

Introduction to Zazen

Migaku SATO

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With this presentation I would like to try, as far as possible, to explain in words and concepts what “zazen” or “Zen” is, so that a general guideline will be accessible to all who wish to begin zazen.

When I say something like this, I already hear a fundamental objection, namely that the essence of Zen cannot be explained with “words.” That is true. However, it is very difficult for modern people to start something properly without first having some idea about what they should be doing. So, I think it is not without significance to offer a rough outline as a motivation for beginning zazen with assurance.

1. Sanbôzen

The following outline largely corresponds to the “Introduction” [*Sôsan-no-hanashi*, 総参の話] for beginners in the “Sanbôzen” [三宝禅] School of Zen in Japan, to which the Sanbo-Zendo Weyarn belongs. The presentation does not, however, reproduce 100% verbatim the introduction of the Sanbôzen in Japan; the details depend on my understanding, so I alone am responsible for the following content.

Probably most of you don't know very much about “Sanbôzen,” so a brief explanation about it would be helpful.

“Sanbôzen” was founded after World War II (1954) by Yasutani Haku'un Roshi (安谷白雲, 1885-1973), originally a Buddhist monk of the Sôtô School, and officially recognized as an independent “religious foundation” in Japan¹. Thus, the Zen organization began its regular Zen activities. Since Yasutani Roshi came from the Sôtô tradition, the group is basically oriented to the Sôtô School in terms of sutra recitation and general ritual, but at the same time it has integrated the *Kôan training* (traditionally called “Kanna Zen”) of the Rinzai School as an important practice element. This is the orientation initiated by Yasutani Roshi's own master, Harada Sogaku Roshi (原田祖岳, 1871-1961), at Hosshinji Temple (belonging to the Sôtô School) in Obama, Fukui Prefecture, Japan. It has become the basic principle of an independent Zen school through Yasutani Roshi. (This kind of verbal “Zazen Introduction” for the beginners had been initiated by Harada Roshi.) That the Sanbôzen School represents the Kôan schooling of “Kanna Zen” means that it places strong emphasis on the direct, experiential acknowledgement of your true Essence, usually called “enlightenment,” “kensho,” or “satori.” In other words, “Sanbôzen” has integrated the merits of both the Sôtô and Rinzai Schools and developed as a Zen

¹ At that time it was named “Sanbô-Kyôdan” [三宝教団, *Religious Organization Sanbô*], renamed “Sanbôzen” in 2018.

movement in its own right.

An important characteristic of this school is that it basically considers itself a *lay group*. There are very few “professional monks” as members of Sanbôzen; moreover, these monks are not priests of Sanbôzen itself, but come – in terms of official affiliation – from other Buddhist schools. That is, Sanbôzen does not form a priesthood of its own. The fact that Sanbôzen is a lay group means that the members of this group are not “Buddhist clergy” but ordinary people working in this world with a certain profession in a specific place in society; they are engaged in Zen entirely out of inner-personal motivation, and this has nothing to do with any professional perspective at all. Even if you have trained in Zen at Sanbôzen, you don’t acquire any official or professional qualification as a “priest.” Probably for this reason, Sanbôzen is very little known in Japan, and is often seen as an “amateur” group by the monastic schools. But in Europe and North America, roughly estimated, about half the people who practice Zen either belong directly to Sanbôzen, or owe their Zen practice indirectly to Sanbôzen, or are disciples (or grand-disciples) of Zen teachers trained by Yasutani Haku'un Roshi before Sanbôzen was founded. There is a very interesting historical situation here, which probably deserves special attention.

Another important aspect: Although the Sanbôzen school is Buddhist-oriented in terms of rites, it takes, as a matter of fact, a *religion-free* position. In other words, zazen is basically understood as an “anthropological” exercise irrelevant of the practitioners’ “religion” or “denomination.” Sanbôzen does not claim that you cannot practice zazen properly without becoming a “Buddhist.” Rather, Sanbôzen holds that you are able to radically deepen your spiritual foundation through zazen, no matter what religion you may belong to (or even if you have no religion at all). If you practice a particular religion, it will certainly become deeper and truer through zazen. In any case, it is emphasized that through zazen the root of your own humanity can be directly experienced and, as a consequence, meaningfully expressed in your real life.

So, once again, it should be said that the whole presentation of Zen practice varies quite a bit depending on the school (Sôtô, Rinzai or Sanbôzen). The following explanation of zazen is essentially the understanding of the Sanbôzen School of Zen.

2. What Is Zen?

The question “What is Zen?” may sound like a big and difficult problem. I

would like to begin by explaining the terms.

2.1. *Zen*

This Japanese word, according to the most convincing explanation, is the abbreviation of the word *Zenna* [禪那; in Chinese: *channa*], which in turn is a phonetic transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyâna* or the Pali word (a dialect in the western part of ancient India) *jhâna* into the Chinese characters. In general, this word means “meditative absorption into yourself.” More specifically, it is explained as “unification of body and soul through meditative absorption”².

What is the purpose or goal of this pursuit? There may be different nuances depending on the view, but it means a path to deep Wisdom through which the true Essence of human existence can be clearly grasped.

Historically, this path of practice originated much earlier than Buddhism. It already existed in the ancient Indus Civilization (around 2600~1800 BCE). That is to say: *Dhyâna* or *jhâna* in and of itself does not denote a systematically organized “religion,” but a more comprehensive human endeavor to delve deeply into yourself in order to fundamentally activate the deepest spiritual-mental layers of human beings.

This method of practice was then taken up and practiced as the main method of practice by the religious system called Buddhism, whose founder was “Shakyamuni Buddha” (secular name: Gautama Siddhartha, ca. 463~383 BCE). This original fact already indicates that this way of practice can in principle also be combined with other religious views besides Buddhism, such as Christianity, Islam, etc. Of course, it must be assumed that the traditional concepts or frameworks of those religions mentioned are fundamentally transformed and deepened through this practice.

When *dhyâna* (or *jhâna*) came to China as a basic part of the Buddhist movement (ca. 1st Century CE, it was transcribed – as mentioned above – *Channa* (in Japanese: *Zenna*), and so “Zen” came into being. At the same time, “Zen” underwent a profound further development: some modifications of the posture were made (see below); especially in “Zen Buddhism,” which developed in the 7th ~10th Centuries, the clear experience of essential reality was consciously emphasized and its integration into everyday reality was strived for. Nevertheless – or precisely because of this – the basic character of Zen as a way of grasping the deepest reality

² *Iwanami-Bukkyo-Jiten* [Iwanami Dictionary of Buddhism], Tokyo, 1989, p. 496.

of our existence has always remained intact.

2.2. Zazen

Zazen means “Zen in sitting” [*za*, 坐 = sitting]. The main reason for this prominent feature is that Zen is most effectively realized through a specific way of *sitting*. (The expression “Zen in sitting” already indicates, however, that there can be “Zen in walking” [*hokô-zen*, 歩行禪, or *kinhin*, 経行] or “Zen in standing” [*ritsu-zen*, 立禪] at the same time. It may be possible to practice “Zen in lying down” [*Ga-Zen*, 臥禪]. Here we mainly talk about “zazen.”)

3. How to Sit in Zazen

3.1. *Zammai* [三昧, absorption]

In the explanation of *zen/dhyâna*, we have spoken of “absorption.” In fact, the *technical* aim of zazen is to enter “absorption.” Traditionally, it is called *zammai* or *jô* [定]. The word *zammai* is originally a transcription of the Sanskrit word *samadhi*; mutatis mutandis it is translated as *jô* [(deep) stabilization]. In essence, it means the consciousness becoming fully unified in deep inner absorption. *Dhyâna*, after all, means entering into this state of mind.

Why should we enter into this state? Because this experience (and its repetition) is the best preparation for becoming aware of our ultimate Reality and thus of our true Self.

In the following, with this preliminary understanding, zazen will be explained in detail.

3.2. Bodily Posture

Traditionally, it is said that there are three main elements in the actual practice of zazen: *bodily posture*, *breathing*, and *inner posture*. (These three elements are also fundamental in other meditative bodily practices, such as *qi-gong*, so this is not a proprium of zazen).

The first element, *bodily posture* [chôshin, 調身], is to bring the body into the proper zazen posture. In short, how to sit in zazen.

3.2.1. What should you prepare?

Before we talk about posture in the strict sense, there are some important “preparations” to make.

a. Mat

First, you need a soft mat. It should be large enough so that the knees can directly touch the mat even when sitting in the so-called lotus position. If you don't have such a large mat, you can fold a woolen blanket to achieve the appropriate size and softness of the sitting surface. It is not recommended to sit directly on the hard floor (or even on a *tatami* mat), as the knees will slip and lack stability; also, the hardness of the floor may hurt the knees over time. These mats are usually provided in an established zendô [禅堂, *Zen hall*].

b. *Zafu*

Furthermore, usually a round cushion called a *zafu* [坐蒲] is used to sit on. This is common in the Sôtô School, while the Rinzai School traditionally folds up a smaller sitting mat for this purpose and uses it as a sitting cushion – although many Rinzai people nowadays like to use a round *zafu* as well. These days, you can easily buy a suitable *zafu* on the Internet. A furnished zendô usually has a sufficient number of *zafus* available .

Before you start your *zazen*, adjust the height of the sitting cushion to allow you the most comfortable position for sitting up straight. Some may say that you should sit on the cushion assigned to you without any further action, but not everyone can sit well on a low cushion. The condition of the spine as well as the joints differs from person to person. Accordingly (and also depending on sitting experience) everyone needs their own seat height. Those who need a higher *zafu* should prepare the optimal height in advance by placing an extra cushion, a suitably folded blanket etc. under the *zafu*. All these preparations should be made carefully.

3.2.2. The types of sitting

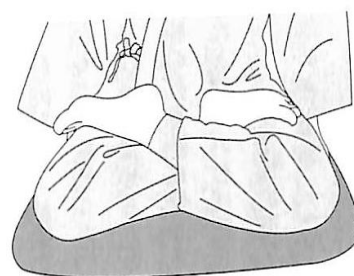
There are four: lotus sitting, Japanese sitting, bench sitting and chair sitting.

In the “lotus sitting,” a distinction is made between “full-lotus sitting” and “half-lotus sitting.” The word *lotus* is traditionally used for the kind of sitting with the legs crossed.

a. Full-lotus sitting [*kekka-fuza*, 結跏趺坐]

This way of sitting has been around for several millennia and is also considered the main type of sitting in *zazen*. The standard form of this *full-lotus sitting* is to place the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh. On the question of how deeply the two legs should be crossed, it is usually said that it is more than enough if the tips of the big toes of both feet touch the outer edge of the thighs on which the feet are placed. Both knees touch the mat. If at first the knees need some kind of support (such as an extra mat or a small pillow underneath

them), so that they can stay solid on the mat, go for it without inhibition; in time the hip joints will get used to it and the knees will touch the floor directly without support. In any case, this is the most stable and ideal form of sitting for zazen since it forms a triangle – or more precisely a kind of trapezium – with the knees and the sitting bones of the buttocks. However, if you are not accustomed to it, this sitting will at first unfortunately be accompanied by considerable pain in the legs.



