

**Notes and Quotes for April 21, 2024 Dharma Reflections:**

**What's On the Path?**

***Part Eleven:***

**Zazen**

“Zazen is not ‘meditation’ and for this reason we have retained this Japanese word throughout. Its precise meaning will become clear as the book progresses.”

- *The Three Pillars of Zen—35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, Philip Kapleau, Anchor Books, 2000, p. 3.*

“The core of Zen is a practice called zazen, literally ‘sitting meditation.’ In Japanese the word ‘za’ means a seat, while ‘zen’ is the Japanese pronunciation of the word that the Buddha himself used for ‘concentration’ or ‘meditation,’ and which he taught as one of eight essential aspects to liberation. Thus the Zen school of Buddhism is the one that puts special emphasis on this aspect of the path....

“Very often the practice of meditation is associated with stress reduction and better health. But it is important to understand that in Zen these things are viewed merely as possible side-effects of the practice. Rather, the more fundamental teaching is that zazen can open us to a direct, experiential understanding of our True Nature, uncovering more and more of our innate clarity, joy and loving-kindness.

“Zazen is a way of working with both the body and the mind, and in Zen we view these two as intimately interconnected: what we do with our bodies affects our minds, and what we do with our minds affects our bodies. For this reason, instruction puts a strong emphasis on finding a relaxed but alert and stable meditation posture....

“We can identify three main elements of any of the postures,... and the first one is stability; we need to find a way to sit in which we can easily settle. A key to this is to have three points of contact with the mat or the floor. If we have less than three points of contact, we’re wobbly. When sitting on a mat, the three points are the seat and the two knees. In a chair, they are the seat and the two feet. But whether in a chair or a on a cushion, establishing three solid points of contact is what allows us to let go and release into the posture....

“After stability, the second element of zazen posture is uprightness. Just as a stable seat fosters a sense of groundedness and connection with the earth, so an upright spine expresses our human dignity and our aspiration to awaken. A properly aligned spine creates the poise that we need in order to be fully present and responsive. To find the correct alignment, we need to have our knees lower than our hips. In this way the pelvis can be placed at an angle that makes sitting up straight virtually effortless. To find this correct angle for the pelvis, make sure when

you first sit down that you are sitting directly on your sitting bones and that your buttocks are thrust back ('your behind is behind'). To accomplish this, it can be helpful to lean forward as far as you can, place your hands under your buttocks and draw the flesh back. Then sit up slowly until your ears are aligned over your shoulders. Relax your shoulders. Check your head and neck also.... Draw the back of the neck towards the back of your collar as you move the head slightly upwards. This will make the chin angle down just a little bit. Sometimes it is helpful to imagine a string from the crown of your head pulling it upwards....

“(S)itting up straight does not mean ramrod straight. The natural alignment of the spine is more like the stalk of a flower than like a stake; it needs to have some softness in it. This leads to the third and final point of posture, which is balance. Balance... refers to the a balance between tension and relaxation.... Our sitting needs to be taut without being tight....

“The *mudra*, or hand position, taught in Zen is another way of working with the balance point between too tight and too loose. In this mudra, the hands are placed in the lap with the back of the left hand on top of the right palm, while the two thumbs touch each other so that an oval shape is formed. The thumbs should touch each other ever so lightly, as if a single sheet of paper were held between them....

“The gaze, too, can help you monitor a proper balance.... (W)e are taught to sit with our eyes open (which) helps us stay awake and alert (not too loose), while keeping the gaze down at approximately a 45-degree angle, keeping the eyes relaxed and the gaze soft... (not too tight)....

“One of the reasons that finding a balanced and well-aligned posture is so important to the practice of Zen meditation... is that... Zen puts a strong emphasis on ‘no moving.’ Because our aim is to settle the mind, we try to maintain a deep physical stillness while we sit. If something itches while we are sitting, we don’t scratch; we just observe. If we experience some discomfort in a limb, or if our foot falls asleep, we don’t change positions, but simply stay as we are until the time that we have set for our round of sitting is up....

“Though some discomfort while sitting is to be expected when you are new to the practice, any sharp, shooting pain, especially while getting into a posture, is a signal you need to change what you are doing at the moment. Likewise if any pain or numbness persists after a practice period ends, be sure to modify the way you are sitting. If your legs fall asleep in the course of a round,... do not try to stand up until you have full feeling in them....

