

Just sitting – quotations

Ta-I Tao-hsin (Dayi Daoxin) (580-651) 4. patriarch

Question: How can we be enlightened to the nature of things and our minds attain lucid purity? Tao-hsin replies: Neither by [trying to] meditate on the Buddha, nor by [trying to] grab hold of the mind, nor by seeing the mind, nor by analyzing the mind, nor by reflection, nor by discernment, nor by dispersing confusion, but through identification with the natural rhythms of things. Don't force anything to go. Don't force anything to stay. Finally abiding in the one sole purity, the mind spontaneously becomes lucid and pure.

Some people can see clearly that the mind is lucid and pure like a bright mirror. Some need a year [of practice] and then the mind becomes lucid and pure. Others need three or five years and then the mind is lucid and pure. Or some can attain enlightenment without ever being taught by someone else. The Nirvana Sutra says: "The nature of the mind of beings is like a pearl that falls into the water. The water is muddy so the pearl becomes hidden. When the water is pure, the pearl is revealed."

-

Therefore, we should know that there are four kinds of students [of Buddhism]. Those who do practice, have understanding, and attain enlightenment are the highest group. Those who do not practice but have understanding and attain enlightenment are the middle-upper group. Those who do practice and have understanding but have not attained enlightenment are in the middle-lower group. Those who neither practice nor have understanding nor have attained enlightenment are in the lowest group.

Question: The moment we are going to begin practice, how should we contemplate? Tao-hsin replies: "We must identify with the natural rhythms of things."

-

First you should understand the source of the mind and the various essences and functions [of things], and then the truth will be seen lucidly and purely with complete understanding and discernment without any doubts. Then afterwards meritorious work can be accomplished. A thousand things comply if you understand but once, whereas a single deception [brings] ten thousand doubts. To miss by the slightest hair-breadth is to err by a thousand li.

-

Although the sea of the Dharma is unlimited, in actual practice it is contained in a single word. When you get the idea, you can dispense with words, for then even one word is useless. When you understand completely in this way, you have obtained the mind of the Buddha.

Daman Hongren (602 – 674) 5. patriarch

Question: Why do you call the mind the fundamental teacher? Answer: The true mind exists of itself and does not come from outside [oneself. As teacher] it does not even require any tuition fee! Nothing in all the three periods of time is more dear [to a person] than one's mind. If you discern the suchness [inherent in the mind] and maintain awareness of it, you will reach the other shore [of nirvana]. The deluded forsake it and fall into the three lower modes of existence (i.e., animals, hungry ghosts, and residents of the hells). Therefore, it is known that the Buddhas of the three periods of time take their own true mind as teacher.

-

Do not let time pass in vain while only wasting energy. The sutra says: "[Foolish sentient beings] will reside forever in hell as if pleasantly relaxing in a garden. There are no modes of existence worse than their present state." We sentient beings fit this description. Having no idea how horribly terrifying [this world really] is, we never have the least intention of leaving! How awful!

-

To be able to discern one's own inherent mind and improve [the ability to maintain awareness of it] with every moment of thought is equivalent to constantly making pious offerings to the entire Buddhist canon and to all the Buddhas in the ten directions of space, who are as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges. It is equivalent to constantly turning the wheel of the Dharma with every moment of thought.

-

He who comprehends the mind that is the source of all dharmas always understands everything. All his wishes are fulfilled and all his religious practices completed. He accomplishes all [that he sets out to do] and will not be reborn again [in the realm of samsara]. If you can stop generating false thoughts and the illusion of personal possession and completely discard [your preoccupation with] the body, then you will certainly achieve birthlessness (i.e., nirvana). How inconceivably [wonderful]!

-

“Sentient beings discern the mind and cross over [to the other shore of enlightenment] by themselves. The Buddhas cannot make sentient beings cross over [to the other shore].” If the Buddhas were able to make sentient beings cross over [to the other shore of enlightenment], then why—the Buddhas of the past being as incalculable as the sands of the River Ganges—have we sentient beings not yet achieved buddhahood? We are drowning in the seas of suffering simply because we are not completely sincere about seeking enlightenment.-

-

Question: What do you mean by the “illusion of personal possession”? Answer: When only slightly superior to someone else [in some way], one may think that this [superiority] is due to one's own achievement. To feel this way is to be sick even while in nirvana.