The order of interlacing the legs, known as the “standard form,” is traditionally called *gôma-za* [降魔坐、the demon-controlling sitting]; this is, in fact, the most common way of sitting. When asked why the right leg is “squeezed,” so to speak, by the left leg, the normal explanation refers to the right leg being more active than the left, which means to bring the more active side to rest. In truth, I think, this has more to do with the function of the cerebral hemispheres: by “suppressing” the right leg in this way, the activity of the left brain is slowed down, while by exposing the left leg, the right brain is activated. As we know, the left brain is the part responsible for our conceptual knowledge, logical thinking and analytical abilities, but these are supposed to be shut down during zazen. On the other hand, the right brain is associated with intuition, holistic comprehension, and integration – the qualities that are in line with those to be activated through zazen.

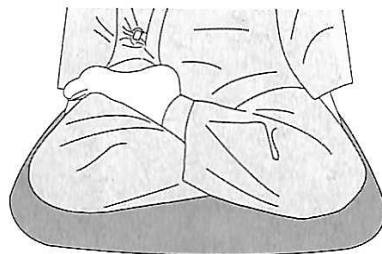
In contrast, the type of sitting in which the left leg is placed on the right thigh and the right foot on the left thigh is called *kisshô-za* [吉祥坐、the auspicious sitting]. Statues of the Buddha predominantly show this way of sitting. It signifies that the Buddha has completed his own salvation and is now working for the salvation of other living beings, so he needs the intelligence and discerning powers of the more active half of the brain. In practice, however, we can alternate the two types of sitting, *gôma-za* and *kisshô-za*.



b. Half-lotus sitting [*hanka-fuza*, 半跏趺坐]

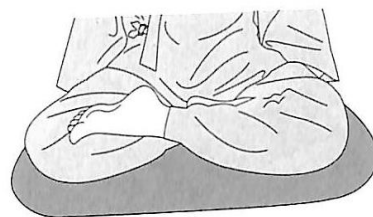
The standard form of *half-lotus sitting* is that the right foot comes under the left thigh and the left leg is placed on the right thigh. This type of sitting is called

“half” lotus because the legs are only half crossed compared to the full-lotus sitting. This sitting style may be more readily available for people who have difficulty with the full-lotus sitting. However, if you compare the two “lotus sittings,” you will see that the half-lotus sitting is less stable than the full-lotus. Nevertheless, this sitting form is also recognized as an authentic sitting type in all Buddhist Zen temples. In the half-lotus sitting, the order of the feet can also be changed, just as in the full-lotus sitting described earlier. In fact, it is recommended to change the order regularly; the reason for this is that especially in half-lotus sitting, the pressure balance on the left and right sides is not the same; therefore, half-lotus sitting in the same order of the legs all the time for a long period of time can cause the waist and spine to become misaligned.



c. Quarter-lotus sitting [*shihanka-fuza*, 四半跏趺坐] and Burmese sitting

The *quarter-lotus sitting* is not a traditionally recognized type of sitting, but many people use it, which is why I include it here. In short, one foot just comes up on the calf of the other leg without reaching the thigh. It is somewhat less stable, but it is nevertheless an acceptable zazen sitting.



In *Burmese sitting* the foot is not placed on the thigh or calf of the other leg; rather, both feet are released forward resting on the mat. This can be helpful if the legs hurt considerably after sitting for a long period.

d. Japanese sitting [*waza*, 和坐]

The *Japanese sitting* is a traditional everyday way of sitting in Japan, also called *seiza*. You kneel and then bring the buttocks down onto the soles of the feet. In this type of sitting, both knees are a hand's width apart; the two soles of the feet overlap to ensure vertical erection and increase concentration. However, with this type of sitting, the blood circulation in the legs may soon become constricted, and numbness may develop in the legs over time. Therefore, variations are possible: Either you place a cushion between the soles of your feet and the buttocks or you “ride” on one or two sitting

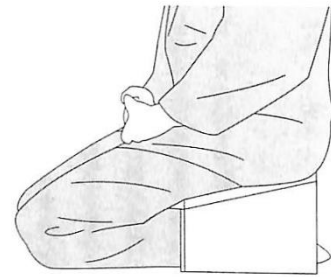


cushions.

e. Bench-sitting

This type is not often seen in Zen practice in Japan and is probably not allowed in a traditional Japanese zendô for monks. In the West, however, about one-third of the people who practice zazen use a small personal bench of some sort. In Japan, many people who practice chanting, tea ceremonies, etc., use a similar sitting aid.

It involves sitting on a low bench (possibly slanted forward) which has one support on each side (or only one support in the middle – as is often the case in Japan), thereby creating space under the bench where the feet can be placed freely. This

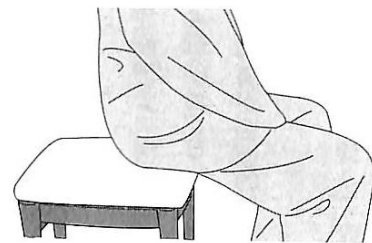


method does not put direct pressure on the feet. Seen from the front, this sitting might appear like the above-mentioned “Japanese sitting.” In terms of stability, this way of sitting cannot be compared with the full-lotus or the half-lotus, but if this frees you from severe pain and allows you to concentrate on sitting, it is undoubtedly a very good method of sitting.

f. Chair sitting (or stool sitting)

Sitting on a chair is the type of sitting commonly used when you cannot even sit on a bench due to age, physical difficulties etc.

The chair should not have any slope or excessive comfort on the sitting. The knees in this case are also a hand's width apart; you sit on the front half of the chair; the soles of your feet should have complete contact with the floor. This type of sitting can also be used if you wish to practice zazen while on a train or in a waiting room.



3.2.3. The practice of zazen

a. Keeping the upper body upright

How do you concretely *sit* in the first place? There is one basic principle that applies to any type of sitting: *keeping the upper body upright*. No matter what type of sitting you may choose: keep your head and upper body upright.

Why? Because this allows you to more effectively reach the sinking state already mentioned above. If you can maintain this posture for a certain time without difficulty, the possibility of entering deep absorption is noticeably increased.

You may already feel that in zazen all the components are, so to speak, “teleologically” thought out and conceived, although it is usually never explained in this way. We come back to this point again and again.

Now we come to the concrete process of sitting. Let us suppose that we are sitting on a *zafu* [round cushion].

In the zendô, the *jikidô* (直堂, responsible for time management; *jikijitsu* 直日 in the Rinzai Line) sounds the wooden clappers [*taku*, 柝] once, announcing “Get ready!” for the beginning of zazen (even if you are sitting alone in your room, you can perform this ritual).



First, you sit on the front half of the *zafu*, not upon the center. Then you let your upper body fall forward, straighten your back, and slowly move back until you are vertical. The upper part of the sacrum is slightly tilted forward, on which – so you may feel – the spine sits vertically. You also feel the two sitting bones upon the *zafu*. Both shoulders drop in a relaxed manner. This is the foundation. As mentioned before, the head is held upright. This might give you a feeling as if the center between the two sitting bones (perineum), the spine, and the crown of the head were penetrated by vertical rays. You might also have the feeling as if the crown of your head were being pulled upwards. Or, for example, if you dropped a small coin from the top of your head, it would fall through the spine and down between the sitting bones and into the center of the earth. This uprightness of the upper body is of critical importance and cannot be overemphasized. In the *Introduction to Zazen* [Zazengi, 『坐禅儀』] of the Rinzai School, it is said that you should have the upper body “stand like the tower (of a pagoda)” – an interesting expression. Or this posture is compared to a vertical “bamboo pole.” Or you sit as upright as a tall chimney.

It is often explained in the textbooks that the line connecting the ear and the shoulder is vertical and the tip of the nose and the navel form a vertical line. But this can only be observed from the outside; you cannot check it for yourself. What you can check is the inner feeling of verticality. After all, there is nothing other than this inner feeling that ensures the correctness of the posture (of course, it is beneficial to have someone look at the posture from the outside from time to time and ask for advice).

May I add a word here: If you can't sit upright in this way, is it impossible to practice zazen? The answer is: It is not impossible at all. In fact, I know some

people who cannot sit in a regular way for anatomical or health reasons, but who have had a deep Zen experience. You do what is possible at any given moment. Just the same, the vertical sitting mentioned above remains the most effective way of sitting. It is extremely difficult if you do not learn to sit vertically and try to break through only by concentrating the mind. Above all, sitting vertically, you can sit very comfortably. Also, the refreshing feeling of sitting increases, and sitting becomes just joy. This verticality also gives zazen a distinctive dignity. Therefore, the main principle is to try to sit vertically as much as possible.

b. Hand posture

The next thing is to consciously relax both arms and assume the formal hand posture [*hokkaijôin*, 法界定印] with both hands: Place the back of your right hand on one leg, and the back of your left hand comes to rest on the right hand. The superimposed hands remain so close to the body that the outsides of the small fingers of both hands lightly touch the lower abdomen. The two tips of the thumbs support each other slightly and point upward – toward the chin. The shape of both hands should roughly represent an inverted heart shape. In other words, you should not let the thumbs fall forward (if the thumbs fall forward, you can see that the feeling of concentration decreases drastically). Master Dogen even says, “The tip of the thumbs touching should be opposite the navel.” That is, you hold the thumbs upright so that the tips are (almost) in front of your navel. This helps the upright posture of the upper body to become clearer and to be more easily maintained.



Also in this hand posture, the left hand rests on the right hand – just like the previously described leg position: the left leg placed on top of the right leg (for the full-lotus sitting). The reason is the same: the left side of the brain should become as inactive as possible, while the right side of the brain is activated.

This hand posture is certainly not an inheritance of the Indian “dhyana.” It originated in ancient China – along with a couple of other details.

Statues or photographic representations of the Buddha sitting in zazen often depict the two thumbs lying flat or horizontal, with the tips of the thumbs lightly touching each other. This looks nice, but when you really practice zazen and go deeper into the contemplation, often the two thumbs that were touching each other begin to move apart and the whole significance is lost. Therefore, in holding the

hands, it is more practical for the “flesh” part of the thumbs to support each other, forming a gentle mountain of thumbs.