“Finding a posture that feels truly comfortable and natural takes time. None of us gets it all sorted out the first time we sit down, and, in fact, many of us continue to work on and refine our posture for as long as we practice. So our aim is always simply to find the best balance that we can for right now....

“Once you have settled your body into your best possible posture for now, it is time to begin the process of settling the mind. In Zen the first practice assigned to newcomers is most often a breath practice. In this practice we bring our attention to the flow of the breath and keep it focused there moment by moment. This practice develops concentration while at the same time encouraging a natural settling and relaxation of the nervous system....

“Keep the lips closed and breathe quietly through the nose. Pay attention to the physical sensations of the breath, not trying to visualize the breath or verbalize what is happening, but just experiencing the sensations of the breath flowing in and out. Remember, too, that your job is *simply* to experience the breath, not to control it or force it in any way. As long as you are bringing your full attention to the breath, or as much attention as you can, then you are doing the practice correctly....

“When you first take up a breath practice, it can be helpful to count each of your... exhalations. Count up to 10, and then start again at 1.... This counting is taught as an aid to concentration and to help you check whether your mind has wandered from its task of following the breath. Remember, though, that the counting is not an end in itself; the main thing is your experience of and connection with the breath. Any time you lose count, just start again at 1. Once you find that, during the course of an average practice period, you can keep the count without losing it for about 15 minutes... try dropping the counting and just focus on the breath....

“(I)t really doesn’t matter how many times you get pulled away from the practice. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred times in the space of a sitting—that’s Okay. Every time we get pulled away is an opportunity to come back, an opportunity to cut those threads that bind us to our delusions. And it is the willingness to come back, over and over again, that is really the core of this practice. Thoughts will inevitably arise, and it would be wrong to say that we are trying to stop our thoughts when we practice—because, in fact, that’s a futile exercise. The more we try and stop the thoughts, the more they will come, because trying to stop them we are giving them attention. Rather, what we do is very akin to what people are doing in aikido and other martial arts. We use the energy of our unruly mind, and divert it, channel it, into the practice. We try to deflect our attention away from the thoughts and onto the breath. And when we notice that our mind is not on the breath, then we gently bring it back....

“If you find your mind very busy, it helps to choose one point in the body where you can focus on the flow of the breath. In Japanese Zen, the point most often recommended for this purpose is the *hara*, that is, in the belly, about three finger-widths below the navel. Focusing on this area brings your center of gravity into the abdomen and this can help you to get out of your head and your thoughts. With your mind centered deep in the abdomen and focused on the physical sensations of its gentle contraction and expansion, you will still hear sounds or see changes in the light, but these things will take place more and more at the periphery of your attention....

“The practice of following the breath is generally the first practice that is taught to those who take up zazen. And yet it would be a mistake to think of it simply as a beginner’s practice. In fact, this is the practice that the Buddha is said to have been doing at the time that he realized full enlightenment. The potential of this practice is unlimited. So take your time with it, and give each breath your full care and devotion. You may feel that your mind is always scattered, jumping here and there. But just noticing that is the most important first step in practice. Your mind may be scattered, but it is your own scattered mind that has generated the aspiration to sit, and to explore.

“In fact, we only have one mind. Just as we tend to divide up the world around us into self and other, me and them, so we do the same thing inside. We divide our mind into concentrated mind and distracted mind, divide ourselves into good Zen students and hopeless Zen students. But in fact there is only one mind. And our job in zazen is to keep shifting back, to keep reaffirming that basic nature of the mind, which is one. We do this through giving ourselves to the practice.”

- ***Finding Your Seat—A Zen Handbook***, Amala Wrightson and Katherine Argetsinger, Auckland Zen Center, 2020, pp. 11-18.

“What then is zazen and how is it related to satori? Dogen taught that zazen is the ‘gateway to total liberation,’ and... ‘even the Buddha, who was born a sage, sat in zazen for six years until his supreme enlightenment, and so towering a spiritual figure as Bodhidharma sat for nine years facing the wall.’...

