we express our meditative awareness and caring with friends, family, and coworkers, all the many beings we personally encounter. And third, we explore how to express buddhi heart to respond to the challenges and troubles of our society and culture. The fifth section of the book includes consideration of the mutually supportive relationship of the American democratic ideal of freedom with Buddhist universal liberation, referencing the many enduring insights and problematic career of Thomas Jefferson. Also considered are the deep conflict between consumerism and Zen, and Buddhist teachings about temporality and environmental awareness that may be informative to contemporary problems of climate damage and energy systems. Finally, I consider the importance of the ancient Buddhist teaching of right livelihood to our current societal challenges.

From this summary of the five sections of this book, it is apparent that I discuss a diverse range of topics herein. Furthermore, these essays are collected and edited from an assortment of contexts and to some extent still express a variety of my voices as well as interests. I thereby welcome the reader

dive in to this collection anywhere and skip to any essay that may spark your interest, rather than feeling obliged to read the whole in sequence.

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I have attempted to maintain consistency of capitalization and in diacriticals for Sanskrit and Japanese terms throughout this work, including changing these when they vary in quoted texts. *Dharma* generally capitalized when referring to truth or the teaching of buddhas, but lowercase *dharma*s used when referring to the elements of reality, as in the Abhidharma system. *Buddha* is capitalized when referring to Śākyamuni or other specific buddhas but generally lowercase when referring to “the many buddhas” or to “the principle of awakening as buddha.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The essays herein are based on, then revised and expanded from, selected published articles and transcriptions of my Dharma talks ranging from 1994 to 2010. From 1994 until I moved to Chicago at the beginning of 2007, I taught at the Mountain Source Sangha in the San Francisco Bay Area, which included small groups in San Rafael, San Francisco, and at Bolinas, where I gave Dharma talks at monthly sittings, a couple of which are adapted for chapters in this book. During this period I also gave periodic Sunday morning Dharma talks at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center near Muir Beach in Marin County, part of the San Francisco Zen Center where I received most of my Zen training. For chapters based on these Green Gulch talks are included here. The Bolinas and Green Gulch talks were all transcribed by Liz Tuomi of Bolinas. I am very grateful to Liz not only for these transcriptions, but for all her help with Mountain Source Sangha.

I started teaching at Ancient Dragon Zen Gate in Chicago in 2004, although I also was guest teaching at many Dharma centers around the United States throughout the period until I relocated to Chicago in January 2007. Ten of the chapters of this book are based on Dharma talks given at Ancient Dragon. I am very grateful to Jennifer Obst for transcribing all of these and the talk on the “Awesome Presence of Active Buddhas” given at the Clouds in Water Zen group in St. Paul Minnesota, in 2007. The latter chapter also includes some material from a talk given at Udumbara Sangha in Evanston, Illinois, in 2004, also kindly transcribed by Liz Tuomi. Thanks also to Jack Cram of Clouds in Water for transcribing my talk on “Genjōkōan” given there in 2006. The sources for each chapter are itemized at the end of the book.

I am very grateful to all the sangha members from both Mountain Source Sangha in the Bay Area and Ancient Dragon Zen Gate in Chicago, who participated in these Dharma talks as active listeners. Thanks also to Kevin Iverson, the website manager at Ancient Dragon Zen Gate, who has made the original versions of these materials available on the Ancient Dragon website. Thanks to Alan Senauk for helpful suggestions after reading an early version. I thank also all the people at Wisdom Publications who have made this book available, and especially Josh Bartok for his great assistance in focusing and clarifying this material.

Thanks to the many teachers in America and some in Japan who have helped inform my sense of how to convey this delightful Zen practice and teaching. Especially I thank my ordination and Dharma transmission teacher, Tenshin Reb Anderson, Senior Dharma Teacher and former Abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, for his tireless patience and kindness.

*The World of Zaze*



## THE PRACTICE OF GENTLE ATTENTION

IN THE SŌTŌ ZEN TRADITION, and in the style of the Suzuki Roshi lineage in which I trained, meditation is pretty gentle, settling in, just sitting. We try to find a way of practice that is sustainable if not necessarily comfortable, at least a restful and compassionate space in which to sit. In our practice we emphasize some sense of connecting with this space of zazen every day. Our zazen is just gentle upright sitting, not an athletic, competitive event, as if whomever could sit in the most difficult position for the longest without moving was the most enlightened. But at the same time, gentle, steady sitting should not be dull and listless. Despite the emphasis on not acquiring anything, this is not just idly passing time. Zazen is a question, an inquiry. Even when sitting quietly, gently, at the core of our sitting is the activity of questioning.