This traditional hand position, however, presupposes that you practice in full-lotus or half-lotus. When sitting on a chair or bench, the slanted thighs are less able to support the hands, and this makes correct hand posture difficult. (Proper hand position may become unstable even in full- or half-lotus.) In this case, helpful measures can be taken such as placing a thin cushion directly underneath the hands resting on each other.

Alternatively, you can abandon this formal hand position and simply clasp the four fingers of the right hand with the left hand. This hand posture, called *kesshu* [結手], may be easier to do while sitting on a bench or chair. In fact, many Rinzai practitioners seem to favor this hand position. The inner sensation, however, differs from the formal hand position. In this way,



the verticality of the upper body does not receive as much support, but the feeling of the surrounding “Qi” energy, gathered in the lower abdomen [*kikai-tanden*, 氣海丹田, or *tanden* for short/], is quite noticeable.

c. Mouth and eyes

The lips are closed, the tip of the tongue rest gently against the edge of the upper gum, and the upper and lower front teeth touch each other slightly.

The eyes look at the level of the horizon and remain open but relaxed, without focusing at anything specific. If necessary, the gaze can be lowered slightly, but it does not have to deliberately fall sharply to the ground – “about 1 meter in front of you,” as is often taught. Dogen Zenji, the founder of the Sôtô School in Japan (道元, 1200-1253), says: “The eyes should be properly opened, not too wide and not too narrow”. Even if the open eyes, almost horizontally raised, seem to disturb the inner contemplation in the beginning, the intensive occupation with the inner practice (see below, 3.4.) will soon “dampen” the gaze; you don’t “see” anything distinctly anymore, although you know for sure that your eyes are open. Then, further concentration is no longer disturbed by having the eyes open.

The instruction to keep the eyes open during *zazen* apparently emerged in the latter part of the ancient Chinese Zen (around 11-12 Century). Before that period, people generally closed their eyes during meditation.

Why shouldn't we close our eyes? In fact, many say that they can concentrate

better internally if they close their eyes. This is an understandable feeling if you have just started zazen. Usually, the reason given for keeping your eyes open is to avoid falling asleep. The traditional instruction of the Rinzai School [*Zazengi*, *s. above*] also says that you should keep your eyes open “so as not to fall into a coma.” In my opinion, there is more to it than that.

First of all, if your eyes remain normally open, it is easier to verify the verticality of your upper body, whereas if your eyes are closed, this vertical body perception decreases, if not disappears altogether. (It is my impression that the vertical body sensation is already considerably impaired when the gaze is strongly lowered.) This is a practical reason why the eyes should remain normally open.

Secondly, in Zen there is ultimately no distinction between the “inner” and the “outer” world. If you close your eyes, you restrict your concentration to the so-called “inner” world, and there is a danger that you will consequently move away from the real “one World” that Zen insists on revealing. When you sit with your eyes open and enter samadhi, you are deeply immersed in the one World, which in reality knows neither “inside” nor “outside.”

d. Deep breathing [*kanki-issoku*, 欠気一息/].

Next, take deep breaths. First, inhale deeply through the nose, pause for a moment, and then exhale slowly through the mouth, as if letting everything sink into the earth. Repeat this process a couple of times. Afterwards, you will feel as if you are in a completely different space and time than you were a moment ago.

e. Left-right swaying [*sayû-yôshin*, 左右揺振/].

Then sway your body from side to side a few times. Gradually decrease the swaying until it stops, while checking the verticality of the head and upper body with the inner senses. This is the beginning of the zazen time.

In the zendô of Sanbôzen, the *jikidô* indicates that formal zazen is beginning by striking the wooden clappers. The communal silence [*shijô*, 止静/] begins with the *jikidô* ringing the bell or *inkin* [引磬, small hand bell] three times. Everyone should already be in zazen mode before the sounds of the bell.

Generally, once zazen has begun, the body should remain still (However, the posture of the upper body may be corrected if you notice that it is not vertical). If your cheeks or other parts of



your body itch, hold out patiently for about ten seconds. The itching will most likely have subsided by then. If your legs hurt to the point that you can't stand it anymore, it is permitted (in Sanbôzen) to switch legs – after a quick “gasshō” [holding your palms together in front of you] as a gesture of “sorry!” to your neighbors. Once you have re-crossed your legs, make gasshō again and continue zazen.

Once a zazen period has ended at the sounds of the bell, gentle swaying to the left and right is again very important. If you stand up too quickly after finishing zazen, you suddenly assume a different posture, which can lead to pain in the (lower) back over time. So, start swaying lightly from left and right, and increase gradually the intensity of the movement, before standing up slowly and quietly.

3.3. Breathing [*chōsoku*, 調息]

The second element is breathing. As previously mentioned, you consciously take a couple of “deep breaths” [*kanki-issoku*] at the beginning of your sitting. Then, you can leave your breathing up to nature. The main principle is to breathe naturally through the nose and not to control or manipulate the breaths with the conscious mind. This is important.

Quite a few instructions advise to tense the lower belly [*kikai-tanden*] with the exhalation. While this could be effective in building up the energy, it is not correct from the perspective of the original nature of zazen. When you exert yourself in the abdomen, you create a duality: the subject who consciously exerts him- or herself in this way and the object, namely the force itself, which is driven into the abdomen. Thus – logically – you cannot enter true samadhi, where consciousness flows into oneness, where there is neither subject nor object. In addition, the common instruction that “the exhalation should be twice as long as the inhalation,” is also an unnecessary measure. It is true that the exhalation naturally becomes longer than the inhalation, but this occurs on its own. You should not consciously strive for it. In other words, “adjustment of breathing” – as this element is often called – is actually “adjustment” in the sense that you don't self-regulate the breathing, but leave it to its natural flow.

Consequently, during zazen your strength is naturally gathered in the lower abdomen (*tanden*), without any conscious effort. In fact, if you sit quietly and allow your breathing to become deep, this concentration of energy into the lower abdominal area and eventually into the whole earth will happen on its own in most cases, and you will get a feeling of serene intensity in the lower areas of your being. However, this does not mean that you should try to create it yourself.

If your breathing is natural and you are sitting correctly, you will enter relaxed *diaphragmatic breathing* before you know it. Only when diaphragmatic breathing is achieved can deep breathing be maintained naturally. If you feel breathless or uncomfortable during this transition, open your hand position, place your hands on your knees, and open your eyes widely – and the discomfort will subside. When you feel normal again, you can resume the hand posture. If you repeat this, your body will get used to it and the transition to diaphragmatic breathing will occur naturally. A little patience is required in the beginning.

3.4. Inner Posture [*chôshin*, 調心]

Alongside posture and breathing, there is a third element: *inner posture*. In a way, this is the most important and difficult point.

Traditionally, we speak of “regulating” the inner posture [*chôshin*]. Here, “regulating” means bringing the mind into a certain state of cohesion. More precisely, it is a matter of converging the consciousness *within, into something that has neither form nor meaning*. Although this is not easy, several methods can assist in achieving it.

3.4.1. Breath counting [*susoku-kan*, 数息観]

Breath counting means counting each single breath. There are several ways to do this. You can exhale with “One.....” and inhale with “Two.....” (counting inhales and exhales). Or you can count only exhaling when you exhale “One....”; when you inhale, you need only be aware that you are inhaling (counting exhales). You can decide which of the two is better for you by trying them yourself or discussing them with your teacher. In either case, when you reach “Ten....,” you return to “One.....” It is important that when you exhale, you do not extend “Oneeeeeee.....” greatly with physical force until the end of the breath. If you do, you are exerting physical force in an unnatural way. A natural length of exhalation is most appropriate. The main focus should be to become completely one with this natural “One...., Two....., Three.....” It is best to let your self-identity disappear in the “One.... Two.....” Traditionally, this is called “forgetting yourself.”

This is not as simple as it sounds. Thoughts come into your head during the process, and before you know it, counting is neglected. Or you count past “Ten” and suddenly you're at “Seventeen...., Eighteen....” In either case, when you notice this, you simply return to “One....” and start over. N.B.: this “coming back” is perfectly fine, perfectly normal. There is no need to be distressed about it.

Although this practice may seem to be a beginner's practice, it is actually practiced by people who have been doing zazen for many years. It is a way of practicing zazen that is adequate for both beginners and experienced practitioners.

Earlier I spoke of “something that has neither form nor meaning.” But numbers actually *do* have some meaning in each case. “Three” is three times “one,” so – strictly speaking – you can't say it has *no* meaning *at all*. Nevertheless, their meaning remains on a completely abstract level. Therefore, it is assumed that the numbers have very little “meaning.” That is why this method is generally recommended.

At this point I may add something: I often recommend English-speaking practitioners to do “A, B, C, D” (just these four letters) rather than breath counting from “One” to “Ten.” This is a variation of breath counting. The reason is that with “A....., B....., C....., D.....” the respective sound is a single open vowel, so you can exhale (and inhale) with the respective vowel more freely and easily than when counting. This makes the whole process much more relaxed. On the other hand, when a sound ends with a consonant (as in “one,” “five,” “six,” “seven,” “eight,” ...), upon exhalation you have to consciously pay attention to *when* the end-consonant of the respective number should internally be pronounced, which is already a small stress factor. With “A....., B....., C....., D.....” this worry is unnecessary.

3.4.2. Breath following [*zuisoku-kan*, 随息観]

The next method is to follow the breaths with awareness. Exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale..... Just that. And become one with that breathing. Disappear into that breathing! This method is “freer” of meaning and much more difficult than breath counting, and at the same time it is probably much closer to pure zazen (many of the “mindfulness” meditation methods that have recently spread around the world are an approximation of this breath following). This method seems to be an extremely ancient one in the history of dhyâna meditation.

3.4.3. Mantra

Although this method is not traditionally practiced much in Japan, it is frequently practiced in the West. It involves speaking individual syllables such as “uuu...” or “ooo...” in the mind in time with the breath. In this respect, it is similar to breath counting and is performed in the same way with exhalation or inhalation. However, it could be more effective than breath counting because the mantras have no semantics at all.

Some people prefer Christian words such as “God,” “Jesus,” etc. instead of single syllables. This can be especially effective for those who have difficulties leaving Christian framework. In fact, this is a common practice of Christian meditation, known especially in Europe as “contemplation.” Certainly, the words “God” and “Jesus” originally have a distinct meaning, but when repeated as mantras, over time they are stripped of their meaning and simply become the sounds “go-o-o-d” and “ji-i-i-za-s-s-s.” As a result, it resembles counting breaths.

Perhaps it has now become clear: What I demonstrated earlier as “A...., B...., C...., D....” actually represents a kind of intermediate method – between “breath counting” and “mantra.”