-

Gently quiet your mind. I will teach you [how to do this] once again: Make your body and mind pure and peaceful, without any discriminative thinking at all. Sit properly with the body erect. Regulate the breath and concentrate the mind so it is not within you, not outside of you, and not in any intermediate location. Do this carefully and naturally. View your own consciousness tranquilly and attentively, so that you can see how it is always moving, like flowing water or a glittering mirage. After you have perceived this consciousness, simply continue to view it gently and naturally, without [the consciousness assuming any fixed position] inside or outside of yourself. Do this tranquilly and attentively, until its fluctuations dissolve into peaceful stability. This flowing consciousness will disappear like a gust of wind.

Keizan Jokin (1885 – 1973)

If you want to clarify the mind-ground, give up your jumble of limited knowledge and interpretation, cut off thoughts of usualness and holiness, abandon all delusive feelings. When the true mind of reality manifests, the clouds of delusion dissipate and the moon of the mind shines bright. The Buddha said, “Listening and thinking about it are like being shut out by a door. Zazen is like coming home and sitting at ease.”

Hajuun Yasutani (1268 – 1325)

In doing shikantaza you must maintain mental alertness, which is of particular importance to beginners—and even those who have been practicing ten years could still be called beginners! Often due to weak concentration, one becomes self-conscious or falls into a sort of trance or ecstatic state of mind. Such practice might be useful to relax yourself, but it will never lead to enlightenment and is not the practice of the Buddha Way.

-

To do shikantaza does not mean to become without thoughts, yet, doing shikantaza, do not let your mind wander. Do not even contemplate enlightenment or becoming Buddha. As soon as

such thoughts arise, you have stopped doing shikantaza. Dogen says very clearly: “Do not attempt to become Buddha.”

-

However, to practice in this manner can require a long time to attain enlightenment, and such practice should never be discontinued until one fully realizes enlightenment. Even after attaining great enlightenment and even if one becomes a roshi (Zen master), one must continue to do shikantaza forever, simply because shikantaza is the actualization of enlightenment itself.

-

Trying to get rid of our thoughts is just another form of fantasy. Zazen, understood as mind being innately one with all phenomena, is a means of seeing all things from the foundation of pure life, wherein we give up both pursuing thought and trying to chase it away. Then we see everything that arises as the scenery of our lives. We let arise whatever arises and allow to fall away whatever falls away.

-

The basis for silent illumination is to entrust everything to the posture of zazen, letting go of all that comes up without trying to work out solutions for what we ought to do about this or that. This is what is called shikantaza. When we do zazen with this attitude, it is no longer sitting for the purpose of fulfilling some artificial fantasy such as gaining enlightenment or improving our minds.

Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi (1932 – 1995)

If we practice to become something else, we simply put another head on top of our own, making ourselves ghosts. One head is enough!

-

Dogen Zenji says, “To study the enlightened Way is to study the self. And to study the self is to forget the self.”

-

In a way it seems contradictory, for Dogen Zenji has written that it’s not really a matter of practice or enlightenment. If this is true, then why do we have to practice? But again that goes back to the two aspects of our practice: Speaking from the intrinsic perspective, of course, we say that fundamentally we are all buddhas and there is no need for anything such as practice or enlightenment since that is our true nature anyway. But the problem is that we may only believe that theoretically; we don’t know it firsthand. To become directly aware of it and know it fully is why we practice.

-

Dogen Zenji refers to the “the backward step.” This is the key. In our everyday lives, our impulse is to go forward. However, instead of going forward, what if we were to step back and carefully consider practice in that very moment?