What are we doing in zazen? Each of us have some question that somewhere back there was behind our wanting to engage in this Buddhist meditation. What question has led you to face the wall in zazen, what is this? There is a question that we each have to explore.

The point of this practice of questioning, however, is not to discover an answer. We sit upright and centered, with ease and restfulness. And yet there is some problem, some question, something we are looking into. How do we practice with question? There is not just one way to do this, because we each have our own version of this question. But we must recognize that there is a question. How do we live this life? How do we take care of this world, face the problems that we each have in our life, the problems that we share together?

This practice of sitting involves facing the questions, learning about questioning, deepening our question, and allowing questions to arise.

## THE QUESTION IN YOUR NERVES

Such questioning is clarified in Bob Dylan's line "A question in your nerves is lit, Yet you know there is no answer fit, To satisfy, insure you not to quit, To keep it in your mind and not forget, That it is not he or she or them or it, That you belong to."<sup>1</sup> The first part, "A question in your nerves is lit," is just the fact that you are present, willing to engage in facing yourself in upright sitting. There is a question beyond your conscious questions. There is a question in your nerves, in your bones, in your marrow. But we do not need to be agitated and upset about getting the answer to that question. The point is to stay present with such questioning. Dylan says, "You know there is no answer fit." The answer may not be so important. Be willing to live upright and present in this body and mind, just as yourself, not trying to become somebody else, in this world and life with all its problems, willing to face the

question. Insights that may arise are part of the questioning process. But you need not receive some answer that you can write down and put on the wall so that all is settled. We learn to connect with the place of facing the questions in our nerves, lit on fire. It may not satisfy you, but you can keep the question in your mind, rather than some answer, and not forget. Practice is a way of relating and dancing with this questioning.

One expression of this questioning in the Zen tradition is koan study. In Zen this is the formal practice of working with a particular traditional story or saying. How do you stay present with the questions? Concerning these traditional stories or dialogues, the Japanese Sōtō Zen founder, Eihei Dōgen, often says, “Do you completely understand this? Please study this completely. Please thoroughly penetrate this question.”

### THREE THOUSAND WORLDS AMID EVERYDAY LIFE

We also have questions that arise in our own hearts, in our own body and mind, occurring via family relationships, and the people around us. Dōgen calls the questions that arise from our own struggle to find our center, from our own problems with being this person, *genjōkōan*, the koan as it manifests itself in our life. What is this appearing in front of me? As we sit in meditation, thoughts, feelings, our whole world appears before us, not just the wall or the floor. Being present, upright and gently aware in a settled posture, we can look at: What is this that thus comes? How is it that this, just this, is here in front of me? What is it? How do I engage it? The point is just staying present in relationship to the question or to the further questions that come up from it. Our way of responding and actually working with these questions is not about an answer. Yet something may arise, not based on our limited human consciousness. This arises from a deeper place that we connect with when we are sitting upright and willing to settle into this space and find our own way of sustaining this space. We can face our life in a way that is deeper than our limited human ideas about who we are and what the world is.

One traditional Buddhist teaching from the Japanese Tendai school is that in each moment or in each thought are three thousand worlds. The Zen approach to questioning involves these three thousand worlds in each thought. Every thought we have, if we tried to track it, is connected to so many aspects of our life, including things that we do not even know are in our life, that truly, in each moment of thought are three thousand worlds. Of course, three thousand may mean three hundred thousand or three hundred million.

### COMPLETE CHILD-LIKE QUESTIONING

Each of those three thousand worlds is a question. How can we face and include three thousand worlds? One useful teaching about questions appears in a poem by Wallace Stevens called “Questions are Remarks.”

In the weed of summer comes this green sprout why.  
The sun aches and ails and then returns halloo  
Upon the horizon amid adult enfantillages.

Its fire fails to pierce the vision that beholds it,  
Fails to destroy the antique acceptances,

Except that the grandson sees it as it is,

---

Peter the voyant, who says, “Mother what is that”—  
The object that rises with so much rhetoric,  
But not for him. His question is complete.

It is the question of what he is capable  
It is the extreme, the expert aetat. 2.  
[expert at being about age two]  
He will never ride the red horse she describes.