3.4.4. Kôan [公案]

The next method is the use of a “kôan.” This must be practiced under the guidance of a qualified Zen teacher, i.e., with your own master. Kôan work cannot be done alone. In addition, when working with kôans, it is assumed that you have a deep desire to absolutely experience the so-called “true Self” directly. (In recent years, some teachers give kôans – e.g. the kôan “Mu” – without regard to the aspirations of the zazen practitioner, but this does not correspond to the actual intention of the kôan). Therefore, the specific methods of kôan work related to the “inner attitude” will not be discussed in this Introduction.

3.4.5. “Just sitting” [*shikan-taza*, 只管打坐]

The last method for regulating the inner posture is “just sitting” or *shikantaza*. “Shikan” means “just”. “Taza” means “(intense) sitting.” In other words: Once you settle down on the sitting cushion, you don't do anything else. You simply let yourself sink deeper and deeper into absorption. While the four methods described above at least “do” something, *shikantaza* “does” nothing at all. In *shikantaza*, you radically surrender everything to pure presence. It is a realization of “absolute passivity.” However, it does not simply mean “dozing off.” Basically, this is the purest and most wakeful form of concentrated-ness. It must be said, however, that it is the most difficult type of zazen. Therefore, it is generally not recommended for beginners. Nevertheless, almost all practitioners of the classical period of Chinese Zen (mainly in the Tang Dynasty [7th-9th centuries]) practiced in this way. Indeed, *shikantaza* can be considered the purest form of zazen. It is this *shikantaza* that Zen Master Dogen has always recommended.

3.4.6. How to deal with wandering thoughts, etc.

Anyone trying to sit with this kind of inner posture will soon realize that all these methods, which seem so simple, are not simple at all. First of all, all kinds of thoughts and memories come up. Or certain images come and go unceasingly. It is very difficult to really concentrate.

In “normal” consciousness, it is natural for thoughts to come up. You should simply take them as evidence that you are alive after all. These various thoughts are neutral, so to speak: they do no harm, but they are not conducive to the practice either. And they will not disappear unless you enter a deep state of absorption, the so-called samadhi state. So, for example, if you want to do the breathing with “A..., B..., C..., D...,” you should not try to first chase away the thoughts and then do “A..., B..., C..., D...”; rather, do “A..., B..., C..., D...” in the midst of the flowing thoughts. Whatever comes to mind, you should just keep going with “A..., B..., C..., D...”

What I have explained so far represents an overview of how to sit in zazen. With this, you can try out sitting in zazen for yourself. However, it is probably to be expected that after some time various questions will arise, especially regarding the inner posture. This can be confusing. It would be unfortunate if you stopped doing zazen because of this confusion. On the other hand, it would be difficult and sometimes even problematic if you tried to overcome this situation “autodidactically.” Therefore, it would be better to have someone who could give you advice. We will come back to this subject later.

3.5. *Kinhin* (経行, Zen in walking or walking meditation)

Finally, I will explain how to practice *kinhin*, that is, “Zen in walking.” To transition from zazen to *kinhin*, the *jikidô* in the zendo rings the bell twice. Everyone begins to rock the body from side to side [*sayû-yôshin*], slowly stands up and turns clockwise 180 degrees from facing the wall to facing the room. Once the *jikidô* strikes the wooden clappers [*taku*], everyone makes *monjin* [gasshō and a bow], turns 90 degrees to the left (i.e., all are now standing in a line) and begins to walk at a slightly slower than normal pace. In *kinhin* your hands and arms are held in a special way:



First, make a fist with your right hand, with your fingers enclosing your thumb, and position it right in front of the pit of your stomach (or chest). Cover your

fist with your left hand. The forearms should form a straight horizontal line. This hand and arm posture is called *shashu-tôkyô* [叉手当胸]. In this posture, you can also turn your hands inward 90 degrees so that the little fingers are on the outside. (Actually, this form is correctly called *issshu* [揖手] which seems to be the original hand posture in *kinhin*. Nowadays, however, the hand position in *kinhin* is generally called *shashu-tôkyô*, which includes *issshu*.) In any case, the head should be raised – just as in *zazen*.

While walking in the Zen hall, the distance between you and the person in front of you should remain the same until the end of *kinhin*. The direction of walking during *kinhin* is always clockwise (as with almost all other movements in the *zendô*).

During *kinhin*, the same state of mind is maintained as during *zazen*, and the same practice principle is continued. It is literally “walking meditation.” During *kinhin*, it is possible to go to the restroom. When you return and want to rejoin, wait at the entrance until your gap in the *kinhin* queue is in front of you, and then – with a slight bow – join the queue.

When the clappers are struck by the *jikidô*, this signals the end of formal *kinhin*, and everyone returns to their position in line and at a normal walking pace. (After everyone has started walking at normal speed, please do not – if you are waiting at the entrance of the *zendô* – try to enter your gap frantically, even if it passes directly in front of you. Let people calmly go back to their place and make a bow together. Only then calmly walk into the *zendô* and to your seat.)

The method of *kinhin* just described – especially the way the hands are held and the speed of walking – is the way we practice in Sanbôzen School. In Soto Zen, the left hand is covered by the right hand, which is the reverse of Sanbôzen. Furthermore, the walking pace is very slow in Soto Zen, with steps of half a foot length. In the Rinzai School, on the other hand, the hand position is the same as in Sanbôzen, but the pace is faster than in Sanbôzen. Sometimes it is almost like running. In terms of speed, the Sanbôzen *kinhin* is somewhere between Soto Zen and Rinzai Zen. In this introductory course, please use the Sanbôzen method. However, if you sit in a Soto or Rinzai Zen group, you should follow the method of that group or *zendô*.



3.6. Basic Rules and Rituals in the Zendô

3.6.1. Rules

There are several rules to follow in the zendô. This may seem strange or even daunting at first, but once you have learned them, you will have no problems with them. The interesting thing is that almost all of these rules have a rational basis. Most of the time, however, they are not specifically explained. The purpose of these rules is to support the deepening of zazen. In this sense, they can be followed with an open heart.

3.6.2. *Gasshō* [合掌]

The most commonly used gesture in the zendô is *gasshō*. The palms of both hands are brought together so that the tips of the middle fingers are level with the tip of the nose. The *gasshō* is done in a variety of situations. Some of them have already been mentioned in connection with *kinhin*; other specific examples can be omitted here.



3.6.3. *Monjin* [問訊, gasshō with bow]

The gasshō can be combined with a bow [*teizu*, 低頭] to make it more polite. This is called *monjin*. It is always performed when entering or leaving a zendô facing the altar, but also on other important occasions, such as at the beginning and end of *kinhin*, when everyone present performs it together.

There is a series of rituals to perform when you enter the zendô and begin zazen. First, you go to your own seat [*tan*] and make a *monjin*, as if saluting your own cushion. This is not a greeting to your own cushion, however, it is a greeting to the neighbors on both sides of your seat, as if to say “Thank you for sitting with me.” This is called the “greeting your neighbors” [*rin'i-monjin*, 隣位問訊]. (You perform this ritual even if your neighbors are not (yet) present.) The next step is to turn clockwise 180 degrees and greet the people sitting on the opposite side of the room with *monjin*. This is called “greeting the other side” [*taiza-monjin*, 対座問訊]. Then, turning again clockwise 180 degrees to face the



wall, you take your seat on your cushion.

However, the order of this *monjin* is reversed at the end of kinhin as a group: Everyone walks back to his or her seat and first does the “greeting the other side” together with all others, then turns 180 degrees clockwise to the mat, does the “neighbor greeting” with all others again, and sits down for the ensuing round of zazen.

This may seem like a purely formal thing, but in reality, by doing this, our mind and body are unconsciously preparing for our own zazen. And we realize that this sitting on this unique occasion is only possible because our companions are sitting with us. Therefore, even if you are sitting alone in your room, you should do the “neighbor greeting” and the “other side greeting.” Even if there is no one else in the room, the door, floor, windows, desk and other things are actually “sitting” with you.



3.6.4. Prostration [*hai*, 拜]

The following is about the deep bow or “prostration” in Zen. It is also known as *sampai* [三拜 <*san* (three) + *hai* (prostration)] because it is usually done three times (only in a very formal case is it *kyūhai* [九拜, nine times prostration]). It is done in the direction of the altar before and after the *teisho* [Dharma talk] or on certain occasions such as during the morning and evening rituals. Prostration is also part of the greeting rituals in front of the master in the dokusan room.

How is it performed? After making a slight *monjin* (as an introductory gesture), bend your knees on the floor, place both hands on the floor with palms up, and touch your forehead to the floor between the two hands. Then raise your hands horizontally above the level of your own ears. Stay in this position for a second or two, and finally place both hands back on the floor. This is a symbolic expression of full respect by “raising the feet of Shakyamuni higher than yourself.” It expresses great gratitude with the highest respect for the entire Zen tradition (of which the teacher is the representative) since Shakyamuni. At the same time, however, this Zen tradition since Shakyamuni is nothing other than the form of the true Self, so on a deeper level it is an expression of respect for the true Self. It has nothing to do with idolatry or personal worship.



3.6.5. Basic behavior in the zendô

In a zendô, your hands should not hang down or dangle by the sides of your body while walking. Always move around with the hand posture of *kinhin*. In this way, our body and mind become aware that the zendô is a place of unique spiritual presence.

In addition, any movement in the zendô is in clockwise direction. This is also the case with the afore-mentioned neighbor greeting and greeting the other side. *Kinhin* is also done in a clockwise direction. You formally never move in the opposite direction. This may have to do with the fact that a person's spiritual energy [*Qi*] always radiates outward in a clockwise direction.

3.6.6. *Kyôsaku* [警策, warning stick]

Kyôsaku (the Rinzai School reads the word as *keisaku*) refers to strikes on the shoulders for the purpose of encouragement or warning; the word also means the stick itself used for this purpose. One end of the stick is flattened so that it makes a “pang!” sound when struck. When people in Japan are asked what they think about Zen, they almost always, in addition to the general “severity” of sitting, refer to the image of being “beaten” with a stick if you budge. Such ideas naturally frighten people. This unfortunate image is also common outside of Japan. In fact, it seems to happen frequently in some zendô halls of a certain lineage that those who are responsible for handling the *kyôsaku* brag about how many *kyôsaku* sticks they have broken during sesshin by their hard hitting. I consider this to be an awful practice. The *kyôsaku* is a help against fatigue, aching shoulders (the specific spots called *kensei* [肩井] are hit), drowsiness, etc., but it is not a punishment or harassment. True enlightenment does not come from violent beating. What results is, at best, a temporary abnormal state of the psyche. In Sanbôzen, in principle, only those who *want* to receive the *kyôsaku* (because of fatigue or pain in the shoulders) voluntarily ask for it; you will never be hit unexpectedly – simply out of the blue. There is a small ceremony on how to receive the *kyôsaku*, but this will be demonstrated specifically when the appropriate time comes, so I will not go into it here.