“For with the ordering and immobilization of feet, legs, hands, arms, trunk, and head in the traditional lotus posture, with the regulation of the breath, the methodical stilling of the thoughts and unification of the mind through special modes of concentration, with the development of the will, and with the cultivation of a profound silence in the deepest recesses of the mind—in other words, through the practice of zazen—there are established the optimum preconditions for looking into the heart-mind and discovering the true nature of existence.

“Although sitting is the foundation of zazen, it is not just any kind of sitting. Not only must the back be straight, the breathing properly regulated, and the mind concentrated beyond thought, but, according to Dogen, one must sit with a sense of dignity and grandeur, like a mountain or a giant pine, and with a feeling of gratitude toward the Buddha and the Dharma Ancestors, who made manifest the Dharma. And we must be grateful for our human body, through which we have the opportunity to experience the reality of the Dharma in all its profundity....

“In the broad sense zazen embraces more than just correct sitting. To enter fully into every action with total attention and clear awareness is no less zazen....

“Zazen must not be confused with meditation. Meditation involves putting something into the mind, either an image or a sacred word that is visualized or a concept that is thought about or reflected on, or both....

“The uniqueness of zazen lies in this: that the mind is freed from bondage to *all* thought-forms, visions, objects, and imaginings, however sacred or elevating, and brought to a state of absolute emptiness, from which alone it may one day perceive its own true nature, or the nature of the universe....

“Zazen that leads to Self-realization is neither idle reverie nor vacant inaction but an intense inner struggle to gain control over the mind and then to use it, like a silent missile, to penetrate the barrier of the five senses and the discursive intellect.... It demands energy, determination, and courage....

“Energies that formerly were squandered in compulsive drives and purposeless actions are preserved and channeled into a unity through correct Zen sitting.... By realigning the physical, mental, and psychic energies through proper breathing, concentration, and sitting, zazen establishes a new body-mind equilibrium with its center of gravity in the vital *hara*.

“No longer are we dominated by intellect at the expense of feeling, nor driven by the emotions unchecked by reason or will. Eventually zazen leads to a transformation of personality and character. Dryness, rigidity, and self-centeredness give way to flowing warmth, resiliency, and compassion, while self-indulgence and fear are transmuted into self-mastery and courage....

“As well as enriching personality and strengthening character, zazen illuminates the three characteristics of existence which the Buddha proclaimed: first, that all things... are impermanent, arising when particular causes and conditions bring them into being and passing away with the emergence of new causal factors; second, that life is pain; and third, that ultimately nothing is self-subsistent, that all forms in their essential nature are empty, that is, mutually dependent patterns of energy in flux, yet at the same time are possessed of a provisional or limited reality in time and space, in much the same way that the actions in a movie have a reality in terms of the film but are otherwise insubstantial and unreal....

“Through zazen the first vital truth—that all component things are ephemeral... becomes a matter of personal experience. We come to see the concatenation of our thoughts, emotions, and moods, how they arise, how they momentarily flourish, and how they pass away....

“That our sufferings are rooted in a selfish grasping and in fears and terrors which spring from our ignorance of the true nature of life and death becomes clear to anyone compelled by zazen to confront oneself nakedly. But zazen makes equally plain that what we term ‘suffering’ is our evaluation of pain from which we stand apart, that pain when courageously accepted is a

means to liberation in that it frees our natural sympathies and compassion even as it enables us to experience pleasure and joy in a new depth and purity.

“Finally, with enlightenment, zazen brings the realization that the substratum of existence is a Voidness out of which all things ceaselessly arise and into which they endlessly return, that this Emptiness is positive and alive and in fact not other than the vividness of a sunset or the harmonies of a great symphony.

“What we must not lose sight of, however, is that zazen is more than just a means to enlightenment or a method for sustaining and enlarging it, but is the *actualization* of our True-nature. Hence it has absolute value....

“Zazen does not bestow Buddhahood, it *uncovers* a Buddha-nature that has always existed....

“Without zazen, whether it be of the stationary or the mobile variety, we cannot speak of Zen training or discipline or practice.”

- Editor’s (Philip Kapleau’s) Introduction to “Yasutani-roshi’s Introductory Lectures on Zen Training” *The Three Pillars of Zen—35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, Anchor Books, 2000, pp. 10-28.