His question is complete because it contains  
His utmost statement. It is his own array,  
His own pageant and procession and display,

As far as nothingness permits . . . Hear him.  
He does not say, “Mother, my mother, who are you,”  
The way the drowsy, infant, old men do.<sup>2</sup>

Stevens illustrates how questions can be statements, or remarks. In the weed of summer, in the middle of our life, “comes this green sprout why” voiced by a child. Questions arise, moment by moment. The grandson sees the returning sun as it is. This spirit of questioning that is our zazen is like the questioning of a two-year-old, or a four- or six-year-old sometimes. Such elemental questioning comes from a place deeper than our ideas of who we are. It is just “this green sprout why.” Sitting moment after moment we do not necessarily articulate this questioning at the core of our sitting. In the middle of our sitting are spaces where there may not be so many thoughts, just calm settling. We need that space to sustain questioning. But even in the middle of the absence of questioning there is this question in our nerves that’s lit.

Sometimes the world brings the questioning to us very intently. Someone gets sick. You lose a loved one, or your house burns down. War is declared, or breaks out undeclared. And yet there is this basic question, even before the sun arises, just “this green sprout why.”

About his grandson, who sees the sun and says, “Mother what is that?” Wallace Stevens says, “His question is complete.” We do not need an answer to our question. To be present in the middle of a question is itself complete. What brings me back to zazen every day is this possibility of the taste of wholeness. It is actually all right for things to be the way they are. And yet that sense of completeness of wholeness, of it being okay to be this person in this world, has to do with this complete questioning of this “green sprout why.”

Wallace Stevens goes on, “It is the question of what he is capable.” The child’s question is complete because it contains his utmost statement. In Zen koan work a statement may be a question and a question can be a statement. The phrases in the old Zen stories are sometimes utterances expressing this complete questioning as utmost statements. Stevens says about his grandson, “it is his own array, his own pageant and procession and display.” Zazen can be an expression, a performance of art. That too is a questioning. How do we express our question, the question in our life, in our world through our zazen? That does not just refer to sitting, finding your inner balance as you wait for the

bell to ring. This space of upright questioning permeates and performs in the rest of our life. “It is his own array, his own pageant and procession and display, as far as nothingness permits . . . Hear him.”

## IMAGINATION QUESTIONS

Near the end of “A Vision of the Last Judgment,” William Blake champions creative imagination, asking whether the sun is merely “a round disk of fire” in the sky, like a golden coin. Instead he proclaims the radiant sun a wondrous event, complete with a “Heavenly host crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’” in celebration.<sup>3</sup> Blake encourages us to fully engage our imagination in questioning of reality. Blake calls forth the visionary exalted sun as miraculous. All of life comes from the sun. And yet if you tried to stand on the sun, you would burn up. The call to imagination is part of Zen’s Mahāyāna legacy as well with the envisioning of bodhisattvas, awakening beings. Creative vision, sometimes childlike, enhances our ability to explore and question the reality around us.

Settling in to the dynamic quality of zazen as question and inquiry requires willingness to be present for this question. Each question is three thousand questions, and a good question provides more questions. Answers do come sometimes, but they bring more questions as well. Can we live in the middle of impermanence and uncertainty? Can we live in the middle of a life that is a question? As we build our life and try to stabilize and care for our situation, we do our best to make it all work. But still, we do not know what will happen. Everything could disappear in a flash. This question is never complete. It is our own array. And it must be all right to live in a life of impermanence, because that is where we are, and abide.

## HOW CAN YOU BECOME A BUDDHA?

Dōgen’s comments on an old Zen story help clarify the realm of questioning in zazen. The story concerns two old Chinese teachers, Mazu Daoyi (709–788; Jpn.: Baso Dōitsu) and his teacher Nanyue Huairang (677–744; Jpn.: Nangaku Ejō). Mazu was a great Zen teacher who later had 139 enlightened disciples according to some accounts. But this story occurred when he was a young monk. Mazu was sitting zazen and his teacher Nanyue asked, “What are you trying to do sitting in meditation?” Mazu replied, “I’m trying to become a buddha.” Hearing that, Nanyue picked up a tile, sat down, and started polishing it. Finally Mazu noticed him and asked, “Teacher, what are you doing?” Nanyue said, “I’m polishing this tile to make it into a mirror.” When Mazu perplexedly asked, “How could you make a mirror from polishing a tile?” Nanyue responded, “How can you make a buddha from sitting zazen?”

Alan Watts told this story as an excuse for not needing to engage in sitting meditation. But Dōgen gives it a different spin. He says, yes, you should polish a tile to make a mirror. And you should meditate aiming to become Buddha, even though in his early writing, “Fukanzazengi” (Universal Recommendations for Zazen), Dōgen says, “Have no designs on becoming buddha.”<sup>5</sup>

Dōgen in his comment on polishing a tile is concerned with the basic question, “What is buddha?” This question implies: How do I live this life? How can I be aware? How can I be wise, compassionate, and kind? How can I get beyond all of my human pettiness and greed, anger, and delusion? This question arises somewhere amid the three thousand questions in each thought moment.