4. Further Notes on Zazen

4.1. Zazen at Home

Below I summarize some precautions you should take when practicing zazen at home.

Sitting in front of the wall: Zazen has always been performed “facing the wall” [*mempeki*, 面壁]. In today's Rinzai School, however, zazen is practiced uniformly facing the room; apparently this practice has spread in Japan since about the 19th century. Previous to that, the Rinzai School also sat facing the wall. Originally there was only zazen practice facing the wall, as the well-known phrases (also in the Rinzai tradition) attest to: “Bodhidharma sat facing the wall for nine years” [*Daruma mempeki kunen*, 達磨面壁九年] or “Roso sits facing the wall” [*Roso mempeki*, 魯祖面壁].

However, the term “facing the wall” does not mean sitting so directly in front of a wall (or door) that you would almost touch it. You sit about a meter or more away from it so that you do not feel pressed. The important thing is to block the gaze to calm the mind.

Location: If you can choose where to do your zazen, a quiet, secluded room – preferably the back – is desirable. It is more suitable for zazen if you move to a more “sacred” part of the building or room, so to speak.

Clothing: Loose clothing is preferable for zazen. For example, narrow, elegant trousers may be too tight for zazen and make it impossible to sit properly. In the zendô, discreet dark clothing is worn in order not to distract others.

Light: The light should be semi-bright or dim so that you can approximately read the newspaper. If there is too much light, you cannot concentrate; if there is too little light, you easily fall asleep.

Room temperature: As a rule, the temperature should be neither too hot nor too cold. Practicing zazen in the cold while shivering all the time is just a test of endurance. You are wasting sitting energy just for endurance, and that would be regrettable. However, it is true that you can concentrate somewhat better when it is slightly cool rather than a little too warm.

Time of day : If you are at home, when is the best time of day to sit? There are no rules for this. In fact, this can be done at any time of the day. The most common time is before breakfast. Many people also sit before going to bed because sitting can deepen sleep. In any case, it is more effective if you incorporate it into the biorhythm of your daily routine.

Time: It is recommended to sit for 25-30 minutes as a unit, which is the length of time it takes to burn an incense stick [called *ittchû*, 一炷]. In ordinary Zen temples, however, you sit between 40 minutes and an hour. In Sanbôzen the standard zazen time is 25 minutes. Even if you want to sit for an hour, you ought to sit with two sessions (with *kinhin* in between). This is the “interval zazen training” so to

speak. The reason for this is that our ability to concentrate generally lasts longer with this interval method. There are individual differences, however, and in the end, there is no definite rule. But one thing is certain: Even if you don't have much time, it is still recommended to sit *every day*. Even five or ten minutes is much better than no sitting at all.

Meals: As a rule, it is recommended to only eat up to 70 to 80% of the fullness of your stomach. After eating, wait for an hour before doing zazen. Allow the stomach to focus on digestion.

Self-checking results: If you are practicing zazen for the first time, you may be unsure whether you want to, should, or even can continue it.

Therefore: Even if you are willing to practice zazen every day – as recommended – , you should first do it for a “trial period” of about two weeks. After two weeks, you can then re-check yourself: Having practiced at least a little zazen every day, do you really feel that you have seen some positive effects? If you feel, even vaguely, that a positive result has occurred, you should try again for another two weeks. If you can't feel that way, then you might as well stop doing zazen. If you continue it for another two weeks, i.e., a whole month since you started, you can check yourself again – and probably a little more clearly this time. If you just feel that it didn't make much sense after all, then you are little motivated to do it any further. If, however, even after a month you still feel that there was some point in it, then you can go ahead for another month or two. In this way, you can keep checking yourself after six months, after a year, and so on. If after a year you still feel that there is something meaningful there, you will not want to stop so easily.

4.2. Forms of Practice

If you wish to continue regular zazen practice, there are three frameworks involved.

4.2.1. Sitting alone [*dokuza*, 独坐]

The basis of zazen is to sit alone. Of course, if a family or couple can sit together, that is very good. But this type of communal sitting every day is usually not so easy to find. In any case, the basic principle is to sit by yourself on a regular basis.

4.2.2. Sitting in a group

If possible, however, it is advisable to sit regularly also in a group. In many

cases, this can be called a *zazenkai* [坐禅会, zazen meeting]. Otherwise, it is probably a more informal gathering of zazen friends. In either case, they are usually held on a specific day, maybe a few times a month (rarely longer than one day). To participate, the group does not necessarily have to belong to the Sanbôzen School. You can sit with both a Soto and a Rinzai group as long as they accept you. If you are allowed to sit together, you should definitely take the opportunity. This is because sitting becomes much deeper and more intense when sitting with other people. When sitting in such a group, it is necessary to follow the rules of conduct in their zendô. The way of sitting itself, that is, the posture, should be the same in all Zen groups. Furthermore, if a group leader is present, it is perfectly fine to listen to his or her *teisho* [提唱, Dharma talks].

If there is a possibility of further private instruction [*dokusan*, 独参] and you are already practicing under the guidance of a Sanbôzen teacher, you should refrain from private instruction at these meetings. This is to avoid confusion in your practice. We will return to this point later.

4.2.3. Sesshin [接心、摂心]

The third framework is to participate in a *sesshin*. Sesshin is a practice in which a group of people focus on zazen for several days under the guidance of a teacher. Ideally, you should be able to attend a sesshin two to four times a year. In fact, zazen develops its original power and depth only through regular participation in sesshin. Attending a sesshin, however, means, at least in the case of Sanbôzen, that you commit yourself to receiving concrete guidance of a particular teacher (Zen teacher, Associate Zen Master, or Zen Master) – even if this commitment has not yet become a regular “teacher-disciple relationship.” If you are not yet ready to make such a commitment, a sesshin may not work optimally, so you may want to continue sitting alone or in a group for a while. The choice of teacher is very important after all, and we will come back to this later.

When these three frameworks of practice – sitting alone, sitting in a group, and participating in sesshin – are launched with certain regularity, you can speak of an optimal zazen practice.

5. *Makyô* [魔境]

Here I would like to discuss the phenomenon of *makyô*. The word *makyô* can be understood in a broader and a narrower sense, but here I will take a narrower view and limit it to non-existent sensory phenomena that can occur during zazen.

If you already started zazen some time ago and are basically on the proper path, you may – quite unexpectedly – experience strange phenomena during zazen. These are mainly phenomena involving the senses of sight, hearing, and smell. A beautiful colored pattern suddenly comes up in front of you, a strange city appears, a luminous figure like Mother Mary beckons to you, a strange monster emerges, and so on. Or church bells keep ringing even though there is no church nearby, or a waft of roast pork inevitably drifts into your nostrils, and so on. Generally, these phenomena disappear once you finish zazen and stand up. But in the state of a certain absorption, they can appear as real phenomena, and you may be perplexed not knowing what to do with them.

Why is this? When you sink inward in zazen, your mind goes beyond the layers of everyday consciousness and descends, so to speak, into the realm of the subconscious. Individual phenomena in the lower layers of consciousness can take on a certain form and enter the upper layer of consciousness. The principle is similar to that of dreams. These magical states usually occur at the beginning of intensive zazen practice and almost always cease when you have become sufficiently accustomed to zazen.

If you experience a *makyô* and are not sure what it is, you should consult your teacher. If you misunderstand that you have seen, say, the world of enlightenment, that would be a serious mistake. Therefore, it is certainly desirable to have someone who can set the record straight. For this reason, too, it is not advisable to practice zazen entirely alone.

In such cases, a good and responsible teacher would always say the same thing: do not follow your *makyô* state; do not hold on to it even if it seems interesting or even extremely appealing. Just let the *makyô* worlds appear as they appear, and focus on your original practice method (breath counting, breath following, mantra, etc.). If you follow a *makyô*, it means – from the point of view of the actual Zen practice – that you are being led astray from the right path, or at least taking a detour. From the teacher's point of view, the appearance of a *makyô* experience is a sign that the person has begun to go a little deeper into zazen – no more than that. Nor does it mean that it is necessarily good if a *makyô* occurs, or that it is not good at all if it does not occur. In fact, there are people who do not experience any *makyô* at all. In other words, even if a *makyô* occurs, don't let it mislead you, simply continue with your original practice.

In this context, it should be mentioned that although it is not a *makyô*, it can happen that you simply cannot stop crying while doing zazen, or that you are

struck by anxiety or even acute fear for no reason. This is also a phenomenon that occurs when the subconscious mind is stimulated by zazen. Often it is the result of previous experiences, sometimes from early childhood, which lie deep inside – probably hidden. In principle, the treatment in this case is the same as in the case of *makyô* states. If you can't stop crying, it's no big deal; just let the tears flow and continue with your exercise. The same principle applies in the case of anxiety or fear: You should continue your practice as you have been doing. Anxiety or fear may need special attention, however, since they can create panic. In such cases, you should stop zazen for a while and see a psychiatrist or psychologist. In parallel with such counseling, it is not impossible to fruitfully continue zazen under the guidance of an understanding teacher.

6. The Three “Fruits” of Zazen

Let us now turn to what happens if you continue to do zazen, and what fruits your zazen practice bears. You could speak of the *aims* of zazen, but since it ought not be understood that zazen has an objective goal in mind from the beginning, I prefer to refer to the “fruit/fruits” of zazen.

This does not include the usual physical benefits, such as improved blood circulation, soothed oversensitivity to cold, improved posture in everyday life, etc. These are so obvious and at the same time so elementary that it is probably not worth emphasizing them as fruits of zazen per se.

There are three main fruits of zazen. The first is the *strengthening of the jôriki*, the second is the *experience of our Essence*, and the last is the *realization of that Essence*.

6.1. Strengthening the *Jôriki*

The term *jôriki* [定力] is perhaps peculiar. The *jô* in *jôriki* is a translation of the Sanskrit word *samadhi* or “absorption.” The *riki* in *jôriki* means “power/powers.” The word *jôriki* therefore means “power/powers of *samadhi*.” What is meant is the noticeable result of repeated experience of entering into absorption.

What is *samadhi* or absorption? What is the inner reality of what we call *samadhi* or absorption? We can say that it is a state in which the consciousness is deeply absorbed and radically unified during zazen. Ultimately, the unified consciousness itself also disappears – it becomes so deep that the “I”-consciousness is dissolved.