-

When you do shikantaza, sit as if your very life depended on it, as if you were in a duel to the death. What kind of intense concentration would you have? You would need to be physically relaxed, and yet in a state of greatly heightened alertness. When we sit, two major types of hindrances may occur: a scattered, busy mind, and a dull, drowsy mind. And the way to eliminate both these hindrances while we sit is to concentrate in zazen as though engaged in the fight for our very lives... So when you sit, please be attentive.

-

“Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking.” Dogen Zenji is quoting the famous words of Master Yakusan Igen (Yaoshan Weiyan). A phrase like this could be certainly elaborated quite a bit – for our purposes, we can plainly take it to mean that

we should stop grasping at thoughts and just sit. That unconditioned state is a state of nonthinking. So what is the unconditioned state? Don't develop or cling to any thoughts.

*Shohaku Okumura*¹ (1948 -)

“To study the self is to forget the self.”

“The self is connected with all beings.”

“The self forgets the self in studying the self.”

“Zazen is not a kind of contemplation as a “method” through which “I” (subject) can see “emptiness” as object.”

„But when I sit facing the wall, I am not a father. I am not a Buddhist priest. I am nothing. I am empty. I am just who I am. This is liberation from my karmic life.”

“To be verified by all things is to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of others drop off.” This means that the separation between self and others is dropped off. Zazen reveals the total reality of interdependent origination. When we let go of thought, we put our whole being in the reality of interpenetrating reality. This is how we are verified by all beings.”

“When we think, “Now I am verified by all things,” we already miss it. Just practice, then the trace is there and yet it isn't. This trace is like the trace of birds flying. It is there but we cannot see it. When we try to grasp it, we miss it. When we open our hands, it is there.”

“When we actually practice in this way we can truly see that practice and realization are one. Without practice there is no such thing called enlightenment. We usually think practice is one thing and enlightenment is another; that practice is the means and enlightenment is the reward. This is not correct. In truth, realization is within the process of moment by moment practice.”

John Daido Loori

“You should understand that zazen is not meditation or contemplation; it is not about quieting the mind, focusing the mind, or studying the mind; it is not mindfulness or mindlessness. If you want to really understand zazen, then know that zazen is not about sitting or lying down. Zazen is zazen; it is undefiled.”

“The truth of the universe fills your body and mind; yet it is not manifest without practice; nor is it realized without enlightenment. Unless you are prepared to move forward and take risks, the truth of your life and that of the universe is never realized as this very life itself.”

“At Zen Mountain Monastery we engage two methods of zazen: koan study and shikantaza. Koan introspection is a directed and focused kind of meditation. In it students use joriki, the power of concentration developed in zazen, to penetrate the koan which is the object of attention during meditation. Shikantaza – just sitting – is less pointed than koan study. It is zazen based fundamentally on faith – faith in the Buddha's enlightenment, faith in one's own buddha nature, faith in the process of practice itself. Most students in the Soto lineage of Zen sit shikantaza. Though the process is different, both forms address the same thing: the study and realization of the true nature of the self.”

¹ *The study of the self*, Just Sitting, 105. old. Az eredeti japán szövegben a „study” szó helyén „nareru” áll, ami azt jelenti, hogy közel kerülni hozzá, megismerkedni, bizalmas viszonyba kerülni vele. A megfelelő kínai kifejezés annak felel meg, ahogy a fiatal madár megtanul szüleiével repülni.

“As with anything else, both approaches have their shortcomings. Koan practitioners get stuck with results and accomplishments. Passing koans becomes some sort of race, and the process is forgotten. In shikantaza it is very easy for students to get lulled into a state of complacency, believing that “Since I’m already enlightened, I don’t have to do anything.” People who think this end up sitting with no awareness and no effort, never appreciating what no-effort in shikantaza really is. What is the effort of no-effort?”

“When you’re doing shikantaza you don’t try to focus on anything specifically, or to make thoughts go away. You simply allow everything to be just the way it is. Thoughts come, thoughts go, and you simply watch them, you keep your awareness on them. It takes a lot of energy and persistence to sit shikantaza, to not get caught up in daydreaming. But little by little, thoughts begin to slow down, and finally they cease to arise. When the thought disappears, the thinker disappears. This is the samadhi of falling away of body and mind.”