Dōgen’s commentary to the beginning of the story has to do with this fundamental questioning in zazen. In response to Nanyue asking Mazu what he was aiming or figuring to do in zazen, Dōgen says, “We should quietly ponder and penetrate this question.” What are we up to in zazen? Is there an aim?



beyond the framework of zazen itself that has not yet been accomplished? Another possibility would be to not aim at anything at all. That might be the way to be buddha. These are each real questions. Dōgen offers a whole series of them. Then he says, “Just in the moment of sitting zazen, what kind of aim, intention, or design is being actualized? We should diligently inquire, in detail.” This sitting is questioning, closely investigating. This questioning may include our usual mode of figuring something out. But it goes deeper. This question pulses within your nerves, not about mere answers.

## THE CARVED DRAGON’S QUESTION

Dōgen adds, “Do not get stuck in loving a carved dragon. We should go forward and love the real dragon.” This refers to a story recorded in Han dynasty China (roughly 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.) about a man who loved carvings and paintings of dragons, whose whole house was filled with images of dragons. One time a dragon was flying overhead, and he heard about this man who really liked dragons. He thought, “I will go and visit him, he’ll be very happy.” So the dragon flew down and stuck his head in the window. But the man screamed in terror. Dōgen suggests not getting stuck in loving carved dragons but loving the real dragon. When you sit in the middle of question, you never know what is going to come up and stick its head in your window. This is another way of discussing the buddha toward which Dōgen recommends we aim.

Dōgen says, “You should study that both the carved dragon and the real dragon have the power of forming clouds and rain.” Even the carved dragon has great power. Some people actually imagine that their practice is not real but just a picture of zazen. But even that carved dragon has tremendous power. Dōgen says, “Neither value the remote nor disparage what is remote. Be accustomed and intimate with the remote. Neither disparage what is close, nor value the close. Be accustomed and intimate with the close.” Whether it seems far away or close, whatever our idea of buddha is, examine it. Be intimate with its closeness and its remoteness. Dōgen says, “Do not take the eyes lightly nor attach too much weight to the eyes. Do not put too much weight to the ear nor take the ears too lightly. [Keep] the ears and eyes sharp and clear.” Thus we sit with eyes open, gazing at the wall or the floor. We sit with ears open, willing to hear the sounds of the suffering of the world, of the people wandering by outside, and of our own questioning and uncertainty.

## BUDDHA’S AIM

In response to his teacher’s question, “What are you aiming at when you sit zazen?” Mazu said, “I’m aiming at becoming buddha.” Dōgen questions that statement:

We should clarify and penetrate these words. What does becoming buddha mean? Does becoming buddha mean that we are enabled to become buddha by Buddha? Does becoming buddha mean that we make Buddha into a buddha? Does becoming buddha mean the manifestation of one face or two faces of buddha? Is aiming at becoming buddha dropping off body and mind? Or is it aiming at becoming buddha dropped off?

One could spend a lifetime on each of these questions. All three thousand questions are there in your sitting, somewhere in the question you have about your own life.

Dōgen says, “Aiming at becoming buddha, does he mean that even though there are ten thousand methods (or Dharma gates) to becoming buddha, becoming buddha continues to be entangled with the

aiming?" Even though there are ten thousand ways in which each of us is this "green sprout why," ~~this green sprout buddha, it continues to be entangled with our aiming and designing.~~ Where are we going to sit in relationship to the question? How are we going to be present in the middle of just looking at "what is this?" How am I going to respond to this particular situation? When we are willing to be here, completely, we sit in wholeness and wonder, "What am I up to?" We cannot avoid those three thousand worlds and this "green sprout why." And yet, going back to Wallace Stevens, the question is complete because it contains our utmost statement. It is our own array, our own pageant and procession, and display.

## THE FAITH OF THE COLORADO RIVER

Zen questioning is a very gentle questioning. It is the kind of questioning that the Colorado River asks the Grand Canyon over centuries and centuries. It is gentle but persistent. Can we stop all the wars of our country wages? That is one question, but there are so many other questions behind that. How do we live together with peace and justice? How do we take care of the world of our own family and relations and workplace, as well as our nation, with peace and justice? How do we sit zazen with peace and justice for our own body and mind? All of those questions are present in each of them. There is not one right answer for all of us. It is not even about getting answers, but it does concern how we express the question. My way of expressing it and yours and others' are all going to be different, and they may change tomorrow. But if we are present in the middle of this question, then we can proceed. And if we are afraid, that is all right; that is just another question.