“We start with Buddha Shakyamuni... (who) began with the path of asceticism, undergoing tortures and austerities.... But he failed to attain enlightenment by these means and... gradually regained his health, and resolved to steer a middle course between self-torture and self-indulgence. Thereafter he devoted himself exclusively to zazen for six years and eventually, on the morning of the eight of December, at the very instant when he glanced at the planet Venus gleaming in the eastern sky, he attained perfect enlightenment....

“The words the Buddha uttered involuntarily at this time (as) recorded... in... the Avatamsaka sutra,... he spontaneously cried out: ‘Wonder of wonders! Intrinsically all living beings are Buddhas, endowed with wisdom and virtue, but because people’s minds have become inverted through delusive thinking they fail to perceive this.’ The first pronouncement of the Buddha seems to have been one of awe and astonishment. Yes, how truly marvelous that all human beings, whether clever or stupid, male or female, ugly or beautiful, are whole and complete just as they are. That is to say, the nature of every being is inherently without flaw, perfect, no different from that of Amida or any other Buddha. This first declaration of Shakyamuni Buddha is also the ultimate conclusion of Buddhism. Yet human beings, restless and anxious, live half-crazed existences because their minds, heavily encrusted with delusion, are turned topsy-turvy. We need therefore to return to our original perfection, to see through the false image of ourselves as incomplete and sinful, and to wake up to our inherent purity and wholeness.

“The most effective means by which to accomplish this is through zazen. Not only Shakyamuni Buddha himself but many of his disciples attained full awakening through zazen. Moreover, in

the 2,500 years since the Buddha's death innumerable devotees... have, by grasping this self-same key, resolved for themselves the most fundamental question of all: What is the meaning of life and death? Even in this day there are many who, having cast off worry and anxiety, have emancipated themselves through zazen.

- "Yasutani-roshi's Introductory Lectures on Zen Training" *The Three Pillars of Zen—35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, Anchor Books, 2000, pp. 33-34.

"We should realize clearly... that zazen is not meditation, contemplation, visualization, or mindfulness. It is not to be found in the mudra, chakra, mantra, or koan. Neither in its stillness nor its functioning, its seated nor its active form, can zazen said to be meditation. Zazen is not single-pointed mind, no-mind, aware-mind, or trance-mind. It is not revealed in words and letters, and is only transmitted one-to-one, from Buddha to Buddha....

"When zazen is incorrectly understood, it can lead to a suppression or denial of our human experience and can drive us further and further from the realization of the self. To study the Buddha Way is to study the self—and to really study the self is zazen. Zazen means to be intimate with the self. To be intimate with the self is to realize the whole phenomenal world as the self.

"The very first sitting of the rank beginner, whether properly or improperly executed, is at once the complete and perfect manifestation of the zazen of countless Buddhas and ancestors of past, present, and future. From the zazen of countless Buddhas and ancestors, our own zazen emerges. From our own zazen, the zazen of countless Buddhas and ancestors is realized. As a result, we all live the life of Buddha, transcend Buddha, have the mind of Buddha and become Buddha."

- *The Eight Gates of Zen—A Program of Zen Training*, John Daido Looi, Shambhala, 2002, Pp. 83-84.

"Even when you practice zazen alone, without a teacher, I think you will find some way to tell whether your practice is adequate or not. When you are tired of sitting, or when you are disgusted with your practice, you should recognize this as a warning signal. You become discouraged with your practice when your practice has been idealistic. You have some gaining idea in your practice, and it is not pure enough. It is when your practice is rather greedy that you become discouraged with it. So you should be grateful that you have a warning sign or warning signal to show you the weak point in your practice. At that time, forgetting all about your mistake and renewing your way, you can resume your original practice. That is a very important point."

- *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki, Shambhala, 2006, P. 78.

“Zazen is the fundamental way of cultivating enlightenment and love. Each breath is emptiness itself; each breath is appropriate. In zazen periods we devote ourselves wholly to our practice. In this crystal-clear situation, we encounter our self-centered delusions in their most obtrusive form, not diluted by the usual conditions of life. By returning to our practice whenever these delusions arise, we train ourselves in choosing what is fundamentally appropriate, and we loosen the grip that delusions have over us.”

- ***Taking the Path of Zen***, Robert Aitken, North Point Press, 1982, P. 42.