What happens concretely when you approach or enter this state? Mostly you

notice it only after sitting. For example: You feel that the legs, which had hurt so much before, *no longer hurt*. Or the pain was somewhere far away. Or there was noise outside, but it wasn't the least bit bothersome. Most importantly, a sitting period was suddenly very *short*; the 25 minutes of the sitting session seems like 5 minutes. When the session is over, you feel an indescribable inner *clarity/transparentcy*. You can also call it a feeling of *peace* without anything causing it. At the same time, you feel inexplicable *joy* and *energy* for living for no reason. Just this experience alone shows us the incredible value in entering into a state of samadhi.

If you come into this samadhi absorption over and over – perhaps even if you just come close to it – you will experience various “powers.” These powers or, more accurately, *qualities*, are called *jôriki*. First, they appear noticeably on an emotional level: *Emotional balance* is restored more quickly. When you are angry or upset, it subsides more swiftly. *Negative emotions* such as hatred and jealousy can be better controlled. Unfortunately, such feelings do not disappear completely. But over time, they definitely become *more controllable* than before.

Many say that they have become *more focused* through zazen. This can be confirmed concretely since tasks are now completed more efficiently in every area of work and life. This is significant because in today's society the ability to concentrate is highly valued.

It also promotes *intuitive cognition*. You don't recognize something with your mind, but with your intuition. More precisely, you can understand the whole if you see only a part, or the depth if you see only the surface. Or you can “somehow” know. In short, instincts start to work better than they used to. That, too, is valuable.

Another aspect is that you become *more creative*. You come up with new ideas that you hadn't thought of before. Especially in the West, many artists, including musicians and painters, practice zazen, which is probably due to the fact that zazen also deepens artistic intuition and creativity.

In addition, you become more resistant, or rather *more resilient*, when faced with so-called stressful situations. This does not mean that you no longer feel stress, but the “blade of stress” becomes blunter, so to speak. A continuation of this quality would be that the anxiety or fear of dying *de facto* subsides or even disappears. This can also be attributed to the effect of samadhi.

Another result of *jôriki* in a broader sense may be that your *relationship with the people* around you and your *immediate environment* somehow improves. In Master Dôgen's words, “If you practice zazen, things will naturally improve.” Quite

a few people have had the experience that something somehow gets better without conscious intent or conscious action. The reality is that the *jôriki* actually changes us over time without our knowing it.

Certainly, this *jôriki* is nothing more than the effects of our Essence becoming activated through zazen. One of the main characteristics of this Essence is that the dimension of the “one World” becomes perceptible or visible. Through this, our “I”-centeredness is broken down piece by piece, so that we naturally become more open, selfless and loving towards our fellow human beings. With *jôriki*, each of us is already on the way to becoming a new human being.

One last comment: When I speak like this, you might be inclined to think that sitting without samadhi would be meaningless. That is not the case. Even if the samadhi dimension is not clearly reached at the level of consciousness, the depths of the body already receive and store the effects of sitting. This will surely bear fruit later. Whether or not you have entered samadhi at the level of consciousness, it is important to continue with zazen.

The qualities of absorption are given, to a greater or lesser extent, to everyone if they continue to practice zazen. There are no negative “side effects” to zazen at all. However, even something so wonderful can weaken and eventually disappear if you stop practicing zazen. It is a very valuable “fruit,” but we should also know that although it is valuable, it has its conditions and requirements.

6.2. Experience of the Essence

The second fruit is the “experience of the Essence,” the experience of our own deepest essence as well as – simultaneously – the experience of the essence of everything and everyone that exists in the world. It is an experiential awakening to that Essence. It is also called the experience of the “true Self” or the “original Self.” Traditionally, this is called “enlightenment,” “awakening,” or *kenshō* [見性, seeing one's own nature].

In order for this fruit to ripen, it is in principle necessary to first enter the afore-mentioned samadhi, the state of absorption. If the experience of the Essence arises without this, and if it is authentic, it must be said that the total disappearance of the ego – final state of samadhi – miraculously happened by chance at the moment when the experience occurred or immediately before it. There are many cases where this happens, but if we keep them too much in our head and cherish them, nothing will happen in the end. In short, we can keep in mind that the process of samadhi is an essential condition for the second fruit to arise at all.

However – and this is the difficult part – it is also true that it is not enough to experience samadhi. The experience of samadhi does not automatically lead to the experience of enlightenment. Samadhi is a necessary condition for enlightenment, but not a sufficient one.

What else is necessary? It is difficult to express, but I would say a kind of *serious despair* in the depths of the mind. It is a desperation that makes us give everything to find some possible solution. Such a basic motivation is probably necessary. It is not the same as the superficial emotion of the moment, for example, in a sesshin. It is a desperation that is going on deep in the heart – perhaps sometimes unconsciously. The step beyond is something that can only be described as a mysterious wonder, beyond human knowledge. Theology points to a pair of opposites at work: of “grace” and “your own doing,” but both grace and your own doing converge at a unique point, and it is precisely this peculiar condition that allows for an unexpected break and breakthrough.

When this happens, it means first and foremost *letting go* – which sounds like a contradiction – *of the desperate self*. You might call it the spiritual “death” of the self. The fact that you are utterly and completely annihilated, or have been annihilated from the beginning, emerges with irrefutable clarity. If this is not the case, there can be no true enlightenment. This is difficult to explain, but very important. When you enter deep samadhi, you may often become one with all things, or you may lose yourself, or you may experience great joy, or you may feel a sense of freedom, but this alone is not true *kenshō*. However, this deep samadhi experience can be misconstrued as enlightenment. Not only the person in question, but also the teacher can be “deceived” by it. In this sense, it is a frightening thing. Therefore, it is necessary to find a “clairvoyant” teacher at any cost.

In other words, the fact that there is “no self” and, moreover, “no thing” at all, becomes unquestionably obvious. Traditionally, this is referred to as “emptiness of self” [*ninkū*, 人空] and “emptiness of objective things” [*hokku*, 法空]. The former means that your self is completely empty, while the latter means that the material and objective world as a whole is empty and without substance. Please don’t think that there are two kinds of “emptiness”; it is rather the fact that both this “I” and this world as such do not exist is verbalized methodically-linguistically in two aspects.

Most importantly, this is not an *intellectual* matter: E.g. the “idea of emptiness” is captured or the “philosophy of emptiness” is established etc. It is simply an indescribable *fact*, which can be expressed linguistically only as *nothing*–

at-all-ness or sheer *zero* or the like – this happens as a fact. Normally, this triggers a deep, great joy that you have never experienced until now.

This is not the full depth or dimension of the true Fact. However, this fact of utter *nothing-ness* is the basis of any further steps, and if this is not clear to a certain degree of purity, it cannot be called enlightenment or *kenshō*. This clear experience of the essential Fact is the core from which the real and concrete world of “One-ness” is infinitely revealed.

All these experiences of enlightenment occur in an instant. In other words, this fact always happens with an inner “Oh!” It is what is called “sudden enlightenment” [*tongo*, 頓悟]. The opposite term, “gradual enlightenment” [*zengo*, 漸悟], exists; this term, however, is used correctly only when it describes the entire process of repeated “sudden enlightenments.” The experience of true enlightenment does not come gradually and step by step, but always in the form of a sudden happening. When someone says that they have “slowly and gradually understood” something, it is almost certainly some kind of conceptual manipulation. Conversely, if you have a genuine enlightenment experience, you can clearly describe when, where, and how it occurred. If you can't tell and claim to have understood it somehow by degrees, then it is definitely not a genuine *kenshō* experience. It is strange, but true.

This does not always happen while sitting. When I said earlier that the experience of samadhi is the prerequisite for this experience, I did not necessarily mean that when you are in samadhi zazen, you can pass to the world of enlightenment in an instant. There are certainly such cases. Oddly enough, however, it's actually much more often the case that the event is triggered by a certain sensory stimulus outside of zazen – especially if you're not thinking about such a thing at all – and then suddenly, with an “Oh!”, it opens up. And this event is most certainly based on having sat sufficiently in samadhi up to that point.

Moreover, the details and concrete aspects of this experience vary from person to person. However, if it is a genuine experience, there are always subliminal common elements that can be recognized, and it is the job of the person called the teacher to confirm this and provide appropriate guidance. Furthermore, the depth of this experience can also vary greatly. In other words, there is a big difference between deep and not so deep. This true world is often compared to an “ox.” To put it this way, there are experiences where you only see the tail of the ox, and there are experiences where you clearly see the buttocks of the ox, including the tail. On the other hand, it is said that it is very rare to see the whole ox at one go. Shakyamuni

or Zen Master Enô (“the Sixth Patriarch in China,” 638-713) were absolute exceptions. Consequently, after the first experience of enlightenment, you work even more intensively on the “post-enlightenment practice” [*gogo no shugyô*, 悟後の修行], trying to go as deep as possible in order to attain real wisdom that is as free from conceptualization as possible.

In this way, the experience of enlightenment actually repeats itself at various depths and dimensions throughout your life – how long the intervening periods last depends entirely on the individual. There is even an exaggerated (?) legendary expression that certain great Zen masters have had “18 great enlightenments and countless small enlightenments.” In any case, it is said that the post-enlightenment practice, which occurs much more consciously and intensely, is many times more difficult than the initial, “blind” zazen practice. At the same time, however, it is this experience of limitless deepening that gives the zazen practitioner incomparable joy. The first breakthrough is certainly a great feeling of relief and joy. Nonetheless, it is often the subsequent reencounter and rediscovery of the experience that allows for a deeper and more enduring joy of another dimension.

Finally, it should be pointed out again that these (often initial) enlightenment experiences can occur even without zazen. Human reality is mysterious, and the number of people who are blessed with such experiences without zazen is not so small. However, I would like to make two comments about this: First, many of those who are blessed with such experiences do not know what has happened to them and are unable to properly evaluate and care for them. With the passage of time, such experiences often become buried in a kind of memory, and you are unable to comprehend what really happened. Or the experience can lead you to a kind of overestimation of yourself, in which your personality changes in such a way that you feel you are the only person endowed with incomparable importance. Therefore, you definitely need a suitable mentor who can be an expert guide in such cases. Also, the fact that you could experience it in this way is a kind of coincidence that cannot be repeated or imitated. (The same is true of the experiences of the mystics in Christianity.) There is a well-known story about a farmer who caught a rabbit because it crashed into a tree stump and died; from then on, the farmer waited endlessly near the tree stump in the hope that he would have the same luck again. As we all know, this kind of luck does not happen repeatedly.

In this regard, I must say that the way of zazen is unique because it is a universal method that applies to everyone. It is a universally applicable systematic method that has been developed over the course of a couple of thousand years. This

methodology knows what you can best do to prepare yourself for the experience of this essential event, and – once this experience has been granted – what you can do afterwards to deepen and complete in the best possible way what has been experienced. Here we can speak of an extremely valuable asset for all humankind, and I cannot emphasize this point enough.