Speaking of questions, the element of faith arises. One description of faith involves letting go of our resistance to receiving. Facing the question, we also face our own resistance to that question. Our practice is not necessarily the removal of the resistance, but first just recognizing resistance. Indeed, questioning is faith. There is no faith without questioning. Faith that is allergic to questioning is just a fundamentalist blind dogma. But faith-questioning is how we sit upright. This is not necessarily about releasing the reluctance or resistance but about being right there in the middle of the reluctance. Our reluctance is this question about whether I can be here, in the middle of question. Can I be willing to be the question I am? Can I really let that green sprout come forth? Faith to doubt or question means being willing to be a question ourselves. Sometimes the people who are most weird or odd, who are walking questions, may be the most inspiring. Those people allow us the opportunity to see our own reluctance to question, so they can inspire faith.

Facing our reluctance is the practice of upright questioning. We aim to be the question we are.

## BREATHING OUR POSTURE

**Z**<sup>AZEN MIND</sup> and its transformative function depend on posture and breathing. For zazen we emphasize upright posture, as this posture becomes a way in which we learn an attitude that goes beyond the formal meditation hall practice. Thus we find our deep inner balance, not leaning left or right, not leaning forward or holding back. We try to find the center, a dynamic place that always is shifting. To find upright posture that is relaxed and not tense is subtle; it takes a while to find our seat in this practice.

Breathing is always happening, but attention to this inhalation, then this exhalation, is a way of knitting together the whole of our zazen awareness. When we inhale we are actually breathing with our whole body, oxygen goes through all of our arteries, throughout the body. Feeling breath as part of our posture and being aware of breath is very helpful, not just in the formal zazen itself, but also as the awareness of zazen becomes part of our everyday activity. Breath provides excellent guidance to “realign” our zazen mind and body.

The practice is available to us always, and we can do it anywhere anytime—yet many people try to sit on their own and find it difficult. Practically speaking, to have a sangha place where we experience and join others in zazen helps, and also to have a Dharma context where we are exposed to the teaching tradition may be necessary as a container in which to actually take on the practice.

## PRACTICE WITH THE SIXTH AND EIGHTH CONSCIOUSNESS

Mind in zazen and how it functions is a huge topic. Indian Buddhism and the Zen tradition in China and Japan include many teachings about mind. One Indian Buddhist teaching about mind, particularly helpful in practice, concerns the “six consciousnesses.” Our usual idea about our mind and thought processes is fairly limited, but the zazen experience opens up different aspects of mind. The Heart Sutra refers to these six consciousnesses. First is eye consciousness, very important to human beings as we are very visually oriented. When there is an eye object, a shape or a color, and an eye organ, the capacity to see, then visual awareness arises. This is part of our consciousness as we sit facing the wall, even as not so much is apparently happening.

Visual awareness is one aspect of consciousness, along with sound consciousness, which is also recommended as a helpful meditation object. We can settle in meditation hearing the traffic and other sounds around us. We also experience nose or smell consciousness, and tongue or taste consciousness and physical consciousness. The tactile is very important in zazen, in which we feel our body in a new way, feeling the pressure of the cushion on our bottom, feeling the tension in our knees or our back or our shoulders, feeling the effort of holding our hands in the cosmic mudra, and feeling breath as part

of our posture. Physical consciousness is subtle.

But the sixth consciousness is foreign to our usual ideas about mind. The sixth is mind consciousness. Thoughts happen as we sit, they pass by, and we can be aware of these thoughts as if we were seeing scenery just as for sounds, colors, or a shape on a wall. We are used to thinking that we can control our thoughts. One of the first things we realize in zazen is that many thoughts arise, the tap of keys are rolling, and that this aspect of consciousness is not under our control. We can notice that we have been thinking about something and not aware of our breath or posture. The twentieth-century Japanese Sōtō master Uchiyama Roshi said that as we sit, our stomach continues to secrete digestive juices, and in the same way, our brain continues to secrete thoughts.<sup>6</sup> In this approach to thought and consciousness we need not identify with those thoughts. Our usual practice instruction is to just let thoughts arise, not trying to push them away, but not doing anything with them either. Thoughts arise and we let them go, just as we let the sound of vehicles pass by. But of course, thoughts are more complicated, because our consciousness is deeply patterned based on certain kinds of thoughts and ways of thinking. The Indian Yogācāra Buddhist system, a branch of Indian bodhisattva philosophy, describes in detail how we get caught in this sixth consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

The point of talking about this in the context of zazen practice is to provide a framework for just sitting, for being present with thoughts, allowing thoughts to come, and go, not doing anything with them while at the same time seeing when you are caught up in some thought—and again letting thoughts go, and appear again.