“It is tragic. People have been deluded for so long. They do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddhas. They do not recognize that their own natures are the true dharma. They want to search for the dharma, yet they still look far away for holy ones. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds.... As the World Honored One said, ‘I see that all sentient beings everywhere are endowed with a *tathagata’s* wisdom and virtue.’ He also said, ‘All illusory guises in which sentient beings appear take shape in the sublime mind of the *tathagata’s* complete enlightenment.’ Consequently, you should know that outside this mind there is no Buddhahood which can be obtained. All the Buddhas of the past were merely persons who understood their minds. All the sages and saints of the present are likewise merely persons who understood their minds. All future meditators should rely on this dharma as well.

“I hope that you who cultivate the path will never search outside. The nature of the mind is unstained; it is originally whole and complete in itself. If you will only leave behind false conditioning, you will be ‘such’ like the Buddha.”

- ***Tracing Back the Radiance—Chinul’s Korean Way of Zen***, Robert E. Buswell, Jr., University of Hawaii Press, 1991 Kuroda Institute abridgement, Pp. 98-99.

Questioning and still questioning,  
Like a cat stalking a mouse,  
Like a starving beggar searching for food,  
Like a thirsty wanderer seeking only water,  
Like an old widow awaiting her only lost son,  
Forgetting eating and sleeping—  
Never letting go,  
Looking deeply into this One Question  
For 10,000 years nonstop.  
Then, Great Enlightenment is right before you.

- ***The Song of Zen***, Zen Master Kyong Ho, Kwan Um School of Zen, 2014.



Moderator's musings:

I first sat my butt on a cushion and crossed my legs for zazen in the spring of 1967, having serendipitously run across one of the few books in English that had any practical instruction on the topic, Chang Chen-Chi's *The Practice of Zen* (Harper Brothers, 1959). My angels worked again with causes and conditions to introduce me to *The Three Pillars of Zen* in the summer of 1969; a few days after devouring it in a marathon reading session, I hitchhiked from Connecticut to Rochester NY and had my first meeting with my first Zen teacher, Philip Kapleau. By January of 1971 I was living in Rochester, and I became a member of the RZC later that year.

Zazen has been a foundational part of my life ever since. My understanding of what zazen is, though, or of what I'm doing (and not doing) when doing zazen, has gone through dozens of changes and upheavals.

Confession: it's only been for the last seven or eight years that I have made sitting an every-day thing (or let me say, this has been the longest consecutive stretch for me since I started). And sitting virtually every day has made a huge difference in my life, my view, my relationships, and my happiness. If I convey only one thing from all of these Dharma Reflection sessions to you, let it be this: find a way to formally sit zazen each day (there may be a day or two in a year when it's just not possible – life gets lifey; and that's Okay). Don't even worry about doing it "right," and as we read in the quotes this month, don't expect to gain anything, or to get rid of anything. Save the world. Save your friends. Save yourself. Sit.

### **Possible Discussion Points:**

1. "What we do with our bodies affects our minds, and what we do with our minds affects our bodies" appears above (page 1), but we are also told that "Body and mind are *not two*." Is there a contradiction here, or just a shift in emphasis?
2. After reading the selections, how might you summarize the difference between zazen and meditation?
3. What about the seeming paradox: zazen practice leads to satori (awakening wisdom), and yet is itself a reflection of our perfection, our lacking nothing from the beginning?
4. The great Korean Son (Zen) master Chinul (1158-1210, p. 8, above) shared, "I hope that you who cultivate the path will never search outside." What are the implications of this for you right now?

5. Robert Aitken Roshi wrote (p. 8, above), “Each breath is emptiness itself; each breath is appropriate.” What are other descriptors of your experience attending to the breath (e.g., each breath is unique... each breath is precious, etc.)?
6. What about Suzuki Roshi’s suggestion (p. 7, above) that being “idealistic” about our practice is a mistake?
7. Have you considered the implications for yourself, of Shakyamuni Buddha’s declaration upon his Great Awakening (Yasutani Roshi on p. 6, Chinul on p. 8)?
8. In these Notes and Quotes, we did not go into the Precautions to Observe (including those regarding delusory or hallucinatory sensations), or the Five Varieties of Zen, or the Three Aims of Zazen, or the Three Essentials of Zen Practice, or into any discussion of koan practice or *shikan-taza* (“just sitting” or “silent illumination”). Any questions about these, or other sub-topics?