6.3. Actualization of the Essence

The third fruit of zazen is the greatest and most important fruit. It lies in the actualization of our true Nature in our real personality, in our real life, and in our real society. This fruit is precisely the ultimate goal of Zen.

It is not impossible for any zazen practitioner to actualize this to some degree, even if *kenshō* has not yet been experienced. After many years of sincere zazen practice, the accumulation of constant *jōriki* will gradually change a person – as we have already mentioned. It is also true that there are people in this world who are commonly called “saints,” and even if they are not enlightened, they can reach such ethical heights that other people could hardly come up to. On the other hand, it is not that an experience automatically leads to actualization. Actualization of the true Self in real life is a new and further dimension.

Just the same, there is no doubt that the actualization of the Essence is promoted to a far greater extent when the true Self is clearly recognized. The relevance of the “second fruit” can only be strengthened, not weakened. It simply takes a long time for the experience of enlightenment to become flesh and blood. The process is limitless and expands endlessly. The saying, “Even Shakyamuni is still practicing,” expresses this aspect.

As for the actualization of the Essence, I would like to add one more aspect. As mentioned earlier, the greatest fruit is that this Essence is actualized in your own personality and in society; in truth, however, the fundamental fruit is the fact that sitting in zazen in silence is in and of itself already “actualization of the Essence.” In this sense, it is true that zazen is not only a method for attaining the first and second fruits, but is itself the actualization of the third fruit – or at least its core. Today it is probably the Soto School that places special emphasis upon this point. However, it is only when the second fruit has been tasted that you really become aware of it, and by simply emphasizing this aspect in words it can easily degenerate into a mere idea.

This is a brief description of the three fruits of zazen. In Sanbōzen, each of these three areas is considered important. From a methodological point of view,

however, the emphasis is on the second, the experience of the Essence. The reason for this is that this element has always been the primordial concern of Zen, and at the same time, in today's modern world, the desire for this “experience of our true Essence” is undeniably strong, and we believe that the living, direct experience of this Essence is indispensable and essential to the attainment of the basic peace of mind of modern human beings. And we believe that it energetically enables and supports human action on the way to a new dimension of being human. If we sincerely sit down and practice deeply in our hearts for this “second” core fruit, the “first” fruit will naturally go along with it and support it in real terms, and it will clearly lead to the actualization of the “third” fruit.

7. Motivations for Zazen and Types of Zazen

Here we would like to reflect on what goals people have in mind when they practice zazen. The above fruits of zazen often run parallel to this.

7.1. Motivations for Zazen

Why do people start zazen in the first place? There are many different motives. The “lowest” motive is *coincidence*. For example – a real case at hand – : “My girlfriend practices so much zazen that I have no choice but to join in.” It is not clear how long it will last, but it is a real case. A case slightly more substantial is *curiosity* about Zen, wanting to know what Zen is all about. Typical cases in Japan are non-Japanese people who are interested in Japan and want to try zazen as part of it. Another type is represented by a considerable number of sons of temple owners in Japan: They are *forced by professional necessity* to do zazen in order to succeed their father and take over the temple. Or, in order to earn “credits” at a (Buddhist) university, students must do some sitting, an additional example of this coercive motive. All these are cases where the motivation comes from outside.

When it comes to personal intrinsic motivation, the first reason is often *health*. For example, if you hear that zazen is good for oversensitivity toward cold weather, or if you want to improve your posture, it can be a good motivation to try zazen. In addition, there are many *psychological reasons* to practice zazen. You may get extremely nervous in public speaking, and want to learn self-control. Or you want to improve your concentration or be able to make the right decisions in important situations as in business. In some cases, it may be very serious, such as when someone is on the verge of death and wishes to be able to calm and control the reeling.

Even more profound is the case where someone practices zazen in search of

a solution for problems related to the *self*. This would be the case if someone really wants to know “who am I” and “what am I” really. A Christian who wants to practice zazen and “know the true 'God'” can be placed in the same category. It might be that someone starts zazen due to vague “fear” of living. This is ontological anxiety; the very fact that we live in this world causes anxiety. The “anxiety” (in German: “Angst”) of the famous philosopher M. Heidegger from the 20th century, who depicts the basic human condition in this way, also belongs to this category. Traditionally, when people come to Zen in search of a solution to the irrepressible problem of the “self,” it is the original problem area of Zen.

The severity of the dilemma is most intensified by the acute question of death. This is the case when someone is afraid of dying, and thinking about what will happen when they die. Or when the person you loved most has died, you are desperate to find out where they went. This is exactly what is often referred to in Zen as “life and death are the greatest matter” [*shôji-jidai*, 生死事大].

We see that people come to zazen for a wide variety of reasons. Notably, zazen does not deny or reject any of these motivations. Even if a person started with a seemingly frivolous motivation, in reality there may be a serious motivation behind it, which they themselves are not aware of. At any rate, there is no doubt that among the roughly estimated seven billion people currently on earth, those who aspire to zazen are an extremely small minority. In other words, just coming to zazen, for whatever reason, constitutes wonderful “karma,” and deserves wholehearted appreciation.

7.2. The Different Types of Zazen

Based on these motivations and goals, it is possible to divide zazen into different categories. The ancient Zen master Keihô Shûmitsu (圭峰宗密, 780-841) divided zazen into five categories, which he called the “five kinds of zazen” [*goshuzen*, 五種禪]. These are: “Non-Buddhist Zen” [*gedô-zen*, 外道禪], “Ordinary Zen” [*bompu-zen*, 凡夫禪], “Small Vehicle Zen” [*shôjô-zen*, 小乘禪], “Great Vehicle Zen” [*daijô-zen*, 大乘禪], and “Supreme Vehicle Zen” [*saijôjô-zen*, 最上乘禪]. I find these designations are rather misleading for our world today; therefore, I will put them aside and try to categorize zazen from a more modern point of view, using other names.

It is, of course, a conceptual classification, and in reality, there may be cases where one category encompasses more than one narrowly defined category, or where one category merges into another. Please note that this is only a more or less schematic classification.

7.2.1. “Zen for external reasons”

This is a form of zazen where, as in the previous example, you practice zazen because your girlfriend is doing it, or because you have no choice but to do it to earn university credits. It is a kind of zazen in which an inner motivation does not seem to be actively present and you do it “accidentally,” so to speak, half under compulsion. Vocational zazen, where you must do zazen in order to qualify as a monk and succeed your father as abbot (probably only in Japan), would also fall into this category.

This category does not exist in the earlier classification of Master Keihô. It is, in other words, a new category in the history of Zen, emerging in modern times.

7.2.2. “Intellectual Zen”

This is zazen to satisfy curiosity. It also includes zazen done by scholars for the sake of learning – “academic Zen.” In this case, the wish to improve one’s knowledge predominates over the longing to purely deepen the Zen practice. Master Keihô’s term “non-Buddhist Zen” [*gedô-zen*], means zazen practiced by people outside the Buddhist path. But considering its true purpose, I see this intellectual Zen also as a kind of *gedô Zen* – independent of whether or not someone is formally a “Buddhist.”

7.2.3. “Jōriki-Zen”

This is Zen in search of *jōriki*, the first of the three “fruits of zazen” already mentioned. Out of the motivations already mentioned, zazen practiced to improve health or to solve psychological problems falls into this category. According to Master Keihô’s classification, it is “Zen for Ordinary People” [*bompu-zen*]. Zazen for businessmen or corporate employees who want to increase their work efficiency, zazen for politicians to improve their political judgment, or zazen for athletes to enhance their performance would also fall into this category.

An extreme case of this *jōriki-zen* is zazen in which the mind is trained not to fear death (cf. the last part of E. Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*). This is the form of zazen that was mainly practiced by soldiers and warriors. What Master Keihô called “Zen of the Small Vehicle” [*shōjō-zen*] has something in common with this extreme type of *jōriki-zen*.

7.2.4. “Enlightenment Zen” [*shōgo-zen*, 証悟禪]

This is the second of the three fruits of zazen already mentioned, that is, the

zazen that you practice in order to attain the experience of enlightenment. This is the desire to truly clarify the real identity of the self, or to solve the problem of life and death in the clearest possible way. This is what Master Keihô called “Zen of the Great Vehicle” [*daijô-zen*].

It is often claimed, by people who do not practice zazen, that zazen should not be done with the goal of becoming enlightened. It is true that during zazen and during the sesshin period, you should work with complete dedication to your practice – for example, to the “Kôan Mu” given by the teacher. During this time, you should not even have the word “enlightenment” in mind. But the reason we practice zazen in this intense way is that deep in our heart we desperately want to have the experience of seeing the Essence. This cannot be ignored or denied, and it is the reason why we strive so earnestly. In other words, in this sense, we must “strive” intensely for realization. This means that we must pay close attention to how we understand and use the words “do not think about enlightenment.”

Moreover, to realize this enlightenment Zen, it is not enough to just sit. There are prerequisites in the mind. To be specific, we can say that there are three prerequisites.

First, we need a kind of *dark and deep yearning*. The reason the yearning is “dark” is that we don't know where it comes from. Obviously, it comes from the true inside of human beings. When we talked about motivation earlier, we were dealing with the situation of wanting to solve such pressing problems related to the self and death. You could say that what is meant here is a fundamental yearning to know what is real, what is the real world and real life. It continuously comes up, even if you want to suppress it, and it forces you to resolve it. It is a situation that seems to call to us from somewhere, far away in our subconsciousness – whether we are asleep or awake. The feeling often referred to in Japan as “impermanence” [*mujiôkan*, 無常感] also belongs to this category. This despair in our inner world, in constant turmoil, is the first condition. Without this element, even the desire for an enlightenment experience will be rather half-hearted and will hardly bring any real solution.

The second is the *dark and deep trust*. This trust is also called “dark” because here, too, we don't know where it comes from. Obviously, you have to be able to trust your teacher. But it is also a trust in something else, such as destiny or the source of life or the hidden “God” or something like that. Without this, we would not dare to take further steps. Strangely enough, in many cases, the stronger the “dark trust” becomes, the stronger the “dark yearning” becomes.

The third condition is *clear and deep determination*. This is the

determination to persevere to the end of the search, no matter what, to put everything into the search and never give up. This is a clear decision. It cannot be “dark.” It can be said that it gives you bright momentum.

With these three elements, internally and externally supported by the teacher's guidance, enlightenment Zen is effectively practiced.