Thoughts returning persistently may sometimes relate to the Yogācāra eighth consciousness. But first, the seventh consciousness in Yogācāra teaching is the faculty of separating ourselves from our experience. Humans naturally believe that there is some subject smelling or tasting or feeling or thinking. We think there exists some self and some other “out there.” This is the fundamental problem, that we separate ourselves from others and the world, the wall, and our own breathing. This is what humans do, and we need to be aware and know that we each are not the only one doing so. Human beings get caught in a strange form of alienation from our world.

The consciousness that we usually think of is about discrimination, making distinctions. We discern and separate this from that. Buddhist practice is not about getting rid of such consciousness but about seeing through our discriminations and not being caught by them. Getting rid of thinking is not the point; the point is settling into a deeper awareness that may include but is not limited by discriminations. The Yogācāra teaching describes an eighth consciousness where patterns of thinking are stored, both positive and negative. We have the capacity to support the positive, and yet all our thought patterns are stored in the eighth consciousness. Our own experience, what happens during the day, and all thought objects that occur appear out of this storehouse from many lifetimes in the eighth consciousness. Even without taking literally the notion of many lifetimes, we can still see the metaphoric storehouse simply as the thoughts created and accumulated from our years of living. All these many thoughts are connected to other thoughts. As we sit, naturally these thoughts arise. As we become intimate with these thought patterns, and aware of their positive and negative effects, we may be able to increasingly disengage from negative patterns and support helpful tendencies.

## THE BACKGROUND BEYOND THINKING

An old story from the Zen tradition about mind in zazen is perhaps a little simpler than the Yogācāra system. The Zen master Yaoshan Weiyan (745–828; Jpn.: Yakusan Igen) was sitting very upright and still and a student asked him, “What are you thinking of, sitting there so steadfastly?” Yaoshan said,

am thinking of not thinking,” or another way of translating it is, “I am thinking of that which does not think.”

This student was very good, and so we remember this dialogue. He said, “How do you do that? How do you think of not thinking?” Or maybe, “How is thinking of that which does not think?” Yaoshan responded using a different negative. He said, “Beyond thinking.” It has also been translated “Nonthinking.”<sup>8</sup>

This concerns foreground and background. We are used to thinking about the thoughts that are floating around in our sixth consciousness. We have been trained as human beings to have an ego; this is not only a problem in our culture, and it is not necessarily a bad thing. We need to be able to go through the day, pay the rent, take care of our lives. Buddhist practice is not about getting rid of the ego, it is about not getting caught by it and instead seeing this background that Yaoshan refers to as “beyond thinking.”

In terms of foreground and background, we do not exactly shift from the foreground to the background; it is more a kind of access between them, a link created. The background maybe can only be expressed in the foreground, but we begin to find more access to the background, or perhaps it has more access to us. Foreground and background have many layers, but a connection with this deeper awareness becomes available. When we intellectualize about the background and make up stories about it, that only becomes more of the foreground. But this background can emerge in each fresh breath.

Zazen offers this actual experience of a deeper awareness. It cannot exactly be called thinking, but it is a kind of awareness, a kind of consciousness. We could call it “beyond thinking,” thinking that goes beyond our usual thinking, thinking of the beyond, or thinking that is beyond any thinking that does not go beyond. It is a kind of thinking, but not thinking that cuts things up into little pieces. This awareness puts things together into wholeness and allows a deeper wholeness to emerge.

A guest shows up from beyond creation, or maybe from deep within creation. We do not know from where. One of the usual ways of minding mind is figuring out mind, and we have difficulty not trying to do that. But the background awareness is about just being with, and allowing something to emerge from our belly, or from between our shoulders, or from the end of an exhalation, or from somewhere we do not know. We become open to the unknown, and we need not fear that. We start to develop a very intimate and deep relationship with something we all share but with which each of us has our own particular relationship.

Very naturally as we sit in zazen, thoughts, sounds, and sensations are present, all of the first six consciousnesses. Some versions of the Yogācāra suggest seeing clearly how the eighth consciousness is guiding the six consciousnesses. But our practice is just to watch the whole thing, to be present and aware from this deeper place that allows the thinking but is not caught by it. Sometimes this is called Mind with a capital M, but calling it anything is part of sixth consciousness, part of discriminative consciousness. Call it anything you want; if you want a name, “beyond thinking” works. The point is to settle into the experience of just being present on our cushion, allowing ourselves to be here studying how it is that we are present with the details of our physical posture, and really enjoying and engaging how it is to inhale and exhale.

## CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION BEYOND WORDS

Allowing these sensations to be present, in ways that we may not even recognize, we start to connect with this experience of a deeper awareness, the background of all the sensations. You may wonder

what the point of this might be. Again, this is not about getting rid of the first six consciousnesses, not losing your faculty for discriminative thinking. Zazen's transformational function needs to be expressed through the bodhisattva precepts and values, and thus we need to use our abilities to taste and smell and sense in all kinds of ways, as well as to discriminate and discern. But words do not go to it, because words take things apart. It is difficult to talk about—and yet even people who recently began zazen practice each have experienced this. You may not be able to say anything about it or recognize it. But somehow, being present and accepting this deeper background awareness not caught by conventional thinking provides a great resource, opening to wider possibilities.

Zazen is a form of creative expression that fosters creative energy. Zazen is a mode of creative expression because it allows this “beyond thinking” to inform our everyday activities. New possibilities can appear, right in the lamentations of the particular life you are living, with your work, your family, and your friends, right in the specific context of the world we create together. As we are willing to settle into a regular practice of zazen, we develop a capacity to allow our lives to be informed by this beyond thinking, this deeper awareness. Again, this is not trying to achieve something called “beyond thinking.” Yaoshan said, “I think of not thinking.” He did not say, “I don't think.”

This awareness itself *is* transformative. It is not that through zazen eventually there will be some transformation. That would be our habitual, acquisitive way of thinking, which arises because of how we have been conditioned by culture and language and family dynamics. Habitual patterns lead to thinking that if you do zazen now, then eventually, later on, you will achieve this transformation. But actually, the transformative function is happening in each moment of awareness.

How does this transformation develop? Zazen includes the craft of letting go. This practice of letting go opens up a deeper kind of awareness, and unfolds through our practice and experience. Sometimes it opens up suddenly and dramatically, and sometimes not. This transformative function does not operate according to some program or formula about awareness or transformative function. It appears in each breath, in each moment of awareness, right in this present awareness.

Yet even this amount of talking about the transformative function is a little excessive. The transformative function is already present in your zazen before you hear about it. Awareness itself does the buddha work. This is not only awareness of thinking but your awareness of hearing, your openness to seeing the wall in front of you, whether the wall is white plaster or red brick, or even when you imagine the world beyond that wall. As you sit, what is this?

This awareness requires you just to show up and be present. And then to continue to show up and be present, with each inhalation, with each exhalation, to pay attention. This is not some particular kind of attention, like a military yell, “Attention!” That might help, at times, to salute the buddha nature in your zazen, but what is most effective is steady, gentle, persistent, generous attention to what is happening, in yet another period of sitting upright on your cushion, with eyes, ears, nose, body open. This transformative function works over time, but also within each breath there is a kind of opening, a capacity, or increased tolerance, both in body and mind, for the manifestation of this body right now.

## ZAZEN AND COMFORT

As for discomfort in zazen, trying to just sit through excruciating pain is not necessary or helpful. However, it is vital to sometimes go beyond your idea of your comfort zone in zazen, to be willing to feel a little discomfort in your knee, or your shoulder, or lower back, or in your heart. Pay attention and bring your awareness to your body; awareness is not just mental but happens physically as well.

in your mind. Bringing awareness to the details of your posture, there is an opening or capacity, letting go of some idea of how your body should be, and a willingness to tolerate some further level of discomfort. This is exactly the transformative function in your body. This is a yogic practice to become more flexible physically as well as mentally.

In your mind as well, thoughts come and go, the brain continues to secrete thoughts, as we settle and breathe and bring awareness to our thoughts, without trying to crush or control them. Without needing to jump in and float down the stream of thought, whenever we do, just return and sit by the side of the stream, and pay attention. This awareness applied to the mind, and its thought stream, also develops capacity or tolerance. We are able to tolerate a greater level of confusion, a wider capacity to be present in the background awareness along with the various thoughts. We might have thoughts that we do not like, or we may notice patterns of thinking that are uncomfortable, or for which we feel ashamed or berate or blame ourselves. With this awareness and transformative function we can simply be present and accept this aspect of being human. We may develop a steadiness, a greater tolerance and openness to how it is to be this body and this mind. Of course they are not separate, although we strangely think of them as separate.