“We need to exhaust that process of linear thinking, and when the mind finally stops functioning, out of the blue the realization of the koan appears. It is like a quantum leap. It’s a very different way of using the mind. It is nonthinking that is neither intellectual nor based on the subconscious.”

“Sometimes during sitting people have what we call makyo: a vision or hallucination. Other times it’s a smell or a sound. Students often think this means they’re enlightened—particularly if the image is related to Zen, like the Buddha sitting on a golden lotus—and they immediately run off to dokusan to get it confirmed. The teacher will usually listen and then say something like, “Maybe you’re not sitting straight. Sit straight. Don’t worry, it will go away.” It doesn’t matter whether we attach to a regular thought, or to the thought of enlightenment. Whatever it is, it is still attachment.

There’s a famous koan of an ancient master who was a hermit. He had been practicing many, many years, living isolated in the mountains. One day he was cooking soup and in the steam Manjushri Bodhisattva appeared and in his deep, resonant voice proclaimed the dharma to him. The old hermit immediately picked up the ladle and started beating him with it. “Get out of here!” he said. “Get out of here!” In other words, don’t put another head on top of the one you already have. Anything that we hold on to along the way – anything – is a dead end, because the minute we attach, we create two things: the “attachee” and the “attacher.” That is not the intimacy of samadhi; it is not the intimacy of shikantaza.”

“We need to exhaust that process of linear thinking, and when the mind finally stops functioning, out of the blue the realization of the koan appears. It is like a quantum leap. It’s a very different way of using the mind. It is nonthinking that is neither intellectual nor based on the subconscious.”

Zoketsu Norman Fischer

“Our life is already fine the way it is. Everything that happens is already a manifestation of our original enlightenment even though we don’t know it. We don’t need to enter another condition or improve or disprove anything. The gentle rain of the Dharma is falling all the time evenly and freely on everything, and each thing receives that rain and uses it in its own way, each in a different way. The whole world is unfolding in a beautiful and perfect interplay of forces. We may have difficulty appreciating this but after all we are only people and why would we not have difficulty? Our difficulty is this: our minds can’t see difference without making comparisons, without making judgments and having preferences. We want either everything to be the same as everything else, which it is although we can’t experience it that way, or if things must be different from one another we struggle to rank them.”

“The problem is that we actually are incapable of seeing zazen as useless because our minds can’t accept the fundamental genuineness and all-rightness of our lives. We are actually very resistant to this reality. We hate it because it is too simple and we persistently think we need more. This is not a detail or a quirk of our minds; it is not even a habit really; it is the deep nature of our minds. The Sanskrit word for consciousness is *vijnana*, which means to divide, or to cut. In order for us to have what we call experience we have to divide or cut reality. Genuineness or all-rightness is wholeness, indivisibility, so it can’t be an experience. And even if we practice zazen and have an enlightenment experience we immediately confuse ourselves with it. Such an experience can be a promising beginning, but we have to be careful to let go of it, not to define it or to name it, not to make it into a cherished memory, into a hook for identity.”

“We are living in a historical period in which we understand that it is necessary for all of us to be conscious and active in our world. None of us can ignore this call to action. And yet, if we do not practice zazen, whether we call it zazen or whatever we call it and however we do it, we cannot act in any accurate way. There has been plenty of action – too much action. What we need is not more action, we need enlightened action. And this means letting go of action.”

Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157)

“Only silence is the supreme speech, only illumination the universal response.”

“But if illumination neglects serenity then aggressiveness appears.”

“When silent illumination is fulfilled, the lotus blossoms, the dreamer awakens.”

“THE PRACTICE OF TRUE REALITY is simply to sit serenely in silent introspection.”

“This empty, wide-open mind is subtly and correctly illuminating. Spacious and content, without confusion from inner thoughts of grasping, effectively overcome habitual behavior and realize the self that is not possessed by emotions.”

Ehei Dogen

Zazen is not thinking of good, not thinking of bad. It is not conscious endeavor. It is not introspection. Do not desire to become a buddha; let sitting or lying down drop away.