I have spoken above of “jôriki-zen” and of “strengthening *jôriki*” as the first fruit of Zen. Once again, however, I would like to emphasize that while this “fruit” is desirable in itself, much of it is given as a natural – so to speak – “by-product” of the process of practicing enlightenment Zen. The relationship is such that “jôriki-Zen” does not automatically lead to “enlightenment Zen,” but that “enlightenment Zen” naturally includes much of “jôriki-Zen.”

7.2.5. “Zen of the ultimate Way” [*shidô-zen*, 至道禪]

This is a paraphrase of Master Keihô's “Zen of the Supreme Vehicle” [*saijôjô-zen*]. This Zen can take two forms.

One form is represented by a person who has realized his or her true Nature in sufficient depth in the preceding “enlightenment Zen,” or has realized the so-called “great enlightenment” [*daigo-tettei*, 大悟徹底]; this person goes beyond the world of great enlightenment to return to the world of ordinary life and endlessly follow the path of actualizing the true Nature by serving the welfare of others. In terms of the “fruits of zazen,” this is the dimension in which, starting from the second fruit, you dedicate yourself to the actualization and development of the third fruit – the ultimate form of zazen.

The other form is to be so impressed by the overwhelming fullness, depth, and sublimity of the zazen path, even before the experience of enlightenment is attained, and to forget and devote yourself to the practice of *shikan-taza* [just sitting] without worrying about “enlightenment experiences.” Certainly, this is a pure form of zazen and, so to speak, the attitude that the Japanese Soto School has adopted since the middle of the 19th century. However, practicing this form of zazen truly and sincerely is a very difficult task, and it does not always correspond to its stated goal, which can end up being an excuse for not having an enlightenment experience. This could ultimately lead to zazen becoming a “template” and merely a formal routine.

After all, the “Zen of the ultimate Way” can only develop realistically if it is supported by the “enlightenment Zen.” Master Dôgen says: “The traces of enlightenment disappear; the disappeared traces of enlightenment can be unfolded

endlessly” (Chapter “Genjôkôan, in: *Shôbôgenzô*). This means you first deeply realize enlightenment, then, awakening from that enlightenment, makes all traces of enlightenment disappear so that the true Self, the world of the true Fact, unfolds endlessly. In other words, “Zen of the ultimate Way” without “enlightenment Zen” is actually extremely rare, and I don't know how it is possible in reality. “Enlightenment Zen,” on the other hand, means devoting yourself to deepening the present path of enlightenment while looking up to the “Zen of the ultimate Way,” which infinitely exceeds the dimension of “enlightenment Zen.” In other words, analogous to the relationship between the second and third fruits of zazen, “enlightenment Zen” and “Zen of the ultimate Way,” mutually deepen, strengthen and ground each other.

8. Dokusan and Teacher

8.1. Why Need a Teacher?

The last topic relates to the *teacher*. This is actually a core theme of Zen. Earlier we described the way of sitting. If you follow this, it may seem that you no longer need a real teacher. Perhaps it is enough to have someone check whether you are sitting correctly. In fact, if you sit for, say, only five minutes a day to calm yourself or for health reasons, you don't necessarily need a teacher, let alone a master. The problem becomes apparent when there is a desire to pursue it further. That's when it's better to have a teacher. Even if it is a motivation that belongs to “jôriki-Zen” in the classification we have mentioned, I must say that it is better to have a teacher. We have talked about the *makyô* before. For some people, this appears quite early. It is important to have a trusted person explain what happened to you so that you can continue to practice with confidence and without fear. Some people misinterpret such *makyô* occurrences as “enlightenment.” When this happens, it is a clear mistake.

Moreover, a teacher is indispensable if someone longs for the second fruit of zazen and wishes to tread the path of enlightenment Zen. And not just a “teacher” in the neutral sense of the word, but a teacher in whom you can have complete confidence and whose guidance you want to follow to the end. Zen Master Dôgen was a strict teacher and said, “If you don't find the right teacher, it's better not to do zazen.”

The path in enlightenment Zen in particular is like climbing a mountain of some thousand meters high for the first time. If you want to climb it at any cost, it is clear that if you do not know the path well and do not have a guide who can lead others on this path, you will lose your life. At the same time, the presence of a teacher

while practicing enlightenment Zen is more than just a “tether” that helps you avoid danger. The very existence of your teacher is a substantial guide, a lifeline, a foundation for confidence and courage. If you entrust yourself to this experienced rope, you can move forward with joy and peace despite the stress. It is in the magnetic field of the teacher that the force to grow beyond your own limits is first triggered. In this sense, the teacher is indispensable.

8.2. Trust and Obedience to the Teacher

As far as zazen is concerned, the most important principle is, of course, to follow the teacher wholeheartedly. In this respect, the situation is different from university seminars, where open-minded professors encourage students to criticize their own theories without hesitation. In Zen, people become students of a teacher because they are attracted to their teacher's experience and the way he or she embodies it, so that if they want to reach the same level, they will not want to criticize his or her experience from the start. If you become a student of a piano teacher by choice, for example, you probably became a student because you admired and were touched by the teacher's playing style and musicality. You then try to be as receptive as possible to what that teacher embodies. No student should criticize his piano teacher from the start.

Zen Master Dôgen was a very radical person and made the following statement:

“When you meet a teacher who can expound the highest way, do not look at his social class, do not look at his face, do not care about his faults, and do not pay attention to his behavior. This only for the sake of respecting Prajna wisdom ...” (Chapter “Raihai-Tokuzui” in: *Shôbôgenzô*).

Zen Master Dôgen says, “When you meet a real master, don't make a problem of the social class; ignore human appearance, personal weaknesses, and behavioral deficiencies. Just follow that person for the sake of the *prajna* wisdom expressed through that person.” In short, the highest criterion for choosing a teacher is the teacher's Dharma eye – the clarity of the eye for the world of Essence. This is an important point. It may not be easy to accept, but if what you are looking for is enlightenment Zen and it is extremely important to you, and if there is a master who can show it to you, then you should follow that person, even if there are flaws from a human point of view and the teacher's personality has not been perfected. This is a very important principle and is dependent on compliance.

The question arises as to where and how many teachers/masters with such an “eye” can be found in Japan or in the world today. One of the major Zen schools in Japan has systematically abolished the practice of taking students and giving them personal guidance through *dokusan* (see below). As a result, unfortunately, with few exceptions, there is little chance for such a teacher-student relationship in this lineage. The other schools in Japan would come into consideration, but how many teachers are there willing to accept so-called “lay people,” who are not monks, as students, and take responsibility for their personal guidance and lead them to true enlightenment? In Japan today, there are very few of them. Nevertheless, if you sincerely look for one, a path will surely open for you. One possibility for the near future is to seek such teachers abroad. There is no denying that “Zen study abroad” will become a reality.

8.3. Compatibility with the Teacher

Let's return to the topic of trust and obedience to the teacher. We have said that we follow our teachers wholeheartedly, but we too are all human, and there are times when we inevitably lose our wavelength or get into an uncomfortable situation. For this reason, throughout the history of Zen, it has always been permissible to change teachers. If you do so, you must ask permission from your former teacher. If you go to another master, the former master will normally allow it and may even write a recommendation to the person who is to become the new teacher. The principle is, “Don't reject the coming, don't chase the going!”

When you change teachers, you must put aside everything you learned from the previous teacher and follow the new teacher's instructions to the letter. At least, that's how it should be. Here is the rigor of the Zen world and at the same time its pragmatic freedom.

8.4 The Final Challenge in Following the Teacher

In conclusion, however, it must be said: The nature of seriously following a teacher should make it clear that it is not enough to simply follow the teacher to the end. If that were the case, the student would never grow beyond the teacher, and over time the quality of the education system would decline and eventually perish. Therefore, I think the following sentence from the Zen tradition is a good example of how Zen maintains solidity and rigor in the teacher-student relationship.

*“If your view is the same as your teacher's, you destroy half of his virtue.
If your wisdom exceeds that of your teacher, it is now worth passing on.”*

This word is traditionally attributed to Master Hyakujô Ekai (百丈懷海, 720-814). If your own views are always the same as your teacher's, it means reducing your teacher's virtue by half. Only when your own views exceed those of your teacher are you qualified to pass on that teacher's Way. To be a disciple of a good teacher means that you walk the path of learning with absolute obedience to that master, but in the end, you set yourself the task of surpassing that master. From the teacher's perspective, on the other hand, he or she becomes a full-fledged master only when he or she has a disciple who surpasses the master. This clear outlook needs to be imprinted in our heart.

What has been said also corresponds to the principles taught in the world of art and martial arts outside of Zen, for example, “*shu*” [守, keep], “*ha*” [破, break], “*ri*” [離, go away, leave]. The first stage is to learn and follow what the master says – in this sense, “keep.” The second is to take a leap forward from there (“break”). And the last stage, “leaving,” is to leave the master. However, the above words of Master Hyakujô may be special in that they do not simply refer to the last stage as “leaving,” but rather they take into account the point at which the student clearly surpasses their own master.

8.5. *Shôken* and *Dokusan*

How, then, is the master-disciple relationship established and maintained? The opportunity to enter into a master-disciple relationship is called *shôken* [相見, literally, seeing each other (for the first time)]. There are usually – depending on the school – certain rituals or rules for this; these will be specifically communicated to you in the respective *dôjô*. At any rate, at this *shôken* you will be personally received for the first time as a student and it will be decided which practice method you will follow.

From then on, the further and long-term personal guidance takes place in the so-called *dokusan* [独参, literally: going alone (to the master)]. To do this, you enter the dokusan room, meet the teacher in private, and ask for guidance.

There are certain rituals for entering and leaving the dokusan room, which I would like to explain briefly here : In Sanbôzen you go into the dokusan room, closes the door and makes the first prostration (see 3.6.4.) at the door towards the teacher. Next, go in *gasshô* directly about 2 meters in front of the teacher, and there you do the second prostration. Then, slide closer and sit about 50 cm away from the teacher. You tell the teacher your name and your practice, and that's how the actual *dokusan* begins. When the teacher

rings the small hand bell, the dokusan is over. You do a slight *monjin*, get up and walk in gasshō to the door. There, just as when entering, you make the third prostration and leaves the dokusan room.

In the Dokusan, only topics related to Zen are discussed. It is not a psychological counseling in general, and certainly not a place to discuss business or hobbies. In any case, it should be emphasized again that personal guidance in *dokusan*, along with zazen itself, is the core of Zen. Without dokusan, proper *sanzen* [formal Zen practice with the master] is not possible.

9. Conclusion

This concludes the introduction to zazen. Now that you have understood the basics of zazen, why not start sitting yourself? And if you want to try something deeper, I hope you will find someone to guide you along the way. And in the end, I would like you to experience the true joy of zazen and fully experience the wonder and depth of our boundless existence.

Thank you for your attention.

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