Awareness is transformative in developing openness, readiness, and willingness to be present and show up in our physical and mental sensations, to just sit with what is happening and notice all the thoughts, not trying to push away or manipulate them. Each moment with each breath includes this openness, capacity, and tolerance. Period after period of sitting, we continue to develop the craft of showing up and paying attention to our life, we start to have a steadiness and a confidence in the practice itself, that the buddhas are supporting us, that the grasses and trees and tiles and walls are supporting us, and vice versa. We are connected to each other and to many beings in the world, to all the people we have sat with together and to all the people we may have been present with in other ways and to all the people who allow and support us in many ways to show up this day. Each moment allows this creative energy, this life force, this dynamic possibility that is part of our awareness when we pay attention.

## EXTENDING THE CRAFT OF ZAZEN

Awareness is transformative and this transformative quality also supports our awareness. Zazen is a mode of creative expression. How we conduct ourselves in the meditation hall is our way of expressing buddha mudra, a buddha's posture, on our cushions. This practice helps find the creative energy in our whole life.

Appreciate your creative activities as you move around during your busy life in the world. You may be a musician, gardener, or parent, or perform obviously creative work with some product, like music, pictures, or poetry, but all kinds of activities can be creative. Notice your life interests, whatever they are. You might like reading mystery stories, or going for walks, or cooking, or washing the dishes. Attend to what interests you and what you enjoy doing, and feel how that resonates with your zazen. In the middle of your zazen, you need not think about those activities, but they might naturally appear anyway as part of your thought stream as you sit. That too may help connect to the deeper creative energy we touch in zazen.

In each breath, in each inhalation and exhalation, a kind of raw, tender freshness is available. Each breath is new, yet each also depends on every single previous breath you have ever breathed. And each inhalation and exhalation you take now is absolutely necessary to every inhalation and exhalation you will ever take. Our life is alive right now. This fact is very easy to ignore. A lot of our culture and i

entertainments encourage us to run away from the reality of the aliveness of our life. But the raw open uniqueness of each breath particularly arrives when you pay attention to your life and your daily activities. We all have chores that we think we need to perform. But it is possible to enjoy washing the dishes, or taking out the garbage? Pay attention to that enjoyment in your creative activities in the world, including the details. Whatever it is you do, can you feel this creative energy?

As your capacity and tolerance for this transformative creativity opens, you might let go of some activities, and you might not be as interested in some things as before. You are alive, and change, and sometimes that is necessary. Keep turning this awareness and transformative function to that to which you give interest and attention. Notice how what you find interesting and enjoy is related to your zazen and might feed your zazen. That does not mean thinking *about* them, but your practice of listening to or making music, or of going for walks, cooking or gardening, or whatever your attention is engaged in, has something to do with the awareness of zazen mind and this transformative function in the middle of awareness. You need not run away from the person sitting on your cushion. Enjoy showing up in the activities of your life and see how they unfold and deepen.

The craft of practice includes just re-minding yourself of this mind during the course of the day and the course of your life, just as you do in the middle of a period of zazen. Mindfully inhaling and exhaling is very helpful; really developing in your body enjoyment and appreciation of your breathing. In the middle of your week in some challenging or frustrating activity, you might just remember to breathe.

## FACING HABITS

In our zazen and our lives off the cushion, we must also face the fact of karmic entanglements, with our addictive patterns, habits of grasping and of feeling frustrated, fearful, lonely, or confused; this is all part of what it is to be human. Our reactions from those can cause problems and prevent us from settling more deeply into this source of creative energy. Part of our practice is facing such karmic entanglements. You do not have to turn away. Be who you are, and be kind to yourself. We learn compassion for the world by being helpful to ourselves, willing to breathe into those sticky places to which we are willing to look at our dark side and apply this awareness and transformative function. Of course we cannot suddenly let go of our addictions or change our stubborn habit patterns, even when we see them clearly. As Bob Dylan sang while “stuck inside of” Mobile, “Here I sit so patiently, Waiting to find out what price, You have to pay to get out of Going through all these things twice.”<sup>9</sup> I say to Bob, “Only twice? You must be kidding.” Well Dylan is a genius; most of us must go through these things many, many times.

As we pay attention to all the patterns we need to see through, settling and developing our capacities, we can learn to be with our thought streams and our habit patterns and to let go of their hold. But usually we cannot simply fix or change them. Some of them are going to be there in subtler and subtler ways for our whole life, or for lifetimes to come, but still, we need not be caught and react to our habit patterns. When we do react, how do we then forgive ourselves and just bring awareness, show up, and be present, and not run away from these habit patterns? Breathe and enjoy your breathing and your life, enjoy whatever it is you find engaging, interesting, enlivening. See the awareness and transformative function in all of those activities.

And then zazen will be with you always.

Please enjoy your sitting